Understanding Psychosocial Functions as an Innovative Practice for Diversity and Inclusion.

Abstract

This study highlights the relevance of recognising and understanding psychosocial functioning in organisational diversity discourse to advance inclusion and belonging in the workplace. In this study, we focus on gender and ethnic organisational diversity. We draw from interviews with 30 women of African origin living and working in the UK. We identify their psychosocial functioning by examining their involvement in mentoring functions. Likewise, we use a womanism theoretical perspective to understand why women of African Origin value psychosocial functioning. Our contribution shows that psychosocial functioning identified through intentional mentoring and adapted within the work environment is a necessity for addressing present and future work challenges concerning diversity, inclusion and belonging.

Keywords: Womanism, Psychosocial functioning Inclusion, Mentoring

Introduction

Recent societal and political unrests such as the Black Lives Movement (BLM) in 2020; #SayHerName movement in 2014 have brought to the forefront the continuing issues experienced by individuals from BAME backgrounds in society and within organisations. Evidence has shown that although little progress has been made, organisations continue to grapple with ways to effectively manage a diverse workforce, reduce discrimination experiences and create a more inclusive workplace. Of particular interest is the pertinent and persistent issues to do with difficulties of career progression experienced by Black women who experience greater marginalisation because of the multiplicative nature of being Black *and* female (i.e., double jeopardy – Berdahl & Moore, 2006, see also Harris and Ogbonna, 2022).

While scholars have begun undergoing research to better understand the overt and subtle barriers to career advancement (Fearfull & Kamenou, 2006), more recent studies have gone further to explore certain strategies that can be used to overcome these barriers (e.g., Otaye-Ebede & Shaffakat, 2022; McCluney & Rabelo, 2018). One such strategy which has received attention is 'mentoring' (e.g., Smith, 2016, Harris and Ogbonna, 2022). Scholars have defined mentoring as a developmental relationship between a mentor and mentee, or protégé, that promotes individual development through career stages (Cooke et al., 2017; Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Although research into mentoring has a long history (Garvey, 2017), its inclusiveness and effectiveness within the context of promoting the careers of black women remains inconclusive. While some scholars see it as a tool that can aid the career advancement and success of Black women (e.g., Smith, 2016; Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021), others have argued it can be perceived as a form of tokenism (Holgersson, & Roman, 2020, , while critical managements scholars have gone further to contend that it could typically reinforce oppressiveness (cf. Adler et al., 2007, Harris and Ogbonna, 2022). These equivocal results suggest that the efficacy of mentoring as a strategic tool to support the career advancement of black women is complex and dependent on careful consideration of certain factors (e.g., power dynamics, intersectionality of identities – Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; context - Bhopal, 2020; uptake etc.). Hence for mentoring to be successful (particularly within the context of black women), careful attention needs to be paid into the fundamental assumptions and traditions underlying mentoring relationships, as well as its context and processes (Erskine et al., 2021; Murrell & Blake-Beard, 2017).

This inconclusive nature in research presents a gap which our study seeks to address. Our overarching research questions are: how and why do women of African origin engage in mentoring in UK organisations? Underpinned by theory of womanism and within the context of understanding the challenges of career development for women of African origin in the UK and the debates concerning the existence of institutional racism, we explore the role of mentoring as access for career development. We draw from research (Kram, 1988, Ragins & Cotton, 1999, Higgins & Kram, 2001, Chandler, 2011) that indicates mentoring is a career resource for employees in organisations. This involves relationships where the individuals involved are committed to providing support, formally or informally. This support can be towards career development to help facilitate advancement within the organisation or the sector, psychosocial function focusing on the emotional, interpersonal, and competence aspects that underlie the mentoring relationship, and role-modelling (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

In addressing these research questions, our study proffers three significant contributions to theory. First, we focus on the role of mentoring in the career experiences of a specific demographic of individuals within the UK workforce – women of African origin. We argue that the unique experiences of these women are not captured in extant research, which limits our understanding of how and in what ways we can better obtain the positive effects of mentoring to promote inclusion and belonging. Specifically, we use the theoretical perspective - African feminism or ‘womanism’ (Hudson-Weems, 1993) to explain the positioning of women of African origin and emphasise why their experiences are relevant to understanding the role of identities in informing development opportunities in the workplace. By adopting this lens, we base womanism as a social-cultural theory that is sensitive to the lived experiences of women of African origin and as such can enable us to better understand and proffer solutions to how mentoring processes are carefully considered.

Second, we add to the diversity, mentoring and careers literature by offering ‘intentional mentoring’ as a potential solution to promoting inclusion and belonging which can be an effective strategy for advancing the careers of black women. Intentional mentoring has predominantly been propagated in the health and sciences disciplines as a tool for promoting inclusivity in education (Stuchiner et al., 2022; Shuler et al., 2021). However, within business and management, little is known about its effectiveness in the workplace. We argue that there is a unique mentoring dynamic that arises from the multiplicity of being black *and* female (i.e., double jeopardy – Berdahl & Moore, 2006) which intentional mentoring can help address, particularly as it requires clear goals to be set by the mentor and mentee, and appropriate strategies identified for addressing these goals (Johnson, 2002; Shuler et al., 2021). This form of mentoring also serves to address both the instrumental (e.g., professional skills) and psychosocial (e.g., communication skills) needs of these women (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

Finally, through an interdisciplinary lens, we shed more light on the needs of these women. In particular, we advance the diversity and inclusion literature by suggesting that given the historical injustice and continued discrimination experienced by Black women, the salient need for them when seeking mentoring relationships is '*prosocial*'. This finding is very significant as it enables scholars to further explore what these needs are and how organisational strategies, practices and policies can be tailored towards addressing them.

Literature Review

Theory of Womanism

The term 'womanist' was first coined by Alice Walker in her book titled 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose' (1983). However, the concept of 'womanism', was more clearly articulated by Ogunyemi (1985) and more recently Hudson-Weems (1993). Ogunyemi (1985), defines womanism as 'a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom'. Hudson-Weems (1993), on the other hand, coined the term 'Africana Womanism', defining it as an ideology developed to explore the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of women of African origin. It depicted the unique experiences of 'African Women', which feminist theory was not sufficiently addressing.

As a construct, 'womanism' is a social theory founded on the historical experiences of black women and black culture. It focuses on inclusivity and the psychosocial needs of black women, highlighting the gaps in the feminist discourse on their experiences (Kagher & Stewart, 2021). Womanism hence is more cultural focused, as it embodies and is sensitive to the unique experiences and relationships of black women and black men (DeLoach and Young, 2015). It embraces the activism of women of African origin who fought for freedom from forms of oppression (Dove, 1998), thereby creating a strong sense of resilience in the family, workplace, and society. It also allows for authenticity in learning from and through the stories of Black females (Russell, 2011).

This study focuses on four elements of womanism: equality, inclusivity, growth and contribution, among other social needs. Historically, societal policies have been targeted as means in which these needs can be met (which seeks to address inequality and discrimination based on certain characteristics. However, we argue that on the meso level, organisations through direct mentorship are in a better position to enable the fulfilment of these social needs. We also argue that given the unique experiences and obstacles to career progress that women of African origin experience at work, there is an increasing need to fulfil the psychosocial needs of these women for them to thrive at work and progress in their careers. These needs, however, cannot be sufficiently met by formal mentoring programmes alone, but by a combination of formal and informal mentoring which are intentional.

We therefore use 'womanism' as a theoretical lens to explore the positioning of women of African origin and to emphasise why their experiences are relevant to understanding the role of identities in informing the uptake of development opportunities (such as mentoring, both formal and informal) in the workplace. Although previous studies have explored female mentor experiences (e.g., Dashper, 2019; Athanasopoulou et al., 2018; Linhan & Scullion, 2008), a womanist perspective has not been applied to study black women's experiences of mentoring, and how it impacts on their career advancement. We argue that the theory of womanism provides us an avenue through which we can explore the unique ways in which African women interpret organisational practices such as mentoring and how they use these to navigate their career progress. In answering our research questions, we adopt the aspect of womanism that focuses on empowering African women (Abdullah, 2021). We further elucidate the differential reasoning behind African women's uptake of mentoring opportunities, and how key elements of womanism (such as family, mothering, and solidarity: Thomas & Jackson, 2007) act as stronger drivers. Additionally, as a theoretical lens, womanism enables us to better explore in their own voices (Walker, 1983) the discriminatory experiences of African women, which could then lead them to developing survival and coping strategies (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015) to meet their psychosocial needs.

Mentoring

There is broad agreement in the literature that mentoring is usually a helping relationship where one person provides support and guidance to aid the personal (Yu et al., 2021), professional and/or career development (Harvey et al., 2009) needs of another person (see also, Sulimani-Aidan, 2019; Gadomska-Lila, 2020; Yip & Walker, 2021). It is also generally accepted that there are two separate though related elements to the focus of such relationships; career development (instrumental) and psychosocial (relational) support (Stuckey et al., 2019; Mullen, 2021). In addition, as well as being a beneficial process for both mentors and mentees (Simmonds & Dicks, 2019; Hu et al., 2021), positive outcomes for employing organisations utilising mentoring are also commonly claimed (e.g., Chen et al., 2014), although, as found by Herrbach et al. (2011), positive organisation outcomes are not guaranteed (see also Harris and Ogbonna, 2022).

There seems to be a similar level of agreement on a variety of approaches to and contexts of mentoring practice. Approaches to mentoring include the mentor being more experienced and/or holding a more senior organisation position than their mentee, an approach termed traditional by Harvey et al (2009), or an approach where mentors and mentees are at the same or similar level of experience and/or organisation position. This latter is often termed peer mentoring (see for example, Simmonds & Dick, 2018). Harvey et al (2009) describe three approaches which are traditional, reverse and reciprocal. Reverse mentoring is a more recent approach and involves a (usually) younger and less senior person mentoring a more senior person, perhaps because of more current and contemporary skills on the part of the reverse mentor. The use of the term ‘reciprocal’ is used by Harvey et al (2009) in part to recognise the benefits that can be gained by a mentor through a mentoring relationship, although it also has some resonance with what others refer to as peer mentoring. As well as approaches, there is also some commonality in the contexts where mentoring has been applied and researched. These contexts include use of mentoring to support students on educational programmes (e.g., Ramirez, 2012; Parsons, 2019; Asempapa, 2019); staff working in education institutions as employees (Stuckey et al 2019); as well as employees in a wide range of other employment contexts (e.g., Chen et al., 2014; Park et al., 2016). However, the contexts of mentoring practice raise some questions on the use of terminology in studies of mentoring when describing what might be called modes of mentoring. Therefore, we now turn to examining this terminology in order to then clarify the approach, context and form of mentoring which provides the focus of this study.

One commonly used pair of terms used to describe modes of mentoring are ‘formal’ and ‘informal’. The study by Chen et al. (2014) is an example of where the distinction between the two modes is seen as significant and one which claims to demonstrate benefits for mentees from formal mentoring. The study was based on data from participants; both mentors and mentees; in programmes initiated, implemented, and managed by employing organisations and so it seems those characteristics were associated with ‘formal’ as opposed to ‘informal’. However, Chen et al seemed also to differentiate and measure the amount of formal mentoring provided by mentors and thus suggest degrees of formality rather than a straightforward dichotomy between the two constructs. However, this notion of degree was a function of the commitment and behaviours of the mentors rather than a function of the programmes’ design. That being the case, the conclusions reached on the implied benefits of formal versus informal can be questioned since there was no direct comparison of formal versus informal mentoring; i.e., where the latter occurs without organisational arrangements.

The previous criticism of research design could also be levelled at the study undertaken by Stuckey et al (2019). The programme studied by Stuckey and her colleagues meets the characteristics of employer sponsored and supported ‘formal’ programme discussed in the previous paragraph. This study also found benefits for both mentors and mentees, in this case also including indirect as well as direct benefits. Direct benefits were associated with the formal aims and expectations of the programme. Indirect benefits were unexpected and were also somewhat more valued by all participants. However, the findings were not compared with any informal mentoring occurring in the organisation. It is though interesting and instructive that benefits outside of those expected by the formal programme were experienced by participants. As mentioned earlier, the study by Herbach et al (2011) identified that mentoring does not always produce favourable outcomes. That study also distinguished between formal and informal and found the unfavourable outcomes in a formal programme. Hence, formality of itself does not guarantee benefits to either organisations or participants, a finding supported by the work of Hu et al (2021). However, Park et al (2016) found that positive organisation support was associated with positive effects on intention to leave on the part of mentees. Again though, the research did not compare formal and informal mentoring and so it is not clear from the study whether similar effects could arise from informal mentoring.

There are alternative constructs in the literature which have some resonance with the differentiation between formal and informal. Yip and Walker (2021) for example conclude that leaders need to proactively mentor followers. This implies a degree of formality. Parsons (2019) draws a distinction between deliberate and unconscious acts within the mentoring process. This suggests that the behaviour of mentors may be of more significance than the degree of formality of a mentoring programme. A similar point is made by Bybee (2014) who distinguishes between intentional and organic mentoring. For Bybee, organic mentoring arises in informal interactions between individuals sharing some social context, which could be employment or non-employment. The former; i.e.; intentional mentoring; is a construct usually applied as a synonym for formal programmes. Such formal programmes can be and are adopted in range of settings, e.g., education as well as employment. However, the notion of organic can also be applied to the behaviour of mentors in interactions with mentees, even when the relationship arises through a formal, or intentional, programme. Hence, there is some similarity between the work of Parsons (2019) and that of Bybee (2014) who both draw attention to the behaviour of mentors, irrespective of the mentoring programme being formal or informal.

We suggest that the notion of intentional mentoring is commonly associated in the literature with planned, deliberate and so formal mentoring programmes. This is evident in the work of Johnson (2002) who seems to have initiated use of the term. It has been applied and used in a number of studies since Johnson’s original research. Asempapa (2019) for example uses the term in work examining mentoring of international students but only in the abstract of the article. Ramirez (2012) uses the term only in the title of his work conducted in a similar context and defines intentional as associated with forethought and planning. The use of intentional in these two studies is clearly associated with planned, deliberate and formal programmes. The same is true of Werner-Washburne (2018) whose research is also in an education context. Ponce et al (2005) have a slightly different understanding of 'intentional' in arguing that its purpose is to improve, or enhance, formal mentoring programmes. Even so, intentional remains associated with formal mentoring. We argue however that intentional can also be usefully applied to informal mentoring when applied to the acts and decisions of individuals choosing to voluntarily engage with others in mentoring relationships (Muntaha, & Jawad, 2019). This might be said to be a form of what Harvey et al (2009) describe as reciprocal mentoring. It also fits in our view in distinguishing between intentional and organic mentoring behaviours on the part of mentors. Both kinds of mentoring behaviours can occur in both formal and informal mentoring programmes. Hence, for the purpose of this study, intentional mentoring focuses on the behaviours of individual mentors rather than on the degree of planning and formality of programmes in either employment or educational contexts.

The work of Harvey et al (2009) is of relevance to our study for an additional reason. That work follows from a starting point that women receive relatively less formal mentoring than men, and that expatriates receive less formal mentoring than domestic employees. Those findings are supported in part by more recent work by Stuckey et al (2019) whose research focused on the benefits of mentoring specifically aimed at women and staff from underrepresented minorities as groups previously receiving less organisational support than others. Hence women of African origin are much less likely to receive formal mentoring in their employment contexts. In addition, research by Richard et al (2019) demonstrates that racial-ethnic dissimilarity can reduce the quality of mentoring in supervisory relationships. This finding is supported by those of Harris and Ogbonna (2022) in their study of formal mentoring in academia. Therefore, our research is relevant to current research interest in a number of ways as detailed below.

Our focus is on mentors and mentees drawn from the same gender and similar racial-ethnic origin. The mentoring modes are a mixture of formal programmes and voluntary though intentional mentoring, both within and outside of employment contexts. This focus adds to the extant research by examining the extent to which mentors and mentees have positive experiences of intentional mentoring in formal and informal mode of mentoring and where, more particularly, there are gender and racial-ethnic matches of mentors and mentees. With this focus, we build on previous research such as that conducted by for example Rasheem et al (2018) which examined the mentoring experience of black women undertaking doctoral study in the USA.

Methods

Sample and Procedures

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 women of African origin working in the UK to address our research aim (i.e., the experience of and motivations for engaging in mentoring for women of African Origin). The interviews typically lasted for 30 minutes to one hour, and the selection method used was purposive sampling.

The recruitment process included a snowballing technique, where the first author contacted women of African origin across different sectors and employed in varying roles in the UK. These contacts were mostly done through other women of African origin who acted as gatekeepers. We recruited volunteer participants working within organisations in the UK, and from social and religious networks. The initial contact was through word of mouth to individual contacts and gatekeepers, requesting their consent to take part. This was followed by an email containing details of the research and what the participants needed to do. Some participants worked in organisations that are significantly male dominated like the oil & gas and construction sectors, while others worked in more gender diverse contexts such as the higher education sector. Participant roles included engineers, project managers, accountants, academics, HR professionals and administrative jobs. This mix of industry context and participant roles provides a useful range of contexts for exploring the process and functions of mentoring (see Table 1).

{Insert Table 1 about here}

The interviews were audio recorded with consent from the participants, and later transcribed. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked general questions about their jobs, background etc., prior to asking more specific questions that guided the tone of the interviews. Such questions focused on the experiences of and motivations for engaging in mentoring within and beyond their organisations. Examples of specific questions include:

- Are you aware of mentoring schemes within your organisation and are you involved?
- How would you describe the mentoring schemes within your organisation?
- Are you involved in mentoring schemes outside your workplace?
- How would you describe the mentoring schemes you are part of, outside your organisation?
- Do you have a mentor or are you currently mentoring anyone?
- What was your role and experience as a mentor/mentee?
- Why did you get involved in mentoring?
- Would you say your role as a mentor or mentee affects your career advancement in any way?
- What are some challenges experienced and benefits gained from mentorship?

As can be seen, questions were loosely worded, and the sequence of the questions varied depending on how the interview proceeded. This format ensured that all areas were covered and helped participants to speak more freely while not deviating from the issues that were significant to them (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Data collection was considered complete once theoretical saturation was reached. The point of saturation was easily identified when no new patterns emerged and the properties, dimensions, or relationships of and within different themes (or interpretative repertoires) were well developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Prior to starting the study, ethical approval was obtained from UREC, Liverpool John Moores University.

Data Analysis

Once the data was collected, we transcribed and analysed the data using thematic analysis, thus identifying themes within the data that are significant in addressing the specific research question.

Using Braun and Clarke (2006), we define thematic analysis as identifying and reporting themes within data to interpret the research topic. We derived these themes by identifying critical points from the narratives, significant to addressing the research questions. We applied conventions for representing prevalence in thematic analysis, using the word 'majority' to show the participant numbers per theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Subsequently, we aligned the themes with perspectives derived from the theory of womanism and mentoring functions from the conceptual framework by Ragins and Cotton (1999) and Higgins & Kram, (2001).

Findings

The findings include a dominant focus on psychosocial functions rather than a balanced focus on the two functions identified by Higgins & Kram (2001) and Ragins & Cotton (1999) which is the psychosocial and career functions. This suggests that identifying clear outcomes concerning mentoring, such as access to facilitate career advancement opportunities for women of African Origin in the UK, is likely to be more of a challenge unless mentoring is tailored to that objective. We may relate this to an additional indication, which suggests that the role modelling function is mainly from the experience of the participants themselves. Likewise, the psychosocial function contributes to their personal growth and professional development (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). The exception to this is mentoring formally organised as part of an organisation's talent development to facilitate career advancement. Table 1 shows phrases extracted from the interviews. We derived these phrases from conversations concerning experiences, challenges, roles, and reasons for mentorship. The table also highlights the themes drawn because of the connections between the phrases extracted from the interviews. We can link these to the mentoring functions either as career or psychosocial functions. Likewise, these can be connected to the themes derived from the womanism theory.

{Insert Table 2 about here}

We highlight key themes that show the significance of psychosocial mentoring functions for women of African origin. They include acceptance, relatedness, awareness of cultural differences, access to opportunities and contributions. We discuss the key themes derived from the findings below.

Access to Opportunities

Though the workplace reflects a diverse workforce across gender, age, disability, and much more, culture and policies do not always and clearly reflect these multiplicities (Turesky & Warner, 2020). This often leads to delayed process for access to opportunities by a minority within the organisation. While delay in access to opportunities can be categorised under career mentoring functions as a professional development path, in this study, we link access to opportunities as path of the psychosocial functions. This is because, the findings indicate key factors that could lead to delay in accessing promotion opportunities, including promotion to senior roles, are language constraints, differing shared values and cultural differences.

A quote from a participant emphasises:

> ‘My organisation tries to create opportunities for all but some of the clauses to access these opportunities are the barriers…..for instance, suggesting some forms of flexible working may affect career advancement and even with a mentor, I didn’t feel like these barriers would be easy to overcome’(R3).

Another participant highlights the impact of language constraints where this poses as a barrier for easy communication.

> ‘I once expressed my concerns to my mentor that though we all speak English, I feel more women like me struggle to engage when they have a strong non-English accent, and this could be a silent barrier’(R12).

And:

> ‘….it is hard to say for a fact that on paper or even with words, I have not been given the opportunity or access to the right support at work however, the reality seems different. The lack of access is subtle’ (R4).

The findings show that some of these barriers or setbacks hindering the career progression of women of African Origin are unconscious biases imbibed in the work systems, making it almost impossible to identify and rectify (Walden, 2020). Most participants perceive the existence of institutional biases as part of unconscious bias, but do not conclude that racial or gender biases prevent career advancement. The mixed perception hinges on the notion that these organisations (where the participants work) have standing policies and action plans for diversity and inclusion. The reality for BAME female staff shows existing implicit barriers that affect career progression or cause delay in career progression.

Acceptance and Relatedness

Homayooni et al. (2020) argue that burnout at work is linked to prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job and as such this is acknowledged to pose a significant challenge. From the findings, we recognise most women of African origin who gain access to senior role opportunities have either worked twice as hard, proven themselves or have had to invest more time to assimilate to be accepted and seen as being part of a social identity that is similar or relatable. We highlight some quotes that reveal women of African origin are more likely to experience burnout in the workplace due to the need to do more to feel accepted or experience cordial relationships.

> ‘I can actually say that I do have friendly colleagues but more often than not, I feel like I need to do much more to be accepted even in my relationship with my mentor’(R15).

> ‘My mentor once implied black people as resilient people no matter what is thrown at them. Maybe, that was a compliment, but I sometimes feel that because I am a black, and a woman, it is expected that I achieve more despite the time constraint or support’(R4).

> ‘I find myself struggling with the perception of not being accepted, so I don’t need to experience a direct form of rejection or discrimination. That perception is always there, and this is a conversation difficult to have with a mentor. My mentor senses my struggle, but again, I feel its personal and sometimes challenging to discuss’ (R1).

Research in psychology (Peters et al., 2018) has shown that motivation and wellbeing are subject to the satisfaction of certain psychological needs. In this research, we identify some of these psychological needs as psychosocial functions like acceptance and relatedness. Despite this identification and awareness, mentoring structures that act as a base strategy for inclusion within organisations (Kashtanova & Kudryavtsev, 2018) lacks the psychological/psychosocial needs demonstrated to mediate outcomes for inclusion and growth. This is possibly due to the lack of a clear model to explain these needs. Hence, the relevance of this research that emphasises intentional mentoring as a framework to identity and address these psychological/psychosocial needs.

Cultural Differences and Awareness

Addressing cultural issues in the workplace is not a new phenomenon with organisations consistently seeking interventions to manage the impact of cultural differences (Carter, 2000). For instance, global organisations engage in the use of frameworks for implementation and feasibility of workplace cultures (Hodulak, 2017). This is to enhance adaptability, be more culturally competent by creating a tolerant and trustworthy environment for its diverse workplace (Rockson, 2019). For women of African origin, the lack of awareness of cultural differences even within the mentoring relationship mirrors the lack of effort by the organisation to be culturally competent. Some of the narratives by participants further highlight cultural difference and awareness, as substantial for building the mentor/mentee relationships.

> ‘I had a mentor with a different cultural background, and I found the relationship okay but there was a sense of should I say awkwardness when I had to share personal matters with a bit of cultural influence that I felt affected my professional life’(R15).

> ‘I am not particular about having a mentor who is female or from the same ethnic background as myself, but I feel a mentor or mentee should understand cultural differences where this may be relevant to the relationship’…..because sometimes being of a minority culture can create the perception of being oppressed or silenced (R3).

> ‘I had a male mentor from a different ethnic background, I found the relationship very good for my professional goals, but I felt the relationship was not quite the same when I had to discuss or consider other personal matters. I am not sure if this was a gender, ethnic difference issue but I would imagine a better awareness of cultural differences might have helped (R6).

The findings suggest that mentoring programmes within most of the organisations have a formal mentoring structure for career support and the functionality of these mentoring schemes depends on the relationships between and shared goals of the individuals (peer mentoring or group mentoring). There is significant evidence that meeting psychosocial needs is a key requirement in the mentoring scheme but is not easily attainable because of organisational cultural barriers, like the constrained structuring of the mentoring scheme. This could be argued to be a lapse in the formal mentoring construction as the findings highlight that the participants do not depend on formal organisational mentoring to experience personal and professional development because of the gap in formal mentoring - the lack of representation, resources, discussions, and actions that promote values of women of African origin. This suggests gaps in workplace formalised organisational culture for professional development, career advancement and where mentoring is concerned. Consequently, the participants emphasise the need for and their involvement in more informal mentoring networks, which are mostly external to their organisation. Therefore, we highlight intentional mentoring as a framework that adapts cultural constructs as it considers psychosocial functions for both professional and personal development.

Contributions

The findings show that women of African origin are keen to contribute to the workplace as part of the psychosocial function. This concept of contribution focuses on the ability to be recognised and appreciated for work done. This hinges on the perception that being recognised and appreciated in the workplace, increases engagement, wellbeing, and better performance (Bhasin, 2018). Though it has been argued that recognition takes a more formal approach and can be limited because it is performance based and conditional (Robbins, 2019), the inclusion of appreciation takes into consideration the psychosocial needs as these focus on their inherent values and worth (Robbins, 2019). As part of their psychosocial need which is to be valued in the workplace, individuals see appreciation and recognition in a way that is acceptable. Likewise, Hamrick & White, (2020), stresses that appreciating one in a language they prefer is revealed to convey that the individual is valued. For these women language of preference beyond recognition is appreciation and adapting this as a psychosocial function in the mentoring process and across work functions is significant.

> ‘I believe, there is an energy that come with being recognised for work done’.(R9)

> ‘One of the reasons I decided to take on a mentorship role as mentor was because I believed it was a way of being engaged and interestingly, I find that I learn more as a mentor which increases my performance’(R14)

> ‘I recognise the importance of appraisals based on KPI but I do believe it is important to acknowledge and appreciate work beyond the KPI’s’ (R10).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of and motivations for engaging in mentoring for women of African Origin. Using womanism as a theoretical lens, we explore how and why women of African origin working the UK engage with mentoring and its relevance in (if any) in enabling career development for these women. We draw from research e.g., Kram, 1988; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Chandler, 2011, that indicates mentoring is a career resource for employees in organisations. This involves relationships where the individuals involved are committed to providing support, formally or informally. This support can be towards career development to help facilitate advancement within the organisation or the sector, and/or the psychosocial function focusing on the emotional, interpersonal, and competence aspects that underlie the mentoring relationship (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Our findings reveal the unique and differential experiences of African women as they engage in mentoring relationships and the importance of intentional mentoring in achieving success for these women as shown in figure 1. By examining the findings, we explicate the resulting implications for both theory and practice as follows.

Theoretical Implications

The literature review unveils definitions and views that emphasise mentoring as a formal or informal role that involves individuals who typically mentor their mentees for a specified period, with the aim to promote their outcomes in different areas and compensate for a lack of appropriate role models (for instance, Sulimani-Aidan, 2019; Stuckey et al., 2019; Gadomska-Lila, 2020; Yu et al., 2021). Likewise, the literature views mentoring as a unique interpersonal relationship between mostly two individuals – which could be peer-based where the mentor is on the same position as the mentee but with more experience hence, mentors the mentee, or traditionally where the mentor is usually in a higher position with years of experience and knowledge. In most cases, this provides career-related and psychosocial support to develop a protege’s career (Stuckey et al., 2019; Mullen, 2020). Following the career-related and psychosocial support that mentoring provides, there is evidence (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Gadomska-Lila, 2020;) to show that mentoring affects an individual’s psychological state which includes the opportunity for personal and professional growth with the aim to generate satisfaction, especially taking into consideration the functional structures in mentoring and quality of mentoring relationships. Studies (Kram, 1988; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Gadomska-Lila, 2020)in mentoring have also provided insights regarding factors that account for the cultivation of structures (time-based, formal or informal, voluntary, or paid role) in mentoring and quality relationships.

Ghosh's (2013) discussions concerning the processes and outcomes of mentoring explore the disparity in mentoring across different sectors. This shows the impact of mentoring is likely to mean different things across different sectors but evidencing similarities in structures (like formal, informal, voluntary, or paid role) and the relationship between the mentor and mentee. Hence, while also capturing mentoring to be an intense emotional relationship contributing to development of an individual, Gadomska-Lila (2020), agree that mentoring as a tool for development in the workplace, can support and address changing conditions and occurring problems involving diversity and inclusion. This is because organisations consider the need for change to address the inevitable changes in the labour market, demographic changes, and consequent diversification of employees due to circumstances like expansions and growth. Despite the case for mentoring, this tool for development has its challenges around the lack of or the intensity of the relationships and the functional and operational processes, especially when considering initiatives aimed at diversity and inclusion in the workplace. This study supports the literature on mentoring and further explores the idea of 'intentional mentoring' as a tool for development of women of African Origin working in the UK by drawing from the varying experiences of these women as mentors and mentees.

As women of African origin working in the UK, the motivations for engaging in mentoring go beyond professional development for career advancement. Drawing from the experiences shared by these women, we recognise the emphasis on meeting psychosocial needs, and we acknowledge the influence of womanism in mentorship. Womanism as an Afrocentric paradigm embraces the activism of women of African origin who have fought for the freedom from oppression across different geographical scales (Dove, 1998). As a social theory, womanism significantly focuses on the struggles of women of colour, black women, women of African origin to realise social needs for advancement or empowerment. It explains equality, inclusivity, growth and contribution beyond the gender equality discourse (DeLoach & Young, 2014; Sheldon, 2017). Womanism in mentoring, therefore, considers some of these social needs that emphasise and identify what social empowerment entails for these women. From the findings, we recognise them as the need to attain acceptance, relatedness, contributions, cultural awareness and early, equal access to opportunities in the workplace.

{Insert Figure 1 about here}

The findings suggest broadly that inclusion and belonging are key outcomes for the intentional mentoring process. Though these words are often used interchangeably, inclusion and belonging are arguably distinct in practice and policy framing (Velibor & Birgit, 2021). Belonging as derived from belonging motivation is argued to have a biological underpinning and value. And from a cultural perspective, this reveals social conduct in interpersonal relations, as part of the human functioning. Belonging creates experiences of one's identity, shared identities, destiny. Hence, providing answers to fundamental questions of 'who am I' (Kovač & Vaala, 2021; Kelly-Ann et al., 2021). This work suggests intentional mentoring as an implication for effective mentoring for women of African Origin in the UK. This form of mentoring will focus on identifying and addressing key functions necessary in building the relationship, especially towards fostering inclusion and belonging and for personal and professional growth. Hence, the theoretical implication emphasizes that intentional mentoring as a framework should be flexible, it should incorporate both formal and informal processes with the aim to drive inclusion and belonging, and it should focus on integrating both the personal and professional development of the mentees.

Practical Implications

Intentional mentoring as a developmental process starts from and includes discussions and actions to promote values of women of African origin, drawing on the theory of womanism which explores the social needs of women like the rights for equality, inclusivity, growth, and contributions. It also explores how mentoring processes can influence personal and professional development for women of African origin. The major focus is on psychosocial needs like acceptance, relatedness, contributions, cultural awareness. This also includes acceptance of language differences and social identities to increase access to opportunities, equality, support and progress through safe spaces, and to eradicate unconscious biases embedded in institutional structural systems.

Some actions for intentional mentoring drawing from the findings include those listed below. While this research focused on women in the UK we suggest that the actions will be relevant for any geographic context outside of Africa for organisations employing women of African origin.

- Establish structures and functional formal mentoring programmes within the organisation – identifying mentors/mentees, establishing timelines, goal settings/targets, understanding social identities, developing cultural awareness.
- Create and support safe spaces for discussions (between mentors and mentees)
- Acknowledge the role of informal mentoring networks and connect personal development achieved because of these networks to the organisational formal mentoring schemes.
- Ensure consistent access to opportunities and resources. (e.g. coaching and training opportunities, developmental leadership roles, building networks)
- Encourage progress and support (working patterns, identifying training needs)
- Promote actions that show evidence of equality (rights, support, access)

- Implement targets to eradicate actions that can be perceived as systematic or institutional structural biases (e.g. unfair discrimination, lack of visibility and recognition of contributions, acceptance)
- Assess mentees' goals/targets to personal development achievements and career advancement realities.

In Table 3, we identify the roles of individuals and the organisation in implementing intentional mentoring for women of African origin.

{Insert Table 3 about here}

Within the context of the findings, it is possible to say that the lack of formal role models to perform intentional career support within mentoring in organisations will have adverse effects on the career development of women of African origin. This will mean that organisations cannot exploit fully the talent available to them from these groups of employees, and thus not maximise the potential for competitive advantage from their potential talent pool.

The findings also suggest that the participants are not wholly dependent on formal organisational mentoring support. This is perhaps a lesson for all employees in that this group of participants shows the possibilities and benefits of informal mentoring organised through social, friendship and other informal networks. The findings also suggest a need for more research from an employer perspective on the pros and cons of formal and informal mentoring in the careers of women of African origin. Our findings suggest the use of formal and informal mentoring can have positive benefits for both employers and employees. This seems to be evident in the experience and career benefits of the women, both as mentors and mentees within formal and informal programmes. The indication is that these women experience enhanced career development as compared with those women involved only in informal or formal mentoring programmes. This is an important consideration for employers who wish to maximise the talent of women of African origin and to gain the associated organisational benefits.

Our recommendations include first the need to build and consistently review the structure and functionality of formal mentoring to ensure its effectiveness. Second, to increase inclusive formalised mentoring within development programmes. This should help identify and inform the effects of diversity in mentoring and career development. In addition, to encourage more informal mentoring networks and link the benefits of these networks to the formalised mentoring and organisational culture. Finally, organisations should create safe spaces for conversations concerning the perception/reality of the lack of inclusion, and there should be evidence of how these conversations inform practice at the organisational level.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The research has clear potential limitations. The first is the sample size which is limited, However, is well within the guidelines suggested by Saunders and Townsend (2016) of between 15 and 60 for the nature of this study. We also acknowledge that the sample does have the potential weakness of being convenience and to an extent self-selected. This could though be argued to be a strength since the sample consists only of participants in a position to provide data relevant to addressing our research questions. In addition, we also found that saturation was reached before the final interview. A final limitation is that we cannot claim with full confidence that our findings have wider application. We do though believe that our recommendations on intentional mentoring have that potential. Future research can usefully explore the validity of our belief by investigating the relevance of our recommendations in different contexts.

Conclusion

Women of African origin living and working in the UK experience discrimination in and barriers to their career progression which are not always or inevitably overcome by formal or informal mentoring programmes. Based on an understanding of their experiences informed by womanism, we have added to current understanding of the value of mentoring in this context. Our main conclusion is that adopting intentional mentoring, within and outside of employer-based programmes, may be more successful in providing the support needed by women of African origin to advance their careers.

Acknowledgements

Funding Details: The author (s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Disclosure Statement: This is to state that there are no financial interests or benefits that has arisen from the direct applications of this research.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, Loliya Kagher. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality clause as containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. However, anonymous data supporting the findings of this study are available within the supplementary materials. This includes the respondents: identifier data.

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Table 1. Interview Themes

Some Phrases from the Interview	Themes	Mentoring Functions
Experience delay in growth opportunities	Access to Opportunities	Career Functions
Sense of limited access to senior roles	Access to Opportunities	
Unconscious bias because of cultural differences	Cultural Differences	Psychosocial Functions
Feeling stereotyped	Cultural difference/Acceptance	
Feeling excluded in certain organisational networks	Acceptance	
The need to always prove oneself	Acceptance	
Be able to work independently, but still feel/be part of a team	Acceptance	
Others accepting my sense of value	Acceptance	
Social identity and conflict	Acceptance	
Help others where I needed help	Contribution	
Recognition of my accomplishments beyond the appraisal requirements	Contribution	
A sense of community because of shared values	Relatedness	
Hard to get a workable mentor	Relatedness	
Easy to connect	Relatedness	
Trust to share my experience and struggles at work	Relatedness	
Share experiences regarding benefits because of family and family challenges	Relatedness	

Womanism

- Equality
- Inclusivity
- Growth and Contribution
- Other social Needs

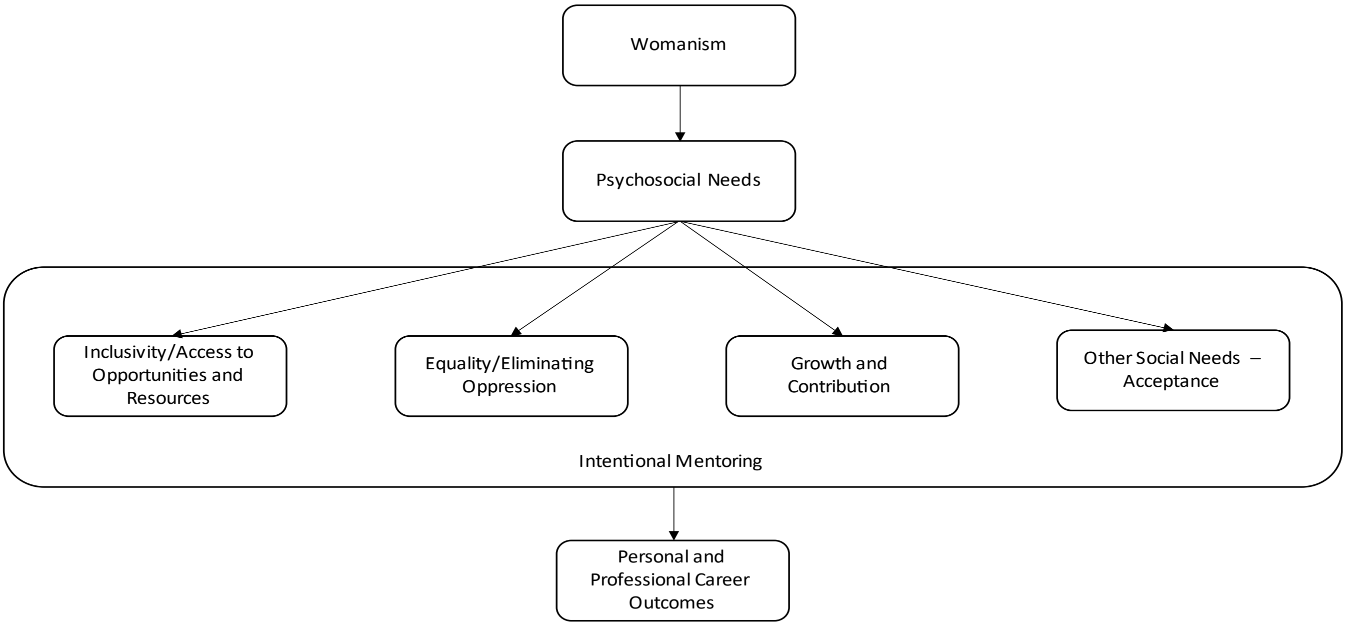
Table 2 – Roles of Individuals and Organisations in Intentional Mentoring

Individual Level (Mentor/Mentee roles)	**Organisational Level (Organisational roles),**
Build relationship	Establish Structures
Plan and implement targets	Create and support Safe spaces
Assess targets and goals to personal development achievements and career advancement realities.	Acknowledge and connect informal mentoring to organisational schemes
Acknowledge and connect informal mentoring benefits to mentoring process	Encourage progress and support (working patterns, identifying training needs)
Identity benefits and challenges with access to opportunities and resources	Ensure consistent access to opportunities and resources
Discuss and recognise unconscious biases within institutional systems	Implement targets to eradicate actions that can be perceived as systematic or institutional structural biases

Table 3- Respondent Identifier Table

Respondents	**Industry**	**Forms of Mentoring**	**Roles/functions**	**Form of Involvement**
R1	Oil and Gas/Energy	Informal	Engineer	Mentee
R2	Oil and Gas/Energy	Both	Management	Mentee/Mentor
R3	IT	Both	Engineer	Mentee/mentor
R4	IT	Formal	Support Staff	Mentee
R5	Health Sector	Formal	Nurse	Mentee
R6	Oil and Gas/Energy	Both	Engineer	Mentee
R7	Higher Education	Both	Associate Professor	Mentee/Mentor
R8	Higher Education	Both	Lecturer	Mentee
R9	Health Sector	Formal	Nurse	Mentee
R10	Oil and Gas	Informal	Project management	Mentee
R11	Third Sector	Informal	Planner	Mentee
R12	Third Sector	Informal	Administrator	Mentee
R13	Higher Education	Formal	Lecturer	Mentee
R14	Construction	Both	Management	Mentee/mentor
R15	Higher Education	Both	Lecturer	Mentee
R16	Energy Sector	Both	Projects	Mentee
R17	Audit firm	Formal	Accountant	Mentee
R18	Energy Sector	Informal	Engineer	Mentee
R19	Higher Education	Informal	Lecturer	Mentee
R20	Higher Education	Both	Lecturer	Mentee
R21	Oil serving Firm	Both	Analyst	Mentee/mentor
R22	IT	Formal	IT support	Mentee
R23	Care Home	Formal	Carer	Mentee
R24	Legal firm	Formal	Advisor	Mentee
R25	Health sector	Formal	Nurse	
R26	Higher Education	Both	Senior Lecturer	Mentee/mentor
R27	Council Administrator	Informal	Administrator	Mentee

Figure 1. Intentional Mentoring as a means of Fulfilling the Psychosocial Needs of African Women


Womanism
Psychosocial Needs
Inclusivity/Access to Opportunities and Resources
Equality/Eliminating Oppression
Growth and Contribution
Other Social Needs – Acceptance
Intentional Mentoring
Personal and Professional Career Outcomes