

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Social Work Practice on 26/08/22, available at:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02650533.2022.2115473> .

The emotional labour of decolonising social work curricula

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In the light of global calls to decolonise the curriculum and the national impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, there is pressure on social work academics to review, deconstruct and decolonise social work curricula. Social work education places strong emphasis on anti-oppressive, relationship-based practice that acknowledges diversity, social and economic injustice (BASW, 2018). This creates additional complexities and pressures for educators attempting to deconstruct social work curricula. This paper considers the emotional labour that such a task entails, and the usefulness of applying psychoanalytic concepts to understanding this emotional labour. It does this by exploring a critical incident and examining the complexities that educators face in constructing decolonised curricula within a marketized academy. It makes recommendations about the kinds of resources that are needed to support educators, especially Black educators.

Keywords: decolonising curricula, emotional labour, racism, relationship-based practice, Black educators

Background

In this reflective paper, I consider, from the perspective of a Black female academic, the usefulness of applying psychoanalytic concepts to understanding the emotional labour involved in decolonising the social work curriculum.

I do this by initially defining my position as a Black academic, the concepts and contexts of decolonising the curriculum and emotional labour to social work education, especially for Black academics in higher education institutions (HEIs). Next, I reflect on a critical incident and consider the light this sheds on the complexities of working towards decolonised social work pedagogy. I then consider how the application of psychoanalytic concepts can contribute to our understanding in this area, and discuss possible ways forward.

Even though I am an Asian woman, I have used the term Black throughout this paper, in preference to the contemporary phrase 'BAME' (black and minority ethnic).

At the time of writing, there is debate about the use of the term BAME, with some people rejecting an overarching categorisation that implies homogeneity (Dacosta et al, 2021; Ali, 2020; Fakim & Macauley, 2020). I have taken the position of using Black, with a capital B, 'in its broad political and inclusive sense to describe people in Britain that have suffered colonialism and enslavement in the past and continue to experience racism and diminished opportunities in today's society' (Unison, 2013). (See also Dominelli, 1988.)

Defining 'decolonising the curriculum'

The term 'decolonising the curriculum' (Alvares and Faruqi, 2011) has taken on a global momentum in recent years. It has been defined as 'creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university' (Keele University, 2021) and is seen as a way of moving beyond the vestiges of colonialism and a Eurocentric curriculum to one that is more inclusive of the student population it serves.

It may be helpful to briefly clarify some commonly used terms. Colonisation refers to the process of internalising the coloniser's culture, while vilifying that of the colonised. Coloniality refers to the historical holding of power that continues to be exercised beyond formal colonial administrations. Decolonisation is the process of 'deconstructing and challenging the ideology of colonisation' (Mathebane, et al, 2018).

As it can be seen, these terms are powerful and emotive in themselves, and require a degree of emotional resource to digest them. I will return to this issue later in the paper.

All social work courses approved by Social Work England have a responsibility to ensure that they are working towards decolonising the curriculum (SWE, 2021).

However, for educators in Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) the term decolonising the curriculum often sits alongside other terms which form the basis of widening participation (Greenbank 2006) and making education more accessible and inclusive (McDuff et al, 2018). This includes a consideration of how to close the attainment gap between the higher and lower achieving students, including closing the BAME attainment gap (McDuff et al, 2018). Some vocational courses (including Social Work) will also have been impacted by the wider repercussions of the Black Lives Matter movement and will be considering how to address values and practice related issues in their curricula. An awareness of this wider context is important, as it sets the background against which educators are working to decolonise curricula.

While decolonising the curriculum is a global movement, part of its complexity lies in the fact that how the term is deconstructed needs to happen at a local and individual level. For example, the meaning it holds for scholars in countries such as Zimbabwe (where it may be seen as essential to strip away the legacy of western knowledge and theories that have been left over from colonialism (Mabvurira, 2018) is very different from the work in China, a country that was never 'colonised' by the west, but where western knowledge and theories about social work have still come to influence practice, often at the negation of local knowledge and practices (Sim et al, 2017). Some Chinese scholars prefer to focus instead on the 'indigenization and authentization of social work' (Cheung & Liu, 2004).

Within a UK context, many Black 'home' students attending university have parents and grandparents who originated from the British Commonwealth, and have their own complex and rich narratives around migration. It would be easy to fall into broad assumptions and stereotypes about what decolonising the curriculum may mean

for them. Bunce et al's (2019) and Richardson's (2015) investigation of Black students' experiences in HE provide a useful analysis.

Decolonising the curriculum and social work education

Considerations of decolonising the curriculum in social work education need to take into account the professional nature of the courses which in England are approved and validated by Social Work England (SWE, 2021) and need to meet professional requirements. These include a detailed understanding of UK law and policy relating to social work, and an assessment of students' ability to meet all of the standards in the Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW, 2018) including those relating to 'values and ethics', 'diversity and equality', and 'rights, justice and economic well-being'. These skills are mapped into the course and students are required to demonstrate their working knowledge and understanding of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, (ADP, AOP).

Bringing these different strands together, can lead to a sense of overwhelm for educators at the complexity of task. This highlights the degree of emotional labour that is involved. The term 'emotional labour' was coined by Hoshschild (1983) from her research into the training of flight attendants, who had to learn to suppress their emotions and instead offer a presentation of themselves that was more aligned to meeting customer satisfaction. Hoshschild interpreted this as the commodification of emotion, where authentic expression of emotion had to be suppressed. She felt that something important – sacred even – was lost in this exchange.

Hoshschild's (1983) concerns about the commodification of emotions within a context of marketization is also relevant within the marketization of higher education

(Molesworth, 2010). Educators have increasingly had to work with students who see themselves more as consumers who have specific entitlements and not necessarily as seekers of knowledge (Andrews and Higson, 2008). Educators have had to learn ways of managing this.

The challenge is to produce decolonised curricula rich and textured enough to give space to explore ADP and AOP in a way that is digestible for students (enabling them to be stretched and not feel persecuted) and is also emotionally manageable for educators, recognising that the emotional labour involved for Black staff will be different from that of white staff.

How both Black and white students are supported to expand their understanding of AOP requires a supportive staff team where there is space and permission to have genuine and frank discussions.

The wider HE context for Black educators

Having set the general context, in this section, I focus on the complexities for Black educators decolonising the curriculum. ‘HESA's Higher Education Staff Statistics 2019-20 show the proportion of professors in UK higher education institutions who are Black (1%) or Asian (8%)’ (Advance HE, 2021). This suggests that Black educators face additional pressures in the work to decolonise the curriculum, based on their structural marginalisation. Thankfully, a small amount of literature is now beginning to emerge which explores this dynamic (see Gunaratnam and Lewis, 2001, Doharty et al, 2021, Doku, 2019 and Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020). However, I am unaware of any analysis that uses a psychoanalytic lense, to focus on the position of Black educators.

The critical incident

I begin my analysis by reflecting on a critical incident which arose in the marking of a set of assignments where I became concerned that a significant minority of students were making racist assumptions. I then consider the learning from this incident. I reflect on the pedagogical complexities, and the emotional labour of these tasks, and consider the extra complexity for Black educators, concluding with recommendations for the way forward.

The critical event in question was the process of marking a set of assignments which were written just before students went out to their first placements. The assignment centres on students' analysis of a case study, where they identify safeguarding concerns and risk factors within a household and signpost appropriate legislation. One of the aims of the assignment is to consolidate knowledge around risk and how this is can be assessed in an anti-oppressive way. This prepares students for their placements which begin directly after the submission of their work.

The case study consisted of 'S', a seventeen-year-old young woman with learning disabilities, from a 'strict Muslim' family being placed in a residential unit while her mother received treatment for cancer. She enters into a relationship with a seventeen-year-old young man, called 'J' and gets pregnant.

When I devised the case study, I hoped it was nuanced and would encourage students to think beyond broad stereotypes of race, culture, and disability. Students were given a three-hour assignment preparation class in which learning outcomes and marking criteria were clarified (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). They had an opportunity to question their own assumptions by working together in groups, to identify the different areas of risk and the appropriate underpinning policy and legislation (Milner, 2020).

I began marking and found, as usual, a wide range of abilities and perspectives.

However, as the process of marking continued, I found that rather than settling into a rhythm with the marking, as I would normally do, I found myself increasingly on edge, at times becoming distressed and defended. This was because, in my view, a significant minority of students were making racist and disablist assumptions. Some would then go on to apply these in an oppressive way in terms of possible social work intervention.

For example, some students assumed 'S's 'strict Muslim family' meant they were fundamentalists who would force her to have a termination or subject her to an honour killing. Another assumption was that the young people would be unable to care for the baby, as they had learning disabilities. These students saw the social work role as rescuing 'S' from the clutches of her extremist family, and supporting her in bringing up the unborn baby alone, away from her family, culture and faith.

Initially, I was shocked and distressed to discover that some students were making these assumptions. As I continued marking, and read more such assignments, I realised this was going to be a recurring theme in marking this batch of assignments. I came to dread beginning to read each essay, until I could establish the value-base of the student. This emotional reaction was unusual for me. As an experienced educator and marker, I have prided myself on taking a measured approach to marking, and ensuring that any comments made are constructive and helpful. However, I found myself becoming increasingly emotionally defended.

Deconstructing pedagogy

Looking back on the event now, I feel it is invaluable to reflect on it, and consider multiple perspectives around my role as an educator, and the pedagogic insights that can be gained from this. I do this by considering the expectations of me as a social work

professional, Black female educator, and leader, and some of the complexity around the expectations within higher education to decolonise curricula and the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) that is involved in carrying out this work.

For me, students making not only discriminatory, but also oppressive comments about service users, or people with lived experience (PLE), just before they were due to go out to their first placements, was of huge concern.

I realise now that what alarmed me was the way students had made inferences and assumptions without considering the need to question limited information (Cottrell, 2020). I was aware I needed to uphold the expectation (from myself, the students and from the institution) of primary trust: that I would act in students' best interest when marking their work (Oakeshott, cited in Frowe, 2005).

Carr (2011) refers to the moral virtues of courage, honesty and justice in educators. I confess, I felt far from courageous and had to hold back from being too honest when I came across judgemental comments. However, I understood the need to be just. It was important to me to not criticise or condone students for their thinking, but at the same time, gently show them that they had made taken for granted assumptions that could be experienced by PLE as oppressive. It felt important to work alongside them, and not risk losing their trust, or 'othering' them.

However, it would be disingenuous of me if I did not consider my own intersectionality and the impact my social location was having on the marking process (Delgado and Stefanic, 2012). I am an Asian woman, from a Muslim background. Perhaps because of this intersectionality, I experienced many comments as blatantly racist and offensive. I had spent the previous academic year working with this group of students on a 30-credit module on ethics and diversity. It now came as a shock to me that students could still

make such overtly racist assumptions. If these comments had come from the general public, I would not have been surprised – but from this cohort, seemed unacceptable. The process of reading and marking each assignment, was at times, unbearable.

I realise now that perhaps my expectations had been unrealistic, especially as the students had not yet been out on their placements, where a lot of learning is usually consolidated and embedded. Ferguson (2018) picks up on Schon's (1983) point about the limits of reflection in action, noting that there are times, especially when the 'self' is under attack, where reflection is not possible. I certainly felt that my 'self' was under attack, and I needed to draw on my reserves of emotional intelligence to see me through the marking period (Yin, 2015).

Acknowledging the impact of 'sameness' and 'difference'

The concepts of 'sameness and difference' (Akhtar, 2013) are important here. This refers to the impact of social characteristics where practitioners can make assumptions about others on the basis of assumed similarities or differences. Yan's (2008) research showed the importance of acknowledging similarities as well as differences in social location. She found that Chinese PLE were reluctant to have Chinese social workers, as they feared practitioners would breach confidentiality in the local close-knit communities. They assumed that white practitioners would be more skilled and professional in their outlook, and better able to hold professional boundaries.

Similarities can also lead to assumptions being made about assumed commonality. A PLE being assessed by a social worker from the same race and background might assume that the practitioner has a shared knowledge of their cultural background and needs and will therefore understand these and represent them favourably. Differences

in social location can generate 'othering'. Practitioners can fall into the trap of making stereotypical generalisations of racial and cultural groups that they are unfamiliar with. This can then affect the service received by the PLE; for example, the perception that black and Asian communities look out for each other can prevent a practitioner from seeing the harsh reality of an individual's situation (Akhtar, 2016).

Practitioners need to be alert to the complexity of intersectionality, and the concepts of sameness and difference (Akhtar, 2016). I experienced white students as 'othering' 'S' and her Muslim parents, and, as a Muslim woman myself, I began to feel othered also.

After the marking was released, I was shocked and disappointed to realise and that some Black students (including Muslims) had made the same racist assumptions as their white colleagues.

On reflection, I realise that I had made assumptions about students' ability to analyse and not make racist assumptions. Fook et al's (2000) research into how social workers develop their professional identities is pertinent here. The research team identified seven stages of professional development: 'pre-student', beginning social work training, completing social work training, becoming a competent qualified professional, becoming proficient, becoming experienced and finally, becoming an 'expert'.

The students were at stage two: beginning social work training. According to Fook et al's (2000) definition, I was at a much later stage. As an experienced practitioner and educator, I had lost sight of this, and of the complexities of working with intersectionality in social work education (Robinson et al, 2016).

Fook & Gardner (2007) point to the importance of stepping outside the story, to consider relationships of power within narratives. These students had not yet been on

placement. And so, unless they had relevant social work experience, their analysis would be 'self-centric'.

Some Black and Muslim students were similarly in an early stage of professional development, where their focus was on achieving technical proficiency of what they perceived to be institutional expectations, rather than adopting an open and questioning outlook. The focus at this stage is on discarding one's personal values, so one can achieve technical proficiency (Fook et al, 2000). I wondered about the parts of identity that had to be discarded by Black and Muslim students in order for them to do well academically or to achieve perceived technical proficiency – what Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2015) refer to as discordant professional practice – where professionals act unethically or neglectfully when they should know better.

The concept of epistemic reflexivity (Taylor and White, 2000) is also helpful – I reconsidered if there was scope to create more spaces where students could become aware of the assumptions that underpinned their practice and how this might lead to dangerous, or oppressive practice; and also questioned if this something that could naturally evolve during the course of their first placements.

These reflections were helpful to me in clarifying my expectations for that module and to shift the focus of scrutiny from the module, to consider the impact of the wider learning context.

I considered the cultural milieu of HEI's: the current climate versus the aspirational climate in which curricula could be 'decolonised', including possible unconscious notions of white fragility (Di Angelo, 2011).

Fook (2017) refers to the 'hidden curriculum' - the messages students implicitly pick up

but which are not necessarily articulated in the curriculum. She also refers to hidden cultures in HEI's. This enabled me to reflect about possible implicit messages that educators can hold about concepts such as decolonising the curriculum.

These might include assumptions and narratives such as, 'Yes, of course it is important to decolonise the curriculum, but:

- We are social workers: we practice in an anti-discriminatory way already. So of course, we are aware of our unconscious bias and how it impacts on us as educators.'
- We teach students all the PCFs, so, of course our curriculum is accessible.'
- We are a professional course – we need to teach students about UK law and social policy – there are limits to the extent to which we can decolonise the curriculum.'

Such narratives can act as defenses, preventing authentic dialogue that could enable course teams to explore the assumptions underpinning their practice, and open up spaces for greater critical reflection (Doku, 2019). Benchmark statements from the Quality Assurance Agency (2019), or Social Work England (2021) can be experienced as overwhelming mandates. However, educators have the power to create curricula, specify learning and assessment outcomes. Change is possible once a team commitment is made, and a decolonising mindset established.

In my own explorations, I became aware of the isolation and the emotional labour involved for Black educators (Doku, 2019). I have found Doharty et al's (2021) paper on critical race counter stories helpful in articulating the intense isolation of Black academics. It also captures the trace of parody around the issue. In articulating rage at the constant micro (and often macro-) aggressions, Black academics risk being further

othered, as their behaviour can be mis-interpreted as paranoid or unprofessional (Brown et al, 2019).

The spotlight of surveillance is a relevant factor here. Evetts (as cited in Sachs, 2016) refers to increased surveillance and measurement of performance, and how the very idea of performance becomes the site of the struggle. It is unsurprising if the intensity of the emotional demands placed on Black educators, lead them to question organisational pressures to ensure curricula are decolonised. Bhopal and Pitkin's (2020) thoughts resonate here. In their examination of several HEI's Race Equality Chartermark (REC) policies, they found that the 'enactment of policy making on race through the REC worked to benefit HEIs by adhering to White normative practices and behaviours which contribute to a system which reinforces and perpetuates White privilege' (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020, p530).

Black educators are often put in the position of leading change on decolonising curricula. So, as well as managing the emotional labour involved in deconstructing and implementing decolonised curricula, and facing the defences of predominantly white staff teams, they also need to protect themselves from the counter-transference of an organisation that puts pressure on them to carry out policies so it can be seen to be working towards inclusivity while it actually perpetuates white privilege (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020).

One way around this impasse is for educators to move beyond the institution's paradigms and standards of practice, to their own sense of standards and good practice (Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996). Decolonising the curriculum is an ongoing process, that in turn needs an ongoing commitment. This includes a willingness and openness to

have difficult conversations, to learn to speak beyond politically correct dialogues, to find a way of speaking that is authentic, and enables individuals to appropriately challenge each other's unconscious biases, and to be aware of the defensive, if unconscious reactions of 'othering' Black colleagues.

I return to the concept of emotional labour and its relevance to decolonising the curriculum. Managing the process of decolonising curricula is an emotionally laden task. It can, at times take educators over the edge of what feels manageable. Black educators, especially, if left unsupported, risk feeling violated – as if the burden of carrying out their duties somehow desecrates some essential aspect of themselves. It can lead to feelings of anger, resentment, shame and inadequacy.

Gunaratnam and Lewis's thoughts (2001) on 'racialising emotional labour and emotionalising racialised labour' have been useful in helping me to reflect on the intense emotions I have both experienced and observed in others. They recognise that emotional and racial dynamics cannot be considered 'by appeals to the rational' but point to the need to integrate complex emotions about one's 'self' and 'others'.

Black educators may have to split off from the part of them that feels violated, and instead, focus on presenting a reasonable, calm self that can offer constructive, positive feedback to students, and offer an open forum to colleagues in which they can off-load their frustrations as white educators. It may seem as if there is no space for them to express their intense feelings as Black educators, thus heightening the sense of them working essentially in a white academy.

I have found Crenshaw's term 'mutual elision' (cited in Leavitt and Harris, 2020) useful. Leavitt and Harris use a psychoanalytic framework to define 'mutual elision'. They describe it as a psychical force operating at the interface between individual and

social-unconscious.’ ‘Elision’ here is a way of concealing oppression through mutual denial between the oppressor and the oppressed. Both deny that not only is such subordination possible, it is actually happening.

For Black educators in predominately white staff teams, the ‘mutual elision’ is around denying the way in which they are othered’, by being placed in an untenable position. This is at both a team level, and at a structural level, within the organisation. In giving responsibility for decolonising the curriculum to Black educators, the organisation can abdicate its responsibilities. If the team succeeds in meeting the set performance targets, the success belongs to the organisation. But if they fail, the fault can easily be lodged with the Black educator.

Decolonising the curriculum is not necessarily about creating a more level playing field for Black students, it is about creating an environment which disrupts racial and other divisions, creating a higher level of consciousness for all students (Cane, 2021). This cannot be achieved without disrupting racial and other divisions between educators.

Recommendations

Decolonising the curriculum cannot be divorced from the other strategic priorities of HEI’s, nor can it be separated from the structural inequalities inherent within HEIs themselves. Any authentic change needs to take place top down – with senior managers being seen to put their own house in order – by taking significant actions to create more transparent processes to reduce nepotism.

HEI’s are beginning to set up sub-groups for Black staff, as a forum for them to be able to articulate their needs. These are still viewed with suspicion and there appears a long way to go win the trust of Black staff.

The process of decolonising the curriculum is not something that can be contained within a limited timescale. By its nature, it is ongoing. Any milestones around this need to be realistic.

An authentic engagement with this task needs genuine commitment to ‘stay with it’ and to also ‘stay with difficult conversations’. For some teams, this may mean using an external facilitator. Others may already have the resilience to weather stormy conversations.

Any ‘change team’ needs to acknowledge the emotional labour of the work, and also recognise that the emotional labour for Black educators will be different than for white. Care needs to be taken to protect Black educators from the unprocessed projections within the team and wider organisation. Some kind of position statement from leadership teams naming this issue would give a much-needed mandate to enable Black educators to position themselves in a way that protects their emotional well-being.

Confidential one to one or group support for Black educators should also be made available, as an voluntary, safe space to digest, and make sense of issues that may arise. This would also give a clear strategic message that Black educators are being supported and upheld in this work, although this relies on the provision of skilled facilitators who, in turn, are supported appropriately.

Conclusions

For many Black students and educators, navigating the daily experience of a predominantly white and racist academy has a huge emotional toll that then reverberates throughout the learning community. If, as Cane (2021) suggests, decolonising the curriculum is about disrupting racial and other divisions, and creating a higher level of

consciousness for all, this can't be done without disrupting racial and other divisions between educators. This needs to be done in a relationship-based way that recognises the intensity of the emotional labour involved, and the defended tendency for mutual elision (Crenshaw, cited in Leavitt and Harris, 2020) to occur. This is the process whereby oppression is concealed through mutual denial. The provision of open, and skilled outside facilitation that can name this process in a skilled, compassionate way may be one way of opening up the discussion.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to John Hammond for his support in reading an early draft of this paper.

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