Walking a tightrope without a safety net:

A systems and psychodynamic exploration into the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles in the UK

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Abstract

This study employed a systems psychodynamic approach to explore the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles within UK organisations. A constructivist phenomenological enquiry was undertaken, using a psychoanalytically informed method, Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) - which involved semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of six Black women of African and African-Caribbean heritage across various sectors in the UK. The data was analysed using Grounded Theory, with a systems psychodynamic lens applied to augment the findings.

The study revealed that Black women in senior leadership often struggle to fully take up authority, and their experiences can be metaphorically described as "*walking a tightrope with no safety net*." Five key themes emerged: *systemic racism enacted through microaggressions; playing it safe; a projected sense of inadequacy; masking emotions; negative stereotype threats.*

Drawing from these findings, the study proposes three theoretical ideas for organisations to explore in order to better understand the complex dynamics shaping these challenges. It concludes with a set of recommendations for interventions aimed at creating environments in which Black women in senior leadership roles feel seen, safe, and authorised to lead with confidence and authenticity.

The three theoretical ideas proposed in this study to explain the difficulties faced by Black women in senior leadership are:

1. *Black women in senior leadership roles find it difficult to take up authority because of systemic racism enacted in overt and covert microaggressions. They experience the system as too dangerous, prompting the use of coping strategies to survive in role.*

2. *Through unconscious group processes Black women may identify with negative projections of failure and incompetence from the dominant groups, resulting in a sense of inadequacy in role and failure to perform in authentic ways and take up authority.*
3. *Black women often draw upon internalised personal defences. These defences influence how they take up leadership roles. If personal defences fail, they will resort to quitting to protect themselves.*

Keywords: Systemic racism, internalised racism, intersectionality, authority, projections, projective identification.

Table of Contents

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

GLOSSARY OF PSYCHOANALYTIC TERMS

Term	Definition	Source
Countertransference	A specific reaction or response to another person's emotions. This is an unconscious process, which may arise out of context, it may be a particular feeling, a desire to behave in a particular way or a pressure to take up a particular role. Being attuned to this can reveal information about the emotional state of the other.	Halton, 2019
Defended subject	Anxiety is inherent in the human condition, specifically that threats to the self, create anxiety and where memories of events are too anxiety provoking, they will either be forgotten or recalled in a modified, by employing psychological defences such as repression, denial or projection, amongst others.	Hollway & Jefferson, 2009
Projections	Projections refer to the state where an individual has some difficult emotions that they cannot manage, and they repress or split them off from consciousness, and project them into some object or person in their external world.	Halton, 2019
Projective identification	An unconscious process where the recipient of the projected unwanted emotions identifies with them as if they are theirs.	Halton, 2019
Transference	Where an individual or group transfers their own emotions to another – this could be the consultant or researcher.	Halton, 2019

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CHAPTER 1: THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

1.1 Background of the Research

Versey et.al (2019), "*if racism is the smog that we all breathe - to what extent do individuals and groups navigate, rather than accept it*" p. 296.

This study explored the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles within UK organisations. Its purpose was to understand why it is often difficult for Black women in these positions to fully take up authority, and to examine the conscious and unconscious factors that contribute to these challenges. The study also investigated the strategies Black women employ to survive in senior leadership roles, and why some are able to thrive while others merely survive or ultimately leave these roles altogether (Black Women in Leadership Network, 2022).

My own lived experience as a Black woman in leadership roles in the UK, spanning more than two decades, sparked my interest in this area. This study is, in many ways, a form of *me-search*, an effort to make sense of the phenomena that have shaped my own leadership journey.

That journey began with my initial aspirations to enter leadership and progress to senior roles, which at the time felt like breaking the "glass ceiling." Today, this metaphor has evolved to the concept of the "concrete ceiling" (Barnes, 2017), reflecting the even greater difficulty faced by women of colour in reaching the top. My path as I progressed from clinical leadership positions to senior leadership roles in the NHS, and more recently in the private healthcare sector, stands as a testament to the

complex challenges Black women face in seeking, attaining, and holding positions of power and influence.

This study has demonstrated that Black women face significant challenges in taking up leadership roles. Their experience can be aptly described by what Philogene (2024), Hines (2024), and Kramer (2020) have referred to as *walking a tightrope*, a metaphor that captures the delicate and precarious balancing act required to navigate leadership while managing racial and gendered expectations.

In my own roles as an executive coach, organisational consultant, and leader, I have frequently observed how I am misunderstood as a Black woman. I have noticed colleagues treading carefully around me, unsure of what to say or how to engage.

My hope is that through this study, and in my future work, I can contribute meaningfully to the growing body of literature exploring how and why Black women take up leadership roles in the ways that they do. I aim to deepen understanding of the factors both external and internal that shape their leadership identities, including the influence of personal background, lived experience, and internalised narratives. Ultimately, I hope this work supports the creation of environments in which Black women can be fully seen, heard, and empowered in leadership.

1.2 Researcher's background

My background is both important and pivotal to my motivations for pursuing this study. Growing up in Zimbabwe as the eighth child in a family of ten, I was always quietly confident and determined to achieve more than what I witnessed in my poor Black neighbourhood. I was in my mid-teens when Zimbabwe gained independence from British colonial rule, following years of armed struggle to break free from the British Empire. That historical context, coupled with my childhood experiences, instilled in me a deep sense of anger at injustice and a strong work ethic rooted in survival and resilience.

I grew up acutely aware of acts of discrimination and blatant racism. My father worked most of his life as a shopkeeper. We didn't have much, and it was common for my mother to send one of us to his workplace to ask for money to cover bills or buy food. I vividly recall one such occasion when I was sent home from school for unpaid fees. My father had to request his salary in advance to pay them. I remember standing there, witnessing how his white employer spoke to him, with a tone that was condescending and humiliating. The expression in my father's eyes was of shame masked with forced composure which has stayed with me ever since.

The segregation we lived with visible in education, housing, and access to services, reinforced that, as Black people, we had zero privileges. This experience gave me some determination to work hard to change the status of being at the bottom of the pile, a quest that has led me to do this Doctorate program, past mid-life.

My parents had only a basic education, but they understood the value of learning and did everything they could to encourage us to pursue education. My older siblings went on to hold a variety of jobs, including roles in sports, accounting, administration, manual labour, and healthcare. Each of us tried, in our own way, to escape the cycle of poverty measured by securing employment and moving out of the poor neighbourhood we grew up in. Sibling rivalry was a constant undercurrent in our household, and we each worked hard to make our parents and the wider community proud.

I became the first person in my family to earn a university degree, though not through the traditional route of entering university straight after secondary school. After completing my GCSEs with good results, I was admitted into nursing college. Upon completing my nursing diploma, I re-entered higher education to pursue A-levels, attending evening classes while working full-time as a nurse. The belief that hard work leads to success became a guiding principle for me during that period and has remained with me ever since.

In 1990, I moved to the UK. As a registered nurse, I progressed quickly and found success in the areas I worked in. I was soon exposed to small leadership roles, which I enjoyed, and this marked the beginning of my leadership journey in healthcare starting in the fast-paced environment of busy teaching hospitals in London.

As a junior nurse, I observed that those in positions of authority such as charge nurses, administrators, and general managers were predominantly white. However, I also noticed that many of the most skilled and clinically experienced nurses in the operating theatre were Black women, primarily of African-Caribbean heritage. I was struck by the disconnect between their expertise and their lack of representation in senior roles.

One day, I asked a senior Black nurse why she had not applied for the role of charge nurse, as she was already informally leading within the department. Her response has stayed with me: *“People like us don’t get promoted, and if you make the mistake of applying and getting the job, they make your life hell.”* Her words left a lasting impression. They reflected the unspoken yet widely accepted reality of the metaphoric glass ceiling, an invisible barrier that my Black colleagues seemed to acknowledge, whether explicitly or implicitly. That moment ignited something in me. I was determined to challenge that narrative by furthering my education and applying for senior roles, equipping myself with the qualifications and confidence needed to break through those barriers.

I completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Management Studies, followed by two MA degrees in management and leadership. These qualifications gave me the confidence to apply for managerial and leadership roles. However, in most of the roles I held across different NHS organisations, I frequently found myself as the only Black person within the senior leadership team. This often left me feeling “othered” and filled with anxieties about not belonging. At times, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude simply for being in the room.

In the earlier years of my leadership journey, I rarely attributed my position in these spaces to my own achievements, skills, or experience. I struggled to believe that I deserved to be there. In hindsight, I now recognise how the group may have unconsciously projected these emotions, perhaps viewing me as an outsider, questioning how I had attained my status. As a Black woman, I was likely not fully authorised or accepted by the group, and this othering rooted in unconscious dynamics of transference and countertransference, may have contributed to my

internalised feelings of being undeserving. My own gratitude for being “allowed” into these spaces may, in part, have been a defensive response to that unconscious rejection. Reflecting on this now, I wonder how much these dynamics influenced how I took up my position and authority as a senior leader. I remember the times I felt silenced, out of place, and incompetent experiences that left a lasting emotional imprint.

The discrimination I experienced felt more rooted in race than gender, which I attribute to the composition of the leadership teams at the time. Most of the senior leadership teams I worked with were predominantly white women. This led me to perceive that the “othering” I faced was based more on my Blackness than on my gender. I recall one organisation where a white male senior leader distinct within an otherwise all-female team was openly celebrated for his difference. In contrast, my difference was unacknowledged but deeply felt. I was hyper-aware of my racial identity in those spaces, even when it went unspoken.

The intersection of gender and race is something I have reflected on extensively. In the past, I may not have consciously identified my experiences as gender-related, likely due to the transgenerational impact of internalised racism and my upbringing in a colonised country where race was the most salient axis of difference. My early socialisation shaped my worldview, leading me to foreground race over gender in making sense of discrimination.

In the NHS, many of the leadership teams I worked with comprised mainly female healthcare professionals, like myself who had crossed the boundary into management. At times, these teams were nearly 100% female, though this shifted at the executive level, which was still predominantly white and male. Female leadership in healthcare

appeared to be accepted, perhaps unconsciously because of the caring primary task (Rice, 1963) of health organisations. However, in more recent years, as gender diversity has increased within leadership, I began to notice what was perhaps envy or competition from some white male colleagues, perhaps reflecting an unconscious desire to reclaim authority from the perceived other, in this case, the Black woman. Stein (1997) describes envy as an unconscious process involving feelings of ill-will or mortification towards the other. This made me think of the persistent societal narrative in the UK: that *"immigrants are here to steal our jobs."*

I also worked in organisations where discrimination was more overt. I was bullied, undermined, and frequently ignored in meetings. I recall feeling physically sick before meetings, anxious about speaking up, yet equally anxious about remaining silent. If I didn't speak, I feared being seen as incompetent; if I did speak, I feared the same judgment. I couldn't understand why I felt so unsure of myself in those moments. Over time, I came to realise that, as the only Black person in the room, I may have been carrying the group's unwanted projected feelings of incompetence, inadequacy, or difference. These group dynamics further exacerbated my self-doubt and shaped how I took up space and authority in those leadership roles.

As a Black person in predominantly white senior leadership teams, my blackness consistently marked me as the "other" a signal that, in the eyes of some, meant not good enough. I often felt the urge to disown aspects of my identity to be accepted and belong. I vividly recall the emotional drain even from deciding what to wear for work, whether to choose dark colours to remain invisible or bright ones in the hope of being seen and liked, and agonising over how my hairstyle would be perceived.

I became adept at self-regulating and masking my emotions as a survival strategy. There were two main reasons for this emotional masking. Firstly, I believed that no one would understand or care about my experiences and feelings as a Black woman, a belief I internalised from my upbringing, colonial legacies, and past encounters with discrimination and racial microaggressions. Secondly, I masked my emotions to hide any perceived weakness or uncertainty. I feared to be labelled as the “angry Black woman” if my views diverged from those expressed in meetings. Over time, I learnt to disown my emotions, conceal my vulnerabilities, and deny parts of my authenticity to avoid drawing unwanted attention.

One of my earliest coping mechanisms was what I called my “screaming sessions” during solitary drives home from work. These were attempts to release the emotions of anger, sadness, and isolation that I had accumulated during the day. I often dreaded arriving home in that state, ashamed to burden my family with how hard it sometimes was for me.

In my work as a systemic psychodynamic executive coach and organisational consultant, I observed that some Black women of African and African-Caribbean heritage faced similar struggles. These challenges often stemmed from being “the other” in leadership roles. I began to recognise that some of these difficulties could be attributed to what Armstrong (2005) describes as the “organisation-in-their-mind” that is, the individual’s internalised reality of the organisational culture, its systematic processes, and negative internalised beliefs (Lowe, 2013).

My personal struggles and the shared experiences of other Black women in leadership led me to wonder whether my experiences were unique or indicative of a broader phenomenon. I observed a few successful Black women CEOs in the NHS, in politics,

and other sectors, and I questioned how they navigated these challenges. Were their organisations more supportive of differences, or did they employ different strategies for coping with the pressures of being both Black and a senior leader?

Surviving as a senior leader became more manageable for me largely through the therapeutic and coaching work I undertook. This process allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how my differences impacted the ways I was received. I learnt how internalised experiences and narratives could be enacted in ways that undermined my confidence and fuelled self-doubt. The theoretical concepts and experiential work I engaged with during my MA in Organisational Consultancy at Tavistock enabled me to examine my emotions and group dynamics, helping me to understand how I could claim and, at times, why I failed to claim my authority in various settings.

This introspective journey sparked my curiosity about whether my struggles were a personal failing or symptomatic of a broader pattern affecting Black women in leadership. I also wondered whether there exists a prototype of a Black woman who succeeds while others falter. I felt compelled to share not only my own story but also the stories of other Black women in senior leadership roles. In doing so, I am reminded of Maya Angelou's (1978) poignant words:

> "*There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you*,"

and of bell hooks' (1994) reflection:

> "*I am grateful to the many women and men who dare to create theory from the location of pain and struggle, who courageously expose wounds to give us their experience to teach and guide, as a means to chart new theoretical journeys*" (p. 74).

1.3 The research question

My epistemological assumption that is, how we come to know what we know and how we make sense of the world (Crotty, 1998), is rooted in a constructionist perspective (Burr & Dick, 2017). This position is based on the belief that individuals construct their own versions of reality. By inviting participants to share their personal narratives, we can co-construct an understanding of the phenomenon under study. Constructionism acknowledges the subjective nature of knowledge, while recognising the existence of an external reality, a stance aligned with critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975). This epistemological orientation led me to adopt a qualitative research methodology, employing a systems psychodynamic lens to make sense of the data. This combined approach enables deeper exploration of the conscious and unconscious processes shaping organisational life and the lived experiences of individuals and groups within those systems. A more detailed explanation of the systems psychodynamic approach is provided on page 23.

My ontological position which is how I perceive reality is through the lens of my lived experiences, observations, and relationships with clients and groups, suggests that Black women in senior leadership roles often struggle to stay in role and fully take up authority. These lived realities formed the foundation for the development of my research question.

Primary Research Question:

What is the experience of Black women in senior leadership roles? A systems psychodynamic exploration.

Sub-questions:

- Is it difficult for Black women in senior leadership roles to take up authority?
- If so, what might be the conscious and unconscious factors contributing to this difficulty?
- What strategies do Black women in senior leadership roles use to remain in role?
- What factors influence whether a Black woman leader survives or thrives in a leadership role?
- What can be learnt by individuals and organisations from the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of my research is to explore the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles to answer the question whether it is difficult for Black women in senior leadership roles to take up authority and if it is difficult, I wanted to find out the conscious and unconscious factors contributing to the difficulties. Approaching my research, the basis of my ontology was that Black women in senior leadership roles find it challenging because of their differences due to race, I became more curious about the impact of racism.

The murder of George Floyd in 2020 in America brought race to the forefront and in the UK, we were reminded of other murders of Black people such as Stephen Lawrence where racism was named as a motive for the unlawful killing and organisations were deemed to have institutional racism (MacPherson, 1999) and in this case institutional racism, impacted on how the investigation of Stephen Lawrence's death was managed. George Floyd's death reignited in some instances the debate about race and race discrimination in organisations, prompting attention to practices around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).

Nkomo (1992), argued that race was always present in organisations even if silenced or suppressed supporting Essed's (1991) assertion of everyday racism. Nkomo (1992) used the analogy of the '*emperor has no clothes'*, implying that racism is in most organisations blatantly obvious, but the system remains unconscious or in some cases

conscious but opting to turn a blind eye to the associated racial discrimination experienced by Black people.

Some studies have shown that only a small percentage of Black women break the concrete ceiling to enter senior leadership roles and Bell (2004) cited racism as a root cause for this underrepresentation of Black women in senior leadership roles. For those that make it, it does not mean that they have overcome racism and are somehow now more immune to it but that they are now dealing with the subtle form of racism, microaggressions which can be overt or covert. The form of covert racism has been referred to as modern-day racism, ambiguous and is challenging to identify and acknowledge when it occurs (Dovidio et al., 2002). Racial microaggressions were described as:

> *"Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273).*

Sue (2010) proposed 3 forms of microaggressions which are microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidation. Microassaults he said are often more conscious and intentional whereas microinsults and microinvalidations are often more subtle and unconscious. Repeated microaggressions are pervasive and cause harm to affected individuals and can have a deleterious and cumulative psychological impact over time, Franklin (1999).

In the first part of this chapter, I explicate the concepts that underpins my research study which seeks to explore the experiences of Black women in senior leadership

roles. The second part looks at the available literature on the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles.

2.2 Theoretical framework

Theoretical framework will be discussed under the following headings:

1. Systems Psychodynamic theory
2. Racism
3. White Privilege
4. Internalised racism
5. Intersectionality
6. Feminism
7. Black women leadership

2.2.1 Systems and Psychodynamic theory

I employ the systems psychodynamic framework to explore the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles in UK organisations, which allows the exploration of both the conscious and unconscious view of what impacts on their taking up senior leadership roles. The psychodynamic theory is concerned with understanding the inner world of human beings and how we relate to other people, organisations and society.

The systems psychodynamic framework widely known as the Tavistock tradition of consulting in organisations originated from Freud's (1915) psychoanalytic theories,

Klein (1946) primitive anxieties, Winnicott, (1952:1956) holding environment, Lewin (1946) systems theory and Bion (1961) group processes in reference to his work at the Northfield Hospital working with war traumatised soldiers. Freud's work on the unconscious inspired Kleinian thinking on infant and adult development.

It is important to note the inception of this work founded by Crichton-Miller and Bion at the Tavistock clinic in 1920 with two aims, one to provide a service for men returning from the first world war who had shell shock trauma, and the other aim was to understand why leadership in the first world war had gone so wrong.

Some of the key players at the Tavistock Institute in the early stages in this field were Eric Miller, Menzies-Lyth (1988) on systems and defences, Emery (Trist et al., 1997), Jaques (1998), Trist (Trist & Murray 1990, 1993), Turquet, (1974, 1975). Von Bertalanffy (1950) influenced the work of Miller and Rice (1967), on open systems leading to socio-technical systems psychodynamics.

One of the important systems psychodynamic perspectives in relation to researching individual's lived experience, is Klein's objective relations theory (Klein,1946), which sees individuals as object-seeking and according to Czander, 1993 permitting an inclusion of "*environmental or cultural factors in a systematic theory*". p. 43. Hirschhorn (1993) commented that objects relations theory highlights how people use one another to stabilise their inner lives, helping to understand how psychodynamic processes within people shape the relationship between them.

The other perspective underpinning systems psychodynamic perspective is that groups or organisations are social systems. Systems psychodynamic in reference to (Armstrong, 2010; Campbell & Huffington, 2008; Gould et al., 2001; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019) is the consultative approach applied when consulting to organisations. The basis of this approach is the acknowledgement that open systems are not only a rational system (Rice, 1963) but "*filled with intangibles that are complex sets of social relations*." (Czander, 1993, p.4). Menzies Lyth (1960) concept of social systems as a defence against anxiety came out of her study of hospital nursing which showed that organisations develop social defences which can be in the form of structures and practices serving defensive purposes to manage anxieties which are task related.

In undertaking research on the lived experiences of individuals in senior leadership roles in organisations, the taking up of their roles can be understood by exploring both the conscious and unconscious behaviours which makes taking up roles complex and intertwined. Long put it as:

> "*Role in work systems is not a simple position description or set of instructions. It is more dynamic and complex. The task system is made up of roles that are taken up in relation to tasks and those tasks in turn are related to organisational purpose. The task system has many roles that influence each other. Moreover, there is a continual process of negotiation between roles as the role holders go about engaging tasks together. (Long 2016,* p. 3).

The concept of valency (Bion, 1961) which is the individual's capacity to identify with certain kinds of projections resulting from their own past experiences, their own experiences, influences the role taken by individuals in a group is important for my study in relation to how Black women take up roles.

The systems psychodynamic concepts that will be referred to in this study include containment (Bion,1970), defences, projections, projective identification transference and countertransference (Halton, 2019), valencies, formal and informal sanctioning of authority (Obholzer, 2019), and Bion (1961;1962) unconscious group processes.

Projections refer to the state where an individual has some difficult emotions that they cannot manage, and they repress or splits them off from consciousness, and project them into some object or person in the external world. The person receiving the difficult emotion, will experience it and could enact it which is projective identification (Halton, 2019).

Countertransference is an important tool for inquiry into the other person's unconscious. It is described as a specific reaction to the other person's emotions, an unconscious process, which arises out of context (Diamond and Allcorn, 2003). In this case, other people's emotions are experienced as one's own and when the emotions appear disproportionate or are intense that is when a clinician, coach or researcher pays attention to the phenomenon to help make sense of it.

Individuals and groups will form social and personal defences to manage anxieties faced with the primary task. Primary task is described as that which the organisation is there to perform to survive (Rice, 1963). Lawrence (1977) further described the concept of the primary task into three types: normative (*what is formally suggested as the task of the organisation)*, the existential primary task (*the task the organisation and those in it believe they are performing*) and finally the phenomenal – (*which is what*

can be inferred from people's behaviours yet which lies out of their awareness) (Roberts 2019).

Menzies Lyth described defences as:

> *"Defences are, and can be, operated only by individuals. Their behaviour is the link between their psychic defences and the institution. Membership necessitates an adequate degree of matching between individual and social defence systems …If the discrepancy between social and individual defence systems is too great, some breakdown in the individuals' relation with the institution is inevitable." (1960, p. 115).*

As the theory developed Long (2015) contributed that defences can be against other emotions such as pride, greed, envy, sloth and anger. These two definitions imply that defences can be to manage anxieties relating to organisational tasks, or some individual deep-seated emotions which could be unknown, or an unthought known (Bollas, 1987). This can make it difficult to decipher what might be going on where unconscious dynamic processes are at play without employing a systems psychodynamic approach of enquiry.

Bion (1961) helps us to understand group dynamics and central to his theory is the role of the unconscious on group processes, stating that in any group, there are two different aspects of group functioning present. One is a work group that is concerned with the primary task and the other is a basic assumption group that behaves as if they had another purpose. There are three basic assumptions groups which are pairing, dependency and fight/flight. In pairing, two members of the group emerge as a strong creative pair to absorb the anxiety of the group. Basic assumption dependency is

where a group becomes dependent on a leader and in fight/flight, the group either attacks or flees from the anxiety provoking situation. Turquet (1975) added basic assumption one-ness which is an attack on differentiation and Lawrence (2000) me-ness where the group questions its existence as a group.

I found the systems psychodynamic framework to be pertinent for my study. This is because it applies psychoanalytic theory to explore meaning from unconscious individual behaviours and group processes, linking in the role and the organisation through open systems theory to understand unconscious processes at an organisation level which impact on how individuals act in role.

2.2.2 Racism

I found myself preoccupied with racism and finding it difficult to make sense of where to begin, and it appeared at the time I had lost all sense of what it all means. I had the notion that I should know more about racism, but I could not think about it, I could not find the words though I have lived with racism all my life. I realised that I was trying to remove myself from the topic thinking that this would help me manage the risk of bias as a Black researcher. I was trying to disown my experience and subjectivity which is an integral part of my research process (Smith ,1983).

I related this experience to perhaps the shame of owning my experience of racism and still being in the systems where it remains an unknown thought (Bollas, 1987). Kinouani (2020) refers to the avoidance by white people to talk about race and to avoid shame-based feelings and projecting them to non-whites who may introject them and

shaming them to silence, and in my case it shamed me to own and think about race which is ubiquitous, staring me in the face and heightened by the fact that I had to write about it. The following quotes brought some meaning to what I was experiencing at the time.

> *"To be black in a white world is an agony. This is because the white world is racist – if you are black, you are seldom allowed to be an ordinary, regular human being." Davids, F (2011).*

> *It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. —W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folks (1989 [1903]:3)*

I wanted to explore theoretical meaning of racism to help me make sense of the literature and anecdotes that the difficulties experienced by Black women in senior leadership roles stem from their differences of race. I turned to Dalal (2006) who is a psychotherapist and group analyst who himself has experienced racism and has studied it and written about it from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Dalal (2006) described racism in two ways. The first is that it is a form of organising people, commodities, and the relationships between them by utilising a notion of race and the second is that racism consists of the feelings of hatred, disgust, repulsion, and other negative emotions felt and expressed by one group for another. He referred to the psychoanalysis way of explaining the phenomenon by looking at the things that

take place in the “external” social world by examining what goes in the individual’s “internal” psychological world, citing the following:

> “*A group consists of individuals in a relationship to one another: and therefore, the understanding of [the individual’s] personality is the foundation for the understanding of social life.*” (Klein 1959, p. 247).

Dalal (2006) qualified this by referring to racism as being some kind of group phenomenon that “*sweeps up individuals into its path through the process of contagion or something similar,*” p.133. Individuals in this group will find themselves behaving badly, being swept up by the group, losing their civilised sensibilities and reverting to some primeval, savage state.

> “*All sociological problems are ultimately reducible to problems of individual psychology,*” (Fairbairn 1935, p. 241).

> “*The basis of group psychology is the psychology of the individual, and especially of the individual’s personal integration*.” (Winnicott 1965, p.146).

Dalal (2006*)* offers the idea that explaining racism based on psychoanalysis thinking cannot be separated from speculations about its causes. He went on to evaluate the different kinds of explanations for adult behaviour starting with Freud *(1912)*’s notion of ‘*transference*’ of repeating without remembering. This is where behaviours in adult life are said to be repetitions and versions of patterns laid down during infancy and childhood. An example is if the developmental events are experienced as traumatic

for instance, the adult may behave in disturbed and in some cases aggressive and could even be racist behaviours.

Secondly, is the explanation drawn on the individual/group dichotomy where racism is viewed as some kind of group phenomenon that sweeps up individuals into its path through the process of contagion or something similar. In this vein, good people find themselves behaving badly because of being swept up by the group, resulting in individuals losing their civilised senses and reverting to some primeval, savage state.

Thirdly, is the explanation that presumes we are driven to act in certain ways by our biological and genetic inheritance, specifically the instincts.

Fourthly, is the explanation that Dalal (2006) rated as the most common place in explaining racism which features the mechanisms of splitting, repression, and projection. It is evident in his paper that he challenges the idea of racism explained as arising from aggressive impulses which cannot be managed and spilt off from consciousness, repressed, and projected into some object or person in the external world. He posits that this explanation is limited to the level of a particular individual and fails to explain how and why it is that a whole group should simultaneously come to hold racist, hateful feelings toward certain other groups. In this case questioning why Black people become receptacles of unwanted problematic aspects, going as far as questioning why it is that sometimes Black people are receptacles and sometimes it is Protestants or even Jewish people.

In the same argument, he made the point that even though it is claimed that these groups become containers of these hateful feelings because they are previously "*socially sanctioned*" as deserving of these projections and so are already denigrated, it does not address the conundrum that how do these groups come to be socially sanctioned in the first place. Dalal further posits what I experienced as a disturbing fact regarding what happens to the unwanted aspects of the individuals who constitute these denigrated groups, such as Black, Jews and women. How do they / we get rid of problematic aspects of our internal worlds if we are not able to do so through the mechanism of splitting and projecting like non-denigrated groups are able to. This highlighted the privilege non-denigrated groups such as white people will always enjoy that Black people and other marginalised groups cannot.

Dalal (2006) highlighted the complexity of racism at different levels. Reference to psychoanalytic theory served the purpose to explain the internal world and the external world in how the dynamic of race is played out. Later in his paper, he introduced the notion of racialisation following a discussion on what race, culture and ethnicity evolved over the years and trying to denounce the notion of race, bringing in kinship across all humankind.

He asserted that racism is anything "*a thought, feeling or action – that uses the notion of race as an activating or organising principle*." p.157. From this assertion, the emphasis is on the act and Dalal suggests the use of the term racialisation as opposed to racism. This imbued me with the notion that though racism is apparent, it is the racialisation i.e. the activities which results in 'othering', emphasising differences and similarities, resulting in unbelonging experiences for Black people.

Dalal (2012), later likens racism to parasites entering the host, mimicking, and fooling the host into thinking that the parasite is a good and healthy part of itself, enabling it to deplete and weaken the host and hosts remaining powerless and done to. This implies the toxicity and widespread problem of racism and the slow progress organisations are making to address racial inequalities and poignantly for my research the continuing disproportionate representation of Black people in senior leadership roles.

Davids (2011) criticised Dalal for focusing on the external world perspective, diminishing the impact of the inner world on the dynamic of racism. Dalal counters this argument by referring to Foulkes (1971) that:

> "*The group, the community, is the ultimate primary unit of consideration, and the so-called inner processes in the individual are internalisation of the forces operating in the group to which he belongs*", p. 212.

In summing up, Dalal, 2020 stated that it is not projections and splitting that is a problem but the power relations being mobilised due to difference for example, race, gender, class and culture to generate the categories designed to distinguish the haves from the must-not haves based on the ideological and politicised phenomena to create divisions. This qualifies the statement by Littlewood and Lipsedge (1989), that projection is a mechanism not an explanation.

The discussions further awakened in me the curiosity about what the 'done to' person has internalised and how perhaps this impact how they receive the projections of

racism. Before I elaborate on this in a section on internalised racism, I will look at the notion of white privilege which is said to create the division in society.

2.2.3 White privilege

Race is what divides groups and evidently white people are privileged in society and Black people and other ethnic minority groups have and continue to fight for survival, for recognition, identity shifting to belong (Dicken & Chivex, 2018; Mullet et al., 2017). My study attempts to understand the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles and blackness as an identity forms a big part of the root cause for the difficulties they experience in organisations. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 2001) reminds us that for Black women there are three complex identities, race, gender and social class that intersect to disadvantage them. In this section I discuss white privilege as the foundation for this catastrophe.

There is evidence that the term race is a constructed concept created for economic and political purposes, and it is entrenched in our social structure, creating, and promoting white privilege (Morgan, 2020), which no one can be free of. Whiteness as a construct is not understood by white people in general, a phenomenon referred to by Mills (2007) as "*white ignorance*". DiAngelo (2018), introduced the term "white fragility", the inability of white people to tolerate racial stress which she argues is not a weakness but a way of protecting white privilege.

Bhopal (2018) who contributed towards busting the myth of a post-racial society argued that neoliberal context policy making, have done nothing but further

marginalise the position of BME (Black and Ethnic Minority) groups, reinforcing the position of whites where whiteness is privileged and prioritised.

Although her focus is on the field of higher education, where she is a Professorial Research Fellow, her assertions about white privilege have relevance across sectors. I have drawn on some of her work to better understand how white privilege operates both overtly and covertly in the experiences of the Black women. Her arguments are grounded in the notion that whiteness is not merely an individual identity but is institutionally embedded as the dominant norm across organisational systems. Despite this, the majority of white people continue to deny the existence of structural racism and its manifestations (Eddo-Lodge, 2017).

Some Black women speak of being silenced an experience that aligns with Kinouani's (2020) framing of silencing as a defence mechanism used to uphold existing power structures in organisations. This silencing serves to protect what she terms *white* peace*,* a superficial harmony maintained by avoiding discomfort and the white psychic equilibrium*,* which resists challenges to white dominance and entitlement. These frameworks have helped me make sense of the subtle yet powerful ways in which organisational dynamics maintain racial hierarchies and marginalise Black women in leadership roles.

The denial of structural racism can also be understood as a defence, an avoidance of the guilt and shame that would arise from acknowledging colonial history and the intergenerational impact of slavery and racial trauma. Facing these truths would require an acceptance of complicity in historical and ongoing systems of oppression. Instead, these difficult emotions of guilt and shame are often projected onto the lesser

other, through the unconscious process of projection and projective identification who then come to experience them as their own (Halton, 2019). This dynamic helps explain the emotional burden carried by Black women in leadership roles, who may unknowingly absorb and embody the unacknowledged guilt of the system around

Kinouani (2020), made some strong statements contributing to the topic of racism in groups, calling it silencing Black people and prioritising white people. The impact of this is the failure for Black people to talk about their experiences and be believed and worked with. I hypothesise that silencing Black people is a phenomenon in organisations and one of the reasons why Black people especially Black women do not progress further into more senior roles.

Predominantly white spaces make white practices the norm and non-whites are othered, this in the UK stems from the processes of structural racism which works to disadvantage Black people and advantage whites. Bhopal (2018) reminds us that white privilege can operate in subtle and nuanced ways. An example can be how Black women's opinions can be turned down and yet same point from a white person receives attention. These acts of microaggressions (Sue, 2010) leaves the affected individual confused and wondering about the intentions of the perpetrator and it is bound to affect their performance in an organisational role for instance.

Bopal (2018) concludes that "*race remains central to the judgements and values made about who is deserving and who is undeserving, who belongs and who does not*". p. 164, validating Dalal, 2020's assertion of the haves and must not haves. Bopal (2018) goes on to say that whiteness and white privilege continues to dominate with white groups doing everything within their overwhelming power to protect and perpetuate

their own positions and status, a phenomenon echoed by (Lowe, 2013 & Morgan, 2020). To this end, there is the dynamic that whiteness is not consciously known to white people, and they do not know how their being is experienced by non-white groups and individuals (Kinounani, 2019). This consciously unknowing or blindness, Kinounani, argues that it serves to keep status quo undisturbed and leadership white (Lowe, 2013).

2.2.4 Internalised racism

In this section I explore the notion of the inner world on the dynamic of racism to the person done to. I am curious about Pyke (2010)'s statement that it feels like taboo to talk about internalised racism and that it is dubbed a dirty secret (hooks, 1995; 2003; Russel et al, 1992).

Pyke (2010) went on to explore why, internalised racism is deemed so pernicious a topic to warrant a taboo describing it as the:

> "*Individual inculcation of the racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the white dominant society about one's racial group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for one's race and oneself*", p. 553.

This according to David (2009) is a set of self-defeating thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours that were developed because of one's lived experiences of racism or an effect of transgenerational racism (Volkan, 2001). Lipsky (1987) had defined it as the turning upon ourselves, our families, and our own people the distress patterns that result from oppression of the dominant society. This depicts an internalisation of

racism by its victims and Speight (2007) highlights the risk of psychological injury stipulating that:

> "*Racism is pervasive, operating at the interpersonal and institutional levels simultaneously, and its effects are cumulative, spanning generations, time, and place encompassing much more discreet acts" p. 127.*

This highlights the impact of racism on individuals from both an interpersonal and institutional levels (Versey et.at, 2019).

Pyke (2010) posited that sociology's failure to engage a sustained study of internalised racial oppression could be a defensive response to the concern that such research will be misinterpreted as reflecting some weakness of the oppressed. She goes on to warn that the silence on this topic buttresses these misconceptions, while denying the existence of some of racisms most insidious and damaging consequences.

David et. al (2019), set out to do a systemic review of the psychological literature on racism most insidious consequences, that is internalised racial oppression, a hidden, covert nature of racism. As I explore the unconscious factors contributing to the challenges experienced by Black women in senior leadership roles, I agree with Pyke (2010), that it is important to understand internalised racism and how oppression is internalised and produced to forge effective methods of resistance. This is important based on the arguments of authors such as David and Okazaki (2006) that with internalised racism, members of the oppressed racial group tolerate, minimise, deny, and perhaps justify racism. Any such dynamic, would mean that nothing changes, and Black women continue to experience difficulties resulting in them avoiding senior

leadership roles where they find their differences highlighted and their actions are receiving extra scrutiny compared to white people in similar roles.

Hall defines internalised racism as "*the 'subjection' of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define them*" (Hall 1986, p. 26). This could explain the apathy and acceptance of racism and the struggles experienced in organisations and where members of the disadvantaged group may legitimise social hierarchies, even to the expense of their own group's interest (Jost and Banaji, 1994).

Internalised racism can be likened to cancer, often lurking in one's body, progressing without them knowing and could lead to a dangerous, harmful, and slow death. In this form of racism, the symptom is oppression which is both a state and a process. David and Derthick (2014), offer the definition that oppression is the state where there is unequal group access to power and privilege, and the process of oppression is the way in which inequality between groups is maintained. Privilege is enjoyed by the dominant group whether they are aware of their privilege or not, whether they want it or not, and whether they are well intentioned or not, it gives them political, social, and cultural advantage over members of marginalised groups.

Fanon (1967) referred to the sustained denigration and injustice that the oppressed are subjected to often leading to self-doubt, identity confusion and feelings of inferiority. This is supported by Memmi (1965) a post-colonial scholar, who wrote that the oppressed may believe the inferiorising messages about one's racial group. Earlier, Clark and Clark (1950) undertook a quantitative based psychological study on

internalised racism and concluded that internalising inferiority complex can begin at a very young age. Acknowledging that Clark and Clark's research is old, Vaninetti (2023) commented it should still be viewed as a respected piece of work, which I agree with because some of the interpretations from the study such as racial inferiority and self-hatred still occur among the marginalised groups. I believe if the study is replicated the results will be different in some areas but could be similar in other areas where awareness of difference can be at a very young age based on how diverse the area is.

Alleyne (2004) undertook qualitative research enquiring into Black workers experience where she used the findings to inform practice within the psychotherapy realm. Her findings are relevant to the subject of internal racism. She referred to the existence of 'internal oppressor' in Black people, a post traumatic syndrome centred on the activation of memory prints from the legacy of their painful historical past, a symptom of intergenerational trauma (Stobo, 2005). The internal oppressor rests in the shadow of the self. This could include the prejudices, the intergenerational racial trauma suffered in the past becoming the baggage we take with us in our life journey and including the organisations that we work.

The literature so far has shown that experiencing racism over lifetimes and generations can lead individuals to internalise the messages of inferiority they receive about their groups and to develop animosity toward others of the same race. The oppressed group could develop idealisation of the oppressor, which leads to identifying with the colonizer against the black / native self. Fanon, (1986) referred to this as the Black person's deep unconscious wish to be white, the "*black problem*"

which exist in the mind of the black colonial subject. He conceptualised that Black people experience their internal worlds governed by the social structures of white supremacy, manifested in the sense of otherness, inferiority, and self-contempt.

Freire (1970) a post-colonial scholar, contributed that because of the inferiority complex attached to their racial or ethnic group and to emulate the oppressor because their ways are seen as superior, the oppressed might develop a desire to distance oneself from their own racial or ethnic group. I see this as competition and envy at times within subordinate groups in a bid to be seen and be accepted by the white people. What is conceptualised by Fanon and Freire is the internal unconscious exchange of splitting and projections of otherness, inferiority, hateful emotions by the powerful to the lesser groups described by Dalal (2006) as the most common occurring reason of racism which fails to address the external dynamic that is the whiteness and protection of the privilege that come with that status.

In their research paper, David et, al (2018) discuss the levels and manifestation of internalised racial oppression, a conceptual framework which states that internalised racism maybe expressed intrapersonally, interpersonally and institutionally. The most frequent known manifestation is intrapersonal when individuals hold derogatory, denigrating, or inferiorising attitudes or feelings towards themselves and enact such beliefs towards themselves. I would argue that the desire by people of colour to change themselves and be more like white people, is seen in some behaviours adopted by Black people in organisations which include, conforming, code switching to fit in. Some of these behaviours were noted in the literature on experiences of Black women in leadership roles in the following section.

Versey et al., 2019, define appropriated racial oppression as a term that reframes the construct of internalised racism:

> "*as a process whereby members of a group appropriate a dominant group's ideology, adapt their behaviour, and perceive a subordinate status as deserved, natural, and inevitable",* p. 297.

This follows the notion that there are repeated racial messages taken in through repeated exposure and then reflected through individuals' thoughts and behaviours and the way they present themselves to the world. This then according to Versey et al., is where appropriated racial oppression shows up as an instinctive to, or a deliberate strategy for, navigating normative whiteness ideals embedded in society. They referred to the responses to fit in by people of colour which is conforming to whiteness, and this could be in the form of conforming to norms and practices to secure privileges or be accepted.

Appropriated racial oppression can be a less restrictive conceptualisation than 'internalised racial oppression' based on the argument that it is not limited to accepting the negative messages about one's racial group but also includes the adoption, mastery, and use of various "tools of oppression" some of which may appear adaptive or positive at face value such as assimilations, "looking professional" or "respectable" Banks & Stephens, 2018; Campton & Carter, 2015; Tappan, 2006). This is questionable because what is referred to as positive or professional is an ideology based on white people's construct of what positive and professional looks like.

I agree with the thinking that internalised racism has problematic connotations attached to it, one is that it perpetuates the psychological field's tendency to over emphasise internal factors and, consequently, blame the individuals for the oppression instead of focusing on the reality that oppression is systemic. I find the theory of appropriated racial oppression pertinent, and it strengthens my comprehension of internalised racism, a disease symptomized by racism in organisation considering the experience of Black women in senior leadership roles. Appropriated racial oppression brings back to the discussion of whiteness or white supremacy as the source from which negative thoughts and actions emerge.

Focussing on internalised racism is like negating white supremacy but it is a phenomenon worth some serious attention because of some hidden injuries that cannot just be ignored and are damaging. I liked the quote: *The inner enemy is as much a formidable foe as the most manipulative {or oppressive} associate*. (George Bach, 1998) cited by Alleyne (2005). Could there be some aspects of Black women internal oppression, that they may perhaps hook onto such as previous experience racial discrimination impacting on their experiences as leaders. These could perhaps account for the highlighted theme of the need to conform, disowning their own identity to fit in or fighting to fit in and as Alleyne (2005) put it, becoming a confirmation of racist assumptions of the angry black women or being silenced as one example.

2.2.5 Intersectionality

There is growing relevance to the theory that Black women suffer double jeopardy resulting from their identity as black and female which is derived from the concept

intersectionality coined by Crenshaw (1989). She affirmed that Black women experience disadvantages through multiple sources of oppression, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. The central premise of intersectionality as it relates to Black female leaders referred to as gendered racism by Essed (1991) defines how race and gender affect their lived experience. Parker's (2005) research described intersectionality as a conceptual lens for interpreting the experiences of Black women in leadership roles within predominantly white organisations. Intersectionality defines the connection between how leadership shapes multiple identities and social identity (Sanchez – Hucles & Davies, 2010), which gives a useful angle for exploring leadership in the workplace for Black women.

Whilst Anthias & Yuvas-Davis (2006), Brah (1996) and Maynard (1994) portray intersectionality in more general terms, applicable to any groups, Essed (1991), Crenshaw (1989) and Harding (1997) portrayed intersectionality to women of colour.

Crenshaw (1989) illustrated the challenges faced by Black women in society using this imagery:

> "*Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group . . .tries to navigate the main crossing in the city. . . The main highway is 'racism road'. One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. . . She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression*" (cited in Yuval-Duvas, 2006, p. 196).

Collins (2009) stated that the experiences and social position of Black female leaders are unique, and I would add loaded and overwhelming. The effects of race and gender are not independent of one another but are intertwined and have multiplicative proportional representation (Burton et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019). Crenshaw (1989) makes a poignant argument that the dominant conception of discrimination conditions individuals to think about disadvantages occurring along a single categorical axis, which erases Black women in its conceptualization.

A study by Rosette and Livingston (2012) on whether individuals with more than one subordinate identity experience more negative leader perceptions than do leaders with single-subordinate identity confirmed that Black women leaders suffered double jeopardy and are evaluated negatively compared to Black men and white women and this arises more during conditions of organisational failures. They use the term 'dual-subordinate identities' for Black women comparing them with Black men who have a 'single-subordinate identity' and found that Black men are less disadvantaged. Rosette and Livingston found that Black women face obstacles both when being considered for a leadership position and when occupying leadership roles.

To summarise, Crenshaw (1989) identified that:

> "*Intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated*", p. 140.

This is supported by Yuval-Davis (2006) who indicated that multiple identities intersect with each other to influence lived experience.

2.2.6 Feminism

At the beginning of this journey, I was not so acutely aware of my gendered disadvantage but that of my race. This is perhaps due to growing up in a colonial country, where you predominantly think about your disadvantages as a Black person because that was ingrained in you and that was what divided the nation. The other explanation could be that growing up in a patriarchal society brain washed me to accept the lesser position to men. The other lens of looking at this is that my naivety could have stemmed from the longstanding tendency of categorising women as “all women” using gender as the common base and avoiding the discussion of difference due to race and using the measure of gender to celebrate diversity and negating race. I could also argue that there is a cultural slant to this phenomenon because as a Black African woman, men were seen as superior in households and perhaps from an unconscious level I accepted this state and took it to the workplace and blinded to gendered discrimination. However, if I had succumbed to that notion, I would not have chosen the path that I chose for my career and life in the diaspora.

Ain’t I a Woman (hooks,1981) was a powerful statement which was also the title of her book where she criticises the emphasis by many feminists that all women are white, and all Blacks are men. Writers such as, hooks, 1981; Collins, 1986; 1990; Davis, 1983; Essed, 1991); asserted that previous research on feminism which is white dominated did not often include the double edge sword experienced by Black women due to the intersection of race and gender.

In her letter titled “*Political Solidarity Between Women”* hooks (1986) attempted to highlight the issue facing “*Sisterhood*” which was based on the idea of common

oppression, regarding the racial conflict between white women and women of colour impacting on the agenda towards a liberatory feminist agenda. The conflict awakened my own feminism and regret as I realised the damage some white feminist women whom she referred to as "*bourgeois white women",* p. 126., were in it with a sense of common oppression which hooks argued is harmful to the agenda of addressing the interlocking systems of domination such as sexism, racism, class oppression and imperialism.

I thought this was unfortunate because these white women probably had a stronger voice to contribute to the agenda of abolishing sexism but turned away because they perhaps could not accept that they too are oppressors as white women with white privilege. This could be interpreted as white women attempting to dissociate themselves from whiteness, the elephant in the room, hiding the fact that women exploit other women. So, they came into feminism to fight sexism and placed less importance on other aspects of prejudices such as racism, class oppression and imperialism. This is not a surprise because even though white women might have an idea of the racism experienced by Black people, they cannot feel or explain what it is like to be a Black woman, they cannot feel the trauma associated with those experiences.

The role of sisterhood was thought to be an important weapon (hooks, 1981) if women are to build a sustained feminist movement, not based on common oppression, a false ideology disguising and mystifying the true nature of women varied and complex social reality. She adds that there can be no mass-based feminist movement to end sexist oppression without a united front and advocates that feminist theory would be more

significant if it showed women ways in which racism and sexism are immutably connected. Gendered racism (Essed, 1991) and social class separates Black women's struggles from the traditional feminist discourse and challenges the idea of common oppression which is the base of 'Sisterhood'.

Black feminism remained on the forefront for scholars such as Collins (2000) who asserted that:

> '*As long as Black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to those oppressions will remain needed'* p. 41.

Black British Feminism as a movement started over 50 years ago, its premise was on the struggles of Black women migrants from post-colonial Caribbean, African and Indian sub-continent. The thing that sets it apart from Black Feminism is the way that Black British Feminism recognises in a different way, migration, nationalism, and it states its emphasis on:

> '*the significance of consideration of the everyday lives of black and postcolonial women of different ethnicities, who are simultaneously positioned in multiple structures of dominance and power, according to race, gender, ethnicity, class and sexualized others'* (Mirza, 2009, p.7).

This approach is contemporary and more inclusive.

2.2.7 Black women leadership

Kets de Vries and Cheak (2014), described leaders as individuals in roles that are created to provide leadership within organisations, which makes the position of leader one that encompass authority, power, and influence (Burns, 1978; Bryman et al. 2006; Byrd, 2009; Chin et, al 2018). The attributes of daringness and originality in problem solving (Burns, 1978) appear challenging for Black women in senior leadership roles, who fear consequences that could be negative if their decisions or actions fail based on the notion that leaders may be judged differently based on their ethnic background (Sy et al., 2017).

The inherent identity of a Black woman namely race gender, culture and social class are some of the external factors affecting their identity as leaders (Curtis, 2017; Dortch, 2016) though there is limited empirical research on how these factors influence an individual's conception of leadership.

A few writers have discussed the challenges faced by Black women in senior leadership roles because of their identity and stereotypes in the workplace. One of them is Williams, (2019) who alluded to the fact that assertive and ambitious Black women are often labelled as angry Black women, and presuming that all Black women are irate, irrational, hostile, and negative despite the circumstances (Rhode, 2017; Yamaguchi & Burge, 2019). Stereotypical biases were also highlighted by (Gipson et al., 2017; Rosette et al., 2016) who stated that organisational culture regards Black women as incapable of leading, intellectually inferior, and morally inept. Van Knippenberg, 2011, posits that Black women do not fit the leader prototype and find themselves deprived of power and influence required in leadership roles.

The first hurdle when entering leadership roles as a Black woman, is how to fit in and perceived as an ideal leader (Bierema, 2016). This brings in the notion of code switching which is shifting or altering of cultural behaviours and languages to deemphasize a negatively valued identity. Some Black women elect to diminish their identity or self-concept to maximize their perceived leadership abilities (Dickens et al., 2018).

To succeed Black women often must rely on their resilience and resistance because of the frequency of which they encounter obstacles and setbacks resulting from the intersectionality of race, gender, and other identities (Roberts et al., 2018; Williams, 2020).

I came across Rhetaugh Graves Dumas' writing through a fellow Black woman researching experiences of Black women leaders. Dumas' life and professional achievements represents an epitome of a Black woman breaking the concrete ceiling achieving the highest accolades in her profession as a nurse, becoming a renowned academic professional as a Dean of University of Michigan and a vice President (Mcbride, 2007) to being appointed by President Clinton to the National Bioethics Advisory Committee. I think that her contributions to the topic of the struggles of Black women in leadership roles deserves great attention. I found Dumas' assertion on myths and symbolic roles taken by Black women in leadership roles most revealing and providing another lens to explore what this meant for me and for my research participants.

Dumas (1985) refers to Black women struggles dating back from 1619 where they were positioned at the bottom of the pile by both the Black and white communities in relation to status. Regardless of Black women contributing significantly to the development of their communities, they have been affected by the dynamic of racism and sexism and not able to reach their full leadership potential throughout history and this is the same for white and black institutions and organisations. She discusses the myths of superiority of Black women over Black men and white women. She asserts that this emphasises the Black women's tremendous power and strength, and the unique capacity for warm, soothing inter-personal relationships. She adds that this myth:

> "*prompt others to press black women into symbolic roles that circumscribe the nature and scope of their functions and limit their options and power in the organisations in which they work and live*", p. 25.

I found myself wondering what happens if Black women do not avail themselves to be used in this way or do not accept these projections on them. Black women face the dilemma whether to conform to the expectations of the mythical image or to those inherent in the formal leadership role. Dumas states that the pressure to conform to the roles of her earlier predecessors are often irresistible. This could be when they find themselves useful i.e., fulfilling a role, a sense of importance. This is who they represent, perceived as by the group and individuals seek to fulfil their own socio-emotional needs in organisations.

Dumas stated the scenario where there is a great deal more interest in personal qualities of Black women administrators than in their skill and competence for formal

leadership. She likened this to taking up the role of 'Mammy' assumed by Black women during the plantation era. She posits that this informal role could continue if the woman is willing and able to provide what is demanded. Where Black women succumb to these symbolic roles i.e., allow themselves to be used in this way, they find themselves conflicted about their own identity and their inner security, who they represent, what role they are employed to do and what authority they have in the organisation. I would argue that they will be viewed as weak leaders and not authorised as leaders by the system.

Reading this made me angry, disappointed, deflated and gave me a stronger urge to want to explore this more. I recalled a conversation I had with a senior leader in one of the organisations I worked in, where I had tried to employ some strategies to make middle managers accountable for their performance in relation to workforce indicators, in response to feedback that the staff did not feel supported by their line managers. My manager said in a strong emphatic voice, '*the staff are gagging for you, they want you'*. This was seductive at some level and though this should have made me feel wanted, I felt undermined because I felt that my efforts to lead and hold middle managers accountable was not seen as important but what was important was for me to continue mothering them and not to be seen to exert my authority. As I was the only Black woman in that service, I agree with Dumas's theory regarding the myth and symbolic roles, and this is perhaps why some organisations employ Black women for some of the difficult challenging roles.

Dumas referred to the pressure for the Black woman to conform to the roles of her predecessor is often irresistible and that the Black women's power lies in the informal

system where she is expected to take the mammy role. How does resisting the stereotype impacts the individual? Dumas stated that if they resist, they may become isolated, unavailable for informal contacts and can also result in them missing out on opportunities for executive effectiveness and promotion. She likens it to being distinguished from the symbolic benevolent black mammy to becoming the wicked malevolent mammy. I postulate that you are damned if you do and damned if you don't.

The myths about Black women expected to have unlimited internal resources to cope with any problems, results in them working harder, long hours, taking the risk of being used up or burn out to maintain the symbolic roles they find themselves in. This sadly can result in people around not noticing their needs for socio-psychological support. I hypothesise that Black women mask this need or weakness to maintain the strong Black woman phenomena.

2.3 Literature on the experiences of Black women in leadership roles

In relation to the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles in UK organisations, this chapter examines the published literature on this topic

2.3.1 Conducting a literature search:

I reviewed literature that answered my question '*What is the experience of Black women in senior leadership roles – a systems and psychodynamic exploration?'* with the sub questions *on page 20.*

I used a systematic literature search (Aveyard, 2014) to review literature referring to my research topic. I used EBSCO to do my searches, firstly using three databases, Psych INFO, PEP Archive and Psych Articles then Discovery database, I broke down my question and searched using the following key words/phrases:

Table 1: Literature search

Search 1: Black Women Experiences in senior leadership roles Power and Authority	Result: 38.000
Search 2: narrowed down to 2000-2024	Result 3818
Search 3: Added Organisational and Social Dynamics to search 2	Result 409
Search 4: Combine search 2 and search 3	Result 10

I reviewed the papers and applied the snowballing technique (Ridley, 2012) where I identified references relating to my subject in some of the papers that came up from my searches and used ResearchGate; Google Scholar; JSTOR; SAGE Journals Online; Wiley Online Library (Journals); Academia.edu platforms for further searches.

I included the terms BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) and BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) in my literature search to ensure that I did not overlook relevant studies pertaining to the experiences of Black women. While some of the literature retrieved through these terms is cited in my review, I do not endorse the use of BME *or* BAME, as they are broad umbrella terms that group all non-white people together, implying homogeneity. These terms risk obscuring the unique identities and experiences of specific groups, such as Black women. By overgeneralising, they can mask disparities and nuances within and between different communities. Furthermore, such terminology frames individuals in relation to whiteness, defining them primarily as minorities or “non-white,” which reinforces marginalisation rather than recognising diversity on its own terms. I also realised that there is scant literature even under these terms within UK research.

Although my research focuses on the experiences of Black women in UK organisations, I have also drawn on relevant literature from outside the UK, particularly from the United States. This decision was informed by the recognition of a shared identity rooted in the intergenerational history of trauma, as well as the common lived experiences of Black women navigating societies and organisations predominantly shaped by whiteness. While contextual differences exist between the UK and the USA, the parallels in structural inequalities, racialised gender dynamics, and historical marginalisation provide valuable insights that have helped inform and deepen my understanding in addressing the research question.

2.3.2 Experiences of struggling in role

Holder et. al. (2015) examined the experiences and coping strategies of ten black women managers in corporate American positions and found a theme of *racial microaggression which presented in environmental manifestations*, *stereotypes about Black women and invisibility and exclusion*. The environmental manifestations category included the lack of representation of Black women in senior leadership roles, strategies on diversity not given an integral part and tokenism where employers showcase few successful Black and other minority employees as commitment to diversity.

In a more recent study (Barnes 2021), undertook a qualitative study to explore the experience of eight BME women in UK academic leadership in higher education and some of her findings were that *structural inequalities cause workplace racial inequality*, *discrimination, and marginalisation* for BME women because of their intersecting multiple identities and that *institutional racism encompassing white privilege renders them invisible* as leaders and *discriminatory racial microaggressions* causing distress. Barnes' finding supports Franklin (1999)'s contribution that racial microaggressions can have a deleterious and cumulative psychological impact over time. Franklin a counselling psychologist was writing about African American men but stated that his assertion also applies to women. On invisibility and racial identity, he highlighted that invisibility which is an inner struggle with the feeling that one's talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or even recognised because of prejudice creates an invisibility syndrome if repeated. Franklin's study was important as it started exploring ways to help Black people suffering from this dynamic of racism.

Miller (2022) undertook important research using a constructivist grounded theory, where she examined the experiences of ten Black British female managers who worked in Children and Young People's Services (CYPS). She set out to find how Black British female managers experience racial microaggressions and how they cope with it. Her research highlighted themes that the women perceived as thwarted their management careers which were: *The Organizational Culture (subtle racism, lack of support and acceptance, espoused policy versus real life, old boys networks), On the Outside Looking In (Outsider-within, exclusion & cliques), Stereotype Threat (Race-based assumptions & Racialised expectations), Prejudice, and Discrimination and Institutional Racism (overt racism, subtle racism, glass ceilings, the need to work harder) and Espoused Practice vs. Reality (subtle racism & institutional racism).*

Though Miller (2022)'s research is limited to the specific field of CYPS in the UK, some of the experiences of the women in her study are similar to those of Barnes (2021) and Holder et. al. (2015) undertaken in America, and I am interested to explore any similarities with my sample of Black women in senior leadership roles across UK sectors based on the selection criteria of gender and racial identity.

To this point, racial microaggressions appear to be the common thread. The racial microaggressions are either covert or overt and can be a result of institutional racism to protect white privilege. This can be weathering, contributing to the challenges experienced by Black women in senior leadership roles. I wonder whether the experience one has, the more senior their organisational role is or the length of time they have spent in one organisation lessen these experiences.

2.3.3 Survival strategies

The growing awareness of this catastrophe coupled with their lived experiences lead to Black women turning to coping strategies to survive in role (Cain, 2015; Chance, 2021; Crawley, 2021). Holder et.al., 2015, found that the women in her study had developed a set of coping strategies including *choosing one's battles*, *leading different lives*, working harder to challenge *negative stereotypes, optimism, and quitting*. She also found that *religion and spirituality* was among the strategies employed by Black women to survive in role, and others included *armouring, shifting, support network, sponsorship, mentoring and self-care.*

There is evidence of a show of resistance as Barnes (2021) discovered that for the women in her study, despite the negative experiences they encountered, they wanted to engage with *academic leadership, drawing on their personal identity, social, ethnic and cultural practice to enact their leadership practice, drawing on professional and institutional resources and sources of support*. Bailey-Morris (2016)'s research in the same field of education as Barnes (2021), discovered that Black women depended on *guidance, mentoring, and coaching* to succeed in senior leadership roles. Both these studies are in academia, where learning and development is embedded in the system. The strategies employed by these women of seeking to develop align with the organisational primary task and perhaps the women are more open to seeking this sort of guidance compared to other sectors. This could imply that the system and organisational structure plays a role in the strategies that Black women employ to survive in role.

There is a plethora of non-academic papers and books, describing experiences of Black women aimed at communicating strategies to fight the ‘enemy’ to succeed in leadership roles. For instance, Crawley (2021) wrote a book based on stories from ten women of Black and Asian heritage in leadership roles, coming up with what she referred to as a success equation. The elements included in her equation are Determination, Resilience, Resistance and Perseverance. Crawley asked semi-structured questions to elicit the women’s stories which were about their hardships in senior positions and their coping strategies. Crawley’s own experiences and subjectivity was powerful in the book and the purpose was to relate and for the women to speak about how they overcome their challenges and so they did.

I couldn’t help but think that this appears one sided with the Black women appearing to be accepting that they must employ these strategies to survive in the system and in a way putting the burden on themselves as if not expecting or even thinking that the system might also have a part to play. To put it in Crawley’s language they must devise strategies to cope with having Black women in leadership positions and allowing them i.e. giving them the authority to lead. I wonder if this is an unconscious dynamic based on the internalised experience by Black women on how they are perceived. I also thought this could relate to a state of powerlessness and a strong sense of mistrusting the system that they can do anything or change anything for Black women to survive without turning to coping strategies.

2.3.4 Putting the impetus on Black women to solve the problem

The silent catastrophe which is not so silent anymore supports the notion that Black women in senior leadership roles struggle to stay in role and have developed coping strategies to survive. The defences they employ is what enable them to remain in role.

Turning to Lowe (2013), who brings a systems psychodynamic perspective to the issue of senior leadership in British organisations, there are hidden agendas to keep leadership white, referring to primitive, often unconscious factors operating to ensure that this position is maintained and racial hierarchy in the workplace continues. Lowe (2013) refers to unconscious racism, from the selection process where the process is more suited for white candidates subsequently results in under-representation of Black people in senior leadership roles. Lowe used an example where BME applicants will not have had adequate experience and skills to apply for advertised management roles. I am reminded of the NHS management trainee graduate scheme where it seems only white graduates enter, which gives them a better platform for entering senior management roles.

The organisational culture according to Lowe is experienced by BME as not inclusive and stopping them putting themselves forward for senior positions believing that it would be pointless. This is a phenomenon I have personally experienced as discussed in chapter 1, and some Black women colleagues and my coaching clients have shared with me. Lowe (2013) aligns with Hogg (2001) theory on leadership prototypes, in this case where followers will choose to follow leaders who match their conscious or unconscious prototype of a leader and there is evidence that prototypical leaders are white men, therefore Black people do not conform and find themselves not viewed as

leaders and expected to take roles that are viewed to be physically demanding or low status roles.

Black women who succeed to senior leadership roles, will suffer from the intersecting advantages of being black, female and of lower social class and are subjected to undermining behaviours, microaggressions impacting on their positions as leaders. Status characteristics and leadership expectations rule out BME people from attaining senior leadership roles according to Lowe (2013) and based on a report by O'Hara (2009) regarding a comment by a former UK Conservative party member that social background including how you spend your leisure time determine whether you can become a senior manager in their 'elite' club. Black women generally report that they avoid social networking or after work events and are therefore excluded from the 'club' and this could result in them missing out on opportunities to progress.

Lowe (2013) talks about the role of projections in this dynamic and refers to Bion (1961) 's theory group dynamics which follows that though human beings have the maturity to undertake complex tasks, they also have a primitive side which is driven by anxieties and the unconscious needs of the group. Lowe (2013) refers to BME being the objects for white projections and end up introjecting unwanted emotions of inadequacy and inferiority, and they may get stuck into unconscious roles in white organisations through a process of projective identification (Halton, 2019).

In trying to understand what appears to be conscious or unconscious state of mind by Black women that they must fight alone to survive, Alleyne (2005) talked about internal oppression as the primary means that we hold on to and enact our unresolved and

repressed difficulties. A notion that was demonstrated in Bartley (2013)'s experience where she narrated her leadership development journey and discovery of self. She used some vignettes where her internalised racism (Lipsky, 1987; Fanon, 1986) and aspirations to whiteness meant that she could not be herself and was blinded to her own achievements due to self-doubt and unable to be a fully present leader (Kahn, 1992). The desire to reach that state of whiteness which she had aspired to in her earlier years, meant that she could not be fully present in her leadership role. As Fanon (1986) stated, "*for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white*", p.4. Bartley concludes that her personal growth has been to present her black self "*rather than a self-operating in the 'other' and in relation to whiteness*", p.175.

Douglas (1998) researched the experience of Black women managers and what she found was that the women shared emotions of deep shame, alienation, negating blinding, and frustration. The women in her action research study perceived themselves as surviving. She noticed that some of the strategies applied revolved around the notion of being a strong Black woman, involving numbing oneself, not showing emotion nor vulnerability and aiming for perfection. She explored what was required to make that shift from surviving to thriving and one of the profound things she said was that survival strategies can be a barrier to thriving and that the process of making that shift from surviving to thriving is challenging and involves learning and unlearning, adding that it demands the objective analysis of the specific ways which our disadvantage and oppression is systematically constructed. I envisaged this process as requiring one to let go of the past challenges and embrace the achievements to reach the position of thriving.

2.4 Summary

From reviewing this literature, experiences of being subjected to racial microaggressions appear to be consistent across all Black women and thought that this is more heightened for Black women in more senior roles because they are outnumbered making them hyper visible and are targeted. My hypothesis is that as Black women become more senior, they become more visible as they are often the only ones in the room becoming more of a target for negative projections. A highly competent person with difference can be seen as a threat and efforts will be made to thwart their brilliance in a bid to keep leadership white (Lowe, 2013).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Aim of research

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles within UK organisations. In this chapter, I outline my research aims, epistemological position, and the research design, including sampling and ethical considerations. The chapter then details the methods used for data collection, coding, and analysis.

I will describe how I applied Grounded Theory (GT) in analysing the interview transcripts from my participants. This began with identifying initial codes, then merged codes with similar interpretive meanings to formulate focused codes. Through a rigorous process of reading and re-reading, I arrived at seven axial codes that served as the basis for constructing theoretical ideas. The chapter concludes with a reflection on my experiences and reflexivity during the research process.

3.2 Developing the Research Question

My interest in this topic arose from personal curiosity and my experience in leadership roles. Entering leadership positions in some NHS organisations was often perceived as breaking the glass ceiling due to my race and gender. Notably, the metaphor of the "glass ceiling" is increasingly being replaced by the term "concrete ceiling" (Barnes, 2017), which better captures the magnitude of barriers faced by Black women in attaining senior leadership roles.

My journey from clinical leadership in the NHS to senior leadership roles in both the NHS and private sector reflects some of the challenges encountered by Black women in leadership. Clarke and Hoggett (2009) pose reflective questions for researchers:

> "*Why are we interested in our research project? Why choose this area and not another? What is our investment in it, and how will this affect the way we go about the research?"* (p. 7). They argue that reflexive researchers should engage in "*sustained self-reflection on our methods and practice, on our emotional involvement in the research, and the affective relationship between ourselves and the researched"* (p. 3).

With this in mind, I was intentional in developing a research question and methodology that would enable a deep exploration of participants' experiences, while also accounting for my own bias, and subjectivity as someone with lived experience of the subject matter.

In the previous chapter, I discussed relevant theoretical frameworks to address my research question. The existing literature on this topic is limited and tends to focus on the struggles faced by Black women in leadership, as well as the survival strategies they employ.

My overarching research question is: **What is the experience of Black women in senior leadership roles?**

In formulating this question, I aimed to understand both the conscious and unconscious factors influencing Black women's experiences, an underexplored area in the existing literature. My approach draws on systems and psychodynamic

perspectives, developed through my studies in the Tavistock Leadership and Consulting in Organisations programme.

3.3 Research Paradigm

My ontological position which is my view of reality and its relationship to this study, is grounded in individual experiences: my own lived experiences, conversations with coaching clients and informal groups, and my observations. I hold the view that Black women in senior leadership roles often struggle with staying in role and asserting authority.

The research adopts a constructivist lens for interpreting data. My epistemological assumption which is how we come to know what we know is constructionist, rooted in the belief that individuals construct their own versions of reality. By enabling participants to share their stories, I aim to construct a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. This stance led me to adopt a qualitative research methodology, which allows for a close examination of individual experiences.

As Guba and Lincoln (1994) assert, paradigms are "*the basic set of beliefs or world view that guides the research action*" (p. 9). Drawing from constructivist and interpretivist paradigms with a relativist and subjectivist orientation, my research values personal perspectives and interpretations.

The study is grounded in systems psychodynamics and phenomenology, aiming to uncover subjective experiences and assign meaning to them. A systems psychodynamic approach allowed me to attend to both conscious and unconscious

elements of participants' narratives by exploring personal defences, transferences, and my own countertransference. As a researcher and organisational consultant trained in this tradition, I adopted a listening, reflexive, and curious stance using myself as an instrument to sense and explore the data.

3.4 Methodology

According to Ohman (2005), qualitative methods allow researchers to delve into participants' worlds to generate new knowledge based on beliefs, words, and experiences, rather than testing a predefined hypothesis as in positivist or critical theory approaches. Through interviews, qualitative research enabled me to understand the meanings participants attached to their experiences.

Ritchie and Lewis (2003) describe qualitative inquiry as the study of phenomena in their natural settings, which in this case involved enabling participants to share their stories authentically. Constructivism centres on how individuals experience and reflect on the world around them. Interpretive phenomenology understanding how people assign meaning to similar events helps reveal the subjective and constructed nature of those meanings.

As a researcher, my role was critical in interpreting phenomena through the participants' perspectives, while recognising that complete objectivity is unattainable (Smith, 1983). Both researcher and participant values shape the research process.

Being a Black woman in a senior leadership role, researching other Black women in similar contexts, required that I remain mindful of potential bias. As Maxwell (2023)

suggests, richer interpretations emerge when researchers capitalise on, rather than suppress, their positionality. I noticed this during data analysis, when familiar codes emerged. I considered the risk of bias but validated these codes through triangulation.

Berg and Smith (1988) acknowledge the complex emotional and intellectual forces that influence research, stating that *"these forces are the source of our insight and our folly*" (p. 11). Thus, researchers must examine their subjective involvement, as it shapes data interpretation. Reflexivity which is turning inward (Steier, 1995) adds rigour and validity.

A systems and psychodynamic approach further enabled me to question my emotional responses and explore emerging unconscious themes through transferences, countertransference, and defences present in the data.

3.5 Research method – Free Association Narrative Interview Method (FANI)

Initially, I considered the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2001), which relies on a single initial question (SQUIN) followed by prompts, adhering to the participant's narrative structure. However, I felt this could generate excessive, unfocused information. Given the study's specific interest in lived experiences of Black women in leadership, I opted for Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008), which sees both researcher and participant as co-producers of meaning (Clarke & Hoggett, 2018).

Unlike more structured methods, FANI accepts that individuals assign different meanings to similar experiences (Hollway & Jefferson, 2009). This narrative, semi-structured approach enables the generation of psychoanalytically informed data.

A core concept in FANI is the defended subject, which holds that anxiety is intrinsic to the human condition, and that distressing memories are often altered or repressed (Hollway & Jefferson, 2009). Defences shape the meanings conveyed in interviews. Both participants and researchers may not be fully transparent to themselves. Hollway (2009) adds that researcher defensiveness often stems from identification with participants.

Rosenthal (2004) shifts the emphasis to the gestalt, the unique pattern shaping a person's life. The role of the biographer is to uncover this intact gestalt without imposing their own concerns. FANI allows participants to speak freely, revealing anxieties and emotions that illuminate their gestalt. This helps the researcher detect incoherence, avoidance, and contradictions, and derive meaning from them.

3.6 Research design

In designing the research, I prioritised ethical considerations to protect participants from distress, acknowledging the emotional weight of the topic. My aim was to foster a safe, confidential space where participants could share openly, in line with Hollway's (2009) idea of "experience-near" studies, which she referred to as a study where the focus is on:

> *"The experiences of subjects who suffer and who care, and on psychological resilience and damage, in the particularities of the settings, past, present and*

> *anticipated future, as people engage with and make meaning out of their situations and actions", p. 461-462.*

I often find it difficult to share some of my challenges as a leader due to feelings of shame associated with being judged as weak and incompetent. I wondered whether my participants will likely have some difficulties narrating their experiences too, therefore my design was aimed at being sensitive to this.

Hollway and Jefferson (2009), approached the concept of the defended subject putting into context the anxiety inherent in humans, highlighting that defences against anxieties in interviewees, will affect the narrative and meanings they make of their experience, adding that:

> "*By eliciting a narrative structured according to the principle of free association, therefore, we secure access to a person's concerns which would probably not be visible using a more traditional method"* p. 310.

By being a good listener and allowing the participant to tell their story unconscious connections will be revealed through the links that people make if they are free to structure their own narrative, allowing the gestalt to emerge in its own way as opposed to narratives that are structured according to conscious logic. With the FANI approach, the researcher's agenda is open to development and change, depending on the participants' experience and the researcher's association to the response, Hollway and Jefferson (2008).

Sampling process

Following Yin's (1994) guidance on research sampling, participants were selected based on relevance, feasibility, access, and willingness to participate. I used purposive sampling to identify information-rich cases (Patton, 2002) individuals likely to provide deep insights into the phenomenon.

I aimed for six participants, aligning with Creswell's (2014) recommendation for small-scale phenomenological studies. I recruited Black women in senior leadership roles through professional networks and referrals, intentionally avoiding individuals I knew personally or had worked with.

Table 2: Sample criteria

Black women in senior leadership roles unknown to me i.e., no existing relationship	To avoid familiarity and draws a clear line between researcher and participant.
Black women of African or Caribbean origin.	My interest is on the experiences of Black women who identify as black and identifiable by the colour of their skin. This is to avoid the tendency to bracket all racially minoritised individuals into one group with the assumption they will have the same lived experience.
Must hold a senior leadership role in the public, private, voluntary, and social enterprise organisations.	Fits requirements of having lived experience in senior leadership roles.
Should be in roles with titles CEO or Director at Board level, or titles that imply authority and power.	The research explores taking up authority in role and roles should imply formal authority in accordance with job title
The leadership roles should be in organisations based in the UK.	The research explores experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles in UK organisations only where my ontological assumptions are based.
Open to sharing openly and honestly their perspectives of the research topic.	Assurance that participants will be open to honest and open sharing their experiences.

I initially approached thirteen individuals whom I knew held senior leadership roles. While all expressed a willingness to participate, scheduling the interviews proved challenging due to the demands of their positions. From this initial outreach, I was able to recruit two participants.

To expand the pool, I shared my research topic on a professional social networking platform and extended an open invitation for participation, also asking for referrals from

my contacts. Through this approach, I successfully recruited four additional participants.

The final group comprised Black women with leadership experience across various sectors, including the public sector, the NHS, Social Work, a government agency, and a borough council in the UK. It was a diverse group, including women of African and African-Caribbean heritage (Appendix 3). Four participants were born in the UK, while two were born outside the UK and migrated as adults. This demographic variation was important in helping me explore how such differences might shape their experiences as senior leaders.

Table 3: Information of the participants

Pseudo Name	Age	Organisation Sector	Role Held	Birth Country	First contact impressions
Tara	45 - 50	NHS	Director	Zimbabwe	Tara has held senior leadership positions in the Acute NHS. She started in an operational role and recently moved to strategy and transformation. I had a pre-meet to discuss my research and information pack. We were able to agree a date in person soon after that. Tara was keen to share her story and later spoke of the session as being therapeutic.
Nina	50 - 55	Government Regulatory Board	General Counsel	UK	Nina has a law degree and has the role of General Counsel; she is a member of the Executive team. Nina responded to my request for research participants on a social network site. Nina was keen to be interviewed but had a lot of questions before she enrolled as a participant, and I thought some of that was due to her legal profession which we discussed in a pre-interview call.
Tess	50 - 55	Health & Social Work, England	Director	UK	Tess made the first contact following my post on a social network site. It took four months from the first contact to having the first interview. I sensed her hesitancy to be interviewed initially but she was open to sharing her experience and to be understood.
Ely	45 - 50	Higher Education England	Director	Jamaica	Ely has a clinical background, has held senior leadership roles in health care before moving to higher education. She is studying for her PHD. She was recommended to me by someone who saw my post seeking for participants and appeared reluctant at first. All correspondences were through her PA, and it took a few months before we could meet. She was keen to share her experiences.
Vicky	30 - 35	Local Borough Council	Portfolio Manager / Director	UK	Vicky responded to my post seeking participants on a social network. She is the youngest of my participants and I initially thought she might not have the level of experience I was after. After a pre-meet, I was convinced that she would be able to contribute. She was extremely keen to be part of my study which made me curious. I later found out she was studying for her PHD.
Aggy	60 - 65	NHS	Director	UK	Aggy was referred by a colleague. She is recently semi-retired. She still works as a consultant in the field of psychotherapy. It took 6 months from when I made the first contact to agree a date.

Interview plan

I planned to conduct two semi-structured interviews with each participant. The first interview was scheduled for 90 minutes, and the second, lasting 30 minutes, was intended to clarify any inconsistencies that emerged during the initial interview. This follow-up interview would be conducted within a month, if necessary, based on my preliminary data analysis.

The interviews were spaced approximately a month apart, with some flexibility to accommodate participants' demanding schedules. This spacing allowed time for reflection on the data from the first interview and provided me with the opportunity to consult with my supervisors or supervision group. Creating space for reflexivity (Clarke & Hoggett, 2018) was an important consideration for me as a researcher personally connected to the topic.

When initially contacting potential participants, I sent an information pack that included a consent form (Appendix 2), requesting that they sign and return it along with suggested dates for the interview. The first participant requested a preliminary call for further clarity on the research and the process before signing the consent form. This appeared to be motivated by a desire to meet me as the researcher, seek reassurance about confidentiality, and confirm their eligibility for the study.

I used this opportunity to explain the content of the information pack during a virtual call. I soon noticed that many other participants also requested a conversation before submitting their consent forms. When they did not initiate contact, I offered the option proactively, in the interest of consistency. I made it clear that these pre-interview calls

were not part of the formal interview process and that no interview questions would be asked during them.

On reflection, these initial conversations helped to establish rapport with the participants and positively influenced the depth and openness of their sharing during the interviews.

Interview question structure:

I started my interviews with a broad open question to elicit the participant's biographical data and followed a loose structure but allowing the participant to lead. The questions were open ended to allow free association to emerge.

- Can you tell me how you got to the role of senior leadership? ***Starting where you would like.***
- Can you tell me your experience as a Black woman in a senior leadership role?
- Can you tell me about your experiences of exercising power and authority in senior leadership role? Please give examples.
- Can you tell me what you think are the essential factors for surviving or thriving in your role?

As the process continued, the ordering of my interview questions would change and this was the observation by Hollway and Jefferson (2009), that questions could develop and change to respond to the narrators' experiences, which meant that each individual interview structure could differ.

I would have liked to but pragmatically couldn't do all my interviews in person. Three of my interviews were in person and the rest were on Zoom which worked out to be more convenient due to the geographical locations of my participants.

The interviews took place between December 2022 to August 2023.

In addition to individual supervision where most of sense making took place, I was also able to share my findings and experiences of interviewing in other settings as follows:

Focus group

I held two focus groups, one of senior leaders from various organisational roles and sectors and the 2nd was attended by Black women researching similar topics to mine. The purpose of the focus group was to present my findings, giving me an opportunity to further triangulate my data and test out my bias and subjectivity.

Doctorate supervision group

I found these monthly supervision groups a valuable resource where I was able to share my progress, themes and received intelligent challenge which helped me in my thinking.

Presentation at Tavistock Annual Research Symposium

The discussions from this session were useful for triangulating some of my themes which will be included in the following chapter.

3.6.3 Data collection and storage

My interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed both manually and use of a transcription software.

My initial step was to listen to the recordings of the interviews as soon as I could after the interview. This was when I was more in touch with emotions and thoughts from the interviews which I wanted to capture in my own version of field notes where I noted countertransference during and after the interviews. During this process, I tried to be in touch with what was unsaid and what I observed in the tone used and body language as my participates told their stories. I frequently referred to my field notes during the data analysis stage when I was trying to make more sense of what I could see as emerging themes.

3.7 Ethical considerations

In accordance with ethical requirements, I obtained approval for this research from the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Research Ethics Committee. The approval letter is included in Appendix 1. The ethical considerations underpinning this research were primarily focused on safeguarding the dignity, rights, safety, and

wellbeing of participants. This was achieved by ensuring participants were fully informed and able to provide consent with confidence (Bryman, 2016). Each participant received a comprehensive information pack (Appendix 2), which outlined how the interviews would be conducted, their role and rights, my role as the researcher, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The pack also detailed data storage procedures to assure participants of confidentiality.

Given the use of a method that explores unconscious processes, there was a potential risk of psychological distress for participants. As such, it was imperative to prioritise their care and protection, particularly when painful emotions surfaced during the interviews. Drawing on my background as a registered nurse, and my systems and psychodynamic training as an executive coach and organisational consultant, I felt well-equipped to recognise when difficult emotions emerged, either through what was directly expressed or surfaced via transference and countertransference.

I remained vigilant for ethically significant moments (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), such as emotional distress, and was prepared to pause or stop the interview until the participant felt ready to continue. The information pack also included details of available support services, such as counselling, coaching, role consultation, networking, or mentoring, to provide participants with options for further support.

During some interviews, I observed moments when participants became emotionally overwhelmed. In these instances, I offered to pause or discontinue the interview. Participants expressed appreciation for this sensitivity, although none chose to end their interviews prematurely. I also ensured that each participant was debriefed afterwards and reminded of the support services listed in the participant pack.

As per requirements prior to commencing my research, I obtained ethics approval from Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Research Ethics Committee. The approval letter is attached in Appendix 1. Ethics considerations for my research was aimed at foremost to protect participants' dignity, rights, safety, and wellbeing aimed at safeguarding their interests. A full explanation was given to the participants to enable them to give informed consent (Bryman, 2016). This was achieved by providing a participant pack with information (Appendix 2) on how the interview will be conducted, their role, my role and that they can withdraw at any time. The information pack included how data was stored to assure them of confidentiality.

Employing a method that involves unconscious processes could pose a risk of psychological distress to my participants. Therefore, caring and protecting my participants as they narrated at times some painful emotions was of paramount importance. As a registered nurse and with my systems and psychodynamic training as an executive coach and organisation consultant, I felt confident to be able to notice when difficult emotions arise in what is observed or surfaced through transferences and countertransference during the interviews. I was prepared to notice any ethically important moments (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) in the form of difficult emotions and offer to stop the interview and not continue until they are ready to. I included in the participant pack details of support services such as counselling, coaching, role consultation, networking, or mentoring.

During the interviews some of my participants had moments where I noticed that emotions were overwhelming, and I was able to offer a pause or even discontinue the interview. When this happened, the participants appreciated that the emotions were

noted. None opted to discontinue the interview. I made a point to debrief after the interview and pointed to the pack where I had listed available support if required.

3.8 Data analysis

My research study employed the FANI method for data collection, whilst the data analysis process was guided solely by a Grounded Theory (GT) approach (Charmaz, 2014). This approach offers a rigorous, flexible, and iterative process that involves analysing inductive data and applying an abductive method (Rosenthal, 2004; Richardson & Kramer, 2006), which emphasizes reasoning and making inferences from empirical experience. This methodology aligns well with my constructivist stance, as it supported my sensitivity and openness to modifying focused codes, what Thornberg and Charmaz (2012) describe as the capacity to remain adaptable and to continually assess the adequacy of codes in guiding the researcher's work.

Grounded Theory analysis is particularly suited to the development of new theories or concepts, whereas thematic analysis is more appropriate when the goal is to identify patterns or themes relevant to an existing theoretical framework. According to Charmaz (2014), one of the key strengths of the GT method is its potential to lead researchers in useful, emergent, and often unexpected theoretical directions for understanding data.

Following Charmaz’s (2014) guidance, I began by closely studying a range of participant data, extrapolating patterns to form initial conceptual categories, marking the beginning of the initial coding phase. Through an iterative process of reviewing my

data multiple times, I was able to sort and cluster these initial codes, merging identical or similar codes, as shown in Table 4.

From initial coding, I progressed to focused coding. This phase helps guide the analysis early in the research process, allowing the researcher to evaluate analytical directions without becoming prematurely committed. Focused codes are those that appear most frequently or carry greater significance in relation to the research question. They play a critical role in condensing and sharpening the data, drawing attention to key insights in the emerging analysis. As Charmaz (2014) notes, focused coding allows researchers to interrogate their own preconceptions, an essential consideration for me as a Black woman researcher studying other Black women, whose experiences may at times reflect my own.

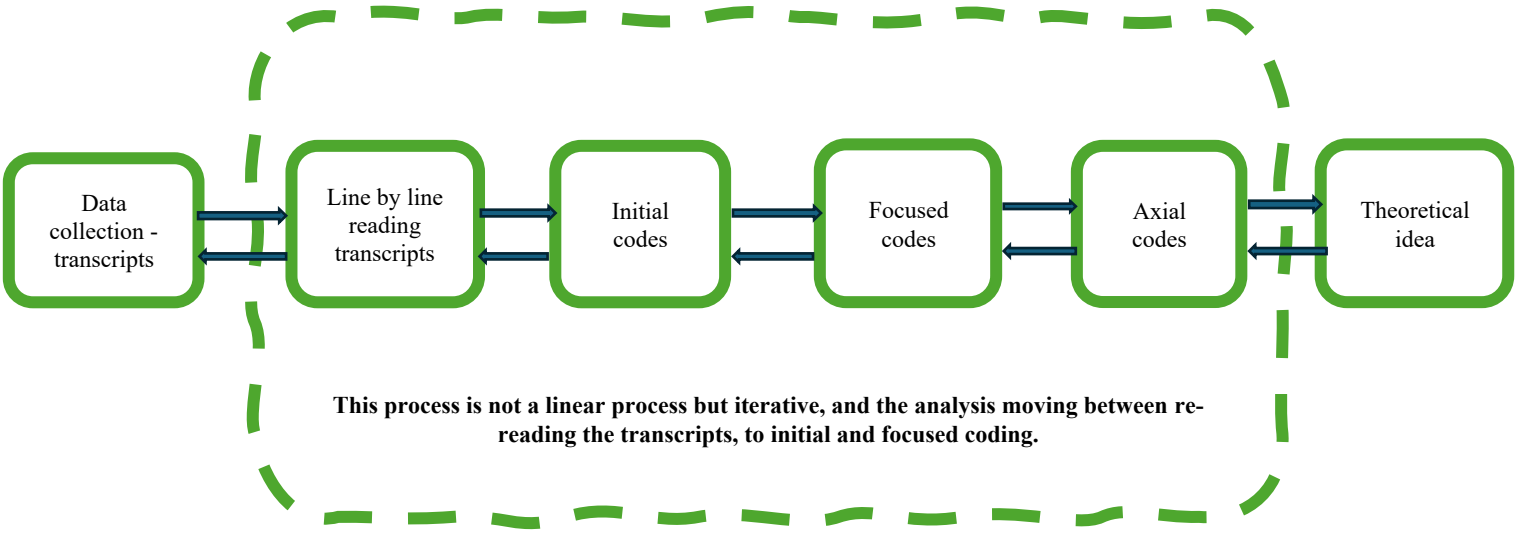
The next step was axial coding, which relates categories to sub-categories, for instance, grouping focused codes and integrating the data into a coherent whole (Charmaz, 2014). The final stage is theoretical coding. Holton (2007) defines this as

> "*the identification and use of appropriate theoretical codes to achieve an integrated theoretical framework for the overall grounded theory*" (p. 283).

Theoretical codes may draw on pre-existing theories or incorporate analytic tools and lenses from external sources to enhance the coherence of the developing theory (Charmaz, 2014). In my study, I applied systems psychodynamic theory to enrich my interpretation of the data, in combination with my lived experience as a researcher working within a familiar field.

Henwood and Pidgeon (2003) caution researchers to remain critically aware when applying theory during the research process. This aligns with Glaser's (1978; 1998; 2005) assertion that researchers must avoid becoming fixated on a single theoretical code or forcing a personally favoured perspective into the analysis. As an insider researcher, I found it vital to keep this caution in mind throughout the data analysis phase.

Figure 1: Step by step coding process



I applied abductive reasoning during the analysis process, which involved continually moving back and forth between the data and pre-existing theories, making comparisons and interpretations in search of patterns and the most plausible explanations (Thornberg, 2012).

Although there is some debate about whether abductive methods limit creativity (Kelle, 2014), a stronger argument suggests that when researchers integrate diverse strands of prior knowledge to theorize puzzling findings, the potential for imaginative

interpretation increases (Charmaz, 2014). This aligns with Glaser's emergent variant, which emphasizes openness and creativity, allowing theory to arise organically from the data (Glaser, 1978). This approach stands in contrast to Strauss's forcing variant, which emphasizes a more structured development of theoretical coding through explicit coding paradigms, where the role of theory is predetermined and clearly articulated (Smaling, 2004).

Charmaz (2014) referenced Charles S. Peirce's (1878/1958) concept of abduction, describing it as a method for "*facilitating the search for new theoretical explanations to account for surprising data*" (p. 200). Richardson and Kramer (2006) expanded on this by linking abduction to pragmatism, stating:

> *"Abduction is the process by which useful explanations are developed and is therefore an essential concept within pragmatism. This process of finding useful explanations is essentially an inference from observed facts*" (p. 498).

3.9 Initial coding

Following an intensive manual review of over 300 pages and more than 85,000 words of transcripts, I identified 110 initial codes. This came after removing overlapping codes and those I recognised as stemming from my own biases and subjectivities, rather than being genuinely grounded in the data.

An example of this reflexive practice occurred when I removed a code that had been influenced by my personal experience. I had initially coded "resisting belonging", which reflected my own emotional response rather than something evident in participants' accounts. At the time, I had recorded the following entry in my reflective diary:

> *23/11/23 – At work, I notice how I have been resisting what I see as the illusion of safety that I often think is being extended to me. The invitation to be one of them, to belong. The suspicion that none of it is genuine and they are out to get me does not leave me. Is this the damage of past traumatic experiences? Does one ever get over this and start feeling differently? Or are all organisations the same? Am I painting them all with the same brush, or are they really all the same? Is it my fault that I cannot accept that invitation to belong?*

Upon reviewing my initial codes, I recognized that this theme did not emerge from my participants' narratives but rather from my own subjective lens. In line with the principles of grounded theory and reflexive rigor, I removed the code from my analysis.

Table 4: Initial codes

1. Being a black woman leader is not accepted
2. Know your place
3. Accepting that there are limitations
4. Feels under scrutiny
5. Living up to what is expected of them
6. Fear of acting
7. Sense of giving up
8. Being ignored
9. Holding back
10. Fear of repercussions
11. Passivity
12. Being positioned with no authority
13. Fear of judgement
14. Taking actions experienced as aggressive
15. Fear of harm
16. Need to be accepted
17. Need to belong and fit in
18. Need for safety
19. Fear of challenging
20. Self-doubt
21. Cannot challenge status quo
22. Feeling grateful
23. Does not want to cause upset
24. Actions are measured
25. Feels restricted
26. Prepared to fight to survive
27. Need to survive
28. Practices self-restraint
29. Practices self-regulation
30. Holding back
31. Acceptance of the situation
32. Tend to be overqualified
33. Low confidence
34. Over-achievement
35. Sense of not ready
36. Self-blame for perceived failures
37. Feels they are underperforming
38. Hiding weaknesses
39. Cannot show their vulnerabilities
40. Taking own too much
41. Fear of failure
42. Fighting the system
43. Overwhelmed
44. Organisation has high expectance of them
45. Need for recognition

46. Over-qualified seeking validation
47. Internalised need to fight
48. Feels pressure to do more
49. Engaging in code switching
50. Must act westernised
51. Conform to accepted appearance i.e. hair styles
52. Masking emotions
53. Pretending to be ok
54. Playing it safe
55. Accepting the mould
56. Cannot be authentic
57. Judged as incompetent
58. Undermined
59. Misjudged
60. Mislabelled
61. Not identified as a leader
62. Fear of being labelled the angry black woman
63. Fear of appearing loud
64. Fear of coming across as aggressive
65. Singled out
66. Challenged
67. Blackness seen as weakness / failure
68. Experiences of being bullied
69. Disappointed
70. Painful memories
71. Experiences of being rejected
72. Receiving more scrutiny
73. Feels not trusted
74. Experiences of being scapegoated
75. Opinions are ignored
76. Isolated
77. Standing out because of difference
78. Targeted racism
79. Lack of representation
80. Negative judgement
81. Misunderstood
82. Seen as worthless
83. Experiences of being othered
84. Racialised
85. Not heard
86. Dismissed
87. Resisting pressure
88. Fighting back
89. Drawing strength from within
90. Internal validation
91. Knowing your own strength
92. Knowing your own self-worth

93. Having inner strength
94. Withdrawing
95. Working harder to prove they can do the job
96. Cannot quit – showing resistance
97. Having a fighting spirit
98. Stressful experience
99. Believing in own strength
100. Lone fighting
101. Faith in God to see them through
102. Building resilience
103. Resistance
104. Believing in Black women strength
105. Driven by the need to make a difference
106. Driven by being a role model
107. Feeling used as expected to work in more difficult settings
108. Treated differently because of gender
109. Experiences of being openly challenged by white mean
110. Not trusted because they are black women

Figure 2: Focused and Axial codes

	Focused codes	Axial codes / Themes
1	Feeling that blackness is seen as weakness	
2	Experiencing bullying	
3	Describing pain of being dicriminated and bullied	
4	Experiencing more scrutiny compared to other non-black colleagues	
5	Experiences being scapegoated and blamed for failures in the system	
6	Feeling that they are not authorised	
7	Experiences of being singled out, standing out as only black person	**Systemic racism enacted in microaggressions**
8	Experiences of being undermined, targeted and othered	
9	Experiences of being ignored	
10	Experiences of being racialised and targeted	
11	Experiences of being misjudged and misunderstood	
12	Feeling rejected by the system	
13	Thinking they are challenged because of race and gender	
14	Experiences of being openly challenged by white men	
15	Not trusted because they are black women	
16	Feeling it is unsafe to challenge status quo.	
17	Accepting you can not make a difference	
18	Fearing the repurcussions if they make any decisions	
19	Feeling anxious about challenging	
20	Needing to be accepted by not causing upset	**Idea of playing it safe**
21	Playing it safe	
22	Fearing the reputation of being labelled as difficult if they speak up	
23	Accepting limitations placed on your role - could be unconscios projections	
24	Sense of holding back	
25	Fearing judgement	
26	Feeling they need to be more qualified to be validated	
27	Doubting their capabilities	
28	Having low confidence	
29	Feeling they have to overachieve to survive	
30	Feeling that they are not to be in senior roles	**Projected sense of inadequacy**
31	Feeling they are underperfoming	
32	Expecting external validation	
33	Feeling that the organisation has high expectations of them	
34	Thinking that organisation expects them to do more	
35	Needing to conform to belong	
36	Feelings they cannot be themselves	
37	Self-regulating the way they speak in fear of being judged as aggressive	
38	Needing to conform through the way they appear and sound / accent	**Masking emotions as a personal defence/ coping strategy / Conformin**
39	Hiding vulnerabilities and appearing strong	
40	Hiding weaknesses	
41	Feeling they can not show their vulnerabilties	
42	Need to code switch i.e. the way they dress	
43	Not identified and not authorised as a leader	
44	Experiences of being undermined seen as a failure	
45	Experiences of being mislabeled	**Negative stereotype labelling**
46	Fearing negative stereotype labels e.g. the angry black woman	
47	Experiences of being mistaken for more junior roles	
48	Seen as worthless	
49	Resisting the pressure of the role	
50	Fighting the system	
51	Employing a fighting spirit to survive	**Source of strength for survival**
52	Importance of doing it for others	
53	Intenalised sense of keep fighting	
54	Believing in self confidence	
55	Drawing strength from within to stay in role	**Internalised strength and belief in own ability - building resilience**
56	Internalised self-validation that they can do the job	
57	Believing in higher power to achieve - Faith in God	

It is arguable that other codes within the data could hold alternative meanings. The process of determining which codes to retain and prioritize was particularly

challenging. I remained acutely aware of the potential for bias and the influence of my subjectivity throughout this stage. I found myself drawn to codes that not only aligned with my research question but also contributed to developing analytic insight. Tables 5 and 6 illustrate examples of the coding process for two of the axial codes.

Table 5: Coding process - idea of playing it safe

Data point	Initial code	Focused code	Axial code	Theoretical idea forming
"*Just play your role, you cannot change who you are…you have to do what you have to do knowing your limitations as a black person....yeah so I think it's showing up and doing a good job so I think there's something about let your work speak for itself because I can't fight fact people see me as a black like I can't do anything about that. So, what can I do things about some very much my parents had growing up there was this this prayer that grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference*" **Tara**	Feeling that they must be cautious, because they are black and there are limitations to what they can do. They cannot fight, how they are perceived and accepting the positioning. Feelings that being black is not accepted; it is a burden but cannot do anything about it but accept.	Feeling restrained Feeling constrained because they are black Defeated Giving up Fear of failure	Idea of playing it safe	System is experienced as too dangerous to act: Black women concerned about their safety and unable to take up full authority to act.
"*some of us who managed to exert themselves and really show their presence they then have a reputation for being difficult and challenging and aggressive and you know all the knives are out so you want it you want to you want to be accepted by the organisation, you want to not necessary liked but will accepted and and so and I think sometimes we are so grateful that we've got the opportunity because we've got in yeah but you he just want everything to be okay and you don't want to cause any upset and you don't want to go in and change things so but actually that is to our*	If they try to take up and exert authority, they are judged as difficult and aggressive, and knives are out – sense of danger. The desire to be accepted makes them not act. Fears upsetting the system by asserting themselves.	Fear of judgement Fear of harm Need to be accepted Fear of challenging Do not want to upset the system by asserting themselves.	Idea of playing it safe	System is experienced as too dangerous to act: Black women concerned about their safety and unable to take up full authority to act.

detriment because that's when people start to take the measure of you and it then becomes quite challenging you have to go with you don't have to go in all guns blazing and wanting to change things but you have to go in with a sense of confidence yeah and if you if you uncertain or unsure, it's almost like we don't allow ourselves to be unsure ……yeah so we want to go in and just be and even if we think well actually I need to change this completely, we doubt ourselves that our view is the right one but that again sometimes is about having confidence in yourself" **Tess**	Anxious about how their view will not be the right one, self-doubt and lacks confidence.	Fear of failure and consequences.		
"*yes so say we might play it a lot safer yeah than we would then we would ordinarily be because you don't want to do anything that will bring any more attention, rocks a boat in anyway or raise your head any higher because you want to hold onto the job*" **Ely**	Speaks about the need to pay it safe, not to rock the boat so as not to stand out and to keep your job.	Need to survive Fear of repercussions Self-restraint Self-regulation	Idea of playing it safe	System is experienced as too dangerous to act: Black women concerned about their safety and unable to take up full authority to act.
"*And I'm not going to say it's like doing the bare minimum because I think people still do their work really well, but maybe being less critical of the way things are being done because you just want to survive, get your money, go home and continue the work*" **Vicky**	Feels limited and forced to do the bare minimum and cautious about being critical to survive.	Holding back Need to survive	Idea of playing it safe	System is experienced as too dangerous to act: Black women concerned about their safety and unable to take up full authority to act.

Table 6: Coding process - systemic racism

Data point	Initial code	Focused code	Axial code	Theoretical idea forming
*"I knew it was not **safe for me as a leader in that organisation** I realised that anything that I was doing my team was **doing was heavily scrutinised and** that made me admit it very difficult for me than because **I find it hard to speak up because I was always and as I'm talking** about it, I can feel it in my chest. I was always anticipated if I speak it was going to happen is going to be against me is going to be the mark against me and…"* ***Nina***	Feeling unsafe in leadership role, silenced, experiencing of self and team targeted and scrutinised in the system.	Singled out. Challenged. Blackness seen as weak/failure. Bullied Disappointed	Systemic racism enacted in overt and covert microaggressions.	Systemic racism and repeated acts of racial microaggressions: Black women have a sense of unbelonging, and failure which strips their confidence in role.
"I have experience racism bullying masses of amounts of bullying um discrimination and it's just as bad today for me in this role as it was when I was starting it that the microaggressions, the racism the undermining is worse now I'm in a director role than before at the current organisation that I mean I'm the only black director but the leadership team is 99% female there's one man so they're all women so female CEO and the othering is worse in this role then I've experienced before". ***Tess*** *"I really experience some of the more traumatic experiences with people usually white men taking me to one side and saying they didn't think I was good enough basically."* ***Tess***	Describing experience of being bullied and discriminated against White men in the system were experienced as bullies. Bullying and microaggressions increased as she moved to more senior roles. Overt and covert microaggressions.	Overt and covert microaggressions. Rejected More scrutiny. Not trusted. Scapegoating. Opinions ignored.	Systemic racism enacted in overt and covert microaggressions	Systemic racism and repeated acts of racial microaggressions: Black women have a sense of unbelonging, and failure which strips their confidence in role.

"And the chief executive labelled me as being defensive, so they couldn't label me as the aggressive black leader. So, they went for defensive. It got to the point where I had to be removed out of the organization just to save my career" ***Ely***	Labelled, as defensive, targeted and scapegoated and blamed for failure.	Undermined. Targeted. Lack of representation. Negative Judgement Misunderstood Seen as worthless	Systemic racism enacted in overt and covert microaggressions	Systemic racism and repeated acts of racial microaggressions: Black women have a sense of unbelonging, and failure which strips their confidence in role.
"I had obviously a white male manager who was again attempting at bullying and so on and so forth. *So, there have been times when attempts have been made to silence me and it's been extremely distressing, extremely painful, where people have tried to bully me and they tended to be people who were bullies,* *"I think the racial discrimination... I think it was deeply unconscious, though, also. But I think that what happens is that when that is operating, that kind of racism, that again, it's always the same…"* ***Aggy***	Experiencing attempts at bullying, overt and covert forms of bullying. Experienced as racism embedded operating in the system.	Racialised Not heard Not listened to		
"So, I think we do all these things not a disguise, but as a coping mechanism, when really and truly it's because we feel really othered and racialized and discriminated against in these spaces where other people feel so safe and almost empowered and emboldened to say and do	Feelings of being othered and racialised, discriminated. Unfair unequal treatment. White privilege.	Racism Discriminated	Systemic racism enacted in overt and covert microaggressions.	Systemic racism and repeated acts of racial microaggressions: Black women have a sense of unbelonging, and failure which strips their confidence in role.

certain things and nobody says anything about it" ***Vicky.***				

Table 7: Axial codes with illustrative data points

Axial code	Description	Focused codes	Illustrative data point
Idea of playing it safe	Fear of challenging status quo and fear of judgement and consequences if their actions fail. This results in acting cautiously or not acting and giving up.	10	*We might play it a lot safer yeah than we would then we would ordinarily be because you don't want to do anything that will bring any more attention, rocks a boat in anyway or raise your head any higher because you want to hold onto the job.*
Systemic racism enacted in microaggressions	Overt and covert discrimination, excluded, ignored, bullied, undermined, seeking to be noticed and heard, othered	15	*I have experience racism bullying masses of amounts of bullying um discrimination and it's just as bad today for me in this role as it was when I was starting it that the microaggressions, the racism the undermining is worse now I'm in a director role than before at the current organisation that I mean I'm the only black director.*
Projected sense of inadequacy	Feeling they underperform, self-doubt, self-blame, needing to work harder and overachieve.	9	*We feel like we have to have all the academic accolades before we even consider going for certain roles so we study and re study and we work, and we work, and we know the job inside out* *So, we are battling a system where we spend a lot of time with a lot of education.*
Negative stereotype labelling	The experience of not identified as leaders because they are black viewed as incompetent, mistaken for roles such as housekeeping, receptionist making them feel unauthorised to take up their role.	6	*I couldn't even if I had a pound for every time that happened to me throughout my career I'm always seen as something other than the actual person I am…I will turn up to meetings even earlier and people will say they are waiting for the manager…but I am the manager…They don't expect somebody like me to be in the room so*

			then you think, you question yourself should I even be in the room? It is soul destroying…
Source of strength for survival - resistance	Bringing in the fight within to survive and drawing from history and earlier experiences, importance of doing it for others	5	*I need to say my dad is a descendant of tribe (REDACTED) who hid in the runaway place in the mountains, who would not be enslaved. So, I have a rebellious strength, so I will succeed out of spite*
Internalised strength and belief in own ability to survive - resilience	Avoid quitting, rely on beliefs and internal strength to survive. Growing up they learn to believe in their own strength and internalised belief they can learn and work harder	4	*And that kind of unconscious belief that we can take anything. We can take anything, and I think it gets played and we have internalised that as well sadly.* *And I think that that's in, you know, definitely part of the part of the picture. And I found that that, you know, it passes, and you come through and you can work another day, you know, kind of thing*
Masking emotions as a personal defence / coping strategy	Self-regulation, code switching and conforming to survive	8	*And that kind of helped me to start to develop a thicker skin because I was, up until that point, very easy to cry, very emotional, take everything personal. They must moderate themselves a lot so they can survive each day. And it's horrible. It's horrible…*

3.9.1 Reflexivity during coding and data analysis

Rice and Ezzy (1999) describe reflexivity as a mechanism for ensuring rigor in qualitative research. It involves critically reflecting on how researchers construct knowledge throughout the research process, what influences shape this construction, and how these influences manifest in the planning, execution, and writing of the research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Clarke and Hoggett (2009), along with Henwood (2008), assert that reflexivity is a vital component of the qualitative research process, enabling researchers to engage with data that is embodied, unspoken, or not readily accessible to conscious awareness. Frosh (2010) further conceptualizes the research encounter as a co-created space, where both the researcher and the research process are acknowledged as active participants in the production of knowledge. In this light, reflexivity becomes an ongoing process of critical self-examination and interpretation, requiring the researcher to consistently step back and scrutinize their own positioning and approach.

A researcher is considered more reflexive when they are aware of the multiple influences, they exert on the research process and, conversely, how the research process shapes them. As a Black woman in a senior leadership role, I have often grappled with the complexities of leading and asserting authority in certain organizational settings. These challenges have not only persisted but, in some instances, intensified as I have progressed into more senior roles. Consequently, from the moment I chose this research topic, through participant recruitment and data collection, I was continually engaged in examining my own experiences. This required

deep introspection and what Steier (1995) describes as reflexively “tuning in” to oneself, a process that was at times painful, as it brought to the surface past injustices I had encountered as a Black woman in predominantly white senior leadership teams.

Listening to my participants recount similarly painful experiences, ranging from bullying to being silenced and rejected, reawakened my own trauma. I was able to explore these emotional responses in reflective spaces, including individual supervision, group supervision, and support networks with fellow researchers.

Using a reflective diary proved invaluable for processing these emotions and disentangling my own reactions from those of my participants. I often found myself trying to make sense of what I heard, instinctively assigning meaning, while simultaneously recognizing the risk that my bias or subjectivity might lead me to prematurely form themes. This tendency was more pronounced at the beginning of data collection. However, as the process progressed, I became increasingly adept at resisting the urge to jump to conclusions, allowing myself the time and space to engage more deeply with the data. This meant revisiting transcripts and audio recordings multiple times to ensure a more accurate and thoughtful interpretation.

Hollway (2009) notes that transcripts can lose critical layers of meaning conveyed through tone, pace, emphasis, and rhythm. She found that listening to audio recordings clarified discrepancies and deepened her understanding of participants’ emotions. I had a similar experience. Repeatedly reviewing my transcripts alongside the recordings helped me make sense of emerging themes. One moment stood out particularly vividly: the tone of a participant, filled with sadness and disappointment, conveyed an unspoken sense of shame. Within a systems psychodynamic framework, emotions are treated as data, and my countertransference particularly to emotions of

shame and sadness served as an important signal of a dynamic that my participants may have been disowning.

In one example, Ely's narrative hinted at shame, perhaps tied to the notion of defeat, a concept that Black women often feel they cannot share. She stated, "*You cannot show your vulnerabilities, because you will be viewed as weak.*" These were deeply emotional moments for me, as they echoed my own struggles with vulnerability and the internalised pressure to conform to the 'strong Black woman' stereotype. The fear of being perceived as weak or labelled a failure often leads Black women to avoid admitting when they are not coping or when they need support.

My first in-person interview was especially difficult to move on from. I noticed that spending time immediately afterward writing field notes became a crucial way of processing the experience. The use of field notes, alongside reflective supervision, plays a vital role in surfacing the researcher's emotions and interpretations, how they feel, what they hear, and what they can truly listen to (Hubbard et al., 2001; Kleinman, 1991; Hunt, 1989).

In some cases, it was the unspoken data that was most telling. During that first interview, the participant's sadness was most evident in her tone as she spoke about accepting what cannot be changed. I felt that underlying sadness and hurt within myself. By attuning to my countertransference, I was able to identify and reflect on the emotions that were not explicitly articulated but were nonetheless present. Staying connected to this reflexive awareness also helped me distinguish between emotions arising from my own lived experience and those that belonged to my participants.

3.9.2 Experience of doing the research

I aimed to recruit Black women in executive roles, such as directors or those in positions denoting authority. Initially, I felt disappointed when several women I approached declined to participate. While each expressed that my study was important, they cited being too busy with other projects. This left me questioning whether their reluctance stemmed from a belief that sharing their lived experiences would not lead to meaningful change, or perhaps from a fear of speaking up due to concern for their positions. Kinouani (2020) discusses how marginalised groups often experience silencing to maintain “white peace,” and I wondered whether this phenomenon was playing out in these interactions.

For those who did participate, I was often surprised by their openness and willingness to be understood. There were strong resonances between their experiences and my own, particularly in how we navigated our roles using personal defences to remain in position and cope with organisational challenges.

My research design included a second interview, intended to clarify any inconsistencies or provide participants with space to reflect on or revise what they had shared. At the end of each initial interview, I explained that I would be in touch to arrange a second session only if I needed to clarify any points during data analysis, or if they themselves wished to follow up.

In the end, I found the second interview was not necessary. I attribute this to the pre-interview calls that each participant requested before the formal 90-minute session. These preliminary conversations allowed me to introduce the research, establish rapport, and create a sense of trust. I believe this contributed significantly to

participants feeling comfortable enough to share their lived experiences openly. Charmaz (2014) underscores the importance of building rapport with participants and adopting an open, accepting stance so they feel safe enough to let us into their worlds.

Throughout the interviews, I sensed a strong desire from participants to be understood, perhaps a reflection of not feeling heard within their organisational contexts. I was struck by the depth of openness in every interview. There was a sense that they had rarely, if ever, been offered the opportunity to articulate their anxieties, fears, and vulnerabilities in a non-judgmental and reflective space. Two participants commented that the session felt like therapy, and another expressed gratitude for having had the chance to think so deeply about her experience for the first time. While it was never my intention to create a therapeutic space, I was left with the impression that the interviews had been meaningful, even healing for some participants.

I believe I was able to create what Bion (1962) refers to as a containing space: the emotional capacity to hold another's feelings without becoming overwhelmed or attempting to quickly dispel them, but rather to reflect on what those feelings communicate. I was emotionally present, and this presence allowed participants to feel safe enough to express deep-seated anxieties related to their work experiences. Miller (2008) stresses that being emotionally available is crucial when researching sensitive topics that may risk retraumatising participants. In a similar vein, Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) note that "*research must be carried out in ways that are sensitive to the setting*" (p.6).

Sharing biographical similarities with my participants proved to be an advantage. I was able to use my presence as a springboard to support participants in exploring difficult and painful experiences that many stated they had never been able to speak about in

the workplace. Hollway (2016) speaks to the concept of defended subjects, individuals who, for reasons of self-protection, may not easily access or articulate certain emotional truths. I sensed that feelings of humiliation or shame were barriers to such disclosures in professional settings, where participants feared judgment or misunderstanding. My shared identity helped mitigate this risk and enabled a deeper level of engagement. These reflections point to the vital importance of safe, reflective spaces if organisations are truly to understand the lived experiences of minoritised individuals.

Once data collection was complete, I undertook the iterative process of reviewing my data line by line, identifying quotes that illuminated my categories, while continuously confronting and interrogating my preconceptions and subjectivity. As a Black woman researching other Black women in similar positions, maintaining a reflexive stance was a consistent and sometimes difficult task. I repeated this cycle of coding and analysis until I reached what I considered a saturation point, where no new codes or categories emerged. From there, I proceeded to theoretical or selective coding, a process Corbin and Strauss (2014) describe as integrating and refining the emergent theory from the data.

3.9.3 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined my research methodology, detailing the use of the FANI method as my chosen mode of enquiry, the overall research design, and the data analysis approach. I have also shared my personal experiences of conducting the interviews. The FANI method, alongside the concept of the defended subject, significantly informed my approach, particularly in supporting participants to explore emotionally challenging material. Allowing them the freedom to structure their narratives in their own way proved essential in creating a safe and open space for disclosure.

I have also explained the process by which I developed the seven axial codes, which represent the core themes emerging from the data and form the foundation for constructing theoretical ideas in forthcoming chapters. These themes will be presented and explored in relation to my research question, as I begin to interpret the data and examine its broader relevance.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction – 7 Axial Codes

In this chapter, I will discuss each of my six participants' themes relating to the focused codes and axial codes generated from the data gathered during the interview process. This will be followed by my reflections and thoughts during and after the interview with each participant. The chapter will end with reflexivity from focus groups and Tavistock Annual Research Symposium.

The data analysis as explained in the methodology chapter was a Grounded Theory (GT) approach which was a process of line by line reading of recorded transcripts, starting with identifying initial codes, followed by a repetitive exercise of sifting through the initial codes, merging those that had the same meaning, to create focused codes. I started off with 110 initial codes (Table 4) and after this step, I arrived at 57 focused codes (Fig 2). This was an arduous process and employing gerund verbs gave some clarity to the evolving theme which are the seven axial codes in (Table 7). For example, I created gerund code '*feeling blackness is seen as weakness'* which I linked with initial codes such as: *seen as worthless; receiving scrutiny; undermined; working harder to prove themselves*; which evolved into the axial code *systemic racism enacted in microaggressions.*

The use of abductive reasoning based on my experience and subjectivity and applying a systems psychodynamic lens through noticing transferences and countertransference and interpreting them during and after the interviews helped me to form and group my focused codes and axial codes thereafter. Table (8) shows the

seven axial codes and associated descriptions for each code which I will discuss in turn in the section below.

Table 8: 7 Axial codes with descriptions

Axial codes	**Description**
Idea of playing it safe	Fear of challenging status quo and fear of judgement and consequences if their actions fail. This results in acting cautiously or not acting and giving up.
Systemic racism enacted in microaggressions	Overt and covert discrimination, excluded, ignored, bullied, undermined, seeking to be noticed and heard, othered
Projected sense of inadequacy	Feeling they underperform, self-doubt, self-blame, needing to work harder and overachieve
Negative stereotype labelling	The experience of not identified by others as leaders because they are Black viewed as incompetent, mistaken for roles such as housekeeping, receptionist making them feel unauthorised to take up their role.
Source of strength for survival - resistance	Bringing in the fight within to survive and drawing from history and earlier experiences, importance of doing it for others
Internalised strength and belief in own ability to survive - resilience	Avoid quitting, rely on beliefs and internal strength to survive. Growing up they learn to believe in their own strength and internalised belief they can learn and work harder
Masking emotions as a personal defence / coping strategy	Self-regulation, code switching and conforming to survive

4.1.1 Systemic racism enacted in microaggressions

All my participants had lived experience of being subjected to a form of discrimination that is paramount to working in systems where systemic racism was present. These were overt and covert displays of being treated differently to their white colleagues. They talked about being the only Black person in the senior leadership team which meant they stood out and were targets of negative stereotyping, discrimination and found they had to work hard to be accepted.

These experiences were repeated across all my participants. I condensed the 24 initial codes into 15 focused codes in table 9. This axial code had the highest number of focused codes, and I will be referring to it as the primary theme.

Table 9: Systemic racism enacted in microaggressions

1	Feeling that blackness is seen as weakness
2	Experiencing bullying
3	Describing pain of being discriminated and bullied
4	Experiencing more scrutiny compared to other non-black colleagues
5	Experiences being scapegoated and blamed for failures in the system
6	Feeling that they are not authorised
7	Experiences of being singled out, standing out as only black person
8	Experiences of being undermined, targeted and othered
9	Experiences of being ignored
10	Experiences of being racialised
11	Experiences of being misjudged and misunderstood
12	Feeling rejected by the system
13	Experiences of unfair treatment because of gender
14	Being challenged by white men and thinking it is because they are black and female
15	Not trusted because they are Black women

Tara

Being black was a factor that she acknowledged had an impact in relation to change initiatives. This acceptance relates to knowing that because you are black, you do not have full authority to act and therefore accept things as they are.

> *Just play your role, you cannot change who you are…you have to do what you have to do knowing your limitations as a Black person....yeah so I think it's showing up and doing a good job so I think there's something about let your work speak for itself because I can't fight fact people see me as a Black like I can't do anything about that.*

Nina

Nina's experiences included overt acts of discrimination. She was not believed and feared speaking because of the repercussions. One of these experiences was a time when efforts were made by the CEO to exclude her from the Boardroom.

> *I knew it was not safe for me as a leader in that organisation … I realised that anything that I was doing my team was doing was heavily scrutinised and that made me admit it very difficult for me then… because I find it hard to speak up because I was always and as I'm talking about it, I can feel it in my chest umm. I was always anticipated… if I speak what was going to happen is going to be against me is going to be the mark against me.*

On occasions she was ignored or dismissed:

> *I recall you know giving opinion saying things in meetings and not being heard and then somebody else a white man would say exactly the same thing,*

> *exactly my word, and it was the best idea that anybody's ever heard, and I recall watching that and thought OK let's just see what's going on here and…*

Nina decided to leave the organisation. She had found the experience traumatising, and she explained that the pain has stayed with her which was evident to me by how emotional she became during the interview.

Nina pointed out that she had to leave before finding another job which shows that she could no longer bear the racial attacks targeted at her in that organisation, quitting was a strategy to protect herself.

Tess

Tess states that she has experienced racism most of her career. The part of the organisation that she works in is predominantly white and she has throughout her long stay in that organisation found herself being the only Black person in the room. She has been subjected to bullying by men and talks about experiences of microaggressions mostly from white women.

> *I have experienced racism bullying masses of amounts of bullying umm… discrimination and it's just as bad today for me in this role as it was when I was starting it that the microaggressions, the racism the undermining is worse now I'm in a director role than before at the current organisation that I mean I'm the only black director but the leadership team is 99% female there's one man so they're all women so female CEO and the othering is worse in this role than I've experienced before.*

> *I really experience some of the more traumatic experiences with people usually white men taking me to one side and saying they didn't think I was good enough basically.*

Tess has noticed that she was being subjected to racism more as she took on more senior leadership roles.

In Tess's experience, white men tended to be more open about their criticisms and undermining her. A sense perhaps of white men's entitlement and privilege making them bolder to not cover up their acts of racial aggressions compared to white women whose acts were more of subtle covert racial microaggressions.

Ely

Ely was very much attuned to being racialised, she talks about the fact that people look at her and judge her and this is because of her differences as a Black woman. She refers to a system that is unforgiving and exerting the pressure to perform.

> *If I make a mistake, well, at least I know I won't do that again. It's like learning that as a leader, for me, it is very important, so that when I'm at the table and others look at me, because I realize then people are going to look at me and judge and wonder and start doing their own investigation.*

Ely's heightened sense of difference and pressure to perform, to do well, could have been projections of unbelonging from the white people in the system she worked in. She describes a time when she was perceived incompetent and scapegoated for poor

results in one of her services, but the challenges needed an organisational wide approach. She was not listened to but felt blamed and was moved on.

Aggy

Out of the six participants, Aggy related to the longest history of being racially attacked and this was from both genders, and she refers to the acts as deeply unconscious.

> *I had obviously a white male manager who was again attempting at bullying and so on and so forth. So, there have been times when attempts have been made to silence me and it's been extremely distressing, extremely painful, where people have tried to bully me and they tended to be people who were bullies, you know, wasn't personal to me. That was the way they went along. And the people who, and it's hard to say this, but it's on the back of a great deal of reflection who have been quite envious and have tried to silence me for that reason.*

> *I think the racial discrimination... I think it was deeply unconscious, though, also. But I think that what happens is that when that is operating, that kind of racism, that again, it's always the same.*

Aggy tried to make sense of the acts of bullying but concluded it is racial discrimination. In her case, it could be that thinking that the racial discrimination was conscious would be more unbearable and she tolerated it by thinking it was unconscious. I thought that there was a sense of justifying white people's behaviours thinking that as Black people we deserve to be subjected to racist behaviours, perhaps her internalised belief based

on her lived experience or effects of the history of transgenerational racial trauma (Volka, 2017).

I noticed that thinking and talking about these experiences were still difficult for Aggy, the pain and hurt was present, and I was through countertransference, left holding some of that for a while after the interview.

Vicky

Vicky talked about the differential treatment Black women are subjected to in the workplace.

> *So, I think we do all these things not a disguise, but as a coping mechanism, when really and truly it's because we feel really othered and racialized and discriminated against in these spaces where other people feel so safe and almost empowered and emboldened to say and do certain things and nobody says anything about it.*

Vicky left an organisation where she felt that she was unfairly treated because of her skin colour. Vicky's experience left her feeling frightened. She resisted the system by quitting to protect her safety.

> *I had to really decide on my safety, my autonomy and just felt like I was being told not what to do and not spoken to about how the service should run. So really irritated, really frustrated, really scared and just really felt like I am now a target because if I don't care about myself, they're not going to care about me.*

4.1.2 Idea of playing it safe

The idea of playing it safe was second highest axial code in relation to the number of focused codes.

Table 10: Idea of playing it safe

16	Feeling it is unsafe to challenge status quo.
17	Accepting you cannot make a difference
18	Fearing the repercussions if they make any decisions
19	Feeling anxious about challenging
20	Needing to be accepted by not causing upset
21	Playing it safe
22	Fearing the reputation of being labelled as difficult if they speak up
23	Accepting limitations placed on your role - could be unconscious projections
24	Sense of holding back
25	Fearing judgement

<u>Tara</u>

Tara appeared confident in her role and delivery but talked about the importance of accepting your limitations as a Black person and accepting what you cannot change:

> *Just play your role, you cannot change who you are…you have to do what you have to do knowing your limitations as a Black person.*

She refers to being Black as having limitations which must be accepted. She recalls the words from her parents about acceptance:

> *So, my parents had this thing growing up… there was this prayer that grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference*.

Though Tara appeared to be comfortable with the situation that she cannot change anything, I sensed sadness and incapacitation as if holding back something. I felt frustrated and wondered if it was being in a role where your hands seem tied, and you feel restricted and powerless.

Tess

Tess displayed the most frustration about not being able to take up authority and act, explaining that you could be viewed as difficult and challenging.

> *You don't want to do anything that will bring any more attention, rocks a boat in anyway or raise your head any higher because you want to hold onto the job.*
>
> *Some of us who managed to exert themselves and really show their presence they then have a reputation for being difficult and challenging and aggressive and you know all the knives are out, so you want it you want… to you want to be accepted by the organisation, you want to not necessarily liked but accepted.*

Her statement depicts a dangerous system where one fears for their lives and that they could be rejected by the system. A system that Black women must be so cautious to not put a foot wrong or they fall e.g., lose your job.

Ely

Ely talked about both playing it safe and standing up for what you believe in.

> *Yes, so say we might play it a lot safer yeah than we would then we would ordinarily be because you don't want to do anything that will bring any more attention, rocks a boat in anyway or raise your head any higher because you want to hold onto the job*.

She related a story where she felt she knew what was required to improve a service, but she was not believed or allowed to make changes, instead she was being asked to change her approach which would have been against her values. This resulted in her being moved on to a different organisation. She was moved to a part of the same organisation sector which was a secondment with no plan for what happens at the end of that secondment. She applied and was successful for another senior leadership role in a different organisational sector. She demonstrates an example of quitting to protect yourself from an uncaring system.

Vicky

Vicky has found a way of managing the challenges associated with not being authorised to act which is accepting and being less critical.

> *And I'm not going to say it's like doing the bare minimum because I think people still do their work really well but maybe being less critical of the way things are being done because you just want to survive, get your money, go home and continue the work.*

I thought this could be an act of withdrawal and done in order to survive but can be limiting for the individual and the organisation will not benefit from the individual's full potential.

4.1.3 Projected sense of inadequacy

The roles that my participants occupy are senior roles and they would have gone through a rigorous selection process to gain entry. None of them were new in the role, but there was a sense that they had to do more to feel adequate or to be seen as adequate by the system.

I narrowed down the 17 initial codes to nine focused codes under this axial code.

Table 11: Projected sense of inadequacy

26	Feeling they need to be more qualified to be validated
27	Doubting their capabilities
28	Having low confidence
29	Feeling they must overachieve to survive
30	Feeling that they should not be in senior roles.
31	Feeling they are underperforming
32	Expecting external validation
33	Feeling that the organisation has high expectations of them
34	Thinking that organisation expects them to do more

Tess

Tess referred to what it feels like going for a job as a Black woman and then when in role.

> *We feel like we must have all the academic accolades before we even consider going for certain roles so we study and re study and we work, and we work, and we know the job inside out before we even apply for the job whereas others will know 50% and have confidence to go for jobs…this is white privilege… I need to know the inside outside the of the job before I even think feel confident about going for it.*

Ely

Ely talked about the battle to be viewed equally and Black women mitigating by spending a lot of time educating themselves.

> *There's no equal opportunity. So, we are battling a system where we spend a lot of time with a lot of education.*

Vicky

Vicky talks about the pressure to do more.

> *We work harder; a lot harder than our white folks because we have to prove it. And this is probably the same as that. If I am being visible, I am being seen. I am proving to them that I am good enough. Whereas white colleagues will not even think about that. It's white privilege. Just by being that colour, people think they know what they're doing. But for us, if you don't, don't say, don't speak up or show that you can, they just assume you can't.*

> *And I always recognize the Black people or racialized people who are employed, they always got so many credentials. They've got masters, they've got PhDs, they've got this course and that course, they've got business on the side.*

> *We are burnt out, burnt out trying to do so many things. Like we don't amount to anything*

Vicky shares how she resists the pull to continue doing more to prove yourself, yet she is studying for a PHD.

But I think… my thinking about it now is that I'm just going to show up like you've employed me for a reason. I don't think I need to do anything extra. And I think we go into organizations feeling and thinking because of the environment, we need to do more.

4.1.4 Masking emotions and conforming

This axial code with eight focused codes, pertains to participants experience of not belonging, not accepted the way they are and needing to conform and mask emotions to be accepted. This need to conform is enacted in different unauthentic behaviours.

Table 12: Masking emotions and conforming

35	Needing to conform to belong
36	Feelings they cannot be themselves
37	Self-regulating the way they respond
38	Needing to conform through the way they speak / accent
39	Hiding vulnerabilities and appearing strong
40	Hiding weaknesses, pretending to be strong
41	Feeling they cannot show their vulnerabilities
42	Needing to code switch i.e. the way they act and dress

Tara

Tara talked about the need to conform to fit, saying that it is not just an issue for Black women, but that it is necessary to survive in senior roles:

I think that is how we can survive in these senior roles by being I think code switching if we call it that. I think there's an element anywhere of the need to. I think human beings naturally just want to fit in, they don't want things that draw attention to themselves so I think everybody does it but people like us probably do it more… yeah we would probably do it more and I think for now unless we

> *do it we might not be in the room so but once you're in the room I can go and wear my funky outfit.*

Tara appears to rationalise code switching saying everyone in senior leadership role must do it but also acknowledges that Black women have a higher need to do it to be allowed in the 'room'. The room pertaining to senior leadership teams.

Tess

> *Black women work hard, and we do not like to be seen as vulnerable and that might be generalisation, but we do not like to show our vulnerabilities because it's seen as a weakness because we work so hard.*

Aggy

Aggy talked about how her response to an incident where her work was scrutinised was seen as '*taking it gracefully'* by the perpetrator and yet she suffered pain and hurt which she did not show, a case of masking emotions and appearing strong.

> *And she wanted to apologise for the way she treated me. And she said, the funny thing is she said, and you took it with such grace. And I thought, oh my goodness, if you just knew, it was so painful, so devastating, you know, because she unravelled a lot of my work.*

Vicky

Vicky talked of how Black women behave to survive and like other participants she used the word 'we' and 'they' a sense that this is a common experience among this

group and that she can represent Black women not present. Perhaps a sense that they are not always represented.

> *Black women…they have to moderate themselves a lot so they can survive each day. And it's horrible. It's horrible.*
>
> *That's what surviving might look like, I think. I think the conditions for that are maybe like bringing less of yourself to work, being less in the office as well, being less visible, being less physical, being less vocal.*
>
> *But I've heard Black people say to me they don't wear colours to work because it feels like colours make them stand out. I never even considered that. But I guess when you're trying to make yourself as small and invisible as possible, you would do things to package yourself in some way.*
>
> *Just certain things make you feel uncomfortable. Even the foods that you bring in, people are questioning, what is that? All these things happen in this office space, and we have to bring a particular version of ourselves into this space.*

<u>Ely</u>

Ely shared an experience where she had felt pressure to change her approach in the way she was leading her service which she resisted.

> *She looked me up and down and she said, Ely, there's not much of you, but throw your weight around when you go on the ward. Let them fear you when you come on the ward. For friends and family, throw your weight around.*

> *I would have felt I'd have failed if I changed my way to fit in. Because I honestly feel that woman didn't like me because of my race. I felt shame and that I was being used as a scapegoat and all blamed on my physique.*

In Ely's experience, she was being asked to overtly change her approach, which would have meant her conforming to the CEO's way of doing things. This scenario relates to the idea that you are not allowed to take your own authority but doing as you are told. If you do not, the system rejects you which was the case for Ely.

4.1.5 Negative stereotype labelling

Negative stereotype threats and often being negatively stereotyped makes it challenging for Black women because they are not recognised as senior leaders. I distilled below focused codes from my participants utterances.

Table 13: Negative stereotype labelling

43	Not identified and authorised as a leader
44	Experiences of being undermined because of race
45	Experiences of being mislabelled
46	Fearing negative stereotype labels e.g. the angry black woman
47	Experiences of being mistaken for more junior roles
48	Seen as worthless

Black women in senior leadership roles find themselves subjected to labels based on the societal stereotype of a Black women remaining in junior roles or more mundane jobs or behave aggressively:

Tara

> I was m*istaken for an assistant when I was the Director, not believed, is it because of my age or because I am a woman, or it is because of the colour of my skin*.

Tess

> *I couldn't even… if I had a pound for every time that happened to me throughout my career I'm always seen as something other than the actual person I am. I will turn up to meetings even earlier and people will say they are waiting for the team manager, yet I am the team manager.*
>
> *Every job I go to they do not realise that I am REDACTED because they expect somebody different, white, and that could have an effect on you if you let it because it's almost always like you're not. They don't expect somebody like us to be in the room so then you think, you question yourself should I even be in the room?*

Tess expressed that the repeated acts of being mis-recognised for roles with less authority, could make you self-doubt your authority.

She talked about her awareness of being pulled into the stereotype role of caregiver and making tea and coffee when she is meant to be leading:

> *I found myself slipping into some of the supporting running around getting teas and coffees together making sure he's comfortable and I would be angry with myself as stepping into that because one I am a woman and Black woman, why it's almost like society has put you in these positions as being and making teas making coffee, being a caregiver in a makeshift is OK. I'm*

thinking this is my bloody meeting why am I stepping into this role and everybody else is sitting there.

Tess talked about how the fear of negative stereotypes makes her self-regulated fearing the negative labels being attached to her actions:

I also have to have self-regulation and self-measurement and by that, I mean before I say anything in meetings, before I talk to people or challenge people, I try not to come across as aggressive, I try not to come up as loud. I try not to come across as you know what because they have put these labels on us already, that we can be challenging, we can be aggressive.

Treading carefully so not to be misunderstood. This describes how dangerous the system is experienced by Black women and the need to be extra cautious in the way you act.

Aggy had several examples of being mistaken for lesser roles which she says is about demotion:

You know, always demotion, either way you look at it. So, so that, that, that's that, that idea that there are people just assuming you know nothing, assuming you've got nothing to offer.

And then as I've got older, of course, it's more like the cleaner or, you know, the sort of domestic worker. I have been handed the keys to the cleaning cabinet before today when I've, you know, been in my professional role, that kind of thing. So that's interesting to me, how over the lifecycle that has happened, but it's always demotion.

4.1.6 Internalised fight for survival – resistance

Participants talked about their fight for survival and what keeps them going, and where the strength comes from. The source of strength appeared to be driven from their past experiences, history, internalised beliefs such as working harder and keep fighting.

Table 14: Internalised fight for survival

49	Resisting the pressure of the role
50	Fighting the system
51	Employing a fighting spirit to survive
52	Internalised sense of keep fighting
53	Importance of doing it for others

Ely

> *You are carrying the race and gender and cannot be seen to fail. If you fail, you have failed your people. My why must be bigger than me for me to stay, so there is something about doing it for the next generation that look and sound like me to believe they can get ahead. This is what makes me fight though at times I want to quit.*
>
> *So that for me, is important. And I think some people quit just when they were going to get that breakthrough. They just give up. And if they had just pushed a little bit longer, they say the night is the darkest just before the dawn.*
>
> *And I am thinking, my ancestors played bigger dragons than you. They overcame greater obstacles than this. I have it in me, right.*
>
> *I need to say my dad is a descendant of REDACTED who were the runaway place people in the mountains, who would not be enslaved. So, I have a rebellious strength, so I will succeed out of spite.*

Aggy

So, they again tried the denigration, the inference, the typical projections really, that you must be like a bit incompetent, a bit kind of bizarre, you know, that kind of thing.

But that, you know, didn't stop me. Again, that was just added stress, really, you know, that had to be managed as well as the job.

4.1.7 Internalised sense and belief in own ability – building resilience

Table 15: Internalised sense and belief in own ability

54	Believing in self confidence
55	Drawing strength from within to stay in role
56	Internalised self-validation that they can do the job
57	Believing in a higher power to achieve – faith in God

Participants talk about drawing strength from within to build resilience to stay in role. This was either from parental influence or learnt behaviours:

Tess

My parents growing up instilled certain values in me, about hard work and you can achieve, you can accomplish and, as I said I have people who recognised and will notice something within me and say, I think you'd be excellent at that so go for it and I've just thought well I'll go forward but so I think it's my personality and my nature.

Nina

I had a very full life growing up and I think that when you have that and the message that I had always received was I can do anything I want, and that was never something that was in doubt so as the first person ever in family to go to university.

Believing in self-worth is really empowering because actually it's really helpful because I really believe in knowing my own self-worth, but we're human so you know something helpful for somebody else to see that thing in you know and that that gives a boost as well.

Ely

But when they see me as an underdog and judge me wrongly because of my race and my background, it's the best thing they do for me because it means that I think, okay, you've written me off before, even giving me a chance. So now is my chance to show you what I'm really made of. So, I'm very resilient and very strong.

Aggy

And that kind of unconscious belief that we can take anything. We can take anything, and I think it gets played and we have internalised that as well sadly. And I think that… that's in, you know, definitely part of the picture.
I had learnt that the harder the going is, the more integrity to have, you know, the more you have to keep your professionalism and your professional ethics close, you know, to me.

And I found that, you know, it passes, and you come through and you can work another day, you know, kind of thing.

4.2 My reflections and thoughts during and after interviews with each participant

I approached the interview process with a degree of anxiety and trepidation on multiple levels. One source of concern was related to my own performance as a researcher; the other stemmed from anticipating the emotional weight of my participants' experiences, both in terms of how difficult they might find it to share and how challenging it might be for me to hear.

Some of this ambivalence was connected to my inexperience as a researcher, coupled with anxiety about interviewing individuals whom I anticipated would be articulate, accomplished, and seasoned in leadership. I found myself questioning whether I would be “good enough,” reflecting a personal valency towards self-doubt and a fear of being judged, emotions that may well have mirrored those experienced by my participants.

After each interview, I recorded my thoughts, reflections, and observations, including instances of countertransference and associative thinking. Below, I have summarised some of these reflections for each participant.

4.2.1 Tara: Director NHS

Tara and I share a similar background as Black women from Zimbabwe who emigrated to the UK in search of better opportunities. Although I did not know her personally, I

was familiar with her through the prominent leadership roles she has held, and I was eager to hear her story as part of my study.

During the interview, Tara came across as calm and measured, often smiling as she spoke about her achievements. She described being consistently recognised for her hard work and frequently “tapped” for promotion into senior leadership positions. She seemed content with her current role and attributed her progression to the support of mentoring and coaching.

However, I found myself reflecting on her reference to "*accepting the things you cannot change*," which struck me as an acceptance of the status quo, an idea that, to me, suggested a form of conformity. This sentiment followed her remark that “*as a Black woman, there is nothing I can do about that*,” which seemed to imply a perceived limitation on what Black women are allowed to achieve within the organisation.

As she continued, I began to feel a sense of sadness and frustration. I wondered why she appeared to have resigned herself to certain systemic constraints, despite presenting as fulfilled in her role. It left me questioning whether there were aspects of her experience, particularly the challenges and constraints that she was not willing or ready to share. I also noticed feelings of being let down and began to consider whether, due to our shared identity, an unconscious sense of competition might have been present in our interaction.

Countertransference:

The emotions of sadness and disappointment that I experienced during the interview and again while reflecting on the data, seemed to conflict with the narrative Tara was presenting of herself as someone who was doing well. The more I engaged with my countertransference, the more I began to sense an underlying feeling that Tara herself might feel constrained and restricted in her role, not despite her identity, but because she is a Black woman.

This realisation became more vivid through imagery that emerged during my reflection. At one point, I pictured a straitjacket, a powerful symbol of restriction and containment. As my data analysis progressed, another image came to mind: tightrope walking. This metaphor seemed to capture the delicate, precarious balance that Black women in senior leadership roles must maintain, navigating organisational demands while managing the weight of their racial and gendered identities.

4.2.2 Nina: Director – Government Regulatory Body

Nina began our conversation by sharing her husband's experience of discrimination due to his beliefs and foreign accent. She then spoke about the different forms of discrimination she had witnessed within the Black community, particularly regarding accents and skin tones. She expressed strong aversion to these discriminatory practices, positioning herself firmly against them. As someone of African-Caribbean heritage born in the UK and speaking with me an African Black woman, I wondered if Nina's reflections on intra-Black discrimination were a form of solidarity or if my research topic, focused on race and discrimination, had heightened her emotions surrounding these issues.

During the interview, I experienced a brief sense of inferiority in comparison to Nina. She had studied law, and I perceived her as more educated than me. Her comments on accents, and her own concerns about being misunderstood due to her accent, made me reflect on how I too had sometimes worried about my own accent being a barrier. I found myself questioning whether Nina might be projecting her own feelings of inferiority as a Black woman onto me, perhaps seeing me, as an African woman, as someone from a community sometimes viewed as even more "inferior" in certain settings. I also wondered if my own transference was at play, where I unconsciously perceived Nina as superior because I viewed her speech and education as more polished than my own.

As we shifted to the interview questions, I regained my researcher authority. It became clear that Nina took great pride in her accomplishments, particularly in becoming a lawyer as a Black woman from a deprived town where, in her words, academic success was often not expected. She spoke of people from her community who were predicted to end up involved in crime, a prediction that tragically came true for many.

Nina's lived experiences in senior leadership roles were marked by painful instances of overt bullying and racial microaggressions. She described being silenced and excluded from board meetings. As she recounted these incidents, Nina became visibly emotional, showing vulnerability. I too felt deeply affected, sadness and a profound sense of anger lingered with me long after the interview, triggered by the injustices she had endured.

Countertransference:

From Nina's story I was left with emotions of anger and disappointment and sense of being worthless which was a word used by Nina when she described her experiences of being ignored and excluded from board meetings. Nina appeared not to have processed some of the difficult emotions from the organisation she left.

4.2.3 Tess: Director Social Work, UK

Tess presented as calm, though she began the interview hesitantly, unsure of how much she was willing to share. She opened by saying she chose to participate because she wanted to support other women like herself. I found myself drawn to her, empathising with the injustices she described and resonating with aspects of her experience. Throughout the conversation, she remained guarded and spoke with great care, as though concerned about saying the wrong thing.

Tess expressed that she does not see herself as a leader. This statement prompted me to reflect on her humility and reluctance to claim her position. I wondered whether she was struggling to authorise herself as a leader, and whether this was shaped by internalised messages or the impact of stereotype threat. Had negative societal perceptions of Black women in leadership caused her to distance herself from her role, to disown her authority before others had the chance to question it?

Countertransference:

I was left with strong emotions of hurt and concern for Tess. There was a lingering sense of a lost child, someone striving to belong, to be accepted as an equal within a group she deeply wished to be part of. An equal who works hard, yet longs for the freedom to simply be herself. Her story left me feeling profoundly sad, reflecting on the ways in which we, as marginalised individuals, often suppress parts of ourselves to fit into spaces that were not built with us in mind.

I found myself asking: *With all this acting, how can we truly be well?* I became acutely aware of the emotional toll such performance takes and how deeply harmful organisational systems can be for those on the margins. Tess's experience brought into sharp focus the psychological costs of constantly navigating structures that demand conformity over authenticity.

4.2.4 Ely: Director – Higher Education

I experienced Ely as eager to share her story, and she appeared intent on demonstrating her competence as a leader. She smiled and laughed frequently while recounting her experiences, but at times, I wondered whether she was trivialising significant issues. I interpreted this as a possible defence mechanism, a way of managing the anxiety or shame evoked by recalling difficult moments in her leadership journey, perhaps stirred by the context of the interview itself.

At certain points, I felt as though I was being preached to, given a definition of what a leader should be and how she embodied that image. Much of her narrative centred

around being strong and adopting a masculine stance, reinforcing the idea that strength in leadership is aligned with male attributes. This left me wondering whether she harboured doubts about her own potency as a woman and whether her ideal of leadership was shaped by a desire to embody masculine traits to gain legitimacy.

On reflection, I wondered whether her performance might have been shaped by underlying anxieties about the impending restructuring in her organisation. It also occurred to me that transference may have been at play, perhaps she felt judged by me, or unconsciously experienced me as a maternal figure. She had mentioned having to prove her capability to her mother, and I wondered if those dynamics were being replayed in our interaction.

Countertransference:

I felt a strong sense of anxiety both during and after the interview with Ely. At times, I felt as though I were being attacked or lectured, being told how to be good in my role as a leader. This dynamic stirred discomfort, and I noticed a powerful urge within me to reassure her, to tell her that she was, in fact, good at her job.

This interaction revealed to me the depth of Ely's own anxieties, particularly her fear of failure and of losing yet another job amid an impending organisational restructure. There appeared to be an internalised sense of not being good enough, shaped by past experiences of exclusion or rejection in previous roles. Now, finding herself in a similarly unstable environment, she seemed to be grappling with uncertainty about whether she would survive yet another professional upheaval. Her need to assert her competence so forcefully may have been a protective response to this vulnerability, an attempt to maintain control in the face of fear and instability.

4.2.5 Vicky: Director – Local Borough Council

Vicky presented as confident and enthusiastic about being interviewed. She shared that she was about to begin a PhD, which I sensed may have contributed to her eagerness to participate in the research.

As I listened to Vicky's experiences of leadership, I found myself reflecting on what I perceived as a lower threshold for resilience compared to some of the other participants. I wondered whether this perception was influenced by her being considerably younger, possibly feeling that she had more options available to her, or whether it was shaped by the organisational context she worked in. She also mentioned having a couple of private income streams, which I interpreted as her way of signalling greater flexibility, perhaps even a sense of freedom when it came to walking away from organisational roles that she found challenging.

One of her comments stood out: "*Do we need to build our own rooms and be comfortable in them as us? Because all we seem to do is performance for the white game.*" This statement struck me as deeply insightful and evocative. I wondered whether this reflected a generational shift, greater awareness of racial dynamics and a growing rejection of the need to conform to white-dominant organisational cultures. It seemed to point to a changing expectation within Black communities, where younger generations may be more attuned to the costs of performance and more willing to imagine alternative spaces for authenticity and leadership.

Countertransference:

The interview with Vicky felt easy and comfortable. Although she shared some difficult experiences, I was left with an overall sense of calm. I began to wonder if this was also how Vicky experienced me as someone with whom she could speak openly and without pressure. I also wondered whether the ease I felt stemmed from her awareness that she had options and the readiness to leave if the role became unbearable.

She shared that she had made a conscious decision to be "*less critical of the way things are being done because you just want to survive, get your money, go home and continue the work."* This comment struck me as a coping strategy, one that allows her to maintain a sense of equilibrium despite facing the same acts of racialisation experienced by my other participants. Perhaps it is this pragmatic approach, combined with her ability to detach from the organisational setting, that contributes to her sense of comfort, even while navigating difficult realities.

4.2.6 Aggy: Director NHS

Aggy gave me the sense that she had survived senior leadership through sheer endurance, having remained in those roles for many years before recently retiring, a decision she made on her own terms. She clearly had a story to tell.

At times during the interview, I felt torn and even angry when she recounted experiences of discrimination and bullying yet appeared to justify or downplay them by suggesting that the perpetrator was simply a bully, and that the behaviour wasn't

necessarily about race or gender. This tendency to excuse or rationalise such acts reminded me of David and Okazaki's (2006) discussion of internalised racism, where members of marginalised racial groups may tolerate, minimise, deny, or even justify racism as a coping mechanism.

At the conclusion of the interview, Aggy thanked me, saying she had never had the opportunity to reflect so deeply on her leadership journey. She acknowledged that the conversation had surfaced unprocessed emotions and experiences, and that she now felt ready to begin working through them.

Listening to Aggy's story stirred a deep emotional response in me, as it resonated with my own experiences of being bullied, ignored, and discriminated against. Her narrative revealed what I thought to be the long-term cost of enduring such treatment.

Countertransference:

Listening to Aggy was a painful experience. Through countertransference, I became increasingly aware of my own anger and disappointment emotions directed not at Aggy, but at the organisations that had allowed such discrimination to persist. I was struck by the injustice of someone who had dedicated her life from her early twenties through to retirement, serving in complex and challenging environments, only to endure exclusion and marginalisation. What made it even more difficult was the awareness that, now retired, Aggy no longer had the opportunity to challenge the very systems that had failed her.

On reflection, it felt as though Aggy had unconsciously projected some of her anger and disappointment onto me, and I was left holding it. I recall being back at work and

feeling anger towards the system in a different way and being more expressive about it which was not my usual behaviour of masking my emotions.

4.3 Reflexivity from research seminar and focus groups.

4.3.1. Focus groups

I held two focus groups as part of my research. The first was attended by four Black women researchers working in various organisations and roles, and the second by two Black women in leadership positions within the health sector.

The purpose of these focus groups was to present and discuss my axial codes as a means of achieving triangulation. In the first group, the discussion around the axial code of *systemic racism* evoked a shared sense of disappointment, though not surprise. Each participant shared personal experiences that closely mirrored those of the women I had interviewed for the study. One participant, expressing a sense of fatigue and resignation, blurted out, "*What's new*?" a remark that resonated with my own internal dialogue throughout the research process. I too had grappled with the question: *What will this study achieve, when systemic racism is already so well documented and discussed?* Her comment reflected the broader sentiment in the group, an awareness that, while the problem is well recognised, meaningful change often feels elusive.

In the second focus group, the conversation focused on the theme of *negative stereotype threat*. As in the first group, participants openly shared experiences, this time around being labelled or perceived through the lens of negative stereotypes. The discussion illuminated how such stereotypes can erode confidence and self-belief

among Black women in leadership roles. This directly connected to two of my axial codes: *playing it safe* and the *projected sense of inadequacy*. Participants described how these internalised narratives often lead to constrained behaviour, reinforcing the emotional and psychological burden of navigating leadership while under constant scrutiny.

4.3.2 Research symposium

This symposium included three Black participants, including myself, and the remaining members were white and of mixed gender. I sensed that my presentation of the themes made some members of the group uncomfortable. This response reinforced my view that the experiences of Black women with racism in the workplace remain largely unspoken, which is also reflected in the limited literature available on this subject.

The theme that generated the most discussion was that of internalised racism and beliefs. Several members of the group engaged with the idea that internalised racism plays a significant role in shaping individuals' experiences within organisations, particularly in leadership roles. However, on reflection, I wondered whether the group's focus on this theme served a different purpose, perhaps one of avoidance. It seemed that, by centring the discussion on internalised beliefs, the group may have unconsciously shifted attention away from systemic racism and acts of racialisation towards Black women. This dynamic risked absolving themselves from the discomfort and potential shame of confronting racism and their own possible complicity. This aligns with Pyke's (2020) warning that discussions of internalised racism can, if not

carefully framed, inadvertently individualise the problem and obscure broader structural inequalities.

I also sensed underlying emotions of embarrassment and shame among the white members of the group. This confirmed how difficult it can be to have open, honest conversations about race with white colleagues and the discomfort that arises when there is a failure to acknowledge racism as a systemic and persistent issue.

4.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the seven axial codes that emerged as key themes in this study, drawing on the findings from each participant. Although the participants worked across a range of organisational settings, their lived experiences revealed striking similarities. A common thread running through their narratives was the presence of systemic racism and its profound impact on their personal and professional identities.

Based on the data, the theoretical ideas I propose to enhance understanding of Black women's experiences in senior leadership roles are as follows:

1. Black women in senior leadership roles find it difficult to take up authority because of systemic racism enacted in overt and covert microaggressions. They experience the system as too dangerous, prompting the use of coping strategies to survive in role.

2. Through unconscious group processes Black women may identify with negative projections of failure and incompetence from the dominant groups, resulting in a sense of inadequacy in role and failure to perform in authentic ways and take up authority.

3. Black women often draw upon internalised personal defences. These defences influence how they take up leadership roles. If personal defences fail, they will resort to quitting to protect themselves.

In the following chapter I will consider all seven axial codes, holding these ideas in mind to attempt answering my research question.

Chapter 5: DISCUSSION AND SENSE MAKING

5.1 Introduction

In exploring the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles, the central research question I sought to answer was: *Is it difficult for Black women in senior leadership roles to take up authority, and if so, what are the conscious and unconscious factors contributing to this?*

As my findings began to take shape and I progressed with writing, I became preoccupied with how to present and discuss the axial code *'systemic racism enacted through microaggressions'*, which had significantly more references than the other six axial codes identified in the data. This concern stemmed from the widespread discomfort in acknowledging the presence of racism within organisational systems, where racialisation is enacted in ways that can be difficult for recipients to articulate and for others to accept. My ambivalence about foregrounding racism in my work may reflect what Kinouani (2020) describes as the silencing of Black voices when they speak about racism, often to shield white people from discomfort. I suggest that racialisation in organisations constitutes what Bollas (1987) termed the *"unthought known",* a dynamic that, though deeply felt, remains unspoken and is frequently met with resistance. This contributes to the slow and often superficial progress in addressing systemic racism.

Upon further reflection, my other concern was that my work would not just be about racism a factor that is referred to as everyday racism (Essed,1991) in modern work settings, but about constructing ideas employing a GT data analysis approach and systems psychodynamic lens to begin to elucidate ways to bridge the gap in

understanding the difficulties encountered by Black women as they take up senior leadership roles in UK organisations.

In this chapter, I will explore the axial codes presented in Table 16, beginning with the code that generated the highest number of focused codes. For the purpose of this study, this is treated as the *primary* code, due to its significant impact on participants' lived experiences. This will be followed by an examination of axial codes two and three, which address participants' experiences upon entering their organisations.

I will then explore sub-question three: *What strategies do Black women in senior leadership roles use to remain in role?* In this section, I will examine the sources of strength participants drew upon for resistance and resilience in navigating their roles.

Finally, I will address sub-question four, which asks: *What determines whether a Black woman survives or thrives in a senior leadership role?*

The table below shows the seven axial codes arrived at from 57 focused codes (Fig 2) in chapter 4 distilled from 110 initial codes (Table 4).

Table 16: Focused codes and descriptions

Axial code	No. focused codes	Description
Systemic racism enacted through microaggressions and aggressive behaviours	15	Overt and covert discrimination, excluded, ignored, bullied, undermined, isolated and othered.
Idea of playing it safe	10	Fear of challenging status quo and fear of judgement and consequences if their actions fail. This results in them acting cautiously or not acting and giving up.
Projected sense of inadequacy	9	Feeling they are not qualified for the role, think they underperform, self-doubt, self-blame, needing to work harder and overachieve.
Masking emotions as a personal defence / coping strategy	8	Self-regulation, not showing pain, cannot be authentic, code switching and conforming to survive.
Negative stereotype labelling	6	Not identified as leaders because they are black, viewed as incompetent, mistaken for roles such as housekeeping, receptionist making them feel unauthorised to take up leadership roles.
Source of strength for survival – Internalised fight for survival resistance	5	Bringing in the fight from within to survive and drawing from history and earlier experiences, importance of doing it for others
Internal strength and belief in own ability to survive	4	Drawing on personal beliefs and internal strength to survive and stay in role and turning to spirituality – faith in God for strength to survive in role.

5.1.1 Primary theme - systemic racism enacted in microaggressions

I recruited a purposeful sample (Creswell, 2014) of six Black women who identified as being of African and African-Caribbean heritage. Participants were informed that the study aimed to explore the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles within UK organisations. A striking and consistent feature across their narratives was the collective use of the word *"we"* when recounting their lived experiences of racism in the workplace. This expression that I am referring to as *"we-ness" implicitly* included

me, the researcher, as a fellow Black woman with lived experience of senior leadership roles.

Institutional racism (Macpherson, 1999) is a widely recognised and recurring reality for Black people, so much so that it becomes normalised as *everyday racism*, described by Essed (1991) as:

> *"A process in which (a) socialised racist notions are integrated into meanings that make practices immediately definable and manageable, (b) practices with racist implications become in themselves familiar and repetitive, and (c) underlying racial and ethnic relations are actualised and reinforced through the routine or familiar practices in everyday situations"* (p. 52).

The empathic sense of "we-ness" (Cosby & Edwards, 2021) that emerged during interviews reflected a shared, collective trauma rooted in racism. This sense of sameness may also be linked to unconscious transgenerational chosen trauma (Volkan, 2001), where Black women, as a group, endure the cumulative and relentless pain of racial discrimination often invisible and with little hope of reprieve. As a Black woman researcher, I came to feel that my study was seen by participants as a rare glimmer of hope: a space to express deeply held emotions in a safe, containing environment, echoing Winnicott's (1963) notion of holding, and Bion's (1962) concept of containment.

Yet, I often left interviews overwhelmed by the weight of participants' experiences and emotions, feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and powerlessness, which seemed to mirror the emotional undertow of their daily realities in leadership.

These emotions also connected with my personal experience. As a Black mother, I have had countless conversations with my son, preparing him for the reality of racial discrimination, guiding him to recognise when it happens, and cautioning him on how he responds, knowing that his reactions could have serious consequences. While deeply saddening, such conversations are common in Black families, a form of emotional armour against a hostile world.

Recent events in the UK also reflect the societal climate that shapes the workplace experiences of Black people. Protests labelled as riots by the media followed a tragic incident involving the murder of three white children by a Black teenager from an immigrant family. The narrative quickly shifted from the crime itself to a broader, racialised debate about immigration and race, underscoring how easily race becomes a scapegoat. I reference this incident to highlight the persistent presence of racism in the UK and the way it is internalised. For my participants, entering organisations already sensitised to how their difference might be perceived speaks to this internalisation.

Participants spoke openly about their experiences of racism in the workplace, much of which took the form of microaggressions (Russell, 1998). Although some incidents occurred years ago, the pain remained vivid, suggesting lasting trauma. Franklin (1999) reminds us that racial microaggressions can accumulate over time, with deeply damaging psychological effects.

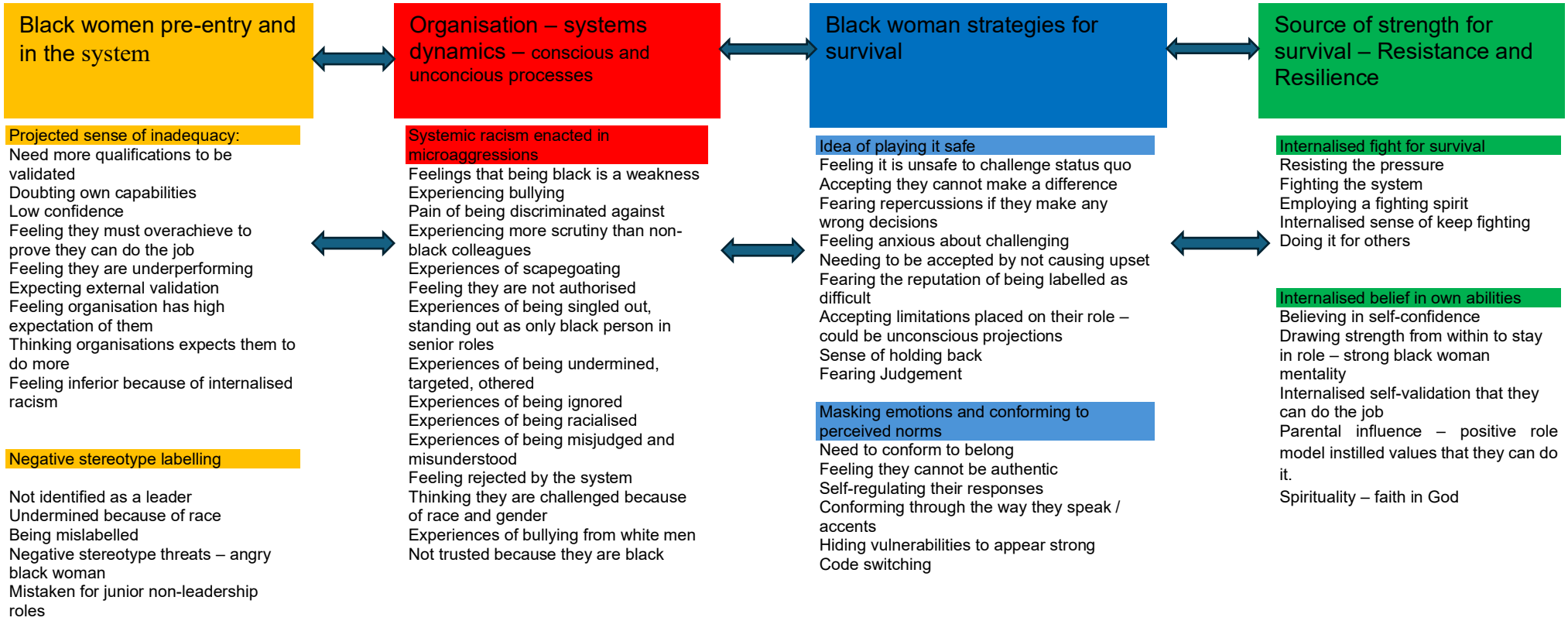
As I listened to their stories, it became evident that while discrimination was normalised, it remained profoundly painful. This normalisation may reflect what Jost and Banaji (1994) describe as the internalisation of social hierarchies by members of

disadvantaged groups. It is the painful knowledge that, as a Black person, one *will* face racism which is what Davids (2011) captures when he writes:

> *"To be black in a white world is agony... at every turn you are confronted by hidden stereotypes that can spring into life in a flash, push violently into you, destabilise you and make you think, feel and act in ways that are wholly determined from the outside, as if yourself had no say in the matter. This can turn even the most innocuous of situations utterly fraught"* (p. 1).

The following diagram illustrates the themes arising from the data. It begins with the entry of Black women into organisations, often carrying internalised racism, sensitivity to negative stereotypes, and projected feelings of inadequacy based on generational messages and personal experience. Once inside, they are subjected to systemic racialisation, often expressed through microaggressions. Those who remain in role often do so by employing a range of survival strategies: playing it safe, masking emotions, conforming to perceived behavioural norms, and drawing on personal sources of strength and internal beliefs. These mechanisms become the foundation for navigating, surviving, and, in some cases, thriving in the face of adversity.

Table 17: Diagrammatic representation of the 7 axial codes impact on participants



I have included below utterances referring to the primary theme of systemic racism in the table below and in the subsequent sections, I will discuss four axial codes springing from the dynamic of systemic racism.

Table 18: Systemic racism - participants data points

Just play your role, you cannot change who you are…you have to do what you have to do knowing your limitations as a Black person....yeah so I think it's showing up and doing a good job so I think there's something about let your work speak for itself because I can't fight fact people see me as a black like I can't do anything about that. (Tara)
I knew it was not safe for me as a Black leader in that organisation I realised that anything that I was doing my team was doing was heavily scrutinised and that made me admit it very difficult for me then… because I find it hard to speak up because I was always and as I'm talking about it, I can feel it in my chest umm. I was always anticipated if I speak what was going to happen is going to be against me is going to be the mark against me. (Nina)
I have experience of racism bullying masses of amounts of bullying um discrimination and it's just as bad today for me in this role as it was when I was starting it that the microaggressions, the racism the undermining is worse now I'm in a director role than before at the current organisation that I mean I'm the only black director but the leadership team is 99% female there's one man so they're all women so female CEO and the othering is worse in this role than I've experienced before. (Tess)
If I make a mistake, well, at least I know I won't do that again. It's like learning that as a Black leader, for me, it is very important, so that when I'm at the table and others look at me, because I realize then people are going to look at me and judge and wonder and start doing their own investigation. (Ely)
I had obviously a white male manager who was again attempting at bullying and so on and so forth. I think the racial discrimination... I think it was deeply unconscious, though, also… But I think that what happens is that when that is operating, that kind of racism, that again, it's always the same. (Aggy)
So, I think we do all these things not a disguise, but as a coping mechanism, when really and truly it's because we feel really othered and racialized and discriminated against in these spaces where other people feel so safe and almost empowered and emboldened to say and do certain things and nobody says anything about it. (Vicky)

When individuals talk about their lived experiences as Black women in senior leadership roles, their stories showed the awareness that they are treated differently because of their race. This phenomenon determines the way they take up their roles.

5.1.2 The Organisation / System

In open systems theory, organisations are conceptualised as whole systems comprised of interrelated subsystems, each with distinct functions aligned toward achieving the organisation's primary task and maintaining sentient boundaries (Miller & Rice, 1967). These systems are structurally designed from a rational and conscious standpoint to fulfil the organisation's intended purpose. However, as Roberts (2019) notes, referencing Colman (1975), the organisational design also arises from the interplay between rational *and* irrational elements, where the irrational includes both covert (conscious but unspoken or unacknowledged) and unconscious dynamics. These undercurrents significantly influence the emotions, thoughts, and behaviours of those working within the system.

A system experienced as racist may operate unknowingly, remain in denial, or function with unconscious motives aimed at preserving the status quo, particularly the protection of white privilege. Bhopal (2018) highlights how white privilege often operates in subtle and nuanced ways, while Dalal (2020) argues that power relations rooted in race, gender, class, and culture are intentionally constructed to distinguish between those who *have* and those who *must not have*, a deeply ideological and politicised mechanism of division.

Dalal (2020) further asserts that racism is *"anything, a thought, feeling or action that uses the notion of race as an activating or organising principle"* (p. 157). While predominantly white systems may be imbued with systemic racism, it is the act of *racialisation* as experienced by the "othered" individual that causes the psychological and emotional harm. In this framing, systemic racism alone does not necessarily impact individuals unless acts of racialisation occur. In the absence of such acts, Black individuals may arguably be free to enact their roles fully and authoritatively in the context of this study, to take up authority within senior leadership roles.

However, in the lived experiences shared by my participants, there is clear evidence of racialisation both overt and covert which directly impinged on their capacity to take up authority. These experiences gave rise to a variety of personal defences and coping strategies employed to remain in role and mitigate the psychological toll of navigating hostile or invalidating organisational dynamics.

5.1.3 Internalised racism

My participants were likely to have had prior knowledge and experiences of racism, whether during childhood or adulthood. In the preceding section, I referenced parenting practices in Black families, where children are often prepared for the realities of racial discrimination. A key aspect of this preparation is ensuring children understand that their racial difference may be a source of bias in certain contexts. This is done in the hope that they will make informed and cautious choices in life to protect themselves.

I share a similar childhood experience with some of my participants, growing up in a colonised country where structural racism was embedded in such a way that one internalised the belief of being of a lesser race. While the formal school curriculum may not have explicitly addressed this dynamic, the advent of freely accessible information online has significantly expanded the availability of Black history, contributing to greater awareness and dialogue around race and racial discrimination in both academic and non-academic spaces.

Through lived experience, transgenerational trauma (Volkan, 2001), and repeated exposure to racism, individuals may develop an unconscious internal world shaped by racial dynamics, wherein they come to anticipate being judged or targeted based on the colour of their skin. Klein (1946) helps us understand this internal psychic structure, while Pyke (2010) describes internalised racism as:

> "*Individual inculcation of the racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the white dominant society about one's racial group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for one's race and oneself*" (p. 553).

These thoughts are what Alleyne (2004) refers to as the "internal oppressor". may operate unconsciously but still be enacted in ways that are personally debilitating. Such internalised beliefs can manifest as self-defeating thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours, shaped by one's direct or indirect experiences of racism (David, 2009).

This is significant, particularly considering David and Okazaki's (2006) argument that internalised racism can lead members of the oppressed group to tolerate, minimise,

deny, or even justify racist treatment. Similarly, Versey et al. (2019) propose the concept of appropriated racial oppression, reframing internalised racism as:

> "*a process whereby members of a group appropriate a dominant group's ideology, adapt their behaviour, and perceive a subordinate status as deserved, natural, and inevitable"* (p. 297).

Pyke (2010) cautions that internalised racism remains a taboo subject, warning that the reluctance to engage with it may itself be a defensive response driven by concern that such discussions could be misconstrued as blaming the oppressed for their condition. I resonate with this caution, as I initially felt hesitant to surface what I perceived as internalised racial dynamics in my participants. I was concerned that doing so might risk shifting the focus away from the systemic roots of racism, inadvertently placing the responsibility for change on those who are already marginalised.

Nonetheless, I contend that when my participants used the term *"we"* in describing their experiences, it reflected not only a sense of collective identity but also an internalisation of the broader racial dynamics embedded in organisational life. This unconscious identification with how the system views them may lead to the introjection of negative projections, such as perceptions of incompetence or failure. Over time, they may begin to identify with these disavowed projections, accepting them as truth. This process reflects a valency (Bion, 1961) to absorb and enact these inferior roles, a pattern I have explored under the theme of *projected sense of inadequacy*.

Du Bois (2005) eloquently captures this psychological tension through his concept of double consciousness*:*

> "*It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity*." (p. 7)

This state of being divided between how one sees oneself and how one is seen by the dominant society continues to be deeply relevant in understanding the lived experiences of Black women in leadership roles today.

5.1.4 Intersectionality

Intersectionality theory, coined by Crenshaw (1989), offers a conceptual lens for understanding the senior leadership experiences of Black women (Parker, 2005). In the narratives of my participants, references to the dynamic of *double jeopardy*, where Black women are negatively evaluated in comparison to both Black men and white women (Rosette & Livingston, 2012), were less pronounced than expressions of being targeted because of race. I wondered whether this might be because *everyday racism* is so pervasive that it overshadows *gendered racism*, which Essed (1991) describes as "*the racial oppression of Black women as structured by racist and ethnicity perceptions of gender roles*" (p. 31).

Tess, while recounting her experience of bullying, referred to men as the perpetrators. However, in the same account, she spoke in more detail about being undermined by white women in a female-dominated organisation where 99% of the directors were women. This suggests the presence of double jeopardy, although her focus on the actions of white women seems to diminish the gendered aspect of the racialisation,

perhaps implying that racial aggression can be enacted across gender lines. Aggy's story reflected a similar dynamic, she was bullied by white men but also had her work undermined by white women in ways that were belittling and demeaning. This may suggest that while men employed more overt forms of discrimination, white women engaged in microaggressions.

In both Tess and Aggy's experiences, gendered racism may have been a motivating factor in their treatment by white men. However, it was perceived and narrated primarily as everyday racism, supporting my assumption that the racial dimension often eclipses other axes of identity. Moreover, some of the gendered racism experienced by my participants may have been driven by envy and competition. Male colleagues might unconsciously perceive Black women in leadership as a challenge to the traditional power structures historically dominated by men, dynamics which could similarly affect white women.

Tess and Aggy were the only two participants who explicitly referenced oppression by men. As I continued coding the data, I became increasingly curious about why many participants seemed to locate the source of their discrimination primarily in race, rather than gender. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, and the scholarship of Essed (1991), Collins (1990), and David (1983), echoed more recently by Burton et al. (2020) and Smith et al. (2019), suggests that race and gender-based oppressions are not discrete, but deeply intertwined. This resonates with Yuval-Davis' (2006) notion of a "*multi-layered blanket of oppression*."

My interpretation of the theme may also have been influenced by my own lived experience. Like my participants, I have been bullied by white men in professional settings. Although their motives may have been rooted in both my gender and race,

perhaps stemming from competition and envy, I tended to attribute the mistreatment primarily to my race. This may reflect a kind of blind spot, shaped by growing up in a colonised society where social divisions were fundamentally organised around race and racism, rather than gender.

Another possible reason why gendered racism was not more explicitly discussed by participants may relate to the organisational contexts in which they work. Five of the six participants were employed in caring professional settings that may unconsciously favour or accept female leadership, perhaps idealising women as containing or nurturing figures (Winnicott, 1963). In such contexts, Black women might be shielded from some of the more overt forms of gender-based discrimination or they may unconsciously suppress awareness of gendered racism due to the idealisation of female roles in these environments.

In conclusion, while gendered racism may not have been a dominant theme in the narratives of my participants or in my own initial interpretations, it remains a critical element that warrants further attention. The oppressions experienced by Black women are multiple and deeply interwoven, and it is neither accurate nor helpful to separate or hierarchise these forms of social division. Intersectionality reminds us that these axes of identity must be understood in their complexity and simultaneity.

5.2 Participants experiences on entering organisations

5.2.1 Projected sense of inadequacy

From the point of entry into senior leadership, many Black women do not believe they have done enough to justify their presence in such roles. These thoughts may stem from deeply ingrained beliefs shaped by ancestral histories of suffering and oppression. Internalised racism, rooted in a legacy of being positioned as inferior and confined to support roles, caretakers, nurturers, and historically, servants to both enslavers and their communities, can influence their sense of self-worth and professional identity. Dumas (1985) highlights this as a longstanding issue dating back to 1619, where Black women were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy by both Black and white communities.

This persistent fear of failure often drives Black women to pursue multiple qualifications at times becoming overqualified, as a way to prove they are capable. Dumas' (1985) analysis resonates with DeGruy's (2017) theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), which discusses the lingering psychological effects of slavery, particularly in the form of adaptive survival behaviours within African American communities. These include feelings of hopelessness, depression, and self-destructive tendencies. Within this study, a prominent theme that emerged was a sense of inadequacy, experienced by participants despite their objective competence and achievements.

Tess captures this sentiment poignantly:

> *We feel like we have… to have all the academic accolades before we even consider going for certain roles. So, we study and re-study and we work, and we work, and we know the job inside out before we even apply for the job. Whereas others will know 50% and have confidence to go for jobs… this is white privilege… I need to know the inside and outside of the job before I even feel confident about going for it.*

Ely echoes this view, asserting that equal opportunities are lacking, and that Black people often find themselves fighting a system that pushes them to invest heavily in education just to be seen as capable. Similarly, Vicky attributes the pressure to outperform white colleagues to the effects of white privilege, describing it as the critical differential in the workplace.

Using a systems psychodynamic lens, I interpret this pressure as initially a conscious effort, but one deeply underpinned by unconscious processes. Here, Black women may become recipients of disavowed projections, emotions and assumptions such as incompetence or failure that are projected onto them by the system. Drawing on Bion's (1962) concept of valency, these women may unconsciously absorb and introject these projections due to pre-existing internal beliefs shaped by systemic oppression.

This phenomenon, I argue, goes beyond simple self-doubt. After all, these women do apply for senior roles, successfully navigate rigorous selection processes, and are ultimately appointed, clear evidence that they possess the necessary knowledge and skills. However, even post-appointment, many continue to feel immense pressure to prove their worth, often through further education and relentless work. This sense of

inadequacy appears not to reflect actual capability, but rather a response to identity-based projections from the system itself. Their perceived lack of adequacy is not rooted in a skills gap but in the internalised message that they, as Black women, do not belong in positions of power.

Additionally, most of these women find themselves as the sole person of colour in their senior leadership teams. The absence of representation reinforces feelings of isolation and doubt, raising unconscious questions about whether they truly belong in spaces that are still predominantly white.

5.2.2 Negative stereotype labelling

This theme highlights how Black women are often labelled through negative stereotypes historically assigned to Black people. These labels instil a deep-seated fear of being perceived through the lens of white stereotypes of how Black people are or are expected to behave. Puwar (2004) encapsulates this sentiment:

> "*Black bodies are represented as coming from uncivilised spaces, wilderness where people are savages and need taming… whites are associated with spirit and mind, representing the flight from the body*" (p. 21).

While one might hope such views are shifting, for many Black people, these perceptions remain soul-destroying, eroding confidence and diminishing any hope of being viewed differently.

Black women often take up roles with caution, acutely aware of the risk of conforming to stereotypical characteristics assigned to their group, characteristics that may disqualify them, consciously or unconsciously, from being considered suitable for senior leadership. This mirrors Dubois' (2005) concept of *double-consciousness*, where Black individuals constantly navigate the tension between how they view themselves and how they are perceived by others.

The focused codes that formed this axial code were: 1) *Not identified and authorised as a leader 2) Experiences of being undermined 3) Experiences of being ignored 4) Mistaken for more junior roles 5) Fearing negative stereotype labels.*

My participants reported not being recognised as leaders because of their skin colour. This aligns with theories suggesting that Black women do not align with prevailing leadership prototypes. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Hogg, 2001) posits that individuals are categorised into social groups, and leadership is often conferred upon those who match the group's prototype based on who has historically been seen in leadership roles.

Van Knippenberg (2011) asserts that Black women frequently fall outside these prototypes, leaving them deprived of the power and influence expected of leaders. This echoes my participants' experiences of being bypassed, ignored, and denied the opportunity to exercise the authority their roles entail.

This concept extends into the political domain. For example, in the U.S., Kamala Harris has faced scrutiny regarding her fitness for presidential leadership, criticism that some argue is influenced by her race and gender. In the UK, while white women such as Theresa May and Liz Truss have held senior political roles, both faced significant

undermining mainly from male colleagues and Truss from intense public and political critique. Despite differing political contexts and additional contributing factors, gender may have played a role in the challenges they faced.

Yet, these examples still reflect only white women's experiences. A Black woman has yet to hold a top UK political leadership role. Whether current non-white women contesting for the Conservative party leadership will break this barrier remains to be seen. Davis and Maldonado (2015) highlight that the workplace experiences of Black and white women differ significantly, challenging the assumptions of collective feminism which often treats all women as white and all Black individuals as men, a notion long critiqued by Black feminists such as hooks (1984).

The persistence of negative stereotype labelling was evident in my participants' narratives. Aggy, for instance, was once handed the key to the cleaning cupboard, a stark symbol of stereotypical assumptions about Black women's roles. I, too, have been mistaken for junior staff despite introducing myself as the most senior person present. In one instance, a white female manager who was my subordinate was regularly approached for leadership decisions, simply because her whiteness signalled authority. These experiences, though routine, were diminishing and made me feel invisible. At the same time, I was hyper-visible as the only Black woman in the room an emotional paradox possibly rooted in unconscious group dynamics.

A particularly harmful stereotype threat is the *angry Black woman* trope, which deters Black women from speaking candidly or challenging others. Williams (2020) discusses how Black women who are assertive or ambitious are often mislabelled as angry. This was evident in Ely's experience when a CEO accused her of being defensive after she questioned criticisms of her service performance. Despite attempting to clarify her

stance, she was labelled difficult, a common stereotype projected onto Black people. To avoid such labels, women often self-regulate, becoming overly cautious in their expressions. Over time, suppressing emotion in this way can be psychologically damaging, potentially leading to emotional numbness, not only suppressing negative feelings but also joy and pride.

Obholzer (2019) describes two forms of authority in organisations: formal authority, as defined by role and job description, and authority from below, which is granted by followers. If group members do not view the leader as fitting their prototype, they may unconsciously withhold this authority. This has significant implications for Black women in leadership roles, making it difficult for them to exercise both formal and informal authority. Yukl (2009) defines leadership as a process of interpersonal influence that leverages power and authority to motivate others toward shared goals. Thus, without group authorisation, even the most qualified Black women may struggle to lead effectively.

The broader cultural landscape reflects this dynamic. In her speech during the Democratic National Convention (2024), Michelle Obama remarked on the symbolic significance of Kamala Harris's candidacy, suggesting that perhaps top roles could now be viewed as "*Black jobs*." This pointed reversal challenges prevailing assumptions about who is permitted to occupy positions of power and underscores the growing but still-contested authorisation of Black women in leadership.

5.2.3 Summary

The previous themes and discussions address the first research question of this study: *Is it difficult for Black women in senior leadership roles to take up authority?* The findings strongly suggest that the answer is yes. The central obstacle is systemic racism, which is arguably embedded within the very fabric of UK organisations. As Dalal (2012) emphasises, it is not merely the structure of racism that causes harm, but rather the acts of racialisation, the active, ongoing processes that position certain racial groups as inferior. In this study, it is these acts that obstruct Black women from confidently occupying their senior leadership roles.

A comparative American study by Holder et al. (2015), which explored the experiences and coping strategies of Black women in managerial positions, found similar themes. Their study identified racial microaggressions as a key concern, manifested through environmental signals, negative stereotypes, and experiences of invisibility and exclusion. These findings closely mirror those of my own study. Notably, both studies underscore the detrimental impact of underrepresentation, a recurring theme in my participants' narratives, which contributes to feelings of isolation and being "othered."

The presence of both overt and covert microaggressions creates a psychologically unsafe environment for Black women, particularly for those who enter organisations with internalised feelings of inferiority and self-doubt, shaped by earlier experiences of marginalisation. These microaggressions are not isolated incidents but cumulative; their repeated nature compounds their psychological impact.

Through the lens of psychoanalysis, the cumulative effect of these experiences can be understood via the concept of projective identification. Halton (2019) defines this

as an "*unconscious interpersonal interaction in which the recipients of projections react to it in such a way that their own feelings are affected*" (p. 16). In this context, the negative projections of incompetence, inadequacy, or deviance from leadership norms emitted by white colleagues or the broader organisational culture are unconsciously absorbed by Black women. Over time, these projections may be internalised, leading individuals to identify with these unwanted traits and reinforcing feelings of shame and self-doubt.

This process was vividly illustrated in Ely's case, where her experience of being scapegoated appeared to trigger defensive mechanisms, such as splitting and projective identification. She redirected the internalised shame by projecting it outward, distancing herself from the negative feelings imposed on her.

Additionally, I have observed scenarios where Black leaders, perhaps unconsciously influenced by these same internalised projections, turn against other Black team members, sometimes naming or locating failure in a single individual. I interpret this as a defence mechanism: a way to manage the intense psychological burden of being racialised as a group within white-dominant organisational cultures. In such cases, the internal group shame is displaced onto a single member, as a means of temporary relief from the weight of collective projections.

These findings reveal that the barriers to authority for Black women in senior leadership are not solely external or institutional, but also psychological and relational, shaped by a complex interplay of unconscious processes. Addressing these challenges requires more than increasing representation; it calls for critical reflection on the invisible dynamics at play in organisational life and sustained efforts to dismantle the racialised projections embedded within them.

5.3 Strategies for survival in role

In this section, I explore the coping strategies employed by my participants to navigate the challenging experiences they encounter in their senior leadership roles. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as:

> "*constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person*" (p. 141).

These strategies are enacted to withstand stress arising not only from the inherent complexity of leadership responsibilities but also from the racialised behaviours and perceptions they regularly face in professional settings.

Notably, none of my participants described a lack of skills or knowledge as a source of difficulty in fulfilling their roles. Instead, they consistently pointed to how they were perceived and the behaviours directed at them as the key challenges. This focus suggests that it is not competence that is questioned, but rather their legitimacy and presence in these roles. It is also important to consider, from a psychodynamic perspective, that acknowledging any perceived gap in competence might feel too risky or painful, given that such an admission could be weaponised to further undermine their credibility or reinforce existing stereotypes.

Through the systems psychodynamic lens applied in this study, I interpret some of these challenges as rooted not solely in external behaviours but also in unconscious individual and group processes. My participants may have become the recipients of projected unwanted emotions such as failure, incompetence, or unbelonging, which

through processes such as projective identification, may have been internalised as their own. This dynamic adds another layer of psychological burden to their roles, intensifying the need for effective coping mechanisms.

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 highlights a range of coping strategies employed by Black women in leadership positions (Cain, 2015; Chance, 2021; Crawley, 2021; Holder et al., 2015; Barnes, 2021; Bailey-Morris, 2016). These strategies include: 1) *Choosing one's battles;* 2*) Leading different lives (professional versus personal selves);* 3) *Working harder to counter negative stereotypes;* 4*) Maintaining optimism;* 5*) Quitting as a last resort;* 6*) Drawing on personal identity, culture, and community values; and* 7*) Seeking support from professional and institutional networks.*

The coping strategies identified in my study align closely with many of these categories. However, a notable deviation is that my participants did not describe drawing on professional or institutional sources of support, an element highlighted in Holder et al.'s (2015) findings. This absence is significant. My participants appeared to be waging a solitary battle, with no reference to organisational support systems that might offer guidance, mentorship, or solidarity. The feeling of isolation was both explicit in their narratives and, at times, deeply felt in my own research experience.

During the research process, I became increasingly aware of my own emotional responses, particularly feelings of isolation and hypervisibility in my role as the only Black woman within a senior leadership team. I also experienced a growing sense of loneliness as a researcher conducting this work independently, and as someone spending extensive time working in solitude. Upon reflection, I recognised these emotional responses as countertransference, my internal reaction to the material being shared with me. These feelings mirrored and validated the themes expressed

by my participants, especially those related to being alone and not belonging. This realisation further supports the authenticity of the axial codes around isolation and the absence of structural or emotional support within their professional environments.

5.3.1 Idea of playing it safe

The focused codes forming this axial code were: *1) Feeling it is unsafe to challenge status quo; 2) Accepting you cannot make a difference; 3) Fearing the repercussions if they make any decisions; 4) Feeling anxious about challenging; 5) Needing to be accepted by not causing upset; 6) Fearing the reputation of being labelled as difficult if they speak up; 7) Accepting limitations placed on their role; 8) Sense of holding back; 9) Fearing judgement.*

Holder et al. (2015) identified "*choosing one's battles*" as a coping strategy, which closely mirrors the theme emerging from my data what I have termed *playing it safe*. For my participants, the risk of error carried disproportionately high stakes. The perception that mistakes would not be tolerated in the same way they might be for others resulted in a cautious, restrained approach to leadership. It was not a question of lacking competence; rather, it was a deep mistrust in whether the system would allow them to fail and recover, a liberty they felt was not extended to them as Black women.

Tara exemplified this when she acknowledged an internalised limit to what she could achieve in her role: "*there is nothing I can do about that*." This resignation points to a conscious decision to avoid challenging the status quo. Her reference to the well-

known serenity prayer *"grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change"*, reveals the depth of unconscious anxiety, the fear of failure, and a survival-driven desire to maintain position within a system experienced as hostile.

Tess's account added another layer of insight. She warned that exerting oneself and visibly stepping into leadership would risk attracting the label of being "*difficult*." Her metaphor "*the knives come out*", evoked a vivid image of danger, a system poised to punish, blame, or even metaphorically "*kill off*" individuals who assert themselves. Here, the "knife" may represent reputational harm or career jeopardy, reinforcing the fear that missteps, or even confidence, could be grounds for expulsion.

Ely's comment about playing it safe to avoid drawing attention echoed similar concerns. Her fear of "*rocking the boat*" and consequently losing her job underscored a pattern of strategic invisibility as a defence mechanism. Vicky's approach involved doing the "*absolute minimum*" and being less critical of organisational practice, an act of self-preservation that, paradoxically, stifles innovation. This quiet withdrawal diminishes the potential contributions of highly capable leaders, depriving the organisation of valuable creativity and critical thinking.

As I analysed these narratives, a powerful image emerged for me: that of a straitjacket. My participants appeared bound by invisible restraints, limited and restricted in their leadership expression. This imagery sharply contrasts with the expectations placed on senior leaders' attributes such as daringness, innovation, and problem-solving (Burns, 1978). Yet, for these women, stepping fully into such roles meant risking judgment and punishment based on deeply rooted biases. Sy et al. (2017) contend that leaders may be evaluated more harshly when they do not conform to racial and gender-based leadership prototypes, a concern clearly reflected in my participants' fears.

In Chapter 1, I recounted the words of a Black woman colleague who warned me early in my career: *"People like us don't get promoted. And if you make the mistake to apply and get it, they make your life hell."* At the time, I did not fully grasp the gravity of her caution. But as I listened to my participants describe their anxieties and reflected on my own leadership journey and moments of performance-related anxiety, I came to understand the fear and danger embedded in her words. Her statement wasn't pessimism, it was a protective, experience-based warning grounded in a survivalist logic shared by many Black women in leadership.

Roberts et al. (2018) and Williams (2020) capture this reality well, arguing that to succeed, Black women must often draw deeply on resilience and resistance. This is because they frequently encounter compounded obstacles linked to the intersectionality of race, gender, and other marginalised identities. In such a context, *playing it safe* becomes not a lack of ambition or ability, but a complex, layered coping strategy, one rooted in a desire for safety and survival within systems that remain deeply racialised and exclusionary.

5.3.2 Masking Emotions and Conforming to perceived norm

Bierema (2016) posited that the first hurdle faced by Black women entering leadership roles is the challenge of fitting in and being perceived as the ideal leader. This introduces the concept of code-switching, the shifting or altering of cultural behaviours, language, and self-presentation to downplay a negatively perceived identity. As Dickens et al. (2018) observed, some Black women choose to suppress elements of their identity or self-concept in order to increase their perceived leadership competence.

These perspectives strongly reflect the lived experiences of my participants. Many spoke of their need for acceptance, a need intensified by their visibility as often the only Black person within their senior leadership teams. Their narratives revealed a conscious awareness of the protective behaviours they employed to guard against the emotional pain of unbelonging, exclusion, and stereotype threat. These behaviours included masking their emotions and conforming, often unconsciously to both spoken and unspoken organisational norms.

Butler (2004) notes that such norms are frequently implicit, internalised as simply *"this is just how things are"* (p. 41). Deviating from these norms results in individuals feeling excluded or perceived as having failed. Black women often enter organisations already anticipating negative perceptions due to their visible differences and the intersectional disadvantages they carry. When these systems also exhibit elements of systemic racism, such fears are not only confirmed but exacerbated.

This theme reveals a deep tension between authenticity and survival. The prevailing belief, rooted in experience, is that Black women cannot fully belong as they are; instead, belonging requires assimilation. Holder et al. (2015) referred to this as *leading different lives*. My participants described the performative demands placed on them, from modifying their dress and hairstyles to altering their speech to meet expectations of appropriateness and professionalism.

Tara illustrated this when she said, *"I've always been quite westernised and that's how I fit in."* While this statement may suggest a degree of comfort or alignment for her, it also sets a precedent: fitting in is contingent on presenting oneself in a way that conforms to a Western, often white-centric, ideal. This creates a dissonance for those whose cultural expression might naturally diverge from that standard.

Participants also discussed the emotional constraint expected of them. Showing vulnerability or expressing emotion risked being interpreted as weakness, feeding into stereotypes that position Black women as either overly emotional or, conversely, stoically strong. The latter was echoed by Aggy when she referred to Black women having unconscious belief that they can take anything.

Here, Aggy reflects the internalisation of historical and racialised projections, the myth of the strong Black woman, rooted in slavery and perpetuated in modern workplaces. The expectation is not only to endure, but to do so without visible struggle.

Participants also expressed a pervasive fear of speaking their minds, leading to self-regulation and self-censorship. There was a strong sense that saying the wrong thing could have serious consequences, and that they would not be protected if they did. The system, as experienced, did not offer a safety net.

This fear of getting it wrong was mirrored in my own experience as a researcher. During and after the interviews, I became acutely aware of my own anxiety, fearful of misrepresenting my participants, of interpreting their data incorrectly, of somehow failing them. This anxiety revealed itself through a form of researcher countertransference. I found myself treading carefully, caught in the same dynamic of tight control and risk-aversion my participants described. The image of the *straitjacket*, which had surfaced earlier in my analysis returned, now accompanied by a metaphor of *walking a tightrope*. One of my supervisors even articulated a similar impression, observing that the participants' experiences seemed akin to navigating a tightrope without a safety net. This metaphor captures the high stakes balancing act many Black women leaders perform, constantly managing perceptions, identity, and performance within environments where failure is unforgiving, and authenticity is risky.

5.4 Source of strength for Survival

As I examined each of my participants' personal defences, I noticed that the emerging themes were closely tied to their internalised beliefs.

5.4.1 Internalised fight for survival - resistance

When my participants spoke about their experiences in role, a recurring theme emerged around personal defences they employed to survive. The focused codes included 1) *Resisting the pressure of the role 2) Fighting the system 3) Keep fighting 4) Fighting spirit to defend themselves 5) Doing it for others.*

Ely's language powerfully illustrated the depths individuals must reach to summon the strength to continue. She said, *"And I am thinking, my ancestors played bigger dragons than you. They overcame greater obstacles than this. I have it in me, right… so, I have a rebellious strength, so I will succeed out of spite."*

I found this to be an intense and striking statement, reflecting the psychological fortitude and emotional labour required to persevere. I brought a snapshot of Ely's data to a group supervision session, where the group associated her narrative with someone on a battlefield fighting for survival.

During the interview, Ely came across as someone eager to prove her competence. She described the challenges she had faced in one of her leadership roles, often laughing hysterically, and at times appearing angry and sad. I wondered whether the laughter masked shame either from how she was perceived or how she thought I might perceive her. Through countertransference where the researcher experiences the emotions of the participant as their own (Halton, 2019), I felt a strong sense of anger,

disappointment, sadness, and a feeling of being let down or mistrusted. These emotions brought me closer to understanding Ely's deep need to fight. I also considered that Ely may have been splitting and projecting her negative emotions onto me as a coping strategy.

Ely was eventually moved on from that organisation, losing the opportunity to prove herself.

Aggy, on the other hand, talked more about her internalised strength and her determination to keep going despite the added stress (Chapter 4, p. 118). Among my six participants, Aggy remained the longest in leadership roles and within the same organisation. She had navigated various role changes and service areas. She described how Black women are often tasked with the most challenging, "dirty" jobs, even using the term "toxic." This sentiment was echoed by Tess, who has also worked in the same organisation for many years and is now in a director role.

Both Aggy and Tess demonstrate resilience and resistance by remaining in leadership roles despite the many obstacles they faced. Loughton (2005) defines resistance as an exercise of power in response to control, which can manifest overtly or covertly (McLaren, 1989). For Aggy and Tess, resistance took the form of drawing on inner strength and working harder to prove themselves, rather than openly opposing the pressures they faced. Their resistance aligns with what Robinson and Ward (1991) described as resistance for survival, a short-term and potentially harmful response. They contrast this with resistance for liberation, which supports long-term psychological health and autonomy.

In my experience of both Aggy and Tess, the downside of their survival-based resistance was a limited capacity to express and process their emotions. This was visibly present during their interviews as they recounted their efforts to suppress vulnerability and persist with complex, stressful tasks. Aggy spoke of the added stress, while Tess admitted she was "*tired of it all*." The pain and trauma of their journeys were palpable, and both women acknowledged that they had not had the opportunity to properly process these difficult emotions.

The study revealed that Black women often draw strength from a sense of responsibility toward their families, extended networks, and communities. Their achievements become not only a means of survival for their immediate families, especially in terms of financial support but also a symbol of success for the broader community. A Black person in a leadership position is seen as a role model, not only within their workplace but in their community at large. Black people often cheer one another on due to the collective trauma of racism and oppression. However, this sense of responsibility can become a burden, as it may compel Black women to remain in roles that negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing, out of fear of letting others down.

Ely described this as:

> "*You are carrying the race and gender and cannot be seen to fail. If you fail, you have failed your people".* She adds *"*m*y why must be bigger than me for me to stay, so there is something about doing it for the next generation that look and sound like me to believe they can get ahead".*

I have personally experienced this. When I left certain organisations, I thought about the Black colleagues who looked up to me as a role model and might feel abandoned. Some expressed that my departure felt like a loss, and they worried about having no

one to represent or support them. What was happening here was an unconscious group dynamic in which individuals projected their sense of power and authority onto me. Drawing on Bion's (1961) theory of unconscious group processes, this dynamic reflects a basic assumption dependency, where the group becomes emotionally dependent on a leader.

This example underscores the broader impact of the lack of diversity in senior leadership roles. Non-white staff often feel that their voices are unheard, and their experiences are misunderstood. This is a common reality for Black women, who frequently find themselves as the only or one of very few people of colour in senior leadership positions.

5.4.2 Internal Strength and Belief in own ability – building resilience

The focused codes in this axial code were 1) *Believing in self-confidence;* 2*) Drawing strength from within to stay in role – strong Black woman mentality;* 3*) Internalised self-validation that they can do the job;* 4*) Parental influence – positive role model instilling values that they can do it.*

In this theme, there is a strong emphasis on drawing strength from within, specifically from internal beliefs where individuals find validation from their values and life experiences. Many of the participants shared that their self-confidence was rooted in early life, often instilled by parents who told them they could be whoever they aspired to be. Nina and Vicky, for instance, were raised by single mothers who worked tirelessly to provide for them. These mothers, through their resilience and strength, became powerful role models for their daughters.

Tara, Nina, and Ely all spoke of observing their parents' achievements, which established a foundational belief that success is earned through hard work. These formative experiences reinforced an internal sense of validation that they could achieve their goals regardless of external barriers.

Participants also internalised the "strong Black woman" mentality. While they were indeed capable and competent in their roles, they often endured pain due to the way they were treated but felt they could not express this pain, fearing it would be interpreted as weakness. Aggy referred to a belief that Black women can do and survive anything, though she acknowledged the added emotional burden this carries.

The myth that Black women possess unlimited internal resources to withstand all hardship can be traced, according to Dumas (1985), back to the era of slavery, when Black women were forced into the 'Mammy' role on plantations. Dumas cautions that continued identification with this role can create inner conflict and distort one's sense of identity. Tess shared an experience that supports Dumas's assertion (Chapter 4, p. 116), further grounding this historical context in contemporary lived experience.

In contrast to the others, Aggy did not focus on parental influence but rather on the sense of purpose derived from the roles she undertook. Working in the mental health sector, she reflected:

> *"I think that I was constantly addressing my own marginalisation really through these jobs. I think that's fair to say… I kind of located something in these complex kinds of populations and tried to make a difference. And I thought…I would say…that the root of it was probably, you know, to do with my racial heritage and social background."*

Ely, on the other hand, cited her faith in God as a vital source of strength. This mirrors a theme identified in Holder et al. (2015), where religion and spirituality were found to be key strategies employed by Black women to navigate and survive challenging environments.

5.5 What determines whether a Black woman survives or thrives in role?

As I approach this question, I am reminded of Maya Angelou's quote:

> *"The issues that face us are not just how to survive – obviously we are doing that somehow, but how to thrive – thrive with some passion, some compassion, some humour and some style*." (1987).

My fourth sub-question aimed to explore what determines whether a Black woman survives or thrives in her role. For this study, I define surviving in role as when individuals find the role bearable by employing coping strategies to manage its demands, while being able to meet the expectations set by the organisation. Thriving, on the other hand, is when individuals are able to show up authentically, develop, and use their full capacity in the role, taking up authority and exercising creativity without fear of failure.

The themes that emerged from the data revealed that my participants were largely fighting to survive; none appeared to be thriving in their roles. Most participants alluded to what they believed was necessary to thrive, and in instances where they didn't, I asked what they thought would be required to shift from surviving to thriving. Their responses were strikingly similar, centring on the need for safety with several explicitly

referring to psychological safety, which Edmondson (2019) defines as a climate in which people feel comfortable expressing themselves and being authentic.

Participants expressed a desire to be trusted, to work in an environment characterised by openness and honest conversations, particularly around the challenges they faced. They wanted spaces where they could share experiences without fear of judgement, spaces where they could think, reflect, and be supported in their professional growth.

They also spoke about the value of allyship**,** support networks**,** and informal support groups. In Holder et al. (2015), support networks were discussed as a form of survival strategy, which led me to question whether what my participants identified as requirements to thrive may, in fact, still be rooted in survival strategies. This raises a critical concern: *Will Black women in these roles ever get beyond survival?* And if not, how can organisations at least make survival bearable? That is, how can organisations offer sufficient containment and psychological safety to allow Black women to take up their roles more fully?

Participants emphasised the importance of having their differences understood. One participant spoke of not wanting to be measured by the same "*Eurocentric yardstick*," which I interpreted as a call to be treated as individuals, acknowledging that their backgrounds and experiences differ from those of their white counterparts. This also included a plea for organisations to refrain from applying negative stereotypes or biased labels rooted in systemic racism.

Ideally, organisations should strive to foster environments that not only acknowledge and respect Black women's differences but also make space for them to be assessed and supported as individuals not through the lens of white-centric norms and

assumptions. Moreover, there is a need for environments that support Black women in processing past experiences and internalised beliefs, helping them to separate the past from the present. This reflective space can be cultivated through access to coaching and therapy, which can be instrumental in fostering a state of mind more conducive to thriving.

5.6 Summary – How they take up role

In summarising the findings, I was drawn to three distinct ways in which my participants engaged with their roles: through strategies of resistance, resilience to remain in post, and, when these strategies were no longer sustainable, withdrawal by leaving the role. These positions are not fixed; rather, individuals shifted between them in response to the organisational dynamics and systems they navigated.

Table 19: How they take up role

Type A – ***Internalised hardworking ethos*****.** Individuals take up the role as authorised and accepting they cannot change anything. They are rewarded with promotion and survive in role. Their capacity for creativity is limited. Tara and Tess *referred to not challenging status quo but doing your job well. Both 'tapped' for promotion.*
Type B – ***Internalised fight for survival*****.** They will resist conforming. They will want to take up authority, push the boundary, defend their actions, try to be creative. They are rejected by the system and will quit or are moved on. Nina, Vicky and Ely *resisted to conform and made decisions to quit and move on to protect themselves.*
Type C – ***Internalised belief in own ability to cope in any situation****.* They have built resilience and resistance for survival. They will challenge and be challenged, fall and get up. They will not quit. They do it for others. They stay in the same organisations the longest. Aggy and Tess *showed evidence of resilience and resistance. They resist the pressure to fail though very challenging.*

The emphasis throughout this study is on survival**.** Black women will do what they can to remain in role and avoid quitting. However, when their capacity to endure is exhausted as observed in participants fitting the profile of Type B, they either choose to leave or are pushed out by the organisation. The missed opportunity lies in the parallel process: while Black women are unable to fully develop their capacity or contribute creatively due to the constraints of survival, organisations, in turn, lose out on the growth and innovation that come from embracing difference. This includes allowing Black women to authentically show up, take up their authority, and work creatively without fear.

The most significant catastrophe revealed by this study is the detrimental impact on Black women's mental and physical wellbeing. This is a direct result of working in environments they perceive as psychologically unsafe, where everyday racism (Essed, 1991) forces them into states of hypervigilance. For example, Aggy described feeling constant added stress, Tess spoke of being overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted from self-regulating and Nina shared how she felt pressured to attend a work event while unwell, out of fear of the consequences if she didn’t.

In the following chapter, I will explore the implications of these findings for consultancy, coaching practice, organisational structures, leadership development, and personal growth. I will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of this research and offer recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS AND APPLICATIONS

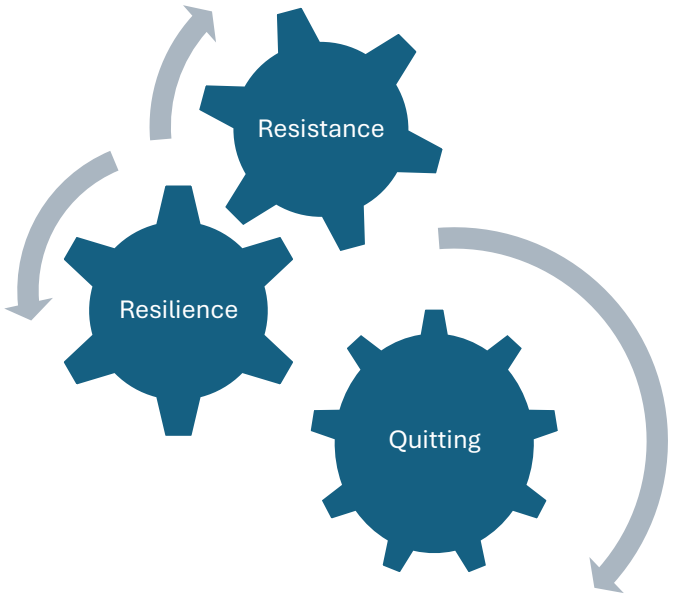
6.1 Introduction

This phenomenological study employed a psychoanalytically informed method to gather rich, in-depth data and utilised a Grounded Theory data analysis approach, analysed through a systems psychodynamic lens, to explore the research question: *Is it difficult for Black women in senior leadership roles to take up authority, and if so, what are the conscious and unconscious factors contributing to this, and what strategies are employed by Black women to stay in role?*

The findings clearly indicate that it is indeed difficult for Black women in senior leadership to take up authority, primarily due to the pervasive influence of systemic racism**.** Participants described fear of failure within organisational systems perceived as offering no psychological safety net, prompting the development of survival strategies to remain in role.

These strategies can be grouped under three overarching themes, Resistance**,** Resilience**,** and Quitting**.** Quitting emerged as a protective mechanism, used when survival was no longer viable, as exemplified by Nina, Vicky, and Ely who experienced their organisations as unsafe.

Figure 3: Survival strategies



I summarised the findings into three ideas which I propose as a starting point for understanding Black women's experiences:

1. Black women in senior leadership roles find it difficult to take up authority because of systemic racism enacted in overt and covert microaggressions. They experience the system as too dangerous, prompting the use of coping strategies to survive in role.

2. Through unconscious group processes Black women may identify with negative projections of failure and incompetence from the dominant groups, resulting in a sense of inadequacy in role and failure to perform in authentic ways and take up authority.

3. Black women often draw upon internalised personal defences. These defences influence how they take up leadership roles. If personal defences fail, they will resort to quitting to protect themselves.

Three types of taking up role drawn from their personal defences: Type A – *Internalised hardworking ethos*; Type B – *Internalised fight for survival*; Type C – *Internalised belief in own ability to cope in any situation (Descriptors in chapter 5, table 18).*

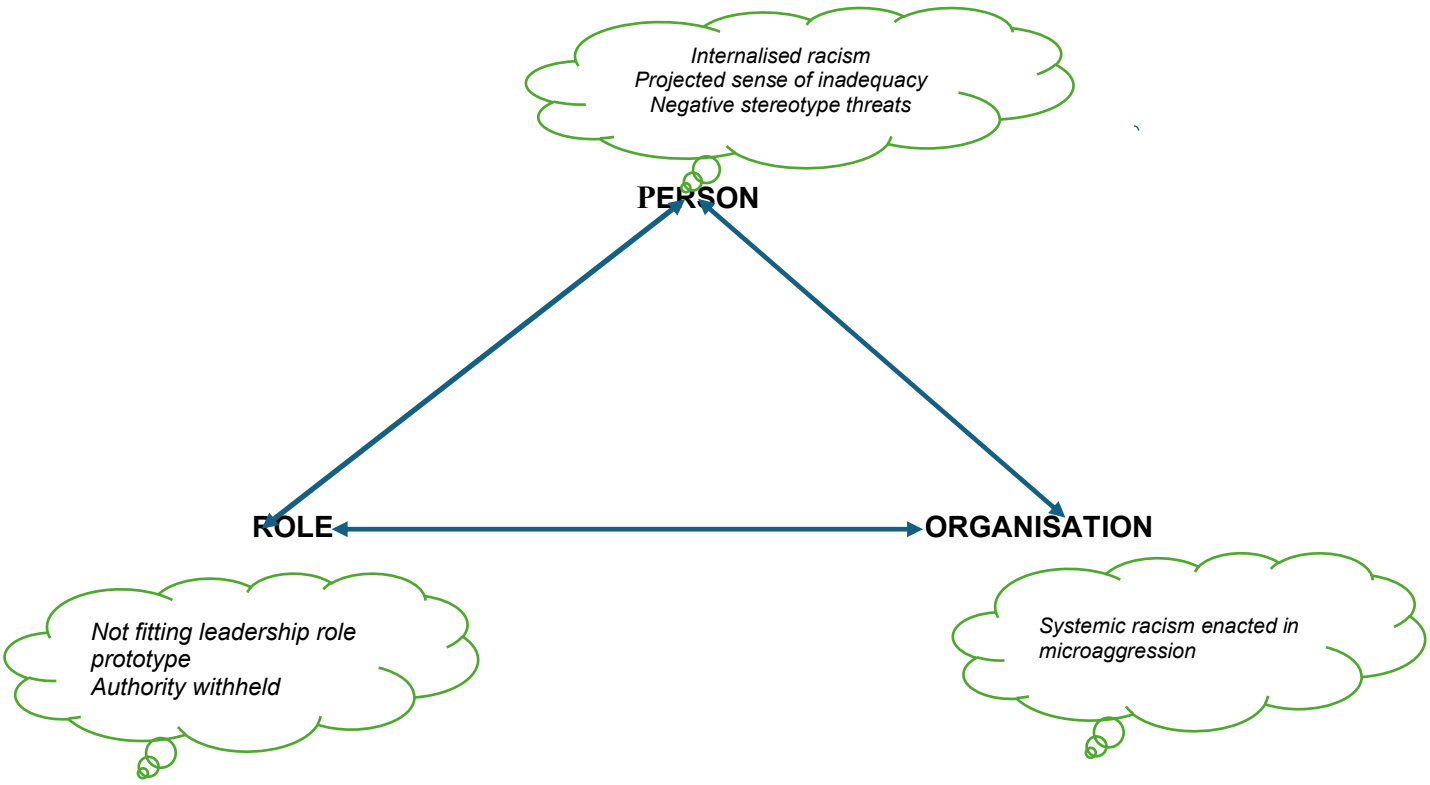
This section serves to answer my fifth sub question which is '*What can be learnt by individuals and organisation from the experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles*?' Through this study, I wanted to contribute to the literature about Black women in senior leadership roles in the UK. One of the thoughts I had as contributing to the scanty literature on this topic was confirmed in a Guardian (Fazackerley, 2019) which was that there are too few Black and Ethnic Minority (BAME) people doing PHDs and one of the reasons is that they do not feel like they belong in academia. This lack of representation in number of BAME people in academia could result in subjects important to them ignored. In the same Guardian article, Kehinde Andrews, Professor of Black Studies at Birmingham City university commented that obtaining funding for Black students to do PHD's is hard, adding that it is a struggle to find a supervisor knowledgeable about the subjects that Black students are interested in, and this subsequently discourages them to pursue. My other thought is that in keeping with Lowe (2013)'s assertion that there is a hidden agenda of keeping leadership white, academia consciously or unconsciously does not support this type of research.

6.2. Implications and recommendations using PRO framework

The data has shown that the difficulties encountered by Black women can be split into Organisation / system context, the role and the individual in role. I find the systems and psychodynamic coaching framework Person, Role and Organisation (PRO) which presupposes an interconnection between the three apexes (Fig. 4) relevant to linking the whole experience for the individual and the organisation.

The diagram below demonstrates my research findings in relation to PRO model in reference to relationship between person, role and system (Miller & Rice, 1967).

Figure 4: Person, Role & Organisation Framework



6.2.1 Person

Systems psychodynamic theories help us understand the role of the unconscious in our work. The theory of object relations (Klein, 1946) where a person is said to introject into themselves aspects of events around them or said to them or about them to form internal objects, which can remain unconscious, forgotten or repressed. These internal representations can still affect one's behaviour, can be enacted, resulting in struggles with taking up authority as the other and can help us to understand the dynamics experienced by Black women.

Starting from the position that a person brings their personality, life stories and identities (Brunning, 2001) to the role, shaping and impacting their performance, it is important to examine how this thinking relates to my research participants.

The study suggests that Black women might bring to the senior leadership role, a projected sense of inadequacy and are sensitised to negative stereotypes. Based on Klein (1946), I postulate that these unconscious dynamics become their inner world beliefs which impacts on how they take up authority and exercise the power to perform in role. They have internalised self-doubt, which is in keeping with the negative stereotypes, misrecognised as occupying lesser roles and in some cases housekeeping jobs. Transgenerational trauma and repeated acts of racialisation, results in Black women feeling they are not good enough for senior leadership roles. Though they have the qualifications and skills for leadership roles which is how they are selected for the roles, the individuals in my study still feel inadequate because of the negative projections which include incompetency, failure and unbelonging.

According to Obholzer (2019) authorising and confirming one as a leader largely depends on the nature of their relationship with the figures in their inner world. These inner beliefs can undermine self-in-role. Farooq and Rodrigues (2020) and Odusanya et al. (2018)'s studies on BME female clinical psychologists leading services demonstrated how internalised beliefs can hinder an individual to self-authorise themselves as leaders and take up authority. Bartley (2013) pointed out that her childhood experiences in education resulted in her internalising negative white curiosities about her blackness as her own. In her own words, she refers to visions of whiteness associated with '*opportunity and possibility and blackness with degradation and caricature'*. (p.165). Farooq and Rodrigues (2020) referred to blackness coming with lack of opportunity.

Being aware of the projections can be a good start to manage the challenges faced and navigate self in role. However, this can be difficult as Davids (2006), stated once racist projections are made, it is difficult to take back adding that '*you must become what the racist insists you are; on no account can you expect to be perceived as a normal human being'*. (p. 70).

Black women in senior leadership roles will have had experiences of navigating themselves in organisational roles and will have formulated personal defences to survive. Through coaching, or mentorship, Black women should be provided the opportunity to explore these conscious and unconscious dynamics in relation to how they take up senior leadership roles.

This study has shown that Black women tend to mask their weaknesses because they fear judgement and negative repercussions. This fact might make it difficult for Black women to seek coaching or mentoring. Therefore, organisations need to invent ways of making development through coaching or mentoring accessible and not used as a stick for people deemed to be underperforming without exploring possible contributing factors for the underperformance, which has been the experience of some of my coaching clients.

As the study has shown that there are unconscious dynamics impacting on Black women's experience in taking up authority. I would recommend that coaching is undertaken by coaches trained in approaches that help explore both the conscious and unconscious aspects of the individual's experience. This can be effective when coaches remain curious and use their emotions as data through countertransference (Halton, 2019) to make sense of the data presented, helping individuals make sense of their internal worlds.

6.2.2 Role

It is important to understand the concept of the role and the impact of group dynamics on the role and ultimately the person in role. Cilliers (2005) refers to the role as *"the conscious and unconscious boundary around the way to behave", p. 4., and Czander (1993, p.295)* defines it as *"a mode of adaptation to authority, structure, culture, duties, and responsibilities".* Czander went on to say that there must be a fit between the role and the individual's inner experience. There is a notion in both definitions that groups create and shape leaders with their conscious and unconscious demands and their perceptions of the individual in leadership role.

I also like Grubb institute (2014) description of a role which says that it is an idea or conception in the mind through which one manages oneself and one's behaviour in relation to the system in which they are positioned. Unconscious group processes (Bion, 1961) and objects relations theory (Klein, 1946) can help to understand the phenomena where Black women in senior leadership roles struggle with authorising themselves to lead and they see themselves in roles of subordination as objects of white people's projections (Lowe, 2013) which is the role-in-mind. For this reason, they do see themselves as inadequate and experience fear of failure.

The social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Hogg, 2001), which explains the phenomenon of not belonging and not feeling accepted as a leader can shed more light. Their contribution is that individuals belong to some social groups and leadership is a group process where there is a prototype-based criterion in selecting leaders. This thinking matches Lowe (2013)'s statement that Black people do not match the prototype of a leader in a white society and therefore not perceived as that.

Helping Black women to understand what they might be up against in the organisations they work in, can help them navigate themselves in leadership roles. This can be achieved by coaches working with the individual and bringing the system into the room (Campbell and Huffington, 2008), a systems psychodynamic approach.

6.2.3 Organisation / System

This section discusses organisations as experienced by my participants and the implications for organisational leaders in policy making and initiatives to support Black women in senior leadership roles. This is relevant for consultancy and coaching practice and leadership development.

My participants worked in organisational settings which I did not have access to. However, working with my participants' emotions and organisation-in-mind, I was able to gather rich data representative of their lived experiences in those organisations. The concept "*organisation-in-the-mind*" is described by Armstrong (2005) as:

> "*Not the client's mental construct of the organisation, but rather the emotional reality of the organisation that is registered in him or her, that can be owned or disowned, displaced, denied, that can also be known or unthought.*"

In this definition, emotional experience is seen not as the property of the individual or individuals but "*emotional experience that is contained within the inner psychic space of the organization and the interactions of its members—the space between.*" p. 52. Shapiro and Carr (1991) contributed that all "*institutions exist in the mind, and it is in interaction with these in-the-mind entities that we live*" pp. 69-70, in Armstrong, 2005, pp. 3-4.

Systemic racism enacted in overt or covert microaggressions was a central theme contributing to the difficulties experienced by my participants. It is fair to say that organisations over the last few years and following George Floyd's murder in 2020

and Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaigns, have made some small steps to improve the experiences of Black people in the workplace. This has included public statements about commitment to anti-racism, organisational structural and policy changes, to employing EDI professionals.

This study has shown that Black women operate in survival mode continuously because they see the system as dangerous, meaning that if they do anything wrong, they might be punished and could lose their jobs. The organisation might not see this problem because they see a Black woman, turning up and doing the job as stated in the job description and delivering. The turmoil that Black women go through to achieve is not apparent because as the study showed and in my own lived experience, Black women mask the pain of the emotions they go through in the workplace.

6.3 Implications and recommendation for organisational leadership

1. The literature refers to the basis for racialisation as designed to protect white privilege. These acts are both conscious and unconscious because according to Kinouani, (2019), there is the dynamic that whiteness is not consciously known to white people, and they do not know how their being and behaviour is experienced by non-white groups and individuals. To this end, organisations should seek ways that can address what is being enacted resulting in the dynamic where Black women fear taking up authority. This can be achieved by organisational leaders being attentive to Black women's experiences by creating spaces for individuals to be listened to with no judgement.

2. The initiatives employed by organisations will need to go beyond the grandiose gestures in making public statements on anti-racism or creating policies and processes that are arguably ineffective and not followed, and or ticking boxes of employing EDI professionals, but to commence working with affected individuals or groups at a deeper level where the unconscious dynamics of racialisation and impact on the racialised can be surfaced, understood and worked with.

   One way of doing this effectively, is engaging consultants and coaches who understand the role of the unconscious in organisational settings, who are equipped to work with the difficult emotions that could surface by creating a holding environment (Winnicott, 1963) and providing containment (Bion, 1962).

3. Organisations need to have a better understanding of the background and identity of Black women. This is because Black women might have some inner struggles based on previous experiences of repeated racial trauma which Franklin (1999) suggested could result in invisibility syndrome of which symptoms include feelings that their talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued. These emotions will be self-limiting for Black women and organisations will not benefit from their full capacity. Creating networks where open sharing is possible without any judgement or fear of losing jobs if they show their weaknesses.

   The groups should be well represented by Black women who understand the challenges and not end up being used to educate white people about racism which can be triggering to the person affected. There are very few Black women

in senior leadership roles in each organisation in the UK, therefore I suggest creating inter-organisational networks, because for the groups to be effective, they need good enough attendance to allow sharing and learning from different systems.

The research has shown that there are potential complex and derailing dynamics which can be complicated to contain. Therefore, it is important that the groups are facilitated by consultants trained to work with unconscious dynamics where difficult emotions could be unravelled and should be worked with. Facilitation by appropriately trained consultants will ensure that the process does not cause more harm to the individuals.

6.4 Personal implications

As a systemic and psychodynamic coach, this study has made me realise the urgent need to work with Black women at a deeper level where they can start exploring how their childhood experience, internalised racism and beliefs could be impacting on their experiences in organisations. This was the approach I took to manage my own experiences and survival in senior leadership roles.

The work that I have done through therapy and coaching made it possible for me to introspect into my own lived experiences as I listened to those of others.

To enhance this work, I will explore engaging with other coaches to create a coaching and mentoring framework for Black women in leadership roles. The framework could

be used by others of different races because the emphasis will be about paying attention to all aspects of PRO which is not limited to Black people

6.5 Limitations of the research

6.5.1 This is qualitative research from a phenomenological perspective about the lived experience in depth of only six Black women in senior leadership roles. However, it is not beyond imagination that they could be saying something which may resonate with other Black women.

The women in my study were from different professional backgrounds and worked in six different UK organisations. The literature on intersectionality, internalised racism, feminism would indicate that the Black women as a racialised group face similar experiences due to institutional racism and genderism, therefore this makes my study relevant in this space.

6.5.2 I worked with the organisation-in-mind (Armstrong, 2005) which is the individual's own reality of the organisation. The data is based on narratives of their lived and emotional experience of working in those organisations. However, we know from concepts applied in this research that individuals' emotional experiences are the emotional reality of the organisation they work in. A different research methodology that allowed access to observe the group dynamics such as action research would have perhaps resulted in more or different data.

6.5.3 As an inside researcher, there could have been bias or tendency to anticipate the data (Pigott & Valentine, 2017). I was cautious about my bias and subjectivity during the process by repeatedly going over the data to ensure that I was not succumbing to my own internal processes and lived experiences in my interpretations. The use of field notes and journaling was helpful to ensure I do not quickly jump into themes. To triangulate and add depth, I used individual supervision and group supervision. I was also able to run a focus group and present my themes at the Tavistock research symposium. I have discussed the outputs from these forums in my findings in chapter 4.

6.6 Recommendations for future research

6.6.1 This study focused on Black women as one racial identity and their background, though known, was not explored in relation to cultural differences, education or leadership development opportunities in relation to how they were prepared for leadership roles.

Further research exploring how Black women's background, culture, education, leadership development impact on how they take up authority and how they survive in role will contribute to understanding this phenomenon. This type of research could be either quantitative or qualitative methodology. Quantitative methodology may show trends in how people survive or don't.

6.6.2 While the women's experience occurred in different organisational systems, there were some similarities in their experience pointing at systemic racism and their

struggles with performing in role. Research into the organisational systems and dynamics in different settings and organisations employing an action research methodology would give a fuller picture of these issues.

6.6.3 The data showed that Black women draw strength from internalised beliefs. Researching childhood experiences in more detail to see what contributes to the internalised personal defences would be an important area to research.

6.6.4

There was evidence that the Black women in my study related their experience as mainly to do with their racial identity. Future study with an intersectionality lens could further develop an understanding of their experiences in senior leadership roles.

Chapter 7: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

7.1 Personal reflections:

I entered this research as an insider, seeking to explore the lived experiences of Black women in senior leadership roles and to answer the central question: *Is it difficult for Black women to take up authority in role?* As a Black woman with experiences similar to those of my participants, the research process was both validating and, at times, emotionally challenging. The theme of playing it safe emerged not only in the narratives of my participants but also in my own approach. I often feared that probing too deeply might trigger emotional pain in them, pain that I too recognised. When participants would say things like, *"you know what it's like,"* I sometimes found myself nodding in agreement. In those moments, I felt ambivalent about pushing further. I now wonder whether taking a more active stance as a researcher in those instances might have elicited different or deeper data.

While many of the themes mirrored my own experiences, hearing the women speak about being misrecognised, judged as incompetent, and consistently undermined, carrying labels that diminished their value and silenced them often left me with overwhelming feelings of anger and frustration. These responses could have been countertransference, possibly reflecting emotions that my participants had not fully processed themselves. Some of the women expressed gratitude for the space the interviews provided, commenting that it was the first time anyone had asked them about these experiences and that it felt therapeutic to be heard and understood.

A common thread in their stories was the practice of masking emotions especially anger. The women described how, even when something was done *to* them or taken from them, they felt unable to express their frustration for fear of confirming the angry *Black woman* stereotype. These narratives led me to reflect on a conversation with one of my supervisors, who introduced the idea of appropriation and theft and how white individuals and systems often appropriate Black people's ideas and labour without recognition. This dynamic, rooted in colonial legacies, evokes anger. Yet, the fear of being perceived as aggressive or unprofessional often forces that anger to remain unexpressed.

This raises important questions: *What happens to that anger when it cannot be voiced? What is the cost to the individual and the organisation when Black women are denied the space to express the full range of their emotions?* The cost of suppressing anger to avoid being seen as "ugly" is that we may also be denied the opportunity to be fully seen as "beautiful" in our authenticity, our truth, and our humanity. I am left wondering: *What would it be like if Black women were allowed to be both angry and beautiful? If we no longer had to protect others from our perceived ugliness, could we finally stop hiding our light?*

> *We wear the mask that grins and lies,*
> *It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, ---*
> *This debt we pay to human guile:*
> *With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,*
> *And mouth with myriad subtleties.*
> (Dunbar, 1913, para 1) in Dumas (1985).

7.2 Conclusion

Throughout this research journey, I have found myself oscillating between feelings of potency and urgency, and moments of powerlessness and paralysis. There were times when the sense of *not being good enough* felt overwhelming, and I had to summon determination, perseverance, resilience, and resistance to push through the temptation to quit. These emotions were not unfamiliar to me, but they intensified as I listened to and internalised the experiences of the women in my study, experiences that have stayed with me and continue to occupy my thoughts.

As I approached the final stages of this work, I often found myself asking: *How have I managed to keep going despite the challenges? Why has completing this study become so important to me?* The first answer that comes to mind is my own ambition and commitment to continual self-development. But I also recognised a deeper motivation, echoing the sentiments of some of my participants of *doing it for others*. Like them, I felt a responsibility to push forward, not only for myself but also for those whose stories I carry and whose experiences mirror my own.

A significant part of this journey has been shaped by grief. I lost my mother just a few weeks before commencing this Doctorate programme. I vividly remember the internal negotiation I had with myself whether to withdraw from the programme and give myself time to mourn, or to begin this challenging endeavour while navigating profound personal loss. I chose to start the programme while grieving.

My mother was the embodiment of strength and hard work, a matriarch who single handedly raised a large and complex family for 20 years after my father's passing. She was my anchor, a source of resilience, and a woman of unwavering determination. If

she could shoulder such an immense responsibility with grace, I felt I could draw from the memory of her and the values she instilled in me to complete this Doctorate. In doing so, I honour her legacy and hope to inspire others, to show that even through pain, growth and purpose can emerge.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethics approval

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699
Fax: 020 7447 3837

Ruth Pombi Chiraga

By Email

18 November 2022

Dear Ruth,

Re: Trust Research Ethics Application

Title: A systems and psychodynamic exploration into the experiences of black women in senior leadership roles in the UK.

I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee your application has been approved. This means you can proceed with your research.

Please note that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc, must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

If you have any further questions or require any clarification do not hesitate to contact me.

I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Paru Jeram
Secretary to the Trust Research Degrees Subcommittee
T: 020 938 2699

Appendix 2: Participant information sheet

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Research Title: A systems and psychodynamic exploration into the experiences of black women in senior leadership roles in the UK.

You are invited to participate in the above-named research study. It is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This document outlines the purpose of the study and what you can expect during the interview process. It will also outline how the research data will be used and the final outcomes of the project. Ethics approval to undertake this research has been approved by the Tavistock and Portman Research Ethics Committee (TREC).

Project Description

The purpose:

This is a research project being conducted through the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and Essex University towards a doctoral degree in Organisations and Consultation.

The aim of my research is to construct a developed understanding of the conscious and unconscious factors contributing to the challenges faced by black women in senior leadership roles, specifically around taking up leadership and exercising power and authority in line with their organisational roles.

Through my research, I aim to explore the factors that make it challenging to take up authority and provide an understanding into what would make black women in senior leadership roles thrive and not just survive.

The driver for researching this topic is to make sense of the repeated narrative about, and by black women in leadership roles that if they are in that rare position of reaching senior leadership status, they find themselves having to fight for survival, employing strategies that are only necessary for them as black women leaders to stay in role.

As a black woman with experience of taking up senior management and leadership roles, I have experience of often struggling in role, the same narrative as the black women in some literature on this topic and some women I have encountered in my role as an executive coach.

I hope that from my study, future black women leaders will learn how to navigate their roles, organisations will learn how to support black women, helping them to reach a level where they can thrive. This study could also inform curricula on leadership courses.

Your role:

Your role in the study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to proceed after reading this information sheet, I will give you a consent form to sign. You may withdraw at any point and do not have to explain your reason for withdrawing. If you choose to withdraw from the study altogether you must do this within 4 weeks of the interview. Once analysis has begun it will not be possible to exclude your data from the data set. All your information will be kept confidential and in reporting back, all data will be anonymised.

You will participate in 2 interviews each lasting 90 minutes, at least a month apart. The interviews will be conducted in person unless contraindicated due to Covid 19 or any other reasons. The interviews will be audio-recoded and stored in a secure drive.

Confidentiality:

Any identifiable information pertaining to you or the organisation(s) you work for will remain strictly confidential. In typing up the transcript and in writing my thesis, your information will be substituted to ensure that it is completely unidentifiable. The audio files will be encrypted and stored in a secure online location only accessible by the researcher. In line with the 5th principle of the Data Protection Act (1998), your personal data shall not be kept for longer than is necessary for the purposes for which it was collected.

This thesis will be kept in the library at Essex University and maybe accessed via the British library.

Results of the study:

The results of this study will be written up into a thesis as a part of my doctoral programme at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and Essex University. Subsequently aspects of this work may be submitted to academic journals for publication and may be written into a book. All names, locations and organisations will be anonymised.

Risks and benefits of taking part:

I am hoping that you will find the interview experience interesting and as an opportunity to reflect on your journey in a safe confidential space. However, should you feel distressed, the organisations listed below will be able to offer counselling or coaching including role consultation as appropriate:

- British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy - https://www.bacp.co.uk/

- Tavistock Consulting - https://tavistockconsulting.co.uk/services/executive-coaching/

- Adult IAPT services can be accessed via the participant's GP or the NHS website https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-services/Psychological%20therapies%20%28IAPT%29/LocationSearch/10008

Should you become distressed during the interview, you or I may end the interview without any pressure.

Ethical approval:

This project has been approved by the Tavistock and Portman Foundation Trust and Essex University Research Ethics Committee (TREC). Should you have any further questions on the conduct of this study please Contact Paru Jeram, Quality Assurance Officer Tel: pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk

What next:

 If you wish to participate in this study, please sign the attached consent form and return it in the enclosed envelope.

You will then be contacted to arrange the date and time of the interview.

Consent form for taking part in research

A systems and psychodynamic exploration into the experiences of black women in senior leadership roles in UK organisations.

Please circle your answer to the following questions:

1. I have read and understand the information sheet for the study and have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

   YES NO

2. I understand my participation in this study is voluntary and I can withdraw at any point up to the data being analysed, without providing a reason.

   YES NO

3. I agree to be interviewed and for the interview to be audio-recorded.

   YES NO

4. I understand that the findings of this research may be published and available for the public to read.

   YES NO

5. I have read and understood the above and agree to take part in the research

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)
……..

Participant's Signature …….

Date: ……

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)
……

Investigator's Signature …….

Date: …….

Appendix 3: Research participants demographics summary – presented at Tavistock Research Symposium

4 out of 6 of my participants were born and educated in the UK
2 of my participants emigrated to the UK (1 African and 1 Jamaican) as adults and completed some of their professional training in the UK.
Four participants (3 UK born) were more expressive about the sense that they felt they are at war in the workplace. They were feistier and displayed anger towards the systems.
All 6 participants referred to their struggles as relating mostly to their blackness, though also aware of genderism.
One participant who is mixed race referred to having felt privileged due to her proximity to whiteness. Though she had experiences of being bullied, she had more experiences of subtle covert microaggressions.
All participants grew up in families where self-belief was instilled in them and where they were encouraged and taught the value of education to better themselves.
All aware from childhood about the challenges they would encounter as black women due to racism. Internalised sense that you will struggle because of your skin colour and that you will need to work 100% harder to succeed.
All participants share a great sense of achievement for themselves, families and community at large and this gives reason to continue though it is painful.

Appendix 4: Reflexivity during coding

Following a lengthy process of reading, re reading and sifting through the codes, I found myself at times overwhelmed, feeling incompetent, with enormous pressure to get it right. I was starting to see that I kept going back and changing the wording and phrases on my focused and axial codes that I had used in the earlier stages of my analysis because they did not appear clever or academic enough. I realised that this exercise was starting to get to a point where I could not recognise the reference or remembering what it might have meant for my participants, and I was trying to find ways to make the focused codes work with axial codes or vice versa. Through applying abductive reasoning and inferences based on empirical experience is part of the GT data analysis undertaking, Glaser (2005) warns us about forcing personally preferred codes into the analysis. In my case it was trying to force terms that I thought would appear more academic and risking diluting the interpretation the participant and I as the researcher initially meant.

When I paused to reflect and writing my reflective journal, I was awoken to the sense of self-doubt and inadequacy a theme that emerged in my analysis lodged in me and my own lived experience. This was the entry in my reflective journal at this stage '*I am finding it difficult to sort my data and wonder whether the closeness to the data is evoking a lot of painful memories for me or is it my concern about my own preconceptions and fear of failure being played out. There is a sense in me of being silenced a common theme in Black people where we do not speak out but conform, accept and how is that played out here. Am I fearing to put my voice to this experience. Or is it that I have not studied the data enough or is it my lack of experience as a researcher creating this ambivalence or perhaps it is the process that I must go through to create valid theory from this academic work. Or is it that I am punching above my weight, and I am not good enough to be doing a doctorate. Nothing seems to make sense…!*'

Following a session with my supervisor, where I discussed my experience of being overwhelmed with my participants data, I decided to focus on a different part of my study and return to the data later. This gave me some renewed energy and I once again was able to separate my participants experience from my own and I was able to manage the emotions that were at times overpowering.

Appendix 5: Tess transcript

So inevitably, you stand out always. So, throughout my career, I've probably been only the only one or one of two or three non-white members of staff. And if I think back to my first role, I was probably not outspoken in a in an obstinate way, but I seem to always be pushed to the front to speak and talk about things.

And I remember thinking, but everybody else is asking their questions, and it was a team effort. So why did he choose to really, he was quite forthright. It wasn't nice. He wasn't very pleasant, actually.

And it was then that I realized that, okay, so I'm visible because of my gender, my color, my ethnicity, but also there was something about me that people would have me front things or ask the challenging questions.

I will turn up to meetings even earlier on and let people say they're waiting for the team manager, and I am the team manager, but they're telling me that they're waiting for the team manager. I will turn up to deliver presentations, and they'll say, oh, we're waiting for the presenter.

And I said, what? What do you mean? Because I thought you'd be white, blonde. I had this image in my head. I said, well, why would you think that? She said, because all the senior leaders we have in the organization, the senior managers, they're all white.

She was surprised I'm always hearing your name, but I didn't realise you were her, she thought my job share partner was me my job share who is white and I said well why would you think that and she said because you know, your name is always about people talking about the work that you're doing. So automatically in her mind she had a vision of who this dynamic person was, and it was not me. Perceptions that you cannot be this good because you are black. Not associated with brilliance".

So then I was working alongside all of the directors in the London region and it's the same thing. I found myself slipping into some of the supporting running around getting teas coffees together making sure he's comfortable and I would be angry with myself as stepping into that because one I am a woman one on a black woman, why it's almost like society has put you in these positions as being and making teas making coffee get being a caregiver in a makeshift is OK.

We don't have the same networks black, black leaders or aspiring leaders do not have the same networks as our white colleagues to be able to expose you to certain leadership situations. So, you might be reluctant to step up in and take on a job or see a job going, but you don't think you're ready for it because you've never had the exposure to say, actually, you're more than ready for it.

In my experience. Again, we feel like we have to have all the academic. Before we even consider going for certain roles. So we study and we study, and we work and we work, and we know the job is tied out before we even apply going for the job, whereas others will know 50% of the job, and they'll learn the other 50% when they're in you.

Yeah. Um I have experienced racism, bullying, massive amounts of bullying, discrimination. And it's just as bad today for me in this role as it was when I was starting it, that the microaggressions, the racism, the undermining is worse.

Now I'm in a director role than before. Wow. Yeah. The current organization that I'm in, I'm the only black director. But the leadership team is 99% female. There's one man, so they're all all women.

And if you don't talk like them and sound like them, or if you don't follow the same mindset, then you're seen as you're not quite there, ready, and you're not quite there, which isn't correct. For me, it's more everybody has their own strengths to bring.

Yes, but there are challenges and barriers that are in place that make it harder for you to do the job because focus can be it doesn't necessarily feel that safe space where you can be your authentic self.

Black women work hard and we do not like to be seen as vulnerable. No. And that might be a generalization but we do not like to show our vulnerabilities because it's seen as a weakness because we have had to work so hard.

So we carry the family, we carry the extended family, we carry the teams, we carry the organization, we take everything on our shoulders and we just keep fighting forward and it's attraction to us doing our jobs and doing them well.

And I also have to have a self-regulation and a self-measurement, and by that I mean before I say anything in meetings, before I talk to people, challenge people, I try not to come across as aggressive.

I try not to come across as loud. I try not to come across as because they have these labels put on us already that we can be challenging, we can be aggressive, we can be loud. And so sometimes they say, Tess, you're so quiet.

So why we don't exert our authority or so yeah because some of us who managed to exert themselves and really show their presence they then have a reputation for being difficult and challenging and aggressive and you know all the knives are out so you want it you want to you want to be accepted by the organisation, you want to not necessary be liked but will accepted and so …..I think sometimes we are so grateful that we've got the opportunity because we've got in yeah but you just want everything to be okay and you don't want to cause any upset and you don't want to go in and change things so but actually that is to our detriment because that's when people start to take the measure of you and it then becomes quite challenging you have to go with you don't have to go in or guns blazing and wanting to change things but you have to go in with a sense of confidence yeah and if you if you uncertain or unsure, it's almost like we don't allow ourselves to be unsure ……yeah so we want to go in and just be and even if we think well actually I need to change this completely, we doubt ourselves that our view is the right one but that again sometimes is about having confidence in yourself.

Yes so say we might play it a lot safe, yeah than we would then we would ordinarily be because you don't want to do anything that will bring any more attention, rocks a boat in anyway or raise your head any higher because you want to hold onto the job.

Then in from of this experience talks to us as black as black people but there's also something that talks to us as women anyways so you've got the blackness you've got the being a female the gender as well so there's that intersectionality thing that's against you as well.

So you don't want to rock the boat. For me, that's the framework in which self-regulation is things. If you do not feel psychologically safe, you will never be your authentic self, because

you're always trying to be the acceptable version of what they want, and then you're always having this.

Can I do that? Why do we need to give ourselves permission? Why don't we just do it? Which is very easy for the white person to just come in, take up that authority, exercise that authority, do what needs to make those difficult decisions, because they feel safe and allow themselves to fail.