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Exploring the ‘legging up’ burden of high-flying minorities in organizational workplaces

Derrick Boakye

Brunel University London

David Sarpong

Aston University

Mairi Maclean

University of Bath

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Abstract

What, if any, are the challenges faced by ‘high-flying’ minorities when mentoring others with whom they share socio-collective identities? Drawing on contemporaneous ‘microstoria’ on mentoring as narrated by high-flying black minorities, we explore what we term the ‘legging up burden’ – the call to support organizational members with whom they share, or are presumed to share, ethnic characteristics. These stories suggest three paradoxical outcomes of intersectional identities that influence the mentoring experiences of high-flying minorities, stemming from: a sense of identity drive; obscured challenges that reify the mentoring burden; and identity-drifting coping behaviours that are triggered in response. Emphasizing the need for better approaches to pursuing diversity in organizational workplaces without tokenizing or overburdening existing, relatively sparse high-flying minorities, we advance understanding of the consequences of how high-flying minorities, sometimes without the ‘broadest of shoulders’, are compelled to carry the significant burden of supporting and progressing the careers of fellow minorities.

Keywords

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agendas, high-flying minorities, intersectionality, mentoring burden, microstoria, shared socio-collective identities.

Introduction

Ignited by the ubiquitous rise in social movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, discussions about systemic and widespread racism, sexism, and the underrepresentation of marginalized groups in organizational workforces have heightened demands to address social identity tensions within contemporary organizations. This call for social justice and fairness has received some positive response in enthusiastic efforts to define organizing practices that encourage Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) across gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and other forms of marginalized minority identities (Ponomareva et al., 2022; Roberson, 2006). Nonetheless, the extant emphasis on establishing fair representation of all forms of social groups has eclipsed a critical examination of the underlying assumptions that underpin the existing (and emerging) approaches to achieving organizational ED&I goals. Specifically, we draw attention to the recent turn to crafting ED&I organizational identities in a manner that is heavily reliant on encouraging minorities to assume the responsibility to mentor others

with whom they share, or are presumed to share, socio-collective identities (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013). We argue that the socio-organizational practices that promote such racial mentoring arrangements within and outside organizations to boost minority group representation in organizational workforces (Ghosh and Chaudhuri, 2022; Deptula and Williams, 2017) (re)create a shared system of organizing patterns that perpetuate or reinforce the minority's situated predicament.

This approach to achieving ED&I is consistent with received understanding that the effectiveness of mentorship relationships is rooted in shared relational demography (Gosh, 2014; Erdem and Aytemur, 2008; Blake-Beard, 2011; Dreher and Cox, 1996; Thomas, 1990). Against this background, we are nevertheless of the view that this tendency exemplifies a received assumption inscribed in partially established narratives which exhort organizations, and wider society, to assume that minority professionals are both representative of their entire social group and in a position to engage in social uplift (Griffin and Reddick, 2011). The extant understanding on *minority-to-minority* mentoring (Busch, 2017), therefore, lacks a fine-grained explication of the hidden situated experiences that exist within such relational arrangements, and which may give rise to unfavourable mentoring outcomes. More importantly, we posit that the relatively small number of minorities within professional work settings raises concerns about how this approach could sufficiently serve the mentoring needs of the marginalized social groups in question. As such, the sparse number of high-flying minority professionals concerned shoulder an obligation to show citizenship by supporting others within their identity category to excel equally in their careers, thereby experiencing what Padilla (1994: 26) calls 'cultural taxation': situations imposed on minorities by organizations based on the assumption that one is best suited for specific tasks due to one's race or ethnicity.

In this paper, we explore the mentoring experiences of black ethnic minority professionals as they become centrally situated in this organizational ‘legging up’ strategy towards achieving ED&I in organizational workforces. Our empirical pursuit to uncover the lived experiences of high-flying black minorities is rooted in the narratological persuasions that utilize contemporaneous storylines recounted by marginalized individuals whose polyphonic voices are often situated on the periphery of mainstream discourse (Boje, 2001; Sarpong and Maclean, 2017). We therefore shed light on the absences, silences, and repressed meanings that cumulatively reinforce their marginalized position in their socio-organizational settings. To achieve this objective, we develop theoretical sensitivity to intersectionality, defined as the interlocking of forms of social identity structures, such as race, sexuality, gender, class, and disability that engender overlapping forms of discrimination to shape the everyday life experiences of individual(s) (Acker, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989). Hence, we conceive the mentoring experiences of high-flying black minorities as subjected to the interactivity of their identity, situatedness and positionalities as minorities, high-flyers, and tokens of racial representation. We therefore argue that the socio-organizational location of these overlapping categories profoundly influences their experiences in mentoring and their sense of uniqueness and belongingness to their ethnic identity (McCluney and Rabelo, 2019).

As we generate important insights into the paradoxical outcomes of advocating for mentoring among marginalized groups to achieve ED&I goals, we illuminate how black minorities come to be perceived as token members in their organizations (Gotian et al., 2022) thereby attracting the responsibility of mentoring and guiding others with whom they share socio-collective identities. We argue that as the burden to provide mentorship based on racial characteristics intensifies, there is a potential to encounter *marginal mentoring* conditions, which may not meet the developmental needs of mentees due to mentor burnout (Gotian et al., 2022; Ragins et al., 2000). These risks setting in motion a vicious cycle whereby the

newly promoted minority member becomes perceived as incompetent as a result, triggering further discrimination. It is therefore relevant that we interrogate the hidden assumptions that underlie the processes designed to achieve ED&I goals to avoid reifying racial markers that create prejudicial social classifications in the first place, which in turn impede professional career progression among ethnic minorities. While the call for ED&I in organizations remains ever more important to establish socio-organizational systems that provide equal opportunity for all regardless of ethnic origin, sexual orientation, or other forms of intersectional identities, there is a clear need to examine how these ends are achieved, as well as the perspectives of the intended beneficiaries of such initiatives.

Our paper is organized as follows. We begin with an exploration of the extant literature on mentoring to establish its foundation in efforts to promote ED&I goals in organizations. We then present intersectionality as a theoretical lens to understand how the fusion of multiple identities influences the allocation of and engagement in mentoring in organizational workplaces, whereby ethnic minority members find themselves obliged to engage in offering social uplift to fellow minorities. Following this, we discuss the methodological toolkits we employed to identify, select, capture, and analyze the microstories which provide the empirical data for our study. We then present our findings in detail. We conclude by discussing our findings, articulating the core contributions of our study, and highlighting its limitations alongside avenues for future research.

Mentoring and the call for ED&I

The Greek poet Homer (1967) is often credited with providing an incisive understanding of the term ‘mentor’ in the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus is instructed to select a trustworthy friend, Nestor, to educate, train, protect, and counsel his son, Telemachus (Gibson et al., 2000). This defines a mentor as a person with superior experience, knowledge, and power to teach, advise and direct a less experienced and often younger protégé in their personal and professional

development (Gibson et al., 2000; Colley, 2001). This understanding is further echoed by Haggard et al. (2011), who conceive a mentor to be one who is crucial in imparting knowledge, initiating change, and fostering the growth of others' abilities. Used in context, the term 'mentor' therefore connotes one who assumes a range of roles, including teacher, counsellor, and advisor, *inter alia*, to benefit the career progression of others less experienced than themselves (Dresden et al., 2018). Thus, mentors provide an important relational resource that plays a crucial part in developing relevant professional qualities and skills for the fruitful career prospects of their protégés (Hudson, 2013; Eby et al., 2008).

Extant research on mentoring suggests that the hitherto predominantly informal relationship, usually established outside formal organizational channels, and based on a personal desire to guide others to realize their personal and/or professional development goals, has gained significance in organizational survival (Singh et al., 2002), such that it is now seen as fundamental to formalized systems of organizing (Inzer and Crawford 2005; Ragins et al., 2000). Thus, mentorship has gained firm foundations in organizational practice as an effective strategy to transfer tacit knowledge from existing, well-trained members to new employees, to socialize them to the norms that underpin the successful accomplishment of organizational tasks (Roche, 2022; Zheng et al., 2021), thereby ensuring managerial succession (Ensher et al., 2001; Swap et al., 2001). Furthermore, mentoring has been identified as important to reducing employee turnover due to the sense of belonging, gratitude and appreciation that is nurtured in the protégé through the mentoring relationship (Higgins and Kram, 2001; Lapointe and Vandenberghe, 2017). Prior studies have also drawn attention to the role that mentoring relationships play in promoting diversity in organizations, thereby fostering equal career opportunity for all, regardless of background (Dreher and Dougherty, 1997; Ragins, 1997). These studies offer important insights into how human resource

management systems that are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring diversity across gender, ethnicity, and disability can be made more effective through mentoring.

The recent wave of advocacy for ED&I in organizations has also led to many organizations striving to promote diversified work settings that furnish career opportunities for all (Bahr and Gordon, 2017; Samdanis and Özbilgin, 2020). This is especially the case within multinational enterprises, whose extensive operational boundaries require them to exhibit an inclusive, diversified identity that complements their reputation and strategy (Vaara et al., 2021). More importantly, having a racially diversified leadership to lead such organizations has become a critical means of gaining sustained social support while enhancing competitiveness (Ghosh, 2014; Tienari et al., 2010). In this regard, providing a well-coordinated system that matches mentors with mentees to foster the qualities that will advance the latter's progression within the organizational hierarchy has become commonplace within everyday organizing practice (Smulowitz et al., 2019). This phenomenon has necessitated an approach to allocating mentors which is informed by studies that identify a significant efficacy in racially founded mentoring relationships (Dreher and Cox, 1996; Thomas, 2001). Specifically, a growing number of studies has emphasized the significance of deep-seated similarities between mentors and mentees for efficient mentorship relationships (Zhen et al., 2021); echoing arguments that mentees have confidence and trust in mentors with whom they share socio-collective identities (Blake-Beard, 2011; Erdem and Aytemur, 2008; Thomas, 1990; Thorne et al. 2021). Although these studies have empirical grounding, we argue that they lack a thorough assessment of how reaffirming and thereby reappropriating shared socio-collective identities may itself come to be implicated in the same poignant racial lenses of disadvantage against which the minority professional has laboured.

Over and above the intuitive inferences that can be drawn from Griffin and Reddick's (2011) study on the strains inherent in balancing mentoring roles and career responsibilities

among high-flying black professionals, specifically professors, how the intensified mentoring approach adopted to respond to the ardent call for ED&I in organizations could potentially represent a burden on ethnic minority professionals is as yet unexplored. We therefore argue that existing research on the racial dynamics of mentoring relationships has counter-intuitively served to precondition perceptions of minority professionals as having an obligation to provide mentorship to those with whom they share socio-collective characteristics. In our view, the preponderance of these studies coupled with the heightened interest in achieving racial diversity goals within organizations has contributed to a failure to engender critical conversations that seek to dissect taken-for-granted assumptions which inform the establishment of such legging up relationships. We perceive this understanding that underpins the intrapsychic depiction of bespoke mentors for minority protégés as having the potential to impact negatively on their career experiences. Thus, highlighting the fusion of identities that underlies the establishment of racioethnic mentoring relationships sensitizes us to an *intersectional* perspective as an appropriate theoretical lens through which to discern the socio-organizational implications of race/ethnicity (Nkomo, 2019) that in turn inform the notion of the ideal mentor required to achieve racial diversity in organizational workplaces.

Intersectional location of minority mentoring role

An intersectional approach to unpacking how mutually constitutive relations and interactivity of social identities shape life experiences has come to dominate today's critical discourse on diversity management (Zanoni et al., 2010). Influenced by the seminal work which situated the marginalization of black women at the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991), the turn to intersectionality focuses attention on the simultaneous interaction of socio-demographic characteristics to inform lived experiences and life trajectories (Alberti and Iannuzzi, 2020; McCluney and Rabelo, 2019). As such, the constellation of identities that constitutively define individual uniqueness (McCluney and Rabelo, 2019) becomes embedded

as principles for differentiating and valorising organizational workforces (Alberti and Iannuzzi, 2020). In this regard, the career experiences of minority professionals are construed according to subjective social frames that impose images of an ideal type of mentor for minorities, thereby reifying systemic biases and existing prejudices concerning the ethnic minority identity.

Intersectionality as our analytical paradigm allows us to situate the mentoring experiences of minority professionals within the multiplicity of identities that co-constitutively define expectations and ideals of mentor-mentee relationships. Thus, we perceive the socio-organizational cognitive frames through which individuals are deemed fit to mentor an ethnic minority member as constituted on the substrate of multiple identities that one relationally enacts. The underlying assumptions and norms that locate one within these identities are, however, shielded by forms of social order or racial policies seeking to privilege minorities (Hwang and Beauregard, 2022; Wooten, 2019). Yet, these deeply inscribed presuppositions, however well-meaning, lead to the perpetuation of stereotypical constructions which reinforce the minority member's marginalized position and predicament. Representing forms of stereotypical social ordering, the nexus of identities which high-flying minority professionals occupy become the basis for ascribing them as mentors. They therefore experience subjective forms of categorized affliction that emerge from the multiplicative influence of mutually constitutive identities within their situated demographic ascription (Dy et al., 2017; Healy et al., 2011).

Drawing on intersectionality as a conceptual tool, we place emphasis on the intertwining identities that a minority assumes within the workplace, in combination with their social location in the collective minority group. These intersections of identities, situatedness and positionalities (Adamson and Johansson, 2016; Anthias, 2013; Dy et al., 2017) that define them first as minorities, then as high-flying career achievers, finally usher

them into the realm of diversity token member of the organization. Thus, focusing on black minorities who occupy leadership positions in their organizations, we construct their mentoring experiences as a serial combination of perceived identities as they become located within this position within a marginalized social category. In the interactions between these multiple axes of situated identities lies the emergence of a socially ascribed responsibility to engage in racial uplift through mentoring others who share their socio-demographic traits. Focusing on the socio-organizational contextualization which shapes the meaning of the intersectional identities they occupy, we now present the empirical context within which we develop our contribution.

Research methodology

Given our aim to identify high-flying black minorities who experience the legging up burden in their workplace and minority social networks, we were attracted to a unique empirical context. Bristol in the southwest of the United Kingdom (UK) represents a city whose history is intertwined with the transatlantic slave trade. It came to dominate recent public discourse on ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests in Britain, when the statue of Edward Colston was toppled and thrown into the harbour (Siddique and Skopeliti, 2020). Bristol is one of Britain’s ten core cities, being the largest in Southwest England and home to a population of 472,400 (Bristol City Council, 2021). Building a reputation as a multi-cultural centre, the city has become increasingly diversified with around 16% of its population belonging to minority ethnic groups (Bristol City Council, 2021). Bristol observes the annual Black History Month celebrations to commemorate the historic achievements and contributions of black people to the cultural and economic development of the UK (Bristol City Council, 2022a). Indeed, its black population has gained recognition since the city’s mayor, Marvin Rees, is the first black African to hold such a role in a major European city (Bristol City Council, 2022b).

Bristol is also known for highly skilled professional employment, hosting a growing number of well reputed organizations (South Gloucestershire Council, 2022). The recent calls for ED&I have led to many of these organizations to aspire to a balance of racial diversity in their workplaces, resulting in an increasing number of ethnic minority employees. This has been accompanied by an upsurge in black groups established with the aim of providing mentorship to members of their network. One of these prominent associations is the Black Professional Network (BPN), set up in 2018 and launched in 2019 in response to the growing need for ethnic minority representation in professional careers (BPN, 2022). The BPN is a uniquely successful organization, expanding from a small number of black professionals to 310 mentors engaged in co-mentoring over 650 fellow professionals, spanning those who identify as black Africans, black Caribbeans, and black British (BPN, 2022). These 310 mentors volunteer to participate in quarterly events to provide professional insights and informal mentorship to its members in various careers. They provide members with access to professional development and progression opportunities required to transform their career objectives through knowledge seminars, continual professional development (CPD) training, and recruitment opportunities. Given its infancy, the BPN has been successful at providing a platform for blacks and ethnic minority professionals in the southwest of England and beyond to influence the labour market and connect with peers to enable them to realize their career ambitions. For the purposes of this study, this implies that the BPN offers a rich empirical research site to access and examine the incidence of the mentoring burden among black ethnic minority professionals.

Methods

We adopted an exploratory qualitative research approach for our study (Corbin and Strauss, 2014), enabling us to focus on the emic and fully captured lived experiences and meanings that characterize the socio-organizational realities which bind high-flying minorities to a

construed duty to provide mentorship and offer social uplift. Against this background, we drew on microstoria, which concerns the creation and sharing of contemporaneous storylines by voices often under-represented in management research (Boje, 2001; Maclean, Harvey and Stringfellow, 2017; Sarpong and Maclean, 2017), to account for the mentoring experiences of black ethnic minorities as they perform a key role in informing contemporary organizational discourse on ED&I. We therefore approached our empirical site with the aim of capturing the lived and living mentoring experiences of ethnic minorities that have long lacked attention within mainstream discourse on diversity in organizational workforces.

The participants for our study were purposively sampled based on two principal criteria. First, participants needed to be a member of the BPN and employed in a professional occupation in the Greater Bristol area. Second, they should have taken on a mentorship role at their workplace and/or within the BPN within the preceding two years. During the data-gathering process, the authors registered for and attended one of the events organized by the BPN, where initial contact with participants was made. After the event, an informal discussion was held with the president of the BPN together with other key members of the group to inform them about the study and solicit their support. At this stage, 20 members of the organization who met our selection criteria agreed to participate in the study. An additional 10 research participants were enrolled through participant referrals and snowballing (Parker et al., 2019). Altogether, 30 black minority professionals belonging to the BPN and pursuing a career in diverse professions, including accounting and finance, biomedical science, law, sales and customer service, *inter alia*, participated in the study. Some 15 of the participants identified as Black-British, seven as Black-Caribbeans, and eight as Black-Africans. Seven of the participants identified as female. Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of participants.

Table 1. Interviewee descriptors

Name	Age	Ethnic Identity	Gender	Profession	Education	Years of Mentoring	Current Mentees
Ada	43	African	Female	Strategist	Masters	12	6
Abebi	33	African	Female	Marketing consultant	Masters	5	5
Baba	40	African	Male	Chemical scientist	Doctorate	10	3
Bob	45	African	Male	Professor	Doctorate	12	6
Dae	37	African	Male	Auditor	Bachelor	6	9
Dakar	52	African	Male	Strategy consultant	Masters	18	2
Ebele	35	African	Female	Financial analyst	Masters	3	2
Femi	48	African	Male	Laboratory scientist	Doctorate	11	5
Funga	28	British	Male	Architect	Bachelor	5	2
Gideon	40	British	Male	Data manager	Bachelor	3	5
Ibrahim	50	British	Male	Web developer	Bachelor	12	2
Ivan	43	British	Male	Construction engineer	Masters	8	4
Iza	47	British	Female	Assistant professor	Doctorate	5	6
Jade	51	British	Female	Auditor	Bachelor	5	6
Joe	35	British	Male	Sales expert	Masters	7	3
Joao	37	British	Male	Export manager	Doctorate	9	4
Jordan	39	British	Male	Journalist	Masters	11	7
Karim	32	British	Male	Financial analyst	Masters	9	5
Lia	46	British	Female	Journalist	Bachelor	8	2
Lydia	43	British	Female	Travelling nurse	Masters	10	5
Malek	31	British	Male	Actuary	Bachelor	4	3
Mirza	36	British	Male	Educationist	Bachelor	5	8
Nic	46	British	Male	Pharmacist	Bachelor	5	3
Noah	38	Caribbean	Male	Export officer	Masters	7	3
Pat	45	Caribbean	Male	Public health auditor	Bachelor	9	3
Raheem	35	Caribbean	Male	Sales consultant	Masters	3	4
Razi	38	Caribbean	Male	Physicist	Doctorate	9	7
Ryan	46	Caribbean	Male	Corporate lawyer	Masters	10	6
Sulley	55	Caribbean	Male	Material scientist	Doctorate	15	5
Tahiru	29	Caribbean	Male	Chartered accountant	Bachelor	2	3

We proceeded to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with participants, which took place over a three-month period in 2021, via a zoom video communication platform. Each interview lasted on average 1.5 hours. At the start of each interview, the consent of participants was sought to have the interview recorded. This was followed by confidentiality assurances and the collection of relevant socio-demographic data, after which the general purpose of the research was reiterated. The interviews were designed to provide in-depth understanding of the participants' views on ED&I among their organization's

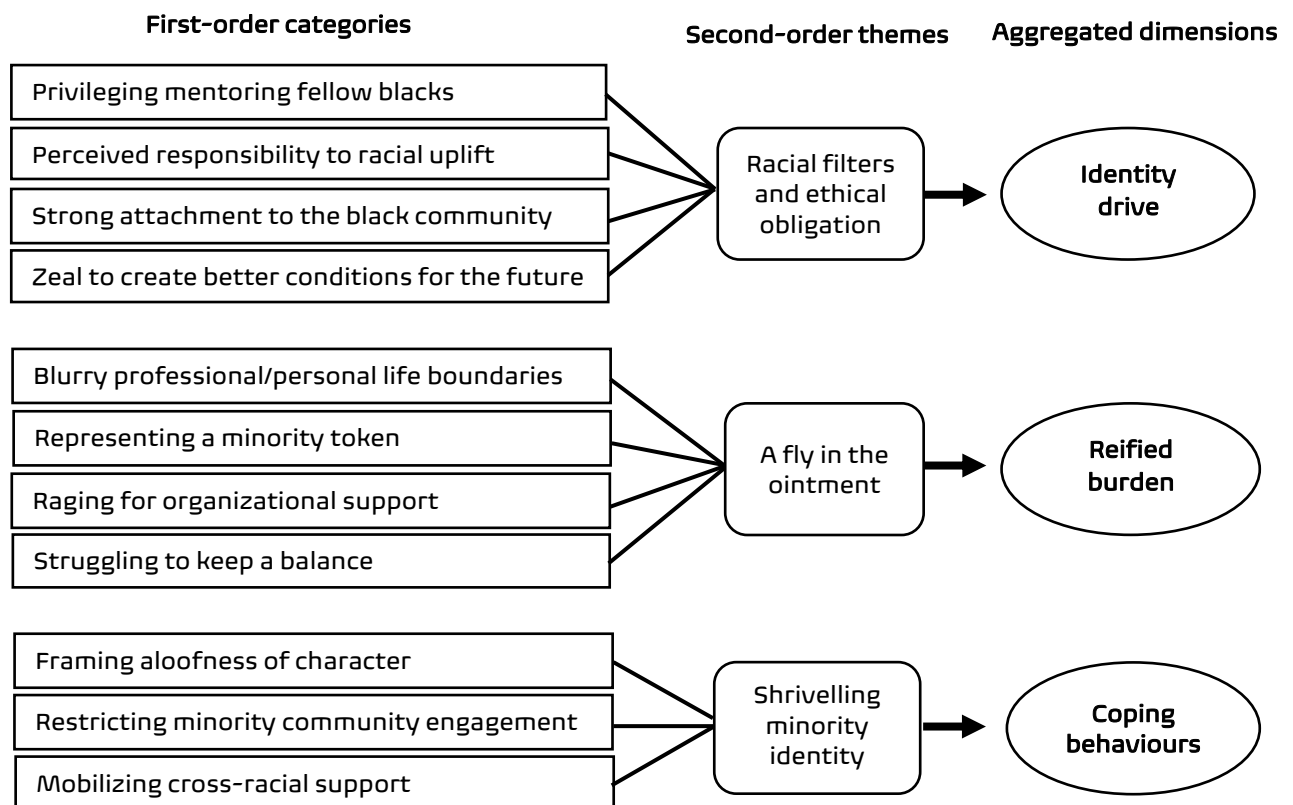
workforce, and how its organizational culture perceives or treats such concepts. Further insights were gathered on the relevance of mentoring roles in fulfilling such goals, and whether they conceived their mentoring roles, including roles outside of those allocated to them within their various organizations, as contributing to improving the representation of black ethnic minorities within professional careers. Of relevance to our study was participants' accounts of the challenges they experienced in engaging in these mentorship roles, and what practical efforts were made to address and contain such challenges. That the interview questions were interactively modified to delve deeper into ideas emerging during the interview, while observing a common set of questions, facilitated comparisons across participants' accounts. The digital recordings were transcribed verbatim within 24 hours following each interview, and the interviewees accorded pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. It is worth highlighting, however, that we ceased to recruit new participants when in-depth understanding of their mentoring experiences was acquired, and a recycling of ideas that confirmed previous insights, on the conditions for the emergence of a mentoring-burden as well as intuitive coping mechanisms employed, was identified.

Data analysis

The data were analysed in an iterative pattern, moving between the data and the emerging themes (Miles, and Huberman, 1994). Drawing insights from our theoretical perspective on intersectionality, our initial analysis focused on constructing a narrative account of participants' mentoring experiences within their organizational setting and black community network, at the nexus of their identifiable markers as minority high-flyers and diversity tokens. In this vein, we engaged in a line-by-line coding of the data by reviewing the interview transcripts and identifying codes that reflected a comprehensive description of language used by participants, and how they saw themselves in their narratives (Gioia et al., 2013). Delving into how interviewees framed their ethnic community embeddedness, career

roles, mentoring relationships, and their identities as black minorities, we listed and reviewed the initial set of open codes to identify patterns and linkages to group them under similar categories. Thus, we were able to condense the overwhelming number of open codes into groups of first-order categories. To illustrate, open codes such as ‘mentees do not always follow instruction because they take it for granted’ and ‘mentees turning up at mentors’ offices anytime’ were grouped together into the subcategory of ‘perceptions of abuse of mentorship relationship’. We then progressed with the analysis to engage in axial coding of the dataset, where we bundled the first-order categories to develop a set of second-order themes. Here, the coding progressed towards a more theory-driven explanation of the dataset (Gioia et al., 2013). For example, subcategories such as ‘strong attachment to the black community’ and ‘privileging mentoring fellow blacks’ were pieced together to form the theme ‘racial filters and ethical obligation’.

Figure 1: Data structure



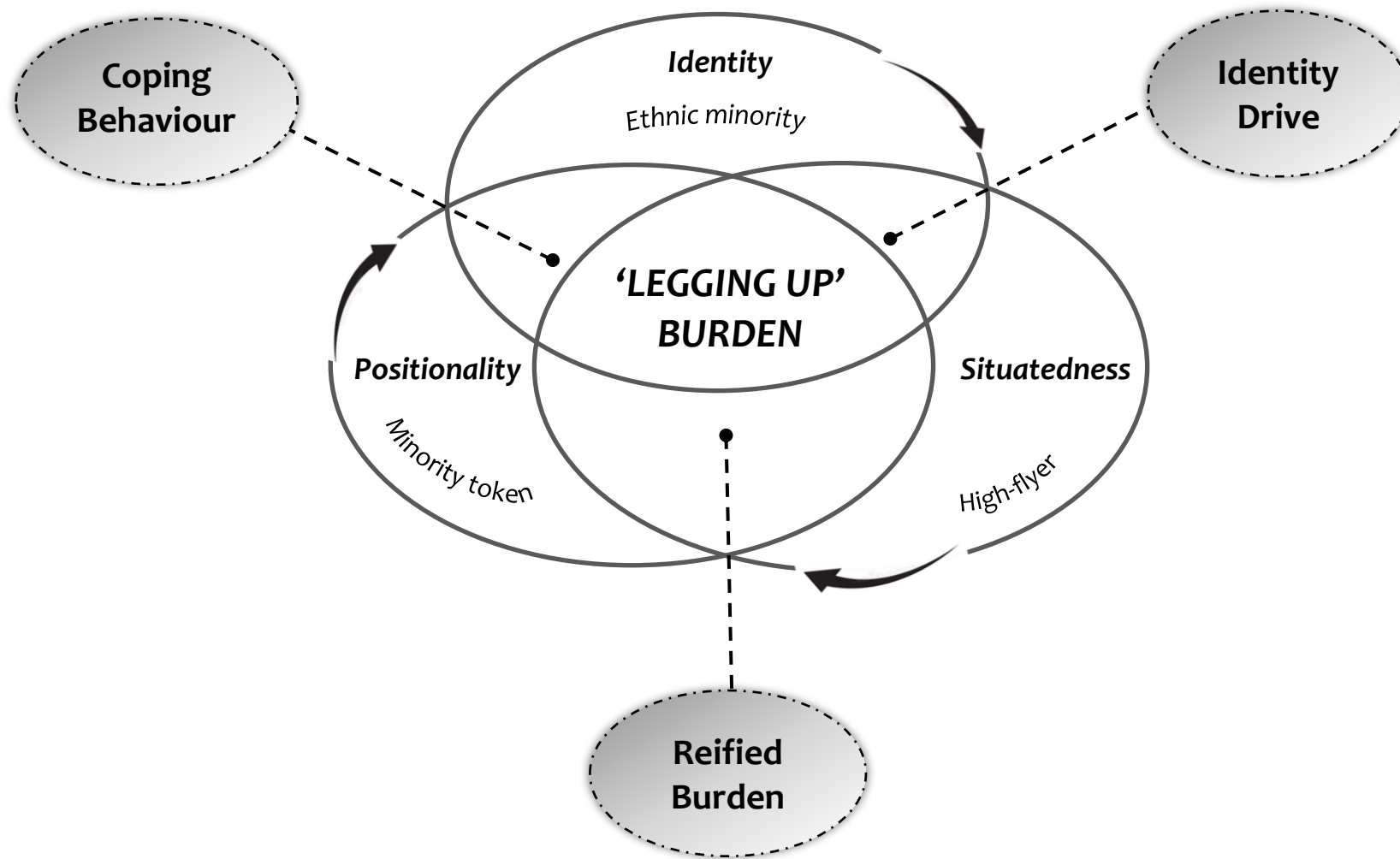
After settling on a set of theoretical categories, we initiated the final step which involved examining the abstracted theoretical themes to create aggregated dimensions that best captured the overarching theoretical understanding of how mentoring among the black ethnic minority is perceived, when and how it becomes a burden, and what improvised coping mechanisms are devised and enacted. After brainstorming on conceptual vocabularies that best described how the various themes related to one another (Sonenshein et al., 2014), we identified and labelled three core aggregated dimensions, namely *identity drive*, *reified burden*, and *coping behaviours*. It is worth noting that throughout this inductive analysis, we were alert to the socio-political situatedness of our study, the potentially biased position of ourselves as authors, and the constructive effect of language to influence our realistic depiction of the socio-organizational experiences of our participants (Alvesson et al., 2008). In this respect, we exercised reflexivity on our analytical procedures by engaging in intellectual critique that cast doubt on the precision of our interpretations of the data (Barge, 2004; Whiteman and Cooper, 2016). We continuously grappled with this technique until we were confident that the proposed theory was intuitively wedded to the realities narrated by our participants. Figure 1 below presents a summary of the final data structure.

Research findings

The data evidence revealed three durationally indivisible phases that characterized the mentoring experiences of high-flying black minorities. Captured in three reliable themes relating to the dynamics between black minority mentors and their racially aligned mentees, the findings suggest that both black mentors and their organizations perceive the mentoring role as a stepping-stone to foster racial balance within their professional workspace. This was assumed to the extent to which they had become socio-organizationally positioned as representative of their minority category. Thus, at the intersection of their identity as

minorities and situatedness as high-flying career achievers, the decision to engage in mentoring, and which undergirded the allocation of mentees by their organizations, was informed by what we identified as an ‘identity drive’. This was construed according to racial filters that framed their cognition to sift out individuals who share their socio-collective identity as deserving of their effortful guidance. However, our data further revealed that such individuals become acutely aware of the heavy workload and challenges associated with mentoring after they become positioned as diversity tokens in both their organizations and professional networks through offering mentorship to blacks. Having all eyes and attention upon them, they have little option but to appear inspired, passionate, and zealous in offering a leg up. Akin to a fly caught in ointment, the possibility for such individuals to wriggle free of the ointment without having sticky legs becomes near impossible. As they narrated their burden into a reification of their situated reality, the dynamics of engagement with mentees rendered the racial filters permeable. As a result, participants took cognizance of the need to devise some mechanism to navigate mentoring relationships carefully, which had contributed to their assuming, or being ascribed, a token black minority identity. The data further suggest that, rather than relying on their organizations to resolve this often tense relationship, the mentors engaged in forms of coping behaviours, including restricting their relational ties with the minority group, in order to ease the challenges of the mentoring arrangement. Altogether, the intersectionality of these multiple identities that underly the mechanism through which legging up becomes a burden had consequences for the black minority member’s career aspirations and broader performance. We present Figure 2 which captures the centrality of their intersectional identities in our explication of these findings. We next illustrate and elaborate on our fine-grained analysis of our core themes, drawing on salient quotations from our data.

Figure 2. Intersectional location of legging up burden



Identity drive: Racial filters and ethical obligation

As participants narrated their experiences, we initially discerned an innate drive to contribute to greater representation of the black identity in their professional work setting, which provided a logical impulse to engage in mentoring programs. Participants were enthused with what seemed to be a conceived social dynamic, according to which they bear the responsibility to mentor fellow blacks. With this hard-wired in their minds, a filter of racial benevolence was construed to accept a greater number of black mentees without cognizance of the potential workload pressures or their limited personal capacities. More importantly, their storied constructions of their career journeys were characterized by a deep sense of self-actualization, which they believed they could help others realize through mentoring (Maclean, Harvey, Gordon and Shaw, 2015). Thus, any form of activity that could help provide a leg up to members of the BPN or a black person in their workplace was deemed desirable and even noble. The following extracts from Sulley and Bob succinctly capture this:

‘You know, I feel it has always been right to mentor blacks, and every opportunity I get to mentor them, I make good use of it. Not because the black is better or special, but I see that we the blacks are more underprivileged. The vision I have is to empower the black community. So, if I could hold someone’s hand to achieve this, why not?’ (Sulley, scientist)

‘I mean, I have been given so much, and I feel I have to give something back to society, and the least you can do is to support your fellow black people, having understood how difficult it is to pursue a professional career in the academy. So, for that matter, I am very happy to help in most of these, I will say black academics. It’s been quite an exciting journey and on so many occasions it’s been very rewarding, because most of them have ended up doing very well. and they are very grateful for whatever I’ve provided for them too. So, I have enjoyed doing this kind of stuff and I have always looked forward to doing a lot more’. (Bob, professor)

The envisioned future of the high-flying black professional who recognizes his or her underprivileged condition seeds the heroism associated with assisting a fellow black to excel in their pursuit of a professional career, and thus paradoxically signals and inscribes an unbalanced social system that legitimizes their marginalized position. In these conditions,

high-flying black professionals acknowledge the need to leverage decades of personal experience and struggles to progress their careers to build a stronger bond with other members of their social group; with the aim of mobilizing a new class of high-flying blacks in the workplace. Their strong relational ties with the black community reinforced their interest in engaging in racial uplift through mentoring, with the intention of reducing career development impediments for others. The social practice within this community further established a somewhat ethical obligation and a sense responsibility to give back by offering a leg up to members with whom they share this socio-collective identity. When asked about why they joined the BPN, conscious that they would be taking on mentoring roles, two participants claimed:

‘You know, once you are a black person and have gained a top role in an international organization like me, you have to be a mentor to somebody else. I am at the BPN because I feel it is my responsibility. Moreover, we share the same identity, and at least I can also help a fellow black knowing how hard we struggle to be professionals here’. (Lydia, travelling nurse)

‘I feel that to a large extent, I am contributing to the next generation of blacks who will change the narrative for us. I’ve got kids who are black, and going out there I know the challenges they will face, and I will expect other black people, like myself, to give them a helping hand. So, this is something I cherish, something I have always wanted to do and enjoy doing’. (Baba, scientist)

While most interviewees felt it was their responsibility to mentor within the BPN, Baba’s statement here indicates the substantiated value essence of being part of a social agenda to promote ED&I. Assisting in these efforts to provide opportunities for individuals with whom they share a socio-collective identity to have successful careers appeared extremely comforting. Ada, who participates in mentoring entry level professionals in her organization’s offices abroad, explained:

‘Oh dear! I always feel honoured to mentor blacks at my workplace because most of my mentees tend to do well very when they are offered a role in my organization. So, whenever I’m given a black mentee at work, particularly those at the foreign branches, I feel privileged. Management is aware of how

passionate I am about mentoring blacks, and they know I will do a good work'.
(Ada, strategist)

The approach to encouraging mentoring based on racial similarity is reflected in Ada's remark. For her, mentoring fellow blacks is a privilege, but to the management team in charge of promoting inclusion and diversity in her organization, her passion is utilized as a strategic means for advancing the organization's ED&I agenda. This is further emphasized when Ada proceeds to say:

'Well, I think I am one of the few black professionals in my company, so when it comes to developing other blacks, I should be the first person to contact. And that's why all my current mentees are black. As I said, I think management knows the mentees are more comfortable and better off with me. After all, we have so much in common'. (Ada, strategist)

Ada's account suggests that, on the one hand, and recognizing her own position as relatively privileged, she has developed a conviction to improve the representation of her ethnic identity in her work context. However, her comments also imply, on the other hand, that the organization within which she executes these duties and passionately engage in mentoring has perceived her as a black minority token. This tokenization underlines the persistent allocation of black mentees, which was consistent among participants' narratives, suggesting an overriding belief in the grand narrative of the effectiveness of mentoring persons with similar racial identities. Malik, an actuary in a multinational insurance company, shared his thoughts about how his organization's pursuit of ED&I seemed to be the overwhelming responsibility for existing minority staff:

'I know the path to professional work can be arduous for the black person, and the best we can do now is to take advantage of the diversity and inclusion policies in organizations to improve our representation at the top. But I also find it quite interesting when I am being allocated black mentees, because they feel it is my responsibility to mentor them. I think if they want to have a diversified management team, they should go out there and recruit or better still allocate mentees based on our abilities. I want to see more blacks working in the company, but that doesn't mean it has to be my duty to ensure that it happens'. (Malik, actuary)

Taken together, the evidence above suggests that there is strong passion and desire to create better conditions for minorities. Nonetheless, as Malik observes, there is sense of representing the ‘other’ with whom one shares a socio-collective identity in this effort. As a result, the existing urge and zeal to engage in activities that offer social uplift to other minorities sparked some irritation, a sense that they themselves were being ‘othered’ in the process, which had begun to dawn on high-flying minority professionals. A sense of burden started to emerge, assume shape, until it was finally identified as such as they shared their lived mentoring experiences.

Reified burden: A fly in the ointment

Even though interviewees enjoyed offering a leg up to their fellow blacks, they further revealed the potential of such a role becoming a burden. When the possibility of mentoring activities becoming a burden was broached, participants first described how even the formal mentoring arrangement tended to become informal. This emerged as the mentees were equally engrained in the socially constructed perception among the minority community which had created a leg up expectation; and which was misconstrued as a way of broadening one’s network to gain unrelated career support. The ethnic similarity and devotion of our participants to mentor others led to conditions in which their role extended beyond professional boundaries to involve the personal life of the mentee. Although this phenomenon was deemed essential to establishing a more efficient mentoring relationship, several interviewees narrated how such conditions are often discomforting. The following quote from Femi captures this succinctly:

‘When it comes to those people you share the same social collective identity, if it’s a Nigerian or a Ghanaian for instance, and you are helping, you end up talking about family, they get to know your wife and children. I remember when my father died, two of my mentees attended the funeral with their parents and I got to know their family as well. I also have some of them who started to send me gifts, you know, it easily kind of spills into your private life, which is not always the best when you want to shape one professionally. Giving out instructions and being strict sometimes becomes really challenging.

And moreover, I am now obliged to be present or have my representative when they also organize any social event. It creates a whole lot of unnecessary things to involve in'. (Femi, scientist)

The participants further revealed how they often faced challenges in mentoring their fellow blacks, particularly when mentees do not approach the mentoring arrangement with keen interest and seriousness. This is intensified as mentees capitalize on their shared socio-collective identity with mentors to play idle, or become non-cooperative, yet still expect to gain the support of the mentor. Bob explains:

'One thing is that because I share the same social collective identity with some of these people, they sometimes do not take me seriously. They behave just like some black colleagues I have tried to mentor in order for them get promotions or land new positions. I try to be as nice as possible, let them feel as welcomed and try to do my best for them, but when they realize that I am down to earth and always willing to help, they begin to miss deadlines. But I doubt they would behave this way towards any of my other [non-black] colleagues'. (Bob, professor)

In addition, several participants described how mentees (as subordinates) seemed to show disregard for the mentor (as a superior) in mentoring relationships. For instance, Lia, a journalist with a multinational news agency, lamented how she has been disrespected by mentees, explaining:

'They [the mentees] feel that because you are black and share the same ethnic identity with them it makes all of us on the same level in the organization... I have mentored other non-black staff and have realized that the black mentees don't take black mentors' advice and orders seriously'. (Lia, journalist)

As Lia lays bare her experience with black mentees and others from non-black ethnic groups, she elaborates on distinct experiences that have come to represent a form of challenge for her. Further emphasizing this racial non-symmetrical experience in the mentoring relationship, Iza likewise acknowledged:

'It is interesting to know that mentoring my fellow blacks has a completely different dynamic from mentoring others. And sometimes it is the most disappointing experience you can ever imagine. I have noticed that allowing them to get closer to me makes them think I could do stuff for them. They always want to be spoon-fed, which I cannot do, because I'm here to support them to get things done and not to do their work for them. And they take my

efforts to provide them with all the support I can give for granted. I tell you what... they don't behave like this when allocated to different mentors from a different race, and this attitude sometimes makes me unwilling to do the extra to support them. For me, this has been my experience. But you know, mentoring fellow blacks is almost like my core responsibility in this organization. If I had my way, I would not mentor any blacks'. (Iza, assistant professor)

As they yearn for their organizations to take steps to address this challenge, the experiences shared by both Lia and Iza resonate with the adage that 'familiarity breeds contempt' (Norton et al., 2007). The shared socio-collective identity poses a challenge for mentors in terms of retaining control of the mentoring relationship, resulting in a possible loss of passion and eventually marginal mentoring conditions (Ragins et al., 2000). These mentoring pressures thus increase the distress of the minority professional, juggling the need to exceed expectations to garner recognition in their organization while developing others to take up roles. Thus, the narrated experiences of participants suggest that the rising responsibility unleashed on black minorities to coach and mentor individuals from their minority category has become a burden. They wrestle to keep up with the high demands of their own work duties and the sometimes unsolicited role and expectation to mentor others. These competing demands throw into sharp relief the legging up burden that has been imposed on these minorities with the aim of achieving organizational ED&I goals. Eventually, realizing that keeping up with such practice exacerbates their existing burden, their racial benevolence filter becomes permeable, leading to their potential withdrawal from efforts to mentor and offer a leg up. As Razi candidly expressed it, he had 'resorted to insisting on getting an interview with the mentees' to avoid having anyone being 'dumped on him just because they are black, and they need support to get promoted'.

Coping behaviours: Shrivelling minority identity

The participants' accounts revealed that they had conceived that relying on their organizations to navigate their challenges was unproductive, and that they had felt compelled to seek out

other strategies. Our data suggest that they engaged in several strategic behaviours to ease mentoring tensions and burdens. They therefore adopt some form of coping behaviours, with implications for their identity as members of the black ethnic community. As one participant revealed:

‘I now decided to cut down on my close engagement with the black community in order to avoid attracting attention as a potential mentor. It does not feel right, but it appears to be that is the only way to reduce the workload’. (Ebele, financial analyst)

This commitment to avoiding black mentees due to the uncomfortable obligations associated with having a shared racial identity was found to dominate the narratives of participants. The case of Pat is illustrative, as he contemplates whether to continue to engage in mentoring, aware that the mentoring relationship carries unwelcome consequences:

‘I just ignore them, just let them go. I try as much as possible to give excuses, like I have lot of work to do and my schedules being tight and stuff like that, you know. I always think twice when it comes to mentoring my fellow black people, since I know how they act and how they will act toward me when I choose to mentor them. I sincerely try not to waste my time by getting to know them or entering into a mentoring relationship at all. This is because I will be doing it for free; no one will pay me for it, and it will undoubtedly add to my workload. So, no, I don't get any closer to them at all’. (Pat, public health auditor)

Gideon reinforces this point as follows:

‘There was a time I had to decline to mentor some blacks, not because I was incapable to do so, but I was simply tired of carrying on this whole responsibility to mentor almost every single black staff that enters the building. I even tried not have them on my team or create acquaintance. I know the next thing will be to help “a brother”’. (Gideon, big data expert)

Gideon’s acknowledgement of the drawbacks of mentoring colleagues with whom he shares a socio-collective identity gives voice to the overwhelming sense of responsibility participants claim to feel, the seeming prerogative of the high-flying black minority in the ED&I-focused organizations where they work. This prefigures conditions of identity drift as high-flying minority professionals seek to disassociate themselves from members of their racial group. Such coping behaviours may also impact negatively on the mentee by instigating

a competence void. Elements of collective coping actions adopted to assuage the mentoring burden were evident in participants' narratives. In this, our data suggest that mentors adopted a group approach to handling the burden, resorting to co-opting other colleagues to help share the mentoring workload. Thus, a mentee may receive guidance even from those who do not have expertise in their area of interest, as captured in the following extract:

'I always get some colleagues to help me. There was a time I had to introduce some of my mentees to another black colleague who worked as an accountant in our office in Dublin. Although his role differs from what we do at the legal team, this was the only way I could help guide the mentee through to taking up a lead role since the company was looking to expand to the United States and needed more black representation to demonstrate that they are indeed concerned about EDI'. (Ryan, lawyer)

The upshot of such an approach is that the mentee may well be unable to acquire the necessary tacit knowledge to shape their specific professional practice adequately (Swap et al., 2021), deriving only what Joe describes as a 'general understanding of the work environment, but not the actual skill needed to compete' in their line of work. In other cases, participants admitted that they had invited other non-black colleagues to contain some challenging situations. Karim explains:

'In my case, I tend to use my lower-level white colleagues to engage directly with my black mentees. I think that is the only way to make them take my guidance and advice seriously. I know it is in a way suggesting some sort of superiority of other ethnic groups, but I know that is the only way to reduce the familiarity that creates this whole lack of cooperation from some of them. I'm usually behind the scenes making sure that I pass on the right information'. (Karim, financial analyst)

Thus, as they come to realize that they are positioned as representatives of their race, and in this sense are victims of 'othering', adopting this strategic maneuvering of the challenges offers a means to evade black mentees. Despite the mentees being allocated to them, or the mentors selecting them off their own bat at BPN, they still needed to adopt such coping mechanisms to have a successful mentoring relationship, or reduce their workload. In this context, participants were aware that building social relations with mentees improved the

mentoring relationship. However, the overwhelming burden to offer a leg up to every black person in their organization led them to develop an identity aloofness. They began to withdraw from their racial group to avoid being noticed and accorded the responsibility of coaching other black colleagues. To the extent that their identities were shriveling, their core identity as black minorities proved to be at risk of dissipation, as such professionals seek to disassociate themselves from this identity.

Discussion and conclusion

We live in a world today where calls for social justice and equality have inundated both public and scholarly discourse on diversity in contemporary organizations. Accordingly, the response has been to increase minority representation at the top of the organizational hierarchy, with the belief of instigating a trickledown diversity effect (Ryder, 2022) across all levels of the organizational workforce. Yet, for many high-flying minorities, their location in these efforts further creates the additional responsibility to offer social uplift to others with whom they share socio-collective identities. Moreover, although prior research suggests some positive outcomes from establishing mentoring relationships that are defined in terms of the shared relational demography (Chandler et al., 2011), we argue that there is limited understanding of the actual lived and living mentoring experiences of these high-flying minorities. Thus, grounded in the narrative impulse to draw on the peripheral voices of marginalized groups on the periphery of mainstream discourses (Hargadon and Wadhwani, 2022; Sarpong and Maclean, 2021), we have sought to provide a fine-grained explication of how minorities involved in mentoring members of their socio-demographic category experience a form of burden that impedes their own career progression, while simultaneously diminishing their affinity to their minority social group. Specifically, we have explored the mentoring experiences of black minorities through the theoretical prism of intersectionality, which revealed a fundamental entanglement of identities, situatedness and positionalities that

co-constitutively define the mechanism through such practices paradoxically constitute a burden.

We found the microstoria narratives on mentoring experiences offered both a revelatory and a cautionary tale, sparking insights into the nexuses of their identity as minorities, their situatedness as high-flying career achievers, and their positionality as diversity tokens of the organization. The narrated experiences of participants reveal a telling story of high-flying black minorities becoming tokenized in their situated socio-organizational contexts. We observed moments of awe and surprise when we invited them, at interview, to reflect on what has become an emerging pattern of mentee allocation in many organizations, namely organized around shared social collective identities, and of their acceptance and compliance with the same, based on the logic of racial sameness. Thus, as minority tokens of the organization, and having defied the odds to realize what is socially construed as a non-prototypical achievement of the black minority, assuming the responsibility to mentor others in their racial category was perceived as a strategic path to fulfilling the ED&I goals of their organization. In this regard, we found that their mentoring roles did not always arise through a fervent desire to support others, but rather as a placatory response impelled through their 'belonging' and 'living' as a black ethnic minority member. Consequently, the experience of the high-flying black minority who is intersectionally located is to become a representative of their entire social group. However, our findings suggests that such high-flying minorities engaged in some coping behaviours, designed to contain the existential legging up burden they faced in their work settings. We argue that these hitherto unidentified tensions and burdens that arise within these ED&I organizing schemes offer unique dynamics that proffer some important contributions to the discourse on inclusion and diversity among organizational workforces.

Our first contribution to the literature on diversity and inclusion in organizational workforces is to identify and articulate the three durationally indivisible themes that characterized the legging up burden for high-flying minorities, and which provide important insights into the mentoring experiences of minorities. Taken together, the three processes we discern here alarmingly counter the received social dynamic that suggests a more effective and convenient way to build ED&I identity lies in establishing mentoring relationships that capitalize on shared socio-collective identity. Thus, although in many respects assuming mentoring roles to benefit other minority members is perceived as noble and desirable among the black ethnic group, the social expectation to support others, coupled with organizational demands to achieve ED&I goals unleashes what was narrated by our participants as a shrivelling minority identity, which stems from the situated strategic manoeuvring triggered by the mentoring burden. This entailed a disassociation from their ethnic identity to protect themselves from being overburdened, such that their ethnic identity became dislocated, at one remove, from their professional careers. Given that our findings suggest that organizations are oblivious to the emergence of this legging up burden and its concomitant coping strategies, perhaps there is a need for managers to attempt to walk in the shoes of these minorities to understand what may sap their morale and impede productivity (The Economist, 2022). Embedding themselves in minority community conversations and establishing discursive spaces that allow minorities to non-prejudicially espouse their lived and living challenges would go a long way to reframe the perceptual evaluations of bespoke mentors for minorities, charged with embodying diversity identities for their organizations.

Our second contribution is to recognize and highlight the importance of context specific dynamics which may require organizations to establish mentoring relationships based on relational demographics. This is important given the perceived need to provide psychosocial assistance to protégés which may be profoundly influenced by the psychic

distance between both parties (Buzzanell and D'Enbeau, 2014). Thus, mentors and mentees may find themselves at odds due to a philosophical or psycho-cultural misalignment between them (Kirchmeyer, 2005). Yet, harnessing racial filters to select and allocate mentors does not guarantee that this gap will be bridged, as it may equally pose relational impediments. For instance, given the perceptual nature of power in mentoring relationship, a blurry recognition of authority due to shared demographic attributes may undervalue the imperatives of protégés actively to engage in tasks that mentors may require them to complete. This was succinctly captured in our findings as a form of familiarity breeding contempt (Norton et al., 2007), whereby protégés took the efforts of their mentors for granted. There was, however, an interesting dynamic that suggests that this phenomenon was racially non-symmetrical. This implies the dynamics we have accounted for are indeed specific to conditions of racial sameness, and that perceptions of that underlay the co-ethnic legging up approach. In this regard, organizations need to acknowledge and ease this mentoring burden by encouraging more cross-racial mentorship (Ragins, 1997), which also entail learning from difference, where the knowledge gleaned may be less endogenous and hence less redundant, while focusing on the specific needs of mentees as matched with the core competences of mentors.

Our third contribution in this paper is theoretical. We expand understanding of how the multiple identities that one assumes within a social category tend to reproduce practices, norms, and relations that in turn can serve to reinforce the predicament of the entire social group. Thus, not only does the co-constitution of cross-social categories, such as race, gender, class and disability, shape the life experiences of persons who are located within these categories, but the variant intersection of identities within a social category also repositions individuals within broader socio-collective prejudice to reproduce systemic constraints. In this way, the leg up burden we identify places inordinate pressures and expectations on sparse high-flying black professionals, which can further compound and exacerbate the disadvantage

they themselves have been labouring against. This increases the pressure on high-flying minorities to disassociate themselves from their ethnic group in order to rid themselves of the accompanying burden of developing its members' careers. In addition, we elucidate the relevance of pursuing intersectionality research on marginalized social groups through microstoria. A methodological orientation of this nature allows for in-depth understanding of subjugated social categories by accessing the voices of those who are marginal to the organizational mainstream, yet which are nevertheless front and central to its diversity agendas. This enables us simultaneously to contest grand narratives and received assumptions on socio-organizational phenomena, including the emerging grand narrative of ED&I.

The study has limitations, which also present opportunities for further research. First, we concentrated relatively narrowly on the mentoring experiences of black minorities and did not sample members of other ethnic groups. Nor did we consider the dynamics of gendered mentorship relationships. As a result, our study represents the viewpoint of high-flying black minorities solely, neglecting the broader dynamics of how this legging burden may play out among other marginalized social groups. Interestingly, no salient differences emerged in our study between high-flying minorities who identified as Black-British, Black-Caribbeans or Black-Africans, all of whom had experienced the legging up burden at first hand. In addition, we failed to illuminate how cultural relativism may influence the construction of the unique intersection of identities within a given social category to shape the life experiences of the entire category. In this regard, the insightful contributions offered in this study could serve as a springboard for scholars to address such concerns and thereby broaden our understanding of the career experiences of high-flying minorities, particular as calls for ED&I within organizations intensify. We also encourage future research to draw on microstoria as a methodological discipline to explore the assorted narratives that characterize how this leg up burden plays out across other forms of marginalized social groups. Our study is also limited

by its narrow focus on mentors rather than mentees (Weinberg, 2019). Accordingly, we encourage future research which examines the perceptions and actions of mentees to provide a holistic account that complements our discussion of the phenomenon explored here.

In conclusion, while prior research acknowledges that ethnic minority professionals face challenges in the mentoring of others from their socio-collective identity, this paper has offered the first empirical work that reveals how the perceived logic in achieving ED&I goals through shared identity mentoring can burden the very ethnic minority it is designed to assist. We underline how the black minority must not only navigate challenging working conditions to exceed expectations and so gain recognition for their contribution to their organizations (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013), but must also engage in mentoring as a form of expectation or obligation to demonstrate citizenship of and inclusion within their social groups. The improvised coping strategies enacted to manage and lessen this burden produce outcomes which have a pernicious effect on individual identities, impelling high-flyers to distance themselves from their minority social category, sacrificing their belongingness to discard the burden. Furthermore, the coping strategies adopted highlight a troubling fact, namely that they may result in inadequate mentoring, precipitating new prejudicious narratives about minority incompetence which could diminish efforts to provide opportunities for these marginalized groups. This manifestation of the legging up burden among high-flying black minorities therefore points to the need for a critical re-examination of the perceived efficacy of racial sameness, or other forms socio-demographic categories, in negotiating mentoring relationships. We conclude by emphasizing that the tokenization of relatively sparse high-flying ethnic minorities, coupled with the responsibility for the career progression of their ‘representative others’ which is foisted upon them *nolens volens*, fails to address the systemic diversity constraints that have long characterized organizational structures.

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