

Racial Microaggressions at Work: Reflections from Black African Professionals in Australia

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Abstract

Theorising how race and Africanness intersect in the professional lives of African immigrants can provide a nuanced understanding of how racial identities shape the professional identities of Black Africans in Australia. This article is contextualised within a larger study that sought to explore the Afro-diasporic experiences of highly skilled Black African immigrants in South Australia. Particularly, it examines how Black African professionals experience their workplace. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with twenty-seven Black African professionals in South Australia. The findings from this study reveal that the often-accepted narrative of race-free workplaces is not one that is supported by Black African immigrants' experiences, as they report constant, subtle and covert patterns of racial microaggressions in the workplace. Utilising critical race theories, this article makes the invisibility of microaggressions visible by probing how the Black body is worn as a burden in the workplace, which consequently produces psychological distress and racial battle fatigue. This study will provide social work practitioners with a critical understanding of the various challenges facing African professionals in the workplace, and how processes of racialisation at work may impact on psychological safety in this environment.

Keywords: Australia, Black African migrants, employment, social work, racial microaggressions

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Introduction

When I am at work, I do have juniors who are Caucasians working under me and I think that role difference makes them doubt you...So until they verify to see my badge to clarify that I am actually a registered nurse, then the respect starts; but before then, they are doubting. I always feel like that they are doubting me (Wanjiru).

This is a reflection from one of my study participants. It makes visible the insidiousness of racial microaggressions often manifested in the form of doubt, suspicion, and scrutiny experienced by Black Africans at their workplaces. The excerpt describes how the patterns of bias and disrespect at the workplace are often manifested through subtle and seemingly harmless yet highly racially coded interactions. Wanjiru's experience of racialisation at work exemplifies how racial difference interacts with wilful ignorance within white institutions to produce experiences of othering and inferiorisation of 'black-ish expertise'. As [Mapedzahama *et al.* \(2012, p. 154\)](#) argue, entering the racialised categories of 'Black' and 'African' summons the experiences of racism which are deployed through the devaluation of 'skills, intelligence and professional identities in a process of inferiorization.'

In the last two decades, the number of African migrants in Australia who are neither refugees nor displaced persons has been increasing. [Flahaux and De Haas \(2016, p. 4\)](#) suggest that to understand the movement of Africans to different countries, we must 'move beyond views of (African) migrants as objects which are passively pushed around by external "push" factors such as poverty, demographic pressure, violent conflict or environmental degradation,' and see immigration as a natural 'function of people's aspirations and capabilities.' Given that skilled migrants are often highly educated and come from well-established careers in their home countries, there is usually an underlying assumption from both migrants and host countries that they will integrate into the new culture with much more ease than refugees. On arrival to Australia, however, migrants marked as racially or culturally different within the Australian context often face challenges such as isolation, racism, social dislocation, alienation and structural marginalisation ([Mwanri *et al.*, 2012](#); [Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama, 2018b](#)). These intersecting factors can negatively impact on mental and physical health and well-being, performance at work and the quality of life for new migrants.

African migrants and employment in Australia

Even though migration has long been recognised as key for the Australian economy—particularly the potential for skilled migration to

fill gaps in the labour market—the skills and expertise of Black Africans remain undervalued and underused. Australia pioneered points-based immigration in the late 1970s to vet applicants in terms of their potential to make significant economic contribution based on their expertise (Ressia *et al.*, 2017). Upon arrival in Australia, employment becomes a crucial tool with which to measure successful migration. This is because it provides an income and a sense of security and stability, as well as encouraging the development of cultural skills and social networks in the destination country, which are vital for integration (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007). However, employment is one of the greatest barriers facing African migrants in Australia (Kifle and Kler, 2008; Uдах *et al.*, 2019; Gatwiri *et al.*, 2020). In Australia, the Department of Jobs and Small Business (2019) indicated that immigrants from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East experience the highest levels of unemployment compared to other immigrant groups. Barriers to employment, as identified by the department, include age, English proficiency, a lack of Australian work experience or references, and the length of time since arrival in Australia. Various studies have also demonstrated the problem of qualification recognition for African migrants (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007; Abdelkerim and Grace, 2012; Uдах *et al.*, 2019). Lack of recognition of overseas qualification results in downward mobility, as migrants who were high-ranking professionals in their home country are forced to take menial work to survive. Studies also indicate that the inability to provide Australian references, as well as ‘experiences of discrimination when applying for jobs and during interviews,’ represent significant barriers to migrant employment (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010, p. 10).

Lack of knowledge and experience in local employment contexts also means lack of access to formal and informal employment networks, lack of local advice and lack of references, all of which may adversely affect employment outcomes (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010; Abdelkerim and Grace, 2012). Majavu (2017) asserts that while ‘good’ high-paying jobs are available in Australia, they are mostly accessible via white social networks, of which many African migrants are not a part. Majavu (2015, p. 64) adds that ‘Western societal institutions often use factors such as nationality, English proficiency, race and immigration status to rationalise social inequalities, as well as to force migrants to work ‘in society’s dirtiest, hardest jobs.’ As such, covert institutional racism may be disguised through ‘legitimate’ reasons, such as lack of localised experience, to pass Africans over for job opportunities for which they are qualified, thus contributing to significant downward occupational mobility (Gatwiri *et al.*, 2020).

Downward occupational mobility, and consequent skills wastage or even deskilling, is a key issue for many migrant workers (Uдах *et al.*, 2019). Groutsis and Arnold (2012) point out that even though a

migrant's skillset may grant them access to Australia; these skills do not necessarily grant them access to meaningful work in the labour market. This may suggest that the system's focus on skilled migration is rendered less useful if the skills of migrants are underutilised or rendered irrelevant upon their arrival in Australia. In situations where gaining employment relevant to qualifications is difficult or impossible, migrants may take forms of 'survival employment', thus reinforcing the processes of downward mobility and deskilling (Creese and Wiebe, 2012). As Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007, p. 3) state, 'securing a job appropriate to one's qualifications, skills and experience' is critical for integration and successful settlement in a new country.

Blackness, Africanness and racialisation in Australia: Theoretical articulations

Black Africans' experiences in the diaspora are political. Ndhlovu (2014, p. 101) states that 'black-African immigration to Australia appears to have brought back memories about representations of race and the social construction of "whiteness" and "blackness" which were widespread in colonial Australia.' Because race has historically been deployed to determine the Australian immigration policy, it is imperative to understand how it complicates Black people's efforts to navigate the broader Australian sociocultural landscape. Racial differences in Australia have always framed the migrant experience, with different waves of immigrants experiencing their own share of xenophobia, racism and hostility (Hibbins and Pease, 2009). Theorising race and the processes of racialisation allows for a critique of the 'very system of racism that perpetuates [racial] inequality' (Mergia, 2005, p. 15). Reflecting on the Fanonian conceptualisation of race, I argue that the colonial system in the Australian political, social and cultural landscape produces what Song (2017, p. 49) terms as the 'epidermalization of Black inferiority', which is the progressive devaluation of the Black body through the filters of whiteness and subsequent internalisation of discursive racial scripts.

Similar to Fanon (1952), I posit that Black people in white spaces experience the ongoing violence of colonialism through the constant annihilation of the Black body and psyche. As colonised subjects, they are forced to diminish their blackness, disappear into the depths of, and enter, the inferiorising gaze of whiteness. Blackness is consequently constructed as an 'object among other objects' (Fanon, 1952, p. 89), where the inferiority of Black people is determined by others who, through the white gaze, assume superiority over and suspicion and curiosity of the Black body. This gaze produces the burden of hypervisibility, which places the Black body into extra surveillance, policing and scrutiny. Fanon (1952, p. 96) says the visibility of Blackness 'is there, dense, and

undeniable,' it's movement constantly patrolled and monitored by the white gaze. The 'negritude and patrolled movement' that is always under scrutiny has total pathological infiltration on the black psyche and body, which alienates not only the Black body, but also it's soul and spirit. In his seminal book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903, p. 2) provides a provocative articulation of what it means to be Black in a white colonial context. He states,

The *Negro* is...born with a veil, and gifted with second sight...[in] a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. 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.

The double consciousness produced through this epistemic violence leads to a crisis of Black legitimacy, relevance, epistemology, historical representation and identity (Ndlovu-Gatssheni, 2013, p. 50). This means the interaction of Blackness with whiteness is mostly mediated through the filters of inferiority and superiority, where whiteness is centred as the object of rescue that helps to dissipate Black psychopathology and deficiency. As the African subjectivity is constructed as deficient and lacking, that is, 'lacking souls, lacking history, lacking civilization, lacking development, lacking democracy, lacking human rights and lacking knowledge' (Ndlovu-Gatssheni, 2013, p. 47)—a silencing of the African ontology is summoned. Yancy (2005, p. 217) argues that the constant invasion of Black bodies through the absolute power of whiteness is a 'powerful experience of violation.'

Unlike white people, Black people in white spaces do not enjoy the protection of a social environment that cushions them from the stressors of racialisation. DiAngelo (2011, p. 63) argues that white people see race as an abstract concept that only becomes operational when people of colour are present. This culminates in what Smith (2008) refers to as racial battle fatigue (RBF), which describes the impacts and the burden of wearing a body that is constantly assaulted by racism. RBF is concerned with 'the physiological, psychological, and behavioural strain exacted on racially marginalized and stigmatized groups and the amount of energy they expend coping with and fighting against racism' (Smith, 2008, p. 617). This 'battle' and burden of living in racist environments has significant health outcomes for Black people, including but not limited to migraines, high blood pressure, muscle aches, indigestion, gastric distress, apathy, irritability, helplessness, powerlessness, hopelessness, mood deregulation, poor eating habits, anger, rage, use of alcohol or drugs and poor school or job performance (Smith, 2008).

These responses to RBF intensify in predominantly white settings where racial hostility and indolence are normalised. Contextualising Blackness as a burden means that it has a ‘socio-political relationship and a political ontology’ (Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo, 2018a, p. 2). In the workplace, Black people are often forced to adopt the ‘mantle of invisibility, and to erase traces of their subjectivity’ by performing whiteness as a way of fitting in (hooks, 1997, p. 317). They must also learn the peculiar rules of managing white panic towards Black bodies, which is ‘always tentative, delicate, and is easily [diminished] by the smallest misstep or the tiniest deviation’ (Wilson, 1990, p. 36). Therefore, while navigating white workspaces, Black people ‘feel themselves to be tokens, as symbolic representatives’ who do not have the luxury of the ‘structurally embedded privileges’ which frame the social ‘fabric of the cloak of White innocence’ in Australia (Anderson, 2018).

Study design and analysis

This article is contextualised within a larger study that sought to explore the experiences of highly skilled Black African immigrants in South Australia. The aim was to investigate diasporic experiences of Black Africans. The questions were structured to explore immigrant experiences of employment, parenting (Gatwiri and Anderson, 2020), belonging, changes in family dynamics, changes in gendering roles, as well as the subjective processes of navigating the overall challenges of being an African immigrant in Australia. Ethics approval was granted by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (Number ECN-18-002). This qualitative study utilised an interview guide that relied on existing literature, informal conversations with Africans and the personal experiences of the researcher to formulate the pre-existing interview questions. Data collection was conducted in Adelaide, South Australia where the researcher has extensive community networks with the African community. Participants were recruited predominantly through social media platforms such as Facebook. Recruitment information was also shared with key Black African community leaders in South Australia as well as African organisations who were invited to circulate the recruitment information to prospective participants. To be eligible, participants had to be over eighteen years, Black and African and skilled immigrants to Australia. Participants were required to sign a consent form after reading the information sheet provided confirming that they understood the design, nature and purpose of the study, that their information would be anonymised, and that they could withdraw their participation at any time. Consequently, all potentially identifying information has been removed.

Overall, there were nine questions informing the larger study, but this article is informed by the data from one question probing the professional working experience for African immigrants:

What is your experience as an African professional in Australia? How is your professional expertise perceived in Australia? (Why and how?)

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with twenty-seven Black African professionals. The richness of the data was informed by the diversity of the participants whose professional backgrounds were as diverse as their countries of origin. There were fifteen participants from Kenya, three from Nigeria, two from Zambia, two from Tanzania, two from Ghana, one from Zimbabwe, one from Rwanda and one from South Africa. Twelve of the participants were women and fifteen were men. Fourteen of the participants (seven pairs) were interviewed as couples and thirteen others were interviewed individually. Respondents had different professional backgrounds, such as medicine, academia, nursing, teaching, banking and finance, IT, engineering and social work. Please see Table 1 with a summary of participants' demographics.

Table 1. Demographics of participants.

	Pseudonym	Country of origin	Current profession	Gender
1	Kwame	Ghana	Mining engineer	M
2	Ajoba	Ghana	Accountant	F
3	Amani	Kenya	Teacher	F
4	Andrew	Rwanda	Engineer	M
5	Awinja	Kenya	Senior social worker	F
6	Banji	Zambia	Senior academic	M
7	Mpenda	Kenya	Entrepreneur	M
8	Nuru	Kenya	Business consultant	F
9	Jabali	Kenya	Finance and accounting	M
10	Milly	Kenya	Banking and finance	F
11	Mukisa	Zimbabwe	Medical doctor	M
12	Jenny	Kenya	Registered nurse	F
13	Patrick	Kenya	Banking and finance	M
14	Jimmy	Kenya	Software engineer	M
15	John	Kenya	Finance and accounting	M
16	Julia	Kenya	Graphic designer	F
17	Kissa	Nigeria	Medical doctor	F
18	Maurice	Tanzania	Medical doctor	M
19	NKandu	Zambia	Senior accountant	M
20	Odera	Nigeria	Social worker	M
21	Patrick	Kenya	Finance and accounting	M
22	Paul	Kenya	Senior specialist nurse	M
23	Sally	Nigeria	Microbiologist	F
24	Abasi	Tanzania	Quality surveyor	M
25	Valentina	South Africa	Registered nurse	F
26	Vera	Kenya	Social worker	F
27	Wanjiru	Kenya	Registered nurse	F

Analysis and reflexivity

The transcripts were analysed using a thematic process, where I analysed the emerging themes in each transcript to investigate how participants experienced their professional identities. Each transcript was analysed as a standalone document, and different themes were extracted from all transcripts. Following the [Braun and Clarke \(2013\)](#) methodology, the process of data analysis and transcription included reading and re-reading; initial coding with descriptive linguistic and conceptual comments; connecting emerging themes; and looking for thematic patterns across transcripts. As a Black African professional, I approached this study from a critically reflexive perspective. Listening to, transcribing and analysing the data sometimes involved a reflexive process of recalling my own distressing racialised experiences at the neoliberal workplace, which I have detailed elsewhere ([Gatwiri, 2018, 2019](#); [Anderson *et al.*, 2019](#); [Gatwiri *et al.*, in press](#)). Although questions of bias might be raised, I bring this ‘insider’ knowledge as a valid component of research that enables a more intimate understanding of participants’ narratives. There are however limitations to the study. It is possible that despite all efforts considered, anonymity cannot not be fully guaranteed due to the small community upon which the participants were recruited. Additionally, participants were recruited in a relatively small, predominantly white and conservative city in Australia, which may amplify experiences of racial isolation, racism and microaggressions.

Themes and discussion

The most consistent theme, raised by almost all participants, was tied to the fatigue of navigating racial microaggressions at work. Microaggressions are symptoms of broader systemic and structural hierarchies of power. As exemplified by the findings in this study, racial microaggressions in the workplace generally take covert, hidden or subtle forms, and may be conceptualised as ‘everyday’ or ‘passive’ racism, and function to inferiorise Blackness through the normalisation of white expertise. Below, I discuss how these racial microaggressions thematically presented themselves in the data.

Racialised microaggressions

The findings from this study reveal that the often-accepted narrative of supposedly race-free workplaces is not supported by Black African immigrants’ experiences. The subtle and covert experiences of workplace

racism constitute racial microaggressions that are often performed as 'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights...put-downs, or a pattern of disrespect' (Sue *et al.*, 2007, p. 271). Most participants in this study reported experiencing relentless patterns of racial microaggressions at work, which they described as being so subtle that it made them question whether it was 'all in their mind'. John, a senior finance expert, described how this 'subtleness' contributes to the difficulty of 'naming the problem':

There are some subtle discriminatory behaviours. They are so subtle that sometimes you question your mind whether, 'Am I really seeing these or not?' ... For instance, there are times when you walk into a meeting; others are acknowledged when they walk in, you are not acknowledged.... Sometimes, you want to give your contribution, and when you start giving your contribution everybody is dead silent, and you are thinking 'What happened? Why is the whole place all of a sudden pin-drop quiet?' They are very subtle (John).

Unlike explicit racism, which is obvious and can be easily named, racial microaggressions are benign, hidden and implicitly 'coded [and] embedded in the commonplace ordering of things' (Mapedzahama *et al.*, 2012, p. 156). As Tatum (2003, p. 6) states, the nature of this benign form of covert racism is 'like smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in.' Sometimes microaggressions are not subtle as they can be intentional and hostile—while still falling within the parameters of what is considered appropriate within a work culture. Vera, a senior social worker, expressed that for her, microaggressions were performed through intentional exclusionary behaviours. This ranged from avoidance of eye contact by colleagues, being made to feel as if she was 'not part of the group' and being excluded from workplace group activities. She reflected:

We had somebody who was in our team and then left went onto another organisation... when she left she maintained contact with all the others. She is having a baby shower, but what I have just observed in the office is a card that is going around being signed to go to her baby shower, and I have not been included in (Vera).

The ambiguous nature of microaggressions at work places the burden of interpretation on those at their receiving end. Trying to 'ascertain the meaning of the communication, whether the incident was intentional or unintentional,' is a burdensome and confusing process (Sue *et al.*, 2008, p. 335). Microaggressions can also be performed through constant micro-invalidations of one's expertise such as being overlooked for promotions even in situations where they are overqualified. Julia reflects on how she

has continuously been passed over for promotion to senior positions at work despite having the expertise and capability for those roles. She states:

Every once in a while, you will find someone in a certain position going on holidays or on annual leave and they would be looking for someone to fill that position for a moment. Normally, when that position is a senior position, you would think that if you have been at a certain place for a while and to the best of your ability, you have been fulfilling all the requirements, you would think that you would be asked automatically to fill that role for a month until this person returns. Now, that is normally not the case...those opportunities are not very easily given to people of colour unfortunately. I can tell you this, many a time you find [white] people coming from other places to come, fill that position for a month, and go back while you were there, and you are thinking I could do this role. So, it tends to make you feel not valued and you kind of resolve back to doing the bare minimum because you feel like you may not want to do more because there is no reason for you to do that (Julia).

The gatekeeping of opportunities for Black Africans denies them access to middle-class ascendancy. Majavu (2015, p. 66) argues that because white people are more likely to be in decision-making capacities in Australia, they are consequently the gatekeepers of job opportunities and will ‘generally perceive other white [people] as more intelligent and more motivated than Africans.’ Sometimes the denial of job opportunities to Africans can be traced to more hostile racial assumptions that perceive Africans as lacking the appropriate ‘appealing’ factors necessary for employability in white workplaces despite their high tertiary level qualifications (Gatwiri *et al.*, 2020).

Microaggressions are also enacted on accents, where African accents are considered undesirable in the workplace. Lacking the ability to speak the Australian, colloquial English disadvantages them because stereotypes of the unknowing, backward African are summoned through speech (Mapedzahama *et al.*, 2012). Banji, a senior academic, narrates his observations of how his accent operates as a tool of exclusion:

There are times when you may be speaking in a meeting, and because your accent is African, you can tell that as soon as they hear you speak, you know they are quizzical. Looking at some people’s faces, sometimes you just get a sense that they are not taking what you are saying as seriously as they should, or they are not taking it to be as important as it is supposed to be, and you cannot help but notice some of these [responses].

Accent discrimination is a well-documented phenomenon that closes employment doors—especially for immigrants of colour, whose English is not a first language. As accent becomes a measure of intelligence, articulation and professionalism, language and race are summoned as tools

for monitoring the speech of racialised populations (Hill, 1998, p. 680). Through this process, white ways of speech are elevated and indexed as the standard and preferable way of expression.

Racialised suspicions

Racialised suspicions towards Black Africans at work are informed by 'attitudes and understandings that are so embedded in the everyday life of a racialized culture, that members of that culture... don't even recognise themselves as making decisions based in a racialized history' (Stratton, 2006, p. 662). The narratives from the study participants locate the workplace as a place of constant surveillance and scrutiny where Black Africans are often assumed to be incompetent or out of place. Wanjiru, a senior generalist nurse, reflected on the nature of suspicion and scrutinisation at work:

When [I] report to work... I will introduce myself... [and say] I am so-and-so and I am working in this ward this afternoon or this morning or this night, and they already know that as they already know there is a registered nurse coming. But you still find them questioning, which I don't see happening –with Caucasian nurses; but they will question me two or three times. And even to make sure that I am [a] registered nurse, they will check my badge to see if my initials read 'registered nurse', so I still feel like they do not believe me.

The hidden nature of whiteness in Australian workplaces allows for the racial surveillance and hypervisibility of Black people. This invisibility of whiteness and normalisation of white expertise as the standard in most organisations underpins the social ontology of racial suspicion in the workplace. As organisational attitudes about race are summoned, the 'hegemony of white ways of knowing, white ways of being, white ways of emoting, characterising, seeing, not seeing, terrorising, policing, mythologizing' act to scrutinise and occlude non-white others (Yancy, 2004, p. 12.) Wanjiru reflects that these constant forms of surveillance and policing are enacted because Africans 'are always viewed from a point of deficit,' and 'always have to prove themselves' despite their qualifications. Consequently, because Black people are often positioned as a 'problem' group in predominantly white spaces, clients and colleagues may feel justified to humiliate, question or challenge their expertise at work with impunity. Mukisa, a medical doctor narrated how when he first moved to a regional hospital for work, patients flatly refused medical treatment offered by him. He said,

The issue was at work, patients were refusing to see me because I am black... It was a long time just adjusting, so I had to prove myself to be that kind of a doctor I am. So, initially patients would refuse me to see them, but as time goes on, people started to accept us in the community.

Through the refusal to be treated by a Black doctor, whiteness inferiorises Blackness by assuming only white doctors can embody the knowledge of Western medicine. The assumption is made that due to their Blackness, their Africanness, or both, they simply cannot be as professionally capable as white doctors. These racialised patterns of behaviours are carried within a symbolism of white supremacy and deployed not necessarily by mean spirited racists, but by those whose 'entire epistemic grid for deciphering social data [is] too white to empathise with and comprehend the [Black] experience' (Yancy, 2004, p. 144). Such mono-racial views of the world, which are layered with wilful ignorance of the *other*, produce multiple racial suspicions.

Interestingly, racialised suspicions are somehow minimised when Black Africans reveal that their training was conducted in Australia, Europe, America or other Western Countries. Paul and Jenny, both senior nurses, reflect on this by saying:

Many times the patients will ask... 'So where did you do your training?' ... trust me, the moment you say in [a Western country], you can see the relief, an admiration. [Suddenly] they want to know about your life there, exactly: what state did you live in, how long were you there; everything changes, their tone, everything changes and you are accepted. They are suddenly like, you are not like the others. You, you are different, thank god. You are not like those other ones. (Paul)

Jenny speaks to similar experiences:

For me, I still have...people wanting to know where I got my qualifications once they see I am their nurse. Like yesterday, somebody asked me, 'Where did you do your training, your nursing?' I told him, 'I did it here in Australia,' and he was like 'Oh, okay.' You could see how relaxed he got.

The persistent undermining of African professionals unless they are 'Western-trained' is another form of racial micro-invalidity. As Paul says, his training in a Western country (unnamed for anonymity) grants him acceptance, trust and respect from white patients and colleagues because it makes him less African in their eyes (read as, less likely to be inadequate). The white ideological stance rests on the assumption that good expert knowledge is white and Western, and that non-Western knowledge needs to be scrutinised and validated within Western standards and epistemologies.

The other way in which racialised suspicions are manifested in the workplace is through the assumption that Black people in senior positions are hired to fill a diversity quota, not due to their qualifications and expertise. The assumption is that their employment is granted as a 'favour' and not earned through merit. Awinja recalls a comment made to her and another colleague of colour after they were hired to head various diversity programs in the organisation:

Someone told me and another lady from an Asian background, she told us, 'You two are very lucky to be managers...in this organisation'... Yes, a Caucasian told the two of us that we are very lucky. We were actually the only non-white managers at that time. She said, 'You are very lucky to be here.' I said, 'Are we lucky or are we skilled?' Right now, it is much better than it was before. In the beginning, I think, they saw me as an African or a CALD person who had just been **given** a job (Awinja).

When African professionals are defined through white 'ways of knowing', racial microaggressions, jokes and comments about 'diversity hires', are normalised as a reminder that their Black bodies are 'out of place' in white organisations which prompts white insubordination and disrespect from co-workers.

The racialised 'burden of proof'

Demonstrating how increasingly challenging it is to transcend Blackness in the white Australian workplace, one participant said, you are always 'guilty until proven innocent.' Majavu (2017, p. 67) states that through the 'dehumanising ideology of uncommodified blackness, Africans are inferiorized and are portrayed as less capable and incompetent even when they are university educated.' Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo (2018c, p. 5) locate blackness 'as a burden' in Australia, arguing that the 'ongoing and constant experience of discrimination, marginalization, and disempowerment by those racialized as "black" imposes on them a unique kind of burden which is both "symbolic" and "material," derived from the notion of black or blackness.' This burden is carried in different ways. In the case of my participants, they reflected on the 'burden of proof', which is the ongoing burden of having to prove that they are worthy of the respect and acceptance of their white colleagues. Mukisa reflects on his experience as a doctor:

When I was in [a regional town], it took about 12 to 18 months to really prove that I had the skill that was equivalent with my colleagues or better than my colleagues, so it takes that long. I always say if you are an African, you need to do things 10 times better than the locals do for you to do well... They always look at what you do over your shoulder to make sure you do the right thing; and until you prove yourself, they do not get off your shoulder. (Jeff)

Similar to what Mapedzahama *et al.*, (2012) argued, African workers are more likely to be subjected to increased surveillance as a result of the 'incompetent' stereotype which is dominant in discourse. This produces the burden and anxiety of *having to work twice as hard* to prove competency and expertise. The burden of the Black body is exacerbated by the social constructions of Blackness, which are often deployed by

the media through a deficit and criminalised lens. Mediatised ideas of Blackness and Africanness inform the ‘single story’ of Africans, which denies them the privilege to be multi-storied—to be complex—or to have other competing or contradictory identities. Nkandu, a senior accountant, reflects on this burden:

When you are black and you are a professional, you have to prove yourself. But any person has to prove themselves, even white people have to prove themselves at work, but I think the biggest difference is with Africans or black person like myself, you *always* have to keep proving yourself, and sometimes it is [not enough].

Coming to terms with what it means to be Black in Australia means to recognise that the Black body is historically and globally constructed as inferior. [Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo \(2018c, p. 5\)](#) argue that, for Black people, the ‘very colour of their skin..which follows them everywhere causes them to be seen and treated in negative ways that often causes them discomfort.’ Sally, a microbiologist, explains how the hyper-awareness of her Blackness puts a burdensome pressure on her to prove that she is not an imposter. She says,

I am also very aware of the fact that being an African, so at times you feel as though you have to work extra harder to prove yourself. You know, you have to make sure you are on top of your game all the time. Sometimes [when] somebody says something, you think, ‘Oh! is this because I am African?’ and it just brings that extra pressure even when people do not [mean it] negatively. But because you are always conscious of that fact and it puts a lot of pressure on you as a professional.

As Black people reflect constantly on the many racialised interactions they experience at work, the ‘black body/mind becomes a battleground where a war of self-examination and questioning of one’s abilities and being is constantly waged’ ([Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama, 2018a, p. 102](#)). The hypervisibility of their Black bodies invites the scrutiny of the white gaze where they become objects of surveillance. The paradox of this hypervisibility is the invisibility it produces when Black people need to be ‘seen’ for their expertise and professionalism. The white gaze is always present in case mistakes are made, but also absent to observe moments of black excellence. John reflects that despite his experience as a top financier in his home country, he has never been able to prove himself enough to rise back to an equivalent senior position in Australia:

My last job was a Chief Financial Officer and when I got here, I literally started as a clerk... For me to expect to be placed at a similar level was probably being overly ambitious... Let me put it this way... I have never had a pay rise since I came to Australia. I am still being paid less than

what I was being paid in [my home country]. That pay has not changed. . . The difference is in the quality of life.

As with John's experience, many participants in the study stated that the constant acts of overt and covert microaggressions, and relentless questioning and challenging of their expertise, knowledge and skills compromised their experiences of belonging at the workplace.

Concluding comments and implications for social work

The findings from this study reveal that the often-accepted narrative of supposedly race-free workplaces is not supported by Black African immigrants' experiences. Utilising critical race theories that make visible the everyday experiences of racism and 'benign' racial microaggressions, I have argued that the 'burden of blackness' at the workplace leads to a racial battle and complicates the professional identities of Black professionals in Australia. The subtle and covert experiences of workplace racism, comprising constant patterns of racial microaggressions, are dominant in the experiences of Africans in the workplace. These everyday microaggressions are mediated via institutionalised racism (i.e. structures, systems and processes), and even though they may seem individually small and benign, their cumulative effects on wellbeing, health and economic and social outcomes can be significant. As highlighted in this article, the perception of race, and of Blackness, has real consequences for Africans. By unveiling these invisible microaggressions, this article has probed how the Black body is a worn burden that produces psychological distress and RBF at the workplace.

As a profession steeped in whiteness, social work is not race neutral. Social work through an interrogation of its own professional cultural privilege needs to understand the ways in which race produces barriers in practice. In Social Work 'we understand that race is one of the key features through which our social world is structured' and that 'race is used to control the future, limiting and controlling people's political and economic possibilities' for those who are racially marginalised (Tascon and Gatwiri, 2020, p. 7). As a profession that is committed to social justice and equity, the role of Social Work in anti-racist work is critical. In an increasingly multicultural world, social workers must learn how to practice through culturally safe and sensitive ways. The findings in this study will provide Social Work practitioners with a critical understanding of the various challenges facing African professionals in the workplace, and how processes of racialisation may impact psychological safety at work.

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