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From the Periphery to the Centre: An Autoethnographic Account of Positionality, Practices and Behaviours of Racialised Minority Leaders (RMLs) as Gatekeepers

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Abstract

The disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on racialised minorities (RMs) in the UK and globally, along with the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, have pushed organisations in the corporate, public and third sectors to act on the representation of racialised minorities. Consequently, racialised minority leaders (RMLs) with social, cultural, and political capital have been in demand to join newly created consultative roles. Problematising the practices of RML as gatekeepers, this paper adopts an autoethnographic research design drawing on Critical Race Theory, and the concepts of social, cultural and political capital. The study findings articulate RMLs' journey to gatekeeping positions, the influence they acquire and how they facilitate and/or impede access to their communities. This research contributes to emerging research on hard-to-reach racialised minorities and gatekeeping by problematising practices and behaviours of RM gatekeepers and arguing for collaboration, mentoring and succession planning in RM leadership.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Critical Race Theory, Gatekeeper, Hard-to-reach, Leadership

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The true measure of a man is not how he behaves in moments of comfort and convenience but how he stands at times of controversy and challenges.

Martin Luther King Jr.

Introduction

The year 2020 saw the emergence of two transformational phenomena that raised concern about the representation of racialised minorities in the United Kingdom: The racial inequalities exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests' call for racial equity left a mark. According to the Office of National Statistics, deaths involving Covid-19 were higher in racialised minorities than in the majority White population. For example, Black Males were 4.2 times more likely to die of Covid-19 than their White counterparts, and the figure for Black Females was 4.3 times (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2020). Many explanations for the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 emerged, including comorbidities, racism, socioeconomic inequalities, and occupational risks (Tapper, 2020). Three years after the initial response to Covid-19 and the associated lockdown, there is an emerging consensus that Covid-19 has laid bare the racial inequalities in the United Kingdom (Balakumar et al., 2020). Similarly, as the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25th, 2020, led to global Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, in the United Kingdom the BLM protests highlighted racial inequalities and institutional biases (Balakumar et al., 2020). Across the United Kingdom, thousands of people were involved in protests in 260 towns reminiscent of the anti-racist protests in the slavery era (Mohdin et al., 2020).

Covid-19 and BLM protests led to a surge in demand for Racial Minority Leaders (RMLs) to engage in consultation processes organised by voluntary sector organisations, public sector institutions and businesses to deal with immediate concerns on the one hand and long-term community resilience on the other. I received many invitations to attend consultation sessions with many service providers¹, including the local Police, the local Council, National Health Service (NHS), and several voluntary sector organisations. In this paper, I will reflect on my experience

¹ Service Providers, in the context of this paper, are organisations that provide services to the public, mainly the public services (Police, Health Services, Council) and voluntary sector organisations that sometimes serve as intermediaries between public institutions and communities, especially the disadvantaged communities.

as an RML ‘gatekeeper’² coupled with what other RMLs and service providers’ representatives expressed on the issue during interviews, focus groups and knowledge exchange roundtables from 2020 onwards.

The service providers' recruitment of gatekeepers (including me) is motivated by the former's effort to reach communities perceived as hard-to-reach. However, the concept of hard-to-reach communities is problematic and questionable as it labels communities rather than raise questions on the service providers’ approach (Freimuth & Mettger, 1990; Hjerne *et al.*, 2010). For example, as I sat in consultation meetings with service providers in 2020, I was struck that some RM communities were absent, and when their absence was raised, we were told that some RM communities were hard-to-reach. It was apparent to me and other RMLs that those communities hardest hit by Covid-19 needed to be represented, and service providers needed to establish connections with them. Some of us felt that service providers may have made themselves inaccessible. RMs may be inaccessible because their leaders have commitments during the hours when such consultation sessions take place. Or they may not trust public institutions and be less likely to engage and may be cut off from mainstream communications channels.

In the literature, RMs are some of the communities labelled as hard-to-reach. The involvement of gatekeepers from RMs in research and service delivery has been an ongoing process. RML as gatekeepers (or RML gatekeeper/s), unlike the formal (police, teachers) and comprehensive (professional and voluntary sectors), are informal gatekeepers (Emmel *et al.*, 2007), and by and large not paid for their services. The positionality of RML gatekeepers makes their accountability a challenge. The gatekeepers’ ‘double-embedded liaison’ positionality entails a multiplicity of roles and loyalties (López-Sanders, 2017a; Hoekstra & Jimenez, 2023).

Although I had been active in the community, it never occurred to me that those recruiting, were interested in my representation credentials or accountability to the RM communities they considered me to represent and that I was, in effect, a gatekeeper, as were many RMLs I met in these forums. What we had in common was social, cultural, and political capital. I do not consider this, in itself, as wrongdoing

² Gatekeeper in this paper refers to people who act as intermediaries between racialised minorities and service providers (Police, healthcare services or councils). The gatekeeper may be an official (Police Officer for example), a professional (for example voluntary sector officials) or an informal person (for example a volunteer), and in this paper the gatekeepers referred to are informal racialised minority volunteers or representatives of racialised minority networks.

on the part of the organisations that called upon our services; social capital “functions as the main engine of long-term recovery” (Aldrich, 2010, p. 1) and the Covid-19 pandemic and BLM protests highlighted a crisis that required long-term recovery planning. However, it can be problematic if the gatekeepers leverage these capitals for purposes that are not in the best interests of the communities they are expected to represent.

In this context, in this paper, I examine the positionality of RMLs who are utilised by service providers as gatekeepers of ‘hard-to-reach’ RMs.

Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives

In this review of literature, I will first problematise the notions of hard-to-reach RM communities, followed by a discussion of the use of RMLs as gatekeepers in reaching such communities, with special emphasis on their social, cultural and political capital. Then, I will introduce the Critical Race Theory which I use to broadly frame my findings.

Hard-to-reach RM Communities

The concept of hard-to-reach communities was featured initially in marketing (Beder, 1980). As previously noted, the challenge with this concept is that it identifies the communities as the problem instead of asking questions about the approaches adopted by the service providers to engage with these communities. In other words, the hard-to-reach label reflects “communicators’ frustration in trying to reach people unlike themselves” (Freimuth & Mettger, 1990, p. 232). Furthermore, labelling transforms people and their problems into “entities that the [service providers] can recognise and process” (Hjorne et al., 2010, p. 305).

It is argued that communities are deemed hard-to-reach when they are inaccessible to most conventional methods for any reason (Flanagan & Hancock, 2010). It is possible that factors such as “low literacy, lack of formal education, transient and precarious lives, the anticipation of discrimination, and rejection” (Bonevski et al., 2014 as cited in Condon *et al.*, 2019, p. 1330), make some communities hard-to-reach. For example, the concept of hard-to-reach RMs came up at the meetings and consultation sessions I alluded to, in the context of people who were eligible for help (Covid-19 vaccination, for example) but who were not accessing the services for some reasons (Barrett, 2008; Brackertz, 2007; Coe et al., 2008; García-Carmona et al., 2020; Cortis, 2012; Eseonu, 2021).

In a critique of this view, service providers are encouraged to be inclusion conscious because "no one is hard to reach, just more expensive to reach" (Wilson, 2001, p. 1). Potential inclusion tools include helping the communities perceived as hard-to-reach in overcoming access barriers; empowering them through relationship building; establishing networks and partnerships with these communities; and hiring staff members from these communities (Cortis, 2012). Landy and Menna (2006) identified six stages of engagement with hard-to-reach families and communities: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination. Effective interventions to include communities considered hard-to-reach have to be culturally appropriate to them and sensitive to their needs (Johnson, 2011; García-Carmona et al., 2020).

As it is impossible to engage with all the communities, connections can be made via proxies (gatekeepers). The invitations I and other RMLs received, in effect, aligned with connecting RM communities with service providers. Gatekeeping is good, especially if it helps remove access barriers and facilitate access to public services people need and have the right to access. In the following paragraphs, I will unpack the concept of gatekeeping.

RML Gatekeepers

The word gatekeeping is rooted in military traditions and means "the activity of controlling and usually limiting, general access to something" (Dehghan & Wilson, 2019, p. 217). In effect, gatekeepers control and regulate entry of those trying to access "bureaucratic, technological or legal institutions" (Trinch, 2001, p. 476). In an employment context, the gatekeeper is the person who stands between someone and the potential employer (Wells, 2013). Gatekeepers play a prominent role in communications between organisations (service providers) and communities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Wells, 2013). It is important to consider "gatekeeping as a discursive encounter in and of itself in which meanings and knowledge can be set, established, and reproduced" (Cuthbert et al., 2022, p. 776). Traditionally, gatekeepers have held critical roles and power over access to the communities perceived as hard to reach (Campbell et al., 2006; McAreavey & Das, 2013; Turhan & Bernard, 2020).

Reliance on gatekeepers to access hard-to-reach communities has been observed in several service domains, including health (Bonevski et al., 2014; Couch et al., 2014; Higgins et al., 1996; Johnston et al., 2006; Kennan et al., 2012; O'Reilly & Higgins, 1991; Penrod et al., 2003; Tross, 2001; Worthington et al., 2005); youth

work (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2012; Curtis et al., 2004; Petersen & Valdez, 2005); social work (Abrams, 2010; Cortis, 2012; Kim, 2011); educational research (Macnab et al., 2007); housing (Emmel et al., 2007); and research in general (Andoh-Arthur et al., 2018; Campbell et al., 2006; Clark, 2011; De Laine, 2000; McAreavey & Das, 2013; Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008; Saunders, 2006). There are different types of gatekeepers, including formal (such as the Police or school staff), comprehensive (such as supportive agencies or national charities) and informal (such as those embedded within the community) gatekeepers (Emmel et al., 2007; Wilson, 2020). In this paper, I focus on the informal RML gatekeepers.

RML gatekeepers can act as cultural mediators and brokers and help the service providers enhance their intercultural skills and competencies (Eide & Allen, 2005; De Laine, 2000; Whyte, 1993; see McAreavey & Das, 2013). Researchers, scholars, and service providers consider RMLs representatives, gatekeepers, and liaison persons with RM communities as an essential pathway to delivering mainstream services (Gould & Fernandez, 1989; López-Sanders, 2017a, 2017b; Hoekstra & Jimenez, 2023). The RMLs “by simultaneously serving as representatives and as gatekeepers, function in a bi-planar brokerage role, potentially dedicated to one group (e.g. as a health clinic employee) and dedicated to another group (e.g. as a co-ethnic immigrant group member)” (Hoekstra & Jimenez, 2023, p. 4). This situation means RMLs' actions and motivations should not go unchecked.

Social, Cultural and Political Capital

Social, cultural, and political capital are essential assets for the gatekeepers, and such assets can be used to benefit the holders or the community. However, gatekeepers are equally capable of leveraging these capitals for self-serving purposes, without prioritising the interests of the communities they are considered to represent.

Social capital is defined as “those tangible substances [that] count most in the daily life of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse” (Hanifan, 1916, p. 130). Social capital “consists of two related but analytically separable elements: structure and content. The structural element is ... association ... The content is ... trust” (Fennema & Tillie, 2001, pp. 29-30). Social capital has three elements: its holders, sources, and resources (Portes, 1998). It is both a 'private good' and a 'public good' (Putnam, 2000, p. 20) as is not embodied in any individual but in people's social relationships (Loury, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Moreover, “the individuals realise social capital” (DeFilippis, 2001, p. 785).

Cultural capital is “the cultural knowledge that serves as a currency that helps us navigate culture and alters our experiences and opportunities” and is underpinned by “instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designed as worthy of being sought and possessed” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 488). In a nutshell, cultural capital covers the discourses, mannerisms, and ways of knowing how the ‘system,’ operates (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986).

Baumann (2000) argues that political capital is one of the vital capital assets people draw to build their livelihoods. Booth and Richard (1998) suggest that political capital is a gatekeeper asset, permitting or preventing the accumulation of other assets. Pelling (2003, p. 3) differentiates instrumental political capital, “the resources which actors can use to influence policy formation processes and realise outcomes in their interest”, from structural political capital, “variables of the political system”, which condition how actors believe they can accumulate instrumental political capital”.

These three forms of capital: social, cultural and political capital is acquired over time and gatekeepers can use them to pursue a self-serving agenda, and/or to promote the interests of their personal friends and/or for community or societal interests (Birmer & Wittmer, 2000; Pelling, 2003). Thus, it is vital for service providers seeking to engage with racialised minorities to observe and, if necessary, question the behaviour and attitudes of RML gatekeepers. The classification of communities as hard-to-reach may not necessarily be because service providers are not connected with people inside those communities (Freimuth & Mettger, 1990); instead, it could be due to challenge service providers face when working on identifying the gatekeepers to go through to communicate with racialised minority communities (Morrill et al., 1999; Wells, 2013).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Delivery of Services to RM

The involvement of gatekeepers in research or service delivery to RM communities should be explored within the broader context of racial inequalities. CRT emerged as a critique of colour blindness in critical, legal studies (Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, 2012). The CRT movement is “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationships among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 2), which, in essence, seeks to challenge systemic racism and bring about racial justice (Bell, 1980, 1992; Applebaum, 2022). It strives to promote social justice and not the reproduction of White privilege (Pane & Salmon, 2009) and contests colour blindness

that can be used to maintain the status quo and keep people blinded to the social privileges of Whiteness (Vass, 2014; Mills & Unsworth, 2018).

CRT encourages people to become racially literate. A racially literate person uses “race as a diagnostic device, an analytic tool, and an instrument of process” (Guinier, 2003, p. 202). The third dimension, racial literacy as an instrument of process, is critical for those seeking to engage in an inclusive and participatory process to address racial inequalities. In simple terms, “in order to change the way race is understood, race has to be directly addressed rather than ignored” (Guinier, 2003, p. 207).

The literature and the theoretical perspective (CRT) outlined above informs this paper in the following way: This paper is prompted by my interest in promoting racial equity. Questioning my position as a gatekeeper is rooted in the values of CRT. I am conscious that I occupy a privileged position and do not necessarily share the experience of RMs who have to endure daily experiences of discrimination and exclusion. Moreover, I am conscious of the need to continuously remind people, especially service providers, to educate themselves about race. In this paper, I remind service providers that recruiting and onboarding token RM gatekeepers will not address the challenges they face in accessing RM communities they perceive as hard to reach.

I argue against the categorisation of RM communities by service providers as hard-to-reach and the perception that the positionality of RML gatekeepers is benign and does not help in maintaining racial inequalities (Cook, 2013; Rocco et al., 2014). Through its call for racial equity, CRT has informed my practices as an activist and lately as a pracademic. Although it is uncomfortable to problematise the group I am part of (RML gatekeepers), it is essential to share my insights and help start difficult conversations that CRT encourages. Using CRT to unpack the concepts of hard-to-reach and RML gatekeepers is timely in the broader context of racial inequalities that prompted this paper.

Methods

This paper is an autoethnographic account reflecting on my experiences and observations of other RMLs with whom I have engaged after being co-opted by the Police, the local Councils, and the local NHS to support them in developing effective outreach services to RMs in order to improve the health, policing and other services' outcomes. Autoethnography is a “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-

conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (England, 1994, p. 82). It is "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9).

An autoethnography has three components; the *auto* element focuses on the self/personal, the *ethno* element on the cultural/social, and the *graphy* element on the interface between the auto and ethno components (Ellis &Bochner, 2000; Chang, 2016). In this paper, I reflect on my experiences because of my embeddedness in the cultural, political, and historical contexts (Denzin, 2014). The experiences shared in this paper are not idiosyncratic (peculiar) but sociocultural (shared). I use my experiences as a window to understand other people's experiences in society (Chang, 2016).

There are many types of autoethnographies, and this paper is a subaltern autoethnography (Besio 2005, 2006; Butz 2001, 2002; Butz & MacDonald, 2001; Gold, 2002; Butz & Besio, 2009; Pratt, 1992). I am adopting a political approach and seeking to give voice to the voiceless (those considered as hard-to-reach RMs) for self-definition, self-determination and challenging the status quo (Butz & Besio, 2009). Subaltern autoethnography or autoethnography from below “produce self-representations ... meant to intervene in ... dominant discourses about them” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1667).

The trigger of this paper was the frustration with representation (or lack thereof) of communities labelled hard-to-reach in service providers’ consultation processes aimed at responding to the racial inequalities exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and to the BLM protests’ call for racial equity. The formal research process started with a scoping project to build a picture of the RMLs who were invited and those who were not invited. The research team developed a typology of engagements from the scoping project, ranging from engaged to less engaged and the not yet engaged RMLs. The engaged cohort included faith leaders and high-profile RMLs. The less engaged cohort included RMLs who saw themselves as seldom-heard (invited sometimes but not taken seriously) and those identified as seldom-asked (those who were rarely invited although they were always working hard for their communities and making an effort to be visible). As for the not-yet-engaged RMLs, the team identified RM youth, asylum seekers, refugees, the Roma community and Eastern Europeans.

Follow-up projects zoomed in on those who are engaged and regularly invited by service providers. These are quintessentially the gatekeepers, and I am one of them.

In the presentation of findings, I will explore how RML gatekeepers build their profiles and sustain their credentials.

In using autoethnography to research and write this paper, I am conscious of the fact that the paper is not just about my social practices; it covers other RMLs as well. As I wrote this paper, I took my relational responsibilities seriously while being reflective (Ellis, 2007). The findings presented in this paper came from various sources, including reviewing my reflective diary, introspection, interviews, and discussions with other RMLs and the experiences I have witnessed (Chang, 2016). This paper is an offshoot of several projects undertaken with colleagues that involved interviews with 20 Milton Keynes (England) based RMLs and six representatives of service providers based in Milton Keynes, six focus groups involving RMLs and representatives of service providers (based in Milton Keynes), and four knowledge exchanges roundtables held in Milton Keynes (England), Swansea (Wales), Newport (Wales) and Cardiff (Wales). The paper focuses solely on my reflections on what emerged explicitly concerning the behaviour of RML gatekeepers. Analysing data from the various research projects that fed into this paper is ongoing and is outside the scope of this paper.

Storytelling

As an activist, I have been interested in leadership based on practice. In my research, I have done similarly deployed research tools underpinned by my belief that "human society consists of people engaging in action" (Blumer, 1969, p. 7). Stories have influenced my social practices and research. Stories are important because, apart from restaging past situations, telling a story is the only way to come close to an integral reproduction of what happened at that time or the past experiences' gestalt ...the argumentations are formulated from the present perspective and from the standpoint of their social desirability (Rosenthal, 2004, p. 53).

In a nutshell, narratives and storytelling have helped me reflect on my experiences, the strategies I used when I experienced discrimination and what I consciously or unconsciously did to present myself in a certain way (Jarvinen, 2003). Questioning my positionality and being reflective have been vital in my social practices and research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1993; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Oka & Shaw, 2000; Davies & Dodd, 2002; Golafshani, 2003). When using autoethnography for this paper, I took on board five standards proposed by Chang (2016). These are: using authentic and trustworthy data; adopting a reliable

and accountable research process; being ethical towards others and self; analysing and interpreting the sociocultural meaning of the experiences shared; and making a scholarly contribution with my conclusions by engaging with existing literature.

Background of the Author

I am from Sub-Saharan Africa and have lived in Milton Keynes, United Kingdom, since 2014. My initial immigration to the West was to the Republic of Ireland, where I spent almost 19 years. Migration disrupted my career trajectory; in Ireland, my career took a turn to working on immigration and human rights-related issues. To legitimise my professional and lived experience, I undertook a PhD at University College Dublin, where I explored the practices of successful migrant activists in Ireland. In Ireland, I worked with the African Cultural Project (2000), the Canal Communities Partnership (2001-2002) and the Immigrant Council of Ireland (2002-2014). As defined in this paper, I was a comprehensive gatekeeper through my work with these organisations.

In addition to working in the voluntary sector in Ireland, I was a founding member of Africa Centre Ireland, a former member of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2013-2019), a former member of the Consumer Panel of the Financial Regulator (2006-2010), a former board member of We the Citizens Speak Up for Ireland (2011), a former member of the Jesuit Refugee Service Ireland Consult (2006-2012), and a former member of the Board of the Lantern Intercultural Centre (2012 - 2014). As outlined in this paper, I was an informal gatekeeper when I was a member of these organisations.

Having an appreciation of the value of gatekeeping in establishing connections in a new place, when I moved to Milton Keynes, United Kingdom, I used my networks to establish local connections. Through Citizens UK, I was connected with their chapter in Milton Keynes, Citizens:MK; subsequently I was a member of its leadership group (2014 to 2020) and represented the network at the Citizens UK's National Council (2016 to 2019). I was a co-leader of Citizens:MK's Fight Against Hate Campaign (April 2017 to 2020). Through the Community Foundation for Ireland, I was introduced to Milton Keynes Community Foundation, where I have served as an Honorary Vice President since 2018. I have since been a trustee at MK Gallery (2020 to present) and the Milton Keynes Rose - The Milton Keynes Cenotaph Trust (2021 to present). I served as a member of the Proportionality Advisory Panel, Thames Valley Police – Milton Keynes (2020-2021) and joined their Scrutiny Panel in 2021. Additionally, I have been the convenor of the Milton Keynes Intercultural

Forum since 2020. Between October 2020 and January 2021, I served Milton Keynes Council's Covid-19 Community Champions scheme. Through these roles, I have been performing the role of an informal gatekeeper.

On reflection, my interest in RML gatekeepers in the UK began on October 27th, 2014: a comprehensive gatekeeper advised me to reach out to two named RML gatekeepers if I wanted to pursue my interest in racial justice through local informal initiatives. On November 6th, 2014, I was introduced to and met one of the two RML gatekeepers, and subsequently, I was connected to the other named RML gatekeeper as well as a third one. I have since met several RML gatekeepers. As we progress with the paper, the readers will realise that not all gatekeepers are willing to help an emerging RML gatekeeper. Some RML gatekeepers were not supportive, understandably, because they felt that I might refuse to play by the rules they have established. Witnessing, at a function on June 22nd, 2017, two RML gatekeepers underplaying racial inequalities in the UK, and blaming racialised minorities for being unable to overcome their disadvantages and succeed like themselves, made me realise that gatekeeping in RM communities was an important issue. I was also conscious at the time that I was still new and needed to build a profile to give me currency to do something about the phenomenon.

The findings presented in the next section are, as explained earlier, my reflections of my own experiences as an RML gatekeeper, supplemented by ideas expressed by other RML gatekeepers and several service providers.

Findings and Discussion

RML Gatekeeper – The Journey

I have been questioning my positionality as an RML gatekeeper while at the same time studying and observing other RML gatekeepers' practices and profiles. I have observed and noted that to be a successful RML gatekeeper, one must acquire social, cultural and political capital. My observations are backed by the various projects I have been involved in as an activist and academic. My experience in Ireland taught me the value of social, cultural and political capital. Although I was a member of an RM community, who migrated to the country as an adult, I built up social, cultural and political capital. This experience enabled me, notwithstanding my RM background, to successfully engage in advocacy and lobbying to get on the boards of prominent institutions like the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. Such appointments did not happen overnight, they were a result of the work I did, the

networks I developed and the profile I built with time. It was also about being in the right place at the right time. I am conscious that there were others with similar profiles who did not get such opportunities.

In the UK, similarly to Ireland, acquiring social, cultural and political capital to enable me to become an RML gatekeeper was a journey. In Ireland, the journey was long as I had to start from scratch, and it took a shorter period in the United Kingdom because I had a base to build on. The figures presented in this paper came from ongoing discussions with an artist about my experience as an RML gatekeeper and observations of other RML gatekeepers, especially those I have met, worked with and researched since moving to the United Kingdom.

Figure 1: Gatekeeper Journey from the Periphery to the Centre (© Andre Mupenzi)



As Figure 1 suggests, RMLs' acquisition of social, cultural and political capital is an upward climb and takes time. However, some required skills are transferable. For example, when I moved to the United Kingdom from the Republic of Ireland, I transferred and adapted my social, cultural and political capital, shortening the journey it would have otherwise taken to build up an RML gatekeeper profile in the UK. To further illustrate this point, I did not know any formal or comprehensive gatekeepers in the UK when I moved here. Through MK Community Foundation and

Citizens:MK, who introduced me to local RML gatekeepers, I learned more about what was happening in the RM communities. This experience and meeting with formal and comprehensive gatekeepers created a platform that ultimately enabled me to run the Fight Against Hate Campaign successfully. Networking enabled me to acquire local social and political capital. I had transferable cultural capital through my educational background and life in the Republic of Ireland. Cultural capital needed some refinement to have application in the United Kingdom. This cultural adaptation ran concurrently with the networking.

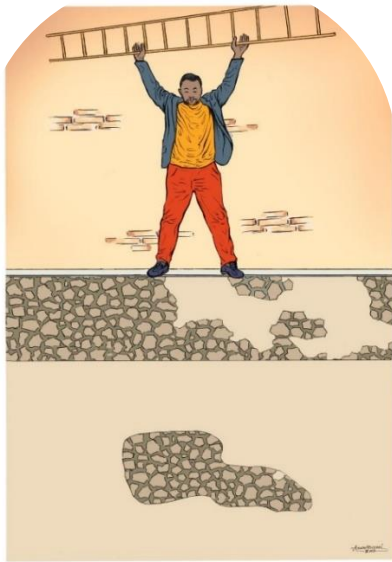
In the following paragraphs, I will share some of the experiences I encountered and heard about on the behaviours of RML gatekeepers on how they can block or support other RMLs. I will also discuss implications for hard-to-reach RM communities and service providers working on inclusion, social cohesion and addressing racial inequalities.

Ladder-Pulling Gatekeeper

RML gatekeepers have a vital role and hold power over access to hard-to-reach RM communities (Campbell et al., 2006; McAreavey & Das, 2013; Turhan & Bernard, 2020). Having acquired this position, some RMLs, as highlighted in Figure 2, pull the ladder and make themselves the only pathways for service providers to access hard-to-reach RM communities. A key practice of ladder pulling is frustrating service providers' efforts to engage directly with RM communities perceived as hard-to-reach. Worse still, gatekeepers often offer to connect service providers with RM communities but fail to deliver, in spite of continuous offers. Sometimes, RML ladder-pulling gatekeepers are happy to serve as tokens and symbolic figures service providers use to make inclusivity claims. In extreme cases, such RML ladder-pulling gatekeepers join those blaming RM communities on the margins for their predicaments rather than asking questions about the barriers the RM communities face in accessing services.

To illustrate the challenge posed by ladder-pulling gatekeepers: On March 1st, 2023, I attended a formal dinner, bringing together service providers (formal and comprehensive gatekeepers) and informal RML gatekeepers. The issue of ladder-pulling RML gatekeepers came up when one of the guests complained to me that it was the first time they were invited to such a function although they have a good standing in their community and the wider society. They noted that service providers have previously been speaking with ladder-pulling gatekeepers who are intent on not including them and the communities they represent.

Figure 2: Ladder-Pulling Gatekeeper (© Andre Mupenzi)



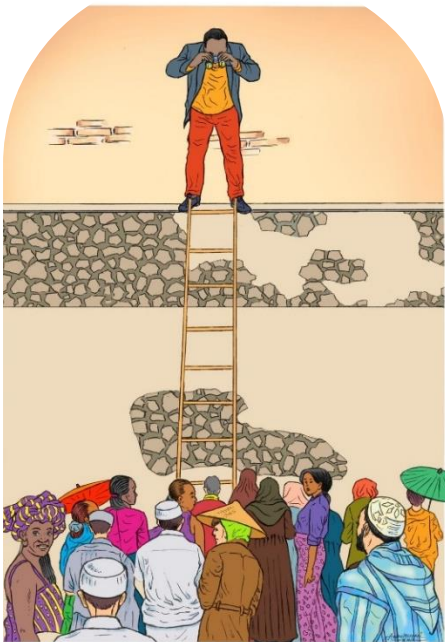
The story reminded me of an experience on November 26th, 2019, when an RML eager to speak to a senior police officer at an event I hosted as part of the Fight Against Hate Campaign told me that they were looking for a gatekeeper to do the introductions. The RML gatekeeper was surprised when I told them that no gatekeeper was required; on previous occasions, they had been discouraged by established RML gatekeepers who insisted on all the communications with the Police and other service providers going through them. Further, there are a few groups that I have been trying to join, and I have been blocked by RML ladder-pulling gatekeepers who feel that my joining would weaken their positions. During a roundtable I hosted in Milton Keynes on July 20th, 2022, I realised that my experience was common, as many other participants shared similar experiences. This experience was corroborated by a formal gatekeeper who underscored that some RML gatekeepers insist that any communications with the communities they claim to represent should go through them and discourage the service providers' direct access. Such an approach makes it difficult to access some of the RM communities, thereby perpetuating disadvantage and giving credence to the notion of hard-to-reach RM communities.

Open and Ubiquitous Gatekeeper

Not all the RML gatekeepers pull the ladder; some RMLs keep the ladder in place (see Figure 3). Keeping the ladder in place allows other leaders to emerge, making it

possible for the seldom-heard and the seldom-asked to get engaged and over time, become gatekeepers themselves. The RML ‘open gatekeepers’ have the potential to fulfil their role in facilitating communications and engagements between service providers and RM communities perceived as hard-to-reach (Gould & Fernandez, 1989; López-Sanders, 2017a, 2017b; Hoekstra & Jimenez, 2023). However, when RML gatekeepers are ‘ubiquitous’, their openness is questionable as their omnipresence means that they regulate mediation and brokerage.

Figure 3: Open and Ubiquitous Gatekeeper (© Andre Mupenzi)



The ubiquitous RML gatekeepers were mentioned in many interviews during the focus groups and the knowledge exchange sessions. Some RML interviewees expressed frustration with this cohort of RML gatekeepers, as well as a fear of being on their wrong side. I am also aware of ubiquitous RML gatekeepers whose practices have frustrated service providers to the point of setting up new consultation mechanisms because the existing ones were not providing them access to the RM communities they wanted to engage with more effectively. Service providers who encounter such difficulties perpetuate the notion of hard-to-reach RM communities.

During a roundtable I hosted in Swansea on October 27th, 2022, participants acknowledged and appreciated the need to engage with a broader representation of

RML gatekeepers. Formal and comprehensive gatekeepers, as well as the RML gatekeepers present, identified the tendency of service providers to look for easily accessible RML gatekeepers, which in effect, means that the same individuals are invited time and time again to represent the communities. Even when the service providers look beyond the usual suspects, they recruit other RML gatekeepers through those who are regularly invited. This observation resonates with my experience. Although I have never claimed to represent a particular community, and therefore, not been a ‘ubiquitous’ gatekeeper intentionally, I have been asked several times to facilitate service providers’ access to RM communities.

Working with ubiquitous RML gatekeepers often does not lead to substantive access and can perpetuate the idea of hard-to-reach RM communities. Expanding the network of RML gatekeepers that service providers work with can help overcome access challenges. At a conference held in Cardiff on December 8th, 2022, formal gatekeepers shared some of the work they are doing to engage with a wider representation of RM community representatives through open recruitment of RML advisors, setting term limits for advisory roles, and doing outreach work with communities previously perceived as hard-to-reach. These changes were born out of frustration of the behaviour of some of the ubiquitous RML gatekeepers.

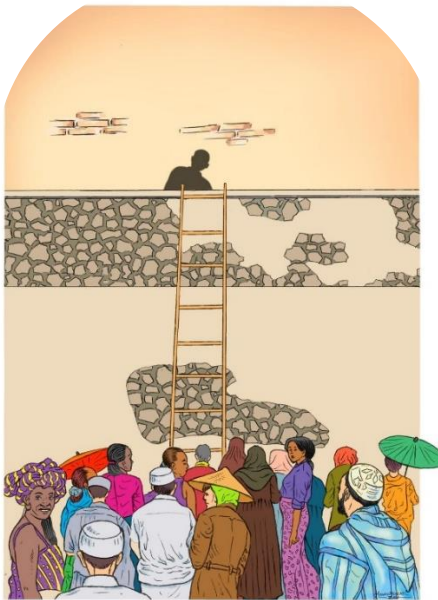
Open and Face-Effacing Gatekeeper

In addition to being open, the cohort of face effacing RML gatekeepers are willing to serve with others and will go out of their way to bring to the fold other RMLs and help service providers reach out to the perceived hard-to-reach RM communities. They are interested in serving as mediators and brokers (Eide & Allen, 2005; De Laine, 2000; McAreavey & Das, 2013; Whyte, 19936) and helping service providers connect with the RM communities they want to connect with more effectively. Figure 4 depicts the open and self-effacing gatekeeper.

As an RML, I have often practiced the characteristics of this category of gatekeepers. I have often flagged my representation and accountability. I have refrained from offering to communicate on behalf of the service providers with RM communities with whom I have no connections. I have instead recommended names or suggested strategies to use in reaching out to RM communities the service providers were interested in reaching out to. For many years, I have also been a champion of mentoring, shadowing, and internship schemes to enhance inclusion and get new leaders on board. Unlike ubiquitous RML gatekeepers, as a self-effacing RML, I have consciously attempted to bring along with me RML guests whenever I

attend consultation sessions or meetings with service providers. In doing so, I have encouraged other RMLs to be prepared to engage with service providers and offered a debriefing session afterwards. On several occasions, I have encouraged service providers to invite other RMLs rather than constantly inviting me. This approach is shared by other RMLs and was mentioned several times in the interviews, focus groups and knowledge exchange activities.

Figure 4: Open and Face-Effacing Gatekeeper (© Andre Mupenzi)



In a meeting with another RML gatekeeper on May 2nd, 2022, we discussed gatekeeping and how to support emerging RM leaders. The RML gatekeeper shared a story highlighting their credentials as an open and self-effacing gatekeeper. They were invited to a function but realised that they were likely to be the only person of colour in the room. They told the host that they would go only on one condition. The condition is that they will bring along an emerging RM leader. They also asked the hosts to invite the emerging leader and another leader of the emerging leader's choice next time around. Had they been a ladder-pulling or a ubiquitous RML gatekeeper, they would have kept their invitation to themselves or imposed conditions on any RML gatekeeper they brought along, assuming they asked for an extra ticket.

Similarly, I have always been keen to think about succession planning; whenever I accept the invitation to join a panel, a working group or a board, I start planning my

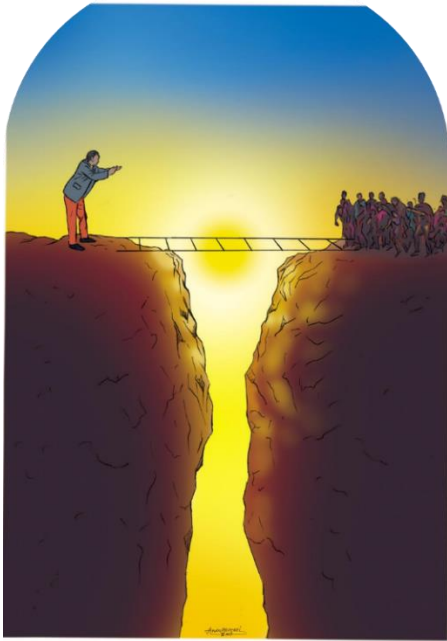
exit. If hired because my ethnic identity is the rationale for joining, I create opportunities for RM community members to engage and to be known by the institution. When I meet with formal and comprehensive gatekeepers on behalf of networks like the Milton Keynes Intercultural Forum, I get other leaders involved. Doing so helps build the capacity of other leaders within the network. It gives confidence to the service providers to develop relationships with other leaders rather than always doing things through me. For example, on August 19th, 2021, when meeting a formal gatekeeper, I insisted on bringing other RML gatekeepers along. I have since insisted that any communications with the formal gatekeeper should go to the team rather than just me.

Bridge-Builder Gatekeeper

The bridge-builder RML gatekeeper epitomises what gatekeeping should be about, connecting people and institutions. As highlighted earlier, social capital is vital in building one's profile and becoming an RML gatekeeper. There are three types of social capital – bonding, bridging, and linking social capital (Putnam, 1993). Bonding social capital is developed with groups with similar characteristics; bridging social capital is built when we connect with people outside of communities with whom we have overlapping interests; linking social capital is built when we link with people and organisation beyond peer-boundaries to “exert influence and reach resources outside ... normal circles” (Gilchrist, 2004, p. 6). Bridge-builder gatekeepers take their bi-planar brokerage role seriously and are eager to perform their dual position of representative and gatekeeper (López-Sanders, 2017a; Hoekstra & Jimenez, 2023). As depicted in Figure 5, unlike the ladder-puller gatekeepers, they serve others and ensure that all voices are heard.

As a bridge-builder RML, I am forthcoming with information about what I represent (my experience) and make an effort to spell out my connections to avoid confusion and raising expectations that I will not be able to meet. The worst thing I would do as an RML gatekeeper is to let down both the service providers and the RM communities by failing to deliver on my offers and promises. I am always the first to admit the limitations of my reach within the RM communities, as well as my ability to sway and influence service providers. Being honest is critical in gatekeeping. As a proponent of bridge-building, I take seriously the need to build other RMLs' capacity and encourage service provider representatives to invest in relationships with RM communities, build their organisations' intercultural competencies, and address unconscious bias. As a leader who believes in practice-based leadership, I firmly believe in bridge-building.

Figure 5: Bridge-Builder Gatekeeper (© Andre Mupenzi)



Earlier, I mentioned the RML gatekeepers, who, on November 26th, 2019, felt that they needed a gatekeeper to introduce them to a senior police officer. The reason for this was that on previous occasions, the RML ladder-pulling and ubiquitous gatekeepers hosting events, like I was on the day, insisted on everything going through them. The fact that I acted like a bridge-builder gatekeeper took them aback. However, my actions gave them the confidence to engage with the Police and other service providers independently without relying on the established RML gatekeepers. Similarly, on August 8th, 2022, at a meeting with an RML gatekeeper new to Milton Keynes, we discussed the advantages of connecting with bridge-builder gatekeepers and the disadvantage of working with ladder-pulling gatekeepers. The RML gatekeeper commended my advice and shared frustration about ladder-pulling gatekeepers who had held them back from establishing themselves as leaders in Milton Keynes in their own right. The message was echoed at a roundtable I hosted in Cardiff on September 29th, 2022, where participants shared their experience about the RML ladder-pulling gatekeepers who use the RM communities as a steppingstone and, once they achieve their self-serving goals, ignore their communities' plight. The participants commended bridge-building RML gatekeepers who do not play the game but instead work with the communities, support other leaders, and challenge the formal and comprehensive gatekeepers when warranted.

The findings shared in this paper align with my position as a bridge-builder RML gatekeeper in my activist and my pracademic roles. As a researcher, I want to promote equality, diversity, inclusion, and participation. The findings also align with my belief that no community is hard-to-reach. It is a matter of service providers doing more to address racial inequalities and earn the trust of racialised minorities. The findings are in line with my view that in RM communities, like any other communities, there are leaders who prioritise their own interests and those who prioritise the interest of the community and the wider society. This paper is a subaltern autoethnographic account that used my reflective research diary, ongoing community engagements, and the research undertaken with colleagues in the aftermath of Covid-19, and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.

As stated earlier, this paper was informed by CRT, which advocates becoming literate about race as an instrument of the process. By discussing the behaviours of RMLs in gatekeeper positions, I attempted to provide some ‘racial literacy’ for service providers who need to rethink, at the very least, their recruitment choices when attempting to engage the services of RMLs. From the perspective of an ‘insider’ (using a subaltern autoethnographic approach), I have shed some light on some practices within RM communities, which shows that using RMLs as gatekeepers, instead of providing access, could make some of the RM communities even harder to reach. In fact, the very behaviour of RMLs in their gatekeeping roles, could render the RMs hard-to-reach especially when the RML gatekeepers deploy ladder-pulling and ubiquitous behaviours. Further, too much reliance on RML gatekeepers with social, political, and cultural capital (who constitute a privileged category) is not in line with intersectionality, i.e., engaging with diverse representatives or RMs linking individual, interpersonal, and social structural domains of experience (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Shields, 2008).

The diversity of behaviours among the RML gatekeepers, from the ladder-pulling through ubiquitous, open and self-effacing to bridge building, highlights the complexities of human behaviours. Though these behaviours are not unique to RM communities, because of the culture wars, it is difficult for many scholars to research this phenomenon for fears of backlash. The fact that I am an insider and do not fear being called out means I can speak about the phenomenon. Using subaltern autoethnography in this paper opens the doors to other scholars complaining about how ‘White’ scholars portray RM communities and their leaders but rarely take the next step and share their views in their own voices. In the case of this paper, I have raised questions about the behaviours of RML gatekeepers that often end up in

murmurs. Subalternity does not mean covering up uncomfortable findings. In this paper, I have shared stories I had been reluctant to share.

This paper contributes, primarily to the literature on gatekeeping. The courage to write this paper emerged from my interest in this body of literature (see, for example, Dehghan & Wilson, 2019; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Wells, 2013; Willems, 2001), particularly with my realisation of the power gatekeepers hold over access to communities perceived as hard-to-reach (Campbell et al., 2006; McAreavey & Das, 2013; Turhan & Bernard, 2020), the realisation that I had been serving as an informal gatekeeper for some time (Emmel et al., 2007; Wilson, 2020), and my questioning of the paternalistic approach to gatekeeping observed in the practices of my peers (Dehghan & Wilson, 2019). I also contribute to the literature on racial equity. In addition to my interest in gatekeeping, I have been championing racial equity as an activist in my research and practice. I have been critical of colour blindness in policymaking and service delivery (Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, 2012), and have made an attempt in this paper to shed some light on how some practices within RM communities could impede racial equity. For me, interest in social and racial justice has meant promoting racial equity to improve the outcomes for racial minorities (Pane & Salmon, 2009). Frustration with ladder-pulling and ubiquitous gatekeepers in RM communities and their potential role in perpetuating racial inequalities (Cook, 2013; Rocco et al., 2014) was one of the main catalysts for this paper.

Implications and Conclusion

This autoethnographic account, backed by contributions of other RMLs and service providers to the broader research projects through interviews, focus groups and knowledge exchange activities, highlights that gatekeeping as a practice is useful, while problematising some aspects of the practice. While questioning the concept of hard-to-reach RM communities, and identifying how RML gatekeepers, could, in fact, contribute to perpetuating the notions of hard-to-reach, the paper also highlights the potential role the RML gatekeepers can play in supporting service providers in delivering services to marginalised RM communities. The concept of hard-to-reach RM community has been in the public domain for some time. Although scholars have argued that communities are not hard-to-reach but may be expensive to reach (Wilson, 2001), broadly using a CRT perspective, this paper suggests that we must ask questions about trust and the credibility of gatekeepers we go through to access these communities. The paper has outlined how there is a broad range of practices

and behaviours exhibited by RML gatekeepers, identifying a typology – Ladder-pulling, Ubiquitous, Open and self-Effacing and Bridge-Building.

Although set in the context of public service delivery, this paper has broader implications, especially for researching RM communities where gatekeepers and community researchers are involved. The paper urges the researchers and service providers interested in inclusive research to exercise due diligence when recruiting gatekeepers to work with.

Proponents of CRT have been challenging colour blindness and calling for racial justice and equity. The racial inequalities exposed by Covid-19 in the United Kingdom and the global Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 called upon society to rethink, work differently and promote conscious inclusion. In such initiatives of inclusion, RML gatekeepers have a role to play; they also need to take responsibility for their actions and should be held accountable. In this paper, I have questioned the behaviour of ladder-pulling and ubiquitous RML gatekeepers who, instead of using their positions to promote racial justice, have the potential to perpetuate racial inequality. I urge service providers, researchers and others in power who engage with RML gatekeepers to ask hard questions about RML gatekeepers exhibiting these characteristics.

Though I have commended self-effacing and bridge-building RML gatekeepers, I am conscious that it is challenging to practice self-effacing and bridge-building. By highlighting the differences between different categories of RML gatekeepers, this paper hopes to trigger service providers, researchers and other groups with power to honour and support open and self-effacing, and bridge-building RML gatekeepers on their advisory panels and contribute to increasing the pool of such RML gatekeepers. Recognising and supporting such RML gatekeepers will help in addressing access issues and, in time, relegate labels such as hard-to-reach RM communities to a thing of the past. Doing so will more greatly enable racial justice and equity in the delivery of services.

For future research, many ideas come to mind. I urge other scholars to undertake empirical work on the RML gatekeepers in the United Kingdom and beyond. This paper focused on the informal gatekeepers; addressing racial equity issues will require exploring the behaviours and practices of formal and comprehensive gatekeepers as well. For example, autoethnographic studies on interactions between RMLs and

formal and comprehensive gatekeepers can bring insider perspectives on issues faced by RMs and RML gatekeepers themselves. Finally, as an autoethnographic account of a male pracademic, I could not relate experiences of female RML gatekeepers, which is another research path that can be pursued.

Declaration Conflict of Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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