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‘Wake Up and Smell the Coffee!’; The Navigations and Experiences of Students of Colour within Higher Education

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my independent investigation except where I have indicated my indebtedness to other sources.

I hereby certify that this dissertation has not already been accepted in substance for any other degree, nor is it being submitted concurrently for any other degree.

I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and consultation by future students and colleagues, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Jack Hogton

05/05/2020

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It has been an absolute pleasure to be able to conduct this project, for an issue which holds great personal and emotional relevance to me. That being said, it did prove to be challenging at times, but I have a great number of people to thank for helping me along the way, a few who I will mention here.

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To my participants, thank you for taking part! I hope you feel like what I've presented is an accurate representation of our discussions and might go some way to creating the dialogue, response and representation we all desire.

And finally, to anyone reading, thank you for taking the time. I hope this gives you an insight into the complexities still facing persons of colour within the university system. Hopefully, this might go some way to igniting discussions and dialogue within the institutions, leading to some positive change.

Abstract

Through the wide-spread implementation of neo-liberal policies, institutions profess to have created environments in which 'diverse' individuals are placed equitable to their white counterparts. In doing such, institutions fail to consider the unequal nature by which Persons of Colour are penalised by historical social constructions created to enforce hierarchy. Through this project, I will demonstrate that; whilst surface level measures have been implemented to rectify the racial attainment gap and allow persons of colour to be present in spheres historically seen as 'white-dominated,' these measures fail to consider the intricacies and nuances that creates the concept 'race.' In doing such, persons of colour risk being 'othered' by these policies, rather than having their narratives brought to mainstream comprehension.

To aid this, I will present extracts from 15 semi-structured interviews, conducted with current or recently graduated UK university students. Each of these participants identified themselves as a Person of Colour (PoC), hailing from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Upon completion of these interviews, I transcribed the data to aid in demonstrating the field in which 'racialised individuals' must navigate Higher Education. Throughout, I question the role 'race' as a concept has in enforcing social narratives, whilst interrogating literature and policy which suggests we have made significant progress in race relations.

In doing so, I present 5 key takeaways which I believe should guide how we create dialogue and discussions within Higher Education, to allow PoCs to not just be tokens attendees but actively involved in the dissection of antiquated narratives still evident. In doing so, I hope to address the importance of PoC's uniqueness, rather than othering us as one homogenous group, allowing us to combat the colonised nature of Higher Education.

Within this chapter, I will give a brief overview of the nature of my project. I will present some of the reasoning behind its undertaking, as well as briefly combing through some of the important literature surrounding the debate.

INTRODUCTION

In today's society, we are often told that it is far more representative of different racial groups and, subsequently, this had led to a reduction of discrimination (Bhopal, 2018). Public discourse continues to be peppered with the notions that British society is 'multi-cultural', 'inclusive' and representative. Whilst the days of public violence and race riots may be part of our recent history, one does not have to look far to find evidence of a continuing racial 'disgust' towards certain members of our 'multi-cultural' society (Bhopal, 2018).

It is my contention that social scientists commonly fail to consider the role institutions play in how individuals construct their 'racial self' (Gates, 1987). Current research considers individual's racial and cultural background, but does not consider how these factors may be actualised by establishments who can play a key role in creating distrust towards the 'racialised other' and how this can negatively impact Persons of Colour (PoCs) ability to navigate within these spaces (Anderson, 2015).

One could also suggest that research often views 'race' as a 'static object' that only correlates to racism. Especially, in centres of academia, staff may often not have the tools to disassemble the socially constructed nature of 'race', being that research often disregards the subtleties in which 'race' can be incorporated into everyday interaction (Khanna & Harris, 2009). In this manner, they fail to consider the effects that this has on individuals navigating society, particularly when considering the impact of non-overt racism and unintended discrimination; through, for example, 'micro-aggressions.'

Taking this into consideration, I decided to analyse students of colours viewpoint through the lens of their experience within Higher Education. I felt students are portrayed by the mass media as being a liberal group within society and I wished to see whether there are levels of discrimination still present in these settings. Not necessarily in an overt way – but manifesting itself as a result of people perceiving themselves as 'woke' – common slang for someone considering themselves to be liberal and open-minded – whilst not considering the narratives of PoCs themselves.

Based on 15 semi-structure interviews, I asked participants whether the racial makeup of a Higher Education institution was an important aspect when considering whether to apply to certain universities, incorporating discussions around quotas and 'perceived diversity' (Bowen et al, 2003). As well as this, participants discussed whether they held 'preconceived notions' towards universities in terms of what they thought they would be like and how this affected their choices in application (Reay, 2001).

My second point of inquiry stemmed from the provisions that a university puts in place to provide 'diverse and accepting campuses' (Reay, 2001) for its students. Utilising publicly available data (UCAS,2019), I wished to consider the impact of neo-liberal policies at universities and the opinions of students towards these.

Thirdly, discussing intersectionality, I wished to observe whether gender, 'race' and class where complicit factors together and how they may have roles to play in regards to attainment and one's ability to obtain a university place and how these ideas integrated with public perception of POCs as 'racialised others.'

As a PoC myself, the experience of 'covert discrimination' in which we experience racism in the forms of micro-aggressions rather than in the more overt nature that it may have manifested historically, is something I wanted to consider. Through this project, I hope to shed light on this and demonstrate the gaps neglected by mainstream academic research. In Chapter 2, I will present the currently available academic research pinning this debate, discussing the merits it possesses but also considering the drawbacks current iterations of 'race' research neglect. Following this, in Chapter 3, I will discuss how the gaps within the reviewed literature allowed me to incorporate research methods that would provide greater individual detail from participants, allowing a more personal approach to researching this topic. In Chapter 4, I shall present transcripts from my 15 interviews as well as an accompanied thematic analysis demonstrating the commonalities between participants. And finally, in Chapter 5, I will give a detail summary of my project, including the 5 main staying points I observed and discuss how we may go about making positive change in this regard.

Within this Chapter, I discuss the academic literature that stemmed my points of inquiry. Whilst my general discussion could be seen as rather nuanced in comparison to some of the available academic literature, these works do allow for greater comprehension of reasoning, particularly when considering the policy response to diversity and the current Higher Education curricula set-up.

2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1) 'Race' & Belonging in 'The White Space'

A theme which I have observed throughout available 'race' research is the concept of spatial belonging. In some of the discussed research, individuals found it problematic to 'see' individuals outside of their 'prescribed social position.' This is something theorised by Elijah Anderson (2015) as 'the white space.' Anderson suggests that whilst the results of the Civil Rights Movement and other racial struggles have reduced formal sanctions towards PoC's occupation of spaces – through the removal of overt segregation practices – there are still spaces within society which are predominately white dominated and this affects the power dynamics displayed here. Anderson discusses how universities, government and educational services in general, are 'white spaces.' For PoC's, when navigating these areas, a certain number of considerations have to be taken to allow them to function here. Anderson cites that PoC's have to 'legitimise' their presence, for example, by wearing a staff lanyard in these areas, otherwise they are more likely to be questioned as to what they are doing in that area – far more than white counterparts.

Similarly, Begum Vergee (2013) conducted research into the experiences of students and staff of colour at Higher Education Institutions and how this impacted on their day-to-day navigations within these settings. A common theme that arose across the study was the concept of a 'bound social identity.' For some individuals, working within predominately white settings, they found that people's understandings of their backgrounds and heritages was bound to the interactions and/or experiences those individuals had had with people from the same social groups as participants. For example, one member of the English faculty, who is from a Caribbean background, recalls how a student in her class asked her if she 'knew his housekeeper' because she was 'Caribbean' and 'looks and sounds like you.' Vergee argues that these 'socially bound identities' lead to PoC's being 'delegitimised' as some cannot comprehend that the people that they have had experience with from that social group can also occupy other roles within society, particularly ones of authority status.

This theme is also replicated in the works of bell hooks. In her book, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, hooks (2003) details how PoC students have a period of 'enlightenment' within their educational career. During this time, they determine that in 'white-settings', teachers will view them as less able and white students will often view them as less capable then themselves. This leads to a junction in which PoC students either accept this stereotype and underperform to 'fit in' or try to challenge this. Often, in the case of the latter, these students are then labelled as disruptive and are not considered to be 'worthy' of enrolment in higher level classes. In addition to this, some students who conform to the stereotype placed on them by their white counterparts will deliberately avoid certain topics of inquiry for research projects centred around race, identity and heritage – particularly linking to oppression - because they know that this will damage the 'racial-status quo' of the classroom and could lead to a lower band mark achieved.

2.2) White Curriculums and Teaching 'Race'

The wider problem of racism and discrimination faced by PoCs within society is an issue that has been present for decades and is routed in historical context. Subsequently, this means that there is a vast amount of literature to explore, especially when relating to experiences within education.

In his book *Black and British: A Forgotten History, David Olusoga* notes the presence of PoCs in the UK well before the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush. Olusoga argues how Black British History is often curtailed and restricted into certain sections of the curriculum – mainly focusing on Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, Black British history, as Olusoga puts it, is 'British history' it is completely 'intertwined with our country's narrative.'

Some individuals, such as Paul Gilroy (1993), suggest that a dismissal by wider society towards 'minority history' is the result of a systematic desire to maintain the 'majority white narrative.' The continuation of white hegemonic ideas is often referred to by academics as a 'colonised curriculum.' Phillips et al (2005), discuss how colonised history is presented as the 'norm' within university curricula. In facets where this may be challenged, the presentation of Indigenous – or 'minority knowledge' – is hampered by certain conditions. Most notably, they argue that the dichotomies of 'diverse knowledge' are often tethered to discussions around difference and diversity.

When these topics are discussed outside of 'identity modules'; 'race', Indigenous knowledge and the role colonialism allows for the reinforcement of perceived racial hierarchies and are treated as 'unmovable, historic facts' (Phillips et al, 2005). This produces issues when attempting to challenge the reasonings behind discrimination when many are to believe that 'race' and racism are not concepts which demand societal cooperation to function.

Other academics argue that students bring their own experiences to the table when discussing topics that are particularly sensitive, such as discussing identity politics (Bell et al, 2007). As a result of this, the topic of 'race' and racism is 'sanitised' to allow white enrolees to remain comfortable discussing these issues. In addition, white teachers/facilitators attempt not to stray too far away from their own understandings of 'race' to maintain the 'racial status-quo' (Vergee, 2013). Paul Gilroy (2002), suggests that this practice - whilst potentially unintentional – stems from a neo-liberal approach to inclusion, yet enabling the epochs of education to remain 'untroubled' by the presence of PoCs in historically white dominated spaces.

This is something that is also touched upon in work by Goduka (1996) within Higher Education in South Africa. Goduka notes that whilst universities may have become more 'visibly diverse', in the fact that they allow students of colour to attend the institutions; the curriculum has not been altered to reflect this. In fact, the curriculum not only ignores the contribution of PoCs throughout history but also, according to Goduka, continues to uphold Eurocentric and Imperialist views of the world which are continually manifested through unchallenged production within the curriculum.

2.3) Conducting Race Research

Supplementary to this, some academics also suggest we should consider the way in which studies of 'race' and identity are conducted. When it comes to Higher Education, individuals such as Harper (2012) propose that a large amount of academic research observes 'race' and how it intersects with identity, but completely ignores the impact racism and institutional discrimination can have on the identities that 'participants' choose to portray. Harper argues that this is misguided in its understanding as racism is fully intertwined with the concept of 'race' and ethnicity.

Supplementary to this, researchers such as Klaas (2007), detail the access difficulties that 'race' researchers can encounter when attempting to research the topic. Within his study, he discusses how he found it difficult to gain access to individuals within predominately white educational institutions who were willing to discuss 'race', belonging and identity. He argues that this could lead to a gap in the academic discourse in which we do not consider white individuals' position(s) in the debate and what their understanding could contribute to developing a better learning environment for PoCs. He talks about how difficult it is to break the 'invisible barriers' that are in place between white students/faculty members and their PoC counterparts especially because the topic of discussion/research interest is particularly contentious to some people.

Other research also demonstrates how fluid 'racial categorisations' can be as a concept and the intricacies and nuances that occur within groups deemed 'people of colour.' Satnam Virdee (2014) discusses how 'light-skin privilege' can play a part in individuals understanding of identity and where they fit within a social group. Virdee cites work by Butneam (1999) in which mixed-race women were asked to discuss their experiences of identification and how they felt it played into their everyday interactions. One individual, Jane, discussed how she felt inferior to her brothers and sisters because she was the 'multi-heritage one.' She discusses how she was led to feel like an 'outcast' by her wider family and that her mother had tainted the family dignity by having 'a baby by a negro.' Jane goes on to discuss how she feels that she does not have the same 'associating factors' that legitimise her placement within predominately 'Black spaces.' Anecdotal examples like these demonstrate the complications PoCs face when considering their identity and how differing these can be from person to person. I believe this shows how contemporary 'race' research neglects these disparities and is too swift in its desire to overarchingly label groups.

This theme is something that is continued when discussing the use of public legislation to counter racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric within public discourse. In his book, *Racism, Class and the Racialised Outsider,* Satnam Virdee discusses the Labour Party introduction of the first Race Relations Act in 1965. Prior to this introduction, 'anti-coloured sentiment' had been a problem within British society but had not legal way of being responded to. He argues that the introduction of this policy was in response to the need to keep economic ties with countries within the Commonwealth rather than considering a sudden altruistic positioning of the party's manifesto. Virdee, amongst others, argue that contexts like this is too readily ignored leading to a perpetration that 'race' is fixed and devoid of political motivations

Speaking in regards to the motivations behind policy, we can see how higher educational institutions employ a neo-liberalist attitude when it comes to dealing with issues surrounding equality and diversity. Deem & Morley (2006), discuss how neo-liberal approaches have been implemented in response to

changing UK governmental policy as well as the EU altering its expectations regarding employment directives. Whilst some may argue that this is evidence that equality and diversity (E&D) issues are highly regarded within politic spheres, Deem & Morley argue this is a very 'tokenistic approach.' Its suggested that combatting issues surrounding E&D are 'individualistically framed' – some believing that mass underrepresentation is something that can be tackled using mainstream public policy. One could argue that this goes some way to allowing us to understand the reasoning behind why these policies exist in higher educational institutions, but fails to consider their effectiveness – something I wish to fulfil within this research project.

Whist the research present goes some way to portraying the issues contended by students of colour, the research continually neglects the student's own role in experiencing this. In doing so, whilst research conveys the issues that PoCs face within Higher Education, it negates the narratives of the individuals directly affected. In doing so, I believe this does not allow us to begin effective discussion on how to solve these issues, if the personal contributions of those effected are rebuked.

Taking this into consideration, I wanted to consider how one could formulate what I proposed were gaps in the current debate, into tangible research questions. Firstly, using the work of Bowen and colleagues (2003) on Affirmative Action in universities, I was interested to discover whether participants thought that their racial background had helped sway their application in a more favourable manner – especially within universities that historically have lower percentages of students of colour. I believe this would allow us to comprehend how HE neo-liberal policy is faring, according to those affected.

Diane Reay (2001), presented transcription(s) from university applicants from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. These included many individuals of colour, often who were the first in their family to attend. Throughout these accounts, a clear theme arose. Many of the PoCs did consider whether the university they applied for would be for 'people like them.' Stemming from this, I enquired about students experience once inside the institution; a point I believe is lacking from Reay's (2011) work.

Bryant-Davis & Ocampo (2005) discuss the complex needs that individuals of colour have working within institutions, particularly in relation to the mental trauma that coexists with being racially abused. They question how many counsellors are not equipped to deal with the complex 'psychological trauma' that racism and micro-aggressions causes because often they do not hail from 'BME' backgrounds. I wanted to determine whether this was a theme that is mirrored within universities. Firstly, had people been victims of overt racist incidents and/or sustained micro-aggressions. Secondly, to determine whether there were adequate support networks in place to allow PoC's to then discuss these issues with the relevant parties to obtain the support that they wanted/needed.

Finally, I wanted to discuss the intersections within this discussion. I feel that there is a lot of data surrounding the attainment of PoC males, particularly those from Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. I also found a large amount of data on the intersections of sexism and racism within universities, namely the works of Roxana Ng (1993). Whilst I do believe that these pieces of research are very integral to the debate, I often found that when discussing male PoC's, the social needs of these individuals were not considered. As a result, I wanted to question this myself to determine whether their experiences aligned with those of the participants discussed in other projects.

This Chapter discusses the manner in which I undertook my research. It dissects my thought progressions from the initial framing of the research questions in response the available literature, right through to the potential complications I predicted conducting 'race' research as a PoC.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

Within the research I have read, I feel that social scientists often spend time explaining the processes that may produce stigmatisation and discrimination, but often negate to include the voices of those that are affected by the aspects they are detailing. As a result of this, I felt it would be important to start with a more introspective approach to my research and work outwards into how it effects the institution. As a result, I felt it necessary to conduct semi-structured interviews, to obtain personalised narratives to observe their relation to wider structures.

3.1) Research Design

I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with students from a variety of British universities, all of which identified as a people of colour. I considered the work of Corbin & Morse (2003) in deciding whether to pursue this research method. They suggest that conducting semi-structured or unstructured interviews as a means of qualitative inquiry allows the participant to have a 'greater role' with more 'control' over the interview process. Given the anecdotal nature by which I wished my research was to be led, I believed it essential to give participants more freedom than perhaps other methods, such as focus groups, may have allowed. Corbin & Morse (2003) also discuss how these type of interviews are useful when discussing topics some may find distressing. The nature of the interview allows the interviewer to divert from certain lines of questioning if they believe the participant is in distress, rather than continuing to press along a certain line of inquiry that may lead a participant to withdrawal entirely. However, being that I did want to obtain a narrative for my study, I chose to utilise semi-structured interviews, rather than completely unstructured, to allow me some semblance of control over the direction of conversation.

On a more trivial note, using interviews also provided many practical benefits, such as being able to undertake them remotely. Prior to choosing to implement this method, I had considered the utilisation of focus groups rather than interviews. However, this did present considerable issues. For example, Olphen et al (2009), discusses how feelings of 'stigmatisation' from other focus group attendees could leave some participants less disposed to wanting to discuss their own experiences. For this project, my data relied almost entirely on personal experience and anecdote; so I was unwilling to risk the utilisation of this method. Similarly, the practical nature of conducting several focus groups in the time-frame I had available also would have posed an issue. I did not have the luxury of being able to conduct interviews with participants more than once so it was integral that I obtain relevant data in the time I had with them.

I felt it important to obtain a wide range of responses and, as a result, I included both male (9 Participants) and female (6) participants. These participants ranged from 18-25 years of age and were collected via snow-ball sampling. I felt this was the most organic way to obtain participants whilst collecting participants that satisfied my brief. I gained access to these individuals through previously built contacts at other UK universities. I had these contacts recruit participants on my behalf and then conducted the interviews myself, either face-to-face or using video-conferencing software. Each interview was recorded, with the permission of each participant, using a Dictaphone.

After conducting all 15 semi-structured interviews, I transcribed the conversations. Conducting a thematic analysis, I considered whether there were similar ideas across participants. I felt being able to access a larger group of participants across a breath of UK Universities gave me a greater sense of generalisability, in turn making the data more impactful. I did not do this to make any 'grand claims' or to theorise, but rather to be able to make sound comparisons about the general experiences of different PoC students across the UK.

3.2) Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and were later transcribed. Once I had transcribed all of the interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis with the data. Considering the differing nature of conducting semi-structured interviews with a variety of participants, one could assume that it would prove problematic to be able to assemble a narrative. Whilst there are many different epistemological approaches to dissecting research data, I found the flexibility provided by thematic analysis to be the most favourable. In addition, considering the possible provocative nature my data could be deemed to have, thematic analysis provided an avenue in which I could present this data as 'participant opinion,' whilst still being able to conduce the response into a wider narrative (Guest et al, 2012).

Authors such as Guest et al (2012) define thematic analysis as 'looking past explicit words and phrases' within the data, allowing researchers to provide coherent links between themes. For myself, this was very important as I wanted to be able to provide shared links between experience of participants, as well as comprehending how widespread issues presented were. I incorporated codes, to determine the type of themes I was attempting to ascertain from the transcripts; including; *academic representation, university pastoral support, university neo-liberal policy & anecdotal examples of discrimination on campus.'* Utilising these codes, I analysed each transcript a multitude of times, each time applying a different one of the aforementioned themes. I found this to be a greater way of dissecting the vast amount of data I had, rather than perhaps presenting data that had no obvious links to one another. In producing data this way, it has allowed me to demonstrate the vast nature of issues affecting students of colour, regardless of geographical locale.

In addition to this, since I was attempting to undertake 'Practical Research', research that may provide societal benefit, rather than 'Applied Research, research that seeks to further knowledge or stem curiosity (Guest et al, 2012) I felt that a thematic analysis would function more favourably devoid of grounded theory than other analysis type may have.

3.3) Ethics

I knew that discussions of heritage, discrimination and belonging could be quite traumatic for participants. Thus, I wanted to provide the relevant ethical and safety guidelines in order to protect those involved whilst still obtaining relevant data.

I provided all participants with a research outline prior to their interviews. Within this, I explain the proposal for my research project and the way in which the interviews would be processed. I gave participants a faint idea of the directions of the research questions, without revealing their exact content. I felt that this was important so that participants did not 'prepare' their answers and allowed our discussions to be frank and honest.

Along with this research overview, I also provided all participants with a consent sheet. Within this, I detailed how their responses would be used in my research. I anonymised all responses so that no individual could be identified, although I did identify the area of the institution they attended – an important factor so I could determine whether experience differed from area to area in the UK. I made participants aware that they had the right to withdrawal from the research at any time, without providing any reasoning. Adding to this, they also had the ability to stop the interview at any time if they found it difficult to discuss an experience. I read these through to all participants and asked them once I had if they understood all that I had explained to them. Once they were happy, I had them sign the documents which I then scanned and uploaded to my secure sever.

Generally, there was a very minimal risk of physical harm to any of the participants. All interviews were either conducted within private rooms or using video-conferencing software in which I called these remote participants from a secure office within the faculty building.

3.4) Positionality

From personal experience, I felt it was important for myself to conduct the interviews rather than employing research assistants, the reasoning being that I felt that for PoCs, sometimes explaining everyday micro-aggressions and discrimination to people that have not experienced them can be rather frustrating. I wanted people to feel like what they were discussing had relevance and that the person discussing it with them understood their position.

Of course, this presented issues surrounding my neutrality within the debate. When discussing a topic of such personal relevance, it can be quite difficult to detach yourself and remain impartial. However, I did feel that for a topic concerning experience, it was important for someone that had possibly had similar experiences to be involved, so that the questions asked would be able to provide relevant and detailed responses to the research questions.

In spite of this, discussing these issues in some cases, was rather upsetting for me. As a result, I conducted 'off-loading' sessions with a faculty member in which I discussed some of these cases. This highlighted, for me, how researchers that share similar characteristics with respondents, and when discussing such intimate and sensitive matters, can rarely remain 'objective' and 'distant' completely.

3.5) Conclusion

In conclusion, I felt that using semi-structured interviews was the most appropriate method of gaining data for a project of this type. Incorporating a thematic analysis in this also allowed me to demonstrate clear links between participants, as well as incorporating differences discussed between participants that held differing characteristics e.g. gender. In the next chapter, I will discuss my research findings, demonstrating how these methods chosen were beneficial for me.

Throughout this Chapter, I present extracts from the 15 participants that took part in this project. Upon the completion of my thematic analysis, the following 4 sub-sections map the complex nature of navigating Higher Education as a PoC. Throughout, I have anonymised the individuals who took part as per my informal consent agreement. In the following chapter, please we warned there is very strong language, including examples of racial slurs and some recounts that readers might find distressing.

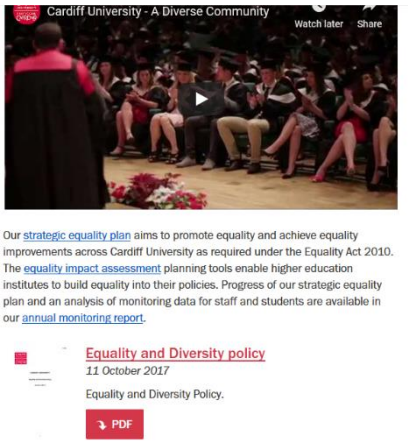
CHAPTER 4 - DATA FINDINGS & RESEARCH ANALYSIS

4.1) University Neo-Liberalist Approaches

I thought a valuable place to actualise this data was to contemplate what participants understood about their university's 'over-arching' policies towards Equality and Diversity and how these were implemented. Considering the work of Deem & Morley (2006) – and the uptake of policies by higher education institutions in response to government policy – I wanted to see what PoCs' opinions on the structure of these were. I felt that, being a policy that directly effects PoCs – and the universities framing of the importance of these issues – I wanted to see if these were accessible and straightforward in the manner in which they were understood.

I collected lots of documents proclaiming a university's commitment to an equal and diverse campus – below are just a few examples of universities responses to tackling equality and diversity issues.











The clear visibility of these policies directed my point of enquiry towards participants. I wanted to ascertain their understandings of these policies – had they sought them out prior to attending and/or applying for their choice of higher education provider?

In fact, the majority of participants showed little to no knowledge of the university's Equality and Diversity policies. In some cases, participants made an effort to consider the university's positionality, but were unable to fully delve into this. Participant 5, a mixed-race 3rd Year student discusses this in more detail;

P5 – you'd think it would be more widely broadcast (1) I wouldn't say it's something that's particularly easy to find(.) but when you do (.) its very vague

This sentiment was similarly held by Participant 9, a British Asian student at university in London;

P9 – {…} you know what (.) its bad (1) I don't think I've even thought about this before you mentioned it (.) fuck (.) I'd like to think that the uni has a policy (.) I mean surely {…} but then policy in practice (.) now that's a different question

Participant 1, a mixed-race female student, questions the legitimacy of the policy;

P1 – I vaguely knew (.) that there was (.) that obviously the university was against that sort of thing (.) I mean its not broadcast that widely {…} you know any uni (.) when they have a positive message but {..} its just there probably for the sake of it

Even with these different responses to the visibility of policy, I considered whether the policies employed were working in more covert ways. As Anderson (2015) writes, higher education has long been seen by PoCs as a stratum of 'white-dominance', effecting facets from the curriculum to university management structure. Many universities place emphasis on their desire to tackle this; whether it be through quota employment – a guideline strategy that has been heavily criticised – or through more creative expressions such as Black History Conferences or 'Blackademia' – a celebration of Black academics and their research at many universities through their Student's Union.

Considering this, I posed this to participants in the form of discussing the representability of PoCs on their course(s). I asked both the perceived racial makeup of the teaching staff and then how this correlated to the makeup of the student/course body. Participant 2, a mixed-race male student at university in the South West states;

P2 – {…}the teaching staff were{…} comparing to my ethnicity(.) I can't say there was anyone that represented me

Participant 4, a Black British Caribbean student is particularly passionate about this topic;

P4 – zero (.) zeeerrooo(1) what they hell (.) seriously (1) zero (.) absolute zero its(.) you know what its actually a joke because they want to spend all their time saying we're inclusive (.) we're diverse (1) wake up and smell the coffee no you're not

This inclination is held by P5 as well;

*P5 – I wouldn't say they are that diverse at all (.) no *laughter* I'm trying to be nice about it (1) but no not at all really (1) no I don't (.) no (1) and I think (.) the person of colour I can think of (.) teaches a module about race anyway (.) so its almost like you're being pigeon-hold into something anyway*

It seemed that the course and/or student body, in most cases, did not seem to reflect representations of diversity at University level. P6, a British Asian graduate, discussed the concern he had with PoC student progression into Academia and/or other roles within the university structure;

P6 –{…}when they were announcing {…} the PhD students and the Masters {…} they were just (.) just from a general observation (.) they were (.) from a different ethnic background than white British (.) so yeah (.) like {…} not seeing that translate into (.) actually professional teaching (.) or within roles (.) like who I was taught by (.) you wonder a lot about the reasoning

Participant 7, A British Asian student at university in London, discussed the make-up of his course and how it can have both positive and negative implications on perceptions of the students;

P7 – I mean (.) for my course (.) there's a lot of Asian students (.) possibly I don't know (.) more than you would expect (.) so that's nice in a sense (.) because you know there will be people that have a similar experience to you (2) or understand the same cultural things (.) but then (1) its kinda negative I guess {…} like I don't know how I feel about people being like {name of P7's course} being seen as a course for Asian boys {…} if you put that stereotype in (.) its not necessarily not true

Whilst we may have seen a greater uptake of students of colour attending higher education institutions, one might consider the *type* of courses that these students apply for and the reasonings behind this. P6 touches on this briefly;

P6 – I suppose (.) I picked it (.) there's that stereotype that Asian students pick medicine or whatever (1) you know because parents say to do so (.) but I wouldn't say that was the case with mine (.) I genuinely wanted to do my course for me

Most generally, the sentiment of most participants was that their courses were aptly 'diverse' and they had a good mix of people – in fact, there seemed to be more of an emphasis on the gender disparity in this respect, rather than a lack of 'diverse individuals.'

P3 – {..}there are a few like (1) people of colour (.) especially Black boys (.) mainly Black boys (.) I don't see many Black girls doing {P3's course} (2) from the courses that I have worked with

P5 continues this sentiment, although, while suggesting that the course is diverse, she still notes that she believes the course is 'white-dominated.'

P5 – I would say it was diverse (1) yeah it was diverse (.) but then I would still say that it was the majority of the course was white (1) I'd stick with that (.) I mean it was diverse (.) maybe in comparison to other schools (.) course or whatever (1) but it def(.) it was definitely white-dominated

4.2) Overt Discrimination

Conducting interviews with such a variety of students of colour from varying institutions goes some way to demonstrating the possible 'changing tides' of higher education populous. Nonetheless, stemming from the writings of Anderson (2015), who suggests university is 'white-dominated', I desired to consider whether participants had experienced overt examples of discrimination on/or around campus or any type of behaviour they would consider to be a microaggression(s). I speculated that if universities were so 'diverse and inclusive' this sort of behaviour would not occur – at least within the university environment.

I found data which greatly countered this view, with many of the personal and anecdotal stories from participants being upsetting and, in some cases, traumatic. Some of the incidents were more overt in nature than others, but a common consensus from participants was their reluctance to label something 'discrimination', even if it was to satisfy what many would consider to be the definition.

P5 recalls a very overt example of discrimination that occurred during a university night out;

P5 – {… }I was having a good night it was at the end of the night as well (.) um it was just me my partner and my friend (.) and this group of lads just came up right behind (1) and they were like (.) look at this nigger by here

Similar examples are discussed by P4;

P4 – {…} there's been instances where I've been called the n word um (.) by {…} a housemate (1) then nearly got stabbed (.) got called a monkey (.) told to go back to my country (.) go back to the jungle (.) had monkey noises made at you (1) and its like (.) hold on a second (1) who the hell do you think you are

And again, by P7;

P7 – I had my whole get up on (.) my Shalwar Kameez {traditional dress worn in parts of South & Central Asia} *(.) that's what its called (.) and some guys {…} drove past me in a car (.) wound the window down and*

just shouted Paki at me (1) that was like 2 minutes round the corner from campus {…} we're supposed to feel safe you know

In the following excerpt, P2 and I were discussing the connotations around Afro hair in public space. In response to this, he discusses an incident that occurred on a university night out;

P2 – I had one person (.) he was French (.) he came up behind me with a lighter (1) and tried to set fire to my hair (2) when I was like what are you doing (.) he was like (.) mulatto and laughed

All of the extracts above occurred in overt ways which some may suggest allows the behaviour to be easily identifiable. However, participants also experienced microaggressions – *a remark that makes someone feel insulted or treated badly because of their race {…} that may not have been intended* (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Sue (2010) discusses how microaggressions can often have greater impact that overt discrimination because it is seen as 'normalised behaviour.' Such an example of this is recalled by P3;

P3 –{…}we were at a pre-drinks (1) and this one like guy sitting next to me (.) I don't know him (.) I just met him that day (1) and he's asking me a tonne of questions like {…} do you carry a knife (.) or do you know how to rap (.) you know (.) one of them was do you know how to rap (1) and just general stupid ones (.) and then he started asking me (.) like do you carry a knife (1) and I was like nooooo (.) definitely not why would I be carrying a knife (1) you idiot (.) and then (3) what was it (.) one girl was telling me how {…}(1) she had a boyfriend (.) one of the guys in her halls (.) Black guy (.) and she was like oh have you slept with a Black guy (.) so there's like that kind of stigma Black guys outperform in the bed or something (.) which can be negative

Similarly, P1 discusses what she believes to be public understanding of Black bodies – particularly in relation to popular cultural understandings;

P1 – {…} I've definitely felt exoticized before {…} people will be like (.) I wish I had a bum like a Black girl {…} I wish I had your curves {…} I don't get why my identity has to be broken down to my body {…} I don't go around saying I wish I had boobs like a white girl or whatever

The notion of Black bodies 'violating the norm of public space' (Barling, 2015) is also something touched upon by Participant 13, a Black female student studying in Manchester;

P13 {…} I've had it before {…} people be like are you (.) down for the swirl of whatever {…} it sometimes makes me think whether people are liking me for me (2) or just because {…} I'm different to what they are used to or something

These personal reflections from participants were harrowing to me – especially, as I have experienced similar situations myself at university. Within the topic of these exerts, society and social club behaviour was mentioned frequently – as well as the university response to these allegations.

*P2 –{…} the agriculture society at my uni{…} there was a (.) there was a bit of an uproar (1) because at one of their socials (.) one of their nights out (1) on Halloween (.) they decided to dress up (.) all of them in the agriculture society (.) in Blackface{…} there was action taken (.) because I know they disbanded the society (.) but they just reformed (1) they're not endorsed by the uni anymore but they still exist (1) it doesn't seem very strong (*the punishment*) to me*

Another incident of Blackface was reported by P4;

P4 - obviously you've got the Blackface incidents we've had with medics and stuff at {university name} *(.) and similar examples at other unis {…} they're bad {…} but they are still happening {…} not a lot is being done it seems*

And again, by P1;

P1 – {…} we had a play {…} a performance {…} which had a big Blackface incident {…} but the uni didn't do a lot about it in my opinion {…} I only found out about it by going to another one of the society's performances {…} I don't think a lot of people knew before it hit the media

Participant 15, a mixed-race male 3rd year student, discusses these issues in relation to his university's policy of zero-tolerance towards discrimination;

P15 – {…} the Blackface incident {…} people knew about it {…} but the university (.) in my opinion (.) they protected the people that did it (.) they kept their identities hidden (.) it was like {…} like they just got a slap on the wrist or something (1) but what they did (.) it's a crime man (.) it hurts people (.) people get really upset (1) it's an emotional thing (.) but these white kids (1) it's a joke to them (.) and the uni seems to just treat it like that (2) honestly (.) its fucked

4.3) University Support

Taking account of the above, one could claim that overt discrimination and racial tensions is an obstacle that students of colour are still challenged by. In response to this, I wished to assess the support that was offered by universities to counter these issues. Many of the university websites, prospectuses and other promotional material that I accessed, stressed the importance of having safe, tolerant spaces on campus for students from different backgrounds to feel comfortable and safe. In addition to this, many also stressed the plethora of support services that are available for students who have been victims of this type of behaviour.

As such, I asked participants about their experiences with these 'safe spaces.' Did they feel that their university provided adequate places for them to go to discuss identity politics? And, if so, how was this integrated into wider university/campus life?

Participant 6 discusses how these societies are held within campus life but also in relation to a wider university structure;

P6 –{…}people who are part of those societies who have those discussions and debates (1) but personally I don't think there's like an overarching one (.) available to people who (.) its just a case of people setting up a society or something like that (2) but if there was a sort of (1) like a safe place (.) like you've mentioned (1) in every university (1) where people can discuss ideas and identity politics (1) and just you know (.) learn about each other (1) and celebrate each other's diversity

Participant 2 discussed how his university had these spaces, but highlighted his reservations about engaging with it;

P2 – um(2) yeah there was an Afro-Caribbean society {…}a society (.) um for loads (1) for loads of different cultural groups (.) so I know it was definitely there (.) I just didn't myself engage in it {…} it felt a bit separated from the uni you know (.) like it was there (.) did they uni care about it (2) did they care about what it did {…} I'm not 100% sure whether they did

P15 discusses this separation in more detail whilst also highlighting the discrepancies between who had access to these groups;

*P15 – {…} Afro-Caribbean Society (.) Pakistani society (.) whatever (2) they are there (.) but they are student-led (.) they are held in the Student's Union {…} would they be supported by the uni if the SU didn't push it{…}there still is micro-politics (.) with ACS (*Afro-Caribbean Society*) for example (.) I never felt Black enough {…} that's half of my identity right (.) politically speaking that's how I get seen (.) but those people there (2) they made me feel like I was half (2) as if it was a bad thing (.) as if I only had half a reason to be there {…} that stopped me engaging with it in the end (.) you know what's fucked {…} that's what* (sic) *the university says I should feel comfortable (.) where I should fit in (1) they say they're providing these safe spaces (.) personally I think that shows how absolutely out of touch they are (4) they just don't know (.) they don't understand (1) but then do they care?*

This general consensus from students here was that the university 'safe spaces' mentioned were often held within the Student's Union. One could suggest that this is a natural place for this type of debate to be held – and that may be precisely the reason why university structured support is also held in these fields. Despite this, academics such as Noh and Kaspar (2003), suggest that support offered by institutions needs to be tailored for PoCs, as their needs differ from other social groups - particularly with respect to the intricacies surrounding 'race', identity and belonging that present unique obstacles necessitating recognition.

Nonetheless, this notion does not seem to be present within the university support. P3 notes the convoluted nature in which this support is structured at his university;

P3 – {…} its been mixed in with the (1) transgender (1) kind of thing (2) its all become one in a sense (3) so if I'm like (.) if I'm looking for support if I've been discriminated against (.) I'll go to the same support {…} if someone is being prejudice against because you are gay I'd expect them (.) that kind of place to be in the same place I'd go to if I'd been discriminated against because I'm Black (1) but then each of these groups has a unique need don't they

Again, with P11;

P11 – {…} its mixed up with PC culture definitely (.) I don't think they know what people need (2) or the fact that they need different things (.) I'm not going to need the same support as someone who's gay or getting an emergency uni loan or whatever (.) unless you straddle both categories (2) that needs to be recognised (.) otherwise (.) in my opinion (.) that support is useless (.) its just tokenistic

P15 discusses, in more detail, how the current support structure can prove to be problematic and the ways in which it may discourage people from reporting issues;

P15 – I was racially discriminated by some students (.) I won't bore you with all the details {…} but the kid called me a nigger (.) I was pissed (.) and my mum told me to take it to the university support {…} by the time I actually spoke to someone (.) like in charge or whatever (1) I'd explained it and explained it and explained it (2) so many times {…} every time it was the same reactions (.) they just looked shook (2) like they didn't know what to do about it

I – that's really interesting (1) why do you think that was the case

P15 – because (.) they've not experienced it (1) those people in those roles don't get it (2) its funny (.) you'll laugh (1) they told me to go to the counsellor {…} I was quite upset (.) so I did (1) and do you know what she said {…} well he's called you a name hasn't he (.) its only a name (.) I felt like turning round and being like (.) I'm not being funny (1) it's a name with 400 years of colonialism and hate and (.) fucking everything behind it {…} but then I thought (.) what is the point? (.) Because they just don't get it (.) they don't ask us why this stuff hurts us so much {…} to them discrimination is over (.) everyone's equal (.) and you know what (.) that's just not the case

Similarly, P4 discusses his understanding of the university provisions that were put in place to deal with reports of discrimination put forward by students;

P4 - So with {name of society involved in the alleged racist incident} *the students had to go on race awareness training {…}it was only like a couple of hours of sessions (.) and after it was all done (.) they just went back to normal there were no tests to see if they had actually changed (2) so yeah they have been made aware (.) but we're aware of a lot of things (.) but we don't change our actions (.) they need to move more towards changing people's minds and attitudes (.) and then (2) in that way hope to change behaviours (.) because really and truly (.) the uni does (.) there's no (1) for example (2) the moment you say (.) a white student calls you the n word or calls you this (.) not only is there no where for you to report it to (.) if you do report it (.) it then leads to so many questions I don't think the uni knows (1) I don't think they know what to do (.) when things like this come around (1) and I think that's the issue of not having (1) a diverse team at the top who make policy and make changes in the interests of students who don't look like them*

4.4) Changing the climate

With the lack of support from the university evident, I posed the query to participants about how they thought this could be aided and/or rectified. The responses tended to follow one of two thematic channels; either a suggestion of a change to university policy and/or leadership structure, or a change in discourse and curricula. In despite of this, the responses did hold some level of commonality – that the changes enforced should be student led. P14 discusses how 'changing people's minds' is imperative to being able to change the approach undertaken by universities;

P14 – {…} they need to move more towards changing people's minds don't you (.) and then (2) in that way (1) maybe you can hope to change how they behave

Similarly, P6 cites how the job of challenging perception – and possible discrimination – should not be the sole responsibility of PoCs, especially within a university environment;

P6 – {…} ignorance is not bliss (.) it has to be dealt with and educated (1) and it should be not only our responsibility (.) to make these outcries and say (.) this isn't good or whatever (.) it should be the responsibility of the uni to assess and address the concerns (of PoCs)

Other participants were franker in their discussions around student-led involvement in changing attitudes.

P7 – {…} its got to be student-led (.) because the uni aren't going to make moves (.) they just care about the money (.) they really need to listen to the students (1) and our needs {…} stop running it like a business and think more about the students (.) I think if the environment is not welcoming (2) people will just stop wanting to go (.) it's as simple as that really (1) and when you take away the customers (.) you're fucked aren't you

Participant 15 debates whether the prevalence of more PoCs on campus would cause an altering of attitudes, hopefully in a positive way;

P15 – {…} more visibility surely (.) fuck they can't keep us out forever (.) if more people {…} have degrees {…} we can start making changes (.) but it has to come from the top as well {…} we need allies

And again, with P8, who cites how she felt attitudes towards PoCs have changed over recent years – something which she suggests has to continue to happen;

P8 – {…} we've seen change (.) in the last 40(.) 50 years or whatever (.) since my grandma came here (1) so maybe that's what we have to do {…} get allies that legitimise what we have to say (1) but also the uni have to be coherent (2) they have to want to listen

Throughout this project, I obtained a plethora of data which I could have mentioned. However, I felt the aforementioned extracts conveyed a clear narrative of issues still evident with UK Higher Education and the complicit nature of E&D policy in allowing this behaviour to continue. In the next chapter, I shall discuss the major takeaways from this piece of research and discuss the ways in which UK HE might alter its position towards this in the future.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I collected different responses from participants, each from differing higher education institutions. This highlighted the deep-rooted problems regarding 'race' within Higher Education in the UK. The themes noted are both common-place, yet unsurprising for someone who occupies the groups affected. A point of great concern I believe, is the regularity at which participants were able to recall both personal and anecdotal examples of overt discrimination, happening in and around campus. In an age where we are led to believe society has become more tolerant, this may come as a surprise to some. Taking this all into consideration, I surmised 5 major takeaways from this research – each which I will elaborate on in due course.

Firstly, one has to consider the impact of university support services and how these were navigated by participants. The overwhelming viewpoint here was that, despite universities indicating that they have considered pastoral support an essential factor in relation to Equality & Diversity policy, student support is difficult to find within the university structure. Not only this, but the support available is tied to other social categories; such as LGBTQ+ and social class. Whilst I am not disputing that these categories can intersect – they definitely do – each of these groups have issues unique to them. Therefore, accumulating all of these together neglects the nuances these groups provide, leading to the support feeling less individualistic and rather token in nature.

Secondly, participants viewed institutional support as staggeringly ineffective. They claimed that whilst incidences could be reported, the archaic and non-cohesive nature in which institutional support structures are integrated provide difficulties to solving issues. This could deter individuals from wishing to report their issues to the 'provided body' because the system is either too slow and unwelcoming or, more concerningly, that the need to discuss these issues with individuals who do not understand creates greater levels of stress and anxiety surrounding events that for many are already upsetting and traumatic.

Thirdly, an emphasis from universities on the 'diverse' nature of campus continues to be rendered, yet the overwhelming analysis shown by my participants indicates how academia still remains a majority white-dominated field. Whilst we have clearly made progress with the presentation of non-white bodies within institutions of higher learning – whether this is down to university policy or a wider societal shift remains to be seen – the individuals delivering the curriculum are more often than not from white backgrounds. Where this differed, a common trend was easily visible. For non-white members of academia, they were often pigeon-hold into running/teaching on modules centred around discussions on 'race', identity and/or belonging – something that is not an issue faced by their white counterparts. Now one can understand the desire to do this, many individuals could be uncomfortable with a white member of staff teaching a module on 'race' was there to be a non-white member of staff available to take this. However, the fact that the majority of diverse staff mentioned by participants occupied these types of roles is greatly concerning.

By having a less diverse team of teaching staff, one could argue it leads to the curriculum continuing to be colonised – in such that it supports the view of the white hegemon as the norm. This ignores the vast differentiation of narratives and backgrounds and could lead some to feel that their positions in society are inferior.

Fourthly, the manner in which E&D policy is delivered needs vast improvement. Whilst university E&D policy has changed to reflect governmental changes to legislation, the practical manner in which it is delivered is still greatly perplexing. There seems to be no direct link between the policy put in place by universities and the provisions that are supposed to be available for students of colour. Often, the 'safe spaces' supposedly available to students of colour through these policies, are provided by the university's Student's Union rather than within the wider university infrastructure. That this service is student-led is not problematic per se; I believe that incorporating students into this delivery is greatly important to develop a sympathetic campus where difference is normalised. But it would be beneficial to have greater structural support in trying to implement these aspects, rather than just an overarching policy which feels static.

Finally, and perhaps the most poignant and charged theme from this study is the continued prevalence of 'overt' and more 'covert' discrimination felt by students of colour in and around campus. Whilst some may suggest, that overt discrimination is an antiquated concept for people of colour, this research shows that this is still a major issue. Also notable was the common experience of micro-aggressions on campus. Many individuals caught in the utilisation of micro-aggressions may consider themselves to be liberal, open-minded people (Broido, 2004). Nonetheless, with a lack of education and understanding, behaviour can still go unchecked and this can cause a great deal of harm to those effected.

As someone who has had the unfortunate experience of being racially discriminated on campus, this finding does not provide considerable shock.

As I have shown in this study, there appears to be a lack of university support structures and representation within the academy. These issues were reported by all participants to varying degrees and goes someway to showing how complicit, accidental or otherwise, university structures are in allowing the exclusion and stigmatisation of individuals that fall outside of the 'accepted majority.' One solution could be the clearer visibility of people of colour within the university structure. With greater visibility I suggest it is likely to create greater awareness of the different narratives people present, breaking down the white hegemon. On a structural level, I suggest that universities invest in greater education and awareness in relation to equality and diversity. Incorporating non-white individuals in these discussions is greatly important and I believe will help to move policy in a more favourable direction. To find a way for social actors in University settings to interact and dwell in more cohesive, decisive and positive way, we need to include more people of colour in these conversations. To take a quote from Harper Lee, 'you never really understand a person until you consider things from their point of view.' If PoCs perspectives are not considered, how can we ever be understood?

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