Understanding the Psychosocial Costs of Racism to White staff Members of an Ethnically Diverse, Post-92 University

Associate Professor, Dr Denise A Miller and Dr Charmaine Brown

22nd May 2025- 5:30-8:00 PM.

Room 822, IOE – 20 Bedford Way

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Aims

- To explore the concept of institutional racism in higher education from the perspective of White university staff.
- To critically engage with Kivel's (1996) framework on the psychosocial costs of racism to White people.
- To examine the key findings of our study and their implications for HEIs and society at large.
- To encourage reflection – your role in addressing racism within academia and professional settings.

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The Authors

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How emotions can affect us....

- Attention - Emotions help determine what we focus on.
- Memory - We remember emotionally charged experiences better than neutral ones. Emotion strengthens the encoding and retrieval of memories.
- Motivation - Positive emotions (e.g., excitement, pride, or interest) increase motivation to engage and persist. Negative emotions can shut it down.
- Cognitive Processing - Stress or fear can impair problem-solving and critical thinking by narrowing your focus and reducing working memory. On the other hand, positive emotions can enhance your thinking.

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Part 1

Introduction and context (30 mins)

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Background

Recent focus on institutional racism in Higher Education and response to pivotal events:

- Tragic killing of George Floyd
- Disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups

Educational leaders' efforts:

- EDI in HEIs
- Ongoing initiatives to tackle racism
- Race Equality Chartermark

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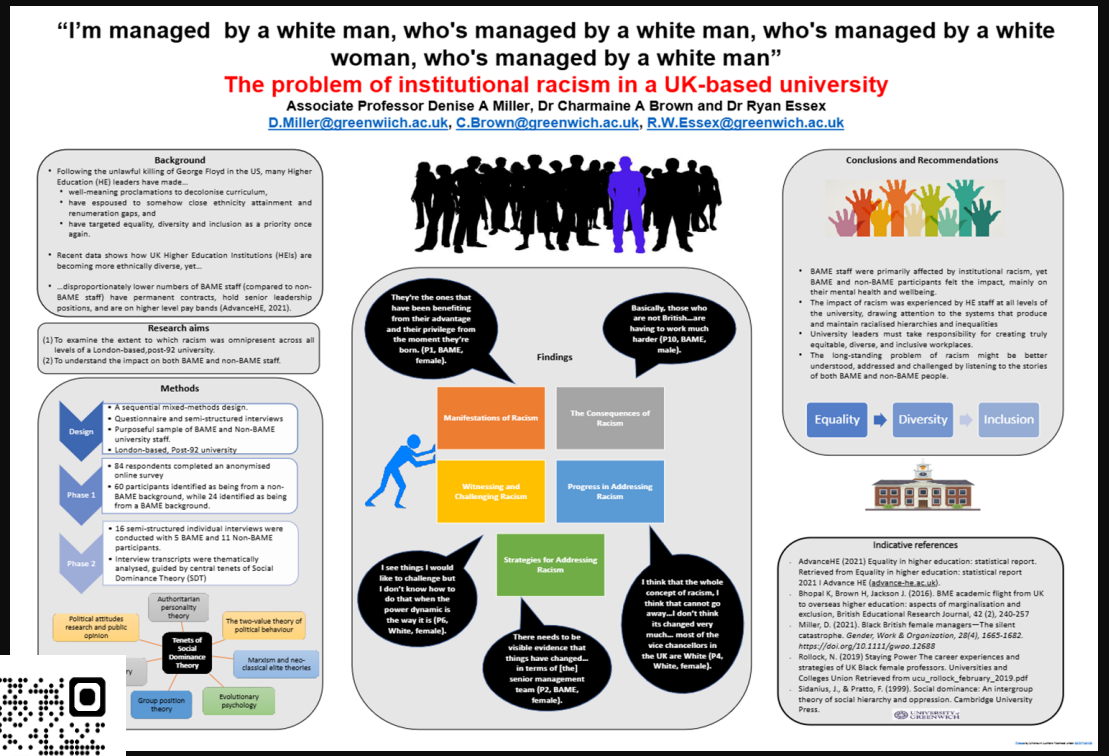
Our Research



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Research article

‘I’m managed by a White man who’s managed by a White man who’s managed by a White woman who’s managed by a White man’: the problem of institutional racism in a UK-based university

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Part 2

Our Research, Key Findings & Discussion (45 mins)

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The Psychosocial Costs of Racism to **White** University Staff

Purpose of the study

Aims:

- To understand psychosocial costs of racism
- Focus on White university staff members' experiences
- Acknowledge historical privilege of White staff colleagues.
- Foster empathy, understanding, and collaboration among ***all*** members of our academic community.

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Conceptual Framework

- Based on Kivel's Concept (1996)
- Feeling Guilt and Shame
- Potential for Isolation and Fewer Interactions
- Tied to Socio-economic Mobility
- Maintaining Status in Hierarchical Systems

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Conceptual framework

In her 2018 book White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism, DiAngelo explains that this fragility stems from living in racial comfort and insulation.

When that comfort is challenged (by discussions of racism, accusations of bias, or acknowledgment of privilege) white people may react with anger, fear, guilt, or silence.

Institutional Racism = 'The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racial stereotyping.'

Literature review

- Goodman (2001): Explored White students' experiences. Reduced empathy and guilt> Feelings of internalized oppression

- Spanierman et al. (2009): Studied white university freshmen. Changing behaviours over time. Empathic, fearful guilt vs. obliviousness.

- Exum (2022): Focused on perceived consequences. Change in appearance scenarios. Feelings of shame and embarrassment

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Research consensus

- Guilt, shame, cognitive dissonance
- Economic impact on well-being
- Reflects Kivel's notions of emotional impact

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Research rationale

- Research on psychosocial costs of racism largely focused on impact on Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) university staff.
- Little attention is paid to the experiences of White university staff regarding racism's psychosocial costs.
- White staff often considered beneficiaries of racial privilege, yet their social, emotional and well-being toll remains understudied.
- Essential to understand and address the unique challenges and responses of White staff to systemic racism.

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Research questions

- Why did you want to become involved with this research?
- How do you define racism?
- How does racism affect you?
- How can racism be addressed in your university?

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Data collection

Phase I: Survey

- Ethical clearance obtained from University Research Ethics Committee
- Invitations sent to HE staff members in a post-92 HEI.
- Online Qualtrics survey introduced study and provided survey link.

Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews

- Conducted via Microsoft Teams, lasting up to 60 minutes.
- Interview guide with open-ended questions explored racism perceptions.
- 3 researchers: 1 interviewer, 1 recorder, 1 off-camera to ensure accuracy.

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Data collection

Sample: 12 participants self-identified as White, diverse in faculty and campus. 7 males (58.33%) and 5 females (41.67%). Sample distribution spanned various employment levels and lengths of service.

Respected participants' autonomy, informed consent, and confidentiality. Provided support resources for participants if needed. Transcriptions maintained anonymity using individualized codes.

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Data Analysis: Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019)

- Data immersion and familiarization
- Generation of preliminary codes
- Identification of themes in data
- Reviewing the themes
- Defining and naming themes/sub-themes
- Producing the report:
- Transparency
- Reflexivity
- Validation efforts

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Findings

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Theme I: Reasons for getting involved (RGI)

There's currently a lot of interest in the realities of racism and prejudice in the UK and it's, it's something that I have been conscious [of] in my own academic career, not as a victim of it, but it's something that I have seen affecting other people and colleagues…so I'm just interested in taking part in providing data (P3, female).

It's not kind of discussed in an open way. It's, you know, very cloak and dagger… but I'm very much interested in this conversation, and how this conversation can be widened out (P15, female).

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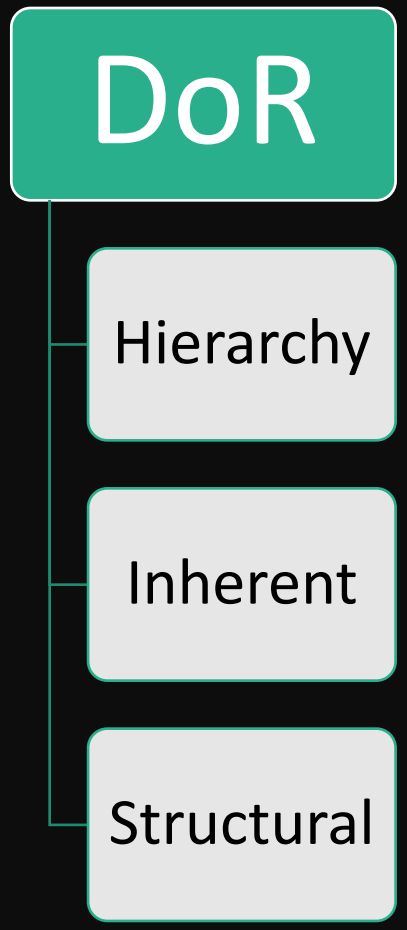
Theme 2: Definitions of racism



It's very hierarchical. It's very structured, there is a way of doing things. Even this…modern university, post-92 university, it feels like it's taken on the trappings (P15, female).

If people think that they can exploit vulnerabilities…if you are from a racial group…that is historically discriminated, that does create certain disadvantages, obviously, and people will exploit them further. People who think like this will exploit them further (P4, female).

Well, I felt very angry…I think there is a bit of a disgust as well, because it's such a twisted way (P16, female).

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Theme 3: PCRW University Staff

PCRW

- Emotional
- Vicarious
- Anxiety

I suppose indirectly in the sense that I've witnessed colleagues experiencing indirect racism, and so I suppose it does affect me to that extent…quite uncomfortable… I felt terrible in the moment…I felt absolutely terrible (P3, female).

Extremely traumatising… the context is just not healthy… it's a very distressing topic…I just felt this wave, like a wave of embarrassment and kind of shame and awkwardness… it's embarrassing it's kind of shameful … just kind of like the horrible knots in my stomach…thinking oh my god…that's just embarrassing (P16, female).

Theme 3: PCRW University Staff

PCRW

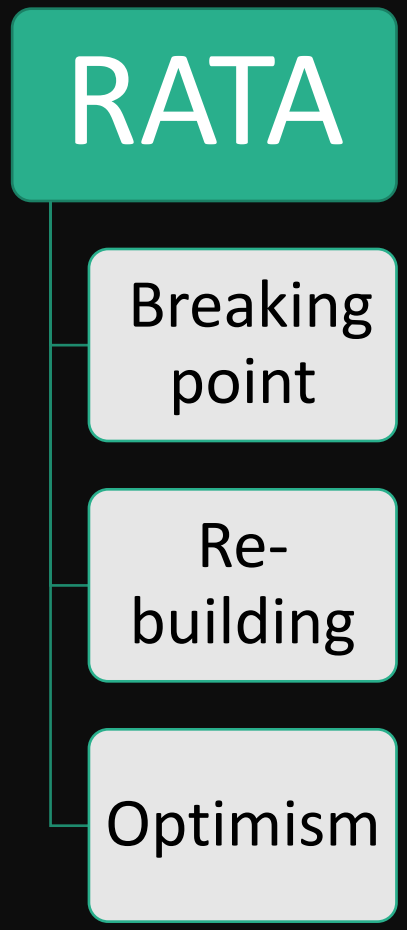
- Self-preservation
- Toxicity
- Negative outcomes

I just realised how I usually just push it outside my awareness because it's too difficult to think about (P16, female).

It made me put some armour and switch off my personality because I need to protect myself (P15, female).

I don't want to be part of their gang, because I don't like what they don't do. I don't want to negotiate on my value set, particularly around race…I guess it's indirectly affected me in that sense that I'm not prepared to join their tacit club (P17, female).

Theme 4: Remain as they are (RATA)



You might have an explosion…when you kind of push people to a limit then you know people explode and that's no good (P18, male).

I do feel like Guy Fawkes. I think the only way to fix the faculty is blow it up. Blow it up smash it (P17, female).

I have to maintain some degree of optimism; otherwise, how can you carry on (P16, female).

Discussion

- Qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 12 White university staff members in a post-92 HEI.
- Lack of research on psychosocial costs of racism to White university staff.
- White staff definitions consistent with Macpherson Inquiry's view of racism.
- Recognizing racism as embedded in structures, policies, and practices.
- White staff motivated to challenge the status quo and understand racism.
- Unique perspective due to being beneficiaries of systemic inequalities.
- Guilt, embarrassment, anger, and shame due to awareness of systemic racism.
- Cognitive dissonance arising from acknowledging racial privilege.

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Discussion

- Anxiety, stress, and emotional exhaustion from confronting racial disparities.
- Activism and advocacy leading to burnout and frustration.
- Calls for addressing the experiences of both dominant and marginalized groups.
- Recognizing complexities and nuances of addressing racism in HE.
- Parallel with global movements for change (e.g., George Floyd protests).
- Urgent need for transformation to prevent potential crises and unrest.

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Limitations and future studies

Ethnicity categories collapsed

- Sample size necessitated collapsing ethnicity categories.
- Limited insight into distinct experiences of individual participants.
- Diversity within White participants not fully explored.

Lack of intersectional exploration

- Intersectionality not fully considered (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender identity).
- Potential influence on participants' experiences not addressed..

Understanding racism as institutional and systemic:

- White allies' role in promoting equality
- Commitment to addressing interlocking systems of oppression.

Exploring intersections

- How different forms of discrimination interact.
- How diverse identities shape experiences.

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Conclusions and recommendations

Inclusive policies and practices

- HEIs should adopt and implement policies that actively address institutional racism.
- Develop inclusive practices that promote equality and diversity at all levels of the institution.
- Engage White staff in anti-racist efforts.

Allyship and awareness

- Encourage White staff to educate themselves on systemic racism.
- Foster allyship through awareness campaigns, workshops, and discussions

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Conclusions and recommendations

Support for SEMH

- Provide resources for staff members to address the psychosocial impact of racism.
- Establish confidential support networks to help individuals cope with emotions related to racism.

Intersectional training

- Offer intersectional training to staff, addressing the interconnectedness of various forms of discrimination.
- Equip staff with tools to recognize and address bias and discrimination in their roles.

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Thankyou.

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