Stop the pain: Black and minority ethnic scholars on diversity policy obfuscation in universities

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Abstract

Purpose – The author extends the work on diversity policy in UK higher education by centring the voices of Black and minority ethnic scholars and de-centring white comfort with the aim of a call to stop the pain that sanitised university diversity policies cause Black and minority ethnic scholars.

Design/methodology/approach – Using in-depth qualitative and auto-ethographic research methods, this paper engages with both respondents' narratives as well as the author's experience of carrying out the research within the walls of predominately white universities.

Findings – In order for universities to move beyond hollow and sanitised diversity, they must centre the voices of Black and minority ethnic scholars. Respondents spoke of their experiences of pain, and feelings of "taking up" space in predominately white universities. The author also discusses respondents' feelings towards diversity and inclusion policies such as the Race Equality Charter Mark.

Originality/value – The research is built on previous work on diversity by decentring white comfort.

Keywords Diversity, Racism, Higher education, white comfort

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is disproportionately impacting and killing Black and minority ethnic people. Police brutality is still taking Black lives, as we have witnessed through the murder of George Floyd. Universities have responded in various ways to the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 – namely, by showcasing their "diverse" spaces and with statements such as "we must ensure our university is inclusive". Whilst there have been a number of recent media stories, academic publications and policy-related documents discussing race and racism in higher education (see for example, Fazackerley, 2020; Murugesu, 2020; EHRC, 2019; Advance HE, 2019), universities have been less reactive to racism within their own walls.

There is a discomfort in the discussions of race and racism in UK higher education; this has meant that race is often not discussed or acknowledged. Rather, there is a preference to preserve Whiteness without ever naming it as such, ensuring the maintenance of white comfort and avoiding what DiAngelo (2018) refers to as "white fragility". DiAngelo (2018, p. 60) defines white fragility as a "state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviours, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium". As Shirley Anne Tate (2018, p. 73) also argues "racism's familiar invisibility produces its own psychic life in institutions and individuals through the power of its deniability which paralyses us into inaction". To maintain the white equilibrium and white comfort, universities have opted to discuss and favour diversity and diversity

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policies. If we have diversity policies, equality and diversity committees, as universities so often do, then how could they possibly be racist? In my research with Black and minority ethnic scholars in England, most of whom also sit within such committees, I sought to decentre white comfort and centralise the voices of Black and minority ethnic scholars. This is a call to stop the pain that sanitised university diversity policies cause Black and minority ethnic scholars.

Diversity policy

Sara Ahmed (2007) evidenced in her research that the language and discourse of diversity policy has enabled, encouraged, favoured and empowered the prioritising of Whiteness and white privilege rather than its dismantling. As she argues (2007, p. 604):

> The discourse of valuing diversity is of course mainstream and hesitates between discourses of economic value (the business case for diversity) and moral value (the social justice case). This model of diversity reifies difference as something that already exists "in" the bodies of others (we are diverse because they are here). Their differences become our diversity. It is this model of diversity as something that others bring to the organisation which we can see at work in the use of visual images of diverse organisations: images of "colourful" happy faces, which show the diversity of the university as something it has embraced.

Jones (2006, p. 146) noted in her review of what diversity means for Black women in higher education that "generally speaking, a cornerstone of the diversity approach is that people in the workplace be understood as individuals rather than as members of social groups. Such an approach has significant implications for members of social groups who may experience social disadvantage and discrimination as a consequence of their perceived group difference". Thus, the institution or social organisation is never under scrutiny, but rather the individuals are placed within institutions to enhance the image of diversity, assimilating those individuals into the dominant structures. Gary Loke (2015) also argues that for too long there has been the presumption that issues are rooted within individual Black and minority ethnic students and staff members rather than within the institutional culture. Thus, a commitment to diversity is not necessarily a commitment to dismantling structures of racism, sexism, classism and elitism that exists in universities.

In this paper, I build upon the work of Sara Ahmed (2012) whose research with diversity practitioners in higher education illustrated that diversity policies and "statements of commitment" are "non-performative" i.e. "they do not bring about the effects that they name" (17). By collating a series of personal narratives detailing the continued experiences of marginalisation, exclusion and frustration on the part of those who should benefit from diversity discourse in the UK, while acting as part of the discussion on diversity polices in their own universities, I seek to decentre Whiteness and white comfort, to re-centre the supposed beneficiaries of diversity and to expose the ways in which diversity still fails those it nominally exists to help. Within this work, I also weave my own experiences as a minoritized ethnic scholar working in universities and conducting research on racism and encountering similar feelings and experiences as the respondents. In light of these narratives, this paper argues that university policies need to centre the experiences of Black and minority ethnic staff members and students and de-centre white comfort in order for Black and minority ethnic groups to feel that they have benefitted from these policies.

In the first part of this paper, I present my methodology and my experiences of carrying out research with Black and minority ethnic academic and postgraduate research staff members. Given that this paper aims to decentre Whiteness and white comfort, it is important that I present my own experiences of discomfort in carrying out research as a minoritized

ethnic scholar in the white academy. I draw upon the work of Johnson (2019) to describe the "sharp white background" that forms the institutional spaces in which diversity initiatives and policy are developed and implemented. I then move on to discuss the ways in which power and privilege are firmly rooted within UK universities and how diversity as a policy has enabled universities to centre and reproduce white comfort. I illustrate this using the current UK higher education diversity data for both Black and minority ethnic staff members and students. In an attempt to decentre white comfort from the discourse of diversity in UK higher education, I proceed to present the narratives of the respondents who took part in the research, focussing on their experiences of being silenced and othered and their feelings towards policies such as the Race Equality Charter Mark. These narratives draw from the respondents' experiences in their own universities as academics and as members of working groups, equality and diversity panels and similar. I do this firstly by presenting how the participants experience diversity policies upon entry into their universities, i.e. from the initial "supposed" benefit of diversity of being "offered" the "gift" to be part of the academic community. I follow with an analysis of the participants' experiences and frustrations of being part of their universities as academics and members of equality and diversity committees.

Sharp white background

Conducting research focussed on race and racism in universities that perpetuate Whiteness, whilst experiencing similar feelings and moments as the respondents in my research, requires discussion and reflection. Johnson (2019, p. 2) asks "is it even possible to do this work without throwing our racialised bodies against this *sharp white background* that makes one feel most coloured?" How can I research shifting and complex experiences of being without re-inscribing "the researched into the dominant representations of powerlessness"? As a minoritized woman conducting research with others who are also minoritized in the academy, I strive to keep this potential for re-inscription – and thus for "othering" respondents and rendering them "powerless" – at the forefront of my thoughts and research.

In my previous research (Ahmet, 2020a, b), I consider the role that space plays in shaping the experiences of Black and minority ethnic students at predominately white universities. I argue that universities are spaces of both power and privilege (Ahmet, 2020a, b), within which British colonial histories are inscribed on the campuses and architecture of many of Britain's oldest and most celebrated universities. The majority of UK elite, research intensive Russell [1] group universities were founded, built and established to satisfy the needs of the British Empire (see Bhambra *et al.*, 2018). This is evidenced by the ways in which Whiteness and white privilege are reproduced through the knowledge created and taught. This is textured by inequalities because knowledge itself is highly racialized, gendered and classed, which is also linked to the imperial foundations of UK higher education (Murji and Solomos, 2015; Tate and Page, 2018; Tate, 2016). The use of metrics such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to demonstrate excellence in higher education (see Bhopal, 2015) is one such way that universities often present themselves through the criteria of excellence.

White supremacy endures through the illusion of meritocracy and academic excellence, which enables elite universities to retain their positions (see Arday, 2020). Kalwant Bhopal (2018, p. 19) has argued that "universities use mechanisms to protect and reserve places in elite universities for white students as an act of white privilege which is used to enhance their own position of elitism to maintain their power. Consequently, such universities work to maintain and reinforce their representation as white middle-class institutions, reserved for white middle-class students". This is substantiated by the current data on diversity in UK higher education. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), there has been an increase in the number of British Black and minority ethnic undergraduate students. In 2016–2017, 130,020 students identified as Black British and in 2018–2019 this went up

5.2% to 137,185. However, Black and minority ethnic students are still underrepresented in research intensive universities at less than 4% compared with the UK average of 8% (www.HESA.ac.uk). Alexander and Arday (2015) and Ahmet (2020a, b) have documented that many Black and minority ethnic students remain concentrated in less prestigious, teaching intensive universities and under-represented in elite, research-intensive universities. This is also tied to the imperial histories of older universities, which new teaching-intensive universities do not possess.

Data on university staff members present a similar picture. In the 2016/2017 academic year, there were just 25 Black women recorded to be working as professors, out of 19,000 professors in total (Rollock, 2019). More than 14,000 white men were recorded as professors, while just 90 Black men held positions of the same status (Advance HE). As Bhopal (2019) has noted, Black and minority ethnic academics are less likely to be in senior decision-making roles and are more likely to be on fixed term contracts compared to their white colleagues. Recent data from Advance HE have identified that in 2018, 94.5% of academic managers, directors and senior officials were white and 5.5% Black and minority ethnic. Similarly, 94.1% of professional services' staff members who are managers, directors and senior officials were white and 5.9% identified as Black and minority ethnic (Advance HE, 2019). According to the Universities and Colleges Union's (UCU) UK data for the period 2017/2018, 42% of Black and minority ethnic academics were on fixed term contracts, 6% of Black academics were on zero-hour contracts and 18% hourly paid lecturers.

Methodology

Between 2015 and 2018, in-depth interviews were carried out with Black and minority ethnic academics and postgraduate research students at UK Russell group universities in England. The research was given ethical clearance by the university ethics committee. I conducted in-depth interviews with 15 Black and minority ethnic academics at various stages of their careers and with seven Black and minority ethnic postgraduate research students. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min and was then transcribed and uploaded to NVivo 10. Thematic analysis was carried out (Bryman, 2008). Due to the sensitive nature of the research, a confidentiality agreement was signed by the transcription company; 15 out of the 22 participants were members of or involved with their university equality and diversity committees in some capacity (see Table 1).

Respondents were recruited via email and word of mouth. Once respondents agreed to be interviewed, details of the research were sent, as were consent forms. The majority of the interviews were carried out in cafes, offices, parks, spaces where respondents felt some degree of "comfort" given the discomfort of the university space. Respondents determined the length of interviews, although they were semi-structured with interview topic guides. Many of the academics interviewed had not had the opportunity to speak openly about their experiences or reflect on their journeys into higher education. A specialist transcription agency transcribed the audio files verbatim. Once the interviews had been transcribed, I read through the transcripts and then began the process of cleaning the data to remove all identifiers. Due to the nature of the research, it was important that any identifiers be removed from the transcripts, such as institution name, ethnicity, gender and position within the institution. I carried out a thematic analysis.

After each interview, I completed a research diary to reflect on the interviews and my own feelings and emotions. I conducted one interview over a two-day period during the summer of 2016; both sessions lasted 1.5 h and consisted of so many moments of pain. I noted the following in my research diary:

14 July 2016 5 p.m.

Participant identifier	Academic/PGR	Member of EDI group
Participant 1	Academic	Yes
Participant 2	Academic	Yes
Participant 3	Academic	Yes
Participant 4	Academic	Yes
Participant 5	Academic	No
Participant 6	Academic	Yes
Participant 7	Academic	Yes
Participant 8	Academic	Yes
Participant 9	Academic	Yes
Participant 10	Academic	Yes
Participant 11	Academic	Yes
Participant 12	Academic	No
Participant 13	Academic	No
Participant 14	Academic	Yes
Participant 15	Academic	Yes
Participant 16	PGR	No
Participant 17	PGR	Yes
Participant 18	PGR	Yes
Participant 19	PGR	Yes
Participant 20	PGR	Yes
Participant 21	PGR	No
Participant 22	PGR	No

Table 1.
Breakdown of respondents

> The interview started at around 3.45pm today as I was running late. The location was the office which was really hot. This was the first time in my research career that I did not or maybe I could not follow the old topic guide. The topic guide is usually my friend to ensure that the interview does not go off point or that all topics are covered. But today I could not keep to it, I also did not want to. The pain that poured and poured could not be stopped. Also, should not be stopped. I am frustrated and wonder if what I am doing is ethical?

15 July 2016 2 p.m.

> Initially I was not sure if I could go back and continue the interview, but I knew I had to. Today it felt more positive from the perspective of the respondent at the start but when we started to talk about promotion . . . I know that none of this research will ever make universities change but to give space and time for talking is also important and I am glad that I shared these moments with this academic.

The knowledge that so often research with Black and minority ethnic scholars is never acted upon was painful and I offered no solution. I frequently walked away feeling that I had provided time and space for talking but nothing more, as I wrote in my first extract – is what I am doing now ethical? I feel conflicted as I write this paper too. It has taken some time for me to write a paper based on the research I carried out, and this was partly due to my own position within the research and within the sector. Due to the social order within universities, I knew I was powerless to ensure change from the research. As a minoritised woman in the academy, I had my own experiences and obstacles, which I have encountered in my journey. I shared experiences similar to the respondents' and found it difficult not to share those experiences, thoughts, feelings and disappointment.

My research diaries enabled me to consider my own positionality and how it impacted the research process, research outcomes and the interviews themselves. My experiences have been shaped by race, class and gender; thus, the interviews also became encounters of shared experiences and differences. As many researchers have discussed (see for example, Park and Song, 1995; Valentine, 2001), gender, class, race and sexuality all shape the interview dynamics. In this research, there is the added dimension that the respondents and I all worked

in UK higher education and recognised these interview spaces in many comparable ways, as sites of authority, congeniality, recluse and conviviality, sometimes all at once.

One of the extracts from my research diary was written after an interview with a female, Black and minority ethnic academic; this was one occasion where I felt torn between what I was doing as a researcher within these walls of Whiteness and the sharing of pain:

> Today was a really hard one. The things spoken left me deflated as the people who I respected and looked up to as role models in the academy have been treated so badly. Why do we do this.

Knowing that research in higher education on both Black and minority ethnic staff and student experiences has been carried out for over 20 years with little to no change, I was often left wondering how I could ensure the respondents' voices and experiences could enact change?

In the remainder of this paper, I draw on the narratives provided from Black and ethnic minority academic staff members and postgraduate research students and explore two key themes that emerged from the data analysis: Black and minority ethnic scholars' pain and discomfort in university diversity policies. First, I centralise the experiences of Black and minority ethnic academics and postgraduate research students who are currently working and researching at UK universities. Second, I centre their experiences of being silenced and their thoughts on policies such as the Race Equality Charter Mark. I focus on the Race Equality Charter as, at the time of conducting my research in 2016–2018, the Race Equality Charter Mark had just been launched. The Race Equality Charter is "One of the services provided by Advance HE that is improving the representation, progression and success of minority ethnic staff and students within higher education. It provides a framework through which institutions work to self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers standing in the way of minority ethnic staff and students. Member institutions develop initiatives and solutions for action and can apply for a Bronze or Silver REC award, depending on their level of progress" (Advance HE, 2019). The introduction of the Race Equality Charter by the Equality Challenge Unit (now Advance HE) in 2012 and its official launch in 2016 has highlighted to some degree the sector's commitment to racial equality. For those of already working within the system, our views and experiences of the Race Equality Charter are varied and some respondents felt that such Charter Marks reinforce the centring of Whiteness through what they viewed as symbolic gestures.

Findings and analysis

> I have learned that the university may want my colour but not my voice.

The data referenced in this paper signal a rather poor picture of "diversity" in terms of the number Black and minority ethnic academics and senior leaders within the UK higher education sector. It also reinforces the argument that universities maintain the social order of empire. As others, such as Mirza (2017), Rollock (2019), Gabriel and Tate (2017) and Gabriel (2020), have evidenced in their research, the isolation experienced, the feeling of being "one in a million" for academics of colour, in particular for Black female academics, is a common lived experience. One postgraduate research student spoke about her experiences as the only Black female in her department and how this made her feel:

> I am just this pet project in the department – I check the box with the one black woman that they needed in this department to say that it is diverse.

This is manifested in many departments across the sector. As Mirza (2017, p. 39) writes, being "an exotic token, an institutional symbol, a mentor and confidante, a natural expert of all things to do with race, is something that many black and ethnicized post-colonial women of colour recount in their careers in the academy". Similarly, Tolia-Kelly (2017, p. 324) writes in

her piece entitled "A day in the life of a Geographer: lone, black, female": "Accumulatively, I think each day I'm not sure this job is for me. Am I invisible? Or is it that I just do not belong? I am constantly reminded that perhaps I am out of place." How does it feel to be working and researching against the "sharp white background" that Johnson (2019) has written about?

Further, two postgraduate research students stated:

> Diversity . . .. I do not make anyone uncomfortable by taking up more space than necessary.

> I have learned that the university may want my colour but not my voice. The university may open itself to diverse students but there is an expectation that we will be grateful, quiet, and maintain the university image.

The experience of "taking up space" highlights the hollowness of diversity policies; the respondents felt no benefit from university policies, rather they felt discomfort. Although respondents were inside the walls, they were made to feel outside of the overwhelmingly white university space. Thus, institutional diversity is not paying attention to the white territory in which it operates and how it and white structural and habitual processes operate within university walls (Ahmed, 2007) and does not provide the space for Black and minority ethnic staff members and students to "belong". The very notion of "taking up space" and "keeping quiet" is one of pain. The institutional diversity discourse is the "master's tools" and therefore it cannot dismantle the master's house (Mirza and Arday, 2018). Another respondent said that diversity is "A constant reminder that we will never set ourselves up in the settlers' place accept in the service of maintaining it". The view is very clear. Diversity is about maintaining the image of the university rather than transforming it:

> This university is very hierarchal, and it is the very kind of. . .people are expected to know their place, so if you're not a professor you're not really expected to have an opinion, and if you're a woman of colour then you're never going to be a professor.

As alluded to earlier, universities' diversity policies lack value and underpin the social order that universities wish to retain. A junior Black and minority ethnic academic spoke directly to this:

> We want to make this a more representative academic community, so yeah for me it always starts at the top, but then it also goes down to the way in which the culture is implemented, *so is there a culture of diversity, or is there a culture of value in diversity?* Is this something we see expressed through who gets invited to do seminars here, which research projects we choose to get involved in, which collaborations we're involved in.

Another Black and minority ethnic academic highlighted that "Diversity politics that was derived from a corporate culture of diversity does not add values". The experiences I have presented allude to the ways in which diversity is a "gift" from Whiteness and is what Wall (2020) refers to as *white generosity*. Wall (2020, p. 1) argues that "white generosity is a phenomenon of Whiteness, the giving to the racialized person that which has not been asked for and which has no practical immediate purpose. In its most benign form, white generosity is a gesture from a white ally that holds no real-world value: an offer of support or the promise of future inclusivity". The concept of white generosity could be applied to diversity in that "white generosity" is offered through diversity. The gift of diversity offers no real value to the people that it supposedly benefits, as both the respondents and I have shown. In the following section, I present how the respondents felt towards policies, and specifically Race Equality Charter.

> They do not listen. Why should they, it is not in their interest.

The frequent use of the word "diversity" at departmental and university level meetings often left Black and minority ethnic academics feeling that much of the discussion was

"symbolic," which can have a painful, dehumanising effect on Black and minority ethnic staff members and postgraduate research students. At the start of each of the interviews, I asked respondents about their journeys into UK higher education and upon arrival to their universities many of them were invited to be part of university equality and diversity groups.

> At every university I have ever worked in, I arrive and I am asked to be part of their equality and diversity initiatives. I join, I sit, but really the decisions and actions are never ever centred on any of our experiences. They focus on comfort of diversity – how can we increase representation I am constantly asked, at the core of this question is comfort. A decision is made: "Let's bring in more black scholars on visiting fellowships", "let's focus on the race charter, Athena Swan". There is no real value tied to any of this. They do not listen. Why should they, it is not in their interest.

Another respondent noted their experience of "diversity" as an agenda item in a meeting:

> I was working at (name of university), and I remember there was a. . .we had our EDI team meeting and the question was about how do we have a more, we use the word "diversity" now, which is a word I hate, but all they want to talk about is how do we have more ethnic mix in the team.

The above respondent disliked the term diversity; they felt that universities understand it as a way of implementing better representation of Black and minority ethnic staff members, which in turn signals success for universities (see Jones, 2006; Doharty *et al.*, 2020) "Their view is simply: Like oh this is about diversity tick that box and just get through it".

As discussed earlier in this paper, a diversity policy with no real commitment to change has very little value or effect for staff members and students:

> The "commitments" to equity are symbolic at best and shambolic at worse, and you place that against the real figures and the experiences of faculty of colour, the dichotomy is painful, the dichotomy between the expressed commitment and the real experiences is painful, and the sector should be ashamed of it's doing, in my view it is a national outrage that this is allowed to continue. But what do you say?

One respondent spoke about the time spent putting together statements on job adverts to "attract" more diverse staff members and the way that this is simply a "symbolic gesture":

> So, we see the job adverts in the newspapers becoming symbolic gestures "equal opportunities" but actually the whole process is nonsense because they will employ their buddies and people they like, and people whose contracts they want to renew and develop, and I have no faith in it. . .
>
> Just these endless stories in meetings of their inability to retain non-white people, and they do not care because as far as they're concerned the institution is too big to fail, it would rather not but it can weather scandals, it can win awards for diversity if it works in the right ways, and everybody's replaceable.

The experiences of the above respondent that "everybody is replaceable" reinforce and return us to what is and is not valued within institutional diversity discourse. The above respondent highlights an important point around "winning awards" as another way in which universities present themselves as diverse. The Race Equality Charter was also viewed as contributing to this "symbolic" presentation. As one respondent noted,

> When I heard that my university was applying for the Race Equality Charter mark, I was shocked. I wondered how this could be possible in a university that has not actively made safe spaces for racialized staff and students to speak about their experiences. What does it mean when a predominantly white establishment decides that it has earned the right to apply and vie for the Charter Mark? There is something deeply upsetting about an institution that opts to brand itself with the Race Equality Charter Mark without engaging in deep discussions with people of colour staff and students.

> My hope is that my university shifts its approach and sees the Charter Mark as something to *be earned through deep, rigorous, and earnest engagement with BME staff and students past and present.* My hope is that my university and the administration will be brave enough to create safe opportunities and spaces for all of us to engage in culture changing dialogues in departments, offices, and the university public commons. Anything short of this is just *branding.*

Another respondent highlighted how unconscious bias training and the Race Equality Charter are ways of branding and marketing a successful inclusion and diversity:

> So, they'll do that, they'll get their kite mark and that kite mark will help their marketing. Because that will mean when the next person who drops out because they cannot do their work and cannot use a computer, when they drop out it will be because of them not because of things that were said or done by the people who work in the university because they have had it trained out of them from a morning's worth of institutional implicit bias training.

Once again, the above respondent returns to the feeling of diversity being about comfort and the centring of white comfort. The lack of faith in the system is evident. In 2019, Bhopal and Henderson carried out an exploratory study of the Athena Swan and Race Equality Charter across seven UK higher education institutions. While respondents spoke of the positive changes for gender and race equality, they also found that "there is danger of the charter marks encouraging 'tick box' or superficial change; the difficulty is of achieving the kinds of institution-wide or even larger societal change that they saw as being required, and the struggle to engage and communicate messages of gender and race equality to all of their colleagues" (2019, p. 5). The decentring of Whiteness requires making institutions uncomfortable. Charter Marks rely on making institutions feel comfortable and Black and minority ethnic staff members and students uncomfortable. This centring of white comfort also allows institutions to avoid any discussion of racism with those enduring the pain of it.

There needs to be recognition within diversity discourse that institutions need to dismantle these forms of dehumanisation. As I have argued previously, racism is about devaluing people based on their perceived race. When you have institutions that do not always value all people, students face lower degree outcomes, racism, feelings of isolation and barriers to their career progressions even when Black and minority ethnic students do get their foot in the door to university (Esson and Last, 2020). In my own recent research, I have drawn attention to the experiences of Black and ethnic minority postgraduate students and the totalising nature of Whiteness on the university campus. I show that universities are not providing institutional arrangements that Black and minority ethnic postgraduate students can belong to and in. The same is true for Black and minority ethnic staff members.

As Sylvia Wynter (1994, p. 58) argues, we must "disrupt the replication of invariant relations of dominance/subordination along racial lines that prevent people's humanity being recognised". Universities must embrace the discomfort of discussing racism and centring the experiences of Black and minority ethnic staff members and students if they are to move forward. Addressing racial barriers in higher education means we must recognise each other's humanity and dismantle forms of dehumanisation as they relate to, for example, class, (dis)ability, land dispossession, patriarchy, religion and sexuality, rather than focussing on diversity policies. Universities should centre those that diversity is supposedly seeking to benefit, celebrating their knowledge, scholarship and decentring Whiteness in order to stop the pain that is caused by hollow sanitised diversity policies.

Conclusion

I have titled this paper "Stop the pain: Black and Minority Ethnic Scholars on Diversity Policy Obfuscation in Universities" to highlight the pain that university diversity policies have caused Black and minority ethnic scholars. I seek, through this paper, to centre their experiences and decentre the white comfort that universities have so frequently opted to

sustain. I also wanted to draw attention to the fact that Black and minority ethnic scholars do not believe in the diversity policies that universities so often pride themselves on. Ultimately, diversity enables universities to avoid discussions of racism within their walls and to truly transform their cultures they must decentre Whiteness. As Barnor Hese (2020) recently tweeted:

> Diversity becomes a rabbit hole when it is pursued as an alternative to anti-racism; when it glosses over racial hierarchy and racial segregation; when it fails to challenge white supremacy; when it is simply there to enhance the boutique experience of the white consumer.

As the narratives in this paper have shown, diversity offers no real value or change; rather, it enables racism to continue within universities.

I presented narratives from Black and minority ethnic academic staff members and research students and my own experience of carrying out research on racism, knowing that my work and the voices of respondents will be silenced. I therefore centre both the respondents and my own voice in this paper as a call to action. I would like to draw this paper to a close with one final quote from a respondent:

> It's not enough to try to change the attitudes of prospective black students to get them to apply for a place at university. Universities should first change themselves to become a welcoming and nurturing environment for black intellectuals.

The respondent argues rightly that no university should encourage black and minority ethnic students (and staff members) into their spaces of whites and white comfort. More specifically, into spaces where white comfort is prioritised. Rather, universities should decentre Whiteness and extend the principles of academic rigour in diversity policies, listening to those they supposedly seek to benefit.

Note

1. UK Russell Group Universities are research-intensive universities. They are unique institutions, each with their own history and ethos, but they share some distinguishing characteristics.

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