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Whiteness as credential: Exploring the lived experiences of ethnically diverse UK event professionals through the theory of racialised organisations

Abstract

Purpose: The events sector is an innovative and dynamic working environment that requires a creative and diverse workforce to help it thrive. However, in the main, the events workforce is not diverse, with evidence suggesting that most leaders continue to be White and male. There has been no previous research exploring the experiences of ethnically diverse professionals in this environment. This paper draws on the theory of racialised organisations to begin to address this gap and amplify the voices of ethnically diverse events professionals.

Methods: Qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 17 ethnically diverse event managers working in the UK events industry.

Findings: Covert and overt forms of racism and discrimination remain ubiquitous within the culture of event organisations, and in a number of guises; ranging from regular racialised microaggressions to more subtle forms of exclusion. The events industry needs to do more than pay lip service to neoliberal notions of diversity and (a) acknowledge the ways in which racial relations of power shape the industry and the experiences of individuals within it, and (b) design interventions to address these issues.

Originality: This study is the first to apply the theory of racialised organisations to the events industry, recognising the centrality of race and racism to events organisations and careers. In so doing, it offers essential insight into race and ethnicity in this sector, and contributes to ongoing efforts to integrate race and racism within theorising in management and organisation studies.

Key words: Ethnicity, Events Management, Event Studies, Race, Racism, Racialised organisations

Introduction

The events industry is worth an estimated £70 billion in direct spend, accounting for over 50% of the UK visitor economy, and employs over 700,000 people, from apprenticeship level upwards (BVEP, 2020). However, despite being a global industry aiming to engage with diverse and eclectic audiences, the UK events workforce falls short of being representative of this diversity. In its 2020 *UK events report: How events deliver the UK's industrial strategy*, the Business Visits and Events Partnership (BVEP – now ‘UK Events’) - the umbrella body and advocacy group for the UK’s events industry (see <https://ukevents.org.uk/>) acknowledged that, to date, considerations of EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) across the sector have tended to focus only on gender inequality, largely ignoring other forms of inequality. Indeed, only one study to date has addressed issues related to race and racism in the context of the UK events industry (Fletcher and Hylton, 2018). This pattern is repeated across hospitality where, according to Russen and Dawson (2023), the focus of academic attention has been on disability, gender and LGBTQ+ groups and individuals. Moreover, as we go on to argue, of the EDI research that does exist (e.g., Gebbels et al., 2020; Gewinner, 2020; Russen et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022), it has tended to overlook the role and influence of organisational cultures in producing and maintaining cultures of exclusion. This paper goes some way to addressing this gap, through exploring the lived experiences of ethnically diverse events professionals in the UK through a racialised organisations theoretical lens (Ray, 2019a).

It is not only the field of events and hospitality management that has thus far failed to engage in critical examination of race and work. In 1992, Stella Nkomo accused the broader field of management and organisation studies of “silencing the importance of race in organizations” (p.488). Nearly 30 years later, she revisited her original critique, concluding that little had changed and the study of race continues to be marginalised in MOS, subsumed under the managing diversity paradigm (Nkomo, 2021). Indeed, although diversity is now a part of everyday management discourse, and organisations within and beyond the events industry speak about diversity initiatives and the importance of valuing difference, this does not mean that organisations have become more inclusive. As evidence in this paper and elsewhere (e.g., Ray, 2019a; Ray et al., 2023) attest, people from minoritised communities often feel marginalised and othered in the workplace.

This paper is the first to centralise the voices of ethnically diverse events professionals and to explore their experiences of work through a theoretical lens that adopts “a view of organizations as made up of *race relations* played out in power struggles” (Nkomo, 1992, p.505, emphasis in original). This involves recognising that “[o]rganizations are not race-neutral entities” (Nkomo, 1992, p.501) and that all people’s experiences of work and organisations are affected by race and race relations, even if this is not always obvious. As Nkomo (1992) argued, this involves more than just ‘adding in’ race, or even studying specific ethnic groups; rather, what is needed is a “re-vision of the very way we ‘see’ organizations” (p.505). In this paper we draw on these insights, and Ray’s (2019a) theory of racialised organisations, that recognises the ways that race influences organisational formation and structure, hierarchies, processes, relationships and experiences.

The paper thus makes an important contribution to both the field of events management (and related fields of hospitality and tourism management), and the wider field of management and organisation studies by centralising race and racism in exploration of organisational processes and experiences. Through interviews with events professionals, we illustrate some of the ways in which events organisations and careers are racialised and subsumed under the unacknowledged dominance of Whiteness. We begin by outlining our theoretical perspective, as informed by the theory of racialised organisations, and illustrating the lack of diversity in the events industry. After introducing the project's methods, we draw on the testimonies of 17 ethnically diverse events professionals to explore the ways in which events organisations are racialised entities. Finally, we discuss the implications this has for both individual careers and experiences, and for achieving wider goals of diversity and inclusion.

Literature review

A theory of racialised organisations

Acker (2006) argues that much of the inequality in contemporary Western societies is created in and through organisations, the daily activities of work, and the organisation of work. She introduced the concept of inequality regimes, defined as “loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations” (Acker, 2006, p.444). Race is an important, if under-theorised, aspect of these inequality regimes. The current socio-cultural context in the UK, and many other Western neoliberal societies, shapes racial relations in and beyond organisations in ways that contribute to hostility and increasing racism, whether that be through anti-migrant sentiment in the post-Brexit UK environment, or the rise of right-wing populism and pushback against so-called ‘woke’ activities, of which diversity initiatives are often seen to be a part. The current climate for workers is thus increasingly hostile, especially for those who do not easily approximate the implicit norm of the ideal worker (i.e., White, usually male, able-bodied, cis, heterosexual, middle class) (Ali et al., 2022; Dashper, 2020; Mooney, 2020). In this hostile environment, there is urgent need for theory that recognises how race is embedded in all organisational practices and relations. Ray (2019a) proposes a theory of racialised organisations that recognises organisations as mechanisms through which racial inequality is produced and reproduced. Ray advocates four tenets of racialised organisations. He finds that racialised organisations: 1) directly affect the agency of racial groups through establishing informal rules or ‘schemas’; 2) distribute resources unequally; 3) treat Whiteness as a credential; and 4) decouple certain formal processes and procedures from organisational practices in a racialised way. For Ray, when schemas are connected to rules and resources, they become durable structures.

In applying racialised organisations to organisational hierarchies, Wingfield and Chavez (2020) argue that theories of racialised organisations do more than just draw attention to racial inequalities in the workplace. Rather, they posit that organisations are structures built on inherently racist assumptions (about who can authentically embody norms of the ideal worker, for example) that then shape internal procedures, cultures, and mechanisms. Basic

organisational practices (e.g., hiring, performance management, everyday interactions) perpetuate racial stratification, even in nominally integrated spaces. Consequently, organisations contribute to racial inequality as they “shape, channel, and sometimes limit how individual racial identity is constructed” (Ray et al., 2023: 140). Ray (2019a) highlights a number of mechanisms that obscure the broad, everyday dynamics of White racial power within organisations, while also subtly disadvantaging ethnically diverse employees. These might include hiring for ‘fit’, mandating dress and grooming rules rooted in European beauty standards, and expecting ethnically diverse employees to ‘perform’ in ways that simultaneously adhere to White norms and downplay their race (Ray 2019b). Wingfield and Alston (2013) similarly refer to a theory of racial tasks, arguing how ethnically diverse employees, through conforming to racialised organisational scripts (i.e., Whiteness) often reproduce structures of inequality. Recognising organisations as racialised entities enables researchers to explore the ways in which race affects the design and organisation of work, or processes for hiring and promotion, or the ways through which networks both support and constrain different individuals, among many other factors. According to Fletcher and Hylton (2018, p.169), the “result of conscious or unconscious ambivalence toward White privilege leads to a legacy of what has been described as ‘White supremacy’ where systematic, insidious processes of privileging manifest themselves across a plethora of arenas as racial outcomes”.

We position our analysis of the experiences of ethnically diverse events professionals within this paradigm of racialised organisations, recognising “organizations as constituting and constituted by racial processes that may shape both the policies of the racial state and individual prejudice” (Ray, 2019a, p.27). We suggest that the UK events industry is shrouded in White privilege that goes largely unnoticed and thus unaddressed, resulting in what one participant in Dashper and Finkel’s (2020) research described as a dominant “white-girl culture” (p.293) which positions those who do not fit this norm as the Other (also see Xu et al., 2020). Indeed, although the events industry is a female-dominated in numerical terms, and courses at universities often have far higher numbers of female than male students (Fletcher et al., 2022), as the next section highlights, White men continue to dominate senior levels of management and board positions. In the next section we illustrate this pervasive Whiteness in relation to events industry organisations.

A remarkable absence of diversity in events organisations

According to the 2021 Census, ethnically diverse communities account for approximately 18% of the UK population (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Currently there are no data available to confidently state the level of ethnic diversity within the events industry. In their absence, it is appropriate to turn to those bodies which represent the industry nationally and internationally as barometers of diversity and inclusion. It is important to start with The Events Industry Board (EIB) which, according to BVEP (2016), was set up to act as a bridge between industry and government. Given its government mandate and purported role and positionality in championing the UK events industry, it would be reasonable to expect that the EIB reflects the diverse talent possessed within the industry. However, as of 2023, only 11 out of 135 Board

members – 8% - come from an ethnically diverse background. This figure is an increase from the 3% when the EIB was first established (see Fletcher and Hylton, 2018), but nevertheless, is worryingly low. UK Events and the EIB are responsible for representing a range of trade bodies and associations from across the events industry. More recently, The Zoo XYZ (2021) explored racial disparities – with a particular focus on Black professionals - within the UK events industry, focusing on 15 of these trade bodies and associations. Its findings were released as a report, *Black in the Boardroom*. The findings showed that, within the trade associations and bodies analysed, there were no Black professionals in senior, board or leadership positions, while in contrast, White people made up 99.1% of those positions. Trade bodies and associations, like those analysed by Zoo XYZ, are voluntary, industry watchdogs, with a purpose of regulating and monitoring industry standards. As a result, they are an integral part of business; helping to ensure the longevity of the industries they serve. It is essential therefore, that they successfully represent the communities they work in and with. In the UK, the evidence suggests that this is not currently the case. There is thus, growing recognition that the events industry is not diverse, and that this is problematic from both a social justice and a business perspective (Zhou et al., 2022). Nevertheless, though the above examples help to illustrate various patterns of inequality, our thinking must go beyond the numbers; for it is the reasons behind the numbers that really matter.

While implementing organisational policies aimed at increasing ethnic diversity and representation is important, this process alone fails to address the racial hierarchies rooted within many organisations. We cannot assume, therefore, that improved representation of people from ethnically diverse backgrounds would signal either the end of racism or indeed, of White privilege (Russen and Dawson, 2023). Indeed, there are a series of machinations and practices which contribute to discrimination, including differing success rates at interview for White and ethnically diverse candidates; quicker career development for White colleagues; higher rates of disciplinary action against ethnically diverse staff; as well as bullying and everyday microaggressions experienced by ethnically diverse colleagues (Kline, 2014). These findings concur with Puwar (2004: 1) in arguing that it is one thing to occupy a space, it is quite another to have an “undisputed right to occupy the space”. As Ray (2019b) contends, rather than asking how to bring diversity into the workplace, a better question concerns why so much power and organisational authority remain in the hands of White people.

It is our contention then, that the UK events industry, as with many other sectors, is pervaded by unspoken White privilege that marginalises ethnically diverse employees, leading to both a lack of diversity and inclusion. What is absent from research on the events industry is the voices and experiences of ethnically diverse events professionals. In the remainder of this paper, we begin to address this gap through presenting findings from interviews with 17 events professionals, situating our research within the framework of racialised organisations and White privilege presented above.

Methodology

Philosophy

Studies exploring the lived experiences of ethnically diverse people working in the events industry are non-existent. Therefore, this research is exploratory, drawing on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 17 events professionals. It has adopted a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. Solórzano and Yosso (2002, p. 26) explain that the gathering of ‘lived experiences’ complements critical race research given the value it places on experiential forms of knowledge.

Recruitment

As there is a relatively small community of ethnically diverse event professionals – especially those operating at higher and/or leadership levels – within the industry, we adopted a purposive, combined with snowball sampling approach. Participants were recruited through a range of approaches, including through the authors’ connections to industry associations, industry forums, guest lectures at our institution, social media, such as LinkedIn, and recommendations from other events professionals. We employed these techniques for three reasons: firstly, to empower our participants to shape the research via the inclusion of those voices our interviewees believed should be heard; secondly, to ensure the sample did not simply reflect the research team’s existing professional networks; and thirdly, given the lack of available data on ethnic diversity in the events industry, snowball sampling was key in enabling us to be sure that we had gathered a meaningful sample of voices.

Taken together, this approach has drawn on the expertise of ethnically diverse event professionals from different sectors of the industry, at different levels of the industry, and with varying levels of service, in order to identify and explore their lived experiences. Our sample included individuals working at venues, agencies, business owners, representatives of industry associations, and entrepreneurs. We deliberately sought out participants at different stages in their career and with different life experiences. Of our 17 participants, 11 self-identified as Black women, 3 as South Asian women, 1 mixed-race woman, 1 Black man and 1 South Asian man. Experience within the industry ranged from 6 to 33 years, with some having worked in events throughout their careers, and others joining from aligned industries, such as hospitality or travel and tourism. We recognise that, in many ways, our sample lacks diversity, with only two men, though this is demonstrative of a largely feminised industry, particularly at lower levels, where due to ongoing racial inequality ethnically diverse individuals are more likely to be positioned (Dashper and Finkel, 2018). Hennink and Kaiser (2022) argue that saturation in qualitative research can be achieved with small sample sizes (9-17 interviews). Given this, at the point when no new recommendations for interviewees were forthcoming, and when no new themes were emerging, we reached theoretical saturation.

Data collection

The research was conducted under the research ethics guidelines of [institution], and any identifying information has been removed. Interviews took place over Teams and Zoom due to restrictions on face-to-face interactions in place at the time due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews were conducted by Fletcher, who is a White male and Dashper, who is a White female. An important methodological and epistemological consideration was that the interview team consisted of White researchers, and while it could be argued this positioned us as outsiders to the research participants, rarely did it feel this way (Fletcher, 2014). On the whole, participants were very pleased to speak with us because, in keeping with our racialised organisations lens (Ray, 2019a), they considered this research to be a rare opportunity to speak out about various injustices they had experienced. Albert is a mixed-race (White-Caribbean) woman and while not involved in conducting the interviews, did co-create the interview guide and participate in data analysis. We used a semi-structured interview guide to direct discussions, but this remained flexible to enable further discussion of issues that arose in each interview. We were interested in individuals' personal experiences of working within a majority White industry, how they entered the industry, experiences of progression, as well as their professional insight into how the industry was responding to wider EDI issues. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. They were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Transcripts were then analysed by all authors.

Data analysis

In order to analyse data, an iterative approach was taken to thematic analysis and racialised organisations (Ray, 2019a) was employed as a guiding analytical framework. Adopting this framework encourages the foregrounding of the voices of racially marginalised people. Adopting this lens also encourages a further co-production stage of analysis. In the case of this research each author individually analysed all transcripts. Initially, we were concerned with identifying all interesting themes. Next, initial open codes were generated through systematically coding the entire dataset and subsequently organising codes into themes. This involved an iterative process moving “between emic, or emergent, meanings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations and theories” (Tracy, 2013, p.184). Themes were then reviewed by all authors to ensure they were a good reflection of the larger dataset. Once all data were coded the themes were revisited for coherency, refined and operational definitions developed to describe each theme. Finally, all identified quotations were then moved into a shared Excel document, in which authors allocated themes to worksheets based on their interpretations of the transcripts.

Findings

We identified four key themes within the data, which draw heavily on the four tenets of Ray's theory of racialised organisations (Ray, 2019a, 2019b; Ray et al., 2023): 1. Racialised hierarchies in the events industry; 2. progression (or lack of); 3. Whiteness as a credential in the events industry; and 4. Black Lives Matter, empowerment, responsibility and burden.

Racialised hierarchies in the events industry

Organisations contribute to racial hierarchies and exclusions, as practices, processes and workplace cultures are based around implicit White norms that ‘fit’ some groups and individuals better than others, marginalising ethnically diverse groups and providing unspoken advantage to White groups who more easily embody the norms of the ideal events professional (Dashper, 2020; Russen and Dawson, 2023). White norms become deeply embedded into organisations and professions, shaping organisational structures, criteria for membership and leadership, norms of operation and interaction. However, although these norms are White, they are rarely acknowledged as such and instead positioned as race neutral (Mueller, 2020). Lack of representation of ethnically diverse individuals across the industry, and particularly at senior levels, is thus understood as either limited interest or underperformance from those groups and individuals, rather than the result of institutional racism.

All participants spoke about the lack of diversity across the industry. The most common consequence of this was that in any work situations they would routinely be the only “non-White” face in the room. Most participants had grown to accept this as normal. However, it was nevertheless hugely frustrating to be in a room of only White people, especially when they knew of other people from ethnically diverse backgrounds who should be in the room. As this Black female participant articulated:

They [company] had their senior leaders, their directors conference ... 200 directors from across the UK. And I was the only Black person in the entire room, and I was just like, “No, this cannot be right”. I personally know there are others ... This is a big problem for the industry because how can we have 200 directors from across the UK, but I'm the only Black person?

In another example, this mixed-race woman had raised the lack of diversity with her management team. She worked for an events company in a particularly multicultural area of London. Given the diversity of the local community, the Whiteness of the workforce was conspicuous:

My workplace is not diverse. When I started we were 33 people. Out of the 33 people, there was one Asian man and me, a mixed-race woman. The diversity is absolutely atrocious. I have previously asked my manager for the diversity figures because I think it's a joke, but he is hesitant to give them to me for obvious reasons. In a city as diverse as London, it is absolutely ridiculous.

The lack of ethnic diversity within the events workforce translates into a lack of diversity at leadership levels. This comment from a Black female participant resonated with what Omi and Winant (2002) refer to as the ‘snowy White peaks’ of organisations:

The grade I started, there's so many Black people at that grade, compared to senior roles. It's actually diabolical how many people are at that grade in comparison. It's like a mountain, that's how we describe it ... "The higher you go, the whiter the snow, right?"

This South Asian female observed these snowy White peaks, adding how, in her experience, these also tend to be male:

My direct managers, they were all White. But, when you looked higher, and you looked at, like, the regional manager and then the head of sales and then above that, it was all very White ... It was mainly men as well.

This lack of diversity has consequences for those entering into and progressing through the industry. Some participants in this research said they would not apply for roles on the basis that they did not feel they would “fit” into the organisation’s White image. Take this Black female as a case in point:

When you go into these organisations, everybody looks the same. I walked into their office, and I just saw a sea of White people, I’m almost like, “does this even make sense? [laughs] ... I got into the interview, the [interviewer], she was so rude to me ... I’m at this point, now, that I’m more confident in myself and who I am. I said, “You know, what? I don’t think that this is the right role for me and it doesn’t make any sense going any further into this interview.” I literally stopped that interview in its tracks and left.

It was relatively common for participants to refer to the “incestuous” nature of the events industry – “everyone knows one another” – whereby recruitment tends to be quite nepotistic. Within this context, participants were not surprised by the relative homogeneity of the workforce:

It’s the industry; it’s the organisations as well. The people at the top are all the same. Then, of course, people down the hierarchy, in managerial positions, are going to be the same, if that makes sense. (South Asian woman)

Sometimes managers are very direct in stating that individuals are hired because of their background, quotas, and the general need to ‘diversify’. In and of itself, positive action should be welcomed in areas where organisations are failing. However, such recruitment practices can also be problematic because, firstly, they do not tackle underlying discriminatory practices and processes that have led to their exclusion, and secondly, employees become conscious that they have not been recruited on the basis of their talent, thus questioning their right to belong:

I’ve done really well, I’ve done really well in the industry. I’m on lots of boards and I have a really good career and I have an incredible network and I have great allies, but ... even if I get an opportunity, I question whether I got it because I’m a Brown woman. Everything I’ve got I’m like “Of course you gave it to me, I’m a Brown woman, of course you gave it to me.” And that’s frustrating. I’m really good, why would I have to question that? (British Asian woman)

Once recruited into the events industry, the workings of racialised organisations continue (Ray, 2019). Participants spoke of feeling excluded from opportunities to progress, of feeling undervalued, and placed under disproportionate levels of scrutiny compared with their White colleagues.

Progression (or lack of)

Much like evidence pertaining to the experiences of women in the events industry, our findings show that people from ethnically diverse backgrounds face a glass ceiling, whereby their opportunities for progression are limited (Dashper, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2021). Such limited opportunities for progression were attributed to a number of factors, including the lack of ethnically diverse staff and allies in senior positions and on appraisal panels. The CIPD (2017) has recognised that although ethnically diverse people are frequently offered fewer opportunities for progression, they are equally as qualified - sometimes more qualified. There was a shared view that people from ethnically diverse backgrounds have to be “better” than their White counterparts to be recognised with promotions. This Black male spoke of how, from experience, people from ethnically diverse backgrounds face a range of conscious and unconscious biases; often being scrutinised for promotions more rigorously than White candidates:

I always knew, or believed that, I had to work infinitely harder than anyone else. It's imposter syndrome. I've had it my whole life. My dad used to manage teams back in the 80s and 90s, right? And as a general manager of a [businesses], you know, 99% of his staff were White and he was, he always had issues with that. There were people who would say they do not like being managed by a Black person. My mum, being a nurse, had patients that have said they do not want to be treated by a Black person. So, that has been in my head all my life, in that people will have doubts about you because of your colour.

Moreover, according to this Black female, sometimes, being better is still not enough. Feeling constantly overlooked, she has taken to asking for promotions:

Don't expect it to be handed to you because that's not how, you know, it works in our community. *We are not given jobs.* You have to work hard to get them. I would never be able to get where, exactly where I am right now, just because I was working hard. That's just not, it's not an option, but Holly with blonde hair, blue eyes, probably could have got a lot higher by just working hard. (*original emphasis*)

These experiences were far too common. Take this South Asian female's response:

People were promoted over me who were less experienced than me and I said, “Well, how can you do that? How can you put a manager in charge of me who has no experience of events? How can you put a manager in charge of me who has less experience than me?” It was to do with race!

The same participant went on to describe a particularly painful experience of being the only person in an organisation to be made redundant, all the while less experienced White staff kept their jobs. Faced with precariousness, other participants spoke of having reached a point where efforts to fit in and play along were no longer appropriate. In recognising that progression on an equal footing was perhaps unattainable, this South Asian female had instead started their own business:

A manager said to me, “You'll do as you're told. You don't question me.” I said, “How dare you speak to me like that? How dare you tell me that I have to do as I'm told? No.”

So, I decided, “Well, actually I'm sick to death of being put in a box and trying to have a voice and trying to progress and actually not getting anywhere.” So that's when I set up my own business.

Rather than speaking out, most participants in this research chose to remain silent on a range of injustices. In this case, remaining silent was a direct attempt to fit in, to “go with the flow” and “not rock the boat”. In recognising this, “a more complex view has emerged which recognises that racism and more recent turns to forms of ‘bias’ (overt/covert, direct/indirect, intentional/unintentional) exist within entire institutions and organisations” (Fletcher and Hylton, 2018, p.169). In part, this is what Ray (2019a) means when he refers to Whiteness as a credential.

Whiteness as a credential in the events industry

Ray (2019a) argues that one of the key ways through which racialised organisations construct racial hierarchies and exclusions is through positioning Whiteness as a credential “providing access to organizational resources, legitimizing work hierarchies and expanding White agency” (p.41). Subtly, often unconsciously, White professionals find it easier to access organisational resources, to have their performances positively rated by managers and clients, to network and make connections with influential peers. In contrast, ethnically diverse individuals often experience discrimination, which leads to their exclusion. In such contexts, racialised organisational structures and practices that position Whiteness as a desirable (but usually implicit) credential, limit the personal agency of ethnically diverse individuals. As Ray (2019a: 36) argues, “The ability to act upon the world, to create, to learn, to express emotion – indeed feel one’s full humanity – is constrained (or enabled) by racialized organizations.”

In an attempt to fit within White workspaces, some participants spoke about how they actively downplay their cultural differences. This Black male for instance, denied his love of hip hop and rap music because he did not want to be associated with negative stereotypes about the genre and a certain kind of Black masculinity:

I am massively into hip hop, massively. But a lot of people won't know that about me. You know, if someone said, “Oh, what are your hobbies?” in a job interview ... “I love listening to hip hop, going to, you know, rap concerts”, I don't think I'd ever say that in a job interview. “What did you get up to at the weekend?” I don't think I'd ever say that “I was listening to Tupac”. That's never been something that I would openly divulge.

Another Black male described how they consciously avoid “dressing Black” due to discriminatory responses from White colleagues:

On a Dress-Down Friday, if I wore a baseball cap colleagues would probably say, “Oh, yeah, you’re looking pretty street” ... But then, the combination of baseball cap and ... let's say, a hoodie, I've even had colleagues say, “Oh, you scared me today”. I'm sure that they wouldn't say that if I was White.

Interviewer: And how does that make you feel?

I can consciously say I know I want to wear a cap, and I love that cap, but I'm not going to wear a cap because I know what people will think. Can you imagine having to consciously think like that?

In other instances, rather than downplaying their cultural differences, participants spoke of playing up their knowledge of White culture, trying to actively deploy the credentials of Whiteness in their favour:

I can sort of adapt very quickly. It's amazing how quickly you can adapt to an environment that you exist in. It's, like, it's so flexible. I almost understand the sort of lingo White people talk about. So, there's certain things that you just won't get unless you've been around White people for a long time. (Black female)

I had a friend yesterday that said "[you're] quite polished." I can certainly talk the lingo [laughs]. It is not probably the best way to phrase it, but it's the only way I can think of saying it. I can't talk how I talk to my friends to, to certain people I need to, you know. There's certain words we would use in the Black community that White people would have much fancier words for. (Black female)

Here we see how ethnically diverse individuals may subordinate their own bodies to aid belonging. As Fanon (1988) suggests, "the oppressed flings himself upon the imposed culture with the desperation of a drowning man" (p.39). There were examples where participants in senior events positions had met clients who assumed they were White. The supposition here is that clients do not expect to see people from ethnically diverse backgrounds in these positions:

Interviewer: You mentioned that you had situations where you've met people and they thought you were a different person. Do you think people thought you were White? Is that what you're saying?

Yeah, yeah, exactly, exactly. Let's say, working exhibition sales, I might sell an exhibition stand and not actually meet the customer for seven months. And then, they'd be like, "Oh (with shock in his voice), you're [name]. Hi. Hi!" And, yeah, you'd see the penny drop right in front of me.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

I've accepted that's just the way the world is, and it's my role to survive and navigate my way through this world the best I can.

Similarly, this Black female spoke of regularly being overlooked during site visits and meetings:

When you go for a site inspection people overlook you because they don't realise that you're the actual client; they just assume it's the White person in the room or when you're working at an event, and people think that you're a worker there ... "Actually, I'm the client here." Those things happen all the time.

As will be discussed in the next section, until recently, none of the participants in this study had felt able to challenge these everyday racial micro-aggressions. Rather, they had accepted them as normal, turning to other ethnically diverse people for allyship and support:

I think Black people tend to try and almost deal with it (micro-aggressions) and put it to the side. You just can't dwell on it ... There's just no point letting it get to you because it really does affect you day-to-day ... I may have probably finished work and probably spoke about it with a group of Black friends where they can probably say ... We'll have a session where we talk about the stupid things White people ask us, if that makes sense. And I suppose, yeah, you almost feel, kind of, better, just by voicing them. It's not something you can really sit on because if you do, it can really eat you up. (Black female)

In these examples we can see how racialised organisations limit the personal agency of ethnically diverse employees. In assuming whiteness as a credential for inclusion and progression, organisations are actively producing racialised structures and patterns independent of conscious coordination of individuals.

Black Lives Matter (BLM): Empowerment, responsibility and burden

BLM has encouraged many industries, including events, to reflect on approaches to race equality. While there was an overarching frustration that it had taken the murder of George Floyd and a global outpouring to prompt these reflections, everyone we interviewed agreed that these discussions were long overdue and, ultimately, would be positive for the industry. Comments ranged from very practical considerations around, for example, ensuring that panels are made up of diverse speakers, to more ideological discussions around disrupting cultures of Whiteness and White privilege. In the main, participants referred to feeling empowered (even obliged) to speak out about EDI issues, and they felt confident that, for the first time, their voices would be heard. This Black male referred to the murder of George Floyd as a watershed moment:

After the death of Floyd it all changed. Prior to that I didn't challenge, not in, not in any significant way. I'm an EDI rep at work now, and I'm doing a lot of work with the organisation as a whole. But more importantly, I'm taking my team on that journey. They're the people that I interact with every single day. I've got an opportunity to educate and influence them.

Similarly, for this South Asian female, BLM had facilitated a context for having difficult conversations about the state of the industry:

The only way change is gonna happen, the only way people are going to change their views, their hiring processes, create that company culture where it's an inclusive culture, the only way that's going to happen in a meaningful way, where it's not an afterthought ... is if people talk out, people speak up and talk out and be like, "Well, actually I don't like it like this."

However, in reinforcing Ray's (2019a) conceptualising of organisational schemas – i.e., accepted rules and practices surrounding race – there were acknowledged risks associated with speaking out on these issues. As this Black female explained:

I was invited to come and speak on it (equality), you know, and my boss at the time said to me, “You need to be careful that you don't get labelled a Black activist.”

Interviewer: Wow.

Do I really need that? [laughs] And I was like, “Okay. What do I do in that situation?”

Some participants noted an apparent discomfort – especially among White colleagues - in discussing issues to do with race and racism in the sector. Asked whether they felt the existing White leaders of the industry could oversee the much-needed cultural shift, the view was unanimously “no ... not on their own”. For this South Asian female, one of the major drawbacks to White privilege, even for the best-intentioned White person, is that they lack lived experience of discrimination and racism:

Interviewer: Do you think White people would get the job done if it was left to them?

No because that's, that's the whole point of privilege. If you don't know it's an issue, if no one tells you it's an issue, you're oblivious to it and you'd be like, “Everyone has opportunities ... What do you mean you didn't have the same opportunities?” If no one tells you, change won't happen ... As the middle-aged White man in the company, race has never been an issue for you. So, you don't recognise that to be a problem.

For change to happen therefore, the feeling was that the industry needs to come together and adopt a shared manifesto for change and social justice. Within this context, it was felt that White privilege could/should be leveraged to benefit a greater diversity of people:

People are listening because the voice is no longer just a singular voice. It's no longer just the Black, the Brown people, we've also got the White middle-aged man. I know this is gonna sound a bit shitty, but if you've got the White middle-aged man talking about it as well, it's gonna get heard more ... People are listening because it is, you know, the White man that is saying “we should talk about it”. (South Asian female)

Some saw this moment in time positively, as an opportunity to be role models who advocate on behalf of the next generation of ethnically diverse events professionals:

I went through a period after the death of George Floyd, thinking, “I got to where I am. I'm really proud of where I've got to. However, what have I done for the next wave of young black men?” And I've had a sense of guilt around that. (Black male)

I'm older and I know that there's, you know, young, younger people coming up behind me. It's about making it easier for everyone else coming up behind. (British Asian female)

Others were left frustrated about carrying a burden of representation, exemplified by being asked to speak on behalf of entire communities:

Why do I have to be the one to have to share my lived experience? I come to work because I'm talented at what I do. Why do I have to fall back into this position of the EDI

champion and leader within the organisation? Can't they just go buy some training or hire a consultant or professional to advise them on it? (Black female)

Building on this, another Black female spoke of the fatigue experienced when constantly re-living racism and discrimination:

By the end of last year I was like, "I don't wanna talk on another panel. I don't wanna discuss anything" because it drained the life out of me. A lot of people didn't realise, don't realise how draining it is; constantly having to teach people or educate people about these issues.

There was a widely held view that the industry had been forced into reflection and therefore, some organisations and leaders would inevitably embrace and/or resist this shift more vociferously than others (Russen and Dawson, 2023). Participants referred to a recent trend of event organisations setting up EDI boards and committees. Overall, the view was that this was disingenuous:

Suddenly, because of Black Lives Matter, "Oh, we have to have a diversity board" or "We have to have, you know, two BAME people on our board" or "We have to have, you know, we pledge to have so many people in our organisation who are different ethnic minorities." But why are you doing it? What are you doing to support them? Are you just going to give them a job because they're Black or they're Asian or whatever? "Oh, we've reached our quota now; we're diverse." "No, you're not!" (South Asian female)

Up until last year, I would say I have never, ever had anyone try to improve anything. Couldn't give a shit. Could. Not. Give. A. Shit ... In their heart they may have realised things weren't right, but they couldn't give a shit. (Black female)

There was thus a heavy dose of scepticism about the current focus on 'diversity' within events organisations. Indeed, Nkomo (2019) argues that diversity initiatives may in fact dilute the pursuit of racial inequality, as the diversity paradigm has become "the neoliberal solution to the problem of the 'other'" (p.214). In the final sections then, we discuss the implications of these findings when considered through the lens of racialised organisations and propose directions for future research and practical actions for the events industry.

Discussion and conclusions

Conclusions

In this paper we have drawn on the theory of racialised organisations (Ray, 2019a) to illustrate the ways in which the events industry marginalises and discriminates against ethnically diverse individuals in both subtle and overt ways. By foregrounding the voices of 17 ethnically diverse events professionals we have illustrated various ways in which racial relations of power affect individuals' experiences of career progression, interactions with colleagues, working relationships, professional opportunities and responsibilities for EDI within organisations. We argue that unspoken White privilege permeates many aspects of the events industry and delineates, in advance, what a successful events professional will look, act and sound like (see

also Dashper and Finkel, 2020; Fletcher and Hylton, 2018), thus often penalising ethnically diverse individuals, and marking them out as different.

Events organisations are not racially neutral entities (Nkomo, 1992), as racism and discrimination, in both covert and overt forms, are omnipresent in the events sector. The experiences of the participants in this study illustrate various ways in which their professional lives and careers have been impacted by race and racism, in an industry that is implicitly dominated by unacknowledged White privilege and schemas. Their experiences are shaped by their position as marginal and as the Other in the UK events industry. Whether this be in relation to the lack of ethnically diverse individuals in leadership positions, being overlooked for roles and promotions, experiencing racial microaggressions which mark them out as different, or feeling responsible for challenging racism and acting as the organisation's 'face/voice' of diversity, ethnically diverse events professionals are well aware that their experiences of work are marked and 'raced', even though this is rarely acknowledged by others in the industry. Drawing on the theory of racialised organisations (Ray, 2019), we argue that events organisations are complicit in the reproduction of racial inequalities that impede efforts to diversify the events workforce and make the industry more inclusive.

The last thirty years has seen increasing attention to diversity in the workplace, within and beyond the events industry. Framed within the 'managing diversity' paradigm, diversity has been presented as good for business, as well as for individuals, and as an overall positive organisational resource to be strategically mobilised (Ray, 2022; Russen and Dawson, 2023). The paradigm has been critiqued by critical scholars concerned that a move away from equal opportunities, with its focus on overcoming discrimination related to group-level differences, such as those based on race and gender, to the individually focused concept of managing diversity, will lead to a lack of attention paid to tackling deep-rooted, systematic inequality, particularly that related to race (Nkomo, 2001; Nkomo et al., 2019). We echo these concerns. Our findings suggest that, within the events industry, racial inequality is endemic, despite stated concerns for diversity and inclusion. The experiences of participants in this research illustrate the pervasive whitewashing of the events industry wherein race is simultaneously denied, through lack of overt discussion and action, and White hegemony superimposed, through enforced adherence to the norms and values of Whiteness and White culture (Puwar, 2004; Ray, 2019, 2022).

For Ray et al. (2023) scholars and practitioners must quickly quash any suggestion that racial exclusions are unfortunate aberrations or slight deviations from otherwise colour-blind ideals. Organisations are not meritocracies; they are long-standing social structures built on and managed by cultures of Whiteness (Ray, 2019b). It is only once leaders begin thinking (differently) about race in these terms that we are likely to see progress (Carrington et al., 2016).

Theoretical implications

This is the first paper to examine the events industry through the lens of the theory of racialised organisations (Ray, 2019a; Nkomo, 2021), and the first to centralise the voices of ethnically diverse events professionals. In recognising the current dearth of research centralising race, racism and Whiteness in hospitality and events management, this paper advances theory significantly by illustrating the often subtle ways in which events organisations are racialised entities. Our research reveals the ways in which ethnically diverse individuals experience racial barriers, racial microaggressions and lack of collegiality and support within these industries. Ignoring how organisations help to perpetuate racial harms virtually guarantees that these harms will continue. For Ray (2019b), it is probably safer to work on the assumption that all organisations are contributing to racial inequality unless there is strong evidence to the contrary. If the events and hospitality industries are to make progress towards becoming truly inclusive, it is important to acknowledge their racialised nature, and the ways in which Whiteness is taken for granted; marginalising those who do not ‘fit’ and often positioning them as unprofessional (Ashcraft, 2013).

At the outset of this paper we highlighted Ray’s (2019b) contention that, rather than asking how to bring diversity into the workplace, a better question concerns why so much power and organisational authority remain in the hands of White people. Our findings illustrate how Whiteness, White privilege and the neoliberal discourse of managing diversity combine to shift attention away from the significance of race to professional and organisational practices and experiences, downplaying racism as an integral aspect of many ethnically diverse individuals’ professional careers. Thus, we have shown how experiences of work in the events industry are racialised and occur within the context of racial relations of power that marginalise and, sometimes, actively discriminate against ethnically diverse individuals. In so doing, it makes a significant contribution to EDI research in the fields of hospitality and events management which have, until now, prioritised developing understandings of gender, disability and LGBTQ+ communities (Russen and Dawson, 2023). Until race and racism become central to theorising about organisations - and acknowledged as integral to the ways in which events organisations operate and are experienced by different individuals - efforts to promote diversity will largely fail as the underpinning power struggles and race relations (amongst other axes of power) remain unchanged. Acknowledging these problems is a necessary first step, and subsequent efforts will be needed to try and address these structural and symbolic barriers to inclusion.

Practical implications

By sharing the voices and lived experiences of ethnically diverse events professionals this paper has provided important evidence for event and aligned industries to begin to face up to issues related to racialised inequalities (including racism), prompting uncomfortable discussions. There are no easy answers when it comes to creating more diverse and equitable environments. That said, there are a range of measures that event organisations would benefit from exploring. The recommendations we set out below respond to Ray’s (2019a) critique that diversity policies often serve a “public-relations function, but do little to change the racial

distribution of organizational power” (p. 42). The main reason such policies fail is that they lack formal enforcement measures. Thus, we would recommend organisations: 1) develop systems to ensure accountability for race equality at the highest levels of an organisation. This would entail every manager/lead being accountable for race equality in their specific area of work; 2) foster a culture of learning and understanding by embedding listening sessions and feedback forums involving employees to co-create, develop and publish organisational values and codes of conduct; 3) set up an Inclusion Committee with representation from different parts of the organisation and representing each of the nine protected characteristics; 4) create systems - that employees trust - for reporting non-inclusive behaviour; 5) develop, support and resource high-quality, mandatory race equality (and other EDI) training; 6) review and, as appropriate, revise recruitment, selection and promotion processes through a racialised lens; 7) consider the introduction of affirmative action policies. Affirmative action policies recognise the credential of Whiteness and attempt to decouple the link between Whiteness and organisational culture. Finally, at a very fundamental level, the events industry is in desperate need of insight around its own workforce. Currently, no comprehensive dataset exists (in the UK or elsewhere) on the demographic composition of the event workforce. If the industry is to be truly inclusive to diverse groups, it needs first to understand who is/is not represented across the workforce and then take action to fairly represent all of those groups.

Limitations and future research

This research has advanced understanding on events organisations as racialised entities and thus, will make a significant contribution to the EDI agendas of events and hospitality management in the UK and internationally. That said, we acknowledge its limitations. The paper draws on insights from the United Kingdom only. We recognise race and racism as socio-historical constructs shaped by contextual factors, and therefore, we call for further research investigating the experiences of ethnically diverse events professionals and the practices of racialised events organisations in different socio-cultural contexts. As the events industry is global it will be necessary to undertake further research outside of the UK, in both Global North and Global South contexts where notions of ethnic diversity, race/racism and indeed, inclusion and accessibility differ. Though small, our sample does draw on experiences from different sectors of the UK events industry, from people at different levels of that industry and with differing levels of experience. It is thus, largely representative. That said, a more systematic analysis of lived experiences across each of the seven sectors of the industry - business and brand experiences; exhibitions and congress; outdoor events and festivals; sport events; music events; public and third sector; and weddings and private parties – and indeed, in other related industries across hospitality, tourism and leisure would strengthen any claims to generalisability. Relatedly, our sample contained only two men. The narratives presented herein are, therefore, both raced and gendered. Participants were not asked about their sexuality or whether that were disabled. In recognising intersectionality, future research must also capture the experiences of more ethnically diverse men, members of the LGBTQ+ community and people with a disability. Moreover, as our focus was on existing members of the events

workforce, we did not seek input from students and aspiring event professionals. Given suggestions that the pathway to an events career for ethnically diverse people is unclear, research should further examine, firstly, why so few ethnically diverse students are studying Events Management degrees at university; and secondly, of those who do, what are their experiences? Our research also took place in the period immediately following the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent global BLM movement. As a result, issues of ‘race’ and racism were high(er) on the public’s consciousness; partly explaining the optimism expressed by participants in the final section of our findings. It would be interesting therefore, to revisit this study longitudinally in order to capture experiences over subsequent periods of continuity and change.

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