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research article

Black Lives Matter in higher education: conversations about race to transform the lived experience of Black (African-Caribbean) staff in UK universities

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Academia in the UK is diminished by a lack of representation of academics from Black (African-Caribbean), Asian and South-East Asian communities. Based on data for 2019–20, only 18 per cent of academic staff at universities in the UK were from global-majority communities. This article will propose positive actions to promote greater representation and leadership opportunities, with a specific focus on Black (African-Caribbean) academics and professional staff. It will underline the importance of solidarity and collective voice to effect change, informed by the lived experience of Black staff thriving and surviving within the White spaces of UK universities. By emphasising the value of the lived experience, the article will conclude that equal representation of colleagues from Black (African-Caribbean) communities is essential not only to support student experience but also to recognise the knowledge, skills and human rights of Black (African-Caribbean), Asian and South-East Asian students and staff.

Keywords racism • lived experience • allyship • social justice • human rights

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Introduction

There is widespread agreement that UK African, Caribbean, Asian and South-East Asian academic and professional staff remain significantly under-represented and marginalised within universities in the UK. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) revealed, unsurprisingly, that many academic staff, inclusive of all grades, are assigned as White (75 per cent), with 10 per cent Asian and 2 per cent Black, with the remaining 13 per cent assigned to categories of 'miscellaneous' or 'other' (AdvanceHE, 2019). Predictably 10 per cent of professional staff within UK universities are from African, Caribbean, Asian and South-East Asian communities, while only 4.5 per cent of people from these same communities are employed as

academic managers, directors or senior officials. Breaking this down further, 14.4 per cent of professional staff from African, Caribbean, Asian and South-East Asian communities are employed in sales and customer services roles, with again only 6.4 per cent employed as managers, directors and senior officials (AdvanceHE, 2019). While diversity across academic and professional scales increased between 2003/04 and 2017/18, evidence suggests that UK African, Caribbean, Asian and South-East Asian academic and professional staff are more likely to be employed on fixed-term contracts, under-represented in the highest contract types and over-represented at the lowest contract levels (AdvanceHE, 2019).

Moreover, inequality is disproportionate within academic disciplines and across different types of institutions. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) found that while 24 per cent of research-active economists are from racially minoritised backgrounds, individuals from Chinese and Indian communities are better represented than are Black (African-Caribbean) individuals. Black economists are also 64 per cent less likely to work at Russel Group institutions (Further Education News, 2020). The same data also indicate that rates of progression to more senior academic grades remain differential for academic staff from African and Caribbean communities (AdvanceHE, 2019). Data indicate, for example, how Black (African-Caribbean) academics are less likely to be employed on permanent contracts and within the higher salary scales reflective of senior management positions. Gender and race clearly interweave, as 'Black women are three times *less likely* than white women to attain professorship and half as likely as Black men' (University and College Union, 2020, emphasis added). Appointments to positions of institutional leadership are also very rare. Valerie Amos was the first Black African-Caribbean woman to head a UK university when appointed as the director of School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London in 2015 (Guardian, 2018). Similarly, Professor Egbu became the UK's first Black vice chancellor when appointed at Leeds Trinity University in November 2020. Given that the UK has approximately 164 universities, Professor Egbu's success constitutes 1.2195122 per cent of the vice chancellor community.

The evidence is clear, therefore, that academics from Black (African-Caribbean) communities are particularly under-represented and marginalised within UK institutions. Such under-representation and marginalisation, in defiance of human rights, demoralises and undermines the abilities of UK universities to offer inspiring and inclusive curricula for all students, including the increasing numbers of students from the same communities. Evidence suggests that 47 per cent of Black students from state schools entered university in 2020, compared with 31 per cent of White students. While such an increase in access and participation is extremely positive, students from Black (African-Caribbean) communities are at risk of becoming recipients of, rather than active participants in, knowledge creation (Richards, 2013) without a corresponding increase in staff representative of their identities. Conversely, access to the more prestigious UK universities for students from these same communities continues to be restricted. The HESA reported that less than 3 per cent of Black (African-Caribbean) students entered the research-intensive universities, compared with an average of 8 per cent for students from White communities (BBC, 2018). There are also, again unsurprisingly, regional variations within both Russel Group and non-Russel Group universities, for example, Queens University in Belfast admitted fewer than 1 per cent of Black students compared with 10 per cent at St Mary's University in London.

Detriment and disadvantage for staff from Black (African-Caribbean) communities is multifaceted and entwined (Gabriel and Tate, 2017). Staff are under-represented and marginalised, with evidence suggesting that gender, institutional, disciplinary and regional variations compound such disadvantage. Commitments to equality of opportunity, access, success and progression for students from under-represented groups (Office for Students, 2021) are fundamentally undermined by the continuous confinement of certain communities of staff within higher education to specific roles or levels of seniority within institutions. It is therefore not merely a matter of agency, nor individuals grasping opportunities, as the recent racial disparity report claims (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). Evidence of the under-representation and marginalisation of staff and students from Black communities underlines UK universities as sites of knowledge creation and discourse (Foucault, 1997) that reflect and reproduce the social order, with its intrinsic inequalities and privileges (Rollock, 2015). It is imperative that we examine such claims through a critical lens to understand, explain and offer interventions to challenge the current hegemony.

This article has emerged from a microcosm of Black and White academics, motivated as allies with a collective ambition to change the experience for Black people employed in UK universities (AdvanceHE, 2019). The work has been fundamental to inspiring our drive and bond as allies, concentrated on the experience of racism and the need for action encompassing individual opportunity *and* structural change. Tasks within the writing of this article symbolise the struggle, as they have been chosen thoughtfully to try to ensure the burden of responsibility is shared. It was important for Julia, as a White woman and deputy dean of school, to write the sections on critical legal studies (CLS), critical race theory (CRT), the inequalities and inequities resulting from racism, and the disproportionate impact of social determinants in order to further motivate her understanding of racism and her own privilege as a White academic. Eastwood (2021) might argue that by so doing, she engaged in 'The Work', utilising her writing to interrogate her own Whiteness, critiquing how as a White academic, she continues to benefit from White privilege and, crucially, how she might better establish a shared responsibility for change.

We will offer a summary of relevant themes emerging from the path-breaking literature contextualising this article before defining CRT, emphasising its enlightenment and relevance for social work practice and higher education. The article will then focus on the force of lived experience as a power for positive change to inspire success, solidarity and a collective voice in overcoming race-related discrimination in UK universities. In this spirit, the counter-narratives of Pauline (an academic), Monique (a director within a UK university) and Maxine (an academic manager within a UK university) reflect their personal experiences of being part of 'under-represented communities' in the higher education sector in the UK.

Contextualising themes from the literature

Accepting UK universities are dominated by Whiteness to the exclusion of Blackness, Black academics and professional staff require strategies for survival and success if they are to productively navigate the myriad assumptions of race and gender, with their far-reaching implications, that is, invisibility, hyper-visibility and exclusion (Gabriel and Tate, 2017). 'Whiteness' and 'Blackness' are ascribed particular social positions, with corresponding assumptions; as Ahmed (2007) argues, Whiteness functions

as a habit, or as a background to social action. Gillborn (2015: 278) suggests that Whiteness 'refers to a set of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that place the interests and perspectives of White people at the centre of what is considered normal and everyday'. Worth is predicated on Whiteness within racially ordered societies (Mills, 1997). Consequently, some have argued that law, custom and practice interweave to imbue Whiteness with the legal attributes of property (Harris, 1993). The position and power of White privilege is therefore confirmed (McIntosh, 1988). The attribution of negative associations through racism propagates discrimination and oppression; as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015: 7) argues, race is a 'defined-indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism – the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them – inevitably follows from this intolerable condition.'

The earlier data revealed how, rather than forces of social change, educational settings reinforce inequality and inequity. Through the testimonials of women of colour, Gabriel and Tate (2017) affirmed lived experience as a source of knowledge, illuminating the intersections in this experience and, moreover, the relationship between individual and structural discrimination related to race and gender. The power of lived experience, reflected through counter-narratives, biography or autobiography, not only enables reflection on this relationship but also inspires action for positive change (Owusu-Kwarteng, 2021). As Long (2021) argues, the 'naming of racism is a crucial step in the process of speaking truth to power; however, once spoken the truth must be heard and accepted. Denial of racialized relations prevents meaningful action.' Therefore, the articulation of the lived experience of Black academic and professional staff within UK universities grounds and transforms educational spaces as sites of political struggle and positive action (Lopez Cardoza and Srimulyani, 2018: 358). The counter-narratives of Paula, Monique and Maxine within this article are important representations of experience that illuminate the institutional reality for Black (African-Caribbean) staff working in UK universities. Paula, Monique and Maxine convey the intersectional nature of this experience dissected by discrimination. Racism is a multifaceted lived experience compounded by gender, sexuality, disability and many other forms of difference. Davis (2008: 86) defined intersectionality as 'the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power'. Indeed Collins (1990) argues that intersectionality as critical social theory, connected to experience and action as ways of knowing, is dependent on dialogue and the development of communities.

However, the construction of the modern, university estate in the UK contravenes knowledge, effective dialogue and the development of communities to counter discrimination and oppression. Mulya and Sakhiyya (2021) argue that the rise of the neoliberal, marketised university estate, advancing as a meritocracy, individualises and depoliticises issues of discrimination, and renders knowledge as a mere priced commodity, over which academics compete in self-promotion – the antithesis of discourse, community and collective responsibility for change. However, as Burke, Cropper and Harrison (2000) have argued, communities are complex, multidimensional and fluid. The sharing of common experiences generates understanding, sets experience in the wider political context and makes the invisible visible, empowering the naming of those depoliticised and yet oppressive practices operating within a marketised and managerial university estate.

Influential authors have suggested several pivotal strategies for change. Alliance making at different levels, both internally and externally, is just one strategy, as are decolonisation and unpacking that 'invisible knapsack' of privilege (McIntosh, 1988), crucial to realising social justice for Black colleagues in UK universities (Gabriel, 2021). Working in alliance, both within and across communities of Black and White colleagues, as in the writing of this article, inspires solidarity for equity, with less hyper-visibility and exclusion. As Paula reflects, as a Black female academic in the university sector in the UK, she has often been pigeonholed into the role of representing all Black views by White colleagues, as she has been seen as a more 'moderate voice'. This has had the effect of quietening her voice when she reminds people that she does not represent all Black viewpoints or that she has interests beyond EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion). Black colleagues have also been offended, especially if they want to be the only Black representative in a respected position. Black voices are often set against each other in spaces where there is only room for one view. Alliance building across Black and White communities in academia would help to ensure that Black staff in universities are not seen as a homogeneous group and that value and reward are not only set for one Black person, thereby setting up artificial competition. Those who wish to be allies or improve the EDI debates surrounding attainment or employment need to address and acknowledge their own privilege and that of their institution.

Recognising the dominance of Whiteness within UK universities emboldens strategies for survival and success. Lived experience serves as a foundation for positive action, inspiring alliance and solidarity within and across different communities of Black and White staff to ensure greater social justice for Black colleagues and students alike. It is only through such mechanisms that the White occupation of academic knowledge can be unsettled and overcome (Arday and Mirza, 2018). CRT has been vital for the privileging of experience framed by racism and so offers a theoretical frame for this article.

CRT

CRT (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) is established as both a lens and an explanatory framework to critique the continued impact of racial inequality and privilege within higher education. CRT has served to privilege lived experience in recognising race as a social construct and not a matter of biology, and is a means of challenging the racism working to preserve inequity and oppression for those communities constructed as 'inferior' (Delgado and Stefancic, 1995). CRT emerged from the critical legal studies (CLS) movement of the 1970s, which illuminated how policy, law and the legal system itself serve to maintain a status quo favouring wealth and power, and resulting in the continued subjugation of the marginalised and disenfranchised (Kennedy and Klare, 1984). For the community of CLS scholars, law should be an agent of change, rather than a means of replicating privilege and inequality. Drawing from CLS, Delgado and Stefancic (1995), among others, established certain key foundational principles of CRT, arguing that race is a social construction, where distinct physical, behavioural and psychological tendencies are structured positively or negatively, with consequences for access to opportunity and positive outcomes (West, 2001).

CRT's focus on the operationalisation of privilege, oppression and the resulting inequality and discrimination has relevance for the priorities and values of social work given the profession's responsibility for respecting and promoting the rights of

people (Social Work England, 2019). Einbinder (2019) has considered the ingress of CRT within social work education and literature. In reviewing the latter, Einbinder discovered CRT present in considerations of social work practice, education and differential treatment or service allocation. While questions persist as to whether CRT helps to reduce racism, marginalisation and oppression in practice, CRT verifies the pervasiveness of racism in the experience of Black people who come within the orbit of social work, whether as students, educators or practitioners (Masocha, 2015). Privileging the importance of counter-narratives based on lived experience and the articulation of a collective voice to be heard, CRT enables the foregrounding of experience shaped by racism at both individual and structural levels (Masocha, 2015). Critique of dominant ideologies, narrative and practices that shape and perpetuate racial stereotypes is possible, and counter-narratives offer a route to this.

While Paula's, Monique's and Maxine's counter-narratives enable the privileging of experience to inspire positive action, the use of such reflections and narratives has not been without challenge. The decision to include has not been taken easily. Moreover, it has been framed by doubts as to how counter-narratives would fit in an 'academic' article. Would inclusion risk harm to colleagues? If it does, is this balanced by a more utilitarian power for good, being a means through which some of us may learn and advance the cause through those with opportunity releasing a little of the power associated with their experience. Ethical principles of maleficence and beneficence (Banks, 2020) have therefore been central to the authors' decision to include the counter-narratives of all, using pseudonyms to shield the identities of all. The narratives have remained because the authors consider that beneficence outweighs the potential for harm. The inclusion of honest and inspiring personal narratives privileges experience and, most importantly, inspires hope for success, solidarity and a collective voice. Paula, Monique and Maxine illuminate the consequences of hyper-visibility, invisibility and exclusion, together with the importance of opportunities for individual development and structural change within higher education to challenge the pervasive inequality faced by staff and students from Black (African-Caribbean) communities. Monique and Maxine reflect on what they have learned and the strategies deployed to progress and advance despite the irrefutable statistical evidence. Three broad themes cohere within these narratives; thriving and climbing; visible but invisible; and individual strategies and organisational solutions for change.

This article summarises the inequality and discrimination facing individuals from Black African-Caribbean communities in educational attainment and career progression within university settings. Evidence challenges the efficacy of the Equality Act 2010, which made it illegal for an organisation or business to discriminate on the grounds of race, sex, belief/religion, age and a range of protected characteristics. While the Equality Act 2010 provides for equality under the law, or formal legal equality (Moore, 2014), UK society remains riven by structural injustice according to race, which is compounded as race intersects with sex, age, belief/religion and age, including other determinants such as occupation, deprivation, location and income. Realising a more just society, where inequalities and inequities are faced and defied, requires greater understanding of power relationships in the context of which discrimination occurs. CRT illuminates this, and the privileging of lived experience provides a foundation for the recognition of difference *and* a more just distribution of rights, opportunities and resources (Hölscher and Bozalek, 2012).

Allyship, alliance and collective voice

Rawls (1971) argued that social justice is realised through agreement and support in pursuit of a common advantage. Agreement, however, is as much a process as an outcome, incumbent upon the recognition of our differences and commonalities, as well as the 'basic human rights of those with whom we disagree' (Hodge, 2014: 160). Agreement requires 'an enabling-across whatever our differences may be – of everyone standing as partners in social interaction' (Fraser, 2005: 32), shouldering the burden of racism as allies across White, Black (African-Caribbean), Asian and South-East Asian communities. Individuals or communities of allies, working in solidarity with those disadvantaged by race, gender, sexuality or any other form of stigmatised difference, are crucial for greater social justice and the eradication of inequality and inequity (Fabino et al, 2003). Maxine's narrative reveals the strength in individual and collective actions for change, following personal aspirations with the support of Black and White colleagues and friends:

> 'Working in higher education has been a fulfilling and enjoyable experience. The highs have been tempered by seasons of discouragement, as was evident when my contributions, experience and views were not valued or heard by team members or peers. Seeking out colleagues like 'me' during these periods of conflict and resistance continues to be a lifeline. Discrimination is too big, emotionally, and so mentally draining to tackle on your own.'

Joining forces with colleagues and friends who recognise that university systems, practices and indeed attitudes towards black staff need to be interrogated and exposed has been central to Maxine's survival in higher education.

Alliance in the face of macro- and micro-aggressions is vital too. Micro-aggressions have been defined as less overt forms of racism that reduce and denigrate (Warren, 2021) but that may be passed by White advantaged people as 'inconsequential'. However, as Thomas and Thomas (quoted in Warren, 2021: 349) reflect: 'If circumstances are perceived as real, they are real in their consequences.' Such aggressions result in doubt and questioning of self. Monique recalls how doubt about being a Black female considering a more senior role surfaced for the first time:

> 'I've never been backward in coming forward, but I have a lot of professional pride and hadn't had much experience of being knocked back. Lots of questions came for me, but if I couldn't succeed here, where I was known, what could I expect from an organisation where I was not known? But if not me, then who? And why not me? After that, I didn't try to talk myself out of it but into it. I also felt I'd be letting more than just myself down. When I was offered the job, I didn't hesitate in accepting, and I haven't hesitated in ensuring people understand who I am and that I am making the role my own, rather than thinking I'd need to do it like my predecessor, and I have found that this has been ok. It's okay to be you, and I am me, with different mannerisms, strengths and foibles. That's what makes us diverse.'

Maxine also recalls the statement of a White male colleague (visiting lecturer) at a previous university, who commented on her appointment to a senior role and, being

relatively new to the university, proceeded to tell her that she would have benefited from undertaking other roles before returning to her new position. Maxine was incensed that, without reservation, he had assumed where she should be in the organisation and so inferred that she did not quite fit in and was not ready for the role. Instead, Maxine took guidance and encouragement from Black and White colleagues alike, who saw her talents and potential. At the same time, Maxine gives back support, encouragement and experience to be a part of a creative, dynamic and resilient Black workforce in the university sector. Racial aggressions, whether overt or implicit, constitute racism (Kendi, 2019), the burden of which should be shared, with White allies empowered to call out the racist attitudes and behaviours of others.

Evidence suggests that allyship and intergroup contact between advantaged White people and those disadvantaged by racism, for example, can contribute to a reduction in racial prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). Intergroup activity has also been found to increase motivation for change (Lewis, 2011). However, allyship has nonetheless been criticised for reproducing the very inequality it has sought to abolish (Sumerau, 2021). Privileging opportunities for individual development over structural change and passing the responsibility for inequality to those communities experiencing discrimination and marginalisation results in only a performative commitment. Indeed, privileging the individual over the structural can demotivate and disadvantage allies' commitment to working together in solidarity to advance (Selvanathan et al, 2017). Whereas contact between disadvantaged members alone can increase motivation for collective action (Cakal et al, 2016), Maxine's narrative illuminates the importance of allyships and networks.

Maxine has been in her current role as an academic manager since 2019, and her desire to advance into more senior positions within higher education has been ignited. As she looks around the university buildings, Black senior managers and professors are visibly under-represented, and so Maxine remains under no illusion that this will not be an easy road to travel. Her reasons for staying in higher education have to be bigger than herself: "To walk alongside colleagues, pursuing goals of diversity and justice in the workforce for our Black student population, the curriculum and the service users requiring social work support, these motives have kept me going when the environment of HE [higher education] was far from collegiate or fair." It is crucial for Black (African-Caribbean), Asian and South-East Asian colleagues with aspirations for working in higher education to do so if they wish. Universities need the unique contributions and talents of Black staff who can, like Paula, Monique and Maxine, contribute to changing the face of universities. All argue that more needs to be done to understand the lived experiences of black staff working in higher education in order to challenge the conventional structures and systems so that people of colour can confidently thrive and climb.

The evidence suggests that advantaged allies are motivated by values of social justice, particularly the realisation that inequality is unjust (Russell, 2011) and that there is utilitarian value in fighting oppression (Edwards, 2006). Opportunities for White allies to listen to, empathise with and respond to the narratives and lived experience of Black individuals and communities appears central to realising equality and social justice through meaningful allyship. Sharing this commitment as White and Black allies, with White colleagues taking responsibility for their community's part in the construction of inequality based on race and committing to working for change, is the lifeblood of challenging any form of discrimination, and most certainly racism. Action committed to both individual and structural change, facilitated in part through

evidence of the lived experience of racism, is reflective of perhaps a more meaningful sense of allyship.

Recognising and agreeing the centrality of power relationships within the construction and replication of racism as a means of perpetuating the marginalisation of Black individuals in university settings and the experience and attainment of students from Black communities is fundamental to the allyship at the centre of this article. As Monique sits in senior executive meetings, she still does not "see enough people who look like me, but part of my role is to continue to keep this front and centre, and to reflect and educate on how we can do better". Outside of the meetings, other areas of invisibility permeate. For instance, walks around the university buildings reveal how pictures and images of Black staff within the physicality of the building are virtually non-existent: "The acknowledgment of our presence and unique contributions should be visible within the fabrics and structures of the university." Paula, Monique and Maxine remain impacted by the lack of diversity among the staff teams working together to write journal articles and books, as well as on project teams. There is so much to gain in our understanding of the Black and White experience as we intentionally work together in a spirit of valuing and respecting each other. Allyship is fluid, rather than fixed. Our microcosm of White, Black, female and male academics, engaged in support of this article, from different regions of the UK and employed within different types of universities, with different levels of experience and responsibility, draws on our capacity to reflect on power and control within our identities, lived experiences and relationships (Scholz et al, 2021). Identifying how discrimination, inequality and inequity intersect within our own lived experiences, together with a commitment to actively reflect and consider together what it is like to live the life of an 'outsider', offers hope that our allyship in the development of further work will be effective and meaningful.

Theoretical perspectives have been important, this article is grounded and framed by an appreciation of CLS and CRT. Recognising critical intersections, however, has also been fundamental to beginning to understand our differences and commonalities as human beings and academics, as well as the vitality of disagreement as a human right (Hodge, 2014). What happens after disagreement is what really matters: do we shift to make a change as partners in action? Moreover, are we transparent about our reporting of the disagreement and our response? Genuine and effective allyship is incumbent on affirmative answers to both questions. It is therefore important to share here that conversations within our microcosm have been robust, particularly as we debated the need for further work to include parallel tracks for change, both individual *and* structural. The reciting of those often-heard but failed justifications, or micro-aggressions, for the lack of Black success in UK universities, including advancement and promotion, underlines the power of narrative and lived experience. We needed to hear this, listen and shift our conceptualisations as partners in action.

Lived experience of racism informing action for change

This article argues that UK universities must prioritise action to reverse the disadvantage and inequity experienced by all university staff from Black (African-Caribbean) communities. There is a need for action at both individual and structural levels. Ensuring colleagues have opportunities and support for career advancement through the equitable resourcing of continuing professional development activities,

furthering academic attainment and engagement in research activities is important, undoubtedly, but largely insufficient to tackle the layers of systemic and structural disadvantage evidenced earlier in this article. The need for more people from Black (African-Caribbean) communities to sit in positions of power, with corresponding decision-making authority relevant to the business of universities and their departments, requires structural change. Legislation and policy to frame obligations scaffold ambition and objectives, but direct action is required. This article will now set out a perspective on what is required to support direct action with the aim of inspiring equality, equity and justice for Black colleagues working in UK universities. The section will stress the importance of positive action, founded on a better understanding of, and response to, the lived experience of racism.

Importance of the personal, lived experience and space for belonging

Evidence suggests the significance of personal relationships as a means of lessening racial stigma, prejudice and related discrimination (Holland, 2014). This underlines the importance of providing and taking opportunities for privileged and powerful communities of colleagues, senior academics, senior managers and vice chancellors to listen to the lived experience of racism. Lived experience can be a powerful mechanism to stimulate more resonant understanding of race and racism (Holland, 2014). Moreover, reliving experience in a safe and supported way can empower and endorse the undoubted resilience, strength and skills of those Black (African-Caribbean) colleagues so that White colleagues learn. Importantly, opportunities for experiential learning can offer White colleagues the space to begin to deconstruct the normalisation of Whiteness (Holland, 2014). As Guess (2006: 649) argues, there has been a failure to address 'both sides of the black/white paradigm when addressing racial inequality', interrogating the 'Other', that is, Blackness, at the expense of understanding the racial significance of Whiteness and what it means to be White.

Engaging in transparent and authentic dialogue about 'Blackness' and 'Whiteness' must at the outset acknowledge and appreciate that the physicality, architecture, structure and culture of universities have remained largely unchanged for centuries, being predominately a 'White' workforce and institution. As Shilliam (2015: 33) states: 'Universities remain overwhelmingly administratively, normatively, habitually and intellectually "white".' This article considers the role of the university space, or its architecture, and the intersection with race as fundamental to achieving positive change. Ahmet (2020) shed light on the intersection of race and space when exploring the experiences of Black, minority and Asian postgraduate students. The impact of the physicality of universities highlighted the absence of images/pictures of Black staff on the walls around the institution. This lack of imagery reinforces 'White privilege' and explicitly reinforces the cultural systems of Whiteness and of who is excluded and included, contributing to how staff perceive their sense of belonging. Moreover, Grier et al (2019) argue that in an increasingly marketised university estate, there is an absence of space for Blackness in academic events, classroom activities and broader marketing materials; indeed, they argue that 'marketing academia as of yet has not found much "value" in the critical study of race' (Grier et al, 2019: 95). Again, the decisive emphasis here is for the need to interrogate the assumed 'essential characteristics of Blackness' through a consideration of power and authority to establish how hierarchies of value and discrimination are constructed.

There is perhaps a need to reflect on the marketing of our own institutions. Are critical considerations of race apparent in general and specific marketing, including campaigns at key points in the academic year? Do current admission and clearing campaigns, for example, speak to a 'diverse student community', without evidencing the academic success of Black (African-Caribbean) student communities within that institution? More broadly, is the success and prominence of Black (African-Caribbean) staff represented and reflected in institutional marketing material? As Grier et al (2019: 92) suggest, race is both highly relevant to university marketing strategies and 'yet seemingly disregarded at the same time'. How do Black colleagues cope with this invisibility? Maxine has thrived in higher education, in part, by looking outside of the university where she works, seeking allies with similar mindsets to bring about change: "This brings the power to energise and recharge efforts for change. Power comes from solidarity, collective action and voice." Equally important to Maxine has been to learn from those who have come before her – Black role models within universities that have developed and refined their strategies to grow and shine despite the largely White environment in which they work. Maxine asks questions, and taking life lessons from Black (African-Caribbean), Asian and South-East Asian staff has been invaluable to her resilience and determination to remain in the university. It is from their wisdom and a deep sense of social justice that she underlined her right to progress in the university setting.

Generating belonging and a meaningful sense of 'being in the right place' is impossible without communication and interaction between individuals, while privileging the relationship between individuals and society (Carter and Fuller, 2016). Yuval-Davies (2016) suggests that belonging can be conceptualised by three broad dimensions, connected to social location; a cultural system, shaped by the ethical and political values, each with the power to decide who is excluded and included within universities. Associations within and between specific groups, related to a shared sense of self and experience that can support a greater sense of belonging and being in the right place. Space to come together is vital to challenging the absence of Blackness and recognising the role of culture and practice, or 'the system', in the maintenance of this absence (James, 2020). Absence reveals the power of the dominant discourse that is Whiteness, to the exclusion of Blackness. The consequences of such exclusion predicated on racial stereotypes, with the ever-present risk of internalised racial stigma, are well established (James, 2020). Absence of Blackness can compound the risk of internalised racial stigma, defined as 'a form of racism that leads people to internalise beliefs and stereotypes about their racial/ethnic group and/or about themselves because of their racial/ethnic group membership' (James, 2020: 1). Visible and positive representation of Black colleagues' success in university spaces appears critical to reducing race-based stigma and to producing a sense of belonging and success for Black colleagues. The challenge for universities is to consider the extent to which images around the university space/walls reflect the diversity of their workforce.

Space for positive representations and frequent, action-orientated conversations between White and Black colleagues at every level of a university's hierarchy, including vice chancellors' corridors, are vital for affirming change. Conversations should be founded on empathy and indebtedness for the lived experience of racism to motivate knowledge, understanding and respect (Duncan, 2021). Concrete action on the part of White-privileged colleagues is a requirement to ensure more Black (African-Caribbean) colleagues occupy positions of power and decision making. Listening and

responding to the reality of colleagues' personal narratives of Blackness and racism is vital if we are to inspire success (see the earlier accounts by Maxine and Monique).

Mentoring, reverse mentoring and positive action on staff recruitment

Monique's and Maxine's counter-narratives convey the power of skill, strength, resolution and resilience, together with the vitality of supportive management and the recognition of talent and potential, in career advancement. The need for support and guidance in career development is perhaps common to all those working in universities. However, given the evidence of systemic discrimination facing Black (African-Caribbean) colleagues considered earlier in this article, there is a structural need to ensure Black colleagues have opportunities for mentoring in leadership at every level of a university's organisation. Role models are not exclusive to those at the top of an organisation. The Chartered Management Institute (2017: 5) argues for a need for 'next up' role models at every layer as a proactive response to inspiring the confidence of those who will follow, evidencing that 'career progression is possible'. Again, such opportunities can contribute to a sense of belonging for Black colleagues, particularly when situated in an organisational culture committed to understanding and respecting the lived experience of racism, and dedicated to structural and cultural change.

Conversations about the lived experience of race and racism are vital, but so too are opportunities to consider the practices within White spaces and of White staff (Omni, 1994). Essentially, space is required for the exploration and interrogation of the racial significance of Whiteness and its replication in organisational structures and relationships within UK universities. Reverse mentoring can offer such opportunities, being a process where senior White leaders (mentees) are paired 'with black and minority ethnic (BME) staff (mentors) to help them explore their mentees' practices in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion' (Raza and Onyesoh, 2020: 94). Stressing the value of relationships as an agent of change, Raza and Onyesoh (2020) argue that reverse mentoring can empower mentors to influence change while acting as critical friends to encourage mentees' self-reflection on their attitudes, behaviours and practice, including that within their organisation. As someone who may be regarded as a senior leader, Julia welcomes an opportunity to work with a reverse mentor. *While, as a person, I do not feel particularly fragile or brittle in talking about race and acting on racism, I am conscious of my conditioning within a world of White privilege and realise I may not always recognise racial aggression quickly enough to call out, or undo. The mentor's lens offers a view on my own thoughts and behaviours, and that of my organisation.*

Mentor feedback must be utilised for change, whether individual or structural. Moreover, opportunities for feedback should be sought outside of a formal reverse-mentoring relationship. Julia agonised as the chair of our Awarding Gap Strategy Sub-group as to whether she was the 'right' person to chair. *Looking back, my question to the membership could have been construed as me saying: 'Equity issues for our Black (African-Caribbean), Asian and South-East Asian students are not my responsibility, as a white person. A black person should chair.' I heard quickly that for some, I was the right person to chair – the perceived power and authority in my role decided that. For others, it was important for the chair to represent the lived experience of racism, and as a white person, I could never do this. We agreed as a group to appoint a co-chair with lived experience of racism: an actual and symbolic*

alliance of partnership in addressing the awarding gap for the success of our Black, Asian and South-East Asian students.

In order to make the most of such initiatives, marketing and recruitment strategies are required to ensure universities attract more applications from Black academic and professional staff. Data analysis of applications and shortlisting indicates where practice needs to change, whether at the marketing, shortlisting or interview stages. Exit interview analysis, particularly for those who leave within two years, can similarly indicate evidence of the change required, informing intervention.

This section has offered a perspective on what is required to effect positive change in the structures of universities – change predicated on a better understanding of the lived experience of racism. Those communities of the powerful and privileged require regular opportunity and space to interrogate the racial significance of Whiteness and to listen to, understand and respect the lived experience of Black (African-Caribbean) colleagues, both as people and as employees. The normalisation of Whiteness within the physicality, architecture, structure and culture of universities must be interrogated, with interventions deployed for action and change. Specific marketing and recruitment campaigns, for example, should evidence diversity and the success of Black staff and students. Space is required to come together as allies in the shouldering of the burden of racism.

Conclusion

Realising commonalities within our allyship is vital to challenging negative conceptualisations of difference and the associated discrimination (Warrener, 2017). Interestingly, both Vida and Julia are registered social workers, being committed to social work as a value-based profession and academic discipline. Social work has a crucial responsibility for highlighting, challenging and responding to social injustice, with its core mandate to 'include promoting social change, social development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people' (International Federation of Social Work and International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2014). Social Work England sets out professional standards for social work. Standard 1 reinforces social work as a value-based profession given that it requires all social workers not only to know but actively 'promote the rights, strengths and wellbeing of people, families and communities' (Social Work England, 2019). Vida's and Julia's work on this article and other endeavours spans their difference in race, being held by a fundamental value for equity and social justice as a human right. However, no person, nor profession, can take value positions for granted. Despite a very long tradition in promoting equality and confronting injustice, the recent 2020–21 Social Work England *Training Report* revealed that the social work profession and education should further investigate and give attention to diversity and inclusion. The report made eight recommendations, with Recommendation 5 stating: 'course and placement providers should increase the time dedicated to examining matters related to equality, diversity and inclusion' Pentaris et al, 2021: 80). Moreover, recent studies on the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students in social work have highlighted the disparities in their placement experiences and outcomes (Thomas et al, 2010, Tedam, 2014; Hertfordshire Social Work Teaching Partnership, 2021).

There is much work to do to ensure Black staff have the same individual and structural opportunities for career leadership and advancement. This article has

argued that lived experience of racism grounds positive action for change, realised through allyship, solidarity and a collective voice. There is a need to interrogate Whiteness as the dominant habit within UK universities to ensure equity in the representation of Blackness within every sphere and level of organisational structures. Space for dialogue, listening and actions, as suggested earlier, will inspire the achievement of equality and equity for Black staff working in UK universities as a human right.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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