



Research article

The psychosocial costs of racism to White staff members of an ethnically diverse, post-92 university

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Abstract

Research examining institutional racism in higher education institutions is invariably based on Black, Asian and minority ethnic people's perspectives, thus overlooking the significance of the experiences and viewpoints of people who are not from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds. To address this gap in the literature, the researchers utilised Kivel's psychosocial costs of racism to White people framework as a means to investigate and understand the issue of institutionalised racism in an ethnically diverse, post-92 university in the UK. Data were collected from White university employees, via semi-structured individual interviews, and were examined using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings revealed how participants were aware of incidences of institutional racism within their higher education institution and understood the privileges that came with the colour of their skin (that were not afforded to their Black, Asian and minority ethnic colleagues). As a result, they invariably experienced significant psychosocial costs, including anxiety, anger, embarrassment and fear. This is the first study to examine the problem of institutional racism as viewed through the lens of White university employees.

The findings of the study present an opportunity for strategic development linked to the 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and Goals 2 and 8 more particularly. Goal 2 focuses on promoting good health and well-being, and Goal 8 on promoting decent work and economic growth.

Keywords White university employees; staff; psychosocial costs of racism; reflexive thematic analysis; institutional racism

Introduction

In recent years, and especially following the unlawful killing of George Floyd in the USA and the revelations that people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups were disproportionately affected during the Covid-19 pandemic, many education leaders have made well-meaning proclamations to decolonise the curriculum (Miller et al., 2023), have espoused their aim to somehow close ethnicity attainment and remuneration gaps, and have targeted equality, diversity and inclusion as a priority once again. Notwithstanding this, the overall experience of BAME staff in higher education, to some extent, remains negative and aversive. Recent data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency show how UK higher education institutions (HEIs) are becoming more ethnically diverse (the numbers of BAME staff have nearly doubled in 10 years – from 8.6 per cent in 2010/11 to 15.4 per cent in 2019/20), yet, disproportionately lower numbers of BAME staff (compared with White staff) have permanent contracts, hold senior leadership positions and are on higher-level pay bands (AdvanceHE, 2021). It is possible that differences between BAME and White higher education staff are due to institutional racism. In the context of this study, institutional racism is taken to mean:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour that amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (Macpherson, 1999: para. 6.34)

This definition recognises the impact of racism on individuals and communities, and the need to work towards creating a more just and equitable society.

The present study builds on research concerning institutional racism in HEIs and is part of a larger study wherein the researchers put forward original typologies of racially discriminatory behaviours that manifest in HEIs. The present study is the first to focus exclusively on the perspectives of White university staff members. This is significant because historically, White university staff members have benefitted from their positions of power, privilege and influence. In other words, given the persistent and widespread nature of institutionalised racism in higher education, White university staff members may be better placed (compared to BAME people) to bring about tangible transformation. Ultimately, the fight against prejudice, discrimination and racism requires the engagement and support of everyone working in HEIs, and especially White people.

The main aim of this study is to bring to the fore the psychosocial costs of racism to White university staff. However, due to the lack of research specifically focused on the impact of racism on White people within UK-based HEIs, the literature focusing on the cost of racism to White Americans is discussed next.

The psychosocial costs of racism to White people

The idea that White people experience psychosocial costs of racism was first introduced by Kivel (1996). According to Kivel (1996), the psychosocial costs of racism to White (PCRW) people can manifest in a range of ways. For instance, White people who are cognisant of institutional racism are more likely to feel a sense of guilt and ashamedness, especially if they have clearly benefitted from systems that afford them unfair privileges. For some White people, this can create a sense of emotional turmoil, leading to feelings of isolation and fewer interactions with others. DiAngelo (2018) coined the term

White fragility to describe the defensive reactions and discomfort that many White people experience when confronted with discussions about race and racism. DiAngelo (2018) supposes that some White people may become defensive or avoidant, or even deny the existence of racism, when the topic is raised, because it challenges their world view or their role in systems that perpetuate racial inequality.

In addition to these emotional responses, it seems that PCRW can also have economic consequences. For example, for socio-economic mobility reasons, some White people feel bound to maintain their standing within a hierarchical organisation that ostensibly perpetuates historical inequalities. In this context, White people's in/actions can lead to a lack of interest in the welfare of minoritised and disadvantaged communities, and some individuals can experience a sense of cognitive dissonance. In this context, cognitive dissonance relates to the mental discomfort or psychological stress that occurs when a person holds conflicting beliefs or values (Brogaard and Gatzia, 2021).

While contributing to the literature on PCRW, Goodman (2001) developed a comprehensive framework that addresses both personal and systemic consequences of racism, which can impact members of both oppressed and privileged groups. Goodman's (2001) quantitative study involved 287 self-identified White students at a predominantly White Midwestern university in the USA. Although Goodman (2001) analysed survey data at two points in an academic year, she was unable to gain a deep and differential understanding of the lived experiences of participants. Notwithstanding, Goodman's (2001) findings provide evidence to suggest that racism disproportionately benefits White students by affording them access to resources and opportunities that are systematically denied to non-White students. In terms of the negative consequences, Goodman (2001) asserted that White students experienced a range of emotions, such as reduced empathy and guilt, as well as feelings of internalised oppression. Similarly, when McGhee (2021) explored the personal, economic and social costs of racism in the USA, she argued that racism is not just harmful to people who are directly targeted by discrimination, but that it also has negative impacts on society as a whole. McGhee (2021) puts forward that the costs of racism can be overcome by addressing systemic inequalities in public sector organisations, such as education and healthcare institutions.

There have been several other prominent studies that have examined PCRW. Spanierman et al. (2009) conducted research involving 284 White university freshmen, aged 18–20 years old. On two occasions, participants completed a PCRW survey and other measures that were designed to elicit economic, social, emotional, and mental health and well-being data. Although the findings of this study may not be generalisable to other samples, the quantitative analyses revealed how students' PCRW behaviours adapted and changed over time. For instance, students who initially exhibited empathy, but also unaccountable and fearful guilt, by the end of the academic year demonstrated anti-racist tendencies. Conversely, the findings also revealed how students who initially showed signs of obliviousness were more likely to become insensitive and afraid during the course of the academic year. Spanierman et al. (2009) questioned whether this concerning finding might be explained by social identity research. When White students are confronted with the realisation that they have benefitted from, or participated in, a racist system, they may experience cognitive dissonance and uncomfortable emotions, and in order to reduce or justify this uneasiness, they may adopt a White superiority perspective (Helms, 1997).

More recently, Exum (2022) utilised mixed methods measures to investigate the perceived costs and repercussions of being a Black person. In short, students ($n = 481$) attending a predominantly White university in the USA were presented with a hypothetical situation wherein a medical error caused them to appear as a different person (that is, non-White). Participants (79 per cent Black and 21 per cent White) were asked to consider the negative consequences they might encounter due to this change in appearance, and they were also required to put a value on race and ethnicity by indicating the minimum amount of compensation they would accept (in US dollars), given the mistake. Exum (2022) reports finding that over 50 per cent of the White students imagined that a change in their race and ethnicity would lead to adverse consequences, such as mental distress and losing friends and respect from others. Furthermore, more than a third of students expressed that they would feel ashamed or embarrassed in such a scenario. While it is interesting to note how Black students who envisioned themselves as White also reported experiencing similar negative outcomes, Exum (2022: 14) notes how 'whites who imagined being Black were more likely to anticipate future losses of wages/income than Blacks who imagined being white'. In other words, without the advantages and benefits associated with White privilege, White students perceive they are likely to experience significant levels of economic hardship. Economic disparity is a long-standing issue for BAME people in the UK.

At present, there is a gap in research concerning the psychosocial costs of racism to university staff, which suggests that there is an incomplete understanding of how racism impacts employees in higher education settings. This gap in knowledge is particularly relevant given the recent proliferation of attention given to equality, diversity and inclusion efforts in HEIs.

Research methodology

Design

This study is part of a larger research project that was designed to examine the behavioural characteristics of racism in a post-92 university. The present study focuses on the concept of institutional racism and how it relates to the psychosocial costs of racism to White university staff. Given that this field of study has not been extensively studied, the researchers utilised reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), informed by both Pollard et al. (2014) and Braun and Clarke (2019). RTA is a qualitative method that allows for the exploration of complex and diverse qualitative data. RTA involves a rigorous process of data analysis, which includes multiple stages of coding and reviewing data to ensure that themes are accurately and reliably identified and interpreted. RTA has been used successfully with a variety of data types, including interview transcripts (for example, Byrne, 2022).

Procedure

After ethical clearance was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), invitations were emailed to all higher education staff members of a post-92 HEI, containing information about the study and a link to complete an online Qualtrics survey. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to contact the researchers if they would be willing to participate in Phase 2; that is, an in-depth semi-structured interview. Only the findings pertaining to the semi-structured interview data (and not to the Qualtrics survey) are presented in this article.

Sample characteristics

Overall, 12 participants who self-identified as being from a White ethnic background volunteered to be interviewed. There were 7 males (58.33 per cent) and 5 females (41.67 per cent). Participants were evenly spread across a range of employment characteristics, including their length of service, the faculty they worked within and the campus at which they worked. To preserve the participants' anonymity, additional demographic characteristics are not included in this article.

The semi-structured interview

Individual interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and lasted up to 60 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interviews, informed by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) and Holstein and Gubrium (1995), were designed to explore participants' perceptions and experiences of racism in higher education. There were three researchers/interviewers (DM, CB and RE). One-to-one interviews were conducted by one researcher, while another researcher, who, after introductions, remained off camera, recorded the interview and made notes to ensure accuracy. The interview guide consisted of semi-structured and open-ended questions and probes that were designed to further the researchers' understanding of racism in higher education. Each interview started with a researcher reading a script that explained the aims of the study and the objectives of the interview. After a brief introductory discussion, participants were asked to reflect on their perceptions of racism in relation to their current HEI. As an example, the following questions were asked:

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

Each participant was interviewed once. At the end of each interview, participants were invited to share anything they felt might be helpful to the study. They were also informed that their involvement in

the study would remain anonymous in any subsequent disseminations, and they were made aware of relevant support services that they could access, should they so wish. Each transcript referred to a participant using an individualised code (chosen by a researcher) to maintain anonymity. After checking the transcriptions for accuracy, the audio recordings were saved in Microsoft Teams files and were thereafter deleted from the researchers' personal devices.

Data analyses

Table 1 summarises the methods used to analyse the interview transcripts.

Table 1. Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis

| Steps | Procedure for each step |
|---|--|
| Data immersion and familiarisation | Each researcher familiarised themselves with the data by thoroughly reading and rereading transcripts. The researchers discussed and noted their early impressions. |
| Generation of preliminary codes | One researcher (RE) identified and highlighted interesting features of the data, and then collated data into initial codes and constructed a brief report. |
| Identification of themes in data | Data and initial codes were reviewed by all three researchers. They regrouped data according to potential themes. |
| Review of themes | Themes were checked, refined and combined/separated by two researchers (DM and CB), and preliminary themes were changed. |
| Definition and naming of themes and subthemes | Through ongoing analysis, the researchers enhanced the identified themes and developed theme definitions that were informed by PCRW research. As the researchers checked for clarity and coherence, themes were revised and improved in an iterative manner. Saturation was achieved when researchers agreed that further coding was no longer possible. |
| Production of the article | The RTA resulted in the development of broad themes that conveyed consensus surrounding participants' discussions. A researcher (DM) reconstructed a cohesive narrative that emerged from the data and themes. All researchers contributed to the final report and agreed that the findings explained the data. |

Trustworthiness, validity and reflections

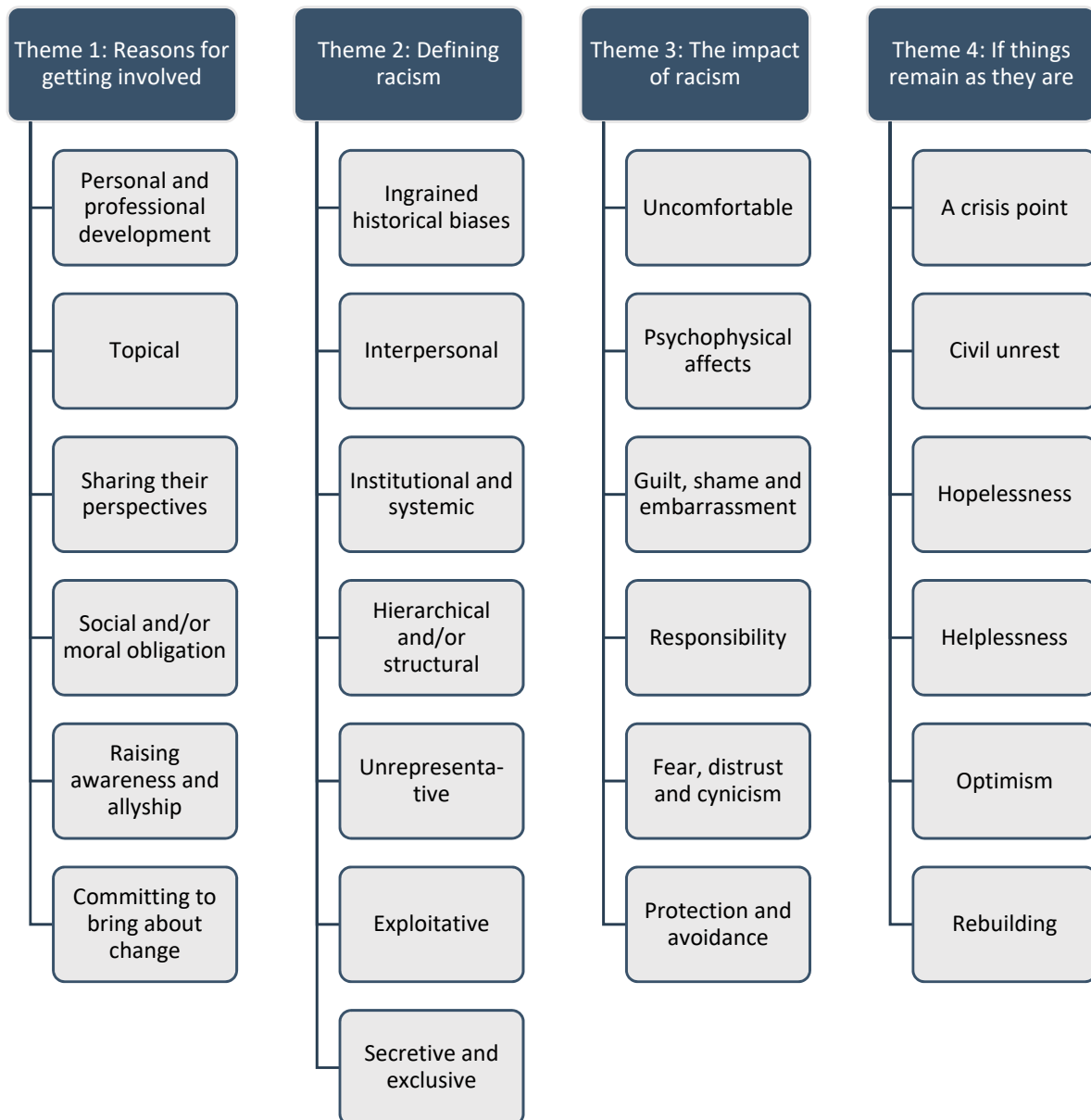
A major advantage of RTA is that it demands transparency and reflexivity throughout the research process. In line with RTA guidelines, in this study, the researchers critically reflected on their own assumptions, biases and perspectives throughout the data analysis process. This helped to ensure that the findings were trustworthy and valid (Braun and Clarke, 2019). In addition to this, RTA was conducted by all three researchers (that is, two Black women [DM and CB] and one White man [RE]), who each brought different viewpoints to the data interpretations. Indeed, the research team frequently grappled with balancing their focus on the experiences and perspectives of White university staff, while still acknowledging the significant impact of racism on BAME university staff. The team were concerned about the potential for their study to undermine or discount the experiences and insights of Black people. They did not want their research to support the notion that BAME people's perspectives are incomplete without input or sanctioning from White individuals (Miller, 2016). Hence, the researchers also made use of two critical

friends. Hatton and Smith (1995: 41) assert that the purpose of a critical friendship is 'to engage with another person in a way which encourages talking with, questioning, and even confronting, the trusted other, in order to examine planning for teaching, implementation, and its evaluation'. Moreover, the researchers included several verbatim quotations from all participants as a means to validate both the richness of the data and the relationship between the raw data, the researchers' interpretations and the reported findings. Last, member checking (that is, researchers returned the synthesised findings to interviewees) was undertaken to validate the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis (Birt et al., 2016).

Findings

In this study, the researchers aimed to examine the problem of institutional racism in UK-based HEIs from the perspectives of White university staff. Consistent with RTA, we present the findings from interviews with 12 White university staff members under four main themes – these are mapped out in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Themes and initial codes



Theme 1: reasons for getting involved

When White university staff were asked to discuss their reasons for getting involved in racism research, they invariably talked about their interest in contributing to the expansion of knowledge and understanding, even if they lacked expertise on the topic:

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

Despite not having personally experienced racism themselves, White university staff were aware of the impact it had on others, including their BAME colleagues. While acknowledging their limited understanding of the multifaceted nature of racism, participants' observations motivated them to gain knowledge about this subject and to contribute to the growing body of research in this field. Hence, White university staff members were also keen to learn more about topical issues, such as the so-called 'BAME awarding gap':

Well, it is really my general impression from the media, and from university communications, that we're faced with an attainment gap that students of colour seem to progress less within higher education than White students. It is not something on which I'd consider myself an expert. (P14, male)

My particular interest is in the attainment gap or the awarding gap, which is a problem that I didn't realise existed ... I think that probably is an example of institutional racism. (P18, male)

White university staff were willing to contribute to this research study due to their concerns regarding the impact of biased practices on disparities in academic outcomes between BAME and White students. Participants sought to understand the experiences and challenges faced by BAME students within their university. They were also interested in having open and honest discussions about their own experiences of racism:

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

The participants in this study revealed how they were privy to confidential and 'dumbed-down' discussions about racism-related issues. White university staff felt that these conversations should be 'widened out'. They wanted to extend the scope and reach of these conversations to necessarily include different voices:

I have quite a lot of experience in interacting with students and colleagues from developing countries ... I thought I could maybe bring some different experience. (P14, male)

Participants' interactions with people from diverse backgrounds have enriched their perspectives. Through engaging with students and colleagues from 'developing countries', some participants believed that they were well-placed to help foster a deeper understanding of racism in higher education:

I think it's important to sort of include everyone into the fight for equality and for more visibility because I think we're all together in that fight, so it's important not to forget that, you know, because someone is White. (P18, male)

By emphasising the importance of inclusivity, White university staff imagined that everyone ought to be involved in the fight for equality. They indicated that solidarity is crucial. They discussed how people should not be excluded or overlooked based on their racial background, even if they are White. This perspective recognises the shared struggle for justice and fairness, irrespective of one's racial identity (Spanierman et al., 2009). In relation to this, participants also alluded to the inherent advantages they had, and they reflected on ways in which they might be able to use their privilege to advocate or 'fight' for unheard marginalised groups:

I'm very much aware that there is a difficulty in people who have experienced discrimination making themselves heard or wanting to speak in the first place ... it made me reflect on my own experiences, and things which I have been involved with and things which I've witnessed. And so it is a conversation which I enjoy having ... from my point of view, it's been hidden for a long time. (P15, female)

When discussing their reasons for getting involved in the study, participants acknowledged the challenges faced by individuals who have experienced discrimination. They noted the difficulty that people may encounter in finding their voice or feeling comfortable speaking up. This awareness prompted White university staff to reflect on their own experiences and observations. The conversations they 'enjoy' having appear to revolve around discussing and raising awareness about issues that have been overlooked or kept out of public discourse for a long time. By engaging in this research, White university staff aimed to bring attention to these hidden experiences and to contribute to a more open, honest and inclusive dialogue. Ultimately, participants' sense of social and moral obligation meant that they wanted to contribute to potentially bringing about 'real change', seemingly both for themselves and for others:

I just thought I'd like to be able to share really, and really make a difference because it's, it's not enough to sit and not do ... I mean you just want to see a change in academia, it's not good enough anymore ... if you can develop strategies and I can contribute in any way that develops things ... it just gets fixed. That's what I'd like to see. I want to see real change. (P17, female)

In short, the participants in this study envisaged that they could help to raise awareness of the ways in which racism operated in the university. Their reflections and willingness to engage in these conversations suggest a commitment to halting the silence surrounding institutional racism in higher education. By amplifying their hidden conversations and experiences, participants believed that they might support efforts to challenge covert discriminatory practices and policies. Put differently, the participants' Whiteness appeared to provide them with the capacity to facilitate change in ways that were not plausible for BAME staff and students. Similarly, Miller (2016) supposes that White people can function as intermediaries, advocating for and representing the interests of BAME individuals through their 'White sanction'.

Theme 2: defining racism

When it came to defining racism, most participants provided an expansive understanding of the term. In so doing, White university staff often acknowledged the role of inherent, systemic and institutional factors in perpetuating racial inequalities:

I would term it as where a system is unfairly balanced or unfairly biased against certain people based on their race ... systemic issues within the university, such as the levels of, let's say, White people in higher positions, which then means that regardless of the many legislation, it doesn't actually have any effect on the representation of White people. (P9, male)

I would see it as racism that is inherent ... brings its power from the structures of the institution. (P14, male)

White university staff members' definitions concur with Macpherson's (1999). Institutional racism is a system that is imbalanced and biased against certain racial groups, resulting in unfair treatment. Participants highlighted systemic issues within their own university, such as the under-representation of BAME people in leadership positions, which they felt signifies how legislation has been ineffective in improving representation. Participants felt that racism is not just about individual actions, but also about the way social structures operate to advantage some groups and exploit or disadvantage other minoritised and vulnerable groups. In this sense, White members view this type of racism as inherent, deriving its power from the institutional structures:

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

White university staff talked about the potential for exploitation of vulnerabilities, particularly for individuals belonging to historically discriminated racial groups. They believed that this exploitation further exacerbated the disadvantages faced by BAME people:

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

The 'exploitation' that White university staff alluded to appears to have significant consequences for their mistreated colleagues. It can reinforce existing disparities, limit upward mobility and hinder their career progression. Moreover, it can contribute to a cycle of disadvantage, making it challenging for individuals from historically discriminated racial groups to overcome systemic barriers and equitably achieve their full potential:

It's the lack of equality of opportunity. It's systems that are in place, that don't enable everyone the same chance to succeed. (P17, female)

To summarise this theme, White university staff members' definitions of institutional racism highlighted the role of power dynamics and structural factors in perpetuating inequalities within their university context. Most of the participants held the view that institutional racism was widely prevalent in their university. In short, according to participants' definitions, racism was explicitly demonstrated through entrenched 'hierarchical structures that don't encourage diversity' (P10, male).

Theme 3: the impact of racism

White university staff reported that institutional racism had various social, emotional and mental health impacts. Participants explained how witnessing discriminatory incidents caused them to experience feelings of anger, guilt and moral discomfort (Kivel, 1996):

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

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

White university staff have observed how incidents of indirect racism have affected their colleagues. They mentioned feeling uncomfortable and disgusted in those moments. These emotions may stem from a deep-seated belief in the importance of treating others with fairness and dignity, contrasting sharply with the discriminatory behaviours they witnessed.

Participants who believed that their unknowingness or ignorance had contributed to the suffering of BAME colleagues reported how they felt a sense of vicarious responsibility, leading to negative emotions, including guilt, shame and anxiety, as well as to psychophysical effects, such as an increased heart rate and stomach tension:

I just felt this way, like a wave of embarrassment and kind of shame and awkwardness ... it's embarrassing, it's kind of shameful ... just kind of like the horrible knots in my stomach ... thinking, oh my god ... that's just embarrassing. (P16, female)

Vicarious racism is a form of trauma that can impact individuals who are not directly targeted by racist stereotyping or discrimination (Segundo, 2017). According to White university staff members, vicarious racism can lead to psychological distress and symptoms similar to those experienced by people who are actual victims of racism (Macaranas et al., 2023), resulting in uncomfortable feelings or hesitancy in terms of interacting with people from diverse backgrounds. This discomfort seems to stem from a fear of inadvertently saying or doing something that could be misconstrued as being racist or insensitive (Spanierman et al., 2009):

I have an opinion, but don't necessarily want to voice it in case of offence or saying wrong things or whatever it might be. (P9, male)

Indeed, *racial anxiety* (Godsil et al., 2014) has caused some White university staff members to withdraw from social interactions and/or to avoid situations where they might have been required to 'think about' their implicit or subconscious interactions (Sue et al., 2007):

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

The reflections of White university staff members indicate that they adopt self-protective strategies when discussing sensitive race-related subjects. In contrast to the approach employed by the Black female participants in Bell and Nkomo's (2001) study, who used armour as a coping mechanism, in this study, the use of armour and the emphasis on self-preservation indicate the participants' desire to safeguard their emotional well-being and maintain a sense of personal safety in potentially contentious conversations:

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

Participants revealed how they tended to avoid engaging with difficult thoughts and emotions surrounding the subject of institutional racism, possibly due to a fear of negative consequences. Although 'silence operates as part of the maintaining of [the] status quo' (P4, female), notwithstanding, White university staff often exercised their freedom of choice to distance themselves from groups or social networks that demonstrate racist attitudes or social dominance-oriented behaviours (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). This is because they do not want to be allied with, or they seek to protect themselves from being associated with, inherently privileged groups that, ironically, favour people such as themselves:

Well, it's just it creates a very toxic environment. And then you have to go into that toxic environment ... it causes alienation from, especially from certain people who seem to think this is OK. (P4, female)

The description of the university environment as being 'toxic' suggests that it is pervaded by harmful dynamics, and that being in such an environment has many detrimental effects:

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

Participants' strong stance in upholding their own values, and refusing to compromise on them, reflected their commitment to integrity and a willingness to distance themselves from those who do not align with their values. However, in many ways, 'toxic' 'gangs' and unhealthy university environments have eroded trust, created cynicism and contributed to an alienating and disturbing workplace:

Extremely traumatising ... the context is just not healthy ... it's a very distressing topic. (P16, female)

Trying to keep the cynicism out. (P15, female)

White university staff members suppose that toxicity in the workplace might result in various negative outcomes, including high staff turnover rates, reduced job satisfaction and lowered career aspirations:

If things progress as they are, then it will drop back down again, there'll be a few changes in leadership, there'll be a few changes within staff ... and the traditional hierarchy will remain. (P15, female)

I think you'll see exits. So, unless we get real change in the faculty, I can see people leaving ... I'm choosing not to be as successful as I could be. (P17, female)

In short, participants' statements reflected the perception of a stagnant or unchanging working environment, where the existing hierarchy was likely to persist despite potential personnel changes. White university staff anticipated that colleagues would eventually leave, primarily due to the lack of significant change. Without substantial transformations, they felt that the university might not be conducive to the personal and professional growth of all its staff members. In other words, although White people are not the primary targets of institutional racism, they can still be negatively affected by the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that underlie racist ideologies and practices in HEIs.

Theme 4: if things remain as they are

Given the perniciousness of racism, White university staff postulated whether the continuance of 'superficial' practices that are supposed to bring about 'real change' might inevitably lead to a crisis point:

Without senior leaders acknowledging their own personal responsibilities there will be a crisis point ... we support each other, but it's still at the superficial level. (P15, female)

Participants' words underscore the potential consequences of inadequate leadership and a desire for a more supportive and fulfilling work environment. White staff members believed that a significant breaking point may arise if the university is forced to confront the reality of systemic racism and redress the harm it causes:

You might have an explosion ... You know, things like ... people rioting, and, you know, there are very serious things and is one you know, when you kind of push people to a limit then you know people explode and that's no good. (P18, male)

Some White university staff strive to maintain a sense of optimism and hopefulness for the future:

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

Conversely, others feel that their HEI requires more fundamental and systemic changes, which may necessitate, metaphorically, rebuilding the university:

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

To summarise, institutional racism can leave White university staff feeling overwhelmed, helpless, hopeless and defeated. Participants' words reflected a strong frustration with the current state of academia and a belief that only radical measures can address the underlying problems. White university staff members revealed the immense difficulties faced by those who aspire to instigate change. For some participants, starting over was the only solution they could muster to 'fix' the deep-seated, unrelenting and systemic problem of institutional racism in their post-92 university.

Discussion

In this study, the researchers analysed qualitative data from in-depth interviews conducted with 12 White university staff members working across all levels of a post-92 HEI. To date, there is no research focused exclusively on the psychosocial cost of racism to White university staff. Understanding these costs can contribute to discussions about the impact of racism on individuals from different racial backgrounds and help foster empathy, allyship and support for efforts to combat institutional racism in higher education. In this section, the findings of our study are explored; the following sections discuss the limitations and conclusions of the study.

This research contributes to the literature on the PCRW and extends this work to HEIs in the UK. The findings of this study suggest that White university staff members' definitions of racism are consistent with those outlined by the Macpherson (1999) Inquiry, which investigated the handling of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a Black British teenager who was stabbed to death in a racially motivated attack over 30 years ago. In short, our participants believed that racism is not just the result of individual attitudes or actions, but that it is also inherently embedded into the structures, policies and practices of their HEI. Notably, all participants were cognisant of prominent topical issues and debates surrounding racism, and, in their own way, they were motivated to gain a better understanding of how racism operates within their workspaces, and they hoped that this research might serve to challenge the status quo. Evidently, when White people get involved in research on the issue of racism, they can bring a unique perspective to the field, especially since they are often the beneficiaries of systems and structures that perpetuate inequalities and oppression (Smith et al., 2017). Exum (2022: 11) asserts that the 'denial of white privilege stalls the growth of America's Great Awakening, and it further delays reconciling the injustices that continue to befall many in black communities'.

Undoubtedly, White university staff do not experience racism in the same way as BAME staff and students do. Overall, the psychosocial cost of racism to BAME people is much more pernicious. As attested by the growing body of research evidence, racism has a far-reaching impact on the lives of BAME people, affecting their health, education and career opportunities, and even their basic human rights in birth, death and war (Cénat et al., 2022; Matthews et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it is true to say that the psychosocial cost of racism to White university staff can lead to feelings of guilt, embarrassment, anger and shame. It seems that White university staff who become aware of the systemic nature of racism can feel responsible for it, even if they have not purposefully engaged in racially discriminatory behaviours (Segundo, 2017). White university staff members may grapple with the ethical implications of their own racial privilege, and the responsibilities that come with it.

Another potential impact of racism on White university staff is the effect on their mental health and well-being. Institutional racism can lead White university staff members to feel anxious, stressed and outraged. Being confronted with evidence of racial disparities, and acknowledging their own racial privilege, can create cognitive dissonance for White individuals. This internal conflict arises when personal beliefs or values are at odds with the reality of racial inequality, causing distress and discomfort (Brogaard and Gatzia, 2021). Experiencing such emotions can adversely affect White university staff members' overall well-being and commitment to their work. White university staff who are committed to addressing racial inequalities may engage in activism and advocacy work. While important, their involvement can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout, and to feelings of frustration when progress is slow or met with resistance. In this sense, our research is in accord with other similar endeavours examining PCRW (for example, Goodman, 2001) and points to the need to prioritise the experiences and perspectives of both dominant and marginalised staff and students, when attempting to address the problem of racism in higher education.

Over the years, there have been several instances where people have endeavoured to bring about substantial change, for instance, during the protests that followed the unlawful killing of George Floyd in 2020. These protests were driven by a deep sense of anger and frustration at the continued discrimination and violence faced by Black Americans, and they provided the impetus for powerful expressions of the desire for long-awaited change across the world. Likewise, White university staff envisioned a 'crisis' point, where protests, violent demonstrations and civil unrest could occur, if the status quo is maintained. As a final measure, the metaphorical notion of rebuilding the university from the ground up was put forward as a way to 'fix' the problem of racism in participants' post-92 university.

Limitations

There are two key limitations that are worth noting. First, given the sample size, ethnicity categories were collapsed to protect the identity of the interviewees. Hence, the results say little about the distinctive experiences of each participant. Being White does not mean that participants do not come from diverse cultural backgrounds. In relation to this, second, we did not consider the intersectional nature of our participants, for example, in terms of their socio-economic status and gender identity. Research evidence suggests that, as allies and advocates, White people can play a key role in promoting equality, 'but it must be underpinned by an understanding of racism as institutional and systemic and a commitment to tackling interlocking systems of oppression through solidarity' (Ejegi-Memeh et al., 2023: 1). Hence, although institutional racism is a higher-level system of oppression, future research endeavours might seek to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how different types of discrimination interact and affect individuals.

Conclusions

The past few years have seen a seismic shift in the narrative around racism in the UK. The disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on BAME people, combined with the killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, have all highlighted structural inequalities and institutional racism in the UK, and further afield. This study builds on research concerning racism in higher education. The findings of this study are significant for two main reasons. First, it is the first study that solely focuses on the impact of racism on White university staff members. While it is undoubtedly vital that BAME people's experiences are not minimised or diluted, it is important to acknowledge

that racism can affect others in different ways. Second, the study is important because it focuses on White university staff members, who historically have held positions of power, privilege and influence within higher education settings. White university staff members' perceptions and experiences of racism may serve to break down long-standing barriers in ways that victims of institutional racism cannot. By working together and listening to diverse perspectives, it might be possible to create a more equitable and inclusive higher education environment. Put differently, BAME staff and students alone cannot be expected to put right the problem of institutional racism in higher education. Addressing systemic discrimination requires a sustained and collective effort, and, given the results of our study, it is crucial for all members of HEIs to actively engage in this work.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of Greenwich Research Ethics Committee.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

Denise Miller is an assistant editor for this journal. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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