**Research article**

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

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## Abstract

Despite extensive research on institutional racism in UK universities, major gaps remain in understanding the contrasting experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and White staff across all levels of higher education. This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of 18 staff members at a post-1992 university, drawing on Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis alongside critical race theory. Four key themes emerged: 'White privilege', 'Discrimination and exclusion', 'Impact on self-perception and behaviour', and a striking, verbatim-titled theme from a White participant (also the title of this article): 'I'm managed by a White man who's managed by a White man who's managed by a White woman who's managed by a White man'. Findings expose the deeply embedded nature of racism within the institution, evident in exclusionary practices, unequal career progression and the persistence of White privilege.

Both BAME and White participants emphasised the urgent need for real change, and they called for greater accountability, transparency, and diversification of leadership. This study contributes to a broader understanding of institutional inequality and aligns with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It supports SDG 4 (Quality Education) by exposing the inequities embedded within academic environments; SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by addressing intersecting forms of discrimination; SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) through its critique of barriers to fair progression; SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by calling for systemic reform; and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) by promoting inclusive, accountable, and transparent institutional practices.

**Keywords** higher education; university; staff; institutional racism; critical race theory

# Introduction

While discussions surrounding racism in education have existed for as long as education itself, it is arguably only within the past three decades that the discriminatory practices within higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK have gained significant national attention. During this period, the unequal treatment of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) academics has been repeatedly brought to the fore. For instance, Bhopal et al. (2016) investigated why Black and minority ethnic (BME) academics ($n = 41$) in UK-based HEIs felt compelled to seek employment abroad. Findings suggest that BME academics encountered shifting goalposts and higher standards compared to their White counterparts, especially when trying to progress their careers. Besides grappling with 'double standards', BME participants also expressed feeling the need to work twice as hard as their White colleagues. This sentiment aligns with findings from Rollock's (2019) examination of the experiences of Black female professors ($n = 20$), where participants recalled how they encountered explicit and implicit forms of racism, including racial stereotyping and microaggressions. To navigate challenges, Black female professors often found themselves working harder (than their White colleagues) to explicitly demonstrate their all-encompassing competences. However, the burden of maintaining such heightened vigilance and performance took a toll on their mental health and physical well-being, with some seeking therapy and others scaling back their career ambitions, thereby exacerbating gender, ethnicity and mental health disparities in the UK (Bignall et al., 2019).

Building on these findings, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2019) released a report titled *Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities challenged*, which examined the prevalence of discriminatory incidences among university staff across England, Scotland and Wales. Notably, participants ($n = 378$) reported experiencing racial bullying and harassment on a monthly, if not a daily, basis. Furthermore, BAME staff felt systematically excluded from decision-making processes and career development opportunities, while it seems White staff often received undue credit for their BAME colleagues' work. Similar to the experiences of Black British female managers in Miller's (2021) study, many participants disengaged from activities to prevent further erosion of their confidence and well-being. Indeed, persistent incidents of racial harassment prompted some participants to resign from their positions, with many others contemplating the same course of action. These findings, which echo those of other research endeavours (for example, Miller et al., 2023; Sian, 2017), highlight the pervasive impact of racism on the professional and personal lives of BAME staff working within HEIs.

In more recent years, particularly following the unlawful killing of George Floyd in the United States, and the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on people from BAME groups, many HEI leaders have issued well-intentioned declarations to decolonise the curriculum, address ethnicity attainment and remuneration gaps, and prioritise equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) efforts once again. However, despite these proclamations, the experience of BAME staff in higher education remains aversive. It is notable that it is still the case that a disproportionately lower number of BAME staff, compared to their White counterparts, hold permanent contracts, occupy senior leadership positions or are operating in higher pay bands (Advance HE, 2021). These disparities suggest that institutional responses to racial

justice movements may, in part, be driven by concerns for reputation and funding, rather than by a genuine commitment to EDI.

# Rationale for the study

Post-1992 universities are often characterised by their commitment to widening participation and serving a more diverse student population. In fact, a substantial proportion of their students come from BAME backgrounds. However, despite this diversity, post-1992 HEIs frequently fail to achieve equitable representation among their staff, particularly in senior leadership roles. Arguably, this imbalance reflects systemic barriers that are inextricably associated with broader neoliberal policies that shape the higher education sector.

Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on metrics, market competition and individual accountability, has been extensively critiqued in the literature for reinforcing systemic inequalities within higher education. Policies driven by neoliberal imperatives invariably prioritise performance indicators, such as league table rankings, student satisfaction scores and graduate employability. Scholars argue that these metrics perpetuate racial hierarchies, marginalise under-represented groups and normalise inequitable power structures. For post-1992 HEIs, which occupy a lower tier in the marketised hierarchy and often encounter significant pressure to deliver value for money (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2023), these forces can exacerbate existing disparities. By situating the present study within this context, this research seeks to critically examine the systemic mechanisms that sustain these inequities and explore pathways towards sustainable change.

This study addresses a significant gap in the understanding of how prejudice, discrimination and racism can manifest within a post-1992 HEI. While much of the existing literature focuses on academic staff, this research broadens the lens to capture the diverse experiences of staff across all roles within a single post-1992 HEI. By considering academic and non-academic perspectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the systemic inequalities that can persist within the higher education sector. It will be guided by the following research questions:

(1) How does prejudice, discrimination and racism manifest in a post-1992 HEI?
(2) What are the effects on staff working within a post-1992 HEI?
(3) Why is it so difficult to eliminate prejudice, discrimination and racism pervading a post-1992 HEI?

# The use of terminology: 'BAME' and 'White'

The terms 'BAME' and 'White' are recognised as contested umbrella labels that do not fully capture the diverse experiences of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Nonetheless, this study adopts the term 'BAME' as it reflects the language commonly used within UK higher education policy and institutional frameworks at the time of the research. To ensure consistency and clarity, 'BAME' is used throughout the study with an awareness of its inherent limitations.

Similarly, the term 'White' is used to describe people who identify as belonging to the racial category of White (that is, people who self-identify as White, including European and White English backgrounds), as it aligns with prevailing terminology in the UK. Notwithstanding, the authors of the study remain attentive to the reductive nature of these labels and their inability to fully represent the complexity of racial and ethnic identities.

## Critical race theory

In the present study, critical race theory (CRT) serves as a lens through which to explore university employees' perceptions of prejudice, discrimination and racism. A theoretical framework that emerged in legal scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s (Delgado, 1989), CRT has since been extensively used and adapted across various disciplines, including education (Ledesma and Calderón, 2015). It incorporates storytelling as a methodological approach to understanding and addressing issues of racial inequality and injustice. Storytelling involves sharing personal anecdotes and lived experiences concerning the ways in which racism operates within society. In higher education, these narratives consistently challenge the permanence of racial hierarchies and demonstrate how they continually restrict access to resources,

hinder opportunities for progression and impact the sense of belonging for BAME university staff within their workplaces.

CRT researchers also focus on examining Whiteness, which, as Malcolm X stated, 'is a state of mind, not a complexion' (cited by Hare, 2002: 9). This concept emphasises Whiteness as a social construction that privileges White identity within hierarchical systems. This notion is evident in the Eurocentric curricula and pedagogical approaches prevalent in higher education, which tends to marginalise alternative viewpoints and reinforce the dominance of White perspectives (Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2019). Such practices perpetuate environments where BAME people can often feel unaccepted, excluded and marginalised. Moreover, research demonstrates that microaggressions, subtle forms of discrimination and the perpetuation of stereotypes normalise Whiteness and maintain these exclusionary practices (Sue et al., 2007). These microaggressions can manifest in various ways, such as through dismissive comments, biased stereotypical assumptions or overlooking the contributions of BAME people. In HEIs, microaggressions serve to maintain the marginalisation and invisibility of non-White perspectives.

CRT also challenges the principles of colour-blindness, neutrality and equal opportunity, which often mask underlying structural inequalities. For instance, colour-blind admissions policies in higher education can fail to account for the historical and ongoing disadvantages faced by BAME students, and, accordingly, may perpetuate racial disparities rather than minimise them. Lewis et al. (2000: 88) assert that the impact of colour-blind ideology within HEIs can contribute to 'increasingly daunting challenges that White students and many White staff do not understand, and with which they do not have to contend'. In higher education, these disconnects highlight how colour-blind policies can reinforce Whiteness by allowing White university staff to remain unaware of, or indifferent to, the struggles and systemic barriers faced by their BAME colleagues and students.

## Methodology

Following approval from the University of Greenwich Research Ethics Committee, all staff members of a post-1992 ethnically diverse HEI were invited to participate in the study, which included details about the research and a link to an online Qualtrics survey. On completing the survey, respondents were given the option to express an interest in participating in Phase 2 of the study, which involved in-depth semi-structured interviews. The findings presented in this article are solely derived from the data collected during the Phase 2 semi-structured interviews. Overall, 18 participants were interviewed. Within this sample, 12 (66 per cent) participants identified as being from a White ethnic background, while 6 (33 per cent) identified as being from a BAME ethnic background. The participants were working in varied areas of the HEI, including academic roles, administrative positions, student support services and technical roles.

Individual interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, with each interview lasting up to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. At the end of each interview, participants were encouraged to share any additional insights they believed would contribute to the study. Additionally, participants were assured that their involvement would remain anonymous in any subsequent disseminations, and they were given information about relevant support services, if needed. To safeguard confidentiality, each participant was identified using a unique code selected by the researchers.

## Data analysis

In this study, CRT served as the guiding framework for the semi-structured interviews, while Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis provided a systematic method for analysing qualitative data. Table 1 outlines how these steps were employed within a CRT framework.

**Table 1. The integration of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis with CRT**

| Step | CRT integration | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Step 1 – Familiarising with the data | In this initial phase, the researchers immersed themselves in the data, which included reading and rereading interview transcripts. | The researchers noted recurring themes of exclusion and marginalisation expressed by BAME university staff, and they paid close attention to how these experiences were articulated and the emotions conveyed. |
| Step 2 – Generating initial codes | During this step, the researchers identified and coded features of the data that were relevant to CRT principles. Codes included specific instances of racial discrimination, references to Whiteness and privilege, or descriptions of colour-blind policies and their impacts. | When BAME participants described feeling overlooked for promotions, these occurrences were coded as 'Career progression barriers' and 'Institutional bias'. |
| Step 3 – Searching for themes | Codes were collated into potential themes that align with CRT's focus on systemic inequalities and the social construction of race. Themes were identified by examining how different codes relate to broader issues of power, privilege and discrimination in higher education. | Codes related to exclusion from decision-making processes and experiences of microaggressions were grouped under the theme 'Systemic marginalisation'. |
| Step 4 – Reviewing themes | The researchers reviewed the themes in relation to the coded data and the entire dataset. CRT's emphasis on storytelling and counter-narratives was important here. The researchers ensured that the themes accurately reflected the experiences of the participants. | The theme 'Systemic marginalisation' was reviewed to ensure that it captured all relevant instances of exclusion and discrimination described by participants. |
| Step 5 – Defining and naming themes | Definitions were developed to articulate how each theme relates to CRT concepts, such as Whiteness, privilege and structural inequality. | The theme 'Invisible barriers' was defined to include various forms of subtle discrimination and institutional practices that maintain racial hierarchies. |
| Step 6 – Producing the report | In the final step, the researchers produced a detailed report that presented the main themes with supporting data extracts. The report integrated CRT to highlight how the findings reveal and challenge systemic racism within HEIs. | The report included participant quotations to illustrate the pervasive impact of microaggressions and institutional biases. |

# Discussion of findings

The following findings provide an overview of four significant themes extracted from the interview data. Each theme builds on the previous, to reveal layers of systemic barriers. To preserve anonymity, each participant was randomly assigned a code (for example, P1) by which they are consistently referred.

## Theme 1: White privilege

The theme 'White privilege' acknowledges the existence of systemic inequalities within the context of a post-1992 HEI. Most participants discussed the existence of White privilege and systemic discrimination, albeit for White participants this was sometimes in a more indirect or subtle manner. For example, White participants discussed how discrimination can be internalised and perpetuated without their awareness:

> People who are discriminating equally internalise a sense of privilege, which they don't even notice anymore. And so, they don't then do anything to restore justice. And it's … it's like a self-fulfilling kind of process that happens. (P4, White, female)

When White participants addressed the phenomenon of privilege and discrimination, they suggested that those who discriminate develop a sense of privilege. Over time, this sense of privilege becomes so ingrained that they are no longer conscious of it. Privilege then becomes a normalised aspect of their world view. In the context of this study, because White university staff often remain unaware of their privilege, they fail to recognise the injustices perpetuated by their actions or attitudes. This unawareness leads to a lack of action in addressing injustices, thus perpetuating the cycle of discrimination and inequality in higher education (Rollock, 2011). In essence, White participants assert that their colleagues' unawareness of their privilege contributes to ongoing discrimination and inequality in their ethnically diverse post-1992 HEI.

Conversely, BAME participants tended to address the concept of White privilege directly. They focused on how systemic advantages benefit their White colleagues from birth. They recognised that systemic advantages exist, and they were willing to explicitly discuss them:

> They're the ones that have been benefiting from their advantage and their privilege from the moment they're born. (P1, BAME, female)

BAME participants openly acknowledged and discussed the existence and effects of White privilege. They recalled how people belonging to the dominant group – in this case, their White colleagues – have been consistently advantaged and privileged throughout their lives. This advantage is likely to encompass various aspects of life, including social, economic and educational opportunities (Alex and Arday, 2015), and it is not something earned or acquired later in life, but is instead present from the very beginning of life. This suggests that privilege is inherited and ingrained within societal structures, and it implies that systemic biases that favour White groups over others are based on race or ethnicity. By highlighting the inherent advantage experienced by White colleagues, BAME university staff critiqued the systemic inequalities present within their HEI. They suggested that these advantages are not distributed equally, and that systemic barriers exist that inherently perpetuate and reinforce this privilege.

## Theme 2: Discrimination and exclusion

White participants highlighted that groups or gatherings often exclude people who may not be automatically welcomed into their inner circles. This exclusion appears to target colleagues who do not align with the conventional profile of those typically included, such as women and people from BAME backgrounds, especially BAME women:

> [They] tend to leave out people who maybe aren't automatically welcomed into the group … people who do get welcomed into the group … not female, and not BAME … but to have these kind of secret meetings … a lot of big decisions are being made as far as I can tell … you should be announcing it and inviting everyone who's interested to join and not having these kinds of decisions being made outside of the official channels. (P15, White, female)

White participants highlighted the existence of 'secret meetings' where significant decisions are made without the involvement or awareness of all relevant stakeholders. This secretive decision-making process implies a lack of transparency and inclusivity, which potentially leads to decisions that do not represent the interests or perspectives of all university staff working in an ethnically diverse post-1992 university. Hence, White participants in the know advocated for transparency and inclusivity in decision-making processes. They argued that important decisions should be announced openly, and that all people who are interested or affected should be invited to participate. Indeed, White participants expressed frustration and disillusionment with the perceived lack of 'equality' and fairness in their HEI:

> I don't see any equality … you can see a lot of nepotism a lot of bias … there's no chance of promotions or … we cannot have this discussion. (P5, White, male)

> [He] used to make people programme leaders or quality leads or whatever, you know, his friends, he nominated. (P15, White, female)

This finding aligns with Showunmi and Tomlin's (2022) concept of sophisticated racism, wherein subtle exclusionary practices (for example, 'secret meetings' and favouritism) operate under the guise of professionalism. By creating barriers that seem innocuous, these practices perpetuate systemic inequities while maintaining an appearance of fairness.

White participants felt that there was a glaring absence of equality in their workplace. They implied that opportunities, rewards and preferential treatment are not distributed fairly among higher education staff members, regardless of their qualifications, skills or performance. They suggested that nepotism (that is, favouritism towards relatives or close associates) and bias are prevalent within their university. They perceived that decisions regarding promotions or rewards may be influenced more by personal relationships or subjective preferences than by objective criteria. White participants also suggested that there may be barriers or a reluctance to openly address concerns related to inequality, nepotism or bias, and, as such, they implied that they worked in an environment where dissent or criticism is discouraged, dismissed or met with adverse consequences. DiAngelo (2011: 54) asserts that 'White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.' This means that White people may react defensively to discussions of inequality, nepotism or bias, making it difficult to address these issues openly without encountering resistance or defensiveness.

BAME participants provided similar, but more personally affecting examples of exclusion. They discussed the informal and potentially exclusionary nature of workplace dynamics, particularly in relation to cultural differences and social norms:

> [They] want you to be a bloke and they want to have, you know, a mate who goes down the pub with them and that's how they sort out all this work. It's just not going to be as open to somebody who is, you know, Muslim, for example and doesn't particularly want to go down to the pub. I guess, of an older British culture, and they want people like that, you know they want people that can be their mate … go down the pub. (P10, BAME, male)

BAME university staff suggested that there is a preference within their workplace environments for a specific type of social interaction, characterised by informal gatherings, such as going to the pub. This informal setting is seen as a way to build camaraderie and facilitate work-related discussions and opportunities shared among in-group members. However, these social gatherings appear to exclude people who do not conform to the expected norms, such as those who do not drink alcohol or do not feel comfortable in such settings. In other words, familiarity and similarity may inadvertently or purposefully lead to a lack of opportunity for people from backgrounds who do not comfortably fit into influential groups within higher education.

Social identity theory explains how people naturally derive part of their identity from the groups to which they belong, and how this can lead to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Said behaviours can result in preferential treatment for those within the dominant group and marginalisation of those outside of it. In accord, BAME participants perceived that within the workplace, their White colleagues are invariably chosen or favoured to receive opportunities for management training or career advancement:

> There're certain colleagues that are sort of chosen to be given the step-up to management training, you know … I think a lot of the time they sort of brush it off. (P11, BAME, female)

The implication that there may be a pattern of favouritism or bias in the selection process, where White university staff receive preferential treatment over others, is supported by research on implicit biases and systemic favouritism. For instance, Levinson et al.'s (2019) analysis highlights that even well-meaning people can 'unconsciously' engage in practices that sustain racial disparities, particularly in environments where decisions are time-pressured.

BAME participants felt that their White colleagues may not fully appreciate or value the unequal opportunities afforded to them. This attitude could stem from various factors, including a sense of superiority, complacency or a desire to maintain the status quo. DiAngelo (2018) argues that White fragility functions to suppress open discussions about race, thereby perpetuating the existing racial inequalities. Consequently, BAME participants lacked confidence in their chances of achieving promotions, believing the process to be biased or predetermined. They assumed that they were unlikely to be selected for promotion, regardless of their qualifications, expertise, experience or efforts:

> I've never gone for promotion because I don't think I'll get it … Because I think, you know, somebody that would have been earmarked for that … there's no point, because you know there's already somebody named already, you know, attached to that position. (P2, BAME, female)

BAME participants perceived that within their university, there is a lack of transparency and fairness in the promotion process, where the outcomes are predetermined, leaving little or no room for consideration of othered candidates.

## Theme 3: Impact on self-perception and behaviour

White participants emphasised the importance of self-belief, self-value and supportive line management in pursuing one's goals and aspirations within their workplace:

> There's a level of self-belief, you ought to have, and self-value to be able to really know that you can do it and really approach it and really sort of pursue it, and if your support, that is, if your manager is not believing in that and it's not enabling you to do it, then automatically, you're not really gonna be doing it. (P17, White, male)

In essence, White participants suggested that if a manager does not believe in their abilities or support their aspirations, it can hinder their ability to pursue their goals effectively. When someone feels unsupported by their manager, they may be less motivated to pursue their goals, and they may not perform to the best of their ability.

In this context, BAME participants felt unsupported, and, in addition, they sensed a heightened level of scrutiny and pressure. However, rather than underperforming, they felt compelled to excel and outperform their White colleagues. This pressure may stem from a desire to overcome biases or stereotypes, as well as a need to prove their competence and worth in a predominantly White or aversive environment. In other words, stereotype threat can lead to increased efforts to disprove negative stereotypes (Steele and Aronson, 1995):

> That level of scrutiny, or having to be better than everybody else, I mean, I had that anyway because you have to be, you know, ten times better … And you're not given any leeway, or you're not given any slack. (P2, BAME, female)

Despite their efforts to excel, BAME participants perceived that they were not afforded the same leniency for mistakes or shortcomings as their White counterparts. Research evidence suggests that just like BAME students (Sevon, 2022), BAME adults often face harsher judgements and greater scrutiny in predominantly White professional settings (Cox and Nkomo, 1990). That said, exacerbated feelings of pressure and scrutiny made it even more challenging for BAME participants to thrive and achieve their full potential in the workplace.

The constant need to meet higher standards can take a toll on the well-being and mental health of people from BAME backgrounds. In the UK, BAME people often experience racial battle fatigue, i.e., a cumulative effect of racist micro- and macroaggressions that severely impacts their mental health and well-being (Vahdaninia et al., 2020).

Although BAME participants expressed a reluctance to use the term 'gaslighting', they acknowledged its relevance in describing the response they receive when reporting their experiences of racism. Gaslighting refers to the manipulative tactic of making someone question their own perceptions, memory or reality. In this context, it suggests that when BAME people speak out about racism, "some people" dismiss or invalidate their experiences:

> I don't want to say gaslighting, gaslighting is maybe too strong but, you know … I mean I'm not expected to get upset. If you highlight your experiences, there's some people that will try to gaslight you … 'There's no racism here,' blah blah blah, when, in actual fact, there is. (P18, BAME, female)

In short, BAME participants felt that there is an expectation for them and others to remain unaffected or unemotional when discussing experiences of racism. This expectation may contribute to a culture of silence or suppression, where university staff are discouraged from expressing their concerns or speaking out against injustices and discrimination. This behaviour can be particularly harmful as it perpetually undermines the lived experiences and feelings of those who have been affected by prejudice, discrimination and racism in higher education.

## Theme 4: 'I'm managed by a White man who's managed by a White man who's managed by a White woman who's managed by a White man' (P8, White, male)

This theme, and the title of this article, emphasises how BAME and White participants are acutely aware of the hierarchical chain of command within their HEI. To be clear, the repeated mention of White men and women in managerial roles suggests a lack of diversity in leadership positions, where people from BAME backgrounds are notably absent from positions of authority. When positions of power are predominantly occupied by people from a single racial group, it is more likely to perpetuate systemic inequalities and to limit opportunities for people from under-represented backgrounds to progress within the organisation (Advance HE, 2021). This reflects broader patterns of racial inequality and systemic barriers to advancement faced by people from BAME backgrounds in many workplaces in the UK (McGregor-Smith, 2017).

White participants asserted that senior leaders bear the responsibility for taking proactive steps towards EDI. They felt that it was not enough for leaders to simply develop policies. They asserted that they must also ensure that these policies translate into actionable initiatives that drive meaningful change. White university staff also advocated for the employment of people from diverse backgrounds in senior leadership roles. They perceived that diverse leadership teams might bring different perspectives and experiences to decision-making processes, and that this might lead to more innovative and effective outcomes:

> It's actually the responsibility of senior leaders of these institutions and wider bodies to make an effort to actually have actionable things that go forward, not just policy … employing people from different backgrounds in senior leadership roles, not just saying this is what we're able to do but actually carrying it out. (P8, White, male)

BAME participants also highlighted the importance of accountability and visible evidence of change in addressing issues related to diversity and inclusion within their HEI, particularly at the senior management level. They suggested that when people whose actions or behaviours negatively impact diversity and inclusion leave the organisation, it can alleviate some of these problems:

> When people leave … Sometimes when you get rid of those people, it does get rid of a lot of the issues. (P11, BAME, female)

This implies that specific people may exacerbate prejudice, discrimination and racism, and accordingly, their departure may lead to a positive change in the culture of the HEI. Furthermore, BAME participants emphasised the necessity for their HEI to address EDI issues and also demonstrate tangible evidence of progress and accountability:

> There needs to be visible evidence that things have changed … in terms of [the] senior management team.  I think there needs to be accountability at the local level, but also in terms of the university level, there needs to be accountability … you're saying you're doing this. Where is the evidence? (P2, BAME, female)

> Actually, talking about it and having some of the difficult conversations… I think it's just making everyone aware that … the behaviours and the things you did before are not necessarily acceptable or right. (P11, BAME, female)

Participants highlighted the importance of engaging in 'difficult' conversations surrounding EDI issues. They felt that these conversations are essential for raising awareness, challenging harmful behaviours and attitudes, and fostering a more inclusive and respectful environment within their HEI. This involves acknowledging and rejecting previously accepted norms or practices that perpetuate inequity and discrimination, and fostering a culture of inclusivity, respect and accountability through open dialogue and meaningful change (Fook et al., 2023; Universities UK, 2023).

# Discussion

Drawing on CRT as an analytical lens, this study builds on research concerning racism in higher education. The researchers report on qualitative data (from semi-structured interviews) elicited from 18 BAME and White higher education staff working in a post-1992 HEI. To date, while a significant body of research has explored the challenges faced by BAME staff in higher education, there is limited research that examines how both BAME and White employees experience (either directly or indirectly) prejudice, discrimination, and racism across all levels of the sector.  Reflecting on the research questions, in the next section, the findings of the study are discussed, prior to the limitations and conclusions of this study.

## How does racism manifest in higher education?

Racism in HEIs manifests through various channels, as highlighted by the participants.  One significant manifestation is the perpetuation of White privilege, whereby people benefit from inherent advantages and privilege solely due to their race. This privilege is deeply ingrained, and it often goes unnoticed by those who possess it, contributing to discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards both oneself and others.  Additionally, racism is evident in exclusionary practices, such as secret meetings and informal social networks, which favour people who fit into the dominant cultural norms, while marginalising those who do not.

## What are the effects of racism on higher education staff?

The effects of racism on higher education staff are considerable. BAME staff often experience unequal treatment, condescension and limited career advancement opportunities due to biases embedded within the institutional framework. For BAME participants, racism leads to feelings of isolation, othering and constant scrutiny, resulting in increased stress, exhaustion and diminished confidence.  Meanwhile, White participants appear to benefit from inherent biases and privilege, but they may also perpetuate discriminatory practices, and they may un/knowingly contribute to an unsettling work environment.

## Why is racism so difficult to eliminate in higher education?

Racism persists in HEIs due to interactive factors.   First, systemic biases and power imbalances entrenched within the organisational structure perpetuate discriminatory practices and hinder transparency and accountability. Moreover, the normalisation of discriminatory behaviours, coupled with the reluctance of those in positions of power to acknowledge or address racism, further exacerbates the problem.  Second, the lack of diversity in leadership positions perpetuates a cycle of inequality, where decision-making processes overlook the perspectives and needs of marginalised groups. The interaction of these factors makes racism difficult to eradicate in HEIs.

## Limitations

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size of 18 participants, while sufficient for qualitative research, may not fully represent the diversity of experiences within HEIs. The findings are specific to a single post-1992 HEI in the UK, which limits the generalisability of the results to other institutional contexts. Second, the voluntary nature of participation may have introduced selection bias, with respondents more inclined to participate if they have strong opinions or experiences related to racism in the workplace. Third, the qualitative nature of the study limits the depth of quantitative analysis that can be conducted. While thematic analysis provides rich insights into participants' experiences and perceptions, it does not allow for statistical generalisation. Future research employing mixed-methods approaches could complement qualitative findings with quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of racism in HEIs.

## Conclusions

The reality embodied in the title of this article, 'I'm managed by a White man who's managed by a White man who's managed by a White woman who's managed by a White man', reflects the deep-seated racial hierarchies that permeate a post-1992 HEI. This research reveals how White privilege, exclusionary practices and hierarchical inequities continue to shape the lived experiences of both BAME and White staff. By examining these dynamics, the study reveals how racism manifests through explicit acts of exclusion, and also in the subtle, often invisible, mechanisms of privilege that reinforce disparities in power, opportunity and recognition. For BAME staff, this systemic inequality affects their career progression, self-perception, and mental health and well-being. For White participants, the findings highlight the often-unexamined benefits of privilege and the necessity of self-awareness and accountability in fostering EDI.

The findings of this study suggest that to dismantle these cycles of inequity, post-1992 HEIs must implement actionable strategies rooted in transparency, accountability and diversity at all levels of leadership. Policies must evolve into tangible initiatives that challenge Whiteness as the default lens of decision making, so that EDI can be meaningfully integrated into institutional practices. By taking these steps, post-1992 HEIs can begin to disrupt the cycle so poignantly captured by one of our White participants in the title of this article. Conversely, without decisive action, this cycle will continue unchecked and perpetuate the narrative described: 'I'm managed by a White man who's managed by a White man who's managed by a White woman who's managed by a White man.'

## 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 Board.

### 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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