Racism, psychology and higher education

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Racism, Psychology and Higher Education:
a response to 'Seeking equality of educational outcomes for Black students: A personal account' by Louise Taylor (Bunce)

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Universities, white ignorance and historical amnesia

> '…there will be characteristic and pervasive patterns of not seeing and not knowing – structured white ignorance, motivated inattention, self-deception, historical amnesia, and moral rationalization – that people of color, for their own survival, have to learn to become familiar with and overcome in making their case for racial equality.'
>
> Charles W. Mills (2003, p. 190)

It may come as a surprise to some readers to learn that, in the early years of this century, all universities in Britain faced a series of legally binding responsibilities to address race inequities. Following *the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report* (Macpherson, 1999) the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 (RRAA) placed upon universities 'a statutory general duty to work to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, and to promote equal opportunities and good race relations. The duty is not optional and colleges and universities have to meet it even if they have very few students from ethnic minority backgrounds' (CRE, 2002).

Universities were required to analyse information about race equality pertaining to student access and achievement, and staff recruitment, retention and promotion. This data had to be published alongside the institutions' plans to address any inequities that were uncovered. For a brief period, it seemed that British universities (and institutions across the public sector) would finally have to take race equity seriously. But the moment was fleeting. Having reviewed the state of universities' planning, in 2003, Professor Gus John (one this country's leading race equality advocates) noted: 'There is a general reluctance to address issues of racisms and especially of institutional racisms' (Curtis & MacLeod, 2003). Currently universities have the *option* to sign up to the Race Equality Charter – a scheme that carries no financial penalty/benefit and where research suggests that it is racially minoritized staff who bear the burden of the necessary workload, but not the rewards (Bhopal & Henderson 2019; 2021). This is what Charles Mills means by 'structured white ignorance' and 'historical amnesia' (2003). This 'will to forget' institutional racism (Tate & Page, 2018: 141) explains how – two decades on from the RRAA - we come to be responding to an article about a White academic's 'challenging journey' as they researched students' experience of anti-Black racism in a university. If the relevant authorities, including successive governments and university leaders, had delivered on the rhetoric that followed the Lawrence Inquiry, the system would by now have mainstreamed a concern with race equity rather than seemly coming to yet another delayed recognition that they even have a problem.

There is growing body of academic scholarship about how racism works in universities (Ahmed, 2012; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Henry, 2015; Rollock, 2019; Tate & Bagguley, 2019) and yet much of academia responded to 2020's *Black Lives Matter* protests with bewilderment - as if this was the first time that the question of racism had come into view. Elsewhere, the reaction was even less positive and more strident, e.g. reimagining antiracist campaigns in higher education (HE) as a threat to civilized discourse and academic rigour (Murray, 2020). Following a year when HE has experienced unprecedented upheavals, because of a pandemic that closed campuses and brutally exposed inequities in the kinds of support and resource available to different groups of students, the government's priority has been to bring forward legislation to threaten universities in the name of 'free speech' (Williamson, 2021). This is highly relevant because internationally, and especially in the US and UK, 'freedom of speech' has become a weaponized trope in the assault on progressive politics in general, and antiracism in particular. Current free speech rhetoric 'functions as a structure of racialized coercion. The idea of "free speech" is being used to discipline expression, demand conformity, and reanimate racist discourses as markers of free thinking and expression' (Titley, 2020, p. 137).

Racism is a deeply embedded, but often subtle and unrecognized, part of the fabric of British HE. Sometimes the racism is crude and obvious, expressed in name calling and even physical assaults, but the vast majority of racism in HE is much more subtle. It runs through the 'business-as-usual' assumptions and actions that continually centre the interests, fears and fantasies of white people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi.). At this point it may be useful to clarify that when critical race theorists talk about *Whiteness*, we are not attacking people who identify racially as 'white'; we are addressing a set of assumptions and discourses that serve to assure and normalize the domination of *white racial interests*; it is, of course, possible for white people to challenge these forces, but it is also possible for people of colour[1] to speak and act in ways that serve Whiteness (cf. Bell, 1992).

In the reminder of our reply, we will further explore how racism is woven through the past and present of psychology as a discipline.

Racism and psychology
Since its inception, psychology has closely followed the traditions of the natural sciences, relying on positivism as the route to objective knowledge and understanding about human behaviour. Through positivism, psychology holds itself as an objective science free from the influence of bias or politics. This, however, does not stand up to scrutiny; psychology both influences and is influenced by politics, and knowledge is not objectively 'out there', waiting to be found, but is rather constructed by researchers and theorists whose understandings are influenced by their positionality. A perhaps well-known illustration of this is the construction of a mental illness named 'drapetomania'; once defined as the cause of enslaved Africans making repeated attempts to flee captivity. Cartwright (1851), the man who created this name for this 'condition', drew on his faith and belief that the Bible had stated that slaves would be submissive to their masters, and in doing so, should have no desire to run away. To this end, he saw such behaviour as evidence of pathology; of there being 'something wrong' with slaves who desired freedom. We trust that the absurdity of this is clear. That, rather than 'pathological' and in need of psychological diagnosis, these are reasonable and proportionate responses to dehumanising and unjust circumstances that warrant resistance. 'Drapetomania' was a psychological label used to pathologise a behaviour that threatened the supremacy of white people and their 'right' to enslave others. The use of this label protected the status quo of white supremacy by constructing resistance to it as irrational and pathological.

Though 'drapetomania' is today recognised as pseudoscientific, and an example of scientific racism, a stain in psychology's 'dark past', mainstream psychology continues to operate in ways that defend the status quo. Cartwright's 'drapetomania' is but one example of a constructed psychological phenomenon granted scientific authority despite its conception from a combination of subjective beliefs and the racist status quo of the time. Although the racism of psychology might be less obvious on the surface today (especially to white people), psychological knowledge continues to operate from a position of whiteness that maintains the status quo and benefits white people while positioning

people of colour – particularly those of Black, South Asian, and Middle Eastern heritage – as inherently inferior. The nature of racism in psychology is institutional, that is to say, the racism is not only present in the views, assumptions and actions of individuals, it saturates the field itself and is present in assumptions about our method and concepts. Through a cycle of research, knowledge production, and curricula, psychology reproduces knowledges and ideas in theory and practice that uphold racism and white superiority.

In psychological research, people of colour are subjected to what Phoenix (1987) refers to as 'normalised absence/pathologized presence'. The vast majority of our psychological knowledge is created by white and western researchers, drawn from samples and experiences of white and western participants. This absence of people of colour is normalised, and the conclusions of such research are regarded as generalisable representations and understandings of 'human behaviour'. This means, then, that the bulk of our psychological knowledge is based on white and western experiences and assumptions that have been analysed and interpreted by white and western researchers. These studies then go on to inform our understanding of the 'healthy' and 'normal' versus the 'unhealthy' and 'pathological'. Inevitably, these 'knowledges' of the ideal ways of being and knowing tend to be constructed in-line with white, western, and middle-/upper-class interests.

On the other hand, when people of colour *are* included as participants in research, this is often when they are positioned as a comparator to the constructed white norm. For example, research frequently portrays Latinx (in the USA), Pakistani (in the UK) and Black (both USA and UK) as problematic groups at heightened 'risk', who must be investigated to understand discrepancies in health and wellbeing – all the while positioning these discrepancies as inherently lying within some deficit in the individual that needs to be drawn out through research and subsequently altered through practice.

This pattern is evident across many topics of interest across subdisciplines of psychology, whereby people of colour are included in research about racial inequalities in health (e.g., obesity), cognitive functioning (e.g., intelligence), and more in order to understand what patterns of behaviour among individuals from these backgrounds are causing these inequalities. Of course, from the outset, this obscures the possibility of interrogating systemic inequalities in favour of individualising blame and pathologising victims of racism for the outcomes of the racism they experience. In research that normalises the absence and pathologises the presence of people of colour, whiteness is positioned as the unexamined norm and, often, as the pinnacle of ideal psychological functioning; any deviations from this are constructed as pathological. To this end, psychological knowledge, as constructed through research, frequently upholds the racist status quo.

With the bulk of our psychological knowledge being created by and for Euro-US populations (Bhatia, 2017), our purportedly 'objective' measures tend to reflect the worldview of white, western men (Burr & Dick, 2017). To this end, the averages based on these measures are based on this specific subsection of society yet, due to their status as 'objective' and scientific measures, are used by psychologists and researchers to analyse and define human functioning across numerous social groups. Of course, this means that white men are more likely to be benefitted by these constructions, while groups deviating from these norms – including other genders, disabled people, and people of African, Arab, Asian, and Caribbean dissent – are more likely to be constructed as 'abnormal' or outside of the average. Two examples of such measures, widely considered scientific and relied upon across psychological research, are IQ (intelligence quotient) and BMI (body mass index). The histories and conception of both measures are steeped in bias and both are critiqued for their inherent racism (e.g.,; Azzarito, 2009; Gillborn, D., 2016; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Lewontin, Rose & Kamin, 1984), yet such critiques seem not to have reached the mainstream of psychology, which remains dedicated to the use of such measures in defining and interpreting human functioning. These measures cannot be removed from the contexts in which they were created, and knowledge built on these measures will continue to pathologise people of colour as 'less than', in both health and intelligence, while claiming scientific authority.

These taken-for-granted knowledges in psychology go on to inform psychology curricula in universities. Accredited by the BPS in the UK, this education is a compulsory step for those wishing to become practicing and chartered psychologists. Although the BPS (2019) accreditation criteria refers to fostering critical evaluation among students, evidence is clear that psychology curricula at best fail to challenge institutional racism and, at worst, reproduce it in their failure to call attention to the racism of much psychological knowledge and how it operates to maintain the status quo. Research with students of colour on undergraduate and postgraduate psychology curricula in the UK demonstrates these failures (Jankowski, Sandle & Gillborn, S., 2018). Students are taught the influential theories of psychology's 'founding fathers' with little or no acknowledgement of these theorists' ties to eugenics and racism. They are taught about theories of human development that are based on white people and white experiences and yet positioned as globally generalisable while failing to adequately apply to people of colour (see White, 2004). Students recognise that, when people of colour are included in knowledge in the curriculum, this is often as a comparator to the white norm (Gillborn, S., Woolnough, Jankowski & Sandle, 2021). Furthermore, instances where the Global South *is* discussed in the curriculum, often portray it as 'brutish and radical' in opposition to the 'progressive and logical' West (Ali-Faisal, 2020). These patterns pervade psychological research and knowledge; they represent a fundamental challenge to psychologists who are serious about equity (Fazal-Short, 2020).

Final thoughts

Adopting a critical approach to race inequity is always challenging, sometimes profoundly so. It requires us to understand processes that may appear normal – *business-as-usual* – but which systematically exclude, humiliate and traumatize people. For white academics, genuinely engaging with antiracism it will involve the realization that they currently *benefit* from these processes (Smoot, 2020). As we have suggested, serious antiracism challenges our assumptions about our work and our disciplines. For example, Dr Taylor says that they 'grounded the research in a robust and universal theory of achievement and wellbeing, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000).' And yet SDT, in its claims to universalism, negates the significance of intracultural divides and inequities around, for example, race, class, gender, and dis/ability. Some might label SDT a 'colour-blind' approach, but a more accurate – and less ablist - description is *race evasive* (Annamma, Jackson & Morrison, 2017); the approach assumes that race and racism are simply not significant enough to be taken into account:

> … to avoid talking about race is a way to willfully ignore the experiences of people of color, and makes the goal of erasure more fully discernible. In other words, to use the term 'evade' highlights an attempt to obliterate." (Annamma, et al., 2017, p. 156)

So-called 'colour-blindness' pretends to adopt a principled stance that stands aloof from messy and difficult conversations about race and inequity; but it rests on the lie that we can simply choose to be unaffected by racist stereotyping, racialised hierarchies and power imbalances that have been built over centuries and which are remade in countless ways *every day*. Numerous studies have shown that supposedly colour-blind approaches – which claim to simply treat all people alike – tends to actively benefit the already-powerful by defending and *extending* White racial advantage (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Burke, 2019; Haney-Lopez, 2007). This is true of so many of the theories and methods that are applied routinely, in numerous disciplines, with little or no awareness of how, in practice if not intent, they encode and entrench deeply racialised assumptions and inequities.

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Footnote

[1]   'Race' is a social construction, with terms applied differently to different populations at different times (see Omi & Winant, 1993; Roediger, 1992). The terminology that is used by antiracist activists and scholars, therefore, changes over time, in reaction to changing understandings and self-identifications. In this paper, we use 'people of colour' as a general reference for people who have been positioned in a racially minoritized status in society: in this usage, minority refer to a power minority, not necessarily a simple population headcount.