

Complicity and Conformity

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Complicity and Conformity: perpetuating race and class hierarchies in UK higher education

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on tenets of Critical Race Theory such as Whiteness, interest convergence, intersectionality and White supremacy this paper examines how some academics of colour are able to accelerate their success in higher education by performing Whiteness by using their privileges and capitals as a means by which they are able to identify with their White colleagues which enables them to perform Whiteness (albeit as outsiders). At the same time, by allowing privileged academics of colour entrance into the White space of higher education, White groups are able to perform inclusion. Drawing on interviews with 34 academics of colour, this paper argues that by performing and enacting Whiteness, some academics of colour mirror successful White behaviours within White normative frameworks. As a result, they are rewarded and gain entrance into the White space of higher education, but the main beneficiaries from this process are White groups, leaving the structures and institutions of racism intact. Consequently, they are complicit in upholding White supremacy, and by doing so protect the interests of White groups.

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Race; White privilege; higher education

Introduction

There is a plethora of evidence to suggest that academics of colour¹ remain underrepresented in higher education; they are less likely to be professors and occupy senior managerial roles compared to White groups (Advance, 2023; Bhopal, 2023; 2024; Warmington, 2024) and report regular incidents of overt and covert racism from their colleagues and students (Bhopal, 2023; Myers, 2022). However, since the global #BlackLivesMatter protests, universities have been forced to address issues of racial injustice. To some extent there has been progress in their response to this particularly about addressing the lack of professors of colour, attempts to “decolonise the curriculum” as well as tackling the racism experienced by both staff and students on campuses. However, much of this has been piecemeal and it has been argued responses to the #BlackLivesMatter protests by universities have been merely a tick-box exercise that work for the benefit of universities themselves rather than addressing racial inequalities (Bhopal, 2023; 2024). This

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article takes this argument further and demonstrates that despite responses to the #BlackLivesMatter protests in higher education, some academics of colour can accelerate their success in universities by performing Whiteness. They can use their privileges and capital as a means by which they identify with their White colleagues to enable them to fit in (albeit as outsiders) whilst upholding systems of White supremacy in higher education. At the same time, White groups can perform inclusion suggesting that they have addressed racial injustice.

Judith Butler (1999) has argued that gender is not something that one is, rather it is something that one *does*, it is an act or a sequence of acts that are based on *doing* rather than being, in this sense, “... gender proves to be performative – that is constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a *doing*, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (1999, p. 4, my emphasis). This is also reflected by Butler’s comment that there, “... is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is *performatively* constructed by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (1999, p. 33, my emphasis). Just as gender is performative, I argue that Whiteness is a performative action that can be used by academics of colour to conform to White hegemonic normative frameworks in higher education. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1993; Gillborn, 2008; 2024 Leonardo, 2009; Warmington, 2024), this article argues that Whiteness works as a form of social control used by White managers as gatekeepers to allow entrance into the White space of higher education based on certain privileges and capitals. This takes place through a process of interest convergence, which works to uphold White supremacy; and some academics of colour are complicit in this. Against the backdrop of the colonial legacy of the British Empire, universities play a crucial role in maintaining and upholding these colonial relations of power that are in effect reproduced by the performance of Whiteness through a colonial positionality. The legacy of colonialism affects all aspects of racial inequalities in universities from pedagogy to attempts to decolonise the curriculum (Mohdin, 2021). Consequently, there is little understanding of decolonisation and the role that universities have played in maintaining systems of oppression that uphold White supremacy (Andrews, 2021; Bhopal, 2024).

Critical race theory: Whiteness, interest convergence, White supremacy and intersectionality

The main focus of CRT is an understanding that racism is normal, and assumptions of White superiority exist in all political, legal and educational structures. Racism is the basis of all systems and how they operate. Race is a social construct used to benefit White groups and disadvantage people of colour through structural, institutional and individual acts of racism. Derrick Bell, one of the founders of CRT, through his experience in civil rights law argued that legislative progress did nothing to address racism because racism is a fundamental aspect of society, it is “permanently embedded in the psychology, economy, society and culture of the modern world” (1993, p. x). When legislation was introduced to address racial inequality, Bell (1980) argued that this took place through interest convergence; a process by which White groups will only tolerate or accommodate Black groups gaining racial equality, when such interests converge with their *own* interests and benefit *them*, “... the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be

accommodated only when that interest converges with the interest of Whites in policy-making positions. This convergence is far more important for gaining relief than the degree of harm suffered by blacks or the character of proof offered to prove that harm" (Bell, 1980, p. 69).

CRT examines how Whiteness and White privilege work to benefit White groups and oppress people of colour through the maintenance of White supremacy. Gillborn argues that "*All White-identified people are implicated in these relations but they are not all active in identical ways and they do not all draw similar benefits – but they do all benefit, whether they like it or not*" (2008, p. 34, original emphasis). Similarly, Andrews argues,

Although all White people receive privilege from being White those benefits are not shared equally. Part of the reason that Whiteness is maintained by delusions is that poor and working class Whites are often duped into supporting people and initiatives that go against their interests. (2023, p. 127)

In this process, Whiteness is crucial in understanding how power structures work intentionally to oppress and marginalise people of colour because, "Whiteness matters. CRT does not assume that all White people are the same – that would be ludicrous; but CRT does argue that *all White people are implicated in White supremacy*" (Gillborn, 2008, p. 34, my emphasis).

Omni and Winant argue that, "the concept of race continues to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world" (1994, p. 55). Race itself is a social construct, but one that varies across time and space through the process of racialisation which is the, "extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group" (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 13). Feagin, however, states that in order to understand race and racism we must understand the, "unjust deeply institutionalised, ongoing intergenerational reproduction of whites' wealth, power and privilege" (2006, p. 4).

Definitions of Whiteness have been useful in addressing how White privilege works as a form of exclusion and oppression. Whiteness has been defined as, "a social construction that embraces white culture, ideology, racialisation, expressions and experiences, epistemology, emotions and behaviours ... normalised because white supremacy elevates whites and whiteness to the apex of the racial hierarchy" (Matias et al., 2014, p. 209). Others suggest that Whiteness is a "standpoint ... that is usually unmarked and unnamed" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1), and "normative assumptions of whiteness that remain unspoken and often in the background but which profoundly shape white attitudes and beliefs about racial others" (Bell, 2002, p. 238). Leonardo defines Whiteness as a racial discourse, different from the category "White people" which "... represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin colour" (2002, p. 32). He goes on to state that,

... whiteness is supported by material practices and institutions ... as a collection of everyday strategies, whiteness is characterised by the unwillingness to name the contours of racism, the avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or group, the minimisation of racial legacy, and other similar evasions. (Leonardo, 2002, p. 32)

From being a racial identity, Whiteness has evolved into a form of protected property. Whiteness as property is constructed as a form of power that gives White groups specific entitlements that allow them to secure their dominance over people of colour.

Consequently, White groups can secure advantages in all aspects of their lives including through social status, political power and material resources. This notion of Whiteness as property is translated as a given in which through property. White groups are able to secure advantages over people of colour and this takes place through white supremacy (Harris, 1993). White supremacy can be defined as a culture,

White supremacy describes the culture we live in, a culture that positions white people and all that is associated with them (whiteness) as ideal. White supremacy is more than the idea that whites are superior to people of colour; it is the deeper premise that supports this idea – the definition of whites as the *norm* or standard for human, and people of colour as a deviation from that norm. (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 22, my emphasis)

An additional strand of CRT is the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) used the term to understand women's experiences about race and sex discrimination; she argued that to understand women's unfair treatment, race alone cannot explain their experiences. In developing the concept, Crenshaw said, "We would signify the political and intellectual location of the project through 'critical', the substantive focus through 'race' and the desire to develop a coherent account of race and law through the term 'theory'" (2002, p. 1361). Through this framework, Crenshaw applied intersectionality to a legal framework to examine how competing and interlocking identities affected Black women's lives and experiences. Her aim was to highlight how the "... focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (1989, p. 1243). Intersectionality has been used in CRT to analyse how race and racism remain central to understanding systems of oppression. Bell argues, "... we emphasise our marginality and try to turn it toward advantageous perspective building and concrete advocacy on behalf of those oppressed by race and other interlocking factors of gender, economic class and sexual orientation" (1995, p. 902).

Methods

Whilst there is a plethora of research that has explored the experiences of academics of colour in higher education (Bhopal, 2018; 2023; 2024; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Bhopal & Henderson, 2021; Myers, 2022; UUK, 2020), there is little research which has examined how academics of colour position themselves once they have entered senior roles in higher education, and the views of other academics of those who have done so. This article, the first of its kind, attempts to redress that balance by focussing on how academics of colour who have reached senior levels in higher education perform acts of Whiteness to be accepted within the White senior space. The key objectives of the study were:

- To examine how senior academics of colour perceived their roles in higher education;
- To explore the views of academics of colour.
- To analyse implications for policy and practice.

Thirty-four academics of colour participated in semi-structured interviews. Access to the respondents was obtained via educational networks and social media channels (such as X). Senior academics (pro vice chancellors and executive deans) were contacted directly. Originally forty-three academics of colour responded, but after several respondents were

contacted numerous times a total of thirty-four participated. All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and all but twelve of the interviews took place online. Respondents were from a variety of backgrounds and universities; 25 were women and 19 were men; 6 were pro-vice chancellors (4 women and 2 men); 8 were executive deans (all women); 7 were professors (4 women and 3 men); 7 were associate professors (3 women and 4 men) and 6 were assistant professors (all women). Eighteen respondents worked in Russell Group universities², four of which were “elite”.³ Sixteen respondents worked in post 1992 universities.⁴ Respondents were asked about their own class backgrounds, histories and trajectories. Some identified as being from a middle-class background, they had grown up in professional families, been to university and some had attended independent fee-paying schools. Others, however, saw themselves as having transitioned into the middle class describing how they had grown up in working-class households where their parents had not gone to university. All described themselves as second-generation immigrants and expressed the importance of education and the desire to do well in their jobs.

Qualitative research is, “... any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about people’s lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions and feelings” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 11). It is based on examining multiple realities and “... in analysing subjective meaning or the social production of issues, events or practices by collecting non-standardised data and analysing texts and images rather than number and statistics” (Flick, 2014, p. 542). Within qualitative research reflexivity is an important part of the research process, it is based on understanding our role in the research process and confronting subjectivities and biases that may play a role in data collection and analysis (Wilkinson, 1988). Reflexivity is a form of critical thinking that is based on questioning our own positionality and the value of what we are studying by asking, “what is the research process and how am I influencing it?” (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020, p. 177). As a female academic of colour my own positionality in the research process was a positive factor in gaining access to the respondents and enabling them to open up and speak about their own experiences of their success and their views of their peers. By asking me questions about my own academic journey and sharing my own experiences, the more they revealed and opened up about their own experiences. This created a shared empathy, which enabled respondents to trust me. I was also aware that my positioning as a senior academic imbued with academic and professional capital affected the research design such as the types of research questions and themes that were discussed during the interviews. In this respect, my racialised and gendered privilege worked as an advantage to create a shared sense of belonging, identity and empathy with respondents. This acted as a catalyst in creating a shared sense of understanding in relation to our experiences of racism in higher education that enabled the voices of academics of colour to be heard and to be the focus of the study.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the participating university and in line with the British Educational Research Association guidelines (2019) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Respondents were given a participant information sheet detailing the study aims and objectives and a consent form. They were told they could withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or any penalties, and that their responses were confidential. Thematic data analysis was used to identify differences and similarities

in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data was coded and recoded to identify themes from which to categorise and make sense of the data drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as an iterative process of; becoming familiar with the data; generating codes; generating themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes and locating examples within the dataset. Part of the process of the analysis involved becoming familiar with the dataset through different stages of reading and re-reading to generate codes from the different topics used within contextual segments. This enabled a process of sorting codes into higher-level topics from which themes were developed. The following sections explore the findings; entering the White space, performing in the White space and upholding White supremacy.

Entering the White space

All of the respondents were aware that higher education was a White space. They recognised that it was a space that often left them feeling as outsiders, despite many of them occupying senior positions. Karli⁵ (British Indian) who occupied a senior position in her institution was aware of the conflicts of her role,

The university is a space that is White and we know that it has always been that way, but there have been some change to accommodate changes in society because even though it is a White space, it is a progressive space because it has to move with the times. The higher up you go, the more Whiter it becomes and you have to accommodate for that if you want to fit in and if you want to stay in that role. You can do that in different ways but it's mainly about conforming to what is expected from you – and yes of course that is all about White behaviours and White norms – but that is part of the system. It can't be changed overnight.

Jeanette (Black British) on the other hand was positive that progress that had been made to address racial inequalities, indicating a shift from the predominant Whiteness of her institution.

Yes of course universities are White, they have always been that way but we are making some changes. There has been lots of progress and it's mainly BAME⁶ academics who have benefited from it. There are lots more BAME professors and BAME people in senior positions. I think that we have to look at the progress we've made and the numbers, rather than focussing on the negatives. To say we need to do more and more is just a cop out, because progress is slow and it's important that we recognise that progress *has* been made rather than just dismissing it. It is also valuable not to have a victim mentality, which can be the case for some BAME colleagues, there is a need to move away from that but at the same time do what we can to progress things (original emphasis).

Similarly, Julia (mixed heritage White/Black British) recognised the predominance of Whiteness in the White space of higher education, but also acknowledged that the space was becoming more "open" in allowing greater numbers of academics of colour to access senior positions.

There is always that complaint that racism exists and we know that it does exist and we know that we have to struggle to reach our goals, but at the same time there's lots of support out there and lots of programmes to ensure that we can reach the top. Things are changing and universities want to have representation at the top and want to make sure they are inclusive and one of the ways they have done this is by increasing the opportunities for us [academics of colour] to support us to achieve that success.

This was also echoed by Kira (mixed heritage White/British Pakistani),

If you reach the top as a person of colour, there is the notion that you are the exception and not the norm. I think we have to move away from that mindset to think that the space of higher education – which used to be White but is now changing – is also our space. I am in a very senior position and I see sometimes that other colleagues [of colour] can't move away from that mentality and that means they won't progress.

In some respects, the view that these academics of colour had reached senior positions, suggested that others too could easily do the same. However, some respondents felt that this attitude was dismissive of the institutional, structural and individual racism academics of colour faced on a daily basis and reinforced the deficit model that academics of colour simply did not work hard enough, therefore were unable to achieve senior positions. Sandra (Black British) felt very strongly about this. She discussed how her experience of those academics of colour who had achieved a high status was one in which they had the attitude that if they could do it, anyone else could – despite the Whiteness of higher education – and the racism they experienced.

There is one senior colleague here – who is very senior – she is a Black woman and I have witnessed her attitude towards myself and other colleagues, when we try and discuss how difficult it is to make progress in our career trajectories, her attitude is one of, well, look at me if I can do it, then so can you. I think that kind of attitude is very damaging and places the blame back on us and makes us feel as though we need to work harder. In turn what that means is that other people [White groups] see one or two Black or Asian people in these roles and they also then think that there is no racism and we can move beyond using that argument and so in this way racism is just dismissed as one of the reasons people don't make it. It focuses the blame on the individuals rather than the systems themselves.

By promoting a small number of academics of colour in senior positions (the odd one or two), universities were able to demonstrate their performance of inclusion and through a process of interest convergence, they presented the illusion that racial injustices were addressed, when in reality everyday racism experienced by staff continued. As Bell argues, “even when the interest-convergence results in an effective racial remedy, that remedy will be abrogated at the point that policy makers fear the remedial policy is threatening the superior status of whites” (1980, p. 69) so by promoting a small number of academics of colour into senior roles, this did not change the realities of everyday racism and in effect worked for the benefit of White groups and the institutions. The intersection of race and class suggests that those academics who are already in advantageous positions because of their access to specific types of privileges and capitals ensure that they are the ones who are chosen as the select few to be part of a system which perpetuates Whiteness. These people of colour are acceptable because they possess similar ways of being and doing which enables them to occupy such spaces. Consequently, this presents an image of inclusion that is performative. As a result, universities can sell themselves to fee-paying students as organisations, which are inclusive and have social justice at the heart of their agendas. In addition, those academics of colour who conform to White normative structures and behaviours protect their own individual interests within this process. By performing Whiteness in this way, rather than dismantling racist structures they are complicit in upholding White supremacy – for their own *personal* gains. These privileges associated with Whiteness and an abundance of academic capital worked to

ensure that academics of colour were able to occupy an insider status. Whilst there is evidence to suggest that exclusionary practices and processes are common in higher education based on inequalities such as race and class (Bhopal, 2024), it is also the case that those in disadvantaged positions are able to hold positions of power and privilege within White spaces (Hurtado, 1989). Ozbilgin and Tatli (2012, p. 260) argue that those who may be traditionally disadvantaged are able to become part of the privileged group and reinforce the status quo and within this context they argue, “... there is a need to move away from a static and categorical conception of inequality to an approach which situates complex interplay between inequality dynamics within the spatial and historical context of processes, relations and structures that construct, maintain and reproduce power and domination”. Similarly, Ahmed (2021, p. 135) in her book *Complaint*, argues that certain individuals are those who are given credibility and support and this is often related to their own modes of being and doing within the space of higher education, “We learn not only from *who* is supported but from *how* they are supported, how ideals (such as academic freedom or criticality) can be reused to justify ways of speaking and acting that are not only the object of a complaint but what most universities say they are committed to opposing”.

Performative acts of whiteness

The majority of respondents who were in senior positions were able to perform Whiteness – ways of being and doing which conformed to normative White identities. This was manifested in language, diction and dress. Monica (Black) spoke about her past experiences and how they contributed to her gaining a chair at an elite university.

I know in some ways I am better off than my peers, despite being a Black woman. I went to private school and I can fit in with my colleagues in every way apart from my visual identity. But by being able to identify with them, that gives me access to things I would not otherwise have – networks, book deals, agents and the like. I know my background helps me with that. I know how to behave, what to say and how to say it. I can do it all so they accept me, it means we are kind of speaking the same language and it makes them feel comfortable that we have things in common. I can be one of them in nearly every way, except for my skin colour – and it has benefitted me.

Whilst Monica was aware of her class privilege, she was also aware that she used it for her own benefit whilst at the same time acknowledging different types of racism.

I know I am in a different position to my peers and I am aware of that and I know it is very difficult to get promoted as a Black woman – there are so many things against you. But at the same time, once I got my chair I knew I had to protect my own position and make sure that I stayed there. Once you reach a senior role, the racism doesn't simply disappear because you occupy that position – in some ways you become more visible, it's a system of hyper surveillance and you have to do what you do to protect your position.

Priya (British Indian) discussed how some academics of colour in senior positions who had achieved significant status retained those positions (and beyond) by performing Whiteness and not threatening White intellectual scholarship.

There are some BAME academics who are able to fit in with academia in ways other people could not – they speak a certain way, they act a certain way and they are able to be part of the [White] groups, those who have succeeded and reached a certain point in their careers. And sadly, it seems that recently – since the need to address racism because of George Floyd and

the Black Lives Matter protests – they are also the ones who are not real scholars, and those who won't be challenged intellectually by others. I have seen this in how certain academics are employed by certain institutions because their scholarship isn't questioned. And this is something that you can't express openly, because if you do it is either seen as sour grapes or that you are not supporting other people of colour – yet that doesn't happen in universities anyway. I have also seen many Black academics talk about how the racism they experience is not equated to the racism experienced by Asian colleagues – so I think if these are the issues going on, then we have a long way to go.

Many respondents suggested that some academics of colour were hired as “token” appointments – because they fitted in and it would enable the university to demonstrate their commitment to addressing racial inequalities. As Jebril (Black African) said,

When universities do employ those academics of colour, they can say, look at us we are inclusive, we are not racist – yet the *very act of employing them* – because they are Black, is racist itself. They then become the token hires and White managers can say, look at that Black professor he is successful because we employed him and so we cannot be racist in any way. That in itself is problematic, because there is a disconnect between what the university wants to show they are doing, and what they are actually doing. At the same time, it is seen as lowering standards, because those academics of colour who are held up to be the bright stars aren't so great. But there is another aspect to this, I think it allows White groups to say, well their [academics of colour] scholarship is not that good, because look at X. This then reinforces the idea that Black scholarship is not as good as White scholarship (original emphasis).

Others spoke about how those academics of colour became “a darker shade of White” once they were accepted by their White peers, as demonstrated by Rafiq (British Pakistani),

It's a bit like we have our Prime Minister who is a brown man, but he does not represent us in any way – he is part of them [White groups] because he is able to behave as one of them – he's just a darker shade of White in some ways because he is just like them in every way. It's the same in universities, people look at successful academics who are at the most prestigious universities but they are just like their White peers in how they behave and act and that's the reason they fit in.

Respondents also referred to how people of colour who supported radical views were often on the side of White powerful groups, such as the example of Kemi Badenoch who in 2020, then secretary of state for Women and Equalities criticised the term “white privilege” and critical race theory in a speech in which she stated that teaching such topics in school would be seen as illegal (Hansard, 2020). Similarly, the recent report published by the Commission for Racial and Ethnic Disparities (2021) which found no evidence of institutional racism in society was authored by a Black man – and therefore seen by some White groups as plausible and justified (Bhopal, 2024). Derrick Bell's (1992) rules of racial standing are central to understanding how some people of colour can become mouthpieces for White groups. Rule 3 states: “Few blacks avoid diminishment of racial standing, most of their statements about racial conditions being diluted and their recommendations of other blacks taken with a grain of salt. The usual exception to this rule is the black person who publicly disparages or criticises other blacks who are speaking or acting in ways that upset whites. *Instantly, such statements are granted 'enhanced standing' even when the speaker has no*

special expertise or experience in the subject he or she is criticising" (1992, p. 114, my emphasis).

It is this rule that is the most important when analysing how some people of colour in powerful positions can be used by White groups to support their causes; who better than a Black person to say that racism does not exist, to deliver a message that will carry greater weight, power and credence than if it were delivered by a White person? Powerful White groups use Black people to protect their White privilege, so that it remains intact and unthreatened (Bhopal, 2018; Bhopal, 2024). Gillborn and Viele-Porter (2010) argue that such approaches use,

... conservative Black voices to ridicule and denigrate anti-oppressive work while demonising minority communities in a way that panders to the racist self-interest of White readers and provides fuel for a media machine that is overwhelmingly on the side of White power holders. (2010, p. 26)

As demonstrated above, this is also the case in higher education when academics of colour climb the academic ladder of success in which their loyalties are shifted to support those groups from whom they will gain the most – White managers in powerful positions.

The performativity of Whiteness for these academics was strategic – it was used to ensure that they were able to blend in, play the White game and be seen as part of the same groups which were dominated by their White (powerful) colleagues. Whiteness is used as a social and cultural privilege for academics of colour through which they are able to identify with their White colleagues in which, performative Whiteness is normalised. Whiteness is embodied and enacted to benefit academics of colour, and this is a *conscious* choice. The universal identity of Whiteness signifies the norm, the central reality to which all other groups must conform. These performative acts take place within the historical legacy of colonialism in universities in which relations of power are reproduced, as Nakayama and Krizek (1995, p. 302) state,

Whether or not one discursively positions oneself as 'white', there is little room for manoeuvring out of the power relations in whiteness. Whiteness stated, or unstated, in any of its various forms, leaves one invoking the historically constituted and systematically exercised power relations.

Upholding white supremacy

Senior academics discussed how they had to change their behaviours to fit in with White normative spaces. Tanya (Black British) said,

Once I got my senior role, I did feel that I had to change the way I dressed and the way I presented myself to the outside world – otherwise how would I be taken seriously? It is something that we have to do – if you want to be part of the senior management team you have to fit in with them, and sometimes that could be seen to be taking on specific ways of doing things. But if you reach a certain level, you simply can't get away from it, by reaching that level you are making a statement and conforming to the way the university is run – because you become part of that machine.

Others echoed this, Nile (Black British) said,

I know that once I became a senior manager, I had to be on the side of senior management but that's the price you pay. You buy into it, but you also get the benefits from it. I think we all know that, and it's naïve to think we don't do that.

Some respondents did feel that senior academics of colour had the intention of supporting other junior academics, but in reality this was not the case. Cynthia (Black British) said,

You always think that when there's a BAME academic in a senior role, they can make a difference and change things. But in my experience that has not been the case, if anything the attitude they seem to have is, well it's not that bad because I have done it and so can you. So you have to be aware that sometimes those academics of colour in top positions have in some ways, sold out.

This was also highlighted by those who had asked for specific support from their senior colleagues of colour but often this was based on them having to conform to White ways of being, particularly in relation to training programmes. Hanif (British Pakistani) said,

I did speak to X about being promoted, but she said to me that it would be best if I attended a training programme designed for BME⁷ academics, I found this highly questionable because I felt that she was just passing the buck and didn't really want to help me at all, and I wasn't sure what the training programmes would tell me, other than what I already knew.

There is evidence to suggest that such training programmes work for the benefit of White senior management to simply address a tick box exercise and perpetuate systems of White normativity (Bhopal, 2020). Such programmes designed by White senior managers are based on using such policies as mechanism by which they can control the reproduction and standards of knowledge making, so that specific types of (White) behaviours are seen as more worthy and legitimate, and places the blame on academics of colour themselves, rather than challenging existing racist structures.

Many respondents discussed their relationships with senior academics of colour who had "made it", they described how these academics developed a greater sense of competitiveness and wanted to be the only ones who occupied top roles and did not want their peers of colour to do so. Ruth (mixed heritage White/Black British) said,

I find it very interesting when you see a non-White person who has a significant role that can change the way things go in academia, they seem to switch sides. So they become even more competitive with other non-White people and don't want others to succeed like them, they want to be the only ones who occupy those roles.

She went on to describe a particular experience she had whilst examining a PhD.

A Black female professor who I thought would be supportive to a Black student was the opposite. I would say, she was actually aggressive and hostile towards the student and it did make me wonder after if she did that because the student was also a Black woman who wants to make it, and she felt threatened by her, so she felt justified in treating her in this way.

Reena (British Indian), described a similar experience,

I remember when I was going for promotion, I reached out to a senior colleague and asked him for advice because he was also from an Asian background, but I was astounded by his reaction, it was as if he thought I shouldn't dare to be asking him for support. I think once BME academics become successful, they move into another zone which separates them out from others and they then fit into the mould of being like all other [White] senior managers, and that in itself is very damaging.

Others spoke about how "niceness" was used by academics of colour to make their positions more palatable to White groups. Whiteness as niceness has been discussed in

relation to using niceness to perpetuate White cultural norms whilst ignoring structural and institutional racism (Liera, 2020). In this sense, White managers are able to use a language of niceness which is race-neutral language and used to ignore racial inequalities (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Darren (Black British) said,

There is one high profile professor who has achieved a great position – but the thing that we are all asking, or the elephant in the room is, is he good enough? He’s nice enough though so I guess that counts. He’s unlikely to cause a fuss, unlikely to speak out, he will be their mouth-piece because he is nice. But by doing that, he is part of the problem, he is the one that is also perpetuating the way we have to be a certain way in universities to be accepted – to have to conform to the way White groups want us to conform to.

Patricia (Black British) said,

If you are non-White and at the top, you have to conform – that goes without saying – you have to be nice, well you have to be super nice – you have to make sure everyone likes you, you are the nice guy. So from this perspective, it doesn’t matter what your intellectual contribution is, because you’re nice.

Just as White male administrators are able to demonstrate they are addressing racial inequalities but without making any real changes (Patton and Bondi, 2015) so too are academics of colour able to do this, by being “nice” they continue to perpetuate a culture in which niceness is used to perpetuate White supremacy, rather than actually challenging or addressing structural, institutional and individual forms of racism.

Respondents spoke about how academics of colour in universities were used by White groups for their own gains. Darren went on to say,

I’ve seen the brochures and the websites, you get a new non-White person in a very senior role and then they’re everywhere – they’re all over the websites and the brochures and there’s pictures of them all over campus. Yes, it’s a good thing, but what’s it really for? Is it for the universities to use this appointment for their own gain? So that students will come here and think we are inclusive? Just because you employ a non-White person in a very senior role, it does not mean you have tackled the day to day racism that still goes on regardless of that.

In this sense academics of colour themselves become commodities to be used in publicity and diversity materials for the benefit of the White gaze – senior White managers and the universities – therefore performing and enacting inclusion for their own gains.

Conclusions

Whilst there is a plethora of evidence to suggest that structural, institutional and individual racism continue to dominate in higher education (Bhopal, 2023; Myers, 2022; Warrington, 2024) there has been some slow progress in addressing racial injustice since the #BlackLivesMatter protests. However, despite this progress, this article has shown how senior academics of colour in leadership positions occupy complex roles within the White space of higher education. It has argued that such academics work within *racialised* and *racist* social structures that recreate White supremacy – and as academics of colour in senior positions – they are able to perform Whiteness and as a result are complicit in upholding White supremacy. By performing and enacting Whiteness they are able to identify with their White colleagues by mirroring successful White behaviours. As a

result they are rewarded and gain entrance into elite spaces, but the main beneficiaries of this process are White groups themselves – who gain from performing inclusion. Consequently, these academics of colour are complicit in upholding White supremacy and by doing so, protect the interests of White groups. The performativity of Whiteness takes place within a social, political and economic context in higher education which fails to challenge the dominant ideologies (based on White privilege) so that the enactment and performativity of Whiteness is normalised and maintained. In this sense, academics of colour enact Whiteness through the political, economic and cultural system in which White groups can “overwhelmingly control power and material resources” (Ansley, 1997, p. 592). This results in them upholding the system of White supremacy in higher education. As a result, their behaviours are reenacted daily in their roles which become framed as the norm and so are socially acceptable to their White peers, but in effect their behaviours work to continually centre and recentre Whiteness and uphold the White racialised status quo – but they are *active* and *complicit* in this process. Their behaviours are produced and modified about Whiteness and the space of higher education works to recreate and reinforce Whiteness and White supremacy.

Implications for policy and practice

This research – the first of its kind – has examined the experiences of academics of colour in higher education. It has provided a better understanding of how some senior successful academics adapt and change their behaviour to fit in with normative hegemonic structures of higher education. Further research on this issue is needed to explore the trajectories and behaviours of academics of colour *before* they advance into senior roles, as well as addressing ways in which they can continue to be successful without having to identify with Whiteness. In addition, a recognition of the prevalence of Whiteness in higher education and an acknowledgement of White supremacy is needed by White senior managers so that they engage in addressing White privilege, because addressing social justice, “... requires vigorous work of informed critical introspection that sees one’s performance of Whiteness, as well as sees the performance of Whiteness in the practice of others” (Gusa, 2010, p. 481). In addition, higher education investing in target systems for the numbers of academics of colour employed in senior roles (without lowering standards) would contribute to achieving social justice and inclusive practices.

Notes

1. In this article I use the term academic of colour to refer to individuals who do not identify as white.
2. Russell Group universities are a group of 24 research intensive universities in the UK which are defined by their excellence in teaching and research.
3. Elite universities are identified by their global positioning in league tables, their names and locations. Their brands are based on their competitive selection processes, exclusivity and domination in their alumni across economic, social and political spheres (see Bhopal & Myers, 2023).
4. Post-1992 universities existed as former polytechnics in the UK that were given university status following the Further and Higher Education Act (1992).
5. All names are pseudonyms.

6. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic is a term used in the UK to describe those who do not identify as White.
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