

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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How international students become black: a story of whiteness in English higher education

Manuel Madriaga¹, Colin McCaig¹

¹*Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, United Kingdom*

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Abstract: This paper highlights how international students from the Global South are racialised in English higher education. Official national higher education data on black and minority ethnic (BME) academic achievement does not account for the international student experience. This is problematic as international students, particularly students of colour, as found in this study, identify themselves under the category of BME. They experience racism and discrimination in and outside the Academy just like 'home' BME students. The work presented here foregrounds the racialised experiences of international students in English higher education. It is a counter-story in the tradition of critical race theory which reveal how whiteness unifies and divides. It unifies in creating a shared experience amongst those who experience the heat of the 'white gaze' in academia. It divides, categorising and classifying 'us' to the extent that 'we', both students and academic staff, may unwittingly perpetuate whiteness.

Paper: International students are viewed as lucrative to the higher education market, especially in the West (McDonald 2014). Although they financially contribute to the host economies, international students, particularly those who hail from the Global South and are people of colour, may experience racism and racist incidents (Brown and Jones 2013). While these racist incidents have been documented (Brown and Jones 2013), there is limited discussion on international students experiencing racism within the corridors of the Academy. Amidst the literature on international students studying abroad in Western contexts, such as in England and the USA, there is a dominant perception of international students of having cultural deficits, such as unsatisfactory language competence, which limits their academic achievement (Jabbar et al. 2019; Tran 2008). This paper questions the extent of such a perception of international students, particularly those who hail from the Global South and are people of colour, is linked to how whiteness is performed and reproduced in English higher education.

In the English context, whiteness is taken-for-granted to the extent that it is invisible, and normal. Its pervasiveness surfaces in the crude categorisation of 'Black and minority ethnic' (BME). The

category is perpetually reproduced in official higher education statistic reports, reinforcing the white racial category as the norm (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). The higher education sector preoccupation of the achievement gap issue has primarily focused upon the experiences of UK-domiciled black and minority ethnic students (Broeke and Nicholls 2007; Equality Challenge Unit 2016; Singh 2011; Stevenson 2012). There is no rationale for just focusing upon the UK-domiciled, particularly when international students of colour, living and studying in the UK may endure similar barriers and racial discrimination (Brown and Jones 2013).

One of the tenets of critical race theory emphasises the centrality of experiential knowledge. This knowledge is considered a strength which draws explicitly on lived experiences of people of colour by including such methods as storytelling, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, chronicles and narratives (Solórzano 1997, 7). These CRT methods are congruent with the lenses of narrative inquiry in teacher education (Conle 2003). The reason for highlighting narrative inquiry here is the emphasis of a teacher or a researcher sharing their stories, experiences, and histories with students and research participants to develop and reflect on teaching practice and raise questions of social phenomena, such as whiteness, that binds and unites us (Milner 2007; Lachuk and Mosley 2012). The sharing of stories falls within Solórzano and Yosso's (2002, 26) advocacy for CRT methodology in education that 'challenges white privilege, rejects notions of "neutral" research or "objective" researchers, and exposes deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of colour'.

Empirical work took place at one predominantly white university in England. It was informed by a narrative inquiry approach (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Milner 2007), incorporating an open-ended survey of teaching staff (n=10) from two different subject groups where there were sizeable proportions of 'home' BME students. In addition, the study included a focus group discussion with members of the student union's BME student committee (n=6). Like previous studies (Milner 2007; Lachuk and Moseley 2012), we shared our racialised experiences with research participants particularly with students in the group discussion. We also shared our racialised experiences in the research process, in the analysis, reflecting upon the stories and responses offered by the research participants in the study with our own stories.

In the set-up of this counter-story, there are two composite characters, Serg and Jonah. These composite characters were formed from the empirical data and our very own racialised experiences (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 36). As Harper (2009, 702) explained, the creation of composite characters relies on empirical data collected from individuals 'who have experienced a particular context or similar phenomena... composite stories are useful for representing the often disregarded experiences of a larger group through a smaller subset of 'characters' who represent the group.' The primary data sources which inform Serg's perspective are themes that emerged from staff responses, our own journal entries during the study as well as our own reflections, with one of us having been an international student in England. In contrast, the perspective of Jonah was informed by the themes picked up from a group discussion on achievement gap issue with BME students (both 'home' and international).

The dialogue of the two composite characters of Jonah and Serg challenges the dominant discourse of the degree attainment gap issue that is absent of racism in the context of English higher education. For people of colour, students and university staff, the work in having to mark out the persistent race

inequality is emotionally arduous and frustrating (Solórzano 1998). The investment in notions of meritocracy and colour-blindness by English universities coerces one to remain silent on the issue, or wear a 'white mask'. However, the wearing of the white mask comes at a cost. The hope we draw upon is recognising that there are definitely going to be costs in pursuing social justice and anti-racist work. Challenging whiteness within English universities is the task at-hand. To achieve this, notions of meritocracy and colour-blindness require critical interrogation, building upon the work of the likes of Bhopal (2018), Tate and Bagguley (2017) and Warikoo (2016).

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