

Racism and sexism are permitted by default: academic's career experiences in UK Higher Education

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Adopting a critical race and feminist standpoint perspective, this presentation will report findings from a mixed methods online survey of 186 UK academics which comprised of 96 (51%) white females, 19 (11%) minority ethnic females, 49 (29%) white males, and 7 (4%) minority ethnic males. Comparisons will be drawn between the experiences and perceptions of female and male academics from minority and majority backgrounds regarding support mechanisms, opportunities and barriers to career progression, as well as their perceptions of discrimination and how this is handled in university space. Utilizing intersectionality as an aspect of critical race theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995), attention will be given to axes of differentiation across groups. Notions of white privilege, white fragility and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence will be applied to understand the mechanisms that enable different forms of oppression to persist in Higher Education.

Full paper

The underrepresentation of women and ethnic minorities in senior leadership and professorial roles is a significant issue across Higher Education. Women are 47.9% of the academic workforce, but only 30% of professors and 33% Heads of Institutions. Figures dip respectively to 9.2% for the female Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) academic workforce and 3.3% for BAME female professors (Advance HE, 2023), but plummet to 61 when considering the number of Black women professors in the UK (WHEN, 2023).

Over recent decades extant literature has documented the challenges women academics face gaining recognition in the academic workplace and advancing their careers, especially to senior positions within the academy (e.g. Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Doherty & Manfredi, 2006, 2010; Jones et al., 2018; Lumby, 2012; Manfredi, 2014; Morley, 2013 2014; Phipps, 2017; Savigny, 2014). In parallel with feminist standpoint research, studies into ethnic minorities' experiences in academia have grown (e.g. Alexander & Arday, 2017; Arday, 2018; Bhopal et al., 2018; Leathwood et al., 2009), along with intersectional studies of gender, ethnicity and race (e.g. Barnes, 2022; Blell et al., 2023; Harpur et al., 2023; Mirza, 2015; Nichols & Stahl,

2019; Rollock, 2019; Showunmi, 2020; Showunmi, 2023; Stockfelt, 2018). Taken together, this documents a plethora of issues for women and minorities, including but not limited to lack of support to bullying and harassment, and exclusion from decision making and cultural insensitivity (Arday, 2018).

Despite evidence of rampant inequalities across the sector (David, 2015), HEIs have been slow to dismantle exclusionary cultures (Bhopal & Brown, 2016). Critics argue that too often interventions take the form of tokenistic window dressing (Aguirre Jr & Martinez, 2006). Moreover, policy making on race often works to benefit HEIs and contribute to systems that reinforce white privilege (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Added to which, research with academic staff shows that most view themselves as critical in their work, so don't believe they have a problem with racism (Ahmed, 2015).

Adopting a critical race and feminist standpoint perspective, this presentation will report findings from a mixed methods online survey of 186 UK academics which comprised of 96 (51%) white females, 19 (11%) minority ethnic females, 49 (29%) white males, and 7 (4%) minority ethnic males. Comparisons will be drawn between the experiences and perceptions of female and male academics from minority and majority backgrounds regarding support mechanisms, opportunities and barriers to career progression, as well as their perceptions of discrimination and how this is handled in university space. Utilizing intersectionality as an aspect of critical race theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995), attention will be given to axes of differentiation across groups. Notions of white privilege, white fragility and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence will be applied to understand the mechanisms that enable different forms of oppression to persist in Higher Education.

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