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Making a Difference? Conducting an applied study on the experience of BME staff in English Higher Education (0160)

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Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

Background –High Stakes and High Emotion

The paper traces the formulation and conducting of the ECU funded study. The notion of 'assumptive worlds' – a concern with normative views of reality - informs our analysis, especially when combined with Butler's notion of 'unspeakability' (Butler, 2005). We trace the ways in which we were challenged in multiple ways in undertaking the work.

Our, bold, substantive concern was to see the extent, impact and reality of how English HEIs exercised their public equality duty in relation to BME staff, as 'race' is one of the 'protected characteristics'. The research brief had been fiercely lobbied for by the main stakeholder assisting the ECU in shaping the research – the Race Forum – a diverse body of interested individuals and groups (union, employer, activists) rightly agitated by the lack of progress on the issue of Black and Minority Ethnic staff within HE, particularly staff from Black Caribbean backgrounds, born in England.
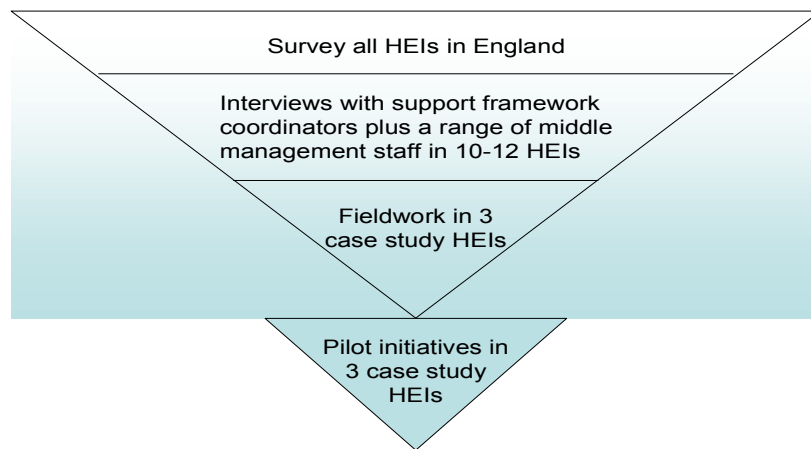
The context was thus highly contested, both in respect to the agenda and our positioning with the ECU and the Race Forum, with our academic affiliations, our 'race' and our theoretical position being directly or indirectly challenged in the 'melting pot' of defining the scope, coverage, sampling, methods and analysis of the data. There were many dimensions to the affective ecology surrounding and constituting the research as discussed below.

Driving this righteous anger was a paradoxical recognition that research, rather than action, was being commissioned. Ideologically it was 'needed' to remind the sector of the inequalities it palpably and recursively evinces in respect to difference, especially 'race' see the prior scoping research literature review (Leathwood et al, 2009), but to imagine our contribution would rectify things was to place the work in a double bind of being seen as symbolically vital but potentially practically inconsequential, given how little success had been associated with the 'non-performativity' of diversity (Ahmed, 2012). Such loading acted to pre-define the research as inevitably 'disappointing' not least because the ECU could not structurally mandate universities to tackle the issue, nor allocate monies to promote 'affirmative action'.

The Doing of the Study, design and its difficult data.

The study took the shape best conveyed in the following diagram:

Research and development design

Survey all HEIs in England

Interviews with support framework coordinators plus a range of middle management staff in 10-12 HEIs

Fieldwork in 3 case study HEIs

Pilot initiatives in 3 case study HEIs

The study design using multiple methods rendered a highly textured data set, enabling us to 'read between the lines' of official accounts. Given how Ahmed (2012) calls race a 'sticky subject' – causing frissons in so-called liberal institutional spaces, thus methods allowing the truths to surface via in-depth interviews and focus groups, proved invaluable in showing how racist power worked, often within the banality of everyday 'taken for granted' modes of ordinary conduct.

We negotiated competing and contradictory pressures throughout the study not, apart from the challenges posed by the Race Forum. 'Assumptive worlds' refers to the informal operation of power in social organisations, what Bourdieu (1990) calls 'the rules of the game'. The idea of the assumptive world – how institutional and cultural forms produce exclusion - was generative in thinking about the banalities of 'racism' comprised of both unconscious and calculatedly racist practices. It was this culture that BME staff had to negotiate; contouring their positioning inside the assumptive white (male, middle class-elite, heterosexual) relation of ruling (Smith, 1987). This idea was also unexpectedly useful in thinking about our *own* positioning within the assumptive worlds of those commissioning and monitoring the research outcomes. This diagram reflects how we have theorised the antagonism between different 'assumptive worlds' which remain/ed at stake in presenting the research:
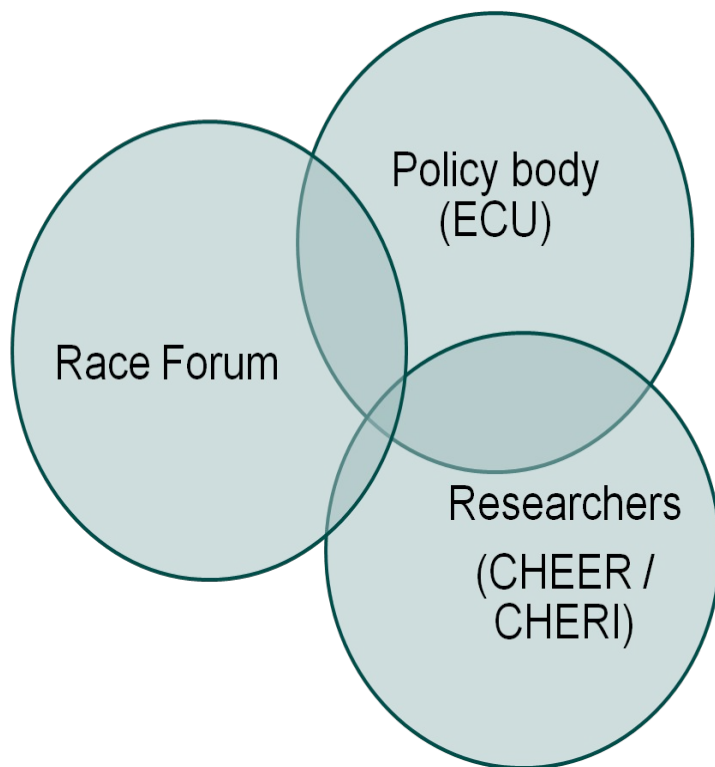
An important marker of just how 'hot' this space was is reflected in the researchers' feelings about presenting to the respective 'stakeholders'. Such anxiety offers an ironic counterpoint to the visceral data (anger, disdain, bemusement, pain) collected as the lived realities of BME staff. It is not the intention to stake any claim to oppression as we could 'walk away' after antagonistic encounters. We were called upon to defend the emergent analysis, the extent of our data or our competence at securing access across all the staff grades. Yet we knew we could not guarantee inclusive coverage, given the voluntary nature of the study nor the resources at our disposal.

Yet if 'race' is not fit for 'polite company', we as white researchers had 'brought it up' legitimated as research evidence rather than as our 'identity'. The irony of this 'objectification' of, what for many was the reality of their daily subjection within racist orders, was not lost on us. We sought to honour their anger.

Impolite Racism & Desiccated Data

However, editing the final report was out of our hands so respondents vivid experiences of inequality required further justification, couched in concerns about 'representativeness'. Qualitative research was rendered less legitimate than the quantitative contributions of our collaborating survey team.

One of the paradoxes of the work, that the very forces of anger which drove it from inception and commissioning- what racism costs and how it works within the embodiment of institutional life - were all but expunged from the report; as if the BME subjects who spoke to us, of the vitality and vulgarity of racism as well as its everyday 'disguise' in the operation of highly discretionary departmental level power, had *not* spoken. What can then say about

racism that makes a/ny difference of the right kind in a policy world and context when 'race' is almost made to disappear even within ostensible research into how it works as a power relation.

References

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