Title: Having to negotiate whiteness in addressing black and ethnic minority gap attainment in English higher education

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Abstract: The proposed presentation exposes the ethical dilemma of addressing a sector-wide issue of unequal outcomes in one English university. Nationally, the issue of gap attainment between white and black and minority ethnic (BAME) students has been highlighted (Equality Challenge Unit 2013), where there is a 17.7% difference in 'good honours' (first or 2.1) achievement in studying for first degrees. I led a team which piloted initiatives within institution to address the unequal outcomes of white and BAME students. In doing so, extracting research information about the student experience based on 'race' posed an ethical dilemma, particularly in recognising our own positions as staff members. This presentation explains what we attempted to do and what we have learned from the process. It is hoped that this story will inform the work of other anti-racist practitioners in instituting positive change within their own workplaces for the benefit of all students and staff.

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Summary

This paper highlights some of the research and ethical issues confronted while conducting a study on Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students recently at one higher education institution in England.

The research was conducted on the heels of recent attention drawn to the BAME student experience and the sector-wide issue of an 'honours' degree gap attainment between BAME and white graduates. Nationally, there is a 17.7% gap between BAME and white graduates, favouring the latter, in obtaining a 1st and 2.1 class degree (Equality Challenge Unit 2013). This statistic is significant because it challenges dominant perceptions of what constitutes quality and performance in an increasingly neo-liberal higher education setting. The proliferation of key quantitative measures, such as the National Student Survey and the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education Survey, reveal little of the BAME experience as it generalises the student experience to a socially constructed norm (Gillborn 2010). It is a 'norm' where notions of objectivity and whiteness are intertwined.

As a researcher in this area, I recognise there is this dichotomy of performativity and social justice. Many ethical questions have arisen out of negotiating this dichotomy, but one question has stood out: as a worker in UK higher education, am I 'unwittingly' complicit in the reproduction of racial inequalities?

In pondering this question, I will reflect on two faces of higher education: (1) a public face which promotes a veneer of 'excellence', whether research and/or teaching, to stakeholders, clients and potential consumers; and (2) a private face where inequalities are marked and continue to persist (Cohen 1985; Madriaga 2005; Turner

1969). The reproduction of unequal outcomes persists while measures of performativity are highlighted and foregrounded in newspaper league tables, and exhibited to an audience outside the walls of the academy (Ball 2003; Espeland and Sauder 2007). The myth of meritocracy is sustained (Hallett 2010; Meyer and Rowan 1978). Simultaneously, hidden within the walls of the academy, evidence of institutional racism, such as the work of Boliver (2013), is downplayed, and tokenistically addressed (Pilkington 2012).

I elaborate on this dichotomy drawing on previous work on critical race theory and whiteness (Du Bois [1903] 1989; Fanon 1967; Madriaga 2005; Gilborn 2008). This literature has been reflected upon in hindsight, as attempts to research the BAME experience in our own institution suffered from low survey response rates and lack of BAME students wanting to participate in our study. The research project did not get off the ground as imagined, forcing a rethink of methods and how to address the question of the BAME gap attainment in higher education. Moreover, it spurred me to be self-critical and question my motivation to pursue this particular research in the first place. It is here where I realised that my research pursuits may have been informed more from an institutional need to protect the 'veneer' of the public face of the institution than for reasons of social justice and addressing inequality. Hence, my return to critical race theory, in particular the notion of 'double consciousness' from Du Bois ([1903] 1989). While written in regards to the American black experience, the notion of 'double consciousness' is pertinent here, particularly for a researcher having to negotiate the public and private faces of English higher education: 'two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals' (Du Bois [1903] 1989, 3). To reconcile this sense of twoness, I imagine the possibilities of addressing the BAME attainment gap through a critical race theory perspective, not only in my own institution, but throughout the sector.

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