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Is race still relevant? Student perceptions and experiences of racism in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the current views and experiences of university students towards issues of race and racism in England. A decade into the UK's Equality Act (2010), we have witnessed a proliferation of support for minority rights and movements, especially from the younger generation, often praised as progressive and liberal. Yet, in UK higher education, there is growing evidence and concern about racial and ethnic inequalities in the experiences and outcomes of minority ethnic students. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 42 undergraduates in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) degrees, the authors explore the nuances in racial perspectives as they highlight three contemporary student discourses of racism: *the naïve*; *the bystander*; and *the victim*. Implications for policy and practice are suggested.

Introduction

In Western and multicultural societies such as the UK, there has been gradual but unsatisfactory progress on racial and ethnic equality, from health and housing to education (Byrne, Alexander, Khan, Nazroo, & Shankley, 2020). A key concern has been racism, which can include verbal, emotional, physical and symbolic forms of abuse or violence. Efforts to reduce or eliminate racism and inequities due to ethnic and cultural differences continue to drive social change. According to the OHCHR and UNESCO (2005), there are generally three types of racism: (1) structural racism, which refers to the historical account of how institutional policies and regulations have perpetuated societal perforation along racial lines, which in turn led to entire systems working adversely for ethnic minorities, particularly within culturally predetermined conditions; (2) institutional racism, which insinuates intra-institutional rules and regulations favouring the majority populace over minority ethnic groups, which are sometimes referred to as 'unintentional institutional biases'; and (3) individual/interpersonal racism, which dictates the observed internalised feeling of privilege and oppression and sequentially affects interpersonal interactions based on preconceived notions of how a particular person or group ought to behave. These are normally based on generalisations about particular groups and are typically implicit, subtle or unconscious (Bowser, 2017).

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A decade into the UK's Equality Act (2010), we have witnessed a proliferation of support for minority rights and movements, where the younger generation are generally considered to be more progressive and liberal than the previous/older generations (Milkman, 2017). Against this backdrop of greater equality, this paper is interested in the ways in which such progress is manifested, shared and experienced by contemporary university students, with the focus on 'race'/ethnicity – one of the protected characteristics. Here, we are interested in the current discourses of race and racism that are articulated and embodied by students – from minority and majority ethnic backgrounds – in UK higher education. This paper provides an updated account into university students' perceptions and experiences of race and racism and contributes to our understandings of the lived experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students in higher education.

Racial inequality in UK higher education

Across UK higher education, there are concerns about differential degree outcomes – also known as the ethnicity awarding or attainment gap – which refers to the difference in the proportion of White and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME[1]) students awarded a 'good' degree (a first or upper-second class degree classification). Whilst the widening access to university agenda has made some progress and resulted in an increasingly ethnically diverse student body at many institutions, the recent focus on student success and outcomes highlighted a national difference of 13 percentage points in 2017/18 between the outcomes of White and BAME students (UUK/NUS, 2019). This degree outcome difference varies significantly within minority ethnic groups, with the largest gap between White and Black Other students, at 28.3%, and the smallest difference between White and Chinese students (6.6%). Most worryingly, this gap exists even when controlled for prior attainment/entry grades (OfS, 2018).

A growing number of universities and/or their student unions are exploring this issue. For example, the *Why is my Curriculum White?* movement was founded by students at University College London to tackle the whiteness that operates within the university curricula (Peters, 2015). There are wider concerns that as an institution, higher education is racially biased, with White students and staff being the main beneficiaries and those from minority ethnic backgrounds often disadvantaged or marginalised (Museus, Nicholas, & Lambert, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). Here, arguments of white privilege have been mooted (Bhopal, 2018), where being White entails inherent advantages in society.

According to the EHRC (2019a), UK universities seem 'oblivious to the scale of racial abuse on campus'. Although 43% of universities were confident of their racial harassment procedures, almost two-thirds of discriminatory incidents as experienced by students are believed to be underreported (EHRC, 2019a). Whilst there are national efforts to address racial inequalities, especially with the *Race Equality Charter* (an institutional award for universities on race/ethnicity, similar to *Athena Swan* for gender and *Stonewall* rankings for LGBT), the credibility and accountability of this initiative have been questioned (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2018).

In higher education, racial inequality is often implicit or subtle (Singh, 2009). Staff and students from minority ethnic backgrounds can experience microaggression, which is

problematic because such acts can purposefully or inadvertently expel individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds, prompting exclusion, perplexity and in some cases can even result in an absence of faith in oneself (Ahmed, 2012; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Harris, 2017). Microaggression can result in physical and mental stress, as well as cognitive dissonance due to discriminatory encounters (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006). Whether the racial inequality takes the form of microaggressions or implicit and subtle discrimination via behaviour, policy or process, recent focus on 'unconscious bias' and 'unintended discrimination' – both themselves contested terms – can make it difficult for racial inequalities to be challenged. Such acts tend not to fall inside the ordinary conduct of clear purposefulness, and thus one may face the challenge of having to prove intent (Reid & Birchard, 2010).

Drawing on the Parekh report (2000), Pilkington (2013) applied the 10 'signs' of institutional racism and unconscious bias in an analysis of student experience at an English university and reported that although efforts have been made to set forth policies for students and staff to combat institutional racism, there has been a lack of proactive enforcement of these policies. Pilkington attributed this shortcoming to the university's culture, which underutilises awareness raising amongst students and staff. Furthermore, Tate and Page (2018, p. 146) argued that 'the institutionalisation of unconscious bias as alibi for white supremacy is part of white fragility and, thereby, unconscious bias reinstates white racial equilibrium'. The authors argued that minority ethnic students and staff need to be conscious of racial internalisation to challenge institutional cultures of racism.

While there are claims that Western societies have now reached a 'post-racial' era, others have criticised this assertion as idealistic and unsubstantiated (Bhopal, 2018; Garibay, Herrera, Johnston-Guerrero, & Garcia, 2020). At colleges and universities, there continues to be evidence of racial inequality as experienced by students from minority ethnic backgrounds, from undergraduate to postgraduate studies (Singh, 2009; Smith, Senter, & Strachan, 2013; Truong, Museus, & McGuire, 2016), including those in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines. Existing studies report that negative attitudes and atmospheres towards BAME students can undermine their sense of belonging and even academic performance at university, as well as reinforce wider racial inequalities (Chang, Eagan, Lin, & Hurtado, 2011; Ong, 2005). A lack of curricular diversity and underrepresentation of minority ethnic students and practitioners suggests white privilege is reinforced in STEM higher education, where those privileged by the system are consequently blind, unaware and often ignorant to their role in the reproduction of whiteness (Bhopal, 2018). Yet, rejecting the centricity of race while remaining accustomed and non-critical of white supremacy can serve to worsen racial inequalities, where students may endure the trauma of compromising, negotiating or internalising their identity to be socially accepted by the majority group (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). If positive messages of racial equality are not supported or substantiated, minority ethnic students will have to consciously navigate and survive educational mistreatment as a result of racial stereotyping, lowered educational expectations or hostile environments, including in STEM degrees (Ong, Smith, & Ko, 2018). As such, minority ethnic university students appear to experience challenges, from structural barriers of racism to social challenges of integration and conformity (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Dortch & Patel, 2017; McGee & Bentley, 2017).

While the literature highlights the existence of systemic inequalities, more research is merited to understand the experiences of BAME students, especially in UK STEM higher education. This paper aims to address the following questions: What do STEM undergraduates think about 'race' and racism at university? Sequentially, how do STEM undergraduates understand, recognise, approach and experience racism and racial inequalities? As detailed later on in this article, these questions are explored through the lens of student perspectives, especially those self-identified as from a BAME background.

The study

The paper draws on an on-going three-year qualitative study that investigates the lived experiences of minority ethnic students in STEM undergraduate degrees. The research emerged in response to concerns about the ethnicity awarding gap as mentioned earlier and the project aims to provide qualitative and contextualised data that will provide us with a better understanding of the experiences, opportunities, challenges and attainments of university students. Our project is sociologically informed and aspires to develop evidence-informed strategies and recommendations that can reduce inequalities in experience as well as in degree outcome. As an exploratory study, the project only focused on STEM disciplines, where BAME students are proportionally better represented when compared to non-STEM degrees. Around 23% of all UK-domiciled university students were identified as BAME, which converts to 24.9% in STEM and 16.5% in non-STEM undergraduate degrees (ECU, 2018).

The importance of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) to the economy and for the progression of society is widely acknowledged. Yet, in Western countries such as the UK and US, there is growing evidence that indicates the experiences and trajectories of minority ethnic students in STEM education are more challenging and difficult than their White counterparts (as noted earlier). Despite their better representation in STEM degrees, the metaphor of the 'leaky pipeline' has been used to describe the relationship between 'race'/ethnicity and STEM participation (Elias, Jones, & McWhinnie, 2006) . Students from minority ethnic backgrounds gradually drop out of the STEM talent pool. Previous studies suggest that widespread images and discourses of science/scientists as typically for privileged White men can contribute towards the general lack of interest in science for students without these advertised characteristics, particularly minority ethnic students (Losh, 2010). Yet, careers in STEM are often highly valued by minority ethnic families and viewed as a tool of social mobility in terms of attracting higher social status and earning potential (Wong, 2016).

This paper draws on in-depth interviews with 42 STEM undergraduates, which include the disciplines of biological science, computer science, mathematics, pharmacy and psychological science. The study is situated in a medium-sized English university with a student composition that broadly reflects the national population, including the ethnicity degree awarding gap. Whilst each university is unique in its own right, the case-study institution is neither extreme nor atypical in terms of student diversity and outcome.

The project began in Autumn 2018 with a call for participants in any STEM undergraduate degree, with an emphasis on those who self-identify as being from a BAME

background. Using personal contacts as well as staff emails from STEM department websites, we approached over 100 staff to seek permission and support to promote recruitment, including over 60 short presentations to students about the project at the beginning or end of a subject lecture. Further details were also disseminated through students' virtual learning environment. Although our target was UK-domiciled BAME undergraduates, to be inclusive, we also accepted interest from those who self-identify as White British or as an international student.

Students were interviewed in Spring 2019 for an hour on average, in quiet rooms across the university. Students were asked to share their views on a range of topics, including their experiences of university, the role of ethnicity in their education, and their thoughts on the ethnicity awarding gap. In particular, we asked students to share their experiences and stories of the issue of race and racism in higher education study, which also includes the domains of accommodation, teaching and learning content/practices and the study/university environment. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, with sensitive details removed. In all interviews, we allocated an extra hour to promote rapport and casual conversations, which varied from non-existence (e.g. students had to leave for a lesson/or had nothing additional to say) to over two hours. A field note for each student interview was written to summarise and reflect on the co-construction of knowledge, which is considered in our analysis as a rich supplementary dataset. An e-voucher was provided as a token of appreciation.

Our participants were diverse, with the majority self-identifying as from a BAME background (n = 28, or 67%), and a higher proportion of female students (n = 31, or 74%). We recruited students from a range of BAME backgrounds, such as Black, East Asian, Middle Eastern, Mixed, South Asian and White European. Although we are aware of the heterogeneities within the umbrella grouping of BAME, we use a binary ethnic grouping of BAME and White British for the purposes of this paper to strengthen anonymity. In the full project, students were also asked to complete an autumn and summer journal reflection and to attend a half-day workshop with staff and students, but these data will be reported elsewhere. The journal reflections were aimed at capturing the evolving views of students over the course of each year, with the goal that current first-year student participants will continue to be a part of the project for the duration of their whole undergraduate degree.

For information, our research team is ethnically diverse and predominately female (with Wong the only male), with heritage including British East Asian, British Mixed (Asian/White), Middle Eastern and White British, and research backgrounds in education, meteorology, political theory and sociology. At the time of research, three authors (Wong, Highwood and Singarayer) were academic staff with departmental or university-level roles that champion equality, diversity and inclusion, one (Elmorally) was a doctoral student and one (Copsey-Blake) a final-year undergraduate.

Data analysis was informed by a social constructionist perspective, which understands social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr, 2003). Interview transcripts were imported into *NVivo* for initial data arrangement, with provisional codes created as we moved back and forth between the data and analyses in an iterative process through which the dimensions of concepts and themes were refined or expanded through the comparison of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). A coding framework was then established, with a guided list of definitions for each

code after the first, second and third authors independently coded five interview transcripts by relevant themes. This was then discussed and compared, with any differences in the application of codes debated until a consensus was reached. These codes produced clusters of ideas for further coding and the emergence of key themes. Here, we focus on the themes that enable us to explore the student discourses of race and racism in higher education.

As discussed later in this article, we identified three prominent student discourses of racism, which we tentatively call *the naïve, the bystander* and *the victim/the witness*. Our findings highlight the continued challenges facing UK higher education as we strive to promote equality, diversity and inclusion for all students, especially those from BAME backgrounds. We stress that these discourses of racism are not mutually exclusive, although most students seem to articulate their views of race and racism that map onto one of these discourses. Although we collected gender data, we did not find notable differences. Females outnumbered males, but both genders are represented across the three discourses. We acknowledge our limitations with intersectional analysis. Our focus on ethnicity took prominence over other social locations such as disability, religion, sexuality and social class. Further research is merited to explore these potential nuances.

The naïve

We call the first student discourse of racism *the naïve*, which refers to those who do not believe issues of race and racism are relevant in contemporary society, especially in the UK. More specifically, racial inequality, prejudice and discrimination are considered to be lessons of history rather than an active or on-going concern. These students accept that racism existed, but only in the past, and are therefore unaware, or deny, that it is still a current issue for social justice. Students who articulated *the naïve* discourse of racism are mostly White British, although a few BAME students also shared this viewpoint.

A lack of awareness or acknowledgement of racial inequalities may reflect the rather homogenous social environment of the individual, especially if surrounding family and peer groups are culturally and ethnically similar. For example, Raymond (White British male) said that he 'never thought of ethnicity as sort of defining me, I never thought being White British you had to do this or have to do this, you just can do whatever you want to do'. He believed the experiences of BAME students should not be any different to him, with the same freedom to do and to be as one wishes. Adopting an egalitarian view, it is unimaginable for Raymond that anyone in the UK is *not* able to pursue their goals and aspirations, if there is enough desire, effort and work ethic.

Similarly, Vanesa, a BAME female student, said: 'I don't think anybody would like actively treat you differently just because, I mean, its 2019 everybody tries to be very correct and everything.' If anything, Vanesa seems to imply that perhaps BAME students might actually benefit from this shift in momentum that seemingly promotes and celebrates diversity and inclusion. Relatedly, suggestions of the idea of positive discrimination or affirmative action, for Georgia (White British female), would be considered as unfair because 'White people would miss out if there wasn't enough space for them' if there were a quota system based on ethnicity, or additional support for particular ethnic groups. Some students, especially from White British backgrounds, felt they are now the

ethnic group which is disadvantaged or discriminated – an issue we explore in a separate paper.

Interestingly, Ahmed (BAME male) talked about the potential abuse of the 'race card' by minority students themselves (see also Leonardo & Porter, 2010), as he believed that the term racism can be exploited and used as an excuse for their differences in experiences or outcomes:

> I know quite a few people who, if they don't get something, they say racism immediately … If you don't get something or something goes against you, it's not because of your race [but yourself]. Most people say, when they're dealing with Caucasian people or anyone who's not their race, they'll say they're racist if something happens against them.

Here, the denial and dismissal of racial inequality can contribute to a powerful discourse that removes or negates the existence of structural and social barriers and propels an egalitarian perspective that places all responsibilities of success and failure on the individual (van Dijk, 1992). Whilst Ahmed admitted he has had 'a few run-ins with bullies' in school, he was adamant that these were not racially motivated. This may be true, but his views align with *the naïve* discourse, which includes those who are genuinely unaware of racial inequalities. For instance, Carol (BAME female) felt that 'as far as I know … everyone's really fair'. She explained that 'you could be black and think a certain way and act a certain way and you would make the same kind of friends as you would do if you were a White person with the same mentality. There hasn't been any bias.'

When asked explicitly about racial inequalities, students who articulate the discourse of *the naïve* tend to say everyone is similar or that there are little differences between them, irrespective of ethnicity. Georgia (White British female), for example, told us that 'some of my best friends at school were Black and they were never treated any differently to me'. From her perspective, typical of *the naïve*, students are all equal in that everyone is treated the same (rather than an equality of opportunity approach) and rejects that racial inequality is a current concern.

The bystander

The second student discourse of racism we identified is called *the bystander*, which includes descriptions that are typically associated with the roles of the observer, spectator or even *silent* witness. Students who articulated the discourse of *the bystander* seem to recognise and acknowledge the existence of racism and racial inequalities but are not readily prepared to interfere or interject. The general disposition of *the bystander* appears to follow the practice that one should not get involved in the business of others, especially since the issues of 'race'/ethnicity are often sensitive, complex and therefore best avoided.

For some, notably those from White British backgrounds, *the bystander* discourse seems to reflect their uncertainties about the *right way* to discuss or comment on racial issues or inequalities, with concerns about being politically incorrect, inaccurate or offensive. Their position as the ethnic majority, for instance, could mean that it is experientially difficult for them to empathise with the racial challenges as experienced by minority ethnic groups. Whilst Sophia (White British female) thinks 'there's still racism that goes around, just in general', she accepts that 'it's not ever happened to me

personally' and therefore 'I can't really [comment].' Sophia also admitted that people like her do not often get involved in race-related issues 'because people were just so scared of getting called racist themselves'. Similarly, Abigail (White British female) said 'I don't know if it'd be my place to report it' if she witnessed racial incidents. As such, the discourse of *the bystander* seems to encourage a culture of silence, passivity and non-interference. Worse, as Bhopal (2018, p. 120) passionately argued, 'a failure to acknowledge racism results in a failure to act upon it', building on the popular saying, 'silence is complicity'.

Racism is not always obvious or explicit, which means there can be alternative interpretations as to whether an incident or issue is considered as racist, especially if there was 'no malicious intent' – whatever that may mean. Several students, including those from BAME backgrounds, recognise that everyday jokes and humour are sometimes taken too seriously and therefore do not merit interference. Lily (White British female) said that 'a lot of things [or remarks] could be taken [or interpreted] differently and it's literally subject to whatever that person thinks'. Here, apparent racial incidents might just be a misunderstanding between the projected and the received meaning. For instance, Melony (White British female) explained that 'a lot of the time, [people] probably say stuff they don't actually mean because they haven't been told that it's not [OK]'. In other words, cultural conflicts may reflect a lack of education and mutual understanding. A possible example suggested by Kieran (White British male) was his desire for lecturers to have a British accent. He said he struggles to understand those with 'a thick accent' and therefore his preferences for tutors are 'down to the accent that they have … and not down to ethnicity'.

We were particularly intrigued by some BAME students who seem to play down episodes or experiences of racism as something else, rather than racism per se. Hannah (BAME female) accepts that 'people have stereotypes, but they're not necessarily racist stereotypes … I think we all have preconceived ideas'. She gave the example that 'I have joked with White friends, like they don't use spices, but it's nothing that anyone's going to lash out and be really offended by.' Similarly, Paddy (BAME female) is often asked 'where are you from?' more than once when her initial answer was not accepted. She said that these questions were 'not necessarily offensive but they're not nice [and] they're not a racial insult'. For Paddy, enquiries about her ancestral origins were interpreted to be from people who are curious, rather than with racist intent.

Others have played down incidents of possible racism as unfortunate misunderstandings of light-hearted jokes. Disha (BAME female), for example, acknowledged that some of her peers 'make fun of my accent [but] these are just for fun'. Similarly, Lutah (BAME male) seems to brush off these potential racial incidents as banter, especially when there is no malicious intent. When asked whether he has ever experienced racism, Lutah explained with 'not like seriously, but in jokes, yeah' and went on to defend his encounters as merely casual conversations with friends and peers. We speculate his reluctance to call out, or inability to recognise, these discourses of racism and micro-aggressions might also reflect his social position and desire to 'fit in' with his White peers, especially since Lutah said he 'don't hang out with a lot of people from ethnic minority groups'. Here, behind *the bystander* discourse of racism, Lutah would need to consider his strategy and approach for making friends, as well as establishing a sense of belonging.

The bystander role enables him to survive when there are potential racialised peer group practices or conversations, through alternative interpretations of jokes and banter.

The notion of 'fitting in' was also described by Sachini (BAME female), who reflected that 'I just kind of wanted to be the same as everyone else', because she 'was just scared that everyone would stare at me'. Here, she admitted that 'I'm always scared about racial discrimination happening to me' and therefore reluctant to interfere due to fear of escalating the situation, as well as for personal safety. Wes (BAME, male) said if he witnesses racism, he would just 'call them an idiot and then just walk away', whilst Ahmed (BAME male) was unsure 'how to react . . . it'd depend on the situation'. Others, especially females, said they are likely to walk away, in silence. Like Sachini, Feng (BAME, female) explained that she 'don't want to meddle into people's business . . . because I am scared [they] will beat me up. I don't think it is a safe thing to confront the person.' Whilst Feng and others like her felt 'I don't have that much of justice to fight there what other people say', we suggest that their articulation of the discourse of *the bystander* is a rather specific form, one that is *silenced*. We elaborate on this in the discussion.

The victim

The third student discourse of racism is *the victim*, which refers to those have experienced racism or racial harassment and injustices. By victim, we do not mean weak or vulnerable, but someone who has been mistreated due to their 'race'/ethnicity, from microaggression, implicit and subtle racisms, to open and explicit forms of racial prejudice and discrimination (Bowling & Phillips, 2000). We note that the racialised discourse of *the victim* can overlap with *the bystander*, in the sense of feeling *silenced* and therefore unable to respond, react and report racial incidents. As such, the narratives we present are not experiences that are openly or casually shared by students, especially those from BAME backgrounds. Relatedly, we did not find clear examples or narratives of students who adopted the role of an active *protestor* against racism, which further highlights the power, culture and prevalence of *silence*, an issue we revisit in the discussion.

When asked to talk about racism in the context of their university experiences, several students, especially from BAME backgrounds, spoke of their *acceptance* of moderate racist behaviours and microaggressions as normal. Ying (BAME female) recalled how she and her classmates were mocked by fellow students about their spoken English and the way they speak, including when they communicate in their native language. She said that 'it's okay, I didn't mind. I even forget it.' For these students, the standard response is *not* to react or retaliate. Many prefer to ignore and move on, akin to *the bystander*, except these students are also *the victims* of racism. These experiences are not limited to the university, but the frequency at which these occur can certainly reinforce the status quo that such behaviours are common, normal and should even be tolerated.

For example, Shu (BAME male) said he had issues with his noisy flatmates, who party weekly, in student accommodation. Eventually, there was a house meeting attended by the warden, but Shu said that 'none of us speak up about it . . . because I'm the only Asian . . . we tend not to take any action' and admitted his fears of retribution because 'my flatmates, I think it's seven of them, they formed a gang'. As such, Shu felt life would be

easier if he could just accept and tolerate these apparent cultural differences to minimise his risk of being targeted within his own accommodation.

Our interview with Nancy (BAME female) also uncovered further episodes of racist incidents on campus, again in student accommodation. Nancy recalled one notable instance at night when 'someone banged on my door and they were like "Where's that Chinese bitch?"' In another episode, Nancy said in a random conversation about dogs, she admitted having little affection for them when she was young. A friend appeared offended and accused Nancy and 'people like her' that their lack of fondness for dogs would explain why dogs are consumed (in China). This remark baffled Nancy: 'I just kind of paused and I didn't really know what to say cos … I was quite shocked.' Nancy also observed unsavoury comments and mockery by peers on the accent of a lecturer, which reaffirmed her view that as an ethnic minority, 'you will be treated differently, even if you're in a position of relative authority.' In a class group online chat, she attempted to raise the issue, but the perpetrators defended their remarks as 'a meme' and a joke. In other situations, Nancy said she has witnessed offensive language and racial ridicules in everyday interactions, which she concedes might just reflect these people's ignorance and insensitivity.

There are several others like Nancy, who seem to practise a level of tolerance towards racism, so to speak, which exemplifies how BAME students can be made to feel silenced and disempowered. According to Pakiza (BAME female):

> When people talk to me, I feel like they always used to see my skin colour, or they just assumed things about me before actually knowing me … .T hey'd make comments and you'd just be like, well, that's not okay … . [People] came up to me with these weird assumptions of how my parents should be, of how I should be living … I feel like they wanted me to fit inside a box, and I didn't really fit their definition of who they thought I was.

It is concerning to note that Pakiza did not initially consider these experiences as a form of racism, but rather tried to explain it through a lack of understanding or exposure that people have of different cultures, including her own. Pakiza's disassociation of her own experience as racism further highlights the difficulties for actions against racism. As Bhopal (2018, p. 142) asserts, 'a failure to acknowledge racism results in a failure to act', albeit the circumstance here is the failure, or reluctance, of the victim to attribute and recognise their experiences as instances of racism and microaggression. Pakiza is not alone here, but her example exemplifies the subtleties and complexities of how racial incidents are acknowledged by the self and by others.

Another example is Kane (BAME male), who said he has already accepted that as a minority, 'you gotta work twice as hard for everything you do'. Like Pakiza's initial thought, Kane was adamant that 'I've never used my background as an excuse because I know that if I sit around and sulk, then I'm not going to get anything in life … I've had certain incidents, but I've got past that.' Students like Kane are reluctant to embody an identity that resembles a victim, despite their articulation of such racialised discourses. Here, we can see that victims of racism can also play down and deny, in the sense that individuals themselves refuse to attribute their negative experiences as a direct result of racism. Such a view also aligns with the discourse of *the naïve*, although here, the presence of racism is accepted but just not used as a justification for unequal outcomes.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper investigated university students' views and perceptions of racism as we explored the extent to which race is still relevant in UK higher education. The short answer is yes, race is still relevant. We unveiled three prominent student discourses: *the naïve*; *the bystander;* and *the victim*. As discussed later, these discourses are not mutually exclusive and provide important insights into the current state of racism for higher education students, alongside potential implications for policy and practice.

The naïve discourse of racism appears to be driven by the powerful visions of egalitarianism and meritocracy that stipulate anyone can be anything according to talent and merit. However, an egalitarian perspective, which seems to include *the naïve* discourse of racism, fails to recognise or acknowledge the existence of racism (Bhopal, 2018). Subscribers to this colour-blind approach or ideology have the potential to disrupt wider attempts to address existing social inequalities, fuelled by the misinformed belief that racism is no longer active or current (Bartoli et al., 2016). Students may demonstrate a general lack of critical knowledge, and, in some cases, a deliberate resistance to race and inequality through a refusal to engage with anti-racist work, discourse and scholarship (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). In contrast, we want to introduce briefly the theoretical framework *Critical Race Theory* (CRT), which accepts racism and white privilege as the starting point (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Popularised in the United States, although beyond the scope of this paper to deliberate, CRT has gained momentum in race-related research across the social sciences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), including higher education research (Hiraldo, 2010). Yet, in everyday life, our findings suggest that racial awareness, even amongst university students, still requires further work. This may reflect a confusion or disconnect between the *ideology* of a fair and equal society and the *reality* of inequalities as lived by many marginalised groups. A recognition of racism and its everyday occurrences is essential.

The bystander discourse of racism is underpinned by passivity and inaction, despite recognitions of racism. The bystander effect is generally stronger when the perceived danger is considered less urgent (Fischer et al., 2011). Although the bystander individual may be criticised as self-centred or lacking social and civic responsibility, their reluctance to interfere is multifaceted. Here, students explained that limited personal experience or knowledge of the situation make them unqualified to intervene in racial conflicts. Furthermore, possible acts of racism are often believed to be poor humour or misunderstanding, rather than with malicious intent, which means the need for intervention is not always necessary. As with *the naïve*, the discourse of *the bystander* is also in alignment with what van Dijk (1992) calls the 'denial of racism', where any accusations of racism are deflected or dismissed. For some BAME students, the bystander stance may also be a conscious attempt to protect their sense of belonging at university, especially with their peers. Calling out subtle acts of racism could risk the friendship and being cast out (e.g. Disha and Lutah) or, worse, risk receive retributions from the accused (e.g. Shu and Pakiza), which is particularly difficult for those in shared accommodation. For self-preservation, social harmony may be preferred over confrontational actions against racism, especially if these incidents appear unintentional, infrequent or forgivable, and the social price is *not* unacceptable. Students who articulated *the bystander* discourse of racism can therefore also feel *silenced* and unable to voice out (due to misrecognition but

also fear), especially if they are also *victims* of racism. Yet, silence suggests complicity, which indirectly contributes to racial violence (Bhopal, 2018). The bystander discourse is therefore dangerous and problematic, as it serves to encourage and promote racism through inaction.

The victim discourse of racism refers to students who acknowledge, recognise and actually experience racial inequalities in their everyday lives. Toughened by previous encounters, most victims of racism spoke of their increased resistance to racial slurs or remarks, although this is a disconcerting discourse that requires urgent disruption to halt the continuation and normalisation of racism, especially in the context of higher education. In short, it is unacceptable for racism to be acceptable, especially for those who are subjected to racism.

Indeed, there is a wider challenge for racism to be recognised as racism, and not reinterpreted as an unfortunate misunderstanding, even though there are growing recognitions and discussions of institutional or structural racism (where no individuals per se are at fault) (Rollock, 2009). Calling someone a *racist* is now socially frowned upon. Acts of racism are widely condemned as undesirable, offensive or even immoral.[2] With this renewed seriousness, an unintended consequence may be a greater reluctance for individuals to attribute potential racist behaviours or attitudes as a form of racism. As seen in public discourses, accusations of racism are regularly disputed or rejected, as concrete evidence is often unavailable or unclear (Blum, 2002). In other words, calling someone out as a racist, or claiming to be a victim of racism, may not be as straightforward as it initially appears, as there can be social and emotional baggage in the process or the aftermath of a racial incident (Macedo, Smithers, Roberts, Paradies, & Jamieson, 2019).

We also want to point out the surprising lack of engagement from our students on issues of racial equality. There was little evidence to support a discourse of racism that might be labelled as *the protestor* or *the activist*, akin to what Nelson, Dunn, and Paradies (2011) called *bystander anti-racism*, defined as the

> action taken by a person or persons (not directly involved as a target or perpetrator) to speak out about or to seek to engage others in responding (either directly or indirectly, immediately or at a later time) against interpersonal or systemic racism. (p. 265)

In other words, there appears to be a *missing* discourse in our study to account for students who protest, oppose and actively defend against racism. These students certainly exist, albeit in other pockets across the higher education sector, but perhaps not in the critical mass that is often needed for meaningful actions and preventive measures (Gibson, 2010). Perhaps such a role is less relevant or promoted in STEM disciplines, given the context and content of these subjects are typically driven by 'hard facts' and 'objectivity' (Garibay, 2015). STEM lecturers also tend to perceive themselves as professionally dispassionate and objective, and perhaps less sensitive to social influences, with 'neutral' teaching and learning practices (Other & Author1, 2019). However, this might hamper recognition of unconscious bias, as well as the need to diversify the curriculum and make teaching and learning practices more inclusive. The seemingly objective and meritocratic nature of STEM may serve as yet another factor contributing to the leaky pipeline. Students and staff, especially those new to the university, are therefore likely to benefit from a structured programme of diversity and equality inductions, and refreshers

that promote critical self-reflections on the implications of our respective teaching and learning pedagogies (UCL, 2020). Unsurprisingly, we did not encounter students who expressed *the perpetrator* discourse of racism, namely those who claim to initiate racial abuse or violence. As such, our students were neither committing nor countering racism. Instead, *the naïve, the bystander* and *the victim* discourses of racism were articulated.

So, what does this mean for policy and practice? For universities, there seems to be an urgent need to ensure that all students are aware that racism exists, from explicit to implicit to subtle forms of prejudice or discrimination, with examples, scenarios or even visual demonstrations for clarity. Universities should also acknowledge the existence and prevalence of interethnic racism in ways that avoid overgeneralising students' experiences, as racism manifests differently within and across minority ethnic groups. Indeed, we acknowledge that our study did not probe specifically on students' voice on anti-Black racism as a distinct form of racism (see Gillborn, 2018), which merits further research.

Andrews (2019) argues school, college and university curricula are overwhelmingly Eurocentric, where issues of race and racism are taught as 'something additional, extra or disposable' (p. 1). Through the lens of CRT, the current institutional and systemic inequalities in education protect imperialism and maintain unjust social order. Universities should be cautious not to add token diversity to their curricula but fully commit to contributions from other parts of the world, accepting that the core ideas currently underpinning STEM higher education are insufficient without true transformation and engagement with alternative knowledges and epistemologies (see Tate & Bagguley, 2017, who discussed the anti-racist university in the contexts of Brazil, Canada, South Africa, the UK and the US). This may serve to bridge the divide between race, ethnicity and the STEM curriculum, addressing *the naïve* discourse and possible despondencies to race and racism by mandating engagement with its relative scholarship.

Whilst schools and colleges may have discussed racism, we believe there is value in a compulsory workshop on equality, diversity and inclusion for all university students (and staff) as part of the aim to tackle racism. New students may be indoctrinated as part of induction and existing students may complete a refresher course with regular self-reflections. More specifically, the workshop/course should have clear written expectations and detailed information and training on what and how students should recognise, respond to, react to and report racial incidents, as well as to promote the roles and responsibilities of individual students to safeguard an inclusive culture and to actively call out any forms of racism (especially recognitions and identifications of racism, and even challenge the naïve discourse of racism). With clearer and explicit instructions and expectations, students will be encouraged to adopt and apply the appropriate responses to racism in a way that has the potential to reform and disrupt existing bystander practices, especially the culture of silence (Vess, 2016). Although the absence of *the protestor* or *the activist* discourse of racism may reflect the specific participants in our study, it is important that students have a collective voice against racial inequality. Whilst university student unions advocate the concerns of students, there are often many student issues, which means racism is not always the priority. As such, we support calls for the establishment of a student committee, working group or network that focuses on race and ethnicity to appreciate the challenges and concerns of students (EHRC, 2019b). Such a platform has the potential to promote a stronger sense of belonging for those who may feel alienated due to racial, ethnic or cultural differences.

So far, our study has revealed a myriad of variables that can contribute to the racialised experiences of BAME students at university, from issues that are on and off campus, *inter alia*, and the culture of silence which has affected the process of reporting racial incidents, creating a 'bystander complex'. Our students highlight areas that universities should consider addressing, such as the need to increase and improve staff diversity, better awareness and reminders of student rights and obligations (including the confidence to report incidents) and an authentic celebration of different heritages and cultures (UUK/ NUS, 2019). While some of these may seem like miniscule changes, our students appear to indicate a stronger sense of belonging when their surrounding community is more diverse.

In conclusion, race continues to be relevant in UK higher education, as evidenced in the three prominent discourses of racism as articulated by contemporary university STEM students. Future studies could attest the prevalence of these discourses across different institutions and contexts, but it seems clear that there is still considerable work for universities and staff to challenge and address existing structural and institutional discourses of racism that continue to undermine the experiences of BAME students in higher education.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that the acronym BAME is not an uncontested term. There are diverse and different experiences between minority ethnic groups and there is a danger that grouping all ethnicities under BAME neglects the specific challenges of particular ethnicities. We use BAME as shorthand.
2. On 25 May 2020, the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States, reinvigorated the #blacklivesmatter protests, which is another reminder that racism is an everyday reality.

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