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The ‘Race’ Awarding Gap: What can be done?

Introduction

Renewed attention has been paid to the ‘race’ attainment / awarding gap in Higher Education (HE) which refers to the consistently higher chance White students have of gaining a 1st or 2:1 degree relative to their Black, Asian, Minoritized Ethnic (BAME) counterparts. In this commentary I use Critical Race Theory to provide some context to the gap. I then draw on three UK university case studies (one of which I have led) to close the gap including tackling staff attitudes, building anti-racism into student employability processes and decolonizing psychology’s curriculum.

The ‘Race’ Attainment / Awarding Gap

Nationally, the latest data shows that White students in the UK are 13% more likely to be awarded 1st or 2.1 grades compared to BAME students, although this increases to 23% when looking at Black students specifically (NUS & Universities UK, 2019). This is a persistent gap – it was 16% in 2016 (Advance HE, n.d.) and is significantly higher than attainment gaps for other student groups (e.g., those with disabilities who have a gap of 3%; Advance HE, n.d.; Office for Students, 2019).

Although BAME students face racism in education before coming to university – as Akala (2018) notes, they are chronically under assessed and more than 2.5 times more likely to be expelled for the same behaviour relative to their White counterparts - two reasons show this cannot account for the attainment gap during university. First and most importantly, when controlling for factors such as prior attainment, the gap remains; where even BAME students with high entry grades (e.g., AAB) are less likely to be awarded a 1st or 2:1 (Khan, 2019). Secondly, university courses typically provide foundational teaching in the first year so that students can ‘catch up’ with others for all students. Some have therefore justifiably renamed

the attainment gap: the ‘awarding gap’ (used hereafter) as this better identifies universities as the cause of the inequality rather than BAME students (Nyhagen & Esson, n.d.).

Racism as a Context for the Awarding Gap

Critical Race Theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hylton et al., 2011), the collective intellectual roadmap produced by anti-racist legal scholars, reminds us how ‘race’ inequalities such as awarding gaps come about. Most pertinent to understanding the awarding gap are the following CRT points that will be discussed in detail below: 1) Whilst ‘race’ is a social construct we still need to talk about it 2) Racism is endemic 3) Racism intersects with other inequalities and 4) Racism is a cyclical system.

1) First, a social constructionist understanding of ‘race’ accepts that it is an arbitrary system of human classification with little to no grounding in meaningful biological or physical differences (Hylton, 2018). Nonetheless CRT scholars are clear that a colour-blind approach, where ‘race’ is never discussed under the misapprehension that racism does not exist, is not anti-racist; instead colour blindness impedes concrete anti-racist actions (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Therefore the ‘race’ of university students matters not because ‘race’ exists but because, currently, there are barriers a student will face based on assumptions surrounding their ‘race’ during the university process.

2) The second important CRT point is how racism intersects with other inequalities such as class inequalities. The 2014 report ‘Beyond Broke’ (Tippett et al., 2014) provides a relatively exhaustive account of the class inequalities BAME people face compared to their white counterparts in the US including lower incomes, and lower family and inherited wealth. For example, BAME American households have 15 times less wealth on average than that of a White household. Furthermore, liquid wealth (i.e., money that can be quickly accessed and

thus is essential in an emergency) in 2011 for Black Americans is, on average just \$200 whereas for White Americans it is more than ten times this (\$23,000). Class inequalities between BAME and White people in the UK are disturbingly similar (Akala, 2018; Khan & Shaheen, 2017; see also my 5-minute animated video summarizing these: Jankowski, 2020). Further intersections between class and ‘race’ inequalities include gender, where BAME women are more likely to be underpaid, and over represented in precarious work, relative to White men, White women and BAME men (Browne & Misra, 2003; Hill Collins, 2002).

3) CRT also highlights the endemic nature of racism where it exists in institutions as diverse as higher education to housing. For example, the UK Government’s (UK Government, 2018) audit into racism shows that (most) BAME groups have a higher chance of being homeless, living in overcrowded households and renting (rather than owning) relative to White groups. These differences can be stark: Sixty-five per cent of White- (and some Asian-) British households own their house compared to just 23% of Black African, Mixed, and Arab households. This is caused partially by the higher rates of poverty these BAME groups experience (Institute of Race Relations, n.d.) and, though research is lacking on this, explicit racism by key actors in the housing process (Siddique & Duncan, 2018). The British ‘super landlord’ of almost 1,000 homes Fergus Wilson is one such actor. His discrimination towards potential Asian tenants because of supposed ‘*curry smell[s]*’ (para. 4) was reported by an estate agent he employed and eventually condemned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in 2017 (Collinson, 2017). Other racist actors in the housing process (such as landlords and estate agents) may go unchallenged, by veiling their racism behind other reasons or more simply staying silent when witnessing racism if speaking out where to interfere with their profit making. Similar racism in housing can be found in the US where housing discrimination was codified into law via redlining practices leaving Black home buyers relegated to the poorest neighbourhoods (Coates, 2014)

4) Finally, CRT emphasizes the cyclical nature of racism, where one manifestation of it compounds and furthers other inequalities. For example, living in houses that have lower increases in value compared to those in White neighbourhoods, means the local amenities around Black houses are also likely to be poorer. For example, BAME children in the US, typically can only go to schools in their local areas, and these schools tend to have the least qualified teachers, worst facilities and most children in poverty relative to other schools (Hannah-Jones, n.d., 2016). Schools with worse facilities and less resourced teachers will result in poorer educational grades and a smaller chance of gaining entry to higher education or higher income employment (Tippett et al., 2014). Further compounding these inequalities, is evidence showing that BAME graduates are still less likely to be employed than White graduates meaning in monetary terms, the payoff of gaining higher education, is higher for a White person than it is for a BAME person (Tippett et al., 2014).

How to close the gap

Collectively, these CRT points show us how BAME students face the awarding gap in the context of broader racism - racism that is endemic, intersecting and has a cyclical nature. This context reminds us why closing the gap is so necessary. Next, we should consult the applied work to show us how to close the awarding gap (Austen et al., 2017; McDuff et al., 2018; NUS & Universities UK, 2019; Tate, 2018) especially because there is a danger of replacing concrete remedial action in favour of needless 'further research' or endless pontification (Austen et al., 2017; McDuff et al., 2018; NUS & Universities UK, 2019; *Tackling the "BPOC" Attainment Gap in UK Universities*, 2018). I will focus on three research examples that offer some of the steps necessary to tackle the gap.

Tackling staff attitudes: Drawing on research by McDuff et al. (2018)

It is worth focusing on Kingston University's awarding gap in detail not least because their gap reduced significantly from 29% to 13% over a 6 year period (Office for Students, 2020). This was achieved by Nona McDuff, OBE and colleagues who designed a project consisting of workshops, peer mentoring and training schemes (McDuff et al., 2018). In their project report, McDuff and colleagues refreshingly detail the concerns and obstacles they encountered during their work. This includes their own concerns that anti-racist targeted action would increase segregation between BAME and white students, would stereotype BAME students as 'less able' or even would worsen the awarding gap where it became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

McDuff and others also note extensive colour blindness from staff including from those active in tackling gender inequalities. Given the majority of HE staff in the UK are white (e.g., 92% of professors; Garner, 2015) and evidence suggests BAME academics (Bhopal, Brown, & Jackson, 2016) leave higher education at a higher rate than White academics, staff attitudes (e.g., defensiveness and colourblindness) are likely to be significant barriers to closing the gap. But this is surmountable. As McDuff and colleagues detail, their project success was in part due to sustained, collegiate and institutional wide encouragement to staff to take the issue seriously (pg. 10-11):

“Our principal interventions, in addition to these course team meetings around the VA data were: sustained communications by the Vice Chancellor about the importance of acknowledging race inequality; collegiate discussions, through workshops on the inclusive curriculum, around improving the racial climate and creating a sense of belonging and expectation to succeed for BME students and staff; and group workshops that explore unconscious bias and how its negative impacts can be mitigated” (pg. 10-11).

Further, McDuff and colleagues presented the awarding gap data as 'value added data' to colleagues; meaning the data was presented only after controlling for student's prior awarding and for students' learning style. This managed to counter – in advance - staff's typical common defensive reactions that the gap was somehow caused by BAME students

rather than by any institutional factor. McDuff and others further noted that their success was not because they penalized staff but because they had an “*institutional dialogue on race without being divisive and without substituting the student deficit model for a staff one*” (pg. 15).

Implementing anti-racist employability practices: Drawing on work by Smith (2016)

The awarding gap is also inextricably linked to racism in student employability processes (e.g., where students who accrue more successful/engaging placements may be graded higher when assessments are tied to these). Smith (2016) uses Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to highlight how placement awarding processes may implicitly advantage White students. She notes because arranging a placement is largely left to students, it is White students who are more likely to achieve these through nepotism and a socialization that enables them to confidently approach organizations more often. Furthermore, some BAME students have- and will- experience racism in their placements only to face universities ignorant or dismissive of the experience (Gair et al., 2015; Poku, 2018). The impact of the awarding gap on BAME students is heightened because racism also occurs in the area that universities seek to extensively prepare them for: graduate employability. This is ironic considering universities spend considerable time urging (BAME) students to correctly format their CVs, yet never even acknowledge the reality that a CV with a ‘BAME sounding’ name is around 50% less likely to gain an interview relative to a CV with a white sounding name on it (Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016).

An anti-racist overhaul of student employability is needed. Unfortunately, the various calls to develop anti-racist employability guidance for students, in recognition of this racism, seem to have been ignored despite being made decades ago (e.g., (Meijers & Piggott, 1995; Wrench & Modood, 2001). Nonetheless we know what this might look like. Fundamentally employability support processes should not be built around a default white student assumed

to not experience employment barriers such as racism. Furthermore, robust and accessible grievances processes for racism experienced should be made available. Further tailored employment support for BAME students should be provided in order to help mitigate the extensive disadvantages they, relative to their white counterparts, are likely to face in a wider labour market that HE claims to prepare them for. Anti-racist employability guidance suits CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) by moving away from colour-blindness and recognizing racism's endemic institutional nature. Furthermore, it contributes towards closing the gap when placements are linked to course assessments and – more importantly – can support BAME students even when they have left the university.

Decolonizing (Psychology's) Curriculum: Our project at Leeds Beckett University

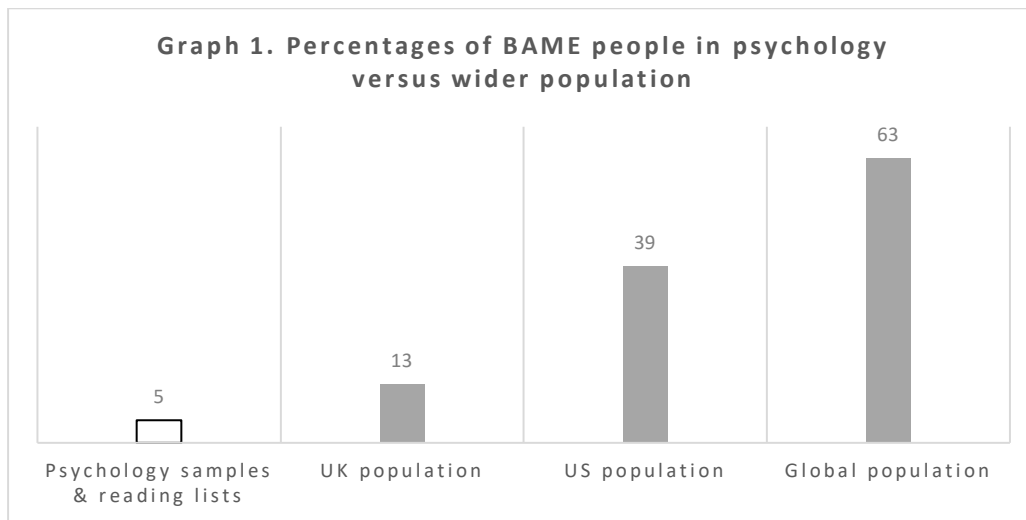
www.bmeopsychology.com

Another cause of this gap is a White, Western curriculum (McDuff et al., 2018; NUS & Universities UK, 2019). Students who learn about people like them, written by authors like them, will have an easier and more engaged educational experience. Ultimately, they will also have higher grades. We can see a White curriculum clearly when looking at the discipline of psychology both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Quantifying psychology's whiteness

Quantitative analyses of US psychology research samples have found just 6% of participants are BAME (Arnett, 2008; Henrich et al., 2010). An analysis of reading list authors on the UK BSc Psychology course I teach on revealed just 3% were BAME men and 1% were BAME women (Jankowski et al., forthcoming). By any standard, this is too low (see Graph 1). For example, if the standard was for psychological research and teaching to reflect the countries in which it is conducted, it should be 13% in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2012) and 39% in the US (Henrich et al., 2010). Psychology is, however, the study of human behaviour, across the globe. On this basis, according to Snopes (Mikkelsen, 2015), BAME

people make up around 63% of the global population. But even this standard is arguably too low given most people taught about, and researched, have so far been White, Westerners in psychology –arguably the standard is higher in order to redress the balance.



Qualifying psychology's whiteness

The proportion of BAME voices and standpoints within Western psychology translates to the discipline's actions, content and detail. Psychology's promotion of eugenics, for example, continues today. Whilst many strongly criticized Phillippe Rushton (including the publisher of his work, the *British Psychological Society*; Fairchild, 1991; Henwood, 1994; Owusu-Bempah & Howitt, 2000) for presenting Black people as less intelligent and more criminally culpable in the early 1990s evidence suggests this is an idea that is returning in 2020 (Evans, 2018; Saini, 2019). Secret academic conferences promoting scientific racism have been running in UCL up until 2017 (Fazackerley, 2020), some neuroscientists have admitted they believe Black people to be less intelligent than white people (Harmon, 2019) and psychology journal editors have themselves published scientifically racist work (Saini, 2018). The BPS (2019) still lists 'individual differences' and 'intelligence' as subtopics undergraduate

psychology curriculums courses should teach, which might be read by some to justify the inclusion of scientifically racist content.

Other evidence of white curriculums abound. For example, 42% of around 1,000 British BAME university students surveyed reported that their curriculum doesn't reflect diversity, equality and discrimination and 34% stated they felt "*unable to bring their perspective as a Black student to lectures and tutor meetings*" (National Union of Students, n.d., p. 20). This was supported by focus groups we ran with 22 of our mostly psychology BAME students (Gillborn et al., forthcoming). Analysis of psychology textbooks attest to curriculum whiteness too with BAME people othered discursively e.g., by referring to Black Africans as "*tribes*" and positioning them next to animal behaviour content (Owusu-Bempah & Howitt, 1994). Furthermore, content on mental illnesses may diagnose Black people as having 'Black self-hatred', arising from 'absent Black fathers' (Owusu-Bempah & Howitt, 2000). Or due to "*paranoi[a] against the police and their doctors*" (Lane, 2010; Metzl, 2011) rather than as caused by racism.

One particularly demonstrative case study of psychology's whiteness came in the form of a media request to my psychology department in 2019. It referred to a recent newspaper interview with White Irish actor, Liam Neeson (Shoard, 2019) who admitted his shame that he previously had learnt of a friend's rape by a Black man and then developed a 'primal' urge to kill any Black man he came across (Michallson, 2019). He subsequently walked the streets with a weapon over a 10-day period hoping to do so.

Journalist Gary Younge (Younge, 2019, para. 6) compellingly rebuts Neeson's comments by noting: "*One has to wonder what would have happened if the [rapist] had been a white person. Would Neeson have gone out looking for a "white bastard" to kill? Or would he just have killed himself? Is the race of the attacker only relevant if they are black? Or can we*

share this bigotry around?”. Younge further critiques those who defend Neeson’s actions such as those denying that he would have ever gone through with a killing and others arguing Neeson’s words were a “*courageous admission*” (Menon, 2019, para. 26). This leads to an important question: Why some will excuse Neeson’s own voluntary admission of such a serious ‘transgression’ (attempted murder) but not the transgressions of Black men which are much more likely to be minor or even entirely imagined by a White racist society?

My psychology department was encouraged to respond to Neeson’s comments by our university’s press team. We were asked to respond on whether “*it is somehow normal and natural for a man to suddenly become racist and want to kill another man to, as he might see it, protect a woman?*”. Posing this as a question, implies ‘yes’ is a legitimate answer. It also raises important questions such as how would an affirmative answer be heard by our Black psychology students? How would a Black psychologist feel receiving this request (*Is it normal and natural for men to want to kill me?*). What might have been asked instead if this question had not been posed? Why does Neeson’s story of wanting to kill a Black man get more attention than the woman raped or the Black men – by Neeson and others – stereotyped as rapists?

Psychology’s whiteness can explain how this media request came about i.e., how (white) psychologists can be supposed to think racism is normal or natural. Work in psychology since the 1950s has largely theorized racism as arising through two key ways (Henriques, 1984; Richards, 2002). The first is through faulty cognitive shortcuts that lead to inaccurate judgements and discriminatory behaviour about others. The second is when individuals see themselves as members of an ‘in group’ and others as an ‘out group’, which boosts self-esteem –something that all people need.

Such theories have been criticized (Henriques, 1984; Henwood, 1994) for treating racism as an inevitability (e.g., where cognitive shortcuts are necessary to function in a messy world or where everyone needs an ‘in group’). Depicting racism as an inevitability implies efforts to end it are fruitless (Henriques, 1984; Henwood, 1994). In addition, Stainton Rogers (2011) also critiques these theories for implying no particular group are culpable for racism. Given the majority of psychologists are White and, as mentioned, our teaching, research and readings tend to be by White Westerners such theories may seem plausible to us (Arnett, 2008; Henrich et al., 2010). Thus, when faced with the question whether ‘racism is normal or natural?’, as my department were, we can see how we can arrive at the answer of yes. Put differently: Yes, it is normal and natural for a psychologist to be asked whether racism is normal and natural. But it shouldn’t be.

We need to change this. Psychology cannot continue to theorize racism away as a blameless individual inevitability. Role models are important. Standpoints matter. Content matters. Decolonizing the psychology curriculum is needed. As a first step towards this, myself and colleagues (Sarah Gillborn, Kevin Hylton and others) have developed an online repository of teaching and research materials designed to challenge psychology’s White and Western standpoint to use in a curriculum: www.bmeopsychology.com. This is important for psychology and also is a third step for closing the awarding gap for BAME psychology students particularly.

Conclusion

In this article I have outlined the ‘race’ awarding gap in HE (NUS & Universities UK, 2019). Whilst this should disturb, it also should be an impetus for concrete anti-racist actions not only to close this gap within the university, but also to disrupt the cyclical, intersecting and endemic nature of racism more broadly. Closing the awarding gap means fairer degree

classifications, and potentially fairer employability, income and wealth outcomes for BAME people. The origins of Western Psychology legitimized racism and our discipline today remains embedded in Whiteness (Owusu-Bempah & Howitt, 2000; Richards, 2002; Tucker, 1996). It is thus apt that those of us in university, those of us in psychology, and those of us interested in inequalities, take such anti-racist actions.

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