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'Intensely white': Psychology curricula and the (re)production of racism

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Abstract

Psychology has witnessed an upsurge in discussions around institutional racism as a response to global anti-racist activism following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 by a police officer in Minneapolis, USA. Within academic institutions, students have been challenging institutional racism for years, highlighting how the whiteness of curricula serves to uphold systems of racial injustice. Such calls are often met with denial and sometimes active backlash. Nevertheless, further reflection is crucial if universities and accrediting bodies endorsing educational and professional courses seek meaningful systemic change. Informed by Critical Race Theory, this study uses original empirical data to uncover how students of colour experience psychology curricula by conducting six face-to-face focus groups with 22 undergraduate and postgraduate students of colour on psychology courses at a UK university. Results from reflexive thematic analysis reveal, first, how the psychology curricula are marked by knowledges that (re)produce racism; second, how students are calling for change; and finally, confusion over where responsibility for change lies. We argue that this analysis has important implications for the perpetuation of institutional racism within psychology, academia in general, and subsequent professional psychological practice.

Keywords: Race; Psychology; Higher Education; Curriculum; Critical Race Theory

Introduction

In September 2020, Sarb Bajwa, Chief Executive of the British Psychological Society (BPS), wrote in *The Psychologist* (2020, p. 23) that the BPS is “institutionally racist”. Urgent calls for action include the need for the discipline to enact long-term, meaningful change (Thornton et al., 2020) through mechanisms such as decolonising our knowledge of the psychology discipline (De Oliveira, 2020). Such calls were in response to powerful protests in the US and

UK following the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, USA. These protests have highlighted both the racism that led to Floyd's murder and the insidious impact of racism across our institutions and society more generally. Institutions, including universities across the UK and US, have responded by making statements attesting to their anti-racist stance and signalling a commitment to anti-racist actions. These have included identifying the need for a robust evidence-based approach to dismantling systemic racism within universities in general and within psychology in particular (Harper & Purser, 2020). Central to this cause is a review of the academic curriculum, which students and scholars have long argued represents a distorted and characteristically Euro-US-centric worldview that is invariably presented as objective and race-neutral (Bhatia, 2017), commonly referred to as the white curriculum (Peters, 2018).

Our study responds to this call. To our knowledge, this is the first academic study to qualitatively address experiences of the white curriculum among students of colour¹ studying psychology courses in Higher Education (HE) in the UK. In doing so, the study produces original empirical data in response to appeals for academic research that privileges the voices of students of colour within academia more widely and within psychology specifically (e.g., Ali-Faisal, 2020). Informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), our study expands existing work that challenges how established curricula can facilitate systemic racial oppression by exploring the experiences and counter-stories (Ladson-Billings, 1998) of psychology students of colour. This research is significant for several reasons. First, there is a general paucity of knowledge in the extant literature exploring psychology students' experiences in general and psychology students of colour in particular (Bunce et al., 2019; Woof et al., 2019). Second, further depth of understanding is crucial given

¹ 'People of colour' refers collectively to people of Arab, Asian, African, and Caribbean descent. In 2018, members of the NUS Black Students' Campaign voted in favour of using this terminology over more top-down terminology such as BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic). In keeping with these recommendations, we therefore make use of this language in this paper when referring collectively to people who experience racist marginalisation and oppression.

that a considerable proportion of psychology students are likely to become practising psychologists (e.g. in educational, health, and occupational fields). Therefore, there is potential for the normalised and largely unexamined whiteness in their education to be reproduced in professional practice (De Oliveira, 2020; Thornton et al., 2020).

Leonardo (2002, pp. 31-32) defines whiteness as a “racial discourse ... not a culture but a social concept”. Whiteness is a set of assumptions, practices, and beliefs that systematically privilege the interests of white people (Picower, 2009). Building on this, Gillborn (2005, p. 488) argues that critical scholarship on whiteness, therefore, is not an assault on white people but on “the socially constructed and reinforced power of white identifications and interests”. In terms of the white curriculum, then, it is argued that university curricula maintain white supremacy by denying whiteness as a system that privileges the interests and assumptions of white-identified people, instead positioning it as the unexamined norm (Peters, 2018).

According to Mbembe (2016), HE aims to encourage students to develop their own intellectual and moral compass. However, scholars attest that this is traditionally constrained in universities that severely limit the scope for diverse and globally relevant content. In recent years, international campaigns to challenge the whiteness and colonialism of universities have been launched by students of colour, including the ‘Why Is My Curriculum White?’ movement at University College London (UCL) in 2015 and the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ campaign in South Africa (Peters, 2018). Central to these campaigns is the disruption of supposedly ‘colour-blind’ approaches within academia, in which knowledge is predominantly based on white ideas by white authors that normalise whiteness (Gillborn, 2008; Peters, 2018). CRT is sceptical of claims to colour-blindness, which are often used by those in authority to close down race-conscious discussions. Indeed, Annamma and her colleagues (2017) suggest that ‘colour

evasion' is a more accurate term, capturing the deliberate refusal to engage with raced inequities.

Campaigning priorities in this area range from diversification to decolonisation. While to 'diversify' the curriculum broadly means to increase the representation of people of colour on reading lists and in curriculum content (Hussain, 2015), decolonising the curriculum moves beyond diversification to a deeper interrogation of the knowledges and biases (re)produced in education. Contrary to misleading newspaper stories about moves to 'replace white authors with Black ones' (Khomami & Watt, 2017), Sabaratnam (2017) summarises decolonisation as involving critically interrogating assumptions about how the world works, questioning the reproduction of knowledge, considering the implications of a diverse student body in terms of pedagogy and achievement, and working to break down structural barriers to enable students' equal opportunity to succeed.

Although educators sometimes make efforts to discuss race and racism in the classroom, research has suggested that these discussions are often inadequate, undermining students of colour while reinforcing the biases and comforts of white students. For example, students of colour sometimes feel further stereotyped by insensitive approaches while white students assert their personal affront at the discussion and respond with anger or distress (Open University, 2019; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). In addition, people of colour are underrepresented within the academic staff body; for example, in 2016-17, only 6.7% of UK academic staff identified as Black, Asian, or minority ethnic in comparison to 14% of the British population (Advance HE, 2018; Office for National Statistics, 2012), and this whiteness of university staff bodies contributes to the maintenance of unequal racialised positions of power (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). There is also a significant degree awarding gap between white students and students of colour in the UK, with a 23% point awarding gap between white students and Black African

and Black Caribbean students specifically (Bunce et al., 2019; Smith, 2017; Universities UK & National Union of Students [NUS], 2019). To this end, scholars indicate that the curriculum content itself and the delivery of it must be interrogated (Richardson, 2018).

The white curriculum holds implications beyond the immediate impact on students. Knowledge reproduced in universities informs social policy and public understanding, and while not the sole creator of knowledge, it has been positioned as *the* legitimate producer of knowledge (Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). According to Andrews (2018, p. 276), the university “produces the knowledge that is the foundation of racism itself”. For example, scholars have argued that mainstream psychological knowledge has been created by and for Euro-US populations (Bhatia, 2017), based on a ‘psychological imperialism’ that undermines the knowledge produced by indigenous and other minoritised communities (Owusu-Bempah & Howitt, 2000; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). In psychology and related subjects informed by such work, the taught curriculum holds ramifications for practice, including healthcare and mental health support. Black people are more likely to be forcibly detained (Wessley, 2018) and secluded (Fernando, 2010) when interacting with mental health services. The independent inquiry into the death of David Bennett, a Black Caribbean man who died after being restrained in a psychiatric unit, concluded that institutional racism had contributed to his death (Blofield et al., 2003). Additionally, research has shown that applicants of colour are less likely to meet the selection criteria for doctorate programmes, a prerequisite for becoming a Chartered Psychologist in the UK (Scior et al., 2007), and practising psychologists of colour must conceal their own cultural identities and make themselves more ‘palatable’ by fitting into white norm and expectations (Carbado & Gulati, 2013; Odusanya et al., 2017). Essentially, there is potential for students to reproduce, in professional practice, the whiteness, and its inequitable outcomes, that is normalised and largely unexamined in their university education.

There is an acute need to explore further how psychology university curricula may be reproducing race inequities through a white-biased view of the world. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the experiences of curricula among students of colour studying psychology courses in a Faculty of Social Sciences in a UK university. Understanding students' experiences is vital for institutions and relevant governing bodies to enact meaningful curriculum change (Harper, 2012; Harris & Reynolds, 2014). We respond to this omission in research, and to calls for more robust empirical research, which provides a platform to students of colour within academia and within psychology specifically. The present study aimed to address the following questions:

1. To what extent do students of colour studying psychology courses at a university in the UK consider their curriculum to be white, and how is this experienced?
2. What do students of colour studying psychology courses at a university in the UK consider to be the benefits and challenges of creating a more inclusive and equitable curriculum?

Methodology

The study was informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), which states that racism is not restricted to crude and obvious acts but rather is frequently hidden and deeply ingrained in society (Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In this respect, CRT works to reveal the less obvious structures and assumptions that persist and converge to uphold and normalise racial inequality. CRT argues that dominant claims of objectivity, neutrality, meritocracy, and colour blindness act as “camouflages for the self-interest of powerful entities of society” (Tate, 1997, p. 235). In contrast, CRT takes seriously the experiential knowledge of people of colour (Tate, 1997) and values the insight and understanding offered by voices often absent from debate. In

light of the theoretical insights described above, this study aimed to understand and uncover the whiteness of the curricula, as told by students of colour, to disrupt and challenge racial injustice. This research endorsed this approach by exploring how students of colour experience their psychology curricula, thereby providing original, evidence-based research to inform the development of more inclusive and equitable higher education.

The present study was internally funded and ethically approved by an institution aiming to consider the impact of the white curriculum on students of colour on psychology and psychology-related courses. This study used qualitative semi-structured focus groups with student participants (Wilkinson, 1998). Participants were undergraduate and postgraduate students on psychology courses within the Faculty of Social Sciences at a post-1992 university² in the UK (majority accredited by BPS and some accredited by British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy [BACP]). In the interests of protecting the university and students' anonymity, details of specific courses are not provided. Emails were sent across the Faculty inviting students of colour to take part in the study. In total, 22 students took part. Six focus groups of 3-4 participants were conducted face-to-face on university premises (i.e. before COVID-19). Participants were aged between 19-28 years old. Most participants were women (n=17), with four men and one agender participant taking part, reflecting the higher representation of women among psychology students internationally (American Psychological Association, 2017). Participants self-reported their ethnicity as Asian British (n=3), Black African (n=2), Black British (n=1), Black Caribbean (n=2), British Indian (n=2), Iraqi (n=1), mixed-race (White/Black Caribbean, n=6), Pakistani (n=1), and South Asian (n=4).

² A post-1992 university in the UK is a former polytechnic or central institution that was given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or an institution granted university status since 1992 without having received a royal charter.

Procedure

The approach to empirical data collection was in keeping with the organising theoretical framework. CRT aims to enable people of colour to name their reality to challenge claims of neutrality and objectivity and disrupt the existing status-quo (Delgado, 1989). Therefore, given the study's subject matter and the imbalance of power between student participants and researchers as teaching staff, focus groups were conducted to offer student participants greater potential to share their views in a supportive collective (Dashtipour et al., 2020; Wilkinson, 1998). Where possible, students were placed into focus groups with friends, and the authors arranged focus groups at times that were convenient for those participating. Each focus group lasted approximately 75 minutes. Participants were informed of our procedures to safeguard confidentiality and anonymity and were offered the opportunity to withdraw their data from the study (no participants chose to withdraw).

Focus groups followed a semi-structured question guide derived from an extensive literature review with the intention to generate discussion related to the research questions. Questions were open-ended to elicit the rich detail afforded within a qualitative approach (Knights & Clarke, 2014), and the order of questioning was followed but adapted accordingly for each focus group dependent upon areas of focus and relevance.

Data Analysis

Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020) to generate meaningful themes that provide an overview of participants' narratives. Analysis was theoretically informed by CRT, which works to reveal the less identifiable structures and assumptions that exist, persist, and converge to uphold race inequity

(De Cuir et al., 2019). Additionally, CRT recognises that those with lived experiences of racism have more informed knowledge about how racism operates (Mohanty, 2018) and that storytelling can be an essential defence against colour-blind analyses (Delgado, 1989). Data analysis was informed by these principles and aimed to uncover how the white curriculum works in practice, as understood and explained by participants, and to disrupt and challenge racial injustice within academia and beyond.

Data were listened to, and the transcriptions actively read and re-read several times to ensure familiarity with the data. The next step involved the first author generating initial codes; here, important features of the data were identified that appeared relevant to answering our research questions. Within reflexive thematic analysis, this process of coding is open and organic, without reliance on coding frameworks or methods of avoiding ‘bias’. Instead, in-line with the fundamentals of reflexive thematic analysis, researcher subjectivity is “conceptualised as a *resource* for knowledge production ... rather than a must-be-contained threat to credibility” (Braun & Clarke, 2020, pp. 7-8, emphasis in original). As data analysis progressed, we generated initial themes from coded and collated data. These themes were then reviewed and revised against the original data set in light of our research questions. Further interrogation of each theme sharpened the focus and ‘story’ of each, and headings were developed to represent data. Finally, we engaged in the process of analysing what was ‘going on’ in participants’ stories and relating these narratives to the research questions and broader relevant theory and research (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Positionality

It is important for researchers to reflect on their positionality within the practice of knowledge production. This reflection is particularly important for white researchers since, within

research, minoritized researchers are frequently highlighted while white researchers are not (Kelsky, 2001). The practice of a white researcher failing to acknowledge this dispensation would itself perpetuate white privilege, described as an acknowledgement of the privileges attached to whiteness and the discrimination that results from it (Bhopal, 2018; Pillow, 2003). This paper's authors are white, British academics with interest in challenging, but no lived experiences of, racism. We recognise that our research cannot be removed from this context (Mirza, 2018). We take instruction from valued scholars and activists who signal that the work of undoing racism should not fall exclusively to those who did not create systems of oppression (Hylton, 2019; Leonardo, 2004), and call on white leaders to reflect on their privileges and work to advocate for change (Hobson & Whigham, 2018). We also acknowledge the necessity of moving beyond introspection of our discomforts and uncertainties when discussing race and racism and instead “demonstrate a willingness to expose ourselves to vulnerability” (Hobson & Whigham 2018, p. 208) in the pursuit of necessary and meaningful change.

The focus groups were conducted in ways that reflected our attempt to avoid top-down approaches to research (based on age, gender, class and race), following a semi-structured format with the researchers sensitive to the need to allow participants to re/shape discussions and suggest new lines of discussion (Wilkinson, 1998). Two members of the research team facilitated each focus group, and care was taken to ensure that students did not participate in focus groups facilitated by people with any direct teaching-relationship to the student. As we will demonstrate below, students of colour on psychology courses undertake what they describe as “*intensely white*” curricula within spaces with “*too much whiteness in the room*”. We are aware that these focus groups may have become spaces in which this problem was replicated. It would be simplistic to assume that this will not have had an impact on participants’ ability to express their thoughts and experiences in relation to the whiteness and racism of the curriculum. At times, participants offered defences of lecturers after highlighting issues with

curriculum content and delivery (e.g., *“that’s not necessarily their fault”*). It is possible that these were intended to reassure white lecturers and avoid causing offense, and that participants would not have felt this necessary had their focus groups been facilitated by people of colour. However, we are reassured that participants who felt silenced by the whiteness of the university spoke openly about this whiteness within focus groups. This indicates that these spaces did not, for all participants, necessarily replicate the suffocating whiteness of university spaces. While it is difficult to say for certain, although there may have been increased reassurances provided for white facilitators, we believe that most participants felt able to freely call attention to the whiteness of psychology curricula. In terms of the research team, authorship of this paper, and those who analysed data, this project was limited by the availability of research time and resources. This reflects the whiteness of psychology in terms of both the profile of the team and limited support for antiracist research in psychology.

Results

The three themes generated through reflexive thematic analysis are outlined below. Participants are identified by pseudonyms and information regarding their ethnicity, gender, student status (undergraduate or postgraduate), and the focus group (FG) they attended.

***“It’s intensely white”*: Recognition of the white curriculum**

Analysis of the focus group data revealed firstly that the whiteness of the university as an institution is recognisable to students:

“It is down to everything about universities ... the building names, the curricula, the authors, lecturers, everything. It’s intensely white.” (Kyla, mixed-race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG2)

In the above quote, beyond the curriculum content as the more specific focus of this study, Kyla draws attention to the university's ever-present whiteness as an institution and physical space, describing the '*intensely white aura*' of universities. In terms of the curricula content more specifically, participants across all six focus groups identified the whiteness of their curriculum content. For example, participants described the extent to which their curricula focussed on white experiences and examples:

"Just everything we're taught about, it's all white men, white men, white men." (Priya, Asian British woman, undergraduate, FG1)

"It's all based on white people and, a lot of the time, white samples." (Malik, Asian British man, postgraduate, FG2)

"Most of the case studies that we've looked into so far is really white, white based, you know. .. There's no[t] much inclusion, so I think is, is really white dominated." (Cadence, Black African woman, postgraduate, FG5)

Participants recognised the failure of such white knowledges to account for the diversity of human experience. Participants said that, without an acknowledgement of the specific sociocultural locations of the theories dominating the curricula, such theories focus on white and Western perspectives while presenting these as race-neutral:

"The [theories and] examples that we get .. tend to be focused on white children and there is, I think there is a difference between Black and minority children and white children, but it's not something we've looked at." (Shaza, South Asian woman, postgraduate, FG5)

"It's not often you find a sample .. of Black people. ... If someone's researching [both white people and Black people], they're saying 'these are two separate groups of

people', it's always independent groups, it's always comparing their result[s]." (Tahir, Iraqi man, undergraduate, FG3)

As demonstrated in the extracts above, participants recognised that their curricula tended to position whiteness as the unexamined norm within psychological knowledge. They discussed how theories and research tend to be based upon the experiences of white people, thereby normalising whiteness. Additionally, when people of colour are included in research (particularly Black people as Tahir articulated in the extract above), they are frequently positioned as comparators to the white norm. Arguably, an understanding that knowledge is usually based on white, Western models and presented as universally applicable is not a surprising finding. Previous work has already cautioned that theories and models used to inform education are often taught from an unacknowledged position of whiteness (Tate & Page, 2018). However, this finding, emanating from conversations with psychology students experiencing their university curriculum, is an expression of their awareness of the white context in which their studies operate:

"[The curriculum] doesn't include representation and knowledge and information from my culture." (Melanie, mixed race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG3)

"In African culture there is kind of different beliefs and different ways of bringing up children and when we look at those things, ... it's like, different from the way it is in like Africa ... [the lecturers] didn't actually put all those things in context ... so it's just concentrating mostly on like the Western way [of] bringing up the children, you know, so I just think is not so related to how it is in other places." (Cadence, Black African woman, postgraduate, FG5)

Here, participants drew further attention to the curricula's treatment of white-based theories as colour-blind and universalistic despite their deviation from, and lack of relevance to, Black students' own experiences and knowledges. Far from whiteness being invisibilised within curriculum content, participants were fully aware and *critical* of colour-blindness/race evasion within their studies and curricula representations of white, Western knowledges as those that are valuable and worth knowing (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, participants noted that they had become increasingly aware through their studies of the limitations of mainstream psychology:

“I think as you go through uni ... you start realising a lot of stuff, especially the critical psychological modules, they really like highlight things that I was actually so unaware of beforehand. Because all, all we're subject to throughout our first two years in psychology is mainstream psychology and mainstream psychology's views, which are outdated and, quite often, racist and sexist.” (Reshmi, British Indian woman, undergraduate, FG6)

Students clearly understand the limitations of psychology curricula and their potential role in reproducing oppressive knowledges. This supports the tenet of CRT that the people of colour's experiences are an important defence against claims of colour-blindness and that those experiencing racism are more informed about how key institutions in society work (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017); in this case, psychology curricula.

Focus group participants also explored how race is represented and talked about within the curriculum. One participant discussed her experience of being in a lecture about sexuality that included a list of countries, all in the Global South, where same-sex relationships are punishable by law. She discussed how these countries' laws were discussed in raced ways while obscuring historical context, including the influence of Western and British ideologies on exporting homophobia to the countries it colonised (Rao, 2014):

“[The lecturer] was saying how ... [in] some places [same-sex relationships are] punishable by death, but ignoring the imperialist history and how it was the west that put all of those things, like laws there. ... That was ignored, and we're just looking at these countries like 'oh they're so backwards' when it was actually the Church of England that put a lot of those laws in place.” (Priya, Asian British woman, undergraduate, FG1)

As it is represented here, the curriculum can serve to pathologise the Global South as inherently homophobic and irrational in opposition to the progressive and logical west (Ali-Faisal, 2020). Notably, our participants highlighted their awareness of such damaging contradictions in their taught curriculum, demonstrating students' awareness of the need for psychology curricula to engage in the decolonisation of knowledge as well as diversifying the experiences and knowledges represented within the curricula. Participants further highlighted how issues of racism among influential theorists within psychology were brushed over without critical interrogation of the role that these theorists' racism has played in constructing our psychological knowledge:

“In second year, actually we were taught about this psychologist, and how he spoke about like other countries in the East and like African countries, and would talk about how all the people there were savages ... and our lecturer was just telling us this and like laughing a bit, and not like saying anything else, but like, he knew it was wrong but he just didn't say much and we were learning all these theories about this white supremacist and it was, I dunno, it was just uncomfortable...” (Priya, Asian British woman, undergraduate, FG1)

While there is evidence here that educators acknowledge the racist standpoints of influential psychology theorists, we argue that this acknowledgement is not helpful without an

interrogation of the impact these psychologists' beliefs have had on dominant psychological knowledges still reproduced in the curriculum, and in practice, today. For example, Raymond Cattell, Charles Spearman, and Lewis Terman were all pivotal in psychology's theorisation and application of intelligence and intelligence testing. These men were tied to eugenics (Guthrie, 2003), such as Terman's (1916/2009) arguments that Mexican and Black people were genetically less intelligent and should be segregated away from mainstream education. Intelligence testing developed to provide a pseudoscientific means to separate the 'gifted' from the 'idiots' and 'imbeciles' (Billington & Williams, 2014), often along racialised lines, and psychology curricula that fail to interrogate this context risk reproducing notions of genetic race differences in intelligence and, subsequently, notions of white superiority.

“There’s too much whiteness in the room”: Students’ calls for change

Data analysis revealed that, following recognition of the *‘intensely white’* curriculum, students called for necessary changes, identifying many positive and transformative benefits to diversifying and decolonising the curriculum. For example, participants reflected on how an education relevant to and informative about different experiences is vital in preparing students to work in services related to their degree. This was articulated through acknowledgement that experiences related to racism and marginalisation have implications for psychologically-based work, such as therapy, and that knowledge and understanding of this is necessary towards training effective practitioners:

*“Societal prejudices will be brought into the therapy room when you're working with clients and by overlooking those, we're ignoring what really is going on for the client.
... Why has this never been brought up before? What we need to know is about people,*

and [racism is] such a big part of people's identity and experience.” (Melanie, mixed race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG3)

“There was (an elective) module on working with difference ... we were looking at all differences, people from BME cultures, people with disabilities and abilities and people with different sexualities, and all of it was addressed and our attitudes towards it. And, especially with a practitioners’ course, we are going to be coming into contact with people. That’s our training, that’s what we’re doing on placement, that’s so important for us to be able to be more aware of difference and have a way of [working with] it rather than just ‘oh yeah, we’re different.” (Dafiya, Asian British woman, postgraduate, FG3)

Here, participants commented on the importance of understanding people’s diverse needs and experiences, citing practitioners' need to work *with* difference rather than simply acknowledging that those differences exist. Such an understanding is vital for strengthening all practitioners' knowledge and practice, not just those who are minoritised. Additionally, the latter quote above reveals this module's elective nature, most likely chosen by students with a more profound interest in the area rather than being provided as a central aspect of developing effective practitioners (Hobson & Whigham, 2018). Dafiya further exposed the potential failure of curricula to prepare students to work with difference through her experience of deciding not to apply for a job she was interested in because she felt as though her training, through the curriculum, had not equipped her to perform this role effectively:

“[There was a job] I was considering applying for working with people that have been granted asylum status in the UK, and I was just like, well ... I don’t feel like I could work with someone that is from a completely different country and culture because I don’t know how to. I don’t know what their culture is, and I’ve never... I don’t know

how to bridge the gap between the knowledge I have about working with people in general to working with someone from a completely different culture to me.” (Dafiya, Asian British woman, postgraduate, FG3)

Here, Dafiya calls attention to the shortcomings of her curriculum; while it has provided her with a knowledge of working with people “*in general*”, it has failed to prepare her to work with people from a “*completely different culture*” to her. There is arguably an understanding here that the “*people in general*” represented within the psychology curricula are from a specific sociocultural location (i.e., white and Western) whose experiences differ greatly from those seeking asylum in the UK. Dafiya argues that the knowledge she has gained through her psychology curriculum has not adequately prepared her to work with and support people with these experiences.

Diversity among teaching staff was highlighted as an important factor for a number of participants. In line with wider student campaigns for greater representation of Black voices in education (Peters, 2018), the majority of participants in the study, notably particularly Black students, placed great importance on diverse representation among teaching staff for several reasons:

“I think it’s really important that the university does place an emphasis on recruitment of lecturers, and does have a mixed bag of, you know, BME and white lecturers to replicate the students that are here. I think that’s the major starting point for me.”
(Melanie, mixed race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG3)

“Maybe if we had more lecturers that were similar to us, we’d be more inspired.”
(Shanice, mixed race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG4)

“[On most staff being white:] Guess you can say it’s not very inspiring.” (Nicola, mixed-race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG4).

As reflected above, Black participants spoke to the importance of seeing themselves represented in the staff that teach them. Participants placed great value on a staff body that replicates students' diversity and speculated that having more lecturers similar to them would help them feel inspired. The value of this representation was expanded on further by participants throughout the focus groups:

“I would personally find it beneficial to have more representation. ... In [personal development] discussions, there's been times where I've, .. I've not wanted to bring something up from my experience. I felt like ... if there was a member of staff that wasn't white, maybe I would talk about certain things about my personal development that I'm uncomfortable talking about, because I feel that there's too much whiteness in the room. Do you know what I mean?” (Kendra, mixed race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, postgraduate, FG3)

Using the personal development aspects of her course as an example, Kendra here talks about how the whiteness of teaching staff and the course in general have prevented her from feeling comfortable discussing elements of her experiences relevant to personal development. Personal development aspects of courses comprise getting students to reflect on their experiences, and experiences of racism are relevant to personal and professional development (e.g., Varney et al., 2019). Kendra's feelings of discomfort in discussing personal development demonstrate how the lack of representative staff creates another barrier for students of colour. They may not receive the care and support in reflecting on experiences related to experiences of oppression when there is *“too much whiteness in the room”*. In addition, it may be likely that

students feel reluctant to reflect on racism in written assignments since they cannot be sure that these experiences will be understood or well received by white staff.

Relatedly, participants stated that they would appreciate the opportunity to hear staff of colours' thoughts on issues in the curricula related to race and racism:

“The [white woman] tutor that was talking about [her opinion of] the niqab, you know, if we had a Muslim person in front of us, I would have liked to have heard her point of view behind it ... because everybody, although you’re here to teach something, sometimes a bit of their like personal beliefs [come] with it as well. So, it would have been nice to hear it from, like, different backgrounds, instead of the lecturer that was white.” (Alesha, Black Caribbean woman, undergraduate, FG1)

In the first focus group, Alesha reflected on a discussion within one of her classes in which the lecturer, a white woman, had encouraged the class to debate whether the niqab was oppressive towards women. Alesha argues in the extract above that lecturers' personal beliefs can at times become evident through their teaching – which appeared to be the case with this lecturer and her discussion of the niqab – and Alesha used this example to explain a further benefit of increasing the diversity of staff. With the overwhelming majority of university lecturers in both the UK (Advance HE, 2018) and US (US Department of Education, 2020) being white, this means that, when these personal beliefs do come through in conversations with students, students are more often exposed to the beliefs and opinions of white lecturers. This is particularly troubling in conversations related to race and marginalised religions, such as the 'niqab debate' that Alesha references, within which students hear the thoughts of a white woman at the expense of the opportunity to hear the thoughts of a lecturer who may be affected differently by such topics and is able to draw on their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). This is argued further by Cassie and Malik:

Cassie (Black Caribbean woman, undergraduate): *“I think that it’s nice to see people like yourself .. in positions of authority and just like, teaching you. And they’ll have, I don’t really know how I’m trying to put this but, a more common understanding. Like, it wouldn’t just be... urm...”*

Malik (Asian British man, postgraduate): *“You can relate to it.”*

Cassie: *“Yeah. You will be able to relate to them, and some of the stuff they teach, they’ll have like similar, maybe, experiences to you. Like, we’ve been learning about stereotypes, but hearing about racial stereotypes from just white lecturers, urm, I don’t really feel like they’d have the same understanding. Of course, that’s not their fault, but... That would make a difference I think.”* (FG2)

Here, Cassie and Malik spoke of the benefits that would accompany ‘seeing themselves’ in their teaching staff. This included the opportunity to learn about racial stereotypes from staff members who themselves have experience of these, instead of learning about these from white lecturers who would perhaps be teaching about this from a theoretical position without *‘the same understanding’*. This was expanded on by Jada:

“Do the lecturers and stuff have a kind of say in what they teach, or? ‘Cause if they do, then I think [staff diversity] would have an impact because they’d be able to, like... Say if they’re foreign, or even if they’ve been brought up in the UK but they are from a minority background, they’ll have different things to kind of put forward, like how they’ve been raised, their experiences, and they’ll probably be more interested about looking into different groups as well. So, yeah, I do think it would help .. if they were more teachers [of colour].” (Jada, mixed race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG5)

In the above extract, Jada reiterates the arguments from other participants related to staff's ability to bring their own experiences into their teaching. These arguments draw on the value of people of colour's community cultural wealth that is ignored or disempowered by the white curriculum (Yosso, 2005). Interestingly, Jada relates this to the power that teaching staff have over the curriculum; much like many of the participants in these focus groups (discussed below), Jada is unsure of how much power individual lecturers have over what content they deliver within the curriculum. She states that, if lecturers do have a say in what they teach, this diversity among staff would be beneficial in that staff of colour may be more likely than white staff to represent a diversity of experiences in their curriculum content. This may provide an alternative to contemporary psychology curricula and knowledge that privilege white and Western theories, samples, and experiences while presenting them as universally psychologically applicable.

“Who’s exactly in control of the curriculum?” Challenging the white curriculum

When it comes to challenging these issues within the curriculum, analysis revealed the ways participants resisted the white curriculum on an individual level:

“I sort of look for [readings by people of colour] ... My course is predominantly white, will my friends do that? No, they wouldn’t even think to do that, which is why it’s important for the lecturer to point it out and use those readings themselves.” (Farrah, South Asian woman, postgraduate, FG2)

“I always challenge it to people that aren’t, that can’t do anything about it [laughs] to my friends.” (Priya, Asian British woman, undergraduate, FG1)

“I’ve spoken about it as part of an assignment ... I used it as part of my assignment instead of challenging [racism] verbally in the group at the time, which I felt was better for me.” (Melanie, mixed-race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG3)

The above extracts demonstrate the ways students are resisting the white curriculum, including through seeking further readings by people of colour, through conversations with their friends, and through including discussions of racism in their assignments. While class spaces are noted to be “*too white*” for these conversations to comfortably take place within them, these additional avenues for providing counter-stories are vital and provide important opportunities to break silences (Housee, 2010). Importantly, Farrah (above) highlights how this additional work to include diversity and discussions of racism within the curriculum often draws on the labour of students of colour. In contrast, white students are unlikely to take these same steps to broaden their understandings beyond the white knowledges privileged within the curricula. This is not dissimilar to processes among staff within Higher Education, in which the work of ensuring issues of racism are addressed on an institutional level often falls to staff affected by racism rather than those contributing to it (e.g., Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal & Henderson, 2021).

Towards making changes more systemically and structurally beyond their individual work, participants across all focus groups expressed a lack of power to make or encourage these changes, feeling that, both as students and people of colour, their voices were less valued than those of white students and lecturers:

“Sometimes it feels like you’re taught in a way that you, what is it called when somebody .. asks you a question but you’re not meant to answer, what’s it called? [Interviewer: “Rhetorical question?”] It’s kind of like that, how they teach you sometimes. So, you’ve been taught it, but don’t challenge it. Don’t challenge.” (Alesha, Black Caribbean woman, undergraduate, FG1)

“If you’re the one experiencing it, you’re most likely to be at the bottom, and then people in power, they never really understand.” (Sumayya, South Asian woman, undergraduate, FG4)

“I feel like it’s always been taught like this, so I feel like... It always feels like it’s not really going to change.” (Shanice, mixed race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG4)

This sense of powerlessness was articulated through participants’ perceptions that they are “*at the bottom*” when it comes to whose voices are heard when arguing for change, feeling as though their position as students of colour granted their voices less influence. Participants stated that those most negatively affected by the white curriculum are rarely those with the power to change it. At the same time, those in more privileged positions are less likely to experience the harm of whiteness – or, indeed, are advantaged by it – and are therefore less motivated to challenge it. There is recognition among participants that the system that creates and perpetuates these curricula are unlikely to listen to students who speak out against it.

Notably, there was confusion across the focus groups related to where control over curriculum content lies. Participants were uncertain as to who is responsible for coordinating and planning what must be covered within curricula:

“When you’re talking about [the curriculum], you know, the stuff that we’re reading, it’s- who’s authorising them to allow us just to read this?” (Alesha, Black Caribbean woman, undergraduate, FG1)

“I wonder how much of the content that we’re having to study for the practitioners’ course is influenced by [the accrediting body], because they accredit our course, and

how much flexibility the lecturers actually have in the content in that they teach.”

(Melanie, mixed-race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG3)

“Who’s exactly in control of the curriculum? So it, does like the government set out a certain standard and then universities decide what they wanna do [within those] standards? Because if it was like totally the government setting what you had to learn exactly then I thought you had to focus more [campaigning efforts] to them. ... Whereas if it was the university who had more control over what they taught, then maybe starting off at universities and expanding from there is better. It just depends who you need to influence and get your message across to.” (Kyla, mixed-race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG2)

The extracts above demonstrate a general uncertainty as to who is responsible for determining the curricula content. Participants speculated how much *“flexibility the lecturers actually have”* and to what extent university curricula are set out or controlled by a standard set by National Government or accrediting bodies. This uncertainty impacts students' ability to campaign and call for positive change to the curricula; they are unsure of where to direct these efforts. Relative to this, participants in another focus group seemed to believe that lecturers, while expressing solidarity and being a part of these calls for curriculum change, had no power to make these changes:

“[The lecturers] make it really obvious that they know [it’s unrepresentative], and individually they might not be able to do anything about it, but they do say ‘we do know this isn’t covering this, that’s something you can try and find out about in your own time’. And it’s a shame they say that they can’t focus on [more diverse content], but I understand that it’s not necessarily their fault. It’s not our lecturers’ fault

individually.” (Nicola, mixed-race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG4)

“It seems to be working from the bottom up, like the lecturers and the students, they seem to know [that the curriculum is an issue] and it just work its way up. There needs to be more of a push for people that are actually writing the courses and allocating these books and everything, they need to be like, looking for other researchers and other journals and stuff rather than just what they know.” (Shanice, mixed-race [White/Black Caribbean] woman, undergraduate, FG4)

The above extracts demonstrate that, although some lecturers are honest and open about the whiteness of the content they deliver, these acknowledgements are not always accompanied by material actions to ameliorate or challenge this in their content. Arguably, this has led the students in this study to believe that lecturers are 'on their side' and believe changes need to be made to the curriculum, though they are not themselves in a position to make these changes. This is perhaps particularly evident where Shanice asserts that students and sympathetic lecturers should take these arguments to the *“people that are actually writing the courses”*, indicating a belief that lecturers, and those writing curricula, are mutually exclusive categories. There is potential here that lecturers' acknowledgements of the white curriculum are not followed with meaningful, material action to change the curriculum, instead encouraging students to *“try and find out about [more diverse applications or theories] in [their] own time”*. The lecturers that these participants have referenced here have arguably positioned themselves as without the power to make positive changes to their teaching content while shifting this responsibility over to students.

Discussion and conclusions

Across our sample, it was clear that students are aware of the whiteness of curriculum content in undergraduate and postgraduate psychology curricula. Participants recognised that the curricula falsely represent white theories and experiences as race-neutral and universal (Bhatia, 2017) and that psychological theories position *white* practices as the *right* practices. This supports existing arguments that curricula frame the west as the sole producer of universal knowledge (e.g., Peters, 2018). Psychology students recognise this pattern in their own curricula. Additionally, this provides evidence that people of colour are subjected to 'normalised absence/pathologised presence' (Phoenix, 1987) within curricula. We argue that this ostensibly race-neutral approach to psychological knowledge within psychology curricula, and the psychology discipline more generally, inherently positions people of colour as pathological due to their non-conformity to the normalised white and Western ideals of dominant psychological theory (White, 2004). Importantly, participants called attention to this race evasion in their accounts of the curricula. To this end, the current study builds on existing work that reveals how established curricula unproblematically facilitate systemic inequalities (Young et al., 2013). Furthermore, we extend this in line with Yosso's (2005) work by calling on educators to value and learn from community cultural wealth beyond the white and Western knowledges privileged in the curricula. Students' recognition of these issues within the curricula supports the tenet of CRT that the experiences of people of colour are an important defence against claims of colour-blindness and exposes the central role of racism as a widespread aspect of everyday life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Participants also highlighted the implications of the whiteness of psychological knowledge for reproducing institutional racism in psychological practice, arguing that understanding the psychological impact of racism *and* various diverse experiences are vital for supporting clients

in psychological practice. This supports recent analysis in which masters' level counselling students called attention to the lack of discussion of race and diversity within the curricula and positioned counselling training as “catered to the positionality of a white student being trained to be a white counsellor” (Varney et al., 2019, p. 37). Further understanding here is crucial given that a considerable proportion of psychology students are likely to become practising psychologists where there is potential for them to reproduce the whiteness and racism normalised and largely unexamined in their education (Bhopal, 2018). Indeed, research with teachers and educational psychologists has revealed the minimal coverage of issues of diversity within their training (Demie, 2021). We argue that with psychological curricula reproducing racism through the knowledges and experiences it privileges – and, consequently, those it pathologises – it is reasonable to expect that this contributes to the institutional racism evident in education (Demie, 2021; Gillborn, 2008) and mental health provision (Blofield et al., 2003; Fernando, 2010; Wessley, 2018). We therefore support the calls of others (e.g., Harper & Purser, 2020) that the psychology profession broadly must engage in a critical examination of the contexts through which our scientific knowledge is acquired and what knowledges are privileged within the discipline.

Importantly, while participants agreed that change to the psychology curricula is needed, they felt powerless to change it; yet, there was significant confusion about where this power for curricula change lies. While participants called on lecturers to take responsibility for challenging the whiteness of curricula, they were unsure of how much control lecturers have over what they teach. This highlights the potentially vital role that could be played by accrediting bodies' requirements, which shape what content courses must include to offer accreditation. This uncertainty hinders opportunities for change. It may be increasingly possible for the parties in question – psychology departments and accrediting bodies – to evade responsibility while positioning this as within the other's control. Shifting responsibility in this

way comes at the expense of working cooperatively to make changes to the ideas reproduced and the knowledges privileged within the curricula, the training of future practitioners, and the psychology discipline in general. This highlights a problem for the field of psychology that both accrediting bodies and individual departments should seek to address.

Disclosure statement

The authors have no potential conflict of interest to declare.

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