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White supremacy in postgraduate education at elite universities in England: the role of the gatekeepers

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Abstract

Home BAME students are under-represented on postgraduate courses in England, especially at elite universities, however, there has been little research on why this should be. This research starts to fill this gap, arguing that gatekeepers to postgraduate courses at some of the most elite universities contribute to maintaining white supremacy. Innovatively combining Critical Race Theory with Bourdieu's tools, the study found that at these institutions, white supremacy is upheld firstly by an operationalising of discourses of meritocracy; secondly by non-transparent recruitment to programmes from UG courses which are mainly white; and thirdly by the gatekeepers interpreting the low numbers of BAME students either as 'unconscious bias', which in their view cannot be helped, or a result of individual or cultural deficit on the part of the students themselves. All of this, we argue, allows gatekeepers to excuse their own role and that of the institution in maintaining white supremacy.

Introduction

The proportion of 'home' (i.e. not international) BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) students in postgraduate education in England is lower than in undergraduate education. BME students are especially underrepresented in postgraduate research (PGR) degrees (as opposed to taught), with Black students being the most underrepresented (Advance HE 2018). BAME students make up 23.9% of the undergraduate (UG) population, and only 16.8% of postgraduate research students (Advance HE 2018). This is a significant drop. In the Arts and Humanities, the drop between UG and PGR is 22.9% to 15.4%, and in the Sciences, 24.9% to 17.9%

(Advance HE 2018). Black students in particular are under-represented in PGR education as compared with UG, with only half as many (as a proportion of all PGR students) taking up research degrees as undergraduate degrees (ECU 2017). Only 3% of full time UK domiciled PhD students in their first year of study were Black in 2019 (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA 2019). Over the last three academic years (2016/2017–2018/2019) only 1.2% of the 19,868 PhD funded studentships awarded by UKRI research councils were awarded to Black or Black Mixed students, with just 30 of those being from Black Caribbean backgrounds (Leading Routes 2019). This drop in numbers between UG and PG study is especially significant, since PGR study is the gateway to progression in academia, and access to roles which involve setting the agendas for knowledge creation.

There has been little research on why there should be such a drop. There has recently been a research focus on whiteness in HE (Rollock 2019; Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhopal 2018). However, the focus of research in the UK has been mainly UG education and staff experiences, with a paucity of scholarship in the area of postgraduate education. In this paper we focus on STEM education, which, it has been argued is the most prestigious of subject areas, and the field where there tends to be most funding and institution support (e.g. Patton 2016). We report on a qualitative study of four elite universities. We innovatively combine Critical Race Theory and Bourdieu's tools to analyse data collected from admissions tutors, to argue that they play a key role in maintaining white supremacy.

BAME students in PG education

Little research has explicitly examined why there should be such a drop in BAME engagement from UG to PGR. However, related research provides some possible considerations. Firstly, existing research suggests that financial cost may be a factor. Government funding for postgraduate qualifications is limited, so potential students from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, which includes a large proportion of BAME people, may find themselves excluded for financial reasons (Pasztor and Wakeling 2018).

Secondly, degree classification may play a role, with BAME students being less likely to achieve a first or upper second class degree than white students. (Advance HE 2018). A third factor, which is likely to influence the previous point, may be a reluctance among BAME students to go into PG education after having suffered negative experiences in UG education. Research shows, for example, that BAME students are more likely to feel isolated at university and feel the need to ‘overperform’ in order to succeed (Bale et al 2020). There is also evidence that a eurocentric curriculum continues to prevail at most institutions, despite recent limited efforts among some courses and individuals to ‘decolonise’ the curriculum (Arday et al. 2021).

Fourthly, type of university attended is also likely to play a role. Existing research suggests that the majority of PGR students have previously attended research-intensive universities for their first degrees (Pasztor and Wakeling 2018). BAME students are far more likely to attend lower tariff, ‘teaching-focussed’ universities than research-intensive ones (HESA 2020b). Moreover, rather than funding individual students, the UK research councils instead allocate funds via doctoral training centres and partnerships where financial support is increasingly concentrated among a few prestigious research-intensive universities (Harrison, Smith, and Kinton 2015).

Indeed, the majority of PG research takes place in so-called ‘research-intensive universities’ (HESA 2020a). It is well-documented that there is a hierarchy of universities in the UK. The more elite, ‘higher-tariff’ group, which require higher entry grades for UG students, including Oxford and Cambridge, are referred to as ‘research-intensive’, and receive the majority of research funding. Many of these universities belong to the prestigious Russell Group, (RG) a self-selected group of 24 institutions. The lower-tariff universities, generally considered to be lower status, are often referred to as ‘teaching-focussed’, suggesting that they prioritise teaching over research. In reality, research is not confined to the research-intensive universities, with many lower tariff institutions, for example, achieving high scores in the Research Excellence Framework national research audit. PGR opportunities are available at these lower-tariff institutions, although fewer than in the ‘research-intensive’. Previous research has shown how research-intensive universities in the UK, especially those in the Russell Group, are seen as positioned, as well as actively

seek to position themselves, as higher in the hierarchy than modern universities (e.g. Boliver 2015). Both social class, and race, determines entry to the UK's research-intensive institutions, with the student population of elite institutions tending to be class privileged and white, while BAME and lower class students are more likely to study at modern universities (Milburn 2009; Sutton Trust 2010; Boliver 2016).

Gate-keepers

Research on UG admissions confirmed that non-traditional applicants (BAME and lower class) were less likely to be admitted to RG universities, even after differences in prior attainment were considered (Boliver 2015). A strand of research has focussed on the key role of gatekeepers -university admissions tutors- in providing and limiting access to HE (Zimdars 2010 and Zimdars et al 2009; Burke and McManus 2011; Bathmaker 2015; Colley et al. 2014). Indeed, it is argued that the judgement of these tutors on characteristics such as, 'students' vocational suitability' and 'particular academic dispositions both of independent learning and of compliant dispositions within the lecture room' (Colley et al 2014, 114) both filters out certain applicants, and enables others to gain entry. Burke and McManus (2011), in their study on admissions to UG Art and Design courses, argue that certain characteristics are valued by gatekeepers, which tend to be associated with white, middle class masculinity. They suggest that there are classed, gendered and raced 'misrecognitions about who is (not) seen as having potential' (p. 707).

There is also some evidence to suggest that BAME students avoid applying to more elite, research-intensive institutions with overwhelmingly white student and staff bodies for fear of being rejected by gatekeepers who would perceive them as not acceptable. For example, Mirza's (2018) study of BAME student teachers focused on the perceptions of the students based on previous experiences or the experiences of others, but did not provide data on the gatekeepers themselves.

Researchers studied the UG admissions processes to Oxford University, which at the time admitted more middle class, white males than any other group (Zimdars et al 2009; Zimdars 2010) in order to better understand the effects of class, gender and ethnicity on admissions. They found that cultural knowledge helps to predict who gains an offer in arts subjects. They also suggest that discrimination may play a role

in women's and Asian students' acceptance in science subjects, however, do not examine this in any detail. In that research, none of the tutors interviewed were prepared to admit explicitly that class, race or gender had an influence on admissions. Therefore Zimdars (2010) concludes that there is 'little direct evidence' to explain inequalities in class, race and gender access to Oxford. However, by not locating these studies in the wider context of racial structures and the often covert ways these are maintained, the opportunity to recognise and name damaging colour blind attitudes and racial essentialisation evident in the data is missed.

There is therefore, a need to examine the role of the admissions tutors in maintaining race inequality, and locate this in wider deeply embedded structures of race. While all of the above-mentioned factors are likely to play a role in the drop in numbers of BAME students between UG and PG study and merit further research, in this paper we focus on the role of gatekeepers in access to these privileged research-intensive spaces.

Combining the tools of Bourdieu and Critical Race Theory

In order to better understand the role of gatekeepers in maintaining white supremacy in PGR education within wider structures of race inequality, we innovatively combine the tools of social theorist Bourdieu and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Both theoretical frameworks are employed frequently to enable scholars to better understand inequalities in education, but are rarely used together (although see Yosso 2005 and Tichavakunda 2019 for exceptions).

CRT critiques racial inequality and originates from critical legal studies in the USA but has now been adopted in other subject areas, such as education, and other countries, like the UK (Gillborn 2008; Chadderton 2012; Preston and Chadderton 2012). CRT is mostly employed to examine secondary schools and more rarely to study HE (e.g. Hiraldo 2010; Patton 2016). It is also mostly employed in the US context when applied to HE, although Bhopal and Pitkin (2020) have recently employed a CRT framework to explore the Race Equality Charter in UK HE. Bourdieu's work is a critique of the reproduction of privilege and disadvantage in society and education and has been used extensively to research HE, including to

understand university admissions processes in the UK (Colley et al 2014; Bathmaker 2015; Zimdars et al 2009).

We focus here on six areas where CRT and the work of Bourdieu can be brought into a productive alliance, whilst recognising that these are complex bodies of work to which we cannot fully do justice in a single brief paper. We begin with two areas where there is much similarity, before moving on to consider further areas where there has not previously been much interaction between the theories:

Inequality as structural and endemic

Both CRT and Bourdieusian scholars argue that inequality is structural, endemic and deeply entrenched in the social and political structures and institutions of society, while Critical Race Theorists focus mainly on race and Bourdieu on class (see below for more on this). Theorists in these fields would agree that race and class inequality is so deeply engrained in society that it is perceived as normal, and is frequently unrecognised, especially by the privileged (Leonardo and Harris 2013). The notion that inequality is structural challenges the widespread belief that racism, for example, consists simply of individual and aberrant acts (Gillborn 2008). In CRT racism is seen to operate not only through crude, overt forms and blatant discrimination, but also through everyday assumptions about what and who is the 'norm', and who holds the power in the society and its institutions, such as education (Rollock and Gillborn 2011).

Reproduction of inequality as a function of education

With regards to education, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, 123) argued that the social function of education is to legitimate the dominant culture and reproduce the current social order. Equally, critical race theorists have argued that, '[e]ducation policy is [...] designed to [...] sustain [race inequality] at manageable levels' (Gillborn 2008). This understanding challenges the common assumption that education systems are broadly meritocratic. Indeed, both Bourdieu and CRT scholars argue that the education system functions to protect privilege and therefore cannot be a neutral, nor a meritocratic space (Tichavakunda 2019). Critical Race Theorists argue that meritocracy and colour-blindness cannot exist in a racially unequal society, and by persisting with such narratives and approaches, the status quo of racial inequality is

both masked and maintained, and existing privilege and disadvantage is fuelled (Gillborn 2012b). Further, meritocracy is critiqued for fuelling the myth that life outcomes are solely individual responsibility, rather than the result of unequal social structures (Chadderton 2018).

An understanding of education as a space designed to reproduce existing structures of disadvantage and privilege also challenges notions of cultural deficit linked with certain raced or classed groups, which involve blaming issues such as under-representation, low attainment, or higher drop-out rates on the (perceived) culture or social background of the individual students. Discussing low access to HE in the US for people of color, Patton et al (2015) argue, 'CRT scholars would argue that this lack of representation is not merely accidental but instead by design' (p. 196). Equally, Bourdieu argues that disadvantaged groups in society are not disadvantaged because they lack capital, rather because their capital is under-valued (Tichavakunda 2019)- an idea we explain in more detail below.

The notion of 'field'

A main focus of Bourdieu's work is to analyse how power operates within social spaces and what kinds of social practices are associated with this. He uses the concept of 'field' to refer to social spaces, a concept with which Critical Race Theory has generally not specifically engaged, and which we would argue has the potential to be very useful to examine how white supremacy is maintained in different ways in specific fields. Bourdieu defines field as:

'... the social world [which] can be represented as a space (with several dimensions) constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question, i.e., capable of conferring strength, power within that universe, on their holder. Agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions within that space.' (Bourdieu 1985, 724)

Bourdieu uses the metaphors of game and market to help us understand how different agents 'play' according to specific rules which differ according to the specific field, and develop strategies for winning, or retaining dominance. In our analysis, the broad

field is education, of which PG study in elite HE institutions can be seen as a sub-field. Our study explored how this field retains its characteristics (in this case, white supremacy, explained below), by investigating issues around access to the field.

Capital

Bourdieu argued that agents are positioned in a field by the amount of relevant capital they have. Individual agents have different amounts of capital: economic (funds and material resources), social (access to networks of people with power in a particular field), cultural (behaviour which is valued in particular field), which they can use to gain advantage within an individual field. The value of all kinds of capital depends on the individual field, as Bourdieu and Wacquant note, ‘capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field’ (1992, 101). Some capitals are valued more than others, depending on the field.

In the field of education, Bourdieu (1986) argues that capital tends to be ‘unrecognised as capital and recognised as legitimate competence’ (p.245) by those within the field. ‘For example, capital can broadly be understood as the skills and repertoires necessary to manage the obligations of being a college student’ (Tichavakunda 2019, 6).

While the notion of capital has not been widely taken up by critical race theorists, Yosso (2005) has theorised the notion of capital to enable a better understanding of how race inequality functions. She argues that in white fields, the capital possessed by minority ethnic groups is under-valued.

Habitus

Habitus is a ‘durable, transposable disposition’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:179), created by one’s social background and personal experiences, and the opportunities and constraints one has had, which forms a matrix for future action. As Reay (2004) argues, it is embodied, as well as incorporating our attitudes and perceptions. Habitus

‘[i]s a socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world-a field-which

structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world.’ (Bourdieu 1998a, 81)

Importantly for this analysis, habitus informs our behaviour in different fields and marks out our social position (Bourdieu 1990b). Bourdieu explains that our habitus provides a template for behaviour, and in fields where we are familiar with the rules, in general we are more comfortable:

‘social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a ‘fish in water’: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted.’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 127)

However, when a habitus is unfamiliar, an individual may not know how to behave or exactly what is expected of them. Habitus also provides us with guidance on whether others are seen to ‘belong’ in a specific field or not.

White supremacy

As mentioned above, Bourdieu’s best-known tools, field, habitus and capital, tend not to be discussed in raced terms. In fact, Bourdieu did consider race in his arguably lesser-known work (see e.g. Wallace 2016 for a discussion of this). Equally, some Critical Race Theorists explore how race and class intersect (see e.g. Gillborn 2008). However, in general, Bourdieusian scholars have not engaged with white supremacy.

Many critical race theorists analyse both the structures which disadvantage individuals positioned as minority ethnic, and those which privilege individuals classified as white. White supremacy has been described as a system of oppression which benefits people identified as White on an economic, social and ideological level (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Gillborn 2006). This does not mean that all white people are inevitably privileged in every way, and recognises that they could be marginalised by class, gender, disability or sexuality, however it does emphasise that white people benefit as a group from the disadvantaging of minority ethnic people. White supremacy in this case does not refer to neo-Nazism or apartheid (although these are products of a white supremacist

system), rather it ‘is seen to relate to the operation of forces that saturate the everyday mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of White people’ (Gillborn 2008, 35).

White supremacy normalises the status quo by making it seem neutral and normative. Further, it operates through what Mills (1997) refers to as ‘epistemology of ignorance’, where most oppressors do not realise that they are being oppressors, which feeds the discourse of white ignorance and ‘racism without racists’ (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Ellison and Langhout 2016). White ignorance is understood as not only individual but also a collective and systemic lack of knowledge of most white people about issues of racial equality. It has also been argued that white supremacy has allowed white people to define oppression by intentions rather than outcomes (Gillborn 2008).

Critical race theorists argue that white supremacy is one of the foundations of the education system in the UK (Gillborn 2008). Scholars in the US have employed the concept to enable them to understand the low proportions of students of color graduating from HEIs in the US as systemic discrimination (Solorzano and Villalpando 1998). Equally, Bhopal and Pitkin (2020) argue that an award for race equality in HEIs, the Race Equality Charter, is simply a performative exercise for universities to ‘sell’ their institutions as inclusive, rather than a demonstration of actual racial inclusivity. Indeed, they argue that this award and the work involved in gaining it, masks racist structures which disadvantage BAME students, and makes BAME staff and students responsible for doing this work, adding to their workloads, whilst others are not held accountable, thus in fact fuelling structures of white supremacy.

Bourdieuian scholars have tended not to engage with assumptions of white normalcy in spaces of privilege (Adewumni 2019), and we would argue that in particular combining this understanding with Bourdieu’s concepts of field and capital, as explained below, can enhance our understanding of the maintenance of privilege and disadvantage in education.

Theorising change

Bourdieu's work is sometimes critiqued for being overly-deterministic (e.g. Reay 2004), and does not focus in particular on how inequalities can be changed. CRT, on the other hand, considers how change is achieved in two ways: firstly via activism by BAME communities and their allies (e.g. Stovall 2006), and secondly via the notion of 'interest convergence'. It is this notion of interest convergence which is most relevant to this paper with its focus on gatekeepers to majority white institutions. Interest convergence is the idea that progress towards equalising White and minority ethnic status is often achieved only when this benefits the White majority. That is to say that progress is dictated by White interests rather than moral awakening over racial oppression (Bell 1980). For example, interest convergence theory has been employed to explain the increase in the university matriculation of African-American athlete-students who dominate many US college sports teams, as a way for the universities to bring huge revenue on their books (Donnor 2005) rather than to widen participation in HE for African-Americans. Interest convergence can also come about through BAME activism and protest, for example, the Swann Report (1985) on racism in education in England was partially a response to protests by BAME communities and allies to endemic racism in a range of settings in the early 1980s. Rather than concern for racial equality in education, in the main the government was persuaded to act in order to address the unrest rather than a significant concern to eradicate racism (Modood and May 2001).

We apply this theoretical framework, a combination of insights from Bourdieusian theory and CRT, to analyse the role of gatekeepers in maintaining white supremacy in PG study in elite institutions.

Methods

This paper focuses on the narratives of white admissions tutors. While for many critical race theorists, a vital tenet of CRT is the engagement with the narratives of minority ethnic individuals, in order to counter dominant narratives of white supremacy, the purpose of this paper is different. Instead, here we examine how white supremacy is maintained by revealing the narratives of the admissions tutors. Despite the potentially controversial nature of this study, we argue that the examination of

narratives of white supremacy is essential if we are to understand how under-representation, exclusion and privilege continue to characterise PG spaces. Further, we ourselves are white. Some might argue that it is problematic for white scholars to conduct research on race, since we are inevitably privileged by raced structures. We argue that in this case, the aim of this research is explicitly to contribute to revealing how white supremacy operates in a field where it is less well understood, to critique the ongoing potency of structures of white supremacy, to challenge assumptions of meritocracy in education, and ultimately to promote social change in HE (see Solórzano and Yosso 2015).

This paper reports on part of a larger study which explored the lived experiences of BAME PG students (Jackson-Cole 2019). As explained above, in this paper we focus only on the data from the admissions tutors, from four English universities, given the following pseudonyms:

- University of Confidence
- University of Merit
- University of Labour
- University of Books

All these institutions are research-intensive, with two belonging to the Russell Group. Each university had a decrease in ‘home’ BAME students going from UG to PG and in particular PGR study (HESA 2017).

Seventeen members of staff were interviewed, seven women and ten men; all were white¹. Eligible participants included university staff, both academic and non-academic (support/professional) who had an impact on the admissions of PG students in STEM areas – either directly making decisions (e.g. admissions officers, admissions tutors²) or at policy level (deans, senior management team). Staff were

¹ This compared to between 12% and 19% of staff being from BAME backgrounds at these institutions (data from annual institutional equality reports).

² Here *admissions officers* are colleagues working for admissions departments (i.e. professional and support service colleagues, not academics) and *admissions tutors* are academic colleagues (faculty members) who in addition to their regular academic work have a responsibility to

recruited via convenience and snowballing sampling (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). Interviews were semi-structured and focussed on admissions. The interviews were conducted by the first author.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded using hand coding and NVivo. Coding both informed, and was informed by, and closely mapped onto, the conceptual framework.

Findings

Narratives of meritocracy as a tool to preserve white supremacy

Admissions staff employed narratives of meritocracy and fairness in the interviews. However, as we discuss in this section, the data suggests these appear to be operationalised to justify the existing hierarchy of institutions, where only capitals acquired from other, high-ranking research-intensive universities is valued. These universities are mostly white, thus the argument of meritocracy seems in fact to function to protect white supremacy.

All staff interviewed explicitly stated that, on the whole, a meritocratic admissions system operated at their university. This reflects a dominant narrative in HE, which is the aim to identify the best talent, as opposed to ensuring that everyone reaches their full potential (Bathmaker 2015).

I think [at] some of the universities there is [bias] but yeah, I mean, I know some people will have some bias but I think we're generally pretty good on meritocracy here and if there's a good student it doesn't really matter where they come from. And I say that not because I've got specifics but when I look around and you hear. . . People are quite proud of the fact they've got people from a wide range of universities

(Raul, head of graduate school, University of Confidence)

support and coordinate admissions process within a school/department/ faculty. Their role will often include reviewing applications and interviewing prospective students. Specific duties may vary and/or overlap with admissions officers, depending on the admissions system adopted by a university.

In the example above, Raul initially claims to be aware of bias at other institutions but denies that bias exists at his institution. He argues they operate a meritocracy because PhD students come to the university from a variety of institutional backgrounds.

These claims are however contradicted by another tutor, who states that whilst they do accept students from other institutions, they mainly accept students from similar elite institutions, in Bourdieusian terms then, within their own field:

Cambridge, Oxford, Warwick, Imperial and our own students and to be honest [for] most British educated undergraduates we are not taking that many from outside those universities.

(Mark, postgraduate tutor, University of Confidence)

At these institutions, the UG student body is overwhelmingly white (Boliver 2016).

Following Bourdieu, the data also suggests that participants' claims that admissions operates fairly and these institutions recruit according to a certain level of skills, competences and experience, masks the fact that academic skills and experiences actually function as capital. Within this privileged field, only certain capitals are recognised - those acquired from institutions of a similar kind within the same field (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

Being fair ... is the key point when you're recruiting, when you were recruiting [students] on grounds of capability and achievement and all the academic things that you expect.

(Scott, postgraduate tutor, University of Labour)

But I couldn't say that there wasn't some in-built bias, and not because of the way they [students] speak. But because of the [academic] background that they've had and the preparation they've had in their programmes. So, if they'd been to a more research-intensive university they will have had more research experience, they will have had more thought around those terms, and we certainly know that there is in-built bias getting into those programmes.

Not bias, but the demographic is clearly there. So, it's a sort of cascade, but [...] It's all about research quality.

(Raul, head of graduate school, University of Confidence)

The examples above suggest that these gatekeepers view their institutions as meritocratic. They speak of 'all the academic things you expect' and 'research quality', however this disguises that these are capitals which will have different values in different fields. Thus expectations of, e.g. 'academic things', will be different in different academic fields. This is clear in Raul's quote, where he states his assumption that students from lower tariff universities would not be exposed to such high levels of research experience. From a Bourdieusian point of view, it can be argued that he does not recognise the capitals from fields perceived as lower in the hierarchy.

As stated above, it is the capital acquired within their own field which is valued, and which enables access to PG study at these institutions, and in this field, the student population is mostly white. From a CRT perspective, this can be viewed as a colour-blind approach which is in fact reproducing the racist status quo. It enables institutions to view themselves as meritocratic and absolve themselves of any responsibility for racial inequality, while simultaneously fuelling it, sanctioned by the rules and character of the white PG field (Gillborn 2008).

Identifying (white) talent via internal recruitment

Secondly we found that the institutions in the study commonly recruit research students internally. Since BAME students are under-represented at these high tariff institutions, the internal recruitment pool is mostly white.

Many of them [PhD students] have studied their MSc here and that's how I've come to know them...I hand-picked them basically, because I know that they have done really well in the MSc programmes.

(Fred, head of graduate school, University of Books)

So, once we get the UK studentships, or external fund for studentships, they tend to be taken internally first, because that's the first group who will see the adverts, so they will apply and often we know the students did well or had a good project and they want to keep the momentum, so we don't really have enough of those kinds of individually funded studentships, in order to advertise widely to get the kind of breadth in application that we might otherwise seek or will benefit from.

(Scott, postgraduate tutor, University of Labour)

Scott justifies the lack of diversity by the small number of funded positions, explaining this would not warrant external recruitment as it supposedly would not produce better quality of candidates. However, again, following Bourdieu, this can be interpreted as the academic recognising students' capitals only from within the same university/field.

'Unconscious bias' as a way to excuse white supremacy

A further way that white supremacy operates in this study is through admissions staff's understandings of race inequality as a form of individual and even excusable bias. This both fails to acknowledge structural oppression and denies individual responsibility (Ellison and Langhout 2016).

When pressed on the notion of objectivity in admissions, some participants admitted they were unconsciously biased. For example, Scott explained how he learned about the notion of 'unconscious bias' through the Athena SWAN programme, which aims to improve the representation and progression of women in academia. However, while he recognises that bias affects him, he does not go to explain whether or how he addresses this bias, nor could he give an example of racial bias.

One of my roles [...] is to serve on the committee called the Athena SWAN... That's a really good example of how people like me tend to think linearly in terms of a recruiting, in terms of function only... if you look around and just monitor what you do actually you can pick up on certain unconscious bias - that you think you're being very fair, but actually if you look what you're

doing, [what] your embedded attitudes do, to some extent [they] steer the way that you think and act.

(Scott, postgraduate tutor, University of Labour)

The notion of unconscious bias has become popular in UK HE and can be described as attributing prejudice to the subconscious parts of the brain (Atewologun et al. 2018). On the one hand, unconscious bias awareness training can potentially help academics to understand that admissions policies and processes are not always objective or purely merit-based, but can be driven by deeply hidden racist, sexist and classist attitudes. However on the other, employing a CRT and Bourdieusian lens of analysis, it can be argued that by placing the fault in the unconscious, automatic reactions of the human brain, this narrative exonerates from individual responsibility the actors of the field (e.g. admissions tutors), and the status quo with inequalities does not change (Noon 2018).

Such ‘unconscious bias’ in recruitment practices was referred to in different ways by the participants. In the example below, it is referred to both as ‘a decision within three seconds’ and ‘chemistry’:

[it is said] that you make a decision on someone within three seconds of walking in the room... I think I’m guilty as I was absolutely forming opinion, strong opinions and being belligerent and not changing them. I think it’s one of those things, you’d have to sit in and watch to understand and I think, I guess, you know, a little chemistry.

(Bob, assistant dean, University of Merit)

In this example, Bob mentions firstly that he forms an opinion about an individual within three seconds. Via a Bourdieusian lens, three seconds, whether metaphoric or literal, does not allow for a full recognition of academic knowledge and skills and would not permit the formation of a merit-based decision. What this time allows for is for the interviewer to note gender and perceived ethnicity, and perhaps body language and accent, and as Bob hints, an opinion formed in such a short time can only be based on bias and perhaps both conscious and unconscious perceptions of the type of student who might be suitable. Secondly, the relationship between the doctoral

supervisee and the supervisor is one of the crucial aspects of students' success and experience in PGR education (Phillips et al. 2016), and as Bob suggests, an interview can give the first indication as to how this long-term relationship will develop. Following Bourdieu, the 'chemistry' mentioned here, like the three second decision, can also be interpreted as the (perceived) alignment of individual and institutional habitus between the prospective student, academic and the institution (Reay et al. 2001). Viewed through a CRT lens, they may be less likely to be aligned if the two people do not share similar intersectional identities (Delgado 2011). Rather than framing all of this as a problem which he could address though, Bob seems to dismiss it as 'one of those things', which again seems to exonerate him from any responsibility to engage with how this could be changed, either at an individual or institutional level.

Blaming the individual/cultural deficit

In this study, academics blamed the BAME students themselves, their families, or their (perceived) cultures for their own under-representation. For example, they portrayed BAME students as having different familial pressures, aspirations and motivations to White students, which supposedly resulted in different participation rates.

I would imagine probably family issues going and money rather than study, coming to the family business perhaps, there is more pressure culturally I think from those backgrounds, than from the White European.

(Fred, head of graduate school, University of Books)

Now another reason might be, I mean an academic career is not viewed as particularly, let's say, lucrative.

(Sam Brown, graduate dean, University of Books)

Firstly, from a CRT perspective, participants viewed BAME students as essentially different from White students, fixing difference and homogenising racialised groups. Their explanations also problematically locate the under-representation of these students within the individual, their families or assumed culture, and are thus entrenched in the student deficit model – whereby the difference in admissions and

progression of BAME students are supposedly explained by the background of the student, or their lack of academic ambition rather than structural or institutional factors operating within the field (McDuff et al. 2018). Secondly, underpinning this data is the assumption that BAME students are under-represented in PG education because they do not apply in the first place- a claim also commonly made about workplace participation. Once again, this is mobilised by the participants to relieve the institution of responsibility.

Economic imperatives, ethnic diversity and the lack of meritocracy – a case of interest convergence.

In this section we argue that in the field of marketised HE, the supposedly meritocratic admissions system is in fact also influenced by economic factors – in particular, international study fees. The data suggest that a certain amount of ethnic diversity is achieved at these privileged universities through international recruitment of students of colour, who pay much higher fees than home students and are not subjected to the same academic requirements as home students. Viewing this through a CRT lens, we argue that this can be understood as interest convergence - a level of ethnic diversity is achieved because international students of colour have the economic capital which benefits the institution. The data presented below suggests that overall though, white supremacy is still maintained by prioritising the admission of international students over the admission of home BAME students.

In the example below, when asked about efforts to bring in BAME students to the institution, the participant replied that home students and international students are treated differently, with international students favoured due to the financial benefits:

So, for us as a department, it's not an issue in the sense that we get the best students that come along. For us there is more of a difference between international students and UK-based students, so UK-based students are typically very well-prepared students, and as I said some of them were our students, but we have to find funding for them. International students pay for themselves, but particularly those coming from Far East, India and Pakistan or Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Iraq they come even less prepared to [do] research, to know what it is to do research and so with that, that's where we find the

difference in terms of where the best students come from, so that's in terms of background for students.

(Lupe, head of department, University of Labour)

Discourses and practices of internationalisation in HE have long been exposed as being implicated in the processes of marketisation, and characterised as being driven by economic gains and shallow engagement with the issues of diversity (Stein 2018). In this example, like others, Lupe also professes the meritocracy of his university's admissions ('getting the best home students') but makes a distinction in the standard of the admissions process between home students who need to be 'well-prepared' and overseas students, which is dictated by finance. From a Bourdieusian perspective, different kinds of capital are required: for home students, it is the social cultural and academic capital from the same, privileged field of elite universities, and for international students, economic capital is required. Lupe states that overseas students who bring in income are accepted even if they are not perceived to be as research-ready as the home students, thus suggesting that economic capital can, to an extent, make up for the lack of other capitals in the case of international students (see also Edwards et al. 2007). This negates the professed meritocratic principle of admissions.

In the following example, one participant discusses how white supremacy was protected by the department lowering their entry standards for overseas students to keep it afloat:

It was a lifeline for us to have overseas students, and without a doubt that's kept us alive as a [...] department, because we are quite small and the kind of metrics that are used to judge performance of [these] departments are almost all related to the scale and size. Okay, so it's quite hard for a small department to score well in the national kind of measure of things. So, in the past, we've taken students from overseas with the philosophy of, you know, training them up, so rather than insisting on a certain level of achievement at that level of entry, we've taken the decision that we are looking at their transcripts of the past years that they would be a good bet to invest in and then train them. And using that philosophy actually, we've generated quite a high number of good

quality PhD graduates who then go largely speaking, go back to their own institutions and take teaching positions all the time... Now, we are in a position, moving forward, where we're growing strong as a department, so for example, we've just raised the bar on our undergraduate recruitment, we just increased the qualification level, you have to get in. And my feeling is that we should follow the same with our postgraduate recruitment.

(Scott, postgraduate tutor, University of Labour)

Scott's words can be interpreted, using Bourdieusian analysis, as his department playing the game in the field of marketised HE, whereby departments are judged globally by a set of (assumed) universal metrics, with the right performance in the metrics making a difference between perishing or thriving. Scott seems to suggest that taking international students with lower 'levels of achievement' and training them up not only helped the department succeed in the game but also produced high quality graduates. Using a CRT lens to analyse this situation we would argue that this situation can be seen as an example of interest convergence, whereby this approach was not directed by altruistic motivations (a belief in the ethos of widening participation) but rather economic needs. The whiteness of the department and the interests of its employees (staying in employment) were protected by taking on a large proportion of international fee paying BAME students, who were deemed not quite 'research-ready' on entry, yet provided a financial boost. Furthermore, once the poor financial situation was averted, the response of the department seemed to be one of protecting white supremacy ('we've raised the bar') rather than applying the same successful model of 'training up' to students from underrepresented home BAME backgrounds. Therefore, the lowering of admissions standards (and training up students) was only applied when it served to protect white supremacy, even if it has been shown to produce quality results (meaning that it could theoretically be applied on diverse groups).

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that combining CRT and Bourdieusian approaches provides insights into how white supremacy is protected in PGR in elite universities by the gatekeepers. Our data showed that on the one hand, the gatekeepers argued that

their institutions and processes were meritocratic, which allowed them to blame under-represented groups for their own under-representation. However, the interviews also suggested that individuals from a similar habitus, and armed with capital the gatekeepers recognised from within their own field of elite HE, were favoured in admissions. Although some participants claimed to recognise their own bias, they absolved themselves from responsibility (and further action perhaps) by interpreting it as unconscious, and therefore unaddressable. Despite claims that these universities privilege high level research skills and experience, this is not the case when it comes to international fee-paying students, who are admitted even if they do not demonstrate such high level research skills, however, the same opportunities are not offered to home students, thus belying the myth of meritocracy in admissions.

Our analysis also throws light on how difficult it is to affect change, due to the deeply entrenched nature of the structures, practices and narratives which shape HE. We suggest that ethnic diversity has mostly only been achieved via interest convergence, enabling the representation of international students of colour due to their strong economic capital, but still leaving home BAME students under-represented.

We hope that our analysis might make a difference. Firstly, naming the white supremacy in PGR in elite universities, and secondly, identifying how it is maintained, are important steps if anything further is to be done to challenge racial inequality (Hidalgo, 2010). The contradictions between the myth of meritocracy and the unmeritocratic admissions processes revealed in this study should be helpful for those working for racial change in HE. For institutions themselves to address this issue, a CRT-informed paradigm shift would be necessary. Universities need to move away from narratives of student deficit and individual solutions such as unconscious bias and toward holistic institutional change models (e.g. McDuff, *et al.*, 2018), which involve an understanding of the structural nature of both the problem and the structural nature of the change required. This would involve engaging the university leadership and whole academic community; not just an acceptance that institutions and gatekeepers play a role in maintaining race inequality, but a commitment to address it; and perhaps most importantly, a collaboration with, and full engagement with the work and voices of BAME students, staff, and scholars of race, who have

long critiqued and protested white supremacy in education, deficit approaches to BAME students and challenged unproblematised notions of meritocracy.

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