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Talking About Race: The Experiences of Minoritised Ethnic and White Staff When Discussing Race, Ethnicity and Difference at an HEI

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences, perspectives and confidence of teaching and research staff of discussing race and ethnicity, and associated equalities matters, at a post-1992 university in North West England, UK. In particular, it studied whether colleagues, who were largely white, had the understanding and personal skills to deliver on race equity in teaching and learning in a Higher Education Institution (HEI). Further, it examined whether there was a disconnect between the intention of an HEI working towards the Race Equality Charter (REC) mark and the detrimental effects this may have on its minoritised ethnic staff. The study was based on focus groups and interviews of 43 academic staff as participants using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Intersectionality as the theoretical lens. These address discrepancies between institutional declarations and realities within higher education, which is important, as HEIs are increasingly positioning themselves as committed to diversity and equity, while the practical implementation often remains inconsistent. The findings demonstrate that the white participants were not confident, competent or pro-active enough to effect any meaningful change in race equity. At the same time, the minoritised ethnic participants often felt the burden of having to relive the trauma and pain of racism and take the lead in any race equity initiatives. In sum, the study demonstrates that HEI initiatives that purport to tackle systemic racism through decolonisation and the REC mark have little chance of effecting institutional change if the staff do not have the confidence, competence and necessary skills to make it happen.

Keywords: racism; race equity; ethnicity; HEIs; decolonisation; Race Equality Charter; minoritised ethnicities; whiteness

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the experiences, perspectives and confidence of teaching and research staff at discussing race[1] and ethnicity, and associated equalities matters, at a post-1992 university in North West England, UK. The paper contributes to ongoing discussions in Critical Race Theory (CRT) by highlighting the communicative and structural discrepancies evident in the gap between formal commitments and lived realities within higher education settings, an internationally important concern (Fagun 2025). We were motivated to work on this project because of our many years of involvement in equality and anti-racism initiatives within the university and the wider regional statutory sector, and voluntary and community settings (Wainwright et al. 2019). Specifically, we

have experienced race equality being discussed in a university where colleagues who were equality, diversity, and inclusion leads were reluctant to or inhibited when expressing salient thoughts and feelings (Wainwright 2003, 2009). Further, the university had made a request that all disciplines engage in a process of decolonising teaching and learning by following a suggested approach communicated by the equality, diversity and inclusion team. We questioned whether colleagues, who were largely white, had the understanding and personal skills to deliver on anti-racism. Further, the university did not appear to have given any consideration to whether this request would have an additional personal impact on some minority ethnic staff (Bhopal and Pitkin 2020). Our view was that the directive to decolonise did not address the underlying staff reluctance to engage with race equality, and that anxieties about saying the 'wrong thing' or causing offence (Gilroy 1990; Wainwright 2003) might persist. Fear of using what is deemed to be inappropriate language is ultimately counterproductive, as reticence to discuss racism often leads to inaction (Sivanandan 1985). Thus, we were interested in exploring how such circumstances affect the everyday work of academics and students, both of minoritised and white British/European ethnicities.

1.1. Background Context

The context of race equality in higher education in the UK is arguably still one of institutional and systemic inequality (Miller 2021), and is bound up with the deleterious impact of neoliberalism (Flemming 2021). This inequality applies to students, staff, to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as institutions, and leads to a wider disconnect with local and national minoritised ethnic communities (Arday 2018b). In particular, there is clear evidence of an awarding gap that Black[2], and to a lesser extent, students of South Asian heritage experience in HEIs (Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting 2022). Specifically, this means that Black and Asian students are awarded lower grades at both the undergraduate and post-graduate level (UK Universities 2022; Ibezim et al. 2025). Further, and not unconnected, several studies have evidenced that Black and Asian students experience racism from their peers in the classroom and wider university environment (Singh 2020; Wong et al. 2020; Ibezim et al. 2025). Black and Asian students have expressed disappointment that there are very few lecturers of minoritised ethnic heritage who can act as role models in the classroom for them (Pryce-Miller et al. 2023). Studies have also evidenced that while there may be few Black and Asian lecturers, there are even fewer senior staff working as managers and/or professors who look like them (Arday 2018a; Advance HE 2022). This creates a context in which Black and Asian students do not feel that university spaces provide the psycho-social and intellectual nourishment, or inspiration, for them to thrive in these environments (Stoll et al. 2022), and even less to have aspirations to be awarded top grades in their studies. Subsequently, students of minoritised ethnicity are less likely to be motivated to pursue an academic career, either as a lecturer or researcher (Arday 2020). Such invisibility is matched by lacunae in the curricula, prompting various efforts to decolonise the curriculum (Arday et al. 2021; O'Neill 2025).

The absence of Black and Asian lecturers also speaks to minoritised ethnic staff's experiences of racism and discrimination in HEIs in the UK. Black and Asian staff have reported feeling undervalued and isolated in the teaching and research environment of HEIs (Arday 2022). Minoritised ethnic staff have also talked about a concrete ceiling that has denied them developmental opportunities and promotion (Bhopal 2020). This systemic exclusion of Black and Asian staff from developmental and promotion opportunities not only has a profoundly negative effect on their careers, but also undermines the notion of meritocracy and equity in HEIs (Rodriguez 2022). In other words, the detrimental experience of Black and Asian students and staff at universities in the UK provides overwhelming evidence of institutional and systemic racism within HEIs (Mirza 2018). Before discussing

some of the experiences of HEI staff in the UK, it is important to acknowledge that there are several international studies of the US, Canada, Europe and elsewhere that indicate a similar level of institutional exclusion, discrimination and systemic racism impacting minoritised ethnic staff at HEIs (Magnan et al. 2024; Osho and Alormele 2025; Razack et al. 2025). This has been further compounded by the negative impact of right-wing populism reaching apotheosis with the election of Trump in the US. This populism has targeted so-called 'woke' initiatives of HEIs, which has led to a campaign against affirmative action programmes and targeting of notable Black academics (Casey 2025).

1.2. Universities as White Spaces

There was a historically brief commitment to widening access that coincided with the post-war welfare consensus, which gathered pace, in part, because of the 1992 conversion of polytechnics to full university status (Tonks and Farr 2003). More recently, various HEI institutional policies have been advanced as remedies for racial disadvantages and attainment gaps; yet, despite these initiatives, increasingly, universities in the UK are being referred to as 'white spaces' (Ahmet 2020). These paradoxical spaces of learning and knowledge production juxtaposed with racism and disadvantage predominantly welcome middle-class, white males, excluding individuals from minoritised ethnic groups (Sian 2017; Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury 2018). Whiteness may be used strategically by white colleagues at HEIs to privilege their position and enhance both their research and teaching careers (Osbourne et al. 2023). Whiteness is also reinforced under the guise of uncomplicated meritocracy at universities, as this provides a platform for white staff and students to progress with their careers and studies, respectively (Madriaga and McCaig 2022).

Further, the defensiveness, denial and/or hostility of white academics when their racial privilege and/or complicity in racism is challenged manifests through white fragility (DiAngelo 2018). This fragility is the strategic response that white academics use to protect their white comfort and, importantly, resist any meaningful structural change (Verma 2022). Understanding white fragility is therefore critical to recognising how (race) equality initiatives provoke resistance from those invested in the status quo. It ensures the co-existence of diversity and EDI rhetoric with institutional inertia (Verma 2022). Many white academics may experience a sense of ambivalence concerning race equality. They may be aware of their whiteness and the structural and individual racism that minoritised ethnic staff experience, but would rather maintain their comfortable position of power and privilege (Nnawulezi et al. 2020).

While Black students and staff have no space or opportunity to challenge such practices and institutional culture, the impact is to implicitly pathologise them as being inadequate or lacking the ability to succeed in the same way as their white counterparts (Arday and Mirza 2018). Thus, to tackle the issue of universities being white spaces, embroidered with white fragility, the influence of race and racism upon its structures, practices, and processes needs to be fully acknowledged and addressed.

In particular, white privilege negatively affects the communication dynamics experienced by Black and Asian students and staff. White staff are often positioned as the standard for professional and articulate communication, in comparison with their Black and Asian colleagues, who are often framed as the polar opposite in HEI spaces (Dyer 1997). This is exacerbated for minoritised ethnic staff because their white colleagues' communication is validated within the context of whiteness and white middle-class expectations. In contrast, minoritised ethnic staff's communication is interpreted as less articulate, lacking in competence, and is often perceived as emotional and aggressive (Sue and Spanierman 2020). This power imbalance undermines the very being and presence of minoritised ethnic staff in HEI spaces. It often leads to them changing their self-presentation and identity,

toning down their communication style as a defence mechanism to avoid institutional or individual backlash, misinterpretation, and/or further racial microaggressions (Delgado and Stefancic 2023).

Thus, there needs to be a fundamental shift among white staff toward the notion of mutual communication stabilisation processes in HEI settings, through which they can acknowledge their power, privilege and invested fragility through white spaces (DiAngelo 2018). This may open up the possibility of white staff appreciating that they can acknowledge and repudiate their inherent political, economic and psycho-social advantages in HEIs (Russo 2024). This may facilitate more balanced, equitable and stable communication; in a group setting it may enable mutual understanding (Apgar 2022).

Changing the university landscape is complex, with race and ethnic diversity being themes that continually appear on the agenda of many universities. Whilst initiatives aimed at tackling ethnic diversity in student and participant populations have been implemented, issues around the lack of racial representation amongst academic staff persist. The extent of the lack of race equity in universities is evidenced by the dissonance between many of the promotional websites displaying a student and (sometimes) staff body that is ethnically diverse and harmonious, in contrast to the reality of white spaces at most HEIs (Scarritt 2019). The imperviousness of universities to lasting change and the relative ineffectuality of remedial policies arguably reflects a previously noted non-performativity of anti-racism measures (Ahmed 2006).

1.3. Institutional Initiatives—Decolonisation

In 2016, the REC was introduced by the Equality Challenge Unit (now Advance HE) to encourage HEIs to take a strategic approach to embedding cultural and systematic changes that would make a real difference for participants and students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds (Advance HE 2025b). Like the Athena Swan Charter award that focuses upon the inclusion and representation of women in higher education (Advance HE 2025a), the REC intends to improve the representation, progression, and success of individuals from ethnically minoritised backgrounds (Advance HE 2025b). Since its introduction, 97 HEIs have signed upto the REC, with 75 universities currently holding a bronze or silver award (Advance HE 2025b). Although these numbers seem promising, they are dwarfed by the number of HEIs that have committed to the Athena Swan Charter. At the time of writing, there were 985 awards already distributed, with 123 held by institutions and 862 held by departments (Advance HE 2025a). Therefore, it could be argued that universities may find it easier, and more politically and culturally acceptable, to tackle gender than racial inequalities. These awards have also missed the opportunity to ensure that the intersections of gender and race equality are addressed in a more strategic and holistic way.

However, inspired by the politics and philosophy of postcolonialism, and driven forward by the energies of the Black Lives Movement, there is a growing movement across some universities to decolonise the curricula (Fanon 1967; Joseph-Salisbury et al. 2021; Ibezim et al. 2022). There have been initiatives to address the whiteness and European dominance of teaching and learning in universities (East 2025). These have focused primarily on the educational materials and resources used by lecturers, in an attemptto move away from using Eurocentric or white scholars' materials in the curricula, while introducing students to scholarly work from Africa, Asia and South America (Ibezim et al. 2022). In other words, some lecturers at universities have understood that for Black and Asian students to feel welcome, included and engaged in their learning experience, it is important that they experience curricula that are representative of knowledge from Africa and Asia, from scholars that look like them. This should ensure that the knowledge base for teaching and

learning is actually fairly and accurately compiled; that is, based on proper rather than Eurocentrically biased scholarship (Manley and Pule 2025).

Yet, decolonisation, on the whole, has only been attempted by some lecturers in specific disciplines. Arguably, these subjects have been concentrated in the humanities, social sciences, and caring professions, for instance, social work and, to a lesser extent, nursing (Prinsloo 2016). It could be argued that these disciplines are more aligned with an intellectual tradition of taking a critical lens to society in general and their topics in particular (Ibezim et al. 2022). This may be in part because decolonisation, as a term, mystifies a process or a commitment, which in essence, is about anti-racist or ethnically and culturally inclusive teaching and learning. Or, quite probably it is because many academics from other disciplines are not engaged, interested, or are too inhibited to explore issues of race, ethnicity and culture in the teaching and learning of their discipline (Shain et al. 2021). Scholars are themselves a product of a lengthy heritage of biased curricula and learning, which trace their origins to a hypervalorisation of the Western Enlightenment and a glorified university system that has operated to exclude or misattribute the scholarship of earlier and/or contemporary great African and Middle Eastern civilisations (Fanon 1967; Said 1985).

2. Methodology

To explore the experiences of staff as participants, the authors understand that racism in HEIs is systemic and that this necessitates a theoretical lens that acknowledges and addresses this challenge. Further, systemic racism is experienced by individuals in different times and spaces depending on their own identity, including their ethnicity (Faheem and Rahman 2024). In this sense, the higher education context is recognised as a setting wherein race and racism are evidently an important aspect of staff and student experiences. The COREQ checklist for reporting qualitative research was utilised (Buus and Perron 2020), and the research team were alert to ensuring rigour and fidelity in the deployment of a Critical Race Theory (CRT) standpoint (Delgado and Stefancic 2023).

The theoretical framework, or lens, used in interviewing the participants and analysing their experiences was CRT within a three-level structural framework of macro, meso, and micro systems (Wainwright et al. 2024; Vohra-Gupta et al. 2024). To make sense of the individual experiences of power and (sometimes multiple) identities that the participants hold, an intersectional lens was also used (Crenshaw; 2013). Our transdisciplinary research team, comprising individuals from schools of law, community studies and social work, are also members of the teaching and research staff at the university, and this will have had some influence on the participants' recruitment and responses to the study. One of us is a white British woman, one is of Indian Muslim heritage, and the other is a Black male of dual heritage (Caribbean and white). We were sensitive to how our ethnicities and identities may have influenced the types of responses the participants expressed at different times during the research process (Gunaratnam 2003). Collectively, the research team has experienced structural racialised disadvantages within their HEI careers and are committed to a dynamic whereby research has a praxis: holding that research findings are redundant unless they lead to action for social change.

The participants were recruited locally within one university using random sampling and snowballing methods. This was a transdisciplinary research project, and the participants were recruited from each of the researchers' specific disciplines, which are nursing, midwifery, social work, medicine, veterinary science, law, policing, and criminology. We approached prospective participants from other disciplines, but they declined to participate, which, in and of itself, is an interesting finding.

The research took place over 24 months, in part because of the difficulties experienced in recruiting participants and also because it was contingent on the available time of both the participants and researchers. There were 43 participants, of whom 31 were white, 9 were of South Asian and/or mixed South Asian/white heritage, 2 were Black and/or of African heritage, and 1 was of East Asian/white heritage. There were 35 women participants and 8 men. The methods used were a combination of focus groups with 40 participants and semi-structured interviews with 3 participants. The data was analysed using a thematic analytic approach using the lens of CRT and Intersectionality within the three- tier systems framework of meso, micro and macro to establish the themes (Crenshaw 2013; Braun and Clarke 2014; Delgado and Stefancic 2023).

Ethics approval for this study was obtained through the university ethics committee reference number BAHSS2 0267 FR.

3. Findings

The participants were keen to contribute to the study and, in many ways, this reflects their commitment to race equality in HEIs. Their responses can be seen as representative of participants' experiences of and journeys into HEIs, and how these informed or affected their confidence and ability to discuss, challenge and explore issues of race(ism) in the classroom. As the focus of the study was on a perceived lack of competence, understanding and experience of a predominantly white group of academics regarding ethnicity, race(ism) and race equity, the first section of the findings are presented separately using the two broad categories of white and minoritised ethnicity participants.

3.1. White Participants

3.1.1. Elephant in the Room?

The majority of white participants typically articulated that on an individual (micro) and societal (macro) level they had little experience of race. Some were concerned that this purported ignorance regarding the experiences of minority ethnic communities led to a specific kind of privilege.

> *I don't have any personal experience, like, at all from, you know, that's had an impact on me personally.*

> *As a child, I was never taught to think about race, and I never overtly knew anything about white privilege, all these layers of oppression and so on. But there were things that, it wasn't an elephant in the room, it just wasn't anything.* (white woman)

The participants felt that because they had very little or no experience of minoritised ethnic communitiesy or of race(ism), that this undermined any sense of legitimacy or credibility they may have had to contribute to discussions with colleagues or in the classroom regarding race (equality) and ethnicity.

> *I don't know what I am necessarily bringing to this conversation. . . I'm obviously white. I'm from a very white area and I don't know and I kind of don't wanna talk about something that I have no place to talk about, you know what I mean.* (white woman)

However, this lack of experience and knowledge could also be understood as ambivalence and fragility concerning their whiteness and inertia when considering the experience of minoritised ethnic communities and race(ism).

3.1.2. Whiteness

On a macro level, the majority of white participants were aware of their lack of contact with anybody from a minority ethnic community growing up, and some felt that this had

not changed significantly in their adult lives. They described having white friendship groups and living in predominantly white neighbourhoods.

> *My upbringing was very strong white community. In primary school, I only recall one Muslim girl in the whole primary school and moving onto high school, there was one mixed race boy in my year, and I wasn't exposed to different backgrounds at that age.* (white man)

This caused many of the white participants to question their level of insight into the lives of those from minoritised ethnicities. Their honesty may evoke questions regarding how they and other colleagues in HEIs can be confident and skilled enough to develop a teaching, learning and pastoral environment that fosters inclusivity and ethnic diversity.

> *Like some of the people here my upbringing was white working class, Catholic school I think about there's two mixed race families that I know of where I live. So, my whole life really is kind of white and very little else. . . I'm also conscious that I only have really limited perspective on the people's lives because of my life.* (white man)

To some extent, working at an HEI played a significant role in mitigating the participants' lack of experience and knowledge of minoritised ethnic communities. Indeed, for some, they felt that working with some Black and Asian colleagues and students had actually informed and enhanced their own personal development on issues of race(ism), ethnicity and culture. This was an inversion of the HE expectation that the staff teaching culture enriches minoritised students' experiences of ethnic and cultural difference. Indeed, it also produced a sense of ambivalence, where the white staff were aware of their privileged position, but benefited from inertia or the status quo, by learning about race(ism) from their students. The significance of an ethnically diverse student group on campus was in stark contrast to their previous experiences of study or employment:

> *I did my sociology degree, did a little bit on race and ethnicity, but astonishingly, only touched on it, when it should have been a big stream within that degree course. And I was sort of thrown in [to HE teaching] at the deep end. I was teaching students about race and ethnicity, and I was about at the same level that they were in the learning.* (white woman)

3.1.3. I'm Not Racist, but. . .

While the participants may have experienced some evidence of an inclusive ethos being promoted in an HEI setting, this was not necessarily mirrored in their personal lives. Some seemed to suggest that it felt like they inhabited two different worlds regarding race, culture and ethnicity. Their exposure at work to a diverse minority ethnic student body in an environment that was trying to promote inclusion was, at times, in sharp contrast to the broader family environments they had grown up in and still inhabited. Tensions with parents were common:

> *I don't think they realise that that is being racist. I've had conversations with my mother about, you know, sort of we should stop borders. We shouldn't be letting anybody else, come in. They have to go through all of these other countries and no one else lets them in. It's only us that let em in and it's like, I don't think that's right.* (white woman)

The participants lacked confidence in knowing whether to challenge or simply accept generational differences in attitudes to race, which would be in contrast to the way they should address racist behaviour and/or language in the university. For instance,

> *I think there is something to say that people don't think they are racist. Yeah, I have a family member who, when they see when they got to the hospital, they see a doctor or consultant, they probably struggle trying to, well they said things like he was black, but*

> *he was really nice. You know, that's the thing, and it's almost like 'I'm not racist but . . .' And they're elderly. And I suppose you could say, well, that generations thing, but then it doesn't make it right, does it?* (white woman)

Overall, the white participants expressed a lack of confidence regarding discussing issues of race, perhaps in part due to their lack of experience of living in ethnically diverse communities as they were growing up. Many still inhabited predominantly white communities and described low-level everyday racism as a feature of intergenerational family life. This has clearly had an effect on their ability and confidence to tackle issues of race and racism that have arisen in the classroom or elsewhere during their work at the university.

3.2. Minoritised Ethnic Participants' Experiences

3.2.1. You Hide Them Away in a Box

The minoritised ethnic participants often came to the university with significant early life experiences of racism; of struggling to fit into education systems; feelings of social isolation and of concealing; or feeling the need to minimise their ethnic, cultural and religious identity or experiences. One participant summarised this powerfully, capturing a shared experience of those of minority ethnic heritage:

> *I think as an ethnic minority person, all those little things that matter to you, you kind of put them away in a box because nobody else sometimes wants to acknowledge them, wants to talk about them, wants them to come up, sometimes it's a waste of time, it's not something they're interested in. All those things that make you, you, that are important to you, you hide them away in a box, because you just want to get on with your day and you just want to fit in.* (Asian man)

Some participants talked about their direct experiences of racism growing up. This was particularly common amongst Muslim participants:

> *But every blend imaginable was probably there on the estate. You got called all sorts of names. you got called Paki. You got called Blacky. You've got called anything, but it was at the time when you're young, you don't quite get it*. (Asian man)

> *Growing up, I grew up in the 80s. It was just, yeah, we're different and we get called names and you might get chased on the street*. (Asian man)

This informed some participants' low expectations of the culture or environment of HEIs taking concerns about race equality or anti-racism being seriously:

> *So, and I think when you come then to any establishment, any workplace, if you experience a bit of discrimination, bit of racism, you know, you just kind of think, it's just how it is. You know that's just how you get treated*. (Asian man)

This perspective, albeit realistic, could be seen as an indictment of UK society on a macro level, and HEIs on a meso level: of resigned acceptance by minoritised ethnic employees that some casual racism is to be expected. It is just a given, if you are Black or Asian.

3.2.2. A Pair of Chopsticks?

Others described racism as being more thoroughly embedded in higher education and intersecting with racism across communities. Some had experienced overt racism as students before they were academic staff. This had seemed to particularly effect those in vocational degree courses with practice placements:

> *When I was a student nurse and I'd go to her house, help her get ready for bed. She was blind. And one day she was complaining about her neighbours, who were Sikh, so they were Asian Sikh. And she said 'Oh they're horrible, them. All of them are horrible.' And*

> *it was a collective. And then she called them some names. I think, cos I've been so used to that terminology, I didn't really take offence as such and it's only now in more recent years that I started not taking it. . . Yeah, I didn't think anything of it, but I felt that I had to say something and I said to her, you do realise I'm Asian. Yes, but you're different as you don't smell like them. You don't talk like them.* (Asian woman)

The racism that some participants witnessed or experienced while training as students was casual and stomach churning:

> *This very quiet Taiwanese Australian student was . . ..asked to perform the procedure on an animal, supervised by a white large animal vet. She was nervous because we're still students, you know, stitching up this, animal, she's quite nervous and this man said, would you feel more comfortable if you had a pair of chopsticks instead? Thinking it was hilarious. A friend of mine was in that group and she told this to me and she's like, I can't believe he said this.* (Mixed heritage Asian/white woman)

One participant described a friend being brought before a school disciplinary committee:

> *I remember one of my friends in medical school he was Somali. . ..in Somalia, out of respect, a man doesn't look up to a female, and a woman doesn't look up to a male. So, he was pulled before what we called the Progress Committee, so he was brought up about professionalism because his tutor said that he was being disrespectful to her because he wouldn't look her in the eyes.* (Mixed heritage Asian/white woman)

On a meso and micro level, this suggests a complete lack of understanding or empathy towards the cultural differences of minoritised staff as colleagues in a HEI.

Others had experienced racism as young professionals in academia, where common situations associated with academic life led to exposure to racism.

3.2.3. Whitewashing

A common theme mentioned by several participants was what minoritised ethnic participants termed 'white washing'. This referred to their own attempts to minimise their ethnicity, their visual and cultural (and religious) differences, and to fit in with mainstream white culture. White superiority, on a macro, meso, and micro level had been entirely normalised within their lives, and attempts to fit in had pervaded their childhoods and then their adult years, both as students and early career professionals:

> *It's the words white washed in a sense, you know that that just comes into my head, that kind of white wash of people's dual heritage.* (Dual heritage/Asian woman)

> *As a youngster I had a lot of issues around kind of race and identity and I found racism really, really difficult. I didn't quite understand it. I remember being in medical school and I basically I tried my best to be ingrained within the society. I tried my best to basically almost if you don't mind me saying, to be white, so to leave my own culture, religion, values behind and just be like, you know, every kind of white person.* (Asian man)

However, at a certain point, some participants came to the realisation that this approach had not been of benefit:

> *And in medical school, I remember there was a [race] incident. . . I cried a lot on that because I just, no matter how much I try to be white I will never be white you know. I'm not going to bleach my skin or something and it really made me realise, I think that was a really pivotal point in my life where I realised that actually I've got to choose who I want to be and be happy with myself.* (Asian man)

Even those who did not describe direct experiences of racism commonly spoke about not fitting in. Their use of the word 'misfit' was common:

> *I'm from a community and I'm a slight misfit for the person who I am. And I always thought that I would probably feel a bit more comfortable with my white counterparts living in a small village*. (Asian woman)

These feelings continued into adulthood and into their present work as academics in universities:

> *and now (working at) university. And now very soon I'm realizing that I'm actually a misfit here as well*. (Asian woman)

> *And then when I come here, then I think my race and my ethnicity, the way I speak and everything about me becomes a bit more apparent and a bit more sort of, you know, places me apart from the rest of the group, occasionally*. (Asian woman)

In sum, most of the minoritised ethnic participants felt that their many and varied experiences of racism, growing up and during their training as students, had had a detrimental effect, which had continued into their experiences of working as academics in HEIs. The institutions were not inclusive or supportive of their differences in terms of ethnicity, culture and religion, with some experiencing racism from (some) white colleagues. Their experiences also reflected the white fragility and ambivalence that they often had to negotiate to try to fit in and avoid racial microaggressions as much as possible. This undermined any sense of belonging as an equal member of staff at the HEI, or confidence in their identity as a professional of South Asian or African heritage.

3.2.4. Fear of Saying the Wrong Thing

The findings below are from both the minoritised ethnic and white participants. Whilst some participants expressed confidence and related positive experiences, the majority described feelings of inhibition when it came to discussing any issue that touched upon race. This was not because they did not want to engage in race issues but because they were concerned about a fear of purportedly 'getting it wrong'. They described a fear of causing offence, of consciously avoiding speaking about anything which might stray into issues of race, and of struggling with race equality because the language and terminology used was believed to be constantly changing. They felt that an unintended consequence of their formal training on decolonising the curricula and of their personal development in understanding white privilege was an uncertainty as to whether it was their place to speak about race; they did not know whether their opinion was valid. For some, this had led to a lack of engagement with topics relating to race and a reluctance to ask questions about race issues arising from their day-to-day practice as lecturers.

Fear of causing offence was common because race was seen to be a such a sensitive topic:

> *I think it's that fear of causing offence. Definitely that fear of causing offence*. (white man)

> *I think I just didn't have the vocabulary or the understanding or the ability to speak out, say something without just saying to somebody, you're being racist. And I think I also have a bit of a fear of saying the wrong thing, not knowing the right thing to say, wanting to ask questions, but not knowing if that's offensive. So I feel a bit restricted*. (white woman)

Some white participants felt inhibited by the sector they worked in. They perceived higher education as an unsafe environment. They lacked confidence that they would be supported if they made a mistake:

> *So my fear is that you say one word or line by mistake or whatever and you know—I know that I would have the backing of my appraiser, who's fantastic. I know that I would not have the backing of the corporate machine and I think that's part of where that fear comes*

> *from is that it working in an environment where there's a culture of fear, where there's continual redundancies where there's changes being made continually*. (white woman)

Consequently, white participants either avoided discussing race issues, or when they did raise them found their colleagues demonstrated a fragility or ambivalence and reluctance to engage. One Black participant recalled a conversation with colleagues about the lack of black referees in football:

> *The minute I brought in the colour thing, they started to cringe. They were like you shouldn't bring colour about it. It's all about their skill and their knowledge. If they are skilled enough. I said, Why should we not? So, there is that aspect of people are scared to discuss colour, to bring colour in. It's like the elephant in the room, but you know, so that, that's my experience really in higher education and in normal life*. (Black man)

Another discussed an external professional body meeting associated with his programme:

> *there is a fear now I think. I was part of a policing thing the other week, sort of trying to tell me that the board that we're on is not diverse enough. And I was like, what do you mean? They're like, ohhh and hmmm. . ., I was like, because we're all white. Is that what you're trying to say? Like, is that what we're looking for? And it's like, we don't want to talk about what we're trying to say*. (white man)

This observation reflects the confusion, avoidance and fragility that many white participants experienced and, in some cases, colluded with. They imply that in HEIs and some professional accrediting bodies there should be representation of minoritised ethnic communities. But they do not know how to articulate these concerns or address them, let alone instigate any changes to, in this case, establish representation on these committees for minoritised ethnic staff.

Some white participants described how they wanted to talk about issues of race and ethnicity, or ask a question, but believed it would not be welcomed by those already committed to race work.

> *there were some people who are so invested in these issues that you feel like you can't open your mouth because, I would probably use the word militant. They're so militant about things that you don't. . . It's like it's almost the opposite issue that they really want a conversation around race, but you almost feel like they're not giving you that freedom to be open and to get it wrong. Oh and I think somewhere in the middle there's a nice happy middle ground where we can have the courage to start talking to one another about what language do we use. Is it OK to say that I've got a black colleague? What language is OK for us to use?* (white woman)

Many participants felt inhibited by a lack of both knowledge of and confidence with the vocabulary used to explore issues of race and ethnicity. This reflection by one participant on white privilege demonstrates an awkwardness:

> *I just know of my privilege and that like it's harder to be from an ethnically- whatever the right terminology is- non white*. (white man)

As does this from another participant regarding language concerning heritage,

> *So I've got a friend who is mixed race or dual heritage and again, there's another thing. Actually. I lack a lot of confidence about what to say actually, what's correct terminology. . .*
>
> *And I came away with the word heritage. What's your heritage. But even so, I wish I'd learned that, before. But that language, that fear of saying the wrong thing, is a barrier*. (white man)

In the UK, official policy language and descriptors change frequently over time, and at the time of the research the notion of BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) was the

most used acronym to describe people of minoritised ethnicity. Some participants did not know whether the term BAME was an appropriate term, or whether the language used to describe or name people of African or Asian heritage had changed again:

> *But then in all the literature, it's like BME or minoritised ethnic, or whatever it is. And I hate it because it's like everyone else that's not white. It's like white people and then everyone else is like a black and minority ethnic group.* (white man)

As this participant suggests, it can be legitimate to critique official language and terminology, especially in the context of what is perceived as ineffectual policy.

3.2.5. I've Got Black Friends and . . .

Some white participants discussed the difficulty in knowing whether it was acceptable to use the word Black:

> *I've got black friends and they're just like, they don't like all the different words that are now introduced as various terms and they're just very much like I'm black, I'm black. That's it.* (Black woman)

This participant demonstrated a limited understanding of the term Black as a political, cultural and social identifier. This was even the case when one of the white participant's family members were Black:

> *My partner is black. My son is black. And even when you're trying to term that, you've got to sit back and think 'am I saying the right thing?' You know, when people refer to my son as mixed race, is that the right thing to say? And people are very conscious of saying the right or the wrong thing. And that terminology, that ever changing terminology. Seems to be something that people avoid or on the other hand people would ask well What do you call it? Is he black. Is he dual heritage, is he mixed race and then you sit there and think . . . You know, my partner feels, my husband feels exactly the same. He really dislikes all of this change in language and he'll say I'm black, my dad's black, my mum's black. I'm black, that's what I am. So, so all of these different terminologies, he finds quite offensive.* (white woman)

3.2.6. Lexicon of Language

The participants were concerned regarding how they were to keep up to date with the ever-changing mosaic of language regarding race. Some felt the university needed to provide much more practical support to inform them. The idea of a terminology sheet was raised on a number of occasions:

> *I will use dual heritage whereas your colleague will use mixed race. It's you know there's some terms that we know we cannot use that past reasons that have been used in a very prejudicial way. But I think just to have, yeah, some kind of sheet around the kind of language that we that we should be using that even if someone pulls up and says I would use a different term that at least we have that feeling, that confidence.* (white woman)

> *If the university gave me framework. . . Because I was speaking to one of the LPC (Legal Practitioner Course) students last week and I wanted to ask where she was from and I knew I couldn't ask.* (white woman)

The combined concerns about the wrong use of language and the risk of causing offence meant that some participants would like to ask questions at work but were hesitant to do so. Some participants felt emboldened to ask anything concerning race and ethnicity. A myriad of issues were raised, ranging from the crossover between' race awareness' and geopolitical knowledge:

> *I'm really confident in saying black, if you are black and I'm less confident in saying Asian because I have said Asian and the person was Arabic and took offence that we called him Asian. So, my lack of, my pure ignorance of like demography and geography* (white woman)

In contrast there were, however, a clear minority of participants who felt comfortable and confident talking about race. These participants came from both white and minoritised ethnic backgrounds. They were robust about the advantages of speaking openly about race and keen to learn and expand their understanding, and had had positive experiences with students when they had done so in class:

> *I'm fairly confident in approaching those matters [about race] and expressing my views in a polite way, just because it's something that I'm passionate about. And I feel like there's just so much we all have to learn. So, unless somebody speaks up, nobody's ever going to learn anything*. (Asian woman)

They were less afraid of making mistakes and happy to encourage colleagues to talk about sensitive issues.

> *I definitely think feeling able to talk about it is probably the most important aspect of that for me. I think you, a lot of people, feel like talking about it openly means that we're going to make a mistake. I think my personal view is that we want to encourage people to talk about it and be able to get things wrong or say things maybe in a way which might not be the best way to say them. . .. almost always people don't end up being really offensive if they talk about it openly*. (white woman)

Those who had encouraged classroom discussions regarding race and ethnicity issues on the topic being taught described their experiences as being much more positive than they had expected:

> *. . .some of the feedback from some of the white students is, you know, we don't know what to say. And I'm scared. I had a student do a presentation the other day and they referred to 'the ethnics'. [I said] can we just have a discussion about this term. . .. And we had this conversation, this student who's white male, you know. And he was like I really, I don't want to say anymore. I'm just scared of saying the wrong thing . . . but definitely in my experience introducing stuff as a conversation has really, you know it's enabled students to have that conversation in a broader sense and then bring it to their lived experience.*
>
> *I've found that students are more open than I am actually expecting, that I might go in feeling a little bit under confident. But when I open up and we have those conversations, I find that people are a lot more forthcoming than I might have initially expected*. (white man)

There frequently was consensus among most of the participants that talking about race was the only way to meaningfully tackle issues of race equality and improve inclusion at the university. The participants felt that the current reluctance to get things wrong meant that academics missed an opportunity to grow in confidence to discuss themes concerning race equality, racism and ethnicity. Further, this demonstrated lack of confidence could then lead to an ambivalent form of white allyship, which inhibits opportunities to explore how mutual reflexivity between white and minoritised ethnic colleagues might grow into a more balanced and reciprocal discussion concerning race(ism).

4. Discussion

4.1. Macro—Whiteness as Normality

Participants of both minoritised ethnic and white British heritage demonstrated at least a rudimentary understanding of structural racism (Miles and Brown 2004), that Black

and Asian communities and individuals experienced racism that was beyond their control and was damaging to their daily lives (Miller 2021; Delgado and Stefancic 2023). However, they had little understanding and confidence to articulate how structural racism impacted minoritised ethnic communities (Bates 2023). In many ways, this is understandable, as it can be suggested that whiteness, through a CRT lens, assumes normality and that anything different, or outside of this normal world, this understanding, is alien, mysterious and potentially misunderstood (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). Whiteness, then, is the natural order of things in many of the white participants' life experiences and this limited understanding of minoritised ethnic communities is, by definition, transferred into their lack of confidence and behaviour in HEIs (Bonnett 1996; Joseph-Salisbury 2019). The participants in this study tended to be middle-ranking academics, but their limited understanding of race(ism), ethnicity, and more broadly of minoritised ethnic communities speaks to the more concerning situation of most staff not really understanding what to do, or how to bring about genuine change and opportunity for Black and Asian staff. This suggests that across the whole institution there is a worrying lack of understanding or confidence regarding race equality (Nayak 2024). This denies the opportunity for the institution to develop effective race equality strategies that shift the balance of power in communication and could provide a forum for stabilisation, or a more equal conversation between minoritised and white staff.

Further, if most white participants are unsure regarding how to challenge the most basic verbal expressions of racism or how to understand identity, ethnicity and cultural difference, any appreciation of implementing race equality or anti-racism in the institution will have a very limited chance of success (Mirza 2018). The institution purportedly claims a commitment to the REC and decolonisation initiatives, yet the evidence from this study suggests otherwise. In particular, most of the white participants did not demonstrated that they have the requisite skills or confidence to deliver on race equity. In contrast, the minoritised ethnic staff's experience of the pain of racism was often subsumed and ignored by the whiteness of the organisation (Campion and Clark 2022). Notwithstanding this, there is a wider acknowledgment in the HEI sector in the UK that systemic racism has a detrimental effect on minoritised ethnic staff and students' lives outside of the university, and on their chances of career advancement and achieving their full academic potential, for staff and students, respectively (Singh 2020; Arday 2022).

For the minoritised ethnic staff who had experienced growing up in the UK, they could clearly articulate a lived experience of structural racism. It damaged their lives, blighted their early childhoods and was a permanent scar on themselves and their families as they entered adulthood (Eddo-Lodge 2020). Whiteness affected their lack of sense of belonging, and there seemed a resigned acceptance that the racism that affected their everyday experience would be the same as they experienced as students training for their profession and later as academic members of staff (Nayak 2024). Racism was all-pervading and being surrounded by white people who knew little and said less, in most cases, meant that very few if any people (of any ethnicity) challenged racism, or 'called it out', even when the most crude and cruel forms of racism were propagated (Arday 2020, 2022).

It is not that the white participants seemed to want to collude with this behaviour, but, evidently, they did not have the intellectual, verbal, or professional tools or confidence to challenge it (Doharty et al. 2021). This, however, does not diminish the emotional and psycho-social pain that the minoritised ethnic staff felt when they were experiencing it. It is also why some of the minoritised ethnic participants and many more Black and Asian staff of HEIs do not have the emotional time and energy to explain the traumatic and damaging everyday experience of racism to their white colleagues (Eddo-Lodge 2020). For the minoritised ethnic staff who were not born in the UK, but either in the continents of

Africa or Asia, their experience of childhood was different. Yet, the clumsy and thoughtless manifestations of racism were still experienced in their university life as students or as academics (Pryce-Miller et al. 2023). As studies have suggested, whiteness can inform a complacency that can ignore or deny the experiences of minority ethnic students and academics (Bonnett 1996; Joseph-Salisbury 2019).

4.2. Meso—Institutional Impact

Much of the marketing in the HEI sector promulgates race equity as a consumer selling point. The imagery in promotional materials frequently suggests a multi-ethnic learning environment as the norm. When we review the evidence, this reality is challenged. Studies have suggested that at an institutional level, Black and Asian staff are not represented in senior positions in management and professorial roles (Bhopal 2020; Osho and Alormele 2025). While there are 22,345 professors in the UK, only 2865 are of minoritised ethnicity, with the majority of these being of Asian heritage (HESA 2024). Likewise, the number of minoritised ethnic staff in basic teaching positions is also disproportionately small in comparison to the wider minoritised ethnic population in the UK (HESA 2024). Minoritised ethnic students have suggested that it is the lack of senior academics and teaching staff that are Black and Asian, who look and sound like them, that has had a detrimental effect on their teaching and learning and general sense of feeling less than belonging. This, in turn, has affected their academic performance, attainment and lack of enjoyment in their studies (Rodriguez 2022; Pryce-Miller et al. 2023). The participants in this study acknowledged that there was a problem of representation of minority ethnic staff at the board level down through the teaching grades, but they did not know what to do about it. How should they challenge the lack of representation, or bring about some sort of institutional change? (Razack et al. 2025). The participants in this study, at best, acknowledged that there was an institutional problem and, at worst, were frightened to say anything about it. This suggests that there needs to be a recalibration of the discussion concerning race equality in HEIs. In the first instance, there needs to be an acknowledgement that HEIs that promote whiteness through their everyday actions, through the process of promoting white academics, will necessarily have a detrimental impact on the teaching and learning experiences of minoritised ethnic and white staff alike (Joseph-Salisbury 2019).

These findings also suggest that there needs to be a shift in emphasis across all of the disciplines to acknowledge that the most important step to addressing race equity in HEIs is providing safe spaces where white and minoritised ethnicity staff feel confident to talk about race. It is important to explore how staff feel about their past experiences of whiteness and/or racism in their communities, including their childhood and early adulthood (Joseph-Salisbury 2019). This will provide an opportunity for staff to have empathy and some insight into how minoritised ethnic staff and students may feel in HEIs where the majority of managers, professors and teachers in the institutions are white (Osho and Alormele 2025). It will also facilitate HEIs' understanding that language is just the first step needed for white staff to initiate substantive institutional change to achieve race equity in HEIs (Miller 2021).

For institutional change to take place in a meaningful way for minoritised ethnic staff, and for white staff to engage in the organisational change that the REC is predicated on, these findings suggest that there needs to be an enabling and dialogic environment where Black, Asian and white staff have the confidence to discuss and question what the language of race equity, inclusivity and decolonisation looks and sounds like (Manley and Pule 2025). In other words, there needs to be a change in the institutional culture of HEIs that enables a space where whiteness is questioned and mutual communication stabilisation

takes place, and where minoritised ethnic staff can communicate, articulate, research, teach and progress on an equal basis in HEIs (Apgar 2022; Russo 2024).

4.3. Micro—Safe Spaces for Counter-Narratives

This paper is about dialogue and, in particular, gauging participants', as staff at HEIs, understanding of and confidence (or lack of) with the language of race equality, ethnicity and identity. As in many other studies, the participants of minoritised ethnicity who experienced racism in their early lives and have seen that transferred into their student and professional lives as academics, have often not felt supported enough by their institutions to challenge these experiences (Singh 2020; Ibezim et al. 2025). Similarly, most of the white participants did not feel the spaces in the university were safe enough for them to develop an understanding of dialogue to enable them to articulate how they felt and what they needed to learn to enact race equity change in the classroom and everyday environment in the university (Gilroy 1990; Wainwright 2003). To promote race equity, white staff need to be trained to be able to deliver effective decolonisation that enhances the working environment and learning experiences of minoritised ethnic staff and students. Likewise, minoritised ethnic staff's experience of racism and the invaluable world-wide African and Asian scholarly contributions to knowledge need to be institutionally reified.

CRT provides a framework to change the relational power in spaces of dialogue. It acknowledges individual and systemic racism in HEIs and seeks to privilege the (counter) voices and experiences of minoritised ethnic staff in all their heterogenic and intersectional identities (Delgado and Stefancic 2023; Vohra-Gupta et al. 2024). By creating relational spaces where minoritised ethnic staff can be provided the space to articulate their experiences of racism, past and present, and be provided the support to feel valued in HEI spaces, including the classroom, there could be a substantive and important shift towards genuine race equity. For instance, minoritised ethnic staff have often suggested that their experiences in research meetings, staff meetings, conferences, and the classroom have shown them that their reality, their views, and their knowledge are silenced, not valued, and marginalised by their white colleagues (Singh 2020; Osho and Alormele 2025). Yet, a simple change in the behaviours of white colleagues, to understand that silencing Black and Asian voices in HEIs is one of the most brutal forms of microaggressive racism in university spaces and a commitment to stop this, would be a concrete step in the direction of race equity (Arday 2018b; Doharty et al. 2021). It requires a movement away from fragility among white colleagues, which produces ambivalent allyship, to a mutual communication stabilisation process with their minoritised ethnic colleagues, where their power and privilege is repudiated in favour of reflexivity and communicative openness.

Likewise, those that promote race equity, through the REC, for instance, need to grasp that for many white colleagues, because of their whiteness, their own (lack) of personal experience of minoritised ethnic communities or of racism, they have little knowledge about talking about race(ism). Therefore, there will not be a movement towards safe dialogical spaces to discuss issues of race(ism), ethnicity, decolonisation and anti-racism, and they need to understand what this means for Black, Asian and white students and staff (Kambunga et al. 2023). If the spaces in HEIs to discuss racism and race equity are not safe, nourishing and growing, then (some) white staff will not be confident to make the crucial step from whiteness, power and privilege to talking about and acting on race(ism) (Manley and Pule 2025). In sum, there is a need for a third relational space where minoritised ethnic staff are supported to feel confident to speak out in meetings, conferences and the classroom, and where white staff are able to question, explore and understand how whiteness need not be inhibiting to talking about race (Joseph-Salisbury 2019). Change can then happen.

5. Conclusions

In sum, the evidence from this study suggests that HEIs need to invest in developmental work and training for their white staff, from senior management to basic grade lecturers, to enable them to be confident and competent in the language and actions of race equity. This needs to be complemented by a supportive environment that acknowledges the trauma of racism that their minoritised ethnic staff continue to experience in their everyday lives and within HEIs. These steps might promote movement away from white fragility and the ambivalence of white staff to open and mutual communication with their minoritised ethnic colleagues. It is only then that the disconnect between the experiences of minoritised ethnic staff and students, and the institutional actions of REC mark accreditation and the laudable aspiration of decolonisation will begin to be bridged. Closing this gap within universities requires both a research-informed and activist-energised commitment to challenge the salient structural disadvantages and promote more equitable communicative dynamics.

6. Study Limitations

The findings of this study emerged from one group of participants (staff) discussing race equality at one university. While many of the themes discussed are relevant and applicable to other HEIs in the UK, there are of course limitations to its transference.

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Notes

1 It is acknowledged that the concept of race is a social construction, as is ethnicity; however, the term 'race' is used in this paper as a point of analysis.

2 The categories of Black, Asian and white can be viewed as broad ethnic super groupings that do not reflect the diversity of ethnicities within them. However, they constitute umbrella representations of political, social and community identities in the UK.

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