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Reflections on Redressing Racial Inequalities, When Teaching Race in the Sociology of Sport and Physical Education

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Introduction

At the very outset, it is of utmost import to get "our cards on the table" in terms of the privileged position from which we write this contribution, as it is this very position which is the kernel for our central arguments below. We write this piece as two White academics, privileged to gain our initial posts as lecturers within the field of the sociology of sport before completing our doctorates. We both predominantly teach sports sociology and regularly discuss the topic of racial discrimination in sport, drawing on the experiences of star athletes such as Serena Williams, Colin

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Kaepernick and Raheem Sterling. Whilst we welcome the fact that these discussions are happening and the growing body of academic research analysing the extent these athletes are racialised through media discourses (Carrington 2013; Hylton 2015; Bradshaw and Minogue 2019), we question whether this teaching and research has helped to make universities more inclusive spaces for Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students in our discipline.

Our central concern lies in the fact that we, as White academics, are an essential part of the problem, in that there is a significant lack of BAME academics teaching within our discipline, and within the academy more broadly (Arday 2018; Gillborn 2008; NUS 2016). Along with questions of gaps in attainment, BAME students have reported often feeling like outsiders within HEI institutes (Alexander and Arday 2015). Given this, our discussion below will initially explore the structural Whiteness of teaching in HE, before discussing critical practices and pedagogies aimed at de-centring Whiteness from the spaces we operate in.

Whiteness and Teaching in the Sociology of Sport—the Problems

We've realised that when discussions of race are framed purely as lecture content, they become disassociated from individuals' lived experiences (Flintoff, Dowling and Fitzgerald 2015; Hobson and Whigham 2018; Leonardo and Porter 2010). Too often, as "liberal" White academics, we can be guilty of discussing racist incidents in sport without considering how our day-to-day behaviours contribute to a culture which can disadvantage others who do not share our privilege. While negative attitudes towards racism and positive attitudes towards inclusion have been central to discussions in our lectures, the extent to which we embody this in practice needs continual checking. As Valluvan (2016) explains, discussions of race and racism at university can lead to a sense of exclusion for Black and Asian students if their White peers don't have a well-developed sense of discussing racial differences, as this can lead students to feel further disconnected from higher education.

Indeed, the fact that BAME students in sport are overwhelmingly taught about race by White lecturers, who lack true empathy and experience of the structural inequalities present in sport, higher education and society, is in itself an illustration of the self-perpetuating inequality in modern universities. This therefore supports Leonardo and Porter's (2010) assertions that the assumed normality of Whiteness means its power often goes largely unquestioned. Indeed, the tendency for White academics—ourselves included—to revert to "safe-space discussions" of racialised phenomena within the domain of sport are often counterproductive in this regard:

> …the reason why safe-space discussions partly break down in practice, if not at least in theory, is that they assume that, by virtue of formal and procedural guidelines, safety has been designated for both White people and people of colour. However, the term 'safety' acts as a misnomer because it often means that White individuals can be made to feel safe. Thus, a space of safety is circumvented, and instead a space of oppressive color-blindness is established. (Leonardo and Porter 2010: 148)

Such "safe-spaces" in academia are replicated in the sports media, re-enforcing this colour-blind ideology and subsequent White privilege. For example, The Black Collective of Media in Sport (BCOMS) noted that at the four Major sports events in 2016 (Olympics, Paralympics, European Football Championships, and Wimbledon) only 44 out of 456 media roles were held by BAME candidates, with 19 of these 44 roles held by former athletes. The lack of BAME journalists shapes the representation of Black and Asian athletes (Burdsey 2016; Van Sterkenburg et al. 2010), and discussions of racism.

Indeed, we were both recently invited to contribute an article in The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/feb/06/as-white-sports-lecturers-were-learning-how-to-make-our-classroom-less-racist) on the issue of teaching about racism in sport based upon a chapter which we had recently authored (Hobson and Whigham 2018), despite the fact that we had explicitly noted in the chapter that we had no specific research specialism on the topic. The irony that we (as White junior academics) were in a position to write an article on this topic was not lost on

us, and in many ways presented a further illustration of the circular nature of inequity of opportunity within the world in which we operate.

Whiteness and Teaching in the Sociology of Sport—Some Solutions?

Racism in sport is a topic neither of us set out to research in our academic careers, and we initially struggled to find a sensitive way of approaching it. But research shows that White academics need to do more to develop empathy with BAME students by recognising our own privilege, changing the way we frame race in the classroom and emboldening us to challenge inequalities. Ladson-Billings (2014) reminds lecturers that if pedagogy is to move beyond discussion then questions of race and racism need to develop socio-political consciousness which students can apply to real-world problems beyond the confines of the lecture theatre. This simultaneously develops cultural competency which enables BAME students to celebrate their own culture, while becoming fluent in the culture of university. Unfortunately, as academics we are often poorly skilled in developing cultural competency and instead appropriate students' culture and experiences as something to be studied (Said 1978), while simultaneously penalising BAME students for not expressing the content in accordance with value judgements of the academy. As such, we have tried to move beyond discussions of theory surrounding racism and sport in lectures to influence our actions and behaviours.

The starting point has been listening to the lived experiences of BAME students and people outside university. Some have underscored a sense of not belonging in a system in which most lecturers and students are White. Research reveals that this feeling out of place can impact how well students do and their likelihood of dropping out (Alexander and Arday 2015; Richardson 2018). We found the Surviving Society podcast series helpful in developing empathy. One episode looked at the feeling of otherness: for a Black person at a rave full of White people, or a White person at a "Black club". In another episode, UCL's head of student success,

Paulette Williams, explained how this concept relates to universities, where Black and Asian students often find themselves in the minority.

We've also learned not to avoid uncomfortable conversations about racial privilege and discrimination for fear of causing offence, for instance by avoiding asking our BAME personal tutees about their university experience, as this can compound a sense of being "out of place". Building trustful, mutually respectful, and open, frank relationships with BAME students and colleagues is a fundamental starting point. In "Teaching to Transgress", bell hooks (1994) encourages academics to create an environment where individuals can share their lived experiences in an environment where they feel these can be expressed freely, thus de-centring the lecturer's voice as the locus of power. To do so, practitioners need to demonstrate integrity and build trust with students by utilising conversation, telling and sharing stories, humour, care, a commitment to knowledge, and respecting their student's voice (hooks 2013). Emdin (2016) notes that BAME students are often better equipped to frame learning in a way which relates to their own lived experiences, suggesting that co-teaching and planning with BAME students can be a powerful tool for building relationships and confidence, while changing the power dynamics and notions of whose voice has value.

But while this is a good step forward for individuals, it's not enough to foster genuine institutional change. Instead, we're using our networking skills as academics to identify colleagues from any ethnic background across the university who are passionate to change the situation. We consider how to pay privilege forward: those who are in a position to provide advice, time and opportunities should consider who they offer them to. Perhaps the most important thing is to realise that some well-intentioned actions may appear tokenistic and non-sincere—but that's not a reason not to try. Instead, it can be a learning opportunity.

Crucially, we've adapted our teaching practice to consider how we can start to decolonise the spaces we operate in. While sports sociology is often concerned with experiences of race in the UK it is still a predominantly White domain in terms of scholarship (Hobson and Whigham 2018). Where possible, we've added papers by Black and Asian scholars to our usual recommended reading, and if there are no papers on the

topic we supplement readings with papers, blogs, podcasts and guest lectures.

We make time in lectures to discuss students' experiences, too, making sure the emphasis isn't just upon abstract institutions such as the media, but encouraging analysis of the spaces staff and students operate in too. In a recent lecture, one of us encouraged students to consider the ethnic make-up of the room (roughly 40 out of 120 were BAME) and to compare this with the university's sports' teams' social media, which mostly featured White players. Students were encouraged to discuss what they thought had shaped this underrepresentation. Were students not playing, and why? Or were they not being photographed? We then discussed how to improve representation both in university teams and professional sports.

In doing so, the hope was to encourage students to apply Stuart Hall's (1997) notions of representation to a local context within which they are immersed, reflecting upon how the social structures of the university potentially reproduce Whiteness and a subsequent sense of belonging or not belonging. Later in the same lecture, parallels were made between the low percentages of BAME football managers (Cashmore and Cleland 2011; Cleland and Cashmore 2014; Kilvington 2019) and funded BAME PhD students (Williams et al. 2019), centring the analysis on institutional racism more broadly and emphasising that sport doesn't operate in a vacuum from other elite institutions.

Conclusion

We still have far to go, but we believe that an open mind and an open ear are crucial to the ongoing evolution of anti-racist practice in universities. As the current political climate in western democracies illustrates, the importance of such actions from academics teaching the industry leaders and educators—in our domain of sport and beyond—remains important.

Whilst we cannot eradicate or ignore the impact of our Whiteness within our teaching practice, nor the inherent privileges it has afforded us, we can endeavour to reflexively amend our pedagogical practices in order to acknowledge the structural inequalities evident within our field. Our next—and ongoing—steps are to pro-actively empower our students

with the skills, qualities and willingness to challenge these inequalities wherever they see them, whether they are BAME students or anti-racist "White allies" such as ourselves. Whilst this process is clearly easier said than done, its continued importance in the world in which we operate renders it a crucial one to persevere with.

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