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White Privilege, Empathy and Alterity in Higher Education—Teaching About Race and Racism in the Sociology of PE and Sport

Michael Hobson and Stuart Whigham

Introduction

This autoethnographic account discusses our experiences of delivering lectures on race and ethnicity in physical education (PE) and sport to consider the extent to which our status as white HE practitioners reinforces and/or undermines white privilege in HE. As white males with research interests in other sociological phenomenon in the fields of PE and sport, namely social class (Michael) and nationalism (Stuart), we make no claim to be experts in the field of race. Instead, we attempt to position ourselves as part of the structures that reinforce the hegemonic status of whiteness within higher education (HE). Hereby, we explore our attempts to simultaneously develop critical consciousness

M. Hobson (✉)

St Mary's University, Twickenham, UK

e-mail: michael.hobson@stmarys.ac.uk

S. Whigham

Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

e-mail: swhigham@brookes.ac.uk

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in both our own praxis and that of the students that we work with (Ladson-Billings 1995), in order to both illuminate and challenge the often unacknowledged inherent power of whiteness in education and society more broadly (Leonardo 2004; Leonardo and Porter 2010). In this piece we unpick some of the frailties of our previous practice and provide a discussion of some of the principles we are currently considering in developing pedagogic strategies that attempt to develop an actively anti-racist stance.

Despite the fact that the undergraduate programmes we work on incorporate lectures on race and ethnicity as a part of the curriculum, such sessions are comparatively low-status in comparison to the development of sport-specific knowledge and pedagogical strategies in an applied context. Instead, lectures on race and ethnicity are viewed as an optional supplement for students with an interest in this topic, rather than a crucial aspect of developing effective pedagogical practitioners in the field of PE and sport. For example, within Michael's institution, students are offered the opportunity to learn about the practical application of disability sports techniques nearly thirty times over the space of three years, whereas bespoke lectures on race and ethnicity are only offered four times. This therefore illustrates that in our experience issues of race and ethnicity are often marginalised during the development of PE and sport practitioners, with a lack of emphasis on the importance of developing praxis which challenges the normative whiteness of these fields.

This chapter therefore aims to consider whether our past practice has provided a critical pedagogic voice, or if it has simply provided a platform for white academics to unconsciously reinforce the institutional whiteness of HE. In particular, we reflect upon the possibility for white academics such as ourselves to empathise with the racialised social experiences of BME students in our cohorts, and the potential risk that our practice simply offers tokenistic discussion of race which reinforces the current forms of inequality and white privilege, whilst violating the alterity of our students (Frank 2004; Levinas 1999). These risks to our students' alterity, and the resultant need for respect of their position as an 'other' whose experiences and emotions which can never be fully understood, thus demand that we, as white academics, critically reflect upon the potential unintended outcomes of our practice in this regard.

Given that academic discussion of race and racism in HE is underdeveloped across disciplines compared to other aspects of identity, such as gender, it can be argued that there is a requirement for pedagogy to instigate activism within the student body. To this end, we heed the arguments of Flintoff et al. (2015) who rightfully identify the benefits of exploring our personal experiences of white privilege within the domain of PE and sport. However, in line with the arguments of (Leonardo 2004; Leonardo and Porter 2010), we also reflect on how we have sought to develop our pedagogical practice when teaching about race and ethnicity in order to move beyond narcissistic accounts and discussions of our 'whiteness', and attempting instead to encourage our students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds to critically reflect upon the structural factors which continue to perpetuate white racial dominance in society. As a result, we hope to provide stimulus for fellow white academics to adopt pedagogical approaches that provide the impetus for activism and empowerment, whilst exploring the nature of normative behaviours associated with 'whiteness' in HE.

We adopt an autoethnographic methodological approach to inform our forthcoming discussion, centering our discussion around a series of reflective vignettes on critical events which epitomise our many shared ruminations on our 'whiteness' when delivering lectures on the topics of race and ethnicity. As has been argued elsewhere (Chang 2016; Ellis and Bochner 2000; Ellis et al. 2010), autoethnographic approaches facilitate an opportunity for researchers to both share and critically analyse past experiences with their audience, and this methodological approach has been shown to be fruitful in academic reflections on the nature of 'whiteness' (Magnet 2006; Pennington 2013; Toyosaki et al. 2009). Whilst colleagues and office-mates on the BA Physical and Sport Education degree programme at St. Mary's University, we spent a great deal of time informally reflecting upon our pedagogical practice together. As relatively inexperienced members of academic staff in our field these conversations were central in shaping our awareness of our own positionality within our field, and our practice when delivering content relating to race and ethnicity emerged as the most frequently discussed element of our teaching responsibilities. Indeed, it is the frequency of these reflective discussions which has motivated us to share our reflections with a wider audience.

To this end, we have selected four vignettes which concisely illustrate examples of incidents which have challenged our pedagogical practice as white academics, with each vignette followed up with a critical reflection on the respective incident by each author through engagement with academic literature from the fields of critical race theory, education and the sociology of sport. The concluding section brings our separate 'voices' back together for a collaborative reflection upon the potential implications of our respective experiences for white academics, particularly those who also strive to move beyond simply creating 'safe space' discussions of whiteness which fail to illuminate the engrained structural nature of white domination and racial injustice in our society (Leonardo and Porter 2010).

Am I Too White to Talk About Blackness?— Michael Hobson

Since the department's expert on race in sport (a black male) had left at the end of the previous semester I'd volunteered to take the session on race the first time. Yet as it grew nearer more worries ran through my head, with just over a third of the class of thirty from BME backgrounds. As a white male will I appear sincere to my students? Will I offend anybody? What if the group don't engage in discussion, or somebody says something ignorant or offensive? I'd prepared a lot for the session, thinking carefully about the tasks I planned to offer room for discussion but to limit the chance of causing offense. I'd even sent my slides to my former colleague to get his thoughts on what I'd prepared. Validation from a black peer seemed important for me to ease my anxieties. Nonetheless, I still felt on edge. An hour and half later and the session was complete and I felt a sense of relief; the discussions had been good, no one had appeared to take offense, and a few students even mentioned discussing the topic in their assignment. Now that I'd finished... this all seemed a bit dramatic.

During my initial experience of teaching in HE, I had embraced the relative comfort of teaching about the rules of sports, pedagogical models, and creative ways of transmitting knowledge. However, the incorporation of critical discussions of identity was something I did not appreciate the value of. The power dynamics associated with the content I taught were not was invisible to me, and as far as I was concerned

using what I deemed to be fairly exciting and innovative approaches towards teaching should be enough to engage all learners regardless of race. However, through exposure to critical theory, my opinion began to change with the focus of my teaching increasingly being orientated towards the sociology of PE, and sport, moving away from the “what” and the “how” of teaching and coaching sport that preoccupied many of my colleagues. However, even as a sociologist I still felt a discomfort in discussing issues regarding race, I often lent towards discussing safer topics such as social class, policy or social theory. If I as a liberal, white sociologist felt unable to approach the topic of race this led me to question other people readiness to tackle such issues within HE.

In the years following the session discussed above, Morrison’s (1992) analogy of ‘the fishbowl’ has become an extremely powerful metaphor for the invisibility of racism which has informed my thinking. She argues that white supremacy in society is present on a structural level that reflects the political system and power struggle in which it is embedded (Taylor 2016). Like a fishbowl, these structures transparently permit the order of life inside, however remain invisible to white protagonists whose lived experience renders them unable to view their own privilege within the system. Within HE the ‘order of life’ derives from the curricula, the hierarchy of disciplines, the heritage of establishments, the faculty and the student body (Gillborn 2008; Pilkington 2013); all of these are shaped by the historical and cultural developments of HE (Bathmaker et al. 2013). Recent critiques of HE in the UK have described the hierarchy as ‘male, pale, and stale’ (NUS 2016) with white middle-class males dominating the most influential positions, both ideologically within the curriculum (the dominance of dead white male theorists), and physically within the faculty. This has often left me wondering as a white male lecturing in HE, how to highlight and disrupt the structural inequalities and anxieties that reproduce white privilege within the discipline of PE and sport in HE.

Traditionally, the more vocationally-focused programmes such as the mass PE and sport degrees I teach on are viewed as being lower within the hierarchies of HE; however, these ‘lower-status’ courses often still demonstrate privileges to white students (Shay 2013). Through subtle implicit messages that are transmitted through daily practices of PE

and sports programmes in schools and universities, invisible pedagogies are transmitted, subtly conveying idealised forms of knowing for students in order to successfully negotiate the terrain of PE and sport in HE (Fitzpatrick 2012; Aldous et al. 2014). Central to the construction of the correct way of knowing is desire for these programmes to reproduce 'people like us', a phenomenon that occurs in the recruitment of staff and the knowledge studied within courses (Alexander and Arday 2015). Archer (2007) notes the curriculum of education studies within HE has moved away from the critical discussions of society present during the 1970s, instead privileging understanding of the 'what' and the 'how' of teaching, while the who is sidelined to a number of labels and acronyms such as 'BME', English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). These technocratic practices are rooted in the development of practical competencies of transmission of skills, drills, and behaviour management (Dowling et al. 2015). This knowledge is viewed as neutral to race, gender, sexuality and other aspects of social identity, thus reproducing behaviour that demonstrates idealised forms of whiteness in PE and sport rather than illuminating its racialised nature (Hylton 2015).

Subsequently, this is reinforced through the lack of diversity regarding staff members within my institution. Within studies of HE, one influential factor for students from all social stratifications and ethnicities in their choice of institution is a sense of attending a university with other 'people like us' (Bourdieu 1990). However, while on the one hand my students from a BME background are becoming increasingly likely to experience others with similar cultural heritage in the student body (Alexander and Arday 2015; Gorard 2010), constituting approximately a third of our 300 students at St. Mary's, the experience of being taught by 'people like them' is not possible at my institution given our entirely white staff team. Seeing individuals that display similar tastes, mannerisms, and physical characteristics is considered highly influential in drawing students towards particular topics and institutions (Ball et al. 2002; Crozier et al. 2008; Reay 1998, 2001). This reinforces the notion that white academics act as custodians of knowledge who unconsciously reinforce a hierarchy of whiteness and 'other' BME students. This can result in BME students experiencing a disconnect from the faculty, and

experiencing a sense of the university being a white space. In sum, this section is representative of the awakening of my critical consciousness regarding the inherent whiteness of our field within HE, and the need for more actively anti-racist pedagogical stances.

The 'Affective Domain' and Student Alterity in Higher Education—Stuart Whigham

6 months after leaving St Mary's, I receive a 'Jiscmail' mailing list email from my replacement as module leader on the second year sociology of sport and PE module. Curious, I read on to discover that they are appealing for guest lecturers to deliver particular sessions on the module relating to religion, sexuality, social inclusion, race and ethnicity in sport, arguing their privileged position as a "straight, white, atheist, PhD-educated" academic potentially prevents them from adopting a sufficiently "critical vantage" to deliver these topics. I immediately feel uncomfortable as this new set of eyes on the module content has confirmed a nagging feeling that I had discussed with my previous colleague Michael – my inability to truly empathise with my students when delivering these sessions from a similarly privileged standpoint. I feel a flush of embarrassed red coming over my face as I reflect on whether I have been doing my Black, Ethnic Minority, female, or LGBT students a disservice through my fudged attempts to empathise with their lived experiences, or whether I have simply missed a trick to enhance the quality of their learning experience by failing to enlist the help of academics with specialisms on these topics...

With Michael having considered his increased awareness of 'white privilege' in HE, my attention now turns to the manifestation of this privileged position when delivering educational content on race. In particular, I draw on the work of Bloom (1956) and Bloom et al. (1956) on the contrasting domains of learning, with specific reference to learning experiences in the 'affective domain', to reflect on the issues of empathy and alterity highlighted in my vignette. For Bloom, learning in the 'affective domain' involves the development of an individual's ability to understanding both their own emotions and those of others, thus being able to empathise with the values, experiences, attitudes and positions of others more effectively.

I have found the notion of learning in the 'affective domain' important when reflecting upon the issue of race and racism in HE. This approach moves beyond simply developing the 'cognitive domain' of knowledge that racism and racial stereotyping exists in society, to a more empathetic understanding of the experiences of individuals of a different race where the learning experiences focus on challenging racial attitudes by considering the subjective positions of others (Flintoff and Webb 2012). Through my knowledge of the structure of similar PE courses in the UK, it would appear that the inclusion of sociological content within PE degree programmes, and Initial Teacher Training programmes more widely, tends to have the explicit rationale of fostering this empathetic understanding of the impacts of social stratification on learners (Flintoff et al. 2015; Hylton 2015).

Whilst this use of sociological content to develop more empathetic and inclusive educational practitioners is undoubtedly a laudable goal at face value, I have found that the core assumptions of this approach to learning in the 'affective domain' are more problematic and, at times, potentially contradictory when applied in practice (Beard et al. 2007). For example, when teaching students about the potential barriers to progression to senior leadership positions within the field of sport or PE for Black students, or the potential falsehood of using sport as a means of social mobility for Black athletes, my understanding of the nature of racial discrimination is clearly limited by my lack of experience of such phenomena in practice.

However, these positional challenges may not always be fully appreciated by practitioners due to a lack of self-examination of the privileges afforded to them by their 'invisible' whiteness in the educational domain (Flintoff et al. 2015). My personal experience of these positional challenges has always prompted a certain degree of navel-gazing with regards to the delivery of content on the topic of race and my inability to empathise with the lived experiences of our Black and Minority Ethnicity students within both education and society more broadly. Given that I have never experienced the effects of overt, covert or institutionalised racism due to my whiteness, my ability to provide a fully authentic or appreciative account of the impacts of race in the contexts of education or sport is undoubtedly hampered by our own privileged racial characteristics.

Levinas' (1999) and Frank's (2004) arguments regarding the concept of 'alterity' is instructive for exploring the impact of my white privilege on student-teacher dynamics in the context of HE. Both theorists emphasise the importance of respecting the 'alterity' or 'otherness' of other individuals within social interactions, highlighting the risk of crudely violating the experiences and beliefs of others through well-intentioned attempts to empathise with others. In particular, Frank (2004: 115) argues that:

to infringe on the other person's alterity – their otherness that precedes any attributes – is to commit violence against the other. Symbolic violence comprises the often subtle ways that alterity is challenged and violated.

The positional challenges faced by white practitioners in HE when covering content relating to race are fundamentally rooted in the violation of the alterity of Black and Minority Ethnicity students. Whilst my attempts to encourage learning through the 'affective domain' and the development of skills of empathy for white educational practitioners or students may have good intentions, I will always remain unable to provide an authentic and complete understanding of the lived experiences of other racial groups who occupy the 'liminal space of alterity' (Ladson-Billings and Donnor 2008; Rollock 2012). Furthermore, if the discussions I facilitate fail to critically examine the factors which support the structural nature of white domination in society, then we will simply revert back to the superficial 'safe-space' discussion of race denounced by Leonardo and Porter (2010: 148):

...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 color. 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. It is a managed health-care version of anti-racism, an insurance against 'looking racist'.

Race, Ethnicity and the Sociology of PE & Sport—A Case in Point?—Stuart Whigham

I'm pretty sure that at some point during my seminar on the topic of race and ethnicity in sport, the 'n-word' debate will be raised by a student for discussion, as has happened on every previous occasion. This time it happens in record speed, with the issue raised by a Black male student halfway through the lecture who asks my thoughts on whether it is racist for a white person to use the phrase – no ducking the issue in front of a full crowd. Following what can only be described as painful advanced caveating of my response (e.g. context of phrase, intent of phrase, lyrical repetition versus self-selected descriptive term, and so on), I finally bring myself to hesitantly offer a response that I do not believe that using the 'n-word' necessarily makes someone a racist in itself, but that instead displaying racist behavior and discriminatory attitudes makes someone a racist. Having avoided eye contact with all students as the uncensored 'n-word' leaves my mouth, I hope that my attempt to break the ice will lead to a more open debate on the semantics of the word (and not a formal complaint)... my answer appears to be met with approval by the original questioner and others, and the ensuing dialogue on the topic weighs up different stances on the phrase from students in a balanced and critical manner. However, I note that the only students to repeat the word uncensored are those who are black or mixed-parentage... the white students awkwardly fidget and stick to saying the 'n-word', possibly in an attempt to avoid the perceived risks that I appear to have taken...

Although a respectful appreciation of student alterity can begin to address some of the challenges faced by white HE practitioners when discussing topics relating to race, it is also abundantly clear that a number of other challenges remain for consideration. My attention now turns to the specific academic field in which my experiences lie, namely the sociology of PE and sport, to reflect upon how these challenges have presented themselves in practice.

Sociology of sport is said to suffer from 'double domination' (Bourdieu 1988: 153), creating the "specific difficulties that the sociology of sport encounters: scorned by sociologists, it is despised by sportspersons". This 'double domination' that inflicts the sociology of sport emanates from, first, the relatively low status of sport within the general field of sociology (Carrington 2015). This is due to perceptions

about the triviality of sport as a social phenomenon. Secondly, there is a general dislike from the sporting profession due to the often critical arguments of sociologists about the nature of sport. Despite these spurious headwinds for the sociological study of sport and PE, the very nature of these activities are undoubtedly an extremely useful medium for examining the impact of race on society historically and contemporaneously with my students, given both the centrality of sports within global popular culture and the 'embodied' nature of sport which provides an explicit, highly visual representation of racial stratification within the sporting domain.

Indeed, sports and PE can be viewed as analogous examples for the wider effects of racial stratification within wider society, with phenomena such as the 'racial stacking' of playing positions, whereby leadership and decision-making positions have been historically dominated by white players in contrast to the over-representation of Black players in positions demanding power and pace. This phenomenon has thus been attributed to false perceptions of contrasting physical and intellectual capabilities of different racial groups based on misleading, biologically-deterministic 'evidence' (Azzorito and Harrison 2008; Entine 2001; Hoberman 1997; Hylton 2015; St. Louis 2003, 2004). Sport and PE have therefore acted as a useful medium to explore some of the wider impacts of race within education and society more broadly within my teaching practice in HE.

However, discussion of concepts such as racial stacking, the lack of representation of BME individuals in leadership positions, and the way in which BME sports people are stereotyped in the media fail to highlight notions of white privilege (Carrington 2010, 2013; Hylton 2015). The focus becomes on how seemingly distant organisations mistreat and misrepresent BME sports people. Although doing so may help my students developed an understanding of discrimination, this fails to develop an understanding of white privilege. Furthermore, my attempts to foster open discussion of racial terminology and slurs, such as in the example of my above vignette, can arguably only achieve the superficial, 'safe space' discussions which Leonardo and Porter (2010) are critical of. Nonetheless, Hylton's (2015) extensive critical reflections on the importance of pedagogical practices which support critical exploration of the

nature of ‘race talk’ within the domain of sport and PE exemplify the fertile nature of these topics for developing critical practitioners. To this end, Hylton argues that “talking critically about these myths and stereotypes disrupts the calcifying of racial ideas that could potentially lead to new generations of PE educators and leaders in sport reproducing toxic racialised ideologies” (2015: 511); this is a position which we have attempted to embrace within our own teaching practice.

‘Discrimination Ball’—Michael Hobson

As I sit in the office preparing for my forthcoming session on race in PE and sport, I flick through the pages of Fitzpatrick’s Physical Education, Critical Pedagogy, and Urban Schooling, and I’m inspired by the practices of Dan, a teacher working in an underprivileged community in New Zealand. I quickly grab a pen and paper and start jotting down notes, thinking about how I can adapt his practices. The end product is an invasion game similar to his, played in teams of five, where the rules are designed to explicitly privilege some students and marginalise others’. Rules stipulating that only certain players can run, hold the ball, or are allowed within particular areas of the pitch are enforced. Furthermore, only certain students are allowed to contribute to team-talks and other students are to act as coaches providing feedback to some students purely on their physical qualities, and others on their intelligence replicating racial stacking. Once the session comes around, I do my best to make sure that the white males in the group who are the most distinguished athletes are penalised the most, in the hope of provoking emotions of anger, frustration, and disheartenment. It is my hope that the group can spot the game is a metaphor for society, and consider adopting similar approaches in some of their future practices. However, I soon realise that while the game embodies inequality, it will take much more than a twenty-minute game of “Discrimination Ball” to challenge racial inequality.

Although the above practice sets out to tackle social inequality, it has been argued that our academic discipline of PE and sport has traditionally reinforced social stratifications in relation to race, gender, social class and disability (Carrington 2010; Dowling et al. 2015; Flintoff 2014; Flintoff and Webb 2012). Sport has helped to perpetuate the

eugenicist notion of 'the dangerous other' by depicting the Black body as animalistic, aggressive and hypersexual thus normalising white privilege (Fitzpatrick 2013; Shilling 2012). For Fernández-Balboa and Muros (2006), the traditional forms of practice associated with PE result in a central focus on the physical development of pupils through depositing skills, and physical competencies. This reinforces the notion that Black students are physical and not intellectual, reducing learning in PE and sport to an embodied form of 'banking', ignoring the repressive social and political contexts which remain unchallenged (Freire 1970). The emphasis on sport-specific knowledge, learning theory and instructional models in PE programmes within HE diverts attention from the racialised nature of the sporting domain, neutering the capabilities of students in terms of challenging the norms within sport, PE and education more broadly.

Reflecting upon my past experiences of teaching about race I often focused upon 'barriers faced by minority groups in PE and sport curriculum', and have come to realise that this can lead to further isolation or frustration for members of minority groups. At times the stereotypical perceptions expressed by white, middle-class peers can further patronise and pathologise students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds (Leonardo 2004). For example, when I have set assignments that ask students to discuss racialised barriers to participation in sport, this can result in white students 'othering' BME students, placing the emphasis upon non-whites as the problem for not meeting the norms of society. This potentially results in superficial discussions of issues such as religious fasting, religious clothing, sub-cultural groupings and cultural practices (Hylton 2015). In doing so students from white backgrounds fail to recognise their own racial privileges by considering themselves to be lacking of ethnicity.

While the practical activity mentioned in the vignette above encouraged students to empathise with the position of others, as with the assessment tasks too it failed to extend beyond the confines of the task and achieve Freire's (1970) desire for students to commit themselves to enacting social change by continually re-examining themselves, and challenging oppressive social practices. Freire's position resonates with Fernández-Balboa and Stiehl's (1995) contention that the study

of critical topics in PE and sport is insufficient; it is therefore argued that there is a need for practitioners in PE and sport to embrace critical approaches to assessment and delivery, avoiding transmission of current inequalities and power dynamics within the study of PE and sport. Interventions such as the expanded use of staff and student biography within pedagogical practice have been argued to achieve this goal of embracing critical practice, thus creating a more reflexive and open environment which allows greater political and social agency for students and staff to re-examine themselves constantly (Camacho and Fernández-Balboa 2006; Fernández-Balboa 2009). One practice that we are therefore exploring which has potential to enhance awareness of white privilege is to set assignments that encourage students to reflect upon their own experiences of privilege and/or discrimination in the context of PE and sport. However, we recognise that this practice in itself may have limitations and is only one of a number of tools that can be deployed when developing an anti-racist pedagogy.

A Concluding Dialogue on Reflexive Whiteness and Pedagogic Practice in PE—Michael and Stuart

As white male academics teaching PE we both found the process of reflecting on our practice both challenging and somewhat disconcerting at times. How do we overcome the challenges of respecting student alterity when exploring issues of race in our teaching? We do not wish to be defeatist in tone. Instead, we argue that the self-reflections and navel-gazing recommended in Flintoff et al. (2015) work on collective biography relating to race in PETE can benefit white practitioners in our field, and HE more broadly. However, in order to maximise the potential benefits of reflexive processes, we need to move beyond introspection regarding our own discomforts or uncertainties when tasked to deliver such content by demonstrating a willingness to expose ourselves to vulnerability by embracing teaching methods which will critically explore the nature of racial privilege and discrimination in our chosen academic fields.

We therefore advocate the use of provocative teaching methods and critical questioning which can force reflexivity from all students and practitioners regarding issues of race and ethnicity throughout all of our practice, thus embracing the potential impact of exploring the uncomfortable or awkward realities of discussing these emotive and delicate social phenomena. Furthermore, we also advocate the integration of discussions of race and whiteness within other lectures we deliver, instead of isolating it to the few dedicated lectures within the curriculum. One tactile way to do so could be to ask the questions such as that presented by Hacker (1992) “how much compensation would somebody need to pay you to become black for the rest of your life?”. Critical questions such as these help white students to understand the value that society places upon their whiteness and unpick the normative inequality experienced by BME students within the field of PE and sport.

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