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Being Black, Male and Academic: Navigating the White Academy

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Achieving a goal or an objective for any human being is the pinnacle of visualising a dream and being able to see this come to fruition. As someone diagnosed on the autistic spectrum with a strand of autism referred to as Global Development Delay (GDD) who learned to read and write at the age of 18, I often think about my journey within education. These thoughts are then followed by what this journey represents when I consider my chosen career path... academia. Upon reflection, there is a self-deprecating aspect of me which often queries whether I have the characteristics, capabilities and credentials traditionally associated with being an academic. Perhaps, my experiences in education and in some ways the deficit position I started from contribute to this particular view, in addition to the professional experiences I have encountered in academia. Interestingly, the 'hidden' part of my journey as an autistic learner is very different from my outward facing presence and journey as a Black Male. Something that cannot remain hidden.

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Negotiating this professionally has always been difficult, as I am overtly aware that my presence as a Black Male academic powerfully disrupts the normativity and centrality of Whiteness within academia.

Whilst disrupting these patterns of normativity are essential towards advocating greater diversification and equality for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)¹ staff within academia, this does often come at a personal cost. During my time in academia, I have more often than not felt isolated and marginalised. There had always been a feeling that survival needed to resemble keeping my head below the parapet and ensuring that I did not draw attention towards myself. The feelings that accompany these experiences ultimately result in a disposition that 'I do not belong here' or 'I am not good enough to be here'. Often these feelings are compounded by racialised experiences which reassert hegemony, normativity, Whiteness, power and privilege (Leonardo 2002). A prominent and more insidious vehicle for maintaining these oppressive cultures has been the racial micro-aggression (Pérez Huber and Solorzano 2015). This effective 'tool of Whiteness' reminds us how racism can be conveyed through subtle occurrences of subordination (Leonardo 2002; Picower 2009). Negotiating and grappling with my presence as a Black Male in academia has been difficult because you are reminded through verbal and symbolic occurrences that you are different from your White counterparts in many cases you are perceived as inferior (Cordova 1998; Ladson-Billings 1998). This becomes a reoccurring narrative which eventually affects and erodes confidence. These feelings become a burden on one's psyche and I have always been aware of the potential effects of this on my mental facilities.

My recent reflection on these experiences through my research and verbal recollections have allowed me to begin conceptualising the effects of racial discrimination and marginality on Black Male academics. The patterns of exclusion which facilitate these experiences can be difficult to articulate or conceptualise due to the irrationality which often ensues

¹Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and People of Colour are used interchangeably throughout this chapter to refer individuals experiencing racism or discrimination in the Academy or society. This term is also used to describe individuals from Black, Asian, Middle-Eastern (Asia), Mixed-Heritage or Latin American ethnic backgrounds.

when racism is confronted by BME academics. These reflections have also prompted and ignited a desire to confront racism despite the imbalance of power and hegemony which pervades within higher education. Challenging this becomes pertinent particularly in a professional context where causal racism within academia is fluid and commonplace. I offer my story as a cathartic outlet for the racialised experiences I have encountered during my journey in academia; as a way of better understanding these experiences and how racism continues to endure within academia to the detriment of Black Male academics.

In this chapter, I draw upon three personal narratives which illuminate my experiences of navigating the White Academy as a Black Male academic. I will employ the counter-narrative as a semi-biographical instrument to unpack the following experiences; attempting to gain employment opportunities within the Academy; and negotiating staff and students perceptions of me as a Black Male within academia. The counter-narrative is a tool of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which seeks to explore and challenge the prevalence of racial inequality within society (Cordova 1998; Solorzano and Yosso 2002). This chapter will conclude with future considerations for greater diversification within Higher Education and exploring my own position as a practitioner and researcher of race and social justice discourse within the Academy.

Gaining Entry into the Ivory Tower

The centrality and all-encompassing nature of Whiteness makes it extremely difficult to penetrate within academia (Ansley 1997; Gillborn 2015; Shilliam 2015). The normativity of this supremacy has meant that the Academy continues to remain the province of the White Middle classes, with recruitment processes often resembling academic appointments made through conscious biases (Alexander and Arday 2015; ECU 2015). A process which continues to be the most prominent disabler of diversity. Upon recalling my experiences of attempting to gain employment within academia; I am reminded of the countless times I have walked into an interview situation where a normally all-White panel are astounded to see a Black Male applicant. At this point, I am already

mindful that several racial ascriptions are taking place in the mind of the interviewees which potentially border on an ignorant disposition. This is contradictory to the footnote that nowadays precedes most job advertisements in academia... 'We value a diverse workforce and would particularly welcome applications from BME candidates where we are currently underrepresented'. The continued dearth of BME academics within the sector suggests this statement to be a tokenistic response to increased calls for greater diversification of academic staff (Ahmed 2012; Bhopal 2014). At the end of all interviews, I have always taken the opportunity to claim a small semblance of control and redistribute the power dynamics that so often do not work in the favour of BME applicants. The questions I pose always query two fundamental aspects; 'Is your staff and student population diverse?' the common response to this being... 'No'. This is followed by interrogating the interview panel further; 'What is your university doing to promote greater diversification of staff and students?' By this point there is a slight sadistic thrill gained from observing (in most, not all cases) a clearly non-cognisant panel squirm on race-related politics and issues. For a short period, the discomfort encountered whilst answering these questions provides a brief source of amusement for what quite frankly will often result in an unsuccessful interview. In many cases, I am rarely provided with the reasons as to why I was unsuccessful, compounding the disappointment further and making this harder to comprehend. Conveying this experience to others is difficult, particularly White colleagues who often view my interpretations of these 'racialised' encounters as subjective, interpretive and without an evidence base. The wall of fragility which I encounter has become an expected and obvious reaction towards discussing or disseminating experiences of racial inequality within academia or society more generally (McIntosh 1992; Shilliam 2015).

My experiences illustrate the multi-dimensional reach of Whiteness and how it can be utilised to continually facilitate processes which perpetrate racial inequality (Picower 2009). These processes ensure that BME academics continue to operate on the periphery of our overwhelmingly White institutions (Casey 1993). Universities by and large are often lauded as a microcosm of society and a hub for multiculturalism and diversity (Alexander and Arday 2015). I have always

found it interesting how universities interpret ‘diversity and equality’ as they have always been wedded to the idea of meritocracy, which is somewhat of a fallacy upon examining the current landscape. Research (Arday 2017a; Alexander and Arday 2015; Andrews 2016; ECU 2015; Shilliam 2015) suggests that in fact universities are deepening and perpetuating inequitable cultures which reinforce poor diversification and racial inequality. This becomes contradictory of the egalitarian utopia espoused by universities, especially when they continue to create inequitable systems through recruitment processes which appear to disadvantage BME applicants (Bhopal 2014). Clearly, these systems have not been penetrative because there remains an impenetrable ‘glass-ceiling’ which ensures that the centrality of Whiteness pervades at the expense of BME academics (Ahmed 2012).

This narrative and these barriers become entrenched within the mind as a BME academic. You apply for jobs aware that there are inequitable external factors beyond your control. You also become cognisant of your presence as a potential tokenistic gesture playing lip-service to the mantra... ‘We are an equal opportunities employer’. You are effectively faced with a situation where it becomes difficult to approach these interview experiences with any kind of optimism, because you immediately become aware of two main factors; will they be able to look past the colour of my skin and will the interview panel most likely be all white? For many BME academics continuously in this situation you are fighting against a systemic and institutional problem which reinforces the paucity of faculty of colour within the sector. This problem is deeply engrained within universities, with its roots firmly entwined within discriminatory cultures (Andrews 2016). As David Lammy MP former Higher Education minister stated in *The Guardian* in response to British universities employing no Black academics in top roles:

This is absolutely shocking. I am appalled that higher education is so deeply unrepresentative of the country. Universities talk about widening participation and fair access but the complete lack of diversity in senior positions sends out an absolutely dreadful message to young people from ethnic minorities who find themselves wondering whether university is for them or not. (David Lammy MP for Tottenham, Former Higher Education Minister, *The Guardian*, 2017)

HESA figures from 2015–2016 compound some of the arguments presented within this chapter. The 2015–2016 figures show universities employed 3,205 Black people as academics, 1,805 in secretarial roles and 1,410 in ‘elementary occupations’, including cleaners, porters and security guards (HESA 2016). Comparatively, HESA found 158,000 white staff in academic posts and fewer than 70,000 performing clerical or manual labour. Unsurprisingly, this all points to a reoccurring and enduring narrative... BME staff continue to be under-represented in less senior and senior levels within higher education (Bhopal 2014; ECU 2015). Under the Equality Act 2010, universities have a duty to ensure equal opportunities for those who may be discriminated against or under-represented. However, monitoring and accountability for senior university stakeholders who do not prioritise diversification of academic staff remains problematic as there are no formal penalties or sanctions, despite the introduction of the ECU Race Equality Charter which specially focuses on improving racial equality practices in higher education (ECU 2015).

Having been overlooked for several senior academic posts despite being suitably qualified, I am often reminded of my first experience applying for a job in higher education 8 years ago. I was unsuccessful during this application, but was proud to have been shortlisted. I asked the interviewer for some feedback on my interview and was really perplexed by their retort, which was, ‘unfortunately, Jason... sometimes your face does not fit’. At this point, I had not aligned this potentially to experiencing racism or being treated differently. As the saying would suggest, familiarity breeds contempt... particularly when you find yourself on the end of these types of comments regularly. The language of rejection or covert racism as I would see it became more refined against a backdrop of diplomatic jargon, ‘on this occasion Jason, you were great, but just not what we were looking for at this time’. I was often left with feelings of why do I even bother? The thing I have always taken away from these disappointing experiences is that I am fortunate to be able to use my work as a vehicle to disseminate these encounters. Professionally, I have experienced more disappointment than success, which is commonplace in academia.

For an academic of colour, this disappointment can be continuous and unrelenting. Perhaps, an important aspect for me now as a Black Male academic which I was unaware of before entering the Academy is the dynamics and subtle nuances of racism and how this penetrates society and its major institutions. Being able to navigate racism within higher education, particularly when attempting to gain employment requires resilience. Significantly, what these experiences do provide are opportunities for BME academics to consider how they may circumnavigate racial inequality whether they are successful or unsuccessful during interview and recruitment processes (Leonardo 2016; Rollock 2016).

Negotiating Staff and Students Perceptions of Me as a Black Male in Academia

Penetrating the walls of the ivory tower and gaining employment is difficult, but perhaps something more difficult than this is negotiating staff and student perceptions which reside against a backdrop of normative Whiteness and dominant Eurocentric curricula (Pérez Huber and Solorzano 2015). My own engagement in negotiating staff and student perceptions of me as a Black Male academic have often been surprising, particularly with regards to the judgements placed upon your professional capabilities (Ahmed 2012; Mirza 2017; Puwar 2004). Upon reflecting on some of these experiences, I am reminded of the constant indifferent treatment to my White contemporaries. Working within these binaries of racism can be enlightening due to becoming aware of how this overt instrument manifests itself in varying insidious ways. For myself and the majority of BME academics this insidious racism derives from the racial micro-aggression. Racial micro-aggressions are often utilised as 'tool of Whiteness' to accentuate deficiency or to demonstrate that Blacks are not as capable as their White counterparts (Cordova 1998; Leonardo 2002; Picower 2009; Sue 2010).

My encounters with this form of racism always resembled a questioning of my capabilities as an academic. The unsurprising caveat to these experiences came from the solitary position I have always adopted as the

only or one of few Black members of faculty. Very often I found myself in situations where I was continuously under surveillance, an aspect that became quite upsetting as I soon came to realise that this type of surveillance was not extended to my White colleagues. Andrews (2016) reminds us that often inequitable academic environments and cultures are sustained by those that have the power and privilege to ensure this. The gap between compliance and enforcement becomes a real and prevalent issue for the BME academic attempting to comply and not destabilise the establishment (Adams 2017; Shilliam 2015). Moreover, there is an awareness of who maintains the power and privilege, whilst recognising the vulnerability of your position as a Black academic at the behest of senior White administrators who have the authority to make your position become untenable (Ahmed 2012; Apple 2004; ECU 2015). Effectively, operating on the margins has become a normalised disposition for BME academics, which has made us susceptible to feelings of marginalisation, isolation and inequity (ECU 2015; Ladson-Billings and Donnor 2008; Mirza 2017). During my time in higher education, I have always been thought of as deficient or not as capable, and I proffer this without a sense of paranoia, hyper-sensitivity or cynicism. At this juncture, I recall two particular incidents which with the passing of time I have come to accept as part of the symbolic acts of violence which permeated my everyday professional life.

The first recollection, points to a discussion with a previous colleague after a period of student feedback in which the cohort of students suggested that I had been a real asset to the module, something my colleagues at the time found quite hard to digest. A colleague then referred to me as a 'dark horse'... stating that, 'I did not know someone like you was capable of such things'. This comment was preceded by 'Let's be honest, the only reason students like you is because you are Black, and Black is the new cool, also you give everyone hugs and high-fives'. Interestingly, the gravity of such an overtly ignorant and racist comment was accepted as a source of humour by my White colleagues at the time. As the only person of colour in the room, I felt undermined, degraded and humiliated, with my mouth arrested in disbelief, subconsciously mindful that a flippant or curt response could potentially place me in

a position of further vulnerability. Unfortunately, what I soon came to realise is that while these comments are instantaneous; the residual effects of these racial micro-aggressions are enduring and a constant reminder that you are perceived as professionally inadequate (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996; Ladson-Billings 1998; Lipsitz 1998; Mirza 2017).

The second recollection, draws upon an encounter with a series of students who all held a similar viewpoint in relation to being assured of my professional capabilities. During my time in academia, I have become very aware of how taken aback students are to be taught by a Black Male. There is a recognition that my presence challenges and disrupts their views of what they perceived Black Males to be, or as one student put it to me once, 'Are you into Rap music...? No offence but you look like you should be a Rapper instead of a Lecturer'. To which the group responded with rapturous laughter. Mindful of my place as a minority ethnic individual, there are times where you visibly weigh up the consequences of challenging and confronting such ignorant comments. This internal conflict undermines and erodes confidence, as you begin to observe this erosion reflecting back as you observe yourself in the mirror.

These racialised experiences reach a crescendo, when students ask you for your help, meanwhile making a clear judgement upon your capabilities which place your racial identity before your professional competence. Frequently, I encountered the same experience which resembled providing students with support or advice on how to complete a piece of coursework or navigate their way through a module; they then discuss their encounter with me to a White colleague, to validate whether the information provided was accurate or inaccurate. With my credibility and competence validated by a White colleague, the students then gain a sense of gratification knowing that this affirmation ensures that the information provided was correct. As a BME academic, you often find yourself in situations where staff and students are both complicit in your racialised experiences. For me this realisation, really emphasised the scale, hegemony and normativity of Whiteness and the reluctance to embrace ethnic difference. Ultimately, contributing to further feelings of operating on the periphery of an institutionally racist society (Alexander 2017; Gillborn 2008).

Racism is ingrained within the Academy. As Leonardo (2016) states the elevation and positioning of those with the power and privilege is reliant on this inequity and imbalance. An imbalance BME academics continue to be disadvantaged by. I offer my experiences not to extract sympathy or awe, but to highlight the cumulative effect of these occurrences and demonstrate how eventually they lead BME academics to lose confidence; question their own capabilities; or sadly leave the Academy altogether.

Many of the narratives provided collide with the notion of racial equality. Inequitable cultures are sustained by the insidious and covert nature of the racial micro-aggression (Rollock 2012). The burden that accompanies BME academics resembles invisibility and hyper-surveillance by both staff and students, with errors being exaggerated and exploited; and praise being reduced to fortuitous episodes or occurrences. To assimilate yourself within these cultures, comes at a physical and mental cost; an aspect of your suffering that you decompartmentalise everyday within your professional working life in an attempt survive (Arday 2017a; Stovall 2006). Keeping some semblance of yourself becomes crucial and integral in BME academics attempts to survive the Academy. As Williams (1991) states the loss of oneself within the landscape of Whiteness, can be hard to retrieve. Unfortunately, this personal, mental and physical cost is one that many BME academics endure for the entirety of their professional careers within academia. The enduring nature of racial discrimination within the Academy shows minimal signs of relenting, unless senior university stakeholders and policy-makers actively attempt to disrupt these cultures with penetrative interventions (Arday 2017b; ECU 2015).

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, a counter-narrative approach has been adopted to elicit racialised experiences of navigating the Academy as a Black Male academic. Understanding oppressive, patriarchal regimes is difficult because their foundations thrive on an unequal distribution of power. The function of Whiteness will always be used to as an

instrument to sustain hegemony, supremacy and inequality (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997; McIntosh 1990). The point of departure which subsequently occurs at this juncture recognises that sustained and penetrative efforts are needed to ensure greater diversification in higher education which are accommodating and inclusive of BME academics (Ahmed 2012; Arday 2017b). Achieving this requires a continuous integration of racist and inequitable cultures within the Academy. As generational and temporary custodians of the Academy we have a collective responsibility to dismantle racism and create a sector that is reflective of our multi-cultural and diverse society (Alexander 2017; Rollock 2016). Establishing legitimacy for BME academics within the Academy will always remain problematic because of the subordinated view of people of colour. However, disrupting racial inequality is integral if we are to collectively realise a more inclusive and diverse Academy.

Upon reflecting on this, there is something that has always comforted me even through the most difficult of experiences during my professional tenure in the Academy. Often, I am presented with the 18 year old Jason, and I remember the sense of euphoria that overwhelmed me once I had learned how to read and write... For me this was my Everest. At no stage, during that point did I ever entertain the idea that I could go from that particular milestone to gaining a PhD 12 years later and working in academia.

In July 2017, I was presented with a dream, in which I was talking to my 18 year old self... the day which preceded this was quite a stressful one in which I had encountered racism within the workplace. My 18 year old self, said to my older self... 'Do you know what Jason, I know this is hard but you have achieved something great, against great odds... you have set out to do something and you have overcome every obstacle in achieving that particular feat'. As I awoke, I thought to myself despite the traumatic, racialised experiences I have encountered professionally, I am one of the lucky few in this world that get to truly do something that while difficult, they enjoy.

Moreover and perhaps more pertinently, I am able to use my voice to speak to the inequality I have witnessed and experienced. Perhaps, sometimes in the mist of these negative experiences, I must remember those BME individuals that do not have a platform to

discuss their encounters of racism; those who are continuously silenced, subordinated and marginalised without an outlet for their frustration. If nothing else, having the opportunity to provide this counter-narrative as a Black Male reminds me of how fortunate I am to be able to tell my story. It is my hope that this story may provide some solace or resolve in navigating racism in all of its institutions forms.

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