

“To make friends, I had to “act White” so that I wouldn’t push them away”

*A study exploring how the experiences of Black African and Caribbean Students in the UK deters applications to Elite Russell Group Universities*

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## Introduction

Students from Black (and Ethnic minority) backgrounds have continuously been underrepresented in higher education institutions, particularly elite universities within the Russell Group (Boliver, 2016). The lack of diversity amongst the student population is a significant factor contributing to ‘institutional whiteness’, which is the way institutional spaces are “shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others; white bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces” (Ahmed, 2007: 157). Black students are made invisible in these white spaces whilst also becoming hyper-visible, meaning they stand-out or stand apart. As such, Black and ethnic minority students often report experiences of exclusion as well as the lack of inclusion and cultural acceptance within their universities (Arday, 2018). Ultimately, the experience of cultural alienation becomes a contributing factor gradually affecting and destabilising the mental and psychological well-being of Black (and ethnic minority) students (Ahmed, 2012 cited in Arday, 2018).

Racial discrimination is found to be a common place in U.K higher education institutions which heavily impacts the experiences of Black and ethnic minority students. More recently, ‘unconscious bias’ and microaggressions have replaced overt racism within institutions as a vindication for the continued occurrence of racism, allowing for the maintenance of White innocence (Tate and Page, 2018). Unconscious bias is described as “our brains making incredibly quick judgements and assessments of people and situations without us realising” (Tate and Page, 2018: 147), and is often used as an explanation for the racial disparities in higher education statistics. However, unconscious bias legitimises the ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ (Mills, 1997 cited in Tate and Page, 2018: 146), where racism is accepted through the idea of ignorance because it was not performed with intentional malice. However, the credence of racism being a part of our unconscious (and therefore, beyond our control) furthers the silences of racism, microaggressions, discrimination and bullying. Adversely, Direct or Teach First, trainee teachers also receive little training on race and racism which cannot permit any depth of understanding of race, ethnicity and racism. Similarly, unconscious bias has been addressed by a 10-minute online training course that is offered to all new starters in universities across the UK (Tate and Page, 2018). Hence, some teachers from a Black or ethnic minority background fail to act or effectively act in tackling racist incidents, which Pearce (2014) explains is due to the “power of conformity to fit in to the prevailing post-racial climate in our schools” (Pearce, 2014 cited in Lander, 2015).

Experiences of race and racism does not only emerge from the student population alone, but also amongst senior academics. Minimal culturally responsive teaching and a lack of academics from Black or ethnic minority backgrounds can affect the performance of students (Lessard-Phillips *et al.*, 2018). Academic attainment can be curtailed by racial discrimination

from staff or anxiety from the triggering of negative stereotypes, as such, Black and ethnic minority students are less likely to be awarded 'good degrees' compared to their white counterparts (Richardson, 2008). 'Good' degrees are degrees that are awarded with either a first-class or upper-second class honours; structural inequalities in society have been suggested to reduce the achievement and aspirations of students from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds (Richardson, 2008). However, academic performance appears to vary between different Black and ethnic minority groups. Black students in particular appear less likely to obtain a 'good' degree than Asian students (Richardson, 2008). Despite various inclusion and diversity schemes, UK universities remain largely occupied by white bodies whilst whiteness is boundlessly facilitated through "curricula, poor diversification, and racial ascriptions regarding the attainment capabilities of ethnic minority students" (Alexander and Arday, 2015 cited in Arday, 2018: 6). The UK's ethnocentric curricula which focuses on 'British Values' (Crozier, 2015: 39), dismisses the importance of exploring knowledge that reflects the culture of a growing ethnically diverse society. It is identified as one that 'codifies the knowledge, skills and attitudes which the "nation" holds to be important' (Gebrial, 2018: 25). Subjects of Western scholarships are "enduringly pale and male"; where people from Black or ethnic minority backgrounds do appear, they often lack substance/significance by being spoken on behalf or reduced to objects of scholarship (Bhambra *et al.*, 2018). Ethnocentric curriculum can contribute to feelings of not belonging, which is essential in new environments in order to relieve the initial integration process (Arday, 2018).

Existing literature has explored the concept of 'race', ethnicity and class in the context of both secondary and higher education, largely centred around the experiences of students from ethnic minority backgrounds within predominately White institutions (see Solórzano *et al.*, 2000; Arday, 2018; Bhambra *et al.*, 2018; and Gebrial, 2018). Institutional racism coupled with a Eurocentric curriculum are recurrent factors found within studies surrounding 'race' and education that deter Black (and ethnic minority) students from applying, being accepted and/or enjoying their course or institution. For example, Boliver (2016) found that despite being equivalently qualified to their white counterparts, Black and ethnic minority students are less likely to receive offers from Russell group universities, suggesting the operation of racial prejudice and stereotypes during the application process. Similarly, Lander (2015) found that there has been prejudice and racism within predominantly White institutions amongst students, as well as teachers and academics. Studies have explored how racial microaggressions have replaced overt and traditional forms of racism, in which it maintains the normative and dominant White cultures whilst stipulating discriminatory experiences (see Solórzano, 2000; Constantine *et al.*, 2011; and Arday, 2018). As a result, previous researchers have found higher levels of stress and imposter feelings amongst Black and ethnic minority students (see Cokley *et al.*, 2013; and Miranda *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, there have also been previous studies with findings indicating less economically advantaged students place less value on the choice of universities in comparison to students who are more economically advantaged. Ball *et al.* (2002) studied the perceptions of students studying in London, and their reasons for applying/attending their chosen university. They found and identified two types of choosers; 'contingent' and 'embedded'. With contingent students, finance is a key concern and constraint; the process of choice uses minimal information in regards to choosing a university. There is also minimal social capital that can be used to help during the decision-making process. In contrast, embedded choosers do not see finance as an issue and choose their universities based on "extensive and diverse sources of information"

(Ball *et al.*, 2002: 337). Although this study oriented around differences between class positions, Ball *et al.* (2002) also found that choice of university for most students included the ability to sustain aspects of their ethnic identity (see also Connor *et al.*, 2004; and Harper, 2012).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework largely used by researchers studying race and institutional racism. Initially, CRT was used to challenge the way race and racial power are represented in American society. Though, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) applied CRT to the field of education in which several scholars (see Gillborn, 2007; Harper, 2012; Arday, 2018; and Ball *et al.*, 2002 for example) have since used the perspective when researching 'race' institutional racism in education (Gillborn, 2007).

Nonetheless, the studies exploring race and racism within education often group Black and other ethnic minority groups together as a homogenous group, despite undergoing different experiences (see Richardson, 2008; and Cokley *et al.*, 2013 for example). Although Black students are likely to be from a working-class background, previous studies focusing on class differences in experience (see Ball *et al.*, 2002) do not explore racial factors coupled with being a Black student at a largely White institution. Studies that have acknowledged this, however, have been conducted quantitatively (see Constantine *et al.*, 2011; Boliver, 2016; and Lessard-Phillips *et al.*, 2018). As this study aims to understand how the experiences of Black students specifically effects the application rates of the Black student population, qualitative study is more appropriate in order to obtain a depth in understanding (Blandford, 2013). Furthermore, previous studies that explore the experiences of Black students have been conducted in the U.S (see Solórzano *et al.*, 2000 for example). Racism experiences are different in the U.K compared to the U.S, therefore, results are likely to differ from each other. Likewise, previous studies (see Ball *et al.*, 2002; and Connor *et al.*, 2004) surrounding the matter are outdated as they had been conducted over a decade ago, hence, experiences and race may have either improved or been exacerbated.

As such, with the use of the Critical Race Theory as theoretical framework, this study will address these limitations and advance the discussion through the use of the following research question: *Why are African and Caribbean Students Deterred from Applying to Russell Group Universities?*

## Methodology

In order to answer the research question effectively, semi-structured and video-call interviews were conducted over two six-week periods to produce detailed accounts of Black students' experiences in UK higher education institutions. The initial six-week research period consisted of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with five participants from Black African or Caribbean backgrounds. The use of semi-structured interviews allows participants the opportunity to provide detailed accounts of events (Opdenakker, 2006), which provides a greater depth of understanding the meaning of participants responses. It also permits for the analysis of social cues such as body language, gestures and the tone of voice of participants in addition to verbal responses (Opdenakker, 2006). The following research period used video-call semi-structured interviews with three additional participants, one of those being a follow up interview from the initial six-week research period. Video-calling is

an alternative method of communication to face-to-face interaction, and is currently the closest widely available technology in terms of “recreating the in-person experience whilst being geographically separate” (Krouwel *et al.*, 2019). It can be more convenient form of research method than in-person interviews if it is geographically difficult to access participants as the effort and time taken to meet is significantly reduced. In addition, video-calls are safer for both the participants and the interviewer as neither parties are required to go to an unfamiliar location (Krouwel *et al.*, 2019), avoiding uncomfortable positions which could otherwise affect the interview and responses. As the study was formed from an inductive approach, the use of semi-structured interviews (in-person and via video-call) allows for new data to derive from areas of research that are yet to be explored fully through the directive, but flexible research questions (Wethington and McDarby, 2015).

All participants were selected using a convenience sampling approach. Participants were recruited through online advertisement which was publicised and shared on Snapchat, as well as the ‘African and Caribbean Society’ WhatsApp group chats within selected universities such as Durham University and London School of Economics. Instant messenger applications have a faster and more conversational pace than emails or posters, it is suggested to be good for interviews with groups that may be uncomfortable with face-to-face communication (Krouwel, 2019). As such, instant messenger applications were used to gain participants, which is often used by younger audiences, therefore, more effective for finding Black students to participate. The advertisement addressed the purpose of the study, and included the information and contact details of the researcher. In doing so, potential participants have the ability to contact the researcher confidentially about their interest in the study, and resolve any queries revolving participation and/or the study. Although this sample approach lacks clear generalisability and external validity (Sedgwick, 2014), this is justified as the overall purpose of the study is to contribute to existing literature, and expand knowledge on exclusion and the deterrence to apply to Russell Group universities. Internal validity has a greater significance than external validity as the study aims to understand personal experiences and perceptions. Additionally, probability samples (for example, random sampling) require a large sample size, which is also likely to expend more time and resources than non-probability sampling methods. However, the use of convenience sampling consumes less time when collecting and analysing data due to the small sample size (Jager, 2017).

As previously outlined, both research periods used qualitative interviews to produce data for this study. Focus groups were considered prior to the conduction of the final study, however, as this study is investigating personal experiences, semi-structured interviews were decided to be more appropriate as it avoids interruption within a group setting when responding to questions which can distract the speaker from their stream of thoughts (Fern, 1982 cited in Acocella, 2012). The use of quantitative methods was not considered as this study intended to achieve depth of understanding in students’ experiences. Qualitative interviews during the initial research period were undergone in either a public or private setting, depending on the participants preference at the time of their convenience. Subsequently, during the final research period, interviews were conducted over video-calls (FaceTime). Although video-calls can be subject to an increase chance of social interruptions from family members, the interviews were also conducted at the time of participants convenience to overcome this issue. All interviews lasted between 20-45 minutes, and were recorded and later transcribed

verbatim for the analysis. Interviews conducted in the initial research period were structured around one main research question, with participants being asked about the reasons for attending their chosen university, and initial thoughts and feelings, subsequently followed by questions surrounding their overall experience so far. Questions formed in the final research period were structured around support for Black students in consideration to the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement protests in the US and UK. Prompts were prepared that aligned with key literature surrounding the study such as follow-up questions regarding microaggressions, racism and economic barriers. However, prompts were initiated after participants had been given the opportunity to openly respond to questions, to allow for an elaboration of responses (Adams, 2015).

Thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke, 2012) was used to analyse the data corroborated. Familiarisation of the data was gained by transcribing the data through reading and re-reading the interviews. All audio recordings were listened over whilst taking notes before formal coding. Data was also semantically coded before developing thematic categories in order to prioritise meanings provided within the data (Clarke, Braun and Hayfield, 2015). Although key themes were identified within the key literature, coding was completed to identify and ensure themes that emerge inductively. Thematic analysis can be used to identify patterns revealed within and across the data obtained from participants lived experience, views, and perspectives (Clarke and Braun, 2017). As it is a useful form of coding when deriving data from small data-sets (Clarke and Braun, 2017), and the study is focused on exploring personal experiences in higher education, thematic analysis is an appropriate form of coding when examining the meaning and provision of a description of social reality (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2016).

The ethical issues considered were drawn from the British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice (2017). Informed consent was gained through a Participant Information Sheet that was given to all participants, detailing the study and the researcher. All participants were verbally informed about the study, and the purpose of the study was reiterated at the beginning of each interview when consent was also gained verbally. Additionally, the use of pseudonyms or initials are used in order to keep each respondent's personal information completely confidential to avoid any identifying details in the final report (Allmark *et al.*, 2009). Any information about participants were also stored on a secure device accessible only by password, and any information used was safely disposed of after use. As this study focuses on the recollection of both positive and negative personal experiences, some questions may be considered sensitive to participants. As such, research questions were worded sensitively to mitigate any potential harm to participants. Furthermore, participants were made aware that they can refuse to answer any question during the interview, and are also able to withdraw from the study at any time without the requirement of providing a reason. Following this, participants were given contact details of online counselling services.

## Results

Analysis of data identified six major themes: location, Whiteness, belonging, microaggressions, lack of support, and African Caribbean Society. Each of these themes are developed in turn.

### *Location*

Most participants were concerned about the location of their university during the initial period of the Universities and Colleges Admissions (UCAS) process. The main role of this is to operate the application processes for British universities (UCAS, 2020). Participants expressed that they felt universities in the North of England are too far from home. For example:

“I think because of location and Durham is kind of far from London so, a bit too far away from home.”

[AN, Undergraduate, London School of Economics]

“Durham is too far. I want to come home a couple times, I don’t want it to be such a drag.”

[TA, Undergraduate, University of Nottingham]

“With Manchester or even Nottingham, it’s still like once you’re there for the term, you’re there for the term. You don’t come back. But once I’m in London, I can still go back so I don’t have to worry about train tickets and all that stuff.”

[PO, Undergraduate, King’s College London]

“I want to be comfortable, so like being in London, I’m not too far from home but Exeter, Durham, they’re too far and too unfamiliar to risk 5 years of my life.”

[PO, Undergraduate, King’s College London]

In contrast, participants in the North preferred to study in the North of England or the Midlands based more on the potential personality of those in the South rather than ethnicity:

“I didn’t want to go to the south because the people in the south are very rude \*laughs\*. And the cost for train isn’t that deep.”

[RA, Undergraduate, University of Durham]

Some participants were unconcerned about the location of their chosen university as they valued the quality of their chosen course above their social life and comfortability. As such, they based their choice of university solely on the position of their course on university league tables:

“I would’ve been willing to travel anywhere”.

[OD, Undergraduate, University of Durham]

“I could’ve gone anywhere. It was more about who does the best Media degree.”

[LO, PhD, University of Bath]

“I know I could be socially happy at other universities but I chose Durham because sacrifices have to be made. I’m sacrificing it for my future life and career.”

[OD, Undergraduate, University of Durham]

One student, however, expressed regret for disregarding how diverse a university is before applying:

“Diversity for me personally wasn’t so much of a concern for me in terms of what university I choose to go to though now it is, now that I’m here.”

[AN, Undergraduate, London School of Economics]

### *Whiteness*

The factor appeared to deter participants the most was the lack of diversity within universities located further towards the North. All participants associated the further away from London a university is with the ‘Whiter’ the university is or will be. Most expectations and first expressions revolved around the ethnic backgrounds of the student population as they correlated this factor with how enjoyable and/comfortable it would be. For instance:

“The university life is very white I will be real with you.”

[NE, Undergraduate, University of Portsmouth]

“I nearly didn’t come because my mum was like she didn’t see a single black person on the open day”

[RA, Undergraduate, University of Durham]

“I don’t know, it doesn’t really matter what university you wanna go to in the top 10 because at the end of the day it is going to be hella White.”

[RA, Undergraduate, University of Durham]

“I knew it was gonna be *very* middle class, and I knew that it was gonna be very White”.

[LO, PhD, University of Bath]

“I didn’t hear much at all about Durham or much from Black people about Durham”

[TA, Undergraduate, University of Nottingham]

“The university is very white. I don’t think I’ve had any Black or even Asian lecturers. Even when I was there and we learned about colonisation it was a White lecturer.”

[NE, Undergraduate, University of Portsmouth]

The highlight of students’ social life is usually “fresher’s week” at the beginning of undergraduate study, and the night life. Participants experienced a lack of inclusion when universities and surrounding city centres provided entertainment:

“The music, the clubs we went to for fresher’s week were all catered for White people”.

[OD, Undergraduate, Durham University]

“They have more clubs catered for them and their music, so their university nightlife is ten times better”

[TA, Undergraduate, University of Nottingham]

Those in the south of England were more comfortable at their university based on the amount of diversity there was on campus which has made their experience so far more enjoyable:

“There’s quite a lot of diversity in London, it kind of makes it feel like everyone’s around, it’s not like there’s not just Black people or just white people”

[PO, Undergraduate, King’s  
College London]

### *Microaggressions*

All participants who study outside London had experienced a certain degree of racism or microaggressions whilst on campus:

“Someone said I’m “good looking for a Black guy”.”

[OD, Undergraduate, Durham University]

“Someone called me the ‘N-word’ and ran away.”

[NE, Undergraduate, University of Portsmouth]

“They make me feel like I don’t belong here. One of them even told me that they said I didn’t belong on the course because I was Black.”

[RA, Undergraduate, Durham University]

Microaggressions were also experienced through the different behaviours non-Black counterparts had illustrated towards participants. These were primarily through acts of ignoring or segregation which made participants feel alienated:

“It’s the welfare and the low-key racism. It’s just their actions towards you and the way they treat you. You never want to think it’s because you’re Black but it gets to a point where you think I think it is because I’m Black.”

[RA, Undergraduate, Durham University]

“People don’t realise it that they are isolating you. People didn’t even speak to me on fresher’s week”

[RA, Undergraduate, Durham University]

“In lectures or seminars with group work I feel like they kinda don’t acknowledge me.”

[TA, Undergraduate, University of Nottingham]

“They can be saying something to you off the cuff but it comes out very ignorant and it makes you feel inadequate to be there.”

[RA, Undergraduate, Durham University]

In addition, participants recalled non-Black counterparts appearing eager to impress them through over-bearing statements or opinions that unintentionally come across offensive.

“I feel like theres almost a game for which White person is the best. It’s like who can impress me the most.”

[LO, PhD, University of Bath]

“One White person, he tried to make conversation but he started off with “do you like \*bashment? Yeah, I love bashment”, or something else to do with Black culture”.

[TA, Undergraduate, University of Nottingham]

\*a type of music genre derived from the Caribbean

In contrast, participants studying in London had not experienced racism and/or microaggressions whilst at university because of the amount of diversity in London. For example:

“Because there’s so much diversity and so many people from different places it would be weird if people pointed out you were different because of your skin colour.”

[AN, Undergraduate, London School of Economics]

“My university is very diverse so, I can’t say the treatment is different because the diversity is a lot”

[PO, Undergraduate, King’s College London]

### *Belonging*

Experiences at university have appeared to be mostly negative amongst those who study outside of London. The majority of participants have felt the absence of the sense of belonging on their campus as well as accommodation. Feeling isolated was also common amongst participants, for example:

“At first it was hard for me to adjust”

[TA, Undergraduate, University of Nottingham]

“I have to put extra effort to be seen or heard.”

[TA, Undergraduate, University of Nottingham]

“I feel isolated within the group and feel like I’m already labelled in like seminars.”

[NE, Undergraduate, University of Portsmouth]

“Durham doesn’t cater to Black people such as black hair shops or food shops”

[TA, Undergraduate, University of Nottingham]

As such, some participants felt as though they had no option but to change the way they would usually behave in order to “fit in” and in fear of being judged or discriminated against:

“To make friends, I had to “act White” so that I wouldn’t push them away.”

[OD, Undergraduate, Durham University]

“I would be more conscious when I speak or say certain things softly or construct my words in a different type of way so that I, not seen as the stereotypical Black girl.”

[PO, Undergraduate, King’s College London]

“I’m the only black person there, so I’m like okay I’m not going to say anything.”

[NE, Undergraduate, University of Portsmouth]

Being associated with students from similar backgrounds made participants feel more comfortable within their environment, as they did not feel compelled to change their usual behaviour:

“It’s easier for me to be friends with people who are similar to me”

[TA, Undergraduate, University of Nottingham]

Moreover, the celebrations of other ethnic minority’s cultures appeared to emphasise the lack of acknowledgment for Black African and Caribbean cultures. Participants expressed feelings of insignificance based on the disregard of celebrations such as Black History month. For example:

“They always send out emails about Chinese New Year and stuff like that. They decorated the whole department. But when its Black history month, you don’t see anything. They celebrate Diwali as well.”

[OD, Undergraduate, Durham University]

“They don’t acknowledge Black history month but they acknowledge Chinese New Year. They don’t acknowledge the things important to Black people.”

[RA, Undergraduate, Durham University]

Nonetheless, participants generally felt more comfortable around students who were within the same social class group as they had more in common. Mostly those who reside in the same area or city had more to relate to which allowed participants to feel less out of place as most were from working-class areas:

“The amount other students parents earned was also a factor, if they were working class, we’d have more in common”

[TA, Undergraduate, University of Nottingham]

The African Caribbean Society (ACS), is a society which celebrates African and Caribbean culture whilst also providing entertainment and opportunities for Black students. ACS can be found usually in every university in the UK. Most participants expressed that the ACS is what has improved their experience at university by making them feel more comfortable on campus by connecting them to other students from similar Black backgrounds:

“It’s been interesting, what made it okay or good is to be honest, the ACS.”

[AN, Undergraduate, London School of Economics]

“I think it makes it easier to just meet people with similar backgrounds”

[AN, Undergraduate, London School of Economics]

“The African Caribbean society fully represents the Black students in areas such as social life welfare and career prospects. They have done more to help Black students than the university has done.”

[OD, Undergraduate, Durham University]

It has also been described to provide support for students that some university’s do not adequately provide:

“Most of the things ive seen in terms of supporting Black students at the university are predominately done by the African Caribbean society for example or the African summit.”

[AN, Undergraduate, London School of Economics]

### *Lack of Support*

Most participants expressed that there was a lack of support for Black students within their universities. Many participants experienced no support at all, though when the support is provided, it has been ineffective:

“I don’t think the support is even there. It’s just useless, that’s all I can really say.”

[NE, Undergraduate, University of Portsmouth]

“People have reported acts of racism but they’ve done nothing.”

[OD, Undergraduate, Durham University]

AN felt as though there was support for Black students during the university application process but had experienced little support when he began studying at his university:

“There are some access programmes for students aspiring to go university but then again that’s for those aspiring to go so it doesn’t directly affect students in the university.”

[AN, Undergraduate, London School of Economics]

The majority of participants experience consisted of using student founded societies when needing help or support rather than using the universities facilities as it makes them feel seen.

“It’s societies that have been doing more rather than the actual university.”

[NE, Undergraduate, University of Portsmouth]

Likewise, participants also felt that they lacked support, not only from the university but also their non-Black counterparts:

“I feel like if anything were to happen, they probably wouldn’t back me”.

[LO, PhD, University of Bath]

“They talk to you because they don’t want to come across as racist. It’s like when a White person defends you against racism, they’re doing that for themselves, not for you”

[RA, Undergraduate, Durham University]

## Discussion

The results presented in this study have illustrated the experiences of Black students at university which can be used to assess what deters Black African and Caribbean students from applying to elite universities. University choice was primarily based on the location of the university in which the majority of participants associated the further the university is from London, the ‘Whiter’ the university space is. This factor deters Black students from certain universities within the Russell Group as it is assumed to be not only a White space, but also a racist one. As such, the comfortability of Black students has shown to rely heavily on which region the university is located in (Khambaita and Bhopal, 2015). Though, results showed that there can still be feelings of regret when choosing to stay in London, correlating to Connor *et al.* (2001) findings of ethnic minority students being more likely to feel that they had made the wrong choice of institution. Moreover, the cost of travel also influenced choice in university. As the cost of travel is greater the further away from home, location was considered to cheapen the costs of attending university. This aligns with the components that formulates a ‘contingent chooser’, as identified by Ball *et al.* (2002). Likewise, in Ball *et al.*’s study of students’ choices of higher education, students from ethnic minority backgrounds were found to be the most concerned about finance when choosing a university. Lower-income students are often reluctant to move further away from home due to the costs of

associated with relocating (Khambaita and Bhopal, 2015). Most lower-income families are from ethnic minority backgrounds (Platt, 2007 cited in Khambaita and Bhopal, 2015), which suggests how Black students can be deterred from applying to particular universities.

Institutional Whiteness has also been shown to worsen the experiences of Black students and is the main theme that deters Black students from these universities. The Whiteness is enabled mainly through the poor diversification. Whiteness reflected in curricula was found to be less significant amongst Black students in contrast to Alexander and Arday's (2015) findings. There was little to no effect on students learning or experience when courses displayed aspects of whiteness through curricula. Nonetheless, racial disparities on campus had an effect on experiences as Black students felt as though they had to put in more effort to be seen due to overbearing White bodies (Ahmed, 2007). Students felt accustomed to the Whiteness of their campus, as such, it had less of an effect on their learning during the course of their studies. As Ahmed (2007) also found within White institutions, the institutional whiteness appeared to be invisible to those who inhabit the space, making Black students feel as though their experience is being undermined. The corporeal schema (Ahmed, 2007) also appears to be interrupted as Black students feel compelled to change the way they act and speak in fear of being racially judged and stereotyped by non-Black counterparts. In contrast, students from London felt that they could be more themselves without having to change their behaviour. Students studying in London were more comfortable around their university peers because of the diversity, thus hypervisibility not being an issue. Still, the lack of Black or ethnic minority lectures have had an impact on student's well-being. The combination of studying in a White space as well as the absence of an ethnic minority lecturer or senior academic to confide in leaves Black students without anyone to empathise with them about being in a new environment. The lack of acknowledgement of the underappreciation for Black and ethnic minority academics has affected the mental and physical well-being of Black students attempting to find their way through university (Arday, 2018). Findings illustrate the reluctance from Black students to talk to their academic when in need of help, regarding personal and academic matters. Black students are under the belief that non-Black academics are not able to understand their struggles in university based on both personal experiences and prejudice. The Whiteness in universities has also been reflected in their entertainment, night life - which is often the highlight of a student's university experience, and cultural supermarkets. Most Black students feel unwelcome due to the large culture barrier on and off of campus, as such, information relayed to aspiring students usually revolves around not catering to Black people. However, Black students studying in London did not experience this problem which attracts them to the city more.

Furthermore, overt racism is less common and has been replaced with microaggressions, experienced by many Black people which is deemed as 'normal' by US institutions (Harper, 2012), and 'unintentional' by UK institutions (Tate and Page, 2018). Similarly, to Solórzano *et al.* (2002), findings demonstrated how racial disparities and microaggressions leads to feelings of marginalisation. All participants studying outside of London had either experienced a racially aggravated attack or been a victim of microaggressions by students, senior academics and/or local residents. The negative stereotypes and comments also place Black students under distress (Cokley *et al.*, 2013). Most students expressed feelings of belittlement when receiving ignorant compliments or engaging in conversation. Higher education institutions have labelled this as a situation where our brains make "incredibly

quick judgments to people and situations without us realising” (Tate and Page, 2018: 143). Still, these actions impact on Black students’ experiences negatively. Similar to Lander’s (2015) studying of racism in secondary schools, the attitude which prevailed when discussing racism and microaggressions was one of ‘I can’t do anything about it’. This aligns with Tate and Page’s (2018) study on Whiteness and institutional racism. Black students have associated these microaggressions with unconscious bias, allowing for the maintenance of White innocence. As such, when reporting racist incidents, Black students regularly experience the denial of anti-Black racism by their university. This leads to less reporting of racism or microaggressions whilst the unconscious bias becomes more prevalent. Additionally, there were also incidents of racism and microaggressions towards Black students carried out by ethnic minorities. Being put down by students from ethnic minority backgrounds, White backgrounds and local residents provides a tense racial environment inside and outside of lecture halls (Solórzano, 2000). However, Black students studying in London experienced little to no microaggressions due to the diverse student population. Therefore, they had no negative experiences from this factor. Still, these findings enhance the growing body of research surrounding the mental health of those from Black or other ethnic minority backgrounds (Mental Health Foundation, 2020), as many students experienced episodes of depression to the extent of deferring their studies.

Accordingly, intuitional Whiteness and microaggressions have had a large influence on Black students’ sense of belonging as it interferes with students’ adjustment to university (Smedley *et al.*, 1993 cited in Cokley *et al.*, 2013). In exclusionary spaces such as White institutions, Black students often have feelings of not belonging. However, there was comfortability expressed around those who were in the same social-economic class as they felt as though they can relate to each other to an extent. Majority of Black students interviewed would describe themselves as from a working-class background. Archer *et al.* (2007) had also found that working-class pupils are often alienated within educational institutions, forming negative views on certain institutions occupied by students from wealthier backgrounds. Although Archer *et al.* (2007) had not specified the race or ethnicity as a distinctive factor when identifying ‘condensed class signifiers’ (Archer *et al.*, 2007: 223), experiences of students from Black African and Caribbean backgrounds aligns with the factors the make a condensed class signifier. For example, students from Black backgrounds experienced offensive reactions to particular characteristics, such as their hairstyles or certain items of clothing. Different reactions that come across condescending result in feeling out of place, as well as ‘unusual’ compared to other students within their universities. Moreover, the celebration of other ethnic minority cultures ostracises students within the Black community to the extent that some Black students prefer not to refer to themselves as ‘People of Colour’. However, Black students from universities located in London experienced more acceptance from other students. This therefore suggests that the more diverse a university campus is, the less likely Black students are to face racial microaggressions.

Still, the more diverse an institution is has not proved to simultaneously provide support for Black students. There is a lack of support for Black students within universities across all regions according to the results. Students’ reports of racial discrimination of feelings of isolation are often ignored by their university, to the extent that students do not feel able to talk to university staff. Similar to Constantine *et al.*’s (2011) quantitative study, Black students avoid official counselling services as they believe that there is also a lack of

therapists who are racially diverse or ethnically similar to them. Therefore, there is a stigma in the Black student community toward actively seeking help because they feel as though non-Black counsellors are unable to understand Black struggles. Despite multiple outreach programmes made available by some universities, support is provided more when attempting to attract students to the university. When students begin to study at their selected university, support is depreciated. Universities focus more on diversity than creating an anti-racist environment (Gebrial, 2018). Furthermore, there is a lack of help from other students when it comes to supporting during racist incidents. Many students experienced occasions where non-Black counterparts take on the 'epistemologies of ignorance' where racism does not exist (Tate and Page, 2018). Thus, students from Black backgrounds are reluctant to confide in non-Black university staff as well as pupils.

Instead, the African Caribbean Society, found in most universities in the UK has proven to have provided Black students with a sense of familiarity to mitigate the feelings of not belonging. It provides Black students with entertainment centred around African and Caribbean culture. Previous researchers have found that people from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds use sources that are not directly associated with official counselling services (Constantine *et al.*, 2011). As such, findings revealed that Black students use the African and Caribbean Society to help when feeling isolated within their university.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the core aim of this research study has been to explore how the experiences of Black African and Caribbean students in higher education institutions can deter Black students from applying to elite universities. Though there has been previous research work to highlight the experiences of students from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds in both the UK and US, this research intends to advance the discussion by specifically investigating Black students' experiences in the UK.

The results support existing findings, and advances the discussion with new discoveries:

- The experiences of Black African and Caribbean students in elite higher education institutions are generally negative based on the Whiteness of the university. Students who refrained from considering diversity and the Whiteness of the university before applying have shown regret as they feel uncomfortable.
- The location of a university was associated with how diverse it would be. As such, the further away from London, the more likely for it to be institutionally White. A priority of the majority of participants was feeling a sense of belonging during their time of study.
- Most participants felt more comfortable when surrounded with students from similar racial backgrounds to them, however, there was also a sense of comfortability when around students from similar social-economic backgrounds.
- Racial microaggressions were a common factor deterring Black students applying to universities outside of London. All participants studying outside of London had pre-existing thoughts and opinions on the inclusivity on and off of campus which were met upon arrival. However, students studying within London had not experienced racial microaggressions or racial attacks.

- Overall, there is a lack of support for Black students across universities included in the study, despite how diverse the student population is. Majority of participants find support from societal groups, particularly the African Caribbean Society. This deters potential Black students from applying to these universities as it is a common conception there is little support for Black students.

### *Reflections*

The small sample generated from a convenience sampling method in this study created a homogenous sample of participants; all except from one participant were female, and all except from one participant considered themselves from a working-class background. The low number of participants recruited for this study also means that the sample is not representative of the UK student population. As such, the results are unable to be generalised beyond this sample (Acharya *et al.*, 2013). Nonetheless, the data accumulated can support existing and future research on Black students and education.

### *Implications for Future Research*

While this study explored how experiences at university can deter potential students from Black African and Caribbean backgrounds, it focused on racism carried out by students from White backgrounds. Future research could benefit from exploring tension between different racial groups on campus as universities become more diverse. Additionally, results revealed how the African and Caribbean society heavily support Black students, therefore, future research can explore the way university societies have become a form of support for isolated students. This can be explored more amongst research regarding the mental health of students. Furthermore, exploration around more Black lecturers and university staff, especially counsellors should be considered. The lack of racially diverse staff proves to have a negative effect on students; therefore, research should consider how more Black academics can positively impact Black students' education. Lastly, this study focused on Black students from London. Future research could benefit from exploring the experiences of Black students from outside London to understand if negative experiences are due to race or due to moving to a less diverse area.

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