

Eurocentrism in British Universities: Perspectives from Black Female Academics

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Abstract

This study explored the personal experiences of three Black female academics (a lecturer, a reader and a professor) to examine how Eurocentrism has impacted their lives, and how their knowledge and positionality in British universities can challenge the Whiteness ever-present in Eurocentrism. This study adopted Critical Race Theory as the theoretical perspective to conduct research. Via online semi-structured interviews, the narratives of the three participants were obtained as primary data for the chosen method of Thematic Analysis to be applied. The four key themes that emerged from this study were: Whiteness; Presence of Black Female Academics in Higher Education (HE); Supporting Black Female Academics; and Supporting Black Students. This study concludes that Whiteness is detrimental to Black female academics and therefore ought to be provided with effective mentoring. Additionally, Black female epistemes challenge Eurocentrism as does the mentorship of Black students.

1. Introduction

Student-led campaigns such as #RhodesMustFall (University of Cape Town and University of Oxford) (2015) and #WhyIsMyCurriculumWhite (2015) raised worldwide awareness of and directly challenged White privilege and White supremacy in Western, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Eurocentric epistemes were exposed and as a result, many statues (for example, Cecil Rhodes (2020), Robert Milligan (2020), Henry Dundas (2020) and others) have been destroyed or defaced due to their presence embodying and glorifying British colonialism and slavery. Yet, there still remains multiple problems of systemic racism within staff recruitment, management and retainment as well as whiteness in the curriculum and ultimately, the construction of knowledge for people of colour.

From the personal experiences of three Black¹ female² academics (a lecturer, a reader and a professor), this study was driven by two aims: to examine the impact Eurocentrism has had on their professional academic lives; and to explore ways in which Black female academics can challenge Eurocentrism in British universities. The research questions used to guide this study were: In which ways does Eurocentrism impact Black female academics?; What is the importance of Black female episteme in academia?; and How can Black female academics challenge Eurocentrism in Higher Education (HE)? Although this study focuses on the voices of Black females regarding Eurocentrism, it by no means intends to dismiss or devalue white, male epistemologies - simply attempts to eradicate the racism and sexism stemming from such knowledge production as well as to make space for knowledge produced by Black females. Additionally, the binary concept of White and Black, Male and Female epistemologies are false dichotomies - this study acknowledges the plentitude of other sources of knowledge production that yet to be explored in UK HEIs.

2. Contextual Background

2.1 Eurocentrism and Whiteness in Higher Education

Eurocentrism is an ideology that privileges people who are racially white³ (Cabrera et al., 2017), especially elite White men (Collins, 2000; Dear, 2019) and therefore marginalises people who are not racially white (Cabrera et al., 2017; Collins, 2000; Cupples, 2019). Although it emanated from colonialism and slavery in the 16th Century, the ideology of Eurocentrism grew in consciousness due to the works on racism by W. E. B. DuBois in the 20th Century (Jerabek,

2016). Unfortunately, Eurocentrism (Whiteness) is still heavily present in higher education (Cabrera et al., 2017: 8). Whiteness not only pertains to policies and interpersonal interactions but is also embedded in research and knowledge production (Cabrera et al., 2017; Harper, 2012). This means that the knowledge being produced in HEIs fails to acknowledge the history, experiences and epistemologies of marginalised people (Olusoga, 2017) which has been “caused by systemic White supremacy” (Cabrera et al., 2017:21). This omission specifically targets people from Africa, Asia and Black/Asian people living in the ‘Western’ diasporic world (Collins, 2000). Some researchers label this ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ (Bain, 2018; Cabrera et al., 2017) or ‘epistemic violence’ (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). This one-dimensional production of knowledge fails to provide a comprehensive and wholesome understanding of the multicultural student body in British universities. Whiteness also formulates barriers and establishes gatekeepers to restrict the entrance and movement of Black and brown academic staff. Since 1999, Black academics in British Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) are still reporting on the racial discrimination and harassment they face in relation to recruitment, employment status and career progression (Pilkington, 2018: 29) as a result of Whiteness in HE. Universities are aware of racial inequalities and other race-related issues in the organisations due to the changes they have been making (ibid). However, their use of ‘colourblind approaches’ results in fickle tokenism and maintenance of the status-quo (Mirza, 2018). This is why Black academics in British universities continue to report on the racial injustice.

2.2 – Intersectionality and Positionality of Black Females

The intersectionality of Black females is the place where race⁴ and gender meet, “creating a positive and powerful multi-dimensional vision of how to implement strategies and opportunities for Black women” (Hall et al., 2007: 282) who have been silenced for many years (Collins, 2000). Though their voices are subjective knowledge (ibid), their knowledge production – known as Black feminist thought - “plays a vital role in enabling Black women to articulate and archive their experiences, both inside and outside of the academic contexts” (Sobande, 2019: 92). Black feminist thought also reveals the dominant nature of those in power due to their marginalized status (Alina, 2015: 2334). Therefore, it is important that the intersectionality of Black female voices is researched and accentuated, especially in the context of Eurocentrism in British universities. The positionality of Black women is situated at the lower end of this hierarchy (after white men, white women and black men) as a result of their “multiple minority statuses” (Mowatt et al., 2017). Despite their social position, Black female academics working in HE are positioned to have a standpoint that “uniquely equips them to uncover aspects of reality and truth that are concealed, unnoticed and masked by conventional methodological and epistemological frameworks...in academic settings” (Brown, 2012, cited in Bhopal, 2016: 56). Therefore this enables them to view Eurocentrism differently to other intersections (Collins, 2000, 2019; Sobande, 2019). Eurocentrism is not new, but despite the advances that universities are trying to make by making the spaces more racially inclusive (see Bain (2018) and Pilkington (2018)), “there still remains a paucity of intellectual knowledge production by and on the lives and experiences of Black women in Britain” (Palmer, 2019: 18).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study works within the epistemological stance of constructionism - common within educational research (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2016). Regarding knowledge production, constructionism focuses on how researchers come to understand truth, therefore acknowledging that there are many knowledges rather than one knowledge (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 30).

The theoretical perspective chosen for this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT centralizes race and racism in research due to the embedded nature of Whiteness and marginalisation of people of colour in organisations (Brown, 2018). Despite originating from the United States and was constructed by Black lawyers, CRT can still be

used within educational research (Brown, 2018; Lynn, 2004; Parker and Lynn, 2002; Sung and Coleman, 2019) in the UK (Cole, 2017; Zamudio et al., 2011). Systematic racism is not confined to the legal and political field. Neither is it an American issue. The core assumption of CRT views racial power as being held by one dominant racial group (Brown, 2018: 304). Therefore, critical race theorists aim to “liberate” people of colour by creating a space for their voices and experiences to be heard (ibid). For this reason, CRT was ideal for exploring Eurocentrism in British universities, from the marginalized perspectives of Black female academics.

3.2 Sampling Procedure

In choosing the sample for this study, the method of purposive sampling was chosen – herein participants were deliberately chosen due to an inclusion criterion that was purposeful to the study. The inclusion criteria for this study was that the participants must: identify as a Black female; work in a British University (a university in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland); and hold a position as a lecturer, a reader or a professor. The strategy undergirding this sampling technique was “to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it” (Cohen et al., 2018: 219). Locating participants for this study was fairly straightforward. The participants were searched for and contacted via the Black Female Professor Forum online as well as a general internet search for “Black Women working in British universities”.

3.3 Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews were carried out virtually via Skype and Microsoft Teams Meeting (a similar digital platform) as the chosen method for this study in order to gather primary data. Although online interviews have been viewed as a “(poor) substitute for face-to-face interviews” (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 79), they have their own strengths and weaknesses as a stand-alone method for interviews. Due to Covid-19, online interviews allowed me (the researcher) to elicit first-hand data while respecting the participants’ right to social distancing.

3.4 Data Analysis

Typically, research that uses CRT analyses the narratives that were gathered as primary data - also known as narrative analysis. However, the chosen analytical tool for this study was Thematic Analysis (TA). TA is a pattern-based analysis which identifies themes across primary datasets (Braun and Clarke, 2013). It was important to capture the key themes present in the experiences of Black female academics to validate their perspective of Eurocentrism in British Universities. The flexibility of TA (adaptable to a variety of theoretical frameworks, research questions, methods and sample size) (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 180) allows for it to be used within a constructionist philosophical perspective and a CRT theoretical perspective.

3.5 Procedure

This study used both Braun and Clarke (2013) and Nowell et al. (2017) methods for using Thematic Analysis when analysing qualitative data. The former presented a clear overall process of thematically analysing raw data. However, Nowell et al. further explored the means to achieve trustworthy knowledge development. Together, the sources provided a solid foundation from which this study generated a sound understanding of how Black female educators can oppose Eurocentrism in British Universities. Once the interviews were transcribed, I read through them and made preliminary notes of theoretical and reflective thoughts as well as potential themes. In order to identify possible commonalities amongst the responses, the entire set of transcripts were re-read, and sections were highlighted using different colours, relating to the different potential themes mapped out. These extracts were then collectively placed within a table (similar to Figure 1) and labels were then assigned to the selected texts. These labels are known as ‘codes’ (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). These codes were numbered to make the process easier. In order to define the key themes in this study’s dataset, descriptions of each were noted down by reading the relevant quotes and summarizing it into one word.

Figure 1

Initials of Themes	Data Extract	Label
e.g. M (mentoring)	Quotes	e.g. 14

3.6 Ethics

This study was cleared via Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) ethos application process. All participants were informed about the study with complete transparency when asked to participate. In compliance with MMU's ethics and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) code of ethical conduct (2018: 9), informed consent was voluntarily provided when initial contact was made. However, they all received a consent form, which had to be co-signed by the researcher (interviewee) and themselves before the interviews began. The decision of conducting online interviews presented lesser risks due to the interviews taking place via Skype or Microsoft Teams Meeting rather than face-to-face. It is, however, impossible to avoid all risks. The risk present was discussing sensitive experiences related to racial issues. Additionally, aliases were used throughout the entire research process instead of their legal names: P1, P2 and P3 (P meaning participant).

4. Findings

The four key themes that emerged from the study were: Whiteness; Presence of Black Female Academics in Higher Education (HE); Supporting Black Female Academics; and Supporting Black Students.

4.1 Whiteness

This overarching theme was a recurrence across the three interviews where the participants expressed their views and opinions towards the detriment nature Whiteness has towards Black

staff. This theme was categorised into three sub-themes: Mentorship; Racial Disparity in Staff; and Challenges and Experiences).

“It was another instance of another White woman mentoring another White woman into a particular role of leadership” [P3, Lecturer].

“The onus is on you er, no I think that's very different for my White colleagues' experiences they have expressed about a mentor that has kind of paved the way for them, opened doors, made recommendations I didn't have any of that, I had to push myself” [P2, Professor]

“Not only isn't the representation not there, you're often not seeing the representation at all levels of academic ranks” [P1, Reader].

“It's everywhere [whiteness]...in the organisational frameworks for progression that structuring whiteness, white supremacy, white ideology, and it's there and and I know that that's real because all the stats bear that out, 26 female professors” [P3, Lecturer].

“It was not about my academic ability but it was about white HE saying ‘well what right do you have to be here’ [pause] and so that doesn't change, doesn't matter what position you achieve that still does not change because the majority of HE is predominantly white” [P2, Professor].

4.2 Presence of Black Female Academics in Higher Education (HE)

This recurrence generated the construction of this overarching theme. Within this theme, there are two sub-themes: Importance of Black Knowledge Production; and Positionality of Black Female Educators in HE.

“Black students that get a PhD that's increasing the Black knowledge base and challenge well should be able to challenge white knowledge base” [P2, Professor].

“We need to be positioned in these gatekeeping spaces to open the doors for others um we need to have positions of power in our institutions. Our institutions need to know that we are there and the thing that sticks with me is that the institution should not be the same when you leave it” [P1, Reader].

4.3 Supporting Black Female Educators

Despite the lack of mentorship, the participants experienced in British universities, they all expressed the necessity of having a mentor or a network, especially amongst other Black females, for support and encouragement.

P2 shared how it has been Black female academics who have supported her on an emotional and psychological level for they were “essential” and “sustained” her -

“It has been my saving grace. Without those, you know my Black colleagues, and erm [pause] I wouldn't have survived, I just wouldn't” [P2, Professor].

“To have always and at every stage had a really critical network of Black women mentors that could really affirm that like yep, you’re supposed to be here and yep you can do this and here’s how and here’s why” [P1, Reader].

“When I come together with other Black scholars that are of a similar mindset and not all Black scholars are the same but there’s a freedom and a liberation that I don’t feel when I’m in the conventional university setting” [P3, Lecturer].

4.4 Supporting Black Students

All three participants spoke about the importance of supporting Black students in HE.

“the status quo will not change if we do not have greater numbers” [P2, Professor].

“I make it my duty to support that particular student as much as I can and I think by that way by building those coalitions of blackness through the institution you can start to interlace the whiteness like and build your strength that way” [P3, Lecturer]

“The institution needs to operate and have no choice really to operate in such a way that actually serves the student body demographic...black students” [P1, Reader].

5. Discussion

This study has reaffirmed the problem Whiteness poses to Black female educators in British universities. One avenue identified was the lack of mentoring that presents a barrier for the career progression of Black female academics. A study funded by the Equality Challenge Unit found that the barriers to career progression for BME academics were mentoring, networking and social capital (Bhopal et al., 2018: 133). The responses from the interviewees in that study mirrored the experiences shared by the participants in this study - “how white senior academics often provide mentoring, coaching and nurturing support to junior white academics” (ibid). It is clear that mentorship (formal or informal) is available in British universities, however the perceived repetitive nature of white academics mentoring each other is problematic due to the fact that Black academics, particularly Black female academics therefore lack mentorship in HE.

Frances Kendall, a white female researcher, acknowledged that White females have the privilege of having a colourblind approach because they feel that race does not relate to them - “we don’t see ourselves as part of the problem, and therefore we don’t feel responsible for being part of the solution” (Kendall, 2012: 80). This is one way in which White females specifically sustain Whiteness in British universities. Mentorship facilitates progression regardless of profession (Li et al., 2018). Yet this problem of same-race/gender mentoring amongst White females makes career progression harder for Black female academics (Bhopal et al., 2018; Davis, 2007; Minor, 2014).

The other avenues that Whiteness is exerted in HE are the extensive racial disparity in academic staff and, as a result, the racial microaggressions. Statistics show that Black females constitute 2.4% of all HE staff in the UK, while White females equate to 87.7% (Advance HE, 2018: 254). If the intersectionality of gender and race were omitted, white people make up 86.9% of all staff, while Black people a mere 2.4% (ibid). Gabriel (2017: 1) argues that these figures are irrelevant

when one can witness the lack of Black HE academic staff for themselves. With such low numbers of Black academic staff present in HE, racial microaggressions are prevalent. Racial microaggression is a common form of interpersonal racism (Cabrera et al., 2017: 35) and is “inextricably linked to [white supremacist racial] structures” (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018: 145). Whiteness adversely impacts the daily lives of Black female educators in British universities. Despite researchers commenting on Whiteness being invisible (Halley et al., 2011; Milders, 2019) within the structures and policies of British universities, it is evidently visible in the personal experiences of the participants and other Black academics that have vocalised their experiences through academic research (Collins, 2000). The increasing volume of Black academic staff who are vocally resisting the exclusionary practices they experience in British universities (Andrews, 2016; Gabriel, 2017) is evident enough that Black academics cannot depend on the institution - the racial inequalities in mentorship, underrepresentation of Black female academic staff and racial microaggressions towards Black staff are simply three of the multiple avenues of exclusion and restriction faced by Black academics in British universities.

This study has also affirmed the importance of the knowledge production from and positionality of Black female educators in British universities. Due to Black women being excluded from academic institutions (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018), their knowledge and experiences can form as part of an epistemic resistance needed to oppose the one-dimensional, White, Eurocentric knowledge production emitted from British universities (Collins, 2000, 2019; Hall et al., 2007; Sobande, 2019). Patricia Hill Collins argues that “epistemic power is deeply intertwined with political domination” (Collins, 2019: 126) and therefore “has never been neutral” (ibid). Knowledge is subjective but having only one group in society whereby their knowledge stands as the dominant narrative has resulted in the racism and sexism permeating throughout British universities (Cupples, 2019).

Black female educators can validate their own presence and positionality in British universities - affirming that they belong - by reaching and claiming the power held in leadership positions. Glynn (2018) argues that “if Black researchers are to seek transformation as a way of transcending their subordination, then they must seek transformative spaces” (Glynn, 2018: 32). Further research would have to be conducted to assess whether British universities can be called ‘transformative spaces’ for marginalised ethnic minorities, and for the purpose of this study, Black females specifically. However, from the research that exists about Eurocentrism in British universities, the presence and purpose of Whiteness can only be viewed as transformative for those that it serves - White students and staff (Cupples, 2019). Universities claim to be changing policies, management and structures for the benefit of all but due to adopting a ‘colourblind’ approach, effective change does not manifest (Mirza 2018; Pilkington, 2018). Therefore, if Black female educational leaders heeded Glynn’s advice, Black female academics would have to search for ‘transformative spaces’ outside of British universities. Therefore, their presence would be absent in British universities, and subsequent change is unlikely to happen.

This study additionally expressed the importance of having Black female mentors and networks in order to help navigate and ‘transcend the subordination’ of the HE system in the UK. Tillman (2012) argues that it should be a priority for all Black females in academia due to their presence being limited in number. The participants in this study shared that Black females are “more likely to use informal support” (Bhopal, 2019: 88). The feelings that the participants expressed regarding their informal Black networking support groups could potentially be the feelings of other Black female academics in HE. However, further research ought to be conducted to understand on a deeper level why people of the same or similar background thrive more (socially, emotionally and potentially academically) when in the company of each other. In the context of Black females working in British universities, and in light of the current research, the detrimental impact of Eurocentrism on Black females (racism, marginalisation and subsequent issues) could encourage them to enter environments where they are no longer considered as ‘other’. Though this study found that the participants rely on their support outside of HEIs, research does not provide reasons why they do.

This study has also found that the lack of support the participants experienced in British universities has not stopped them providing support to their Black students, undergraduate and postgraduate. Research states that same-race (Black and Black) mentoring tends to have a stronger relationship than cross-race mentors (Tillman, 2001). This could be because the mentors provide an aspect of validation to the mentees in academia (Davis, 2007: 227) that they may not receive in PWIs with limited Black academic staff. In a study conducted by Davis (2007), she found that students with Black or Brown mentors “expressed higher levels of inspiration and engagement” (2007: 227). A potential reason for this could be due to the challenges and barriers Eurocentrism has created in British universities for Black and Minority Ethnic academics to push themselves to succeed in the institution. Showunmi et al. (2016) found that 95% of BME women encountered barriers at work, compared to 40% of white women. However, same-race BAME mentors were more capable of discussing race and race-related issues than White mentors where focus was emphasised on education and careers (McNeil and Moore, 2020: 24). Mentoring for Black students is fundamental (Phelps-Ward and DeAngelo, 2016), yet research has established that white academics mentor white academics (Bhopal et al., 2018). It is for this reason that Black academics are necessary so that they can then mentor these students. Although students attend universities to educate themselves and create pathways for a career, race cannot be ignored when Black students attend PWIs. Students have expressed that White lecturers have the tendency to dismiss or ignore their cultural identity and history when dealing with race (Rollock, 2018: 315).

6. Conclusion

The study initially set out to achieve two aims: examine the impact Eurocentrism has had on Black female educators; and explore ways in which Black female academics can challenge Eurocentrism in Higher Education. The use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the theoretical perspective to elicit narratives via semistructured interviews regarding race and racism, provided the necessary data for TA to be applied and generate knowledge. The study discovered that Whiteness, particularly lack of mentoring, limited number of Black academics and racial microaggressions, are detrimental to Black female academics personally and their career progression in HE. The study also found that Black female epistemes challenge Eurocentrism because they enrich the pool of knowledge and provide a different dimension to what constitutes as trustworthy, valid knowledge in British universities. By completing PhDs and releasing publications, Black females invariably challenge White knowledge production and epistemologies. Furthermore, the support of Black students strengthens the coalitions of learning and knowledge production. In this way, eventually barriers would be broken, equity would exist and racial harassment would hopefully diminish therefore improving the professional lives of Black female educational leaders. However, the participants made clear that mentorship, networking and support is fundamental so that more Black females will be in positions of leadership in HE.

6.1 Limitations of the Study

1. The study focused on the intersectionality of Black females - Eurocentrism has other intersectional aspects, beyond race and gender (for example, class).
2. The use of Thematic Analysis (TA) - By choosing TA, I have found that it ignores the depth of the content in the narratives and instead extracts the necessary themes.

6.2 Recommendation for Change

This study has highlighted areas where change can be implemented to achieve racial equity for Black female academics in British universities:

1. British universities should provide Black female academics with effective mentoring. However, due to the limited number of Black academic staff, same-race mentoring (Black mentors and Black mentees) would be difficult. Therefore, they should-
2. Encourage formal, cross-racial mentoring (White, race-conscious mentees and Black mentors).

6.3 Recommendation for Further Research

1. More research into Eurocentrism and Whiteness in Higher Education - In order to truly understand the impact Eurocentrism has had on British universities generally, multiple studies ought to be conducted, assessing the different categories of universities in the UK (Ancient, Russell Group and Post-1992s).
2. More academic research targeting other marginalised groups is also necessary – This study researched a specific marginalised social group that is affected by Eurocentrism in British universities. Communities such as other minority ethnic groups, LGBTQIA+ members, lower socio-economic groups and more, both students and staff, are marginalised and affected by Eurocentrism in higher education. These areas would need to be researched in order for Eurocentrism to be opposed from multiple angles.

Notes

1. Black - A person whose heritage is from Africa or the Caribbean
2. Female - Due to the fact that this study is not addressing the differences between gender and sex, female(s) and woman (women) have been used interchangeably. The pronoun she has also been used when referring to the participants.
3. White - a racial discourse which is usually based on skin colour (Leonardo, 2002)
4. Race - A social construct in line with Suyemoto et al. (2020)

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