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# Silent or silenced? Minority ethnic students and the battle against racism

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**ABSTRACT**

Racism is harmful for minority ethnic students from compulsory to tertiary education. Whilst there appears to be renewed public interest in structural racism, the realities of lived racism are, for many, a part of everyday life. This paper explores the experiences of minority ethnic students in UK higher education, especially their approaches to racism and coping strategies. Drawing on 51 in-depth interviews, the authors discuss the different ways in which racism can affect students and the extent to which it is normalised. As a means of coping, students appear to develop different degrees of emotional detachment and desensitisation towards racist behaviours. They discuss how white privilege in higher education can contribute to the silencing of minority ethnic students in the battle against racism, especially in white university spaces where racist behaviours are generally accepted, overlooked or trivialised. They conclude with a discussion of implications for policy and practice.

## Introduction

In the West, including the UK, public attention to issues of race and racism has been exacerbated after the racially charged murder of George Floyd (25 May 2020) in the United States, which prompted a renewed sense of social reflections and commitments for racial justice from individuals and organisations. Whilst the recent but controversial (see Whittaker, 2021 for example) UK government report on Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) downplayed the prominence of structural and institutional racism, academic research continues to challenge and highlight the breadth of racial inequalities across different spheres of society (Byrne, Alexander, Khan, Nazroo, & Shankley, 2020).

This paper explores the experiences of minority ethnic students in higher education, especially their approaches to racism and coping strategies. Drawing on sociological and psychological literature, we investigate how minorities recognise and approach their experiences of racism. We find emotional detachment and desensitisation to be prominent in the everyday management of racist encounters. Such coping strategies may reflect the challenges of confronting 'white privilege' and racism in university spaces, where

racist behaviours are generally more accepted, overlooked or trivialised. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for policy and practice, highlighting how minority ethnic students are not only silent, but silenced, in response to racism.

## Racism and white privilege in higher education

In the UK, the number and proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds at university continue to increase (AdvanceHE, 2020), although existing studies have raised concerns about racial inequalities in higher education (Arday & Mirza, 2018), including subtle and overt forms of prejudice and discrimination (EHRC, 2019; Pilkington, 2013; Wong, ElMorally, Copsey-Blake, Highwood, & Singarayer, 2021b). Studies of racial microaggressions, for example, have been a focal point in existing scholarship on the racialised experiences of minority ethnic students in higher education (Singh, 2009; Smith, Senter, & Strachan, 2013; Truong, Museus, & McGuire, 2016). Subtle forms of racism can marginalise, demean and negate the identities of minority ethnic students, typically in ways that are 'normalised' in society, as racist behaviours can rise and thrive when unchallenged or unrecognised. Though microaggressions are often socially tolerated, evidence suggests they can prompt isolation, perplexity and low self-esteem (Harris, 2017), and may even be more harmful than explicit forms of racism (Jeyasingham & Morton, 2019).

Scholars (e.g. Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nişancıoğlu, 2018) have argued that UK universities are built on racial hierarchies and unequal power dynamics, as the structures of higher education are embedded in colonial ideologies and practices that reinforce and reproduce 'white privilege'. According to Bhopal (2018, p. 19), being white entails inherent advantages in society through 'the maintenance of power, resources, accolades and systems of support through formal and informal structures and procedures'. In short, white people in white-dominant spaces embody certain social privileges just on the basis of their white appearance. Whilst such views are sometimes disputed (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021), with assertions that inequalities by socioeconomic background are more prominent in social equalities, research from intersectional studies on educational outcomes suggest otherwise (Boliver, 2015; UUK/NUS, 2019). White students and staff remain the main beneficiaries of UK higher education, where those from minority ethnic backgrounds are often disadvantaged or marginalised (EHRC, 2019; UUK, 2020).

There have been high-profile campaigns to tackle racial inequalities in English universities, especially student-led initiatives such as *Why is my Curriculum White?* (Peters, 2015) and *Why isn't my Professor Black?* (UCL, 2014). These initiatives aimed to address the whiteness that is perpetuated by the university curricula and the underrepresentation of Black academic staff. The decolonisation agenda has been animated through such campaigns, as well as critical dialogue and wider institutional questions about the principles of what makes 'good' and 'diverse' practices (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2020). Yet, white privilege persists in predominantly 'white spaces', including universities (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019), which may help to explain the challenges of confronting racist behaviours.

Racism and racial microaggression are inextricably tied to institutionalised whiteness and structural white privilege, as they exclude and target minority ethnic students, and, in turn, codify the university as a 'white space' (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). On an individual level, experiences of racism and racial microaggression can cause race-related trauma (Choi, Clark, Gutierrez, Runion, & Mendenhall, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby, Johnson, Edwards, McCoy, & White, 2020). For example, in a qualitative study of Black men attending seven 'elite' US universities, Smith, Mustaffa, Jones, Curry, and Allen (2016) found that experiences of racial microaggression, as well as stereotyping and hyper-surveillance, resulted in psychological stress responses that are symptomatic of what has been called 'racial battle fatigue' (e.g. 'sadness, shock, anger, hypersensitivity, hypervigilance, anxiety, and fear', p. 1190).

Existing research, especially from educational psychology, has noted that racism and racial microaggression can be a source of emotional abuse (Kirkinis, Pieterse, Martin, Agiliga, & Brownell, 2021; Sanchez-Hucles, 1999), which is harmful for mental and physical wellbeing (Kinouani, 2020). Here, emotional desensitisation can emerge as a main coping strategy towards racist behaviours due to the stigma attached to trying to confront, validate or prove experiences of racism (Ortiz, 2019). The social and individual cost of speaking up may prompt further racist abuse and contribute to the silencing of minority ethnic individuals – by self and by wider social structures. The mental health outcomes of racism can also increase stress, trigger past racial traumas and lead to unhealthy coping strategies, including 'disengagement coping' (e.g. detachment, internalisation, shame or substance abuse) (Hill-Jarrett & Jones, 2021; Williams & Lewis, 2019).

Critical race scholars such as Bonilla-Silva (2019) have urged educational sociologists to consider 'racialised emotions' or what it means to 'feel race'. The emotions and coping strategies that are engendered by racism are often under-researched in educational sociology. For instance, racial minorities can experience increased levels of anxiety when entering white spaces (Anderson, 2015), while white people have been observed to follow a 'normative racial script' because they adopt the typical emotional repertoire of dominant actors in society, often by becoming accustomed to what makes acceptable (or unacceptable) feelings and behaviours (Rosino, 2017). Furthermore, the apparent cognitive dissonance and emotional disconnect of white people when confronted with issues of race and racism have been observed in mainstream discourses (Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Oluo, 2019), especially in terms of 'white fragility', 'white guilt' and 'white tears' (DiAngelo, 2018; Phipps, 2021; Vice, 2010). Yet, discussions that centre the emotionality of whiteness risk diluting the effects of racism on minority ethnic individuals. For example, a critical and reflexive study of minority ethnic staff in a UK teacher-training context exemplified how the emotionality of whiteness, as experienced by the white researcher during discussions about racism (e.g. 'horror', 'shock' and 'dismay', as well as the threat of being seen as 'a racist' or a perpetuator of racism), can contribute to the marginalisation of minority ethnic participants (Simon, 2020). Here, concerns over the emotionality of whiteness may exacerbate the challenges of confronting perpetuators of racism.

For instance, Call-Cummings and Martinez (2016) found white teaching staff regularly fail to acknowledge subtler forms of racism as experienced by minority ethnic students, instead only recognising racism as explicit or overtly aggressive racist acts.

Victims are often required to 'prove' their experience, highlighting a structural barrier, and the trivialisation of complaints about implicit racism and racial microaggression. Furthermore, the Latinx students in the study would have 'shied away' from discussions of race, opting to remain silent and 'play the game' in order to survive everyday racism. Call-Cummings and Martinez argue the silence of the students reflects feelings of disempowerment, as their experiences of implicit racism and racial microaggressions remain mostly unacknowledged, resulting in emotional fatigue and apathy to challenge or report racist encounters. Implicit racism and racial microaggressions therefore not only harm mental health and wellbeing, but the conditions that enable and maintain white privilege may contribute to the silencing of minority ethnic students in the battle against racism.

Students from different ethnic backgrounds may approach and respond to racism differently, on both personal and social levels. According to Kuo (2011), emotional and cognitive coping strategies are shaped by cultural values, such as: 1) forbearance, familism and honouring authority figures; 2) reliance on in-group interdependence (e.g. feeling heard, valued and accepted); 3) cognitive strategies such as acceptance, reframing, emotional detachment, avoidance or 'focusing on the positive'; and 4) coping behaviours that are rooted in religious beliefs or practices, spirituality or rituals. For example, DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2020) found African American students to engage in a number of 'adaptive' and 'maladaptive' (or 'protective', due to fear of calling out racism) coping strategies when faced with racial microaggressions in the higher education workplace. Adaptive strategies were considered to be a 'healthy' mechanism, which included: 1) confronting racism through open communication; 2) establishing personal and professional networks; 3) engaging in self-care; and 4) setting boundaries, such as maintaining a balanced work and social life. Meanwhile, maladaptive forms of coping extended to: 1) using avoidance techniques to mitigate the likelihood of being subjected to the consequences of reporting perpetrators of racism; and 2) working harder or 'twice as good' for fear of impending consequences such as 'reproaching', 'questioning' or 'dismissal' (see Choi et al., 2020 for Latinx students).

As a means of coping and surviving educational mistreatment, minorities may have to endure the trauma of compromising, negotiating or internalising their identities to gain social acceptance at university (Harwood, Mendenhall, Lee, Riopelle, & Huntt, 2018). Available literature suggests similar issues and challenges for minority ethnic students in UK higher education (Bhopal, Myers, & Pitkin, 2020; Khattab, 2018; UUK/NUS, 2019). There are concerns that UK minority ethnic students may feel unable or reluctant to speak about instances of racism in HE from fear of repercussions (Ahmed, 2012; Jeyasingham & Morton, 2019). More research is merited to better understand concerns around racial inequality and minority ethnic students' experiences of racism at UK universities, especially on how they manage and cope with these encounters as a daily occurrence.

Our brief review of the literature suggests that while the widening access agenda has been somewhat successful at increasing the number of different students at university, evidence of racism and racial harassment in UK universities highlights that more research is needed to better understand racial inequalities in HE, especially on how racism is recognised, approached and managed. We reviewed educational psychology and sociology literature to appreciate the personal and structural influences in how

minority ethnic students experience and approach racism. To contribute to the field, this paper explores the responses to racism by minority ethnic students, especially their coping strategies and how they navigate their university experiences.

## The study

The paper draws on data collected in the first two years of a three-year qualitative study that investigated the lived experiences of minority ethnic undergraduates in England, in response to concerns over the ethnicity degree awarding gap. As an exploratory study, the project focused on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, where minority ethnic students are proportionally better represented when compared to non-STEM degrees. Around 25% of all UK-domiciled university students were identified as an ethnic minority, which converts to 26.9% in STEM and 17.4% in non-STEM undergraduate degrees (AdvanceHE, 2020). The project aims to provide rich qualitative data to enable us to have a more authentic understanding of the experiences, opportunities, challenges and attainments of university students.

The value of STEM is widely acknowledged by governments around the world. However, in Western countries such as the UK, there are concerns the experiences and trajectories of minority ethnic students in STEM education are more challenging and difficult than their white counterparts (Wong, 2016). The metaphor of the 'leaky pipeline' has been used to describe the relationship between 'race'/ethnicity and STEM participation. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds tend to gradually drop out of the STEM talent pool. Previous studies suggest that widespread images and discourses of science/ scientists as typically for privileged white men can contribute towards the general lack of interest in science for students without these advertised characteristics, particularly minority ethnic students (Losh, 2010). Yet, careers from STEM are often highly valued by minority ethnic families and viewed as a tool of social mobility in terms of attracting higher social status and earning potential (Wong, 2015).

The project began in Autumn 2018 after approval from the researchers' university ethics committee. It started with a call for participants in any STEM undergraduate degrees, with an emphasis on those who self-identify as being from a minority ethnic background. Using personal contacts as well as staff emails from STEM department websites, we approached over 100 staff to seek permission and support to promote recruitment. Further details were also disseminated through students' virtual learning environment. Although our target was UK-domiciled minority ethnic undergraduates, to be inclusive, we also accepted interest from those who self-identify as White British or as an international student. For information, the authors themselves were from the same university, all with a social science background and self-identify as a British East Asian man, White British woman and Middle Eastern woman. At the time of research, Wong was an academic staff with a departmental role that champions equality, diversity and inclusion, Copsey-Blake just completed a Master's degree and ElMorally was a doctoral student.

Collected over two years, this paper draws on 51 in-depth interviews with minority ethnic students from disciplines such as biological science, computer science, mathematics, pharmacy and psychological science. In the full study, a further 15 students from White British backgrounds were interviewed, but these are excluded in this paper. Of the

51 interviews, 34 were 'first interviews' and 17 were 'second interviews', with 34 unique individuals. A range of ethnicities were recruited, including Black (n = 6), East Asian (n = 6), Middle Eastern (n = 3), Mixed (n = 5), South Asian (n = 8) and White European (n = 5) and 'other' (n = 1), although most identified as female (n = 25). The study is situated in a medium-sized English university with a student composition that broadly reflects the national population, including the ethnicity degree awarding gap. Whilst each university is unique in their own right, the case-study institution is neither extreme nor atypical in terms of student diversity and outcome.

Students were interviewed for an hour on average, in quiet rooms across the university. Students were asked to share their views on a range of topics, including their experiences of university, the role of 'race'/ethnicity in their education, and their thoughts on the ethnicity awarding gap. In particular, we asked students to share their experiences and reflections on the issue of race and racism, and the approach they took in response. As the authors were outside of the disciplines of the participants, with no associations or interactions with the students outside of the project, we believe our positions and researcher identities can facilitate a safe space for participants to share their views. Given the potentially sensitive topics to be covered, each interview was allocated an extra hour to promote rapport and build trust, with time for students to settle, ask questions, meet the interviewer and learn more about the research. We wrote a note after each interview to reflect on the interaction and we are confident that our students found their participation to be pleasant. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, with sensitive details removed. An e-voucher was provided as a token of appreciation.

Data analysis was informed by a social constructionist perspective, which, in line with experiences of racism, understands social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced, within structural power relations (Burr, 2003). Interview transcripts were organised into the qualitative data analysis software, *NVivo* and provisional codes were created as we moved back and forth between the data and analyses in an iterative process through which the dimensions of concepts and themes were refined or expanded through the comparison of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). A coding framework was then established, with a guided list of definitions for each code after the authors independently coded five interview transcripts by relevant themes. These themes were then discussed and compared, with any differences on the application of codes debated until a consensus was reached. The codes were also grouped together into higher-level themes, corresponding to the study aims and purposes. The key theme relevant to this paper was on *students' responses and reactions to racism*, which was dominated by the coping mechanism of *emotional detachment or desensitisation* (e.g. over three-quarters, 40/51 transcripts and 26/34 individuals, had coding under this subtheme).

We note that the interviews were conducted prior to the renewed #blacklivesmatter global movement from May 2020, which prompted greater awareness and discussion on race equality. Yet, preliminary analysis from our third-year interviews, conducted in March 2021, did not seem to result in any drastic differences in students' views of and approaches to racism. The coronavirus pandemic did, however, exacerbate experiences of racism for East Asian students, mostly from members of the public via verbal abuse (UK Parliament, 2020).

As discussed later, this paper centres how minority ethnic students navigate, negotiate and react to their experiences of racism. More specifically, we focus on emotional detachment and desensitisation as an approach adopted by minority ethnic students to defuse and deescalate their reactions to racism.

## The sound of silence: emotional detachment and desensitisation

While a fortunate few appear to have been shielded, by family or by chance, from experiences of casual racism, most minority ethnic students acknowledged their encounters with microaggression, implicit or explicit racial prejudice, and discrimination at some point in their lives. Some of these experiences are elaborated elsewhere (see Wong, ElMorally, & Copsey-Blake, 2021a), as our focus in this section is to explore how minority ethnic students navigate their experiences of racism. We are particularly concerned with the coping mechanisms of students who experience racism, and how this can often manifest through emotional detachment and desensitisation. In other words, we highlight how students appear to recognise, accept and even tolerate certain levels of racism as part of their everyday lives.

Consciously or not, most students in our study seemed passive and even resigned in the battle against racism. Perhaps by consequence of previous (or continuous) negative experiences to challenge or call out racist behaviours, there appears to be a tone of acceptance about the unequal playing fields for underrepresented groups, especially racial minorities. When our students recalled and reflected episodes of their discriminatory experiences, most appear to trivialise their racial mistreatments and instead reframed those incidents as unintentional misunderstandings rather than malicious acts.

For example, Sachini (British South Asian female) said she often felt judged by certain peers in her class but she 'just sort of tend[s] to ignore it [because] I wouldn't really know what subtle signs [of racism] would be'. Whilst Sachini gave her peers the benefit of the doubt, her experiences highlight the difficulty of identifying and proving the effect of racial microaggression. The lived experiences of subtle racism for students like Sachini may not be validated or understood by the majority. Minority ethnic students may then take accountability, put it down to misinterpretation, or ignore their experience from potential fear of repercussion. This may not only be harmful for students' mental well-being, but may also mean that implicit forms of racism remain unchallenged or even dismissed.

For those who have experienced explicit racism, most often through verbal abuse, such as 'go back to your own country' from members of the public, as in the case of Alisha (British East Asian female) and several others, their reactions are usually to ignore and avoid engagement with the perpetrator (especially strangers). Alisha reasoned that it would be an 'unnecessary' confrontation with little to gain but many risks, particularly personal safety. In light of Covid-19, our students also recognise, and unfortunately a few have personally experienced, an increase in verbal assaults directed at those who look East Asian.

For students such as Lutah (British South Asian male), racially motivated verbal remarks often manifest as racial microaggressions in the form of 'jokes'. Due to the frequency in which they occur, Lutah explained that microaggressions are usually overlooked and therefore unchallenged or trivialised, 'especially if . . . it happened and your

friends were with you and they didn't do anything, they might not have noticed it, then you might feel like you're alone in it in that sense'. Lutah described desensitisation and emotional detachment as the often-easier alternative. He explained, 'before, I got quite upset about it, but then the more it happened, the less I got concerned about it. It's like desensitisation to the point where I just don't care anymore'. He continued, 'even if someone [is racist] as a joke, it still feels hurtful . . . it's still impactful on people . . . I just learned to ignore it'. However, Lutah felt 'uncomfortable' that he would only be remembered as 'the student who reported racism', as 'say if someone like a lecturer did it, it would be really uncomfortable in all the other lectures you were in, because that would always be the one thing you take away from that person'. He also believed that challenging racism 'made people uncomfortable', which may suggest that the emotionality of his white lecturers and peers are prioritised at the cost of his own mental wellbeing. Here, students appear to resist challenging racist comments and microaggressions.

In other words, there is a degree of acceptance amongst minority ethnic students towards their own experiences of racism, especially encounters that are seemingly implicit and verbal. Some played down the significance of their experiences and dismissed the idea of being racist victims. Here, students appear to be emotionally detached and even desensitised from everyday racism. Although Nancy (British East Asian female) shared several stories of racism, she maintained that her wellbeing and experiences at university are not adversely affected by racial ignorance. She recalled:

> In the past, one of [my peers] was like, 'Why are your eyes like this?' And then I was just like, it's so stupid. And then another one was like 'Can you actually have normal vision?' Or is it like 'do you see this?' And she was actually one of my friends, so it was a genuine question. I was like, okay, she's not being mean, but I was like, what are you? Like so stupid.

Nancy may have attributed stupidity, or naivety, to the abovementioned incident, but she also justified the comments of her peers later and admitted that 'I do understand why they would think that cos my eyes don't open up as big . . . I think it's just me not understanding'. Like Sachini, Nancy might be seen here to take accountability for misinterpretation, by internalising the impact of racial microaggression and mitigating any possible ramifications for speaking up about her lived experience. Her reluctance could also reflect her emotional detachment from the implicit or intended meanings behind these assertions. In other words, she no longer regards these comments to be personally offensive or racially charged. On the one hand, this approach appears to reduce the surface-level stress and associated pain that can be caused by calling out racism, especially when the impact of subtle manifestations may be invalidated, defended or challenged by the majority. On the other hand, such desensitisation and increased levels of tolerance are dangerous because the boundaries of acceptable and unchallenged behaviours are further stretched and even normalised (see Bhopal, 2018).

Emotional detachment and delayed emotions/reactions seem to be adopted by some students as a mechanism to cope with or interpret racism. Whilst Pakiza (British South Asian female) said her appearance is often subject to racist jokes from friends 'whenever there was a terrorist attack or something', she would typically 'laugh it off at the time' alongside her peers, although she admitted 'then it just sort of niggles at the back of your head [later] and I was just like that wasn't funny'. Here, Pakiza's default response is to play along, subconsciously, with a racist discourse, even if the content is racially

aggressive towards her, but only to reflect and react later about the implications and meanings of these narratives. Similarly, Ali (British South Asian male) is also tired of these 'terrorist jokes' with his white peers and admitted that his friendship groups are now just students from similar or other minority ethnic backgrounds. His distancing is not just emotional, but also social and physical.

For others such as Carol (Black British female), emotional detachment from racism was taught and socialised at home. Carol said that her 'parents have raised me to think that okay, if I'm good, I'm good and no one can tell me otherwise', which has meant that, as Carol admitted, she may be 'oblivious' to racist treatment because she has learnt to take complete ownership of her own success and failure, which can be liberating but also underplays structural inequalities.

Some students deliberately avoid discussions of race and cultural difference to blend in with peers. Kelly (British mixed female), for instance, spoke of her 'strange experience' when she averted 'to say things about race for the first couple of weeks' after she moved into a student accommodation as the only minority ethnic student. Similar to research on Black men in the United States who experienced 'racial battle fatigue' (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011), Kelly was conscious about how she interacts and admitted that 'I have to sort of hold my tongue sometimes when people say things . . . I can't intervene every time someone says something that's slightly racist'. She is worried about being 'the one who makes a thing about race' and accepts that 'I can't fight every battle'. Here, Kelly opted for a more strategic and collegial approach in how she engages and reacts to racially sensitive topics with her white peers, who may be subsequently apathetic or fragile to accusations of racism (Wong et al., 2021b).

When probed, most of our students suggested that confronting racists and reporting racism would be their last resort, rather than their first response. The reasons as to why minority ethnic students appear reluctant to report racism are multifaceted, including, as mentioned already, fears of retribution and the difficulty in proving or validating less explicit forms of racism. Of more concern is the apparent lack of trust and confidence from students in racial reporting, including the university's grievance process. Chetachi (Black British male), for instance, was sceptical as to what actions might be taken in response to racial complaints. He asked, 'what are they [the university] going to do? They probably will just warn the student, just give them a warning rather than do anything serious'. As such, Chetachi believes racist victims would avoid the reporting process because of the belief that 'the university wouldn't do too much'. Similarly, Farzana (British South Asian female) commented that 'some people just don't want to report things because they feel like it might get worse', which can include the personal trauma of reliving and redocumenting their experiences for record purposes.

Disha (British South Asian female) shared an experience of her friend who filed an official report with the university about racism, but was dismayed at the apparent lack of urgency, empathy or progress. As Disha recited, 'she went to the uni, spoke to them, but they haven't done anything about it. It's like no one really thinks it's an issue or a problem. They don't really take initiatives'. Here, Disha felt there was a lack of communication, from the basic acknowledgement of the concerns raised to the actions, if any, that was taken as a result of the complaint. As such, widely held perceptions, as well as actual first-hand experiences, of low transparency and progress do little to help promote or restore confidence in the grievance system.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that both personal and social perspectives are important for understanding minority ethnic students' approaches to racism, providing insight into structural and societal influences, as well as how racism can shape individuals and their experiences. For reasons of social survival and integration with white peers, minority ethnic students appear to have, at different points, accepted racism as an expected aspect of their everyday lives. In this paper we discussed their detachment of emotions as a strategy to cope and live with racism. But as we discuss later, these survival strategies may be linked to longer-term structural inequalities for minoritised groups. Considering these caveats, we offer our views and suggestions for policy and practice.

Consistent with existing scholarship (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020), we found emotional detachment and desensitisation as approaches adopted by minority ethnic students to cope with everyday racism and white privilege. Although their desensitisation to casualised racist behaviours may have pre-empted or neutralised potential conflicts with perpetrators, the danger of such acceptance and silencing is that the status quo is strengthened through the normalcy of racism (Bhopal, 2018). For minorities, the cost of social integration and harmony appears to include their desensitisation of racism, which means certain forms of racism remain unchallenged or even accepted (Bhopal et al., 2020).

With emotional detachment, individuals may be more subdued in their reactions to racism in the moment of its occurrence, but the longer-term side-effect of their perceived desensitisation could be their future reluctance to recognise or label racial injustice. As we elaborated elsewhere (Wong et al., 2021b), some students, from white as well as minority ethnic backgrounds, appear to be socialised with a *naïve discourse of racism* that projects a historic view of race and racism where the issues are no longer prominent or relevant in society today. In short, students with these views are likely to dismiss or deny racism as a current problem in UK society, including structural racism, as advocated by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) report.

Of more concern is that whilst most of our minority ethnic students recognise racism in society, none claimed to feel supported or even able to challenge or protest racism. Instead, our students appear to accept subtle forms of racism in their everyday lives, through a degree of tolerance. There are multifaceted reasons for this approach, including concerns of retribution, especially personal safety and wellbeing (Wong et al., 2021b); the challenge in identifying racism, particularly that which subtle and implicit (Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2010); and a general lack of trust in the grievance system, with little if any belief that real actions will emerge from complaints (Pilkington, 2013). For these students, it is regrettable but understandable that emotional detachment became their own form of resistance against racism, especially with everyday encounters that may be both physically and emotionally depleting, especially if each occurrence is unchallenged (Ahmed, 2012; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020). As such, students learned to desensitise their feelings and mitigate their reactions to racism, but also in response to wider concerns that minority ethnic groups are generally disadvantaged across different spheres of society, as evidenced in existing literature (e.g. Byrne et al., 2020).

However, we should not rely on those who are subjected to racism to be the only ones to challenge or identify these inequalities. For minority ethnic students, being silent is often the safer, if not the only, viable option. Here, students appear to be trapped in a state of emotional detachment and desensitisation of racial abuse, which may be a result of the stigma and barriers associated with the process to express or validate racialised experiences (Ortiz, 2019). The challenges of speaking up about experiences of racism are also exacerbated by the perceived emotionality of whiteness, where the potential repercussions of confronting issues of race and racism maintain white privilege and contribute to the silencing of minority ethnic individuals (Call-Cummings & Martinez, 2016; Simon, 2020).

For context, in popular discourse, the term 'gaslighting' describes an act of manipulation which invalidates victims of abuse and causes them to question their sanity or lived experience, making them uncredible or even guilty for expressing their concerns. While it is underexplored, 'racial gaslighting' refers to the enduring process that pathologises individual or collective resistance by restricting freedom of expression (Davis & Ernst, 2019). It is arguably enabled by the apathy of those fortunate enough not to experience or truly understand the effects of racism, and the related difficulty of proving or challenging its subtleties to a majority where white privilege is seemingly invisible and protected (Bhopal, 2018). Our findings suggest that minority ethnic students may be at risk of carrying personal accountability for misinterpretation because they feel unable to identify, evidence or validate their lived experience of racism. Furthermore, the trivialisation of such incidents at the cost of the mental wellbeing of minority ethnic students may be attributed to misunderstandings of racism among staff, especially white senior leaders in universities (Call-Cummings & Martinez, 2016). The challenges of reporting and validating experiences of racism supports the finding that racism serves to codify the university as an exclusively 'white space' (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Consistent with recent research, we are concerned that racial gaslighting upholds white privilege, as it protects perpetuators of racism and enables the exclusion and silencing of minority ethnic students, causing them to desensitise and internalise their responses. This has serious implications, as experiences of racial trauma, especially if unrecognised or unattended, can cause long-lasting psychological and physical harm to the mind and body (Kinouani, 2020).

Here, we view racism as a 'social virus'. Whilst our students may have developed mechanisms to cope with everyday racism through their efficacy in desensitisation and emotional detachment, it is problematic that the onus rests on the victim, so to speak. Their silence is for social survival and comes at a high personal cost. Their resistance to everyday racism is not to be celebrated because it highlights the failure of society in terms of equality and social justice. It lays bare the reality of racial difference in lived experiences and questions why minority ethnic students ought to adjust themselves to accept everyday racism.

As existing studies have argued, white privilege and structural barriers have made it difficult or even impossible for minority ethnic individuals to challenge every aspect of their racialised experiences, especially when racism fails to be recognised (Bhopal, 2018, 2020). The emotional work, namely detachment and desensitisation, as practised by our minority ethnic students, seem to grow out of frustration and resignation that the status quo can be meaningfully challenged. A sign of optimism may be drawn from the

reinvigorated #blacklivesmatter movement in 2020, which seem to have 'woken' some individuals and institutions, with renewed commitments for race equality and self-reflection (Thomas, Davis, Wilson, & Sobande, 2020). However, racial inequalities persist in HE, as white privilege is arguably institutionalised through subtle manifestations of racism, and the subsequent trivialisation of racist behaviours which favour the emotionality of its perpetuators (Phipps, 2021; Simon, 2020). The longer-term impact of the latest movement on the lived experiences of minority ethnic students therefore remains to be seen as the constant battle against everyday racism continues. This can cause minority ethnic students immense race-related stress, where emotional detachment and desensitisation are likely to be indicative of racial battle fatigue (Call-Cummings & Martinez, 2016; Smith et al., 2011, 2016).

## Implications for universities

As public institutions, UK universities must adhere to the Equality Act 2010 and have policies to counteract discrimination against protected characteristics, including race/ethnicity. However, the enactment of policy (or even law) into practice is complicated, with unintended consequences (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Universities have a moral responsibility to ensure that the experiences of minority ethnic students are not compromised because of their racial background. Structural inequalities must be acknowledged and actively dismantled. A growing number of UK universities have issued statements of commitment to eradicate racism and structural inequalities, including membership to AdvanceHE's *Race Equality Charter*, which signals a long-term commitment to race equality. As of September 2021, there are 80 university members but only 17 award holders, which means more work is still needed in both membership and awardee numbers. Some universities have also engaged with the #BlackoutTuesday trend on social media (see Sinanan, 2020), whilst others released personal messages from vice-chancellors, senior leaders and student officers. Although responses varied in length and depth, few universities to date seem to have developed specific anti-racist actions to tackle racial inequalities and the structural barriers operating within HE (see UCL, 2020). Thus, the recent movement is not a passing 'trend' but a very real reminder of long-term, contemplative anti-racist and decolonial work that needs to be done.

We suggest universities should deter the 'performative activist' stance, that is, commitments driven by public reactions and relations which often lack substance or strategy. Rather, universities ought to take a strategic view in tackling racial inequality that addresses a multiple of interrelated issues, especially a clear and transparent approach on how the complex problem of racism is handled, from staff and student training to the grievance process and procedure (Liyanage, 2020). Given the reported low confidence in the reporting system, there should be a concerted effort to build trust, working with students, to develop a grievance system that is 'fit for purpose'. We concur with the suggestion that universities should implement a support system for victims of racism where students and staff would have readily accessible professional support and counselling, beyond a 'report and wait' process that often fails to acknowledge and support the emotional needs of victims (UUK, 2020). For students, the process of reporting racism should be clear and straightforward, with complaints promptly reviewed by trained staff, with regular updates of each case to ensure progress is being made and seen. Furthermore, universities ought to

work even closer with student-led societies and local charities to engage with the wider community, and ensure support is available for minority ethnic students who may be subject to multiple inequalities (e.g. disability, neurodiversity, sexuality), in addition to racism. A clear, transparent and committed system to tackle racism has the potential to mitigate the risk of students developing 'unhealthy' coping mechanisms (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020), such as emotional detachment and desensitisation.

Our findings also reflect current research that suggests social and psychological support systems tend to overlook the impact of racism and race-related trauma on the wellbeing of minority ethnic individuals, who must develop potentially damaging coping strategies to manage their emotional responses out of fear of repercussion or due to the normalcy of racism and hegemonic whiteness in society (Kinouani, 2020). It seems apparent that minority ethnic students face a number of barriers that can inhibit the ways they identify and respond to racism. This is evidenced in our study, where students feel unable to speak up with friends or make formal complaints about racism. There does not seem to be a safe space on campus that would allow students to share their experiences of racism, as even within their peer and social networks, staying silent may well be the 'safer' option. It is imperative that students' lived experiences of racism are validated, and our response to racism is sensitive of the trauma as experienced by our minority ethnic students. We feel that claims of racism should not be judged by perceived credibility or solely based on concrete evidence but founded in empathy for whom racism is an everyday lived reality. Students and staff may benefit from support groups, think tanks or community spaces that are designed to educate and provide feelings of validation and solidarity, as well as encourage students to speak out, find solace in the experiences of others and feel supported to make formal reports and complaints about instances of racism, regardless of their subtlety or perceived intent.

To improve support for minority ethnic students, more research is needed on the psychological and social harm caused by racism, how it is approached and silenced in HE, and the different (and sometimes, unhealthy) coping strategies that students develop in their response to racism. To fulfil the promise of social mobility through education, policy on racial inequality should refrain from redressing issues of racism with politicised rhetoric and messages of token diversity, and actively work to eliminate structural barriers and racisms through an acknowledgement of the work of anti-racist scholars, activists and movements. Our hope is that this will infiltrate in practice, inform pedagogy and shift the conversation about race and racism from a singular dimension of diversity towards eliminating the ongoing dynamics of racialised power, so that all students feel able to break the culture of silence in the battle against racism.

## Disclosure statement

## Funding

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