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Belonging for 'Outsiders Within', A Critical Race Perspective on Whiteness as a Means of Promoting the 'Insider Without' Syndrome

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Abstract

A university education and subsequent qualification may enable graduates to achieve symbolic capital – interspersed with social and cultural capital. Why is it then that universities are becoming hostile spaces for people of colour? How does this compromise their sense of belonging? What are some of the issues that people of colour face in achieving a sense of belonging in the academe? How can this be overcome? Universities have become a space where the 'outsider within' is "assigned a group inferiority status [that serves] as proof of the group's inferiority" (Hill Collins 1986 :S20). A space where the 'outsider within', armed with a particular way of seeing reality from both the outside and inside remains an 'insider without'. White supremacy severely undermines sense of belonging by posing institutionalised threats to persons of colour in the academe; it may be considered the antithesis of cultural diversity in progressive societies. Therefore, how can educational spaces be transformed by using the experiences of the "insiders without" to effect transformational change?

Keywords: Critical Race Theory (CRT), Sense of Belonging, Whiteness, Insider Without, Outsider Within

Introduction

It had been a good day. The first year of the PhD had been completed and Afolabi had successfully defended his proposal in the upgrade interview. Afolabi's supervisors were exceptional – asking tough, but challenging questions. He couldn't wait to return the books to the library and get a good night's sleep. One of the nice perks that comes with working at a university is that you also get to study there. Afolabi often feel a sense of privilege, gratitude and pride, working at a prestigious university and being able to do a PhD part time. Having completed his undergraduate and Masters degrees on the same campus, the library had become a second home. Added to that, as part of his role as a member of staff, Afolabi hosted several events in the library and believed he had a convivial relationship with the staff.

The books were heavy and for ease, Afolabi donned the lanyard containing the ID card around his neck (the word STAFF was clearly imprinted on the lanyard). Afolabi entered the library and managed to clumsily negotiate the automated security access gate, scanning his ID card. Still desperately balancing the books, he headed towards the automated book deposit, when a member of the library administrative staff mounted a challenge, 'let me see your ID?'. Afolabi acquiesce and immediately declared that he was a member of staff and was only intending to return the books.

Afolabi's ID card was scrutinised closer. The member of staff, calling him by name, said 'you would never imagine the things that students get up to these days in the library, we have to be vigilant. On a daily basis we see gangs, drug dealing and other criminal activity'. Afolabi attempted to redirect the gaze, as a teachable moment, mentioning that the manner in which

he was treated could be misconstrued as a form of microaggression. This event occurred in the gaze and earshot of students who were themselves traversing the space.

The books were then successfully returned. Afolabi couldn't help noticing that for 10 minutes following the event, only black male students were challenged for their ID cards.

On entering his place of work the following morning, Afolabi was informed that a meeting had been arranged between the Library Manager, his line manager and himself to discuss the incident.

A university education and subsequent qualification may enable graduates to achieve symbolic capital – interspersed with social and cultural capital. It is shown that some graduates have the potential to achieve social mobility and increased employment prospects. It is also shown that year on year, students of colour are entering UK higher education (HE) *en masse* – at a higher rate than any other group. Why is it then that universities are becoming hostile spaces for people of colour? How does this compromise their sense of belonging? What are some of the issues that people of colour face in achieving a sense of belonging in the academe? How can this be overcome?

This article offers answers to these questions and argue that rather than an isolated incident, the prologue is best understood as an example of the predictable iterations of microaggression, inequality and normative whiteness that undergirds UK HE. First, this article will draw on critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical and methodological framework to analyse how racial conditions promote social inequalities that are reinforced through institutions and institutional structures of HE at the expense of students and staff of colour. Second, institutional whiteness and the dichotomy of liberalism will be discussed in order to unveil the 'post racial' hegemony that it ratifies. Professor Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the '*outsider within*' will provide a further analysis of the web of whiteness and highlight how what I call the "*insider without*" syndrome is developed – a state of double consciousness that result from battle fatigue caused by perpetual microaggressions. This will be unpacked, drawing on the allegory provided in the prologue. Finally, I will conclude with thoughts on how educational spaces can be transformed by using the experiences of the "*insiders without*" to effect transformational change.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Originating as an outgrowth of the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement, during the mid-1970s, CRT emerged from the early work of Derrick Bell (an African-American) and Alan Freeman (a White), who were discontent with the slow pace of racial reform in the United States (Ladson-Billings 1998). Since then, CRT has been used extensively to unmask larger, systematic, structural conventions and customs that sustain hegemony of certain groups over an unequal status quo. CRT presents race as a jumping off point to unpack the intersections of inequality that promote otherness for those outside the dominant cultural paradigms (male, White, hetero-sexual, able bodied) and ideology, which perpetuates stereotypes (Ladson-Billings 1998). CRT has become an important tool for deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses and reconstruction of human agency and equitable, socially just power relations. CRT's framework comprises of five tenets: counter-storytelling; acknowledgement of the permanence of racism; Whiteness as property; interest convergence; and the critique of liberalism. CRT places race at the centre of the paradigm; however, this does not necessarily mean that other identities are ignored. Through the use of CRT, interspersed with the counter-narrative in the prologue, this chapter will highlight how institutional structures promote and reinforce inequality in education at the expense of people of colour. Next, white supremacy will be unveiled by highlighting the structural ways in which White supremacy operates by adopting Whiteness as a baseline descriptor of normalcy in society.

White supremacy: The dichotomy of liberalism

Frances Lee Ainsley (1989:1024) defined White supremacy as:

“... a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.”

This White supremacy that Ainsley describes still reverberates through historical and contemporary manifestations. Through the lens of CRT, it can be seen how White supremacy is enmeshed in contemporary structures and depicted in Afolabi's story, where the library staff justified their actions to challenge Afolabi through the use of a 'stock explanation that constructs reality in a way that maintains their privilege' (Ladson-Billings 1998: 21). As Gloria Ladson-Billings points out, Whiteness can be considered as property – supreme. But why was Afolabi subject to closer scrutiny? Since Afolabi was not White, he did not possess property, hence was relegated to a diminished standing and thrust into subordination, despite his status as a member of staff and postgraduate researcher. As we will see later in this article, Afolabi's counter-narrative provided a facility to analyse the campus climate and to articulate his experience of being marginalised. At this point, it is important to acknowledge the juxtaposition between students of colour and staff of colour and how they encounter, endure and traverse White spaces, in the light of Afolabi's story and the permanence of racism in society. Racism is used here as a construct to understand inequality and depict the ways in which White supremacy works to control the social, political and economic realms of society, rather than individual acts of discrimination.

White supremacy may be seen as a dichotomy of liberalism. CRT proports a critique of colourblindness, equal opportunity for all and the neutrality of the law. The prologue lends itself to the question, to what extent was Afolabi's experience a reflection of non-partisan actions? Within Afolabi's narrative, it is seen where rights were both conferred and subsequently withheld almost exclusively on race. On a macro level, White supremacy is recycled and unveiled as part of a 'post racial' hegemonic structure, intricately enmeshed into the fabric of the university – AKA institutional racism. On a micro level, it is masked in seemingly colourblind rules and regulations that legislate racist policies that perpetuate microaggressions and social inequality. Policies that provide leverage for subjectivity and inconsistencies for the custodians and those that expedite them. What are some of the gravest implications of White supremacy on people of colour in the academe? The following section will employ Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the '*outsider within*' (Hill Collins 1986) to further analyse normative Whiteness and demonstrate how White supremacy is operationalised as an instrument to retract property rights and promote a syndrome that I call hereafter, the "*insider without*" syndrome.

Outsiders within and the "*insider without*" syndrome

Professor Patricia Hill Collins believes 'outsiders within' experience less of a fit between their personal and cultural experiences and... paradigms than that facing others [within that environment]. The outsider allegiances may militate against them choosing full insider status and they may be more apt to remain 'outsiders within'" (S26).

Subsequently, the "*insider without*" syndrome is characterised by belongingness uncertainty (insecurity and lack of confidence caused by negative environmental stimulus), lack of autonomy, stress and fatigue resulting from accumulative and debilitating everyday microaggressions, and feelings of vulnerability and isolation, receipt of covert and/ or overt acts of inequality). The "*insider*

without” is comparable to a stateless individual, who primarily do not feel like they belong. At this juncture within this paper Afolabi’s counter-narrative will be developed using an auto-ethnographic paradigm in order to unearth some of the sophisticated forms of discrimination he received as an *Outsider* within the academe; this is essential in order to understand some of the causal factors associated with the development of an “*Insider Without*” syndrome.

Prior to the planned three-way meeting with the Library Manager, Afolabi was asked to meet with his Line Manager. Afolabi works as a Diversity Practitioner within the University’s Widening Participation team. Afolabi’s Line Manager stated, “The Library Manager has received a complaint that you accused their staff of being racists. You need to be careful not to let something like that undermine all the hard work that you have been doing here at the university. We want to meet with you to discuss this. You have to understand that using language like microaggression infuriates people. Furthermore, what about your PhD”? “If I were you, I would just let it go.”

How does one know when they are an insider and not an outsider in disguise? Professor Patricia Hill Collins (1986) believes that an ‘outsider status’ is bound to:

“... generate tension, for people who become outsiders within... they become different people and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may difficult for... insiders to see. Some outsiders within try to resolve the tension generated by their new status by leaving... others choose to suppress their difference by striving to become bonafied... Both choices rob [society] of diversity”(S29).

White supremacy severely undermines sense of belonging by posing institutionalised threats to persons of colour in the academe; it may be considered the antithesis of cultural diversity in progressive societies. Note how Afolabi was reminded not to upset the furniture by seemingly being given commendation for his good work on the one hand, but implicitly threatened on the other. Of equal note was the default position taken by Afolabi’s line manager, insinuating that Afolabi was hypersensitive, playing identity politics and upsetting the fragile White staff by ‘playing the race card’ (Arday 2018:152). As the ‘outsider within’, Afolabi’s egalitarian position is in conflict with that of the institution. He is reminded that it is not his job to highlight how “these behaviours reproduce cultures of discrimination and marginalisation which denigrate people of colour” (Arday 2018: 153), but that the practices displayed by the library staff were “normal, not aberrant” (Ladson-Billings 1998: 18). Master scripting now occurs, as Afolabi is muted and his perspectives erased, as he attempts to challenge the dominant culture, authority and power (Ladson-Billings 1998). Disempowered, disillusioned and voluntarily isolated, Afolabi’s “*insider without*” status is confirmed, as his syndrome develops.

People of colour are not only the outsiders within in the academe. As outsiders moving *en masse* through Widening Participation initiatives, into a space that historically excluded them. The experiences of people of colour in the academe highlights the tensions experienced by any group of less powerful outsiders, encountering the paradigmatic thought of a more powerful insider community. Afolabi’s story is one such example of how libraries have been desecrated, becoming a space of conflict in the academe. In making Afolabi’s story more salient, it is seen where the academe has now become a space where White supremacy is maintained and enacted through racial profiling, PREVENT strategies and ‘stop and search’ procedures similar (guised in the form of ID card challenges) to those performed in UK communities. A space where the barrier gate and CCTV cameras have become barriers of entry to ‘*insiders without*’ who infiltrate and appear within, despite justification of its use as a data capture point to gauge student engagement and to enhance security. A space where institutional policies and practices have seemingly built in a measure of subjectivity as

a contingency to maintain hegemony. A space where the *'outsider within'* is "assigned a group inferiority status [that serves] as proof of the group's inferiority" (Hill Collins 1986 :S20). A space where the *'outsider within'*, armed with a particular way of seeing reality from both the outside and inside remains an *'insider without'*.

Thus far, this article has used CRT as a tool to elucidate how race has become a central construct for understanding inequality in the academe. Afolabi's counter-narrative demonstrated an example of how white supremacy is employed as a hegemonic tool to maintain dominance, while compromising sense of belonging. While Afolabi inhabited two identities, his experiences as a member of staff (of colour) can easily be juxtaposed with that of a student (of colour) in the academe who often face similar challenges in their striving for belonging. As *'outsiders within'* who often develop an *'insider without'* syndrome, it is important that these experiences are used to shape and inform practice, strategies and policies in order to promote a sense of belonging for people of colour in the academe. The following section will recommend actions to transform praxis to tactics.

Concluding points

Looking back at Ainsley's definition, it is seen how White supremacy is used as a vice to maintain an outsider status for staff and students of colour and as a catalyst to develop an *"insider without"* syndrome; this compromises sense of belonging. It is also seen how conscious and unconscious White superiority is maintained when one seeks to challenge the 'so-called' neo-liberal 'post-race' university. Looking forward, what needs to be done, is to operationalise an interest convergence tactic (Ladson-Billings 1998).

First, it is important to understand that "failure must be acknowledged in order to build possible futures from the materials at hand... We cannot ameliorate something which we think does not exist because it is unsayable" (Tate and Bagguley 2017: 294). Universities need to acknowledge that race and racism shapes the experiences of staff and students of colour in the academe, thus compromising their sense of belonging. It is insufficient to believe that the tokenistic unconscious bias training that provides a tick in the box to state "there is no racism here" (290) is fit for purpose; this should be decommissioned and replaced with mandatory cultural competence training. In this sense, universities could utilise the cultural/ academic capital borne by the *"outsider within"* to design and deliver this training in conjunction with White allies.

Second, "equity, diversity, and other policies aimed at equality amount to no more than well-worded mission statements and some minor cosmetic changes which leave structural racial inequality intact" (290) "...if we do notice and say 'this is racism' our acknowledgment is always tied to an individual failure or pathology on the part of both students and faculty and their white anti-racist allies" (274). Therefore, universities need to address their inertia to uphold egalitarian principles and promote social justice. There is an urgent need for institutional policies and procedures to report, record and penalise perpetrators of race-based violence and discrimination. This is paramount in dismantling White supremacy.

Third, universities have become a site of pain for both students of colour and staff alike. Drawing on the attrition caused by the *"insider without"* syndrome and institutional initiatives to 'widen participation' that sees an increase in the number of students from non-traditional backgrounds entering the academe, there is a need for the provision of culturally appropriate wellbeing services. Through a convergence of interest, this will not only enable institutions to meet their neo-liberal objectives but also address the inevitable mental health needs of students and staff of colour.

Given the vastness of the barriers to the achievement of sense of belonging for staff and students of colour in the academe, this article only goes some way in identifying tactics to overcome these barriers. However, “until there is a recognition that students and staff of colour continue to be blighted and subordinated by racial oppression, the struggle for equality and acceptance in higher education will continue” (Arday 2018: 156).

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