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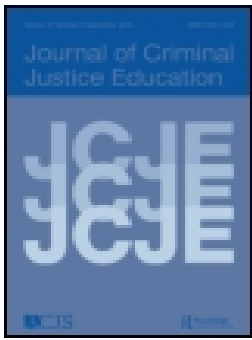
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Why Is My Criminology Curriculum Still so White? “Race” and Racism as “Blind Spots” in UK Criminology Teaching and Student Recommendations for the Future

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ABSTRACT

This article centers undergraduate criminology students’ concerns regarding their overwhelmingly white¹ criminology curriculum. Situated at a UK university, this research draws upon focus groups and interviews with students and outlines three findings. Firstly, teaching on “race” and racism rarely arises. When it does, it focuses on “watershed moments” which are explored within singular sessions. Secondly, the white curriculum reinforces white, male and Western theoretical standpoints as the archetype, leading to feelings of disconnection. Thirdly, seminar discussions result in silence or racist viewpoints being shared, with these not adequately managed by lecturers. White students do not see themselves as part of a broader racialized structure, whilst some racialized students remain silent to enhance connection with their white classmates or to protect themselves from racism. This article acts as an urgent call for criminologists to reflect upon their current pedagogical choices and to begin embedding “race” and racism in the criminology curriculum.

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Criminology; “race”; racism; teaching; decolonization

Introduction

This paper foregrounds student reflections on their criminology degree and centers their frustrations at the discipline’s narrow engagement with “race” and racism. It calls for faculty to centralize and embed “race” within criminological teaching, arguing that “race” is particularly pertinent to the discipline given the presence of criminal justice agencies who continue to benefit from racial and other forms of social injustice. In the UK and beyond, there have been calls to decolonize the curriculum (Arshad et al.,

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¹The terms “white” and “whiteness” here and throughout the article, do not refer to skin colour or physiological traits. Whiteness is approached as a political term in that it describes ways of being structurally ‘white’, both as a social identity *and* as a social structure that upholds it (Fatsis, *in press*). Jennings’ (2020) uses the term whiteness to refer ‘not ... to people of European descent but to a way of being in the world and seeing the world that forms cognitive and affective structures able to seduce people into its habitation and its meaning making’ p.9. In referring to “whiteness”, this text does not refer to a biological status but rather a *political colour*, as “the colour of [people’s] politics and not the colour of [their] skins” (Sivanandan, 2008, p. xvii).

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2021; Bhabra et al., 2018; Elliott-Cooper, 2018; Tate & Bagguley, 2017). These calls have been inconsistent, with one fifth of universities pledging to “decolonize” the curriculum in 2020 (Batty, 2020). What decolonization means, who it serves and what it maintains needs to be given greater attention (Fatsis, 2021). Previous research with undergraduates shows that students do not feel their curriculum is reflective of issues of diversity, equality and justice, both at university (National Union of Students, 2011) and at school (Savadia, Gomes Da Costa, & Jackson, 2021). In 2015, student activist groups led “Why is my Curriculum White” protests across the UK (National Union of Students 2016), questioning the production of racialized knowledge and the whiteness of university curriculums and staff. In the same year, the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which began at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, quickly spread to Oxford University, drawing attention to how the architecture of university spaces is ideological, racialised and micro-aggressive (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019).

As an early career academic employed at a post-92 university, I began reflecting on the contradictions between national calls for the decolonization of the curriculum, university diversification agendas of students and staff and the dearth of attention given to “race” within the criminology curriculum that I was teaching. This article elucidates findings from a qualitative study with second and third-year undergraduates at a university in England. The findings reveal students’ frustrations at the privileging of white, male, Western theory in first year criminology modules and the silence and racism which arises in classroom discussions of “race.” It calls for faculty to reflect upon how they are complicit in reproducing a white criminology curriculum and to make tangible changes to centralize “race” within the curriculum. The article prioritises the voices of a racially diverse cohort of students and illuminates how the white curriculum can enhance feelings of marginalisation and exclusion for racialized students. It urges white staff and students to think critically about their own racialized identity and white epistemological standpoint (Parmar, Earle, & Phillips, 2022).

Constructions of “Race” in Criminology

Where criminology has engaged with “race,” it has often been “as-a-variable,” as though “race” is an inherent, essential, and measurable characteristic (Zuberi, 2001). Crime and arrest data is often presented in criminology textbooks by racial and/or ethnic group without an interrogation of what “race” or “ethnicity” mean (Parmar, 2021). As a result, “race” is presented as a real, naturally occurring phenomenon. Interpreted without a critical eye, “race” can therefore be read as the cause of a social condition such as criminality. Other criminology textbooks go further to explore how racism has led to the over-representation of racialized individuals within the criminal justice system today (Bowling & Phillips, 2002; Rowe, 2012). Briefly, this paper approaches “race” as a discursive construct, as “race” has been, and continues to be, defined differently throughout time (Hall, 1997). The language and actions of the powerful produce different understandings of “race” throughout history and therefore “race” is a “floating signifier” (Hall, 1997). We must refer to “racialization” rather than “race,” as ideas of “race” are injected on people, places, institutions and relationships (Garner, 2017). As such,

“race” will remain apostrophised throughout this article, due to its shifting, non-biological and non-essentialised nature.

Lombroso’s (2006) ideas, translated and published in *The Criminal Man*, are often the first to be taught on theoretical modules, whilst their racist and discriminatory underpinnings are under-theorized and sometimes overlooked. Whilst “race” is briefly mentioned in Merton’s (1968) strain theory and is unexplored in Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory, these theories can be drawn upon in the classroom where “race” either becomes an explanation or causal factor of criminality. It is relatively easy to critique less critical criminological theories, however, “the relative silence about ‘race’ in Marxist, radical and control theories and to a degree, labelling perspectives ... has largely gone unnoticed” (Phillips, Earle, Parmar, & Smith, 2020, p. 433). Cunneen and Tauri (2017, 2019) have critiqued the discipline for the dismissal of indigenous knowledge, whilst Fatsis (2021) argues that we need to interrogate why the ethnography of the Chicago School is given attention over the work by Du Bois (1973) in the *Philadelphia Negro*. Whilst an increasing number of scholars are reviewing and diversifying their reading lists, we need to go beyond simply replacing one text with another to critically reflect on why certain texts are “canonized” in criminology (Fatsis, 2021, p. 5).

Phillips et al. (2020) recent article titled “Dear British criminology: where has all the ‘race’ and racism gone?” critiques the discipline for neglecting and marginalizing “race,” rendering the discipline “institutionally white” (p. 427). The concept of disciplinary reflexivity, underpinned by Emirbayer and Desmond, is drawn upon by Phillips et al. (2020) to encourage all criminologists “to inquire critically into the presuppositions that shape our thought” (p. 429). The discipline has close affiliations with the criminal justice system, through criminal justice guest lecturers, as well as large financial and contractual arrangements between universities and criminology frameworks such as the recent Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA²). This means that both the discipline, and the university more widely, benefit from close affiliations with criminal justice agencies who operate to target, surveil and detain racialized populations in the UK and beyond.

There have been some positive improvements within the discipline. The British Society of Criminology recently founded the “Race Matters Network,” which aims to give greater attention to “race” and racism in criminological projects and offer support to racialized scholars (The British Society of Criminology, 2021). The development of the Southern Criminology project also critiques the privileging of theories and methods based on the global North (Carrington, Hogg, & Sozzo, 2016; Cunneen, 2011). This has not been without its criticisms, with Ciocchini and Greener (2021) stating greater attention should be given to the structures of neo-colonization, whilst Parmar (2017) argues that both approaches need to engage further with existing imperialisms. Despite their presence, the embeddedness of theoretical standpoints generated outside of the Global North remains sketchy in the British criminology curriculum, with first year and core modules often excluding the voices from the global majority

²The PCDA is a recently developed three-year degree course which will see student officers gain a fully-funded, BSc (Hons) degree. A number of UK universities now offer this degree course, benefitting from large financial arrangements with the police. An increased number of criminology and policing lecturers are now involved in the training of police officers.

(Stockdale & Sweeney, 2019, 2022). The next section explores some of the barriers to centralizing “race” and racism within the curriculum and in classroom settings.

White Barriers to Centralizing “Race” and Racism

The university is a site of entrenched racialized, as well as classed and gendered, inequalities. In 2022, 82% of UK lecturers are white and 1% of professors are Black (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022). Whilst diversification agendas permeate UK universities, this work is often the responsibility of racialized members of staff (Ahmed, 2007, 2012). Mills (1997) *Racial Contract* outlines how white supremacy is a long-lasting and deeply ingrained project. HE institutions exist to support and rearticulate white supremacy, with students often leaving university with their “walls of whiteness essentially unchallenged, unscathed and often, strengthened” (Brunsma, Brown, & Placier, 2013, p. 718). In a study in the UK, Brunsma et al. (2013) found that whiteness was strengthened through extracurricular activities, residential isolation and everyday practices such as grading and classroom interactions. Joseph-Salisbury (2020) writes:

The role of higher education is not abstract, but inextricably tied to the production of knowledge, to the organisation of the labour market, to the qualifications of professionals, and – fundamentally – to the (re)production of white supremacy (p. 73).

Research evidences that one of the barriers to teaching on “race” and racism are lecturers themselves (Alvarez & Milner, 2018; Maingi, 2017; Williams & Conyers, 2016). Exploring a survey completed by 336 white lecturers from differing disciplines, Alvarez and Milner (2018) found that whilst 90% of white lecturers felt “race” was important to discuss, they were unprepared in doing so and tried to avoid “race” talk in discussions with students. Bonilla-Silva (2014) suggests that lecturers’ fears are grounded in individualism, influencing how they approach structural and institutional issues of “race.” Teachers tend to exercise expression of choice to protect their interests and not their students’ needs or interests (Alvarez & Milner, 2018). Brunsma et al. (2013) argue that white students must understand themselves racially, as active parts of the social structure. They call for the importance of teaching anti-racism to white students and making this more critical in cracking, and eventually destroying, the walls of whiteness. Parmar et al. (2022) suggest that lecturers should be:

Providing white students with a critical appreciation that they are “educated formally and educated culturally into whiteness” (Ryden & Marshall, 2012, p. 10), and that whiteness is not some innocuous feature of an ethnic spectrum but a systematic, historical form of supremacy (p. 4).

Research Design and Sample

This research took place at a post-92 university in the UK in the summer of 2021. The criminology degree is offered as a combined degree with a number of specialisms. The researcher had recently completed their doctoral research which interrogated the governance of nightlife with specific attention to “race.” At the same time, the researcher began identifying and problematising the white criminology curriculum that they were teaching. An increased number of students had also begun showing

an interest in exploring “race” as part of their dissertation projects (motivated in part from the police murder of George Floyd in the US and the resulting Black Lives Matter protests in the UK, see: Abbott, 2021). In supervisory meetings, many students shared concerns that their criminology degree had not engaged with “race” or racism. This drove the formation of the research and after reviewing the literature the following research questions were constructed:

1. When has “race” arisen as a topic during the criminology degree? What was taught? In what setting did this take place?
2. Has “race” and/or racism been discussed in seminar settings? What was the nature of the discussion? How does this topic make students feel?
3. What are students’ recommendations for developing the curriculum and teaching to be more inclusive of “race” and racism?

The researcher set up two focus groups to explore students’ perspectives in relation to the research questions. Focus groups were favoured by the researcher as they allowed them to adopt the role of a “facilitator” and aided in centering the student voice (Hohenthal, Owidi, Minoia, & Pellikka, 2015). The use of focus groups also encouraged students to explore what was important to them in their own vocabulary (Kitzinger, 1995) and provided a safe space to reveal dominant cultural narratives. Two focus groups took place, each with seven students. These were in-depth and lasted between 90 minutes to 2 hours. At the end of the focus groups, students were asked whether they would like to take part in a follow-up semi-structured interview. This resulted in a further five interviews, four with students who had taken part in the focus groups, and one with a student who did not want to take part in the focus group but wanted to be interviewed. The focus group and interview questions were loosely based around five themes: biographies, the criminology degree program, the classroom setting, the university and ideas for teaching “race” in the future.

A total of 15 undergraduate students, in either the second or third year of their degree, took part in the project. Some of the students had been, or were about to be, supervised by the researcher for their undergraduate projects³. Other students volunteered to take part in the research following an email invitation which was sent to all second- and third-year undergraduates. The power imbalance between the researcher and researched was carefully negotiated and students were made aware that they did not have to take part in the research and could withdraw at any point in the process. Dissertation students were made aware that taking part in the project would not positively or negatively impact their grades, with this further supported by the university’s anonymous marking arrangement. A culture of respect and confidentiality was generated at the beginning of the focus groups through the collective design of a “confidentiality agreement,” with participants agreeing not to repeat sensitive matters shared by others outside of the focus group. A significant proportion of the sample

³This research was not funded and the author acknowledges that there are no relevant competing interests to declare. It was given ethical clearance from the university where the research took place. A reference number cannot be provided as the university and the participants contained within have been anonymised. All participants have given informed consent to take part in the research and were able to withdraw from the research project at any time.

identified as racialized (47%, 7 of 15 students) and this article provides a vital space in which their viewpoints are shared. To contextualize this, at the time of the research 78% of students enrolled on the criminology degree self-identified as white. Students were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire prior to the focus groups which asked them to identify their “race,” age and degree program. This allowed students to self-identify racially, and the language used in the article reflects their identification. Students identified as follows: white (n=8), mixed race (n=3), Ghanaian (n=1), British Nigerian (n=1), Filipino (n=1), Brazilian Portuguese (n=1). The focus groups were racially mixed, following advice from the participants that this would be their preferred approach.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the focus groups and interviews took place online. The focus groups and interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2013) approach to thematic analysis. Transcripts were printed, read and re-read, in order for the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data. Transcripts were then coded, before being sorted into sub-themes and themes in line with the research questions. In being student centred and participatory, the generated themes were communicated with the students either in online meetings or via email, for their reflections and contributions before the research findings were written up.

Researcher Positionality

This research was conducted by a white, woman researcher. Ahmed (2007) has outlined how much diversity and “race” work is conducted by scholars of colour and it is necessary that white colleagues also fight racial injustice. However, traditional scholarship has worked from a place of white ignorance (Mills, 1997) and has reproduced racist assumptions through what Sullivan and Tuana (2007) call “epistemologies of ignorance.” This means that whilst white researchers can be committed to being antiracist, they can also reproduce racism in their work. Whilst there is no biological basis of “race” (Hall, 1997), “race” continues to operate in ways which privilege some and discriminate against others (Bhopal, 2018). In being racialized as white, the researcher was able to approach this research from a place of relative comfort. Unlike Black women academics, the researcher will not be further racially stereotyped as a result of doing this work (Bhopal, 1995). Whilst it is not enough for the researcher to reflect on their privilege and how they feel complicit in the oppression of others (Ahmed, 2004), it is necessary to state that the researcher does not align with white ideology and seeks to disorientate and dismantle white ideological structures in both educational and non-educational settings. As Leonardo (2009) states “Whites do have a choice regarding Whiteness and may opt to commit ‘race treason’” (p. 140).

This research evidences the urgency of dismantling white power structures in criminology. It does this by offering perspectives on how the criminology curriculum and teaching is experienced by a racially diverse cohort of students. Criminology students felt uneducated about “race” despite its centrality to the criminal justice system and the racist policies and practices it upholds. This

enhanced feelings of disconnection and frustration for many students who took part in this study. The research also adds to a growing body of work which serves to dismantle white power structures in social sciences more widely (Adewumi & Mitton, 2022, Arday & Mirza, 2018, Esson, 2020, Joseph-Salisbury, 2020) whilst also recognising why this is particularly urgent for the discipline of criminology. It is vital that criminologists “unpack the relationship between race and crime because our discipline plays a role in producing representations that associate criminality with people of color” (Palmer, Rajah, & Wilson, 2022, p. 438). These representations impact the lived realities of racialized individuals both in the UK and beyond with the criminal justice system continuing to benefit from racial and other forms of social injustice.

When “Race” Arises

Reflecting on their criminology degree, the research participants explained that they had minimal teaching on “race” and that this topic was usually explored within a singular lecture on optional modules. Katherine and Rachael explain:

The only real time was second year, they covered racism within the police and the over-representation of Black individuals in the criminal justice system. It’s a blind spot. (Katherine, White)

It was on the hate crime module, but that’s because I took that module. It was one week. It wasn’t really explored much as we had other topics, like disabilities, to learn too. (Rachael, Ghanaian)

Teaching on “race” was often focused on “watershed moments” such as the death of Stephen Lawrence and the resulting Macpherson Inquiry (1999). Whilst some further attention was given to “race” on the optional Hate Crime module, this was explored within a singular lecture and the module was only available to those on certain combined honours degree programs. Due to this, some of the research participants could not recall one teaching experience where they had explored “race.” Joel shared:

I can’t remember being taught about anything to do with ‘race’. It might have been one week in first year, and I missed it. I haven’t been taught about it at all if I’m honest. (Joel, White)

Due to the marginalized nature of “race” and racism within criminology teaching, many of the research participants had only experienced one lecture and seminar which focused on “race” during their degree. Some students were therefore graduating with criminology degrees without learning about “race,” despite its centrality to the historical foundations and lived experience of the criminal justice system. Students contextualised this within their wider experiences of school education in the UK:

It’s not explored enough in primary and secondary school teaching either. There is no real focus at school or university. It’s like out of sight, out of mind kind of thing. (Billy, White)

My GCSEs were like World War One and Two, Nazi Germany. In Year 8 you do this little bit on slavery and that is about it. You don’t learn about Black history, racism, the conduct of our history. (AJ, Mixed Race)

I was going to say, when I was at school, I'm an older student, I'm 27, I had nothing in my education which was to do with colonization or slavery. It was World War Two and World War One. (Beth, White)

The students felt that teaching at university was an extension of their education at school, which taught one version of British history where Britain was portrayed as heroic and tenacious. Some of the students described their education as a "white education," with Katherine joking that she was soon to graduate with her "white-washed degree." When asked what educators could do to mitigate the whiteness of their education, students explained that more time needed to be given to teaching the realities of Britain's history in relation to the empire and the harms and experiences of the intentionally exploited, racialized communities. Students argued that this should feature in the curriculum from primary school onwards, to ensure that students are not learning about this for the first time at university. They also argued that teaching about colonization in primary school would hopefully lead to more inclusive learning spaces for children in their early years.

Experiencing the White Curriculum

Inspired by the work of Stockdale and Sweeney (2019), the students were asked to reflect upon the key theorists taught in the core first year theoretical module and to note down their "race," ethnicity/culture, nationality, class, gender and age. Unlike Stockdale and Sweeney (2019) students, who were described as having an "aha!" moment, the students in the focus groups were unsurprised at the privileging of white, male Western thought in criminology. Leah reflected:

We call the theories we learn "universal theories" but they're primarily made my white, males from upper classes so how can they be? I read something about how these theories are applied in other countries without the country's context being considered. But then there have been amazing theories that I've learnt through my dissertation. I think we need to learn more about these theories as well. They're not just like "general" or "universal" because they aren't general or universal. They apply to lower classes. They apply to people from other "races", ethnic minorities. I think they're better than the theories we have learnt. (Leah, Brazilian Portuguese)

For Leah and some other students, the introduction of criminological theory as "universal" was insulting and ignorant. Utilising this language erased theories generated in non-Western contexts and by racialized scholars and affirmed male, white, Western thought as the archetype. It is no surprise that racialized students are more likely to explore "race" and to employ non-Western theoretical standpoints in their dissertation topics. However, at the time of the research, an increase in the number of white students wanting to explore "race" in their dissertation projects was noted. All students explained that they had to conduct extra research to find and detect critical criminological scholarship on "race" and to identify theories from non-Western contexts as these had not been covered in their degree. Dwayne felt that lecturers needed to do more to centralize alternative perspectives in the criminology degree:

I feel like when a person, and by person, I mean like a white middle-aged man in the U.K, it's more acceptable to take their theories. It needs to be more equal – men and women, scholars of colour. I know it's not standard to look at theories from another country, but

it's the fact that you get that different perspective. I know it might be there in the wider reading but implement it more so like "Hey, this is actually a good thing". (Dwayne, Filipino)

Students explained that theoretical modules needed to be reworked to centre theories by women, racialized scholars and those arising from non-Western contexts. Some students shared that doing this was a way of showing allyship with racialized students and could help enhance feelings of belonging. Dean and AJ shared:

I was reading up on the [Why is my Curriculum White Protests] and they're right. The white curriculum does feed into feelings of isolation, marginalization, alienation and exclusion. Maybe there isn't enough support. It just reinforces that feeling of marginalization or alienation like, "I don't belong here". (AJ, Mixed Race)

I would like to have more teaching on "race" and racism. As a person of colour, I've experienced it. I already have knowledge throughout my life already but just the fact I'm being taught it in my degree solidifies that. (Dean, British Nigerian)

Whilst many universities now proudly advertise their diversification strategies (see: University of Bristol, 2022; University of Nottingham, 2019), students from racialized backgrounds are less likely to complete their degree and are more likely to regret their HE choices (Rostron, 2021). These findings evidence how the construction of the white criminology curriculum can enhance racialized students' feelings of alienation at university. This is not to say that these feelings were expressed by all racialized students in the study, but they were described as significant for some students who took part in the research. Some students recognised the whiteness of academic publishing and felt passionate that lecturers should also incorporate podcasts, documentaries and the work of think-tanks to engage with the voices and experiences of racialized minorities.

Seminar Discussions and Non-discussions

This section of the article explores the nature of discussion on "race" and racism in the seminar setting and draws upon some pertinent themes which arose during the focus groups. After reflecting more broadly upon the criminology curriculum, students were asked to explore when "race" and/or racism had arisen for discussion in a seminar. Most students explained that when these topics were raised for discussion, the classroom became "silent," "tense" and "awkward." AJ and Kaylee share:

If we don't explore the topic much in our criminology degree, then if it is discussed its often based on what people have seen in the media. It's hard for people to give their position on it if they don't have the information about it. So, it just never is a big discussion. (AJ, Mixed Race)

I think, I remember discussing about the Stephen Lawrence case in hate crime but as they said it is a sensitive topic so many people don't talk about it. If it isn't something we explore much in criminology then all the information you have to speak about will be from the media. (Kaylee, Mixed Race)

Due to the lack of attention given to discussing "race" and racism throughout their education, when discussions did arise in seminar, these were often based on what students had read or heard in the media. This resulted in uncritical, biased and on

occasion, racist discussions, reinforced with students drawing upon problematic racist newspaper articles. Students explained that they felt white students remained silent in classroom discussions of “race” as they either feared being called a racist and/or offending their fellow classmates. However, not all students experienced this fear. Katherine, a white woman student, recalled an incident where three white male students shared their racist views in a seminar:

The lecturer linked the Chicago School to ‘race’, basically talking about over-policed areas. There were two black female students in the classroom, and somebody said, “well, if that’s where they live and commit crime, then what do you expect?” I remember the tension in the classroom ... in my mind I was like well there’s a reason why they’re over-policed, but I felt like I couldn’t say anything. Me and my friend just sat there, like, didn’t know what do. Two other white boys then began chiming in and backing up the first white boy. The lecturer basically said, “I’m going to let you guys have a discussion because you need to be able to have these debates and express what you think’ ... I was sat there and I was like, “Do I want to try?”, I don’t know if I want to say anything, because obviously these two girls, that’s what they’ve experienced. I made eye contact with the lecturer and she was like “I don’t know when to stop this”. (Katherine, White)

Whilst Katherine detected that this discussion was racist and harmful to the two Black women students in the seminar, she questioned whether she should enter the discussion. Katherine’s uneasiness around entering the discussion orientated around two points. Firstly, due to her whiteness, Katherine had not experienced racism and therefore felt she could not contribute to the discussion as she had no experiences to share. Secondly, she did not want to invade the perspectives being given by the Black women students. Katherine and other white students in the focus groups shared that they wanted to be white allies but did not know how to be.

This incident also evidences how some lecturers are unprepared in challenging racism. Whilst the lecturer initiated the discussion of “race,” the theory of the Chicago School was drawn upon by three white male students to support their racist viewpoints. In encouraging open debate, the lecturer enabled these students to continue to share their racist views which harmed, (re)victimised and offended the two Black women. This incident evidences how university spaces continue to be orientated around whiteness (Ahmed, 2007), with the white students able to share their views without these being challenged or interrogated. Katherine shared that following this incident, the attendance of the two Black women at that seminar reduced. Whilst standalone, this incident is symbolic of how the university can (re)produce racial injustice and how lecturers can fail to acknowledge and challenge racism. It also evidences the need to work with students and staff to expand their knowledge of what it means to be a white ally and to enhance their awareness of how to be active agents in building an anti-racist classroom (BARC Collective, 2022; Tate & Bagguley, 2017).

Choosing Silence

Whilst some white students remained silent in classroom discussions of “race” for fear of unintentionally offending someone, some racialized students also remained silent in classroom discussions of “race.” At the time of the research, 78% of the criminology

cohort self-identified as white and classrooms were predominantly white. However, there had been an increase in Black and Brown students enrolling on the criminology degree in recent years. The racialized students in this study showed an increased awareness of their racialized identity in the seminar. Dwayne shares:

It's hard because there are barely any people of colour, in most teaching rooms I'm the only one. So, the majority are just, like, "Oh, it doesn't really concern us." I do feel I'm looked upon to speak. I'm not dissin' though. At the moment, I have that support from the society, it's why I came here. (Dwayne, Filipino)

Dwayne explained that the whiteness of the classroom made him increasingly aware of his own racialized identity and felt that the topics of "race" and racism were unimportant to his white classmates. During his interview, Dwayne was passionate in stating that he was not painting a negative picture of his white classmates and that he felt their lack of concern towards the topics of "race" and racism was due to their lack of education on these matters. AJ and Rachael also spoke about how the predominantly white classroom produced their racialized outsidership:

In classrooms I'm very aware of my own "race" and ethnicity but I'm very vocal. I understand that others probably feel that pressure that they're being watched. (AJ, Mixed Race)

I feel that pressure. Unfortunately, all I have is bad experiences, so it is hard to give my position, so I try not to speak as I'll never have a positive view. I prefer to hear what others have to say rather than speak as others will think 'oh but you're just saying bad experiences or bad stuff'. But that is all I've had all my life so unfortunately that is all I know. so, I don't really speak. (Rachael, Ghanaian)

These reflections evidence how the whiteness of university classrooms enhance racialized students' awareness of their own racialized identity. This awareness led to Dwayne and Rachael remaining silent in classroom discussions of "race" or criminal justice agencies. For Dwayne, this silence allowed him to enhance his connection with, and acceptance from, his primarily white classmates. For Rachael, the silence prevented her from being stereotyped as negative and/or complaining. These reflections evidence the work that some racialized students did to fit in and to protect themselves in predominantly white seminar settings. As Fanon famously states in *Black Skin White Masks*:

When the black [man⁴] comes into contact with the white world [he] goes through an experience of sensitization ... the entire purpose of [his] behaviour is to emulate the white [man], to become like [him], and thus hope to be accepted (as cited in Sardar, 2008, pp. vi-xx).

Racial identities are not necessarily mono-cultural and there is a danger of reductive reification when this is not recognised (Gunaratnam, 2003). In the focus groups, AJ, a student of mixed British and African heritage, shared that his light skin tone meant that he had never come into contact with the police and was able to positively contribute to seminar discussions on race and policing. He shared that he had three male friends with darker skin tones who had negative experiences of the police and that they would be more reticent to contribute to seminar discussions. At this point in the focus group, Dwayne, Rachael and Kaylee shared that they were all part of specific racialized student

⁴The brackets have been added to draw attention to, and disorientate, the gendered language utilised in the quote.

societies, such as the Black Student Society and that these helped them generate a sense of connection at the university. Dwayne shared that the existence of student society which facilitated connections to students of a similar ethnic heritage was the main contributing factor in choosing to study at his specific university. He argued that enhancing and developing a diversity of racialized student societies for students of differing ethnicities and nationalities could enhance a more diverse cohort of students as these created alternative safe spaces where students could connect and socialise outside of predominantly white classrooms.

Conclusion

Using thematic analysis, this paper centers students' concerns surrounding the marginalized status of "race" and racism in criminology teaching. Students feel uneducated in discussing "race" and racism and their white criminology curriculum can result in feelings of disconnection. This paper offers three main findings. Firstly, "race" rarely arises in criminology teaching and when it does it is covered within a one-week lecture and seminar and is usually featured on optional modules. Teaching focuses on well-known "watershed moments," such as the death of Stephen Lawrence and the resulting Macpherson Inquiry (1999), or "race" is narrowly explored through the over-representation of ethnic minorities in the criminal justice system. Secondly, all students detected the presence of the white curriculum, stating that more needed to be done to embed and centralize the work of indigenous and diverse scholars. Thirdly, the analysis revealed pertinent findings regarding classroom discussions and non-discussions. When "race" or racism arose for discussion in seminar settings, this resulted primarily in silence, however, sometimes racist viewpoints were shared. The classroom was a place in which white students felt unable to contribute to discussions of "race" and racism by virtue of their whiteness, whilst racialized students felt a heightened awareness of their racialized identity and an assumption that they would educate the class on issues of "race."

This part of the paper offers recommendations for criminologists, inspired by the findings of the research. Firstly, if we are to undo the dominance of whiteness in the discipline, then we must move beyond teaching about "race" in terms of "watershed moments." This white perspective traces the continual racializing dynamics in society and in criminal justice to exceptional "episodes" which erupt at particular moments in history, rather than as a pervasive and damaging feature of everyday life. If we are to undo the dominance of white colonial power structures in the education we provide, we need to embed the critical work of racialized scholars and theories arising in non-Western contexts. Some of this work does not exist within criminology itself and we therefore need to look to scholars outside of the discipline. The work of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Kimberle Crenshaw, Du Bois and Ida Wells, for example, could be used to transform and enhance criminology teaching material. The "Connected Sociologies" curriculum project also serves as a pertinent example of how this work is being carried out in British sociology, with attention given to policing, colonialism, social theory, migration and British citizenship, amongst others (Connected Sociologies, 2022). By approaching "race" as discursive and paying attention to the thoughts and language of the powerful in its construction (Hall, 1997), criminologists have a wealth of

opportunity to explore how criminal justice agencies produce particular understandings of “race.” Within the UK, the national Police Race Action Plan (College of Policing, 2022) has recently been published and centers “race” over previous “diversity” discourses (see: the Equality Act, 2010). As a result, the police will now receive training on anti-racism and Black history, whilst at the same time they continue to stop and search, arrest and detain Black individuals in the UK at a much higher rate than their white counterparts. As Parmar (2017) argues, criminology needs to go beyond critique to expose newer ways through which “race” maintains its presence and importance.

Secondly, white students and staff must see themselves as part of a racialized social structure which upholds white dominance (Parmar et al., 2022). White staff should be encouraged to reflect upon their own whiteness and education and how this impacts their teaching style and material. Warr’s (2022) article on the whitening ontologies of imprisonment as they are experienced by Black prisoners provides a critical example of how future criminological research can bring whiteness into the analytical frame, making it both visible and consequential. White students also need to be encouraged to think critically about their own racialization. Racialized students were tired of being looked to provide their inputs on “race” when this arose for discussion and argued that their white counterparts need to educate themselves about matters of “race” and racism. Thought should be given to ignorant and clumsy ways in which criminological theories are introduced as “universal,” reproducing the notion that white and West is best. By embedding theories developed in the Global South (Carrington et al., 2016; Cuneen, 2011) and East (Franko, 2021; Piacentini & Elena, 2017) and thinking about existing imperialisms (Parmar, 2017), criminology lecturers can begin undoing the whiteness of the curriculum. This is not to say that some criminology departments in the UK are not already doing some of this work, although how embedded this work is across modules and whose responsibility it is to teach remains unknown.

Finally, this is a call for staff to give thought to how to navigate racist seminar discussions. In most cases, students experienced silence when “race” or racism arose for discussion. However, some students had experienced racist viewpoints being shared in seminar settings. These viewpoints went unchallenged by the lecturer and were sometimes supported by other students, enhancing racialized students’ feelings of estrangement. Research evidences how ethnic minority students are more likely to feel unfulfilled with their HE choices and to leave their degree before completion (Rostron, 2021). The white-Black, Asian and minority ethnic awarding gap also stands at 9.9 percentage points in academic year 2019/20 in the UK (Advance HE, 2021). This research urges criminology lecturers to ensure that racist discussions are detected and adequately challenged in seminar. As Hooks (1994) infamously states, “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (p. 12) and the BARC Collective’s (2022) recommendations for building an anti-racist classroom are paramount if we are to drive change.

Whilst this research focused on centring student perspectives, further research would benefit from engaging with criminology lecturers and exploring their treatment of “race” in their teaching. Criminology lecturers should also be encouraged to reflect upon their own education and its racialized nature. Extending this research project to incorporate a larger number of students could alter the research findings, however,

this research serves as a starting point for outlining the need for change. British criminology must do more to dismantle the whiteness of the discipline both in its design and pedagogical choices. For education to be transformative and for students to flourish both within their degree and beyond then the historical and dialectical relationship between “race” and crime must be given precedence in criminology teaching.

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