

**“Where are you *really* from?” Female BME students’ narratives of encountering racial-microaggressions in their everyday university experiences**

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*We have chosen each other*

*and the edge of each others battles*

*the war is the same*

*if we lose*

*someday women’s blood will congeal*

*upon a dead planet*

*if we win*

*there is no telling*

*we seek beyond history*

*for a new and more possible meeting.*

Audre Lorde, “*Outlines*”, unpublished poem.

*“All our silences in the face of racist assault are acts of complicity.”*

bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*

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**Abstract**

The dominant liberal conception of the university is as an institution that is simultaneously a-political and socially enlightened – a bastion of objective, unprejudiced learning and teaching. However, in the light of recent high-profile on-campus protest movements such as Rhodes Must Fall (#RhodesMustFall) and campaigns such as the National Students Union supported ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ the question of whether universities in the United Kingdom are institutionally racist has become an increasingly salient subject of analysis. Embedded within a critical race theory perspective, this thesis therefore explores and seeks to understand the everyday experiences of female British BME students at a leading UK university. Drawing data from in-depth biographical narrative interviews and focus group discussions with nine female Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students from Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black British Caribbean ethnic backgrounds, this research identifies and details three related phenomena: (i) institutional microaggressions; (ii) inter-personal microaggressions; and (iii) racialised aggressions. The findings of this research analysis demonstrate the subtle but powerful manner in which racial microaggressions can manifest within the university setting, and the strategies of resistance via which minoritised students subsequently navigate the institution on a daily basis. While similar analyses have previously been undertaken within the context of the US higher education system, analyses of racial microaggressions within the UK university sector remain, as yet, embryonic. As such, the thesis aims to contribute to this important, nascent UK literature.

**Keywords:** racial microaggressions; critical race theory; higher education; BME students; Whiteness

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**INTRODUCTION**

**0.1 Introduction**

In the light of recent high-profile on-campus protest movements such as Rhodes Must Fall (#RhodesMustFall) and campaigns such as the National Students Union supported ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’, the question of whether universities in the United Kingdom are institutionally racist has become increasingly salient as a subject of analysis. Such a claim has a long-standing pedigree; it is generally recognised that, as Paul Allen (1993, 1) states, the university, as an institution, has traditionally ‘served an elite group of white middle class men’. Indeed, it is in recognition of such claims that in recent decades UK governments have introduced policies, falling under the general rubric of widening participation (WP), that have sought to counter the situation Allen describes. This has taken the form of an active focus on the recruitment of greater numbers of students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds (see: Hoare & Johnston, 2010, 3).

For those seeking comfort in the narrative that such schemes have been successful in altering the previous ‘white male’ dynamic of universities, a perusal of the raw data might offer some hope. Indeed, taking a snap-shot of the situation, and judged simply in terms of raw numbers such as the data for the 2014 to 2015 academic year, widening participation may appear a successful policy agenda: that year, while disparities continued in terms of access and retention, 90% of universities and colleges were nevertheless judged to have met, or be on course to meet, their WP targets (Offa, 2015).

Such quantitative measurements, however, fail to take into account the qualitative experience of students once they reach university. Formal programs may be in place to facilitate an increasing number and percentage of historically excluded candidates entering university, but the question then arises of whether the institutions that these students are gaining access to are structurally inclusive or, once there, students from non-traditional backgrounds are disadvantaged by the nature of their university environment. Founded upon a liberal conception of equality of opportunity, widening participation policy fails to adequately conceptualise or take account of the non-formal power relations that structure the social sphere. This is a vital omission since, as figures such as Burke (2001) have demonstrated, while the narrative of widening participation frames the policy in terms of altering the status quo for the better, the reality may be that, contrary to its own claims, the policy has served to maintain material and cultural inequalities.

The purpose of this thesis is to shed light upon this latter issue. To this end, the subsequent research focuses upon the experiences of a particular group of so called ‘non-traditional learners’ at the University of Sheffield; specifically, it looks at individuals from the most underrepresented groups in the British higher education system, women from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black British Caribbean backgrounds (Pilkington, 2004; Vincent, 2012; cf. Runnymede Trust, 1997; Equality Challenge Unit, 2015b).[[1]](#footnote-1) The intention, in so doing, is not to produce research from which a set of generalisable (and essentialist) conclusions can be drawn about the “female BME[[2]](#footnote-2) university experience”; rather, the study adopts an ethnographically-informed approach, with the aim of gaining a deep understanding of a group of nine female BME students’ experiences of navigating university, and shedding light on the important role that race plays within this experience.

This project was initiated with a broad and open research question, which was not focused, in the first instance, specifically on issues related to race. The main aim was to give voice to the students themselves, to hear from them about their own, general experiences navigating the university environment. Thus, whilst, as detailed below, I approached the field from the perspective of Critical Race Theory, from the outset I sought to avoid imposing presuppositions regarding the centrality of race onto my research participants that might frame their subsequent, individual narratives. Resultantly when I first approached the field, the primary research question was simply: What are these students’ experiences at university?

By leaving the initial research question broad, I hoped to hear about their experiences in all their facets, allow participants to determine the salient themes of their own experience, and see whether issues relating to race were raised by the students themselves. This was practically facilitated via the methodology I developed and adopted, based around the combination of narrative interviewing and a constructivist grounded theory. In this manner, I was able to narrow the initial broad research question down after a first set of open interviews, when issues around racism and racial microaggressions emerged. These were followed up in the subsequent stages of the research, in which I sought to understand the lessons that could be drawn from these female BME students studying at the University of Sheffield regarding the role race plays in their everyday university experience; was the university a genuinely inclusive environment for them, or did the nature of the university environment disadvantage them in their studies – and what might be done to change this in the future?

**0.2 Thesis Structure**

This thesis is structured in six substantive parts. Chapter 1 performs two key functions. First, it clarifies and defines the subject of analysis, and details and delineates the theoretical framework through which it is conceptualised, founded upon the use of an approach drawing upon Critical Race Theory (CRT) and racial microaggression theory. Second, it provides an initial literature review that covers pre-existing research into racism in higher education, identifying the particular lacuna that this thesis’s research helps to address. Chapter 2 provides the research design via which the research itself was undertaken, detailing issues surrounding epistemology and methodology, including narrative biographical interviewing, focus group research techniques, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations.

The following four chapters constitute the analysis of the data collected – as explained and developed across the preceding two chapters. Chapter 3 focuses upon students’ experiences of institutional/environmental racial microaggressions; Chapter 4 focuses upon their experiences of inter-personal microaggressions. Chapter 5 focuses upon students’ encounters with displays of explicit racism – here labelled ‘racialised aggressions’. The previous three analytical chapters having focused predominantly upon structural and inter-personal racism, Chapter 6 places the focus upon the agency of the research participants and the strategies of resistance through which they navigate the previously detailed racist experiences on campus.

The thesis concludes in Chapter 7. This chapter summarises the research findings and its implications both within the context of existing academic literature and practically, discussing how universities can and should respond. Ultimately, this thesis offers two significant, original contributions to the existing literature: first, the application of its research approach to the UK context; and second, the development of an innovative research strategy that strengthens the internal validity of the research. The hope, in carrying out this research project, is that it inspires further research of this subject matter, in particular research drawing upon the CRT-inspired approach adopted herein, and that the evidence and insights such research offers can focus attention upon race and racial equality in UK HE, with the long-term aim of transforming university cultures.

**CHAPTER 1:**

**STUDYING ‘THE UNIVERSITY’ AS A WHITE INSTITUTION:**

**A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS**

**1.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the basic definition of key concepts utilised in the analysis of this thesis, explicating the theoretical framework used herein, and situating this work within the wider, related, academic literature. To this end, it is divided into three interrelated sections that provide an overview of the key conceptual understandings of this thesis’s subjects of analysis: specifically the university as an institution (Section 1), whiteness as a social construction (Section 2), and this thesis’s approach to the analysis of the two (Section 3). In the process of doing so, the chapter delineates and defines the student body under investigation, provides an introduction to critical race theory (CRT), whiteness theory and microaggression analysis (the aforementioned theoretical framework(s) underpinning this research), situates the research within a broader academic literature, and concludes with a more detailed reiteration of the thesis structure and key research questions.

**Section 1: Theorising the University**

**1.1.1 Definition of Key Terms: Institutions, Power and the Formal/Non-Formal division**

To understand how the university is conceptualised as an institution, it is first necessary to understand how the concept of an ‘institution’ is itself understood.Ill-defined, the concept of an institution has a wide range of applicability, covering entities such as the institution of marriage (e.g. Murphy, 2002) – or, more broadly, ‘the family’ as social institution – as well as an institutional organisation such as the University of Sheffield. The term institution also refers to both an entity and an action, labelling ‘the concrete institutions of a given society’ as well as ‘the instituting process’ by which these institutions are institut*ed,* and the social relations that they conterminously institute(Arnold, in Castoriadis, 2007, 272). One thing that can certainly be agreed upon, however, is that for any understanding of socio-political dynamics, ‘institutions matter’ (Lowndes, 2013).

As conceptualised in this thesis, institutions refer to ‘relatively codified and enduring social practices’ (Moon, 2013, 114) that, following Hay (2002, 106), are ‘defined in terms of rules, norms and conventions’. This aligns this thesis with the work of the body of ‘new institutionalist’ literature categorised at different times as ideational (Hay, 2001), constructivist (Hay, 2004; 2006; 2010), discursive (Schmidt, 2006; 2008; 2010; 2012), or post-structuralist (Bacchi & Rönnblom, 2014; Moon, 2013; Sørensen & Torfing, 2008). Key to this conceptualisation of institutions in this thesis is the emphasis that such approaches place upon ‘ideas as constitutive *of* institutions – even if shaped by them – rather than institutions as constitutive of ideas’ (Moon, 2013, 112). The ontological ramification of this position is to conceive of institutions as entirely discursive entities – discourse referring to *the horizon of meaning,* or in Foucauldian terms, ‘what it is possible to speak of’ (Bacchi & Rönnblom, 2014, 5). Actors are always immersed in discourse – all acts and practices are discursively embedded – and institutions exist not as a-social objective entities, but as the meanings and understandings actors attach to the rules and social practices that they themselves institute (and which subsequently structure their actions). As such, this is an interpretivist approach to understanding institutional dynamics (cf. Campbell, 1998; Hay & Gofas, 2010).

This discursive conceptualisation of institutions is significant as it allows a precise ontological distinction between formal, informal and non-formal power structures (see Moon, 2013; Moon & Bratberg, 2010).[[3]](#footnote-3) Formal structures refer to ‘the codified, official rules, positions, jobs, etc.’, which structure relationships between individuals within institutions. Non-formal structures refer to ‘the dynamic webs of meaning, understandings, norms and ideas that are attached to these formal rules’ (Moon, 2013, 115). Both are discursively constituted, but the former are commonly accepted as ‘fact’ (they can be treated as ‘as-if-real’ (Hay, 2005)) whereas the latter are ‘mere’ interpretation of those ‘facts’. Non-formal structures differ from informal structures in as far as the latter are commonly understood rules and conventions, even if not formally codified, to which non-formal meanings are attached (the informal can thus be conceptualised as a modality of the formal). A university’s widening participation policy is therefore a formal institutional aspect, while the understanding attached to this program by university employees is a non-formal institutional aspect. Interest in this thesis lies in the non-formal – pertaining to student experiences within the university. Having defined institutions, the next question to address is how ‘the university’ is conceptualised as an institution, paying attention to the conterminous question of the social function that it plays.

**1.1.2 The University as Institution**

In popular discourse, the university is a Janus-faced institution. Viewed from one side, universities are conceptualised as neutral, a-political spaces of learning and research; ‘curious institutions whose main social and political function lies precisely in their impartiality and independence from social pressure and political power’, as Hannah Arendt (1970, 93) put it. For advocates of this perspective, university studies should, in Zbigniew Brzezinski’s (1970, 45) phrase, be governed by ‘intellectual detachment and the disinterested search for truth’. From this essentially liberal perspective, any attempt to politicise campuses and courses is a stain upon this ethos and to be ‘rightly deplored’ (Arendt, 1970, 93).

From another point of view, however, often identified with the ‘New Left’ (Kenny, 1995), the university is conceptualised as an inherently politicised institution that is far from independent of political power. The Gramscian political scientist Robert Cox (1996, 86) famously stated that ‘[t]heory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose’, as ‘[a]ll theories have a perspective. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically political time and space.’ Viewed from this leftist perspective, therefore, the perspective of the university *qua* social institution is *not* impartial or independent of social pressure, but rather the exact opposite; the university is a key institution via which elites engage in what the philosopher Jacques Rancière (1996, 173) refers to as ‘the activities which create order by distributing places, names, functions’.

Such a perspective was notably articulated by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), in their work examining the operation of educational institutions as mechanisms of ‘codification’. The phrase ‘codification’ denotes education systems’ function in transmitting and inculcating the cultural canons of society through the ‘conserving’ and ‘consecrating’ of an elite heritage. Thus, for Bourdieu (1984, 387), the educational system is:

‘an institutionalized classifier which is itself an objectified system of classification reproducing the hierarchies of the social world in a transformed form, with its cleavages by “level” corresponding to social strata and its divisions into specialities and disciplines which reflect social division *ad infinitum,* such as the opposition between theory and practice, conception and execution, transforms social classifications into academic classifications, with every appearance of neutrality…’

In playing this function, universities are, to utilise Louis Althusser’s terminology, one of many ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’, the function of which is ‘the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation’ (1971); indeed, for Althusser ‘the educational apparatus [is] in fact the dominant Ideological State Apparatus in capitalist social formations’ (ibid.).[[4]](#footnote-4)

From a discursive institutionalist perspective, neither of these two discourses is ‘correct’, each in different manners being wedded to the notion of an objective position situated outside of the realm of discourse. Subsequently, this thesis does not subscribe directly to either conceptualisation, since while it entirely rejects the liberal conceptualisation of an institution ‘independent of social pressure’ as an ontological possibility, it also dispenses with any residual notion, *pace* Althusser, of economics determining the discursive ‘in the last instance’ (see: Brewster, 1969).[[5]](#footnote-5) The conceptualisation adopted here does share the critical outlook of the ‘New Left’, albeit subscribing to a particular branch of critical thinking by approaching the university as an institution through the lens of critical race theory (CRT).

**1.1.3 Why focus upon universities and race?**

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks both enable and direct a researcher’s analysis by identifying particular variables as the fundamental points of interest. CRT is defined in detail below as part of the delineation of this thesis’s theoretical framework; it is enough to note at this point, however, that the issues it pursues – in brief, how apparently normal and unremarkable social and institutional structures function to maintain and embed racial inequality – have been and remain at the forefront of key conflicts within the academy in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These have included debates over student radicalism in the nineteen sixties and seventies – especially surrounding Black power – and the battle over ‘the canon’ (Howe, 1992; Said, 1992; Louis Gates, 1992) and arguments surrounding the need to ‘decolonise’ courses; media frenzies surrounding the alleged danger of ‘trigger warnings’ in university education (Filipovic, 2014), as well as no-platforming policies (Smith, 2016).

Traditionally, these ‘culture wars’ were compartmentalised by British commentators as a largely American phenomenon, a particular product of ‘the quintessential country of identity politics’ (Keucheyan, 2013, 154); however, as noted above, recent decades have seen these same conflicts appearing in UK institutions also. The 2015-2016 ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ protest movement, for example, originally targeted a statue of the white supremacist Cecil Rhodes on the University of Cape Town, calling for its removal. The movement’s spread, however, brought it to UK campuses, including Edinburgh, Cambridge, but most significantly Oxford, where the campaign grabbed national newspaper headlines and led reports on BBC Radio 4’s Today Show (Shi, 2015), generating inevitable backlash (Williams, 2016).

Such activist trends find themselves echoed in the policy adopted by the National Union of Students (NUS) labelled ‘Liberate my Degree’. This policy supports campaigns such as ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ (Magd, 2016) and ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ (Ali, 2015) that aim for a ‘more inclusive curriculum’ on campuses (NUS, 2016). The election of Malia Bouattia – ‘a frequent critic of the “colonisation” of curriculum at British universities and the white-centred focus of literature and history’ (Elgot, 2016) – as NUS President is another sign.

Returning to the conceptualisation of the university as an institutional subject of analysis, in seeking to illuminate the aforementioned non-formal structures and their effects, a key area that CRT directs the researcher’s focus to is the idea of ‘Whiteness’ – and the controversial notion of British academia as a predominantly ‘white’ institution (a characteristic not specific to the British example). The concept of ‘whiteness’ is, again, explained below in the section on CRT. To gain initial purchase upon this key concept, however, and to provide an initial justification for the valence afforded this ‘theoretical’ concern, it is worth providing a brief overview of the academic and professional data regarding the racialised nature of UK Higher Education (HE). As this literature demonstrates, UK HE can be deemed to be ‘white’ – and thus institutionally racist – by critics on both quantitative (e.g. numbers of students, staff, reading list citations) and qualitative (e.g. normalising the whiteness of culture and knowledge production (Sharma, 2004)) grounds.

Thus, taking the quantitative data first, we find that senior staff in universities are disproportionately white; staff from minority ethnic backgrounds do not match the population mix; and staff applicants from minority ethnic groups are less likely to be appointed than those from the majority ethnic groups (see: Bhopal 2015; Pilkington 2004; 2011; Crofts & Pilkington, 2012; Carter et al., 1999; Rangasamy, 2004; Law, Phillips and Turney, 2004). Figures for 2015 correlated by the Equality Challenge Unit (2015a) found that, despite the 2011 census of England and Wales recording 12.83% of the population as BME (excluding figures for Scotland and Northern Ireland), only 8.3% of UK academic staff and 2.9% of UK academic managers, directors and senior managers were BME. Of 18,500 UK Professors in 2015, only 85 are black – and only 17 are Black *and* female; in percentage terms, 92.4% of UK Professors are white, while just 0.49% are Black (Garner, 2015; Wynne-Jones, 2015).

Beyond sheer numbers, research by Pilkington (2004) into a university in Midshire has identified a lack of ethnic minority staff involvement in major decision-making – a situation unlikely to be unique in nature. More recent research by Bhopal (2016a), in which British BME academics were interviewed, found that all had experienced some form of racism or racist bullying, describing racism as a factor in all aspects of their working lives. This included how they were treated by their white colleagues and students, the professional roles they were asked to perform and how they were judged by peer review and promotion committees.

20.2% of students across the UK are BME (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015b, 113), although figures vary dramatically by region – only 2.5% in Northern Ireland, in comparison to 46.2% in London. Excluding London, the BME student population of England and Wales is 17.6% (ibid.). Despite an increase in student numbers over the last decade, however, research published in 2016 found that:

‘[B]lack and Asian applicants to university fail to win undergraduate places with the same rate of success at the bulk of British universities as white students with similar qualifications. Black students were particularly badly off in the admissions results, with the data for 2015 showing that 108 out of 132 universities offered a lower proportion of places than expected, using a Ucas forecast based on their predicted A-level grades and the courses to which the students applied’. (Adams & Bengtsson, 2016)

Using Freedom of Information requests, the Labour MP David Lammy found that, in 2009, just one British black Caribbean student was admitted to Oxford University and that one Oxford college had not admitted a single black student for five years; this being despite the fact that 292 black students had achieved three A grades at A-level and 475 black students applied to Oxbridge (Lammy, 2010). In 2015, research published by the Runnymede Trust (Alexander & Arday, 2015) found ‘that offer rates are 3-16 percentage points lower for ethnic minority applicants to Russell Group universities [than for white applicants], after differences in A Level attainment have been taken into account’ (Boliver, 2015).

As Matt Ford (2014) has shown, BME ethnic groups are subsequently underrepresented at Russell Group universities, with BME students in the UK becoming ‘concentrated in post-1992 universities and former polytechnics’. It is in recognition of such facts that former Prime Minister David Cameron (2015) pledged that candidates’ names will be removed from university application forms from 2017, as a way of removing unconscious bias against candidates from minority backgrounds, and universities forced by law to disclose what proportion of ethnic minority applicants receive places (Ross, 2016).

Furthermore, once *at* university, BME students have lower levels of continuation/qualification rates: 91.8% for white UK domiciled full-time students, but only 87.9% for BME students – 84.9% for black African and Caribbean students, 87.6% for Pakistani and 89.0% for Bangladeshi students (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015b, 136). They also attain poorer degree classifications; the ethnicity degree attainment gap in the UK is 15.2 percentage points, with 75.6% of white qualifiers receiving a first/2.1 compared to 60.4% of BME qualifiers. The proportion of black qualifiers receiving a first/2.1 was lower than for all other ethnic groups across all of the constituent nations of the United Kingdom, ranging from 19.1 percentage points in Scotland (75.3% compared to 56.2) to 26.8 percentage points in England (76.3% compared to 49.5%) (ibid. 138).

Campaigners and academics have argued that race equality initiatives have lagged behind those concerned with gender in Higher Education (Bhopal 2016b; Neal, 1998; Bowl 2001; Turney, Law & Phillips 2002). Even following the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act* in 2000, universities were slow to develop race equality strategies (Pilkington, op cit.), researchers identifying a deep resistance within universities to deal with issues of institutional racism and the drift towards multiculturalism (see Law and Turney 2004). More recently, despite the introduction of *The Equality Act* in 2010, the UK has experienced what Pilkington (2015) describes as a ‘declining salience of race equality in Higher Education policy’. The challenges extend beyond policy making and policy implementation, however. In concrete terms, his studies have found:

‘persistent ethnic differentials in the student experience that adversely impact on BME students and point to possible indirect discrimination; ethnic differentials in staff recruitment that adversely impact on Black and Asian applicants and point to possible indirect discrimination; (some) minority ethnic staff subject to racism and (some) White staff cynical about political correctness; an overwhelmingly White senior staff team, with no evident efforts to transform this situation; low priority given to the implementation of a race equality action plan; few staff skilled in intercultural issues; many staff not trained in equality and diversity; and few efforts made to consult Black and Asian communities.’ (ibid., 8)

Recognition of this situation led to the publication in 2016 of the Equality Challenge Unit’s Race Equality Charter (REC) – modelled on the Athena Swan gender charter – as a framework through which institutions can ‘work to identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers standing in the way of minority ethnic staff and students’ (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016). Less than one year old, the program is still very much in its infancy.

Applying a theoretical framework centred upon the concept of whiteness, this research aims to shed further light upon the structural inequalities noted by Pilkington and implicit in the Equality Challenge Unit’s charter. Specifically, by paying particular focus to the lived experiences of a select demographic of BME students, it investigates the lessons they may offer regarding wider strategies for the elimination of exclusionary power structures within UK universities. As outlined at the start of this chapter, these students, who fall under the general rubric of ‘widening participation students’, are women from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black British Caribbean backgrounds. The following section delineates, defines and explains the choice of these research participants.

**1.1.4 Universities and ‘Widening Participation’: Identifying the subject of analysis**

The institutional response at a national level to the unavoidably poor statistics reported above has been ‘widening participation’ – or ‘WP’ – a phrase for which there is no agreed single definition. Indeed, the term can be simultaneously understood as an outcome, process or a type of student (Shaw, *et al.* 2007). Layer (2003), for instance, defines widening participation as ‘a range of initiatives designed to target groups, which are under-represented within the higher education system’. Accepting this basic definition[[6]](#footnote-6) the question then becomes what this ‘targeting’ involves. As noted at the outset of this chapter, this process has come to be widely defined in terms of a distinction between ‘non-traditional’ and ‘traditional’ students. In this simplified dichotomy, ‘non-traditional’ acts as a broad-brush synonym for many potential inequalities (e.g. social class, age, ethnicity and gender; see below) counterpoised against a concept of ‘traditional’ students which is often – unsurprisingly maybe – undefined (Gorard, *et al.*, 2006).

The academic literature on WP is, thus, understandably broad and focuses upon a multi-faceted variety of subject groups. The very definition of what constitutes such a group is in itself a contentious question; as Fenge-Davies (2008, 27) notes, ‘within the literature different terms are used to describe those groups traditionally excluded from higher education which include ‘under-represented’ as used with HEFCE [Higher Education Funding Council for England] indicators, and ‘non-traditional’ which has a variety of interpretations.’ As a result, every university can define them differently. Such groups have included ‘those from working class backgrounds, particular ethnic minority groups, immigrants, and, in the past frequently women’ (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, 312). Research carried out over the last twenty years has indeed highlighted the systematic underrepresentation of working class people, BME people and women in higher education (Metcalf, 1993; Thomas, 1990) – and while the latter increased their percentage share of places during the 1980s to around 50% of full-time entrants (DfE, 1992) the same levels of proportional success have not been achieved in terms of BME or working class people (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015).

As a result of this inherent broadness, within academia, authors focusing upon WP have focused upon a number of groups. Burke (2001), Fenge-Davies (2008) and Redmond (2004) have each approached the subject with regards to adult access to HE. Other authors, such as Allen (1993) and Arbouin (2009), have studied the topic from the angle of race and Black British Caribbean students’ experiences of HE. Clark (2004), focusing upon widening *access* only, has addressed the issues regarding the experiences of gypsy/traveller students and there are further literatures on participation which focus upon gender, disability, etc. The impact of social class on higher education participation is a further reoccurring theme in the literature (see for example: Brennan and Osborne, 2008, 180); Bourdieu, in particular, extensively addressed issues related to social class and higher education, albeit not with regards to WP (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964; 1994; Robbins, 1993; Jenkins, 2002). Focusing on this specific WP demographic, Gorard, *et al.* (2006, 118) studied how students from lower-income households study locally and subsequently reside at home as a means of avoiding debt, resultantly experiencing ‘specific problems with integrating socially‘.

While the very concept of WP is unsurprisingly unpopular in certain conservative circles – in particular, in the UK, those identifiable with the libertarian right (e.g. Williams, 2015) – more substantial and focused criticisms have emanated from academics questioning whether the policy is still relevant with regards to notions of *gender* as a category of inequality. Universities, it is argued, have experienced what Allen and Ainley (2010) describe as the ‘feminisation of HE‘ whereby, starting in the early 1990s, a greater number of women than men have come to pursue full-time undergraduate degrees. To give the figures for the University of Sheffield by way of example, in 1995/6 the university had 7,300 women and 6,900 men; by contrast, for 2004/5 the equivalent figures were 10,700 to 8,200 (including part-time students as well as full-time the difference was even greater, with 11,602 female to 8,286 male students).

Former Universities Minister and Conservative politician David Willetts even argued that a reversal has taken place with regards to gender inequality linked to HE access and participation, arguing that ‘feminism trumped egalitarianism‘; according to Willets, 'assortative mating’ — whereby well-educated women marry well-educated men — now holds back working class men, who go unmarried (Prince, 2011). Analyses of the socio-economic data have refuted Willets’ extravagant soundbite (e.g. Gaffney, 2011) and the latest available figures – for 2011/2 – find that the previous female dominance has ended at the University of Sheffield, with 9,822 male to 8,798 female undergraduate students attending. Nevertheless, even with this reversal of trend, the gap is so narrow that the University’s own calculation labels the student body as *equal* “50/50“ in terms of gender (see: University of Sheffield, 2013).

There is a tendency, as Lee (1993, 55) describes, especially among those who make and implement policy, to assume that producing ‘numerical estimates helps to fix the dimensions of a social problem’, placing a great deal of weight on the ‘persuasive power’ associated with numbers. Arguments, however, that raw, quantitative data such as that detailed above proves that the days of gender inequality are past, ignore the deep, thick descriptive data offered by the qualitative experiences of female students, in comparison to male. Here, research in this area has identified patterns of gender discrimination within the classroom whereby women ‘were viewed as “equal” as long as they “did the same thing as men”’ (Morrison, *et al.* 2005, 153/4). As Cheeseman (2010, 22) relates, what this meant in practice was that: ‘While men were expected to conform to masculine stereotypes, their interpretation placed women in a double bind, socially they were expected to behave in a feminine fashion, yet in [an] institutional sense feminine characteristics were not valued.’

Indeed, recent studies focused upon the *discourse* of WP itself – for example, studying discursive strategies used by higher education institutions in marketing literature, open day settings, as well as policy documents and statements made by staff – found government policy to have had limited effect in terms of changing existing institutional cultures, calling for tighter enforcement of regulations as a result (Graham 2010; Clark, 2004). Viewed through this lens – placing emphasis on the importance of such institutional cultures, more than simply student numbers – removing gender as a consideration for WP would thus be a mistake.

There are, as such, multiple possibilities when selecting particular subjects for analysis. Yet it is very difficult to separate non-traditional learners into simple, clean categorisations of race, age, gender and class; exclusion and oppression is intersectional (Bhattacharya, 2012, 71) and most studies cover a number of these inter-related categories. With this in mind, this thesis focuses upon a particular group of ‘non-traditional’ learners defined by their race and gender – specifically, women from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black British Caribbean backgrounds – but without a particular focus on age, sexuality, class or disability. To return to this chapter’s introduction, these students are chosen on the basis that they have been the most underrepresented groups in the British higher education system (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015b).

Having identified the particular subjects of analysis, it is also important to be clear about the subsequent use of labels when describing them – an issue of central importance for this thesis. Labels, as Wood (1985, 3) argues, are an inevitable part of our understanding and management of the social world – and from the perspective of this thesis, vital in clarifying the focus of the following research. Labelling, however, includes questions of power, disproportionately affecting particular groups while excluding people who fall outside of precise definitions (Griffiths, 2012). It is important, therefore, that this thesis has a clearly stated – and as inclusive as possible – rationale for the labels it deploys.

Following the work of Stuart Hall (1988), the term “Black” can be understood as signifying the common experience of marginalisation and racism regardless of an individual’s particular race. This explains why writers such as Ware (2015, 27) refer to black and white people ‘without specifying the obvious diversity of either category’; because within the ideological framework of whiteness, ‘what matters is that a person is either white or non-white, even though the implications of their particular kind of blackness, or non-whiteness, is fundamentally affected by their ethnic or cultural origin.’ Nevertheless, diversity does exist and it ‘creates its own politics’ (ibid.). Alongside the term Black, this thesis will also utilise the term BME (for Black and Minority Ethnic) as the preferred British nomenclature.

This being clarified, the aim of this analysis is not to dissect numbers, nor to analyse WP programs and systems, as such. Rather, it is to gain analytical purchase upon the experiences of these students *as students* – i.e. as members of the university campus community. To achieve this aim, this thesis draws upon the insights offered by critical race theory (CRT) to develop a systematic theoretical approach to the subsequent analysis. Before this introductory chapter can proceed, however, it is necessary to provide an overview of CRT and the key concept of ‘whiteness’. Only by doing so is it possible to situate this thesis’s analysis within the relevant contemporary literature.

**Section 2: Theorising Whiteness**

**1.2.1 Critical Race Theory**

No one positional statement defines critical race theory (CRT); however, as Rollock and Gillborn (2011) broadly define it, CRT ‘is an approach that offers a radical lens through which to make sense of, deconstruct and challenge racial inequality in society.’ Still evolving as a methodology and theoretical construct, CRT originates in the US. Specifically, it originates in the field of law and the 1970s ‘leftist legal movement’ (Ladson-Billings, 1998:10), where its primary aim was an attempt to disrupt racism and dominant racial paradigms within a legal system that it critiqued for ‘sustaining the dominance of whites in American society’ (Buenavista, *et al.,* 2009; cf. Matsuda, *et al.* 1993). Highly interdisciplinary as an approach, CRT has been applied in numerous areas since, including, most significantly for this research, education (for example: Bell, 2009; Bhopal and Preston, 2012; Gillborn, 2005; 2008; Gillborn and Ladon-Billings, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

In comparison to the US, in Great Britain the utilisation of CRT is in its infancy; it is, however, already at the forefront of research focusing upon the role of race in higher education. Indeed, the major CRT researchers that are based in Great Britain – such as David Gillborn (2005, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015), Nicola Rollock (2007, 2012, 2016, 2018), John Preston (2007, 2009), Namita Chakrabarty (2012), Charlotte Chadderton (2015) and Paul Warmington (2009) – work in the field of education. This is not to say its adoption has been smooth sailing; as Chakrabarty, Roberts and Preston (2014:1) explain, in establishing itself, CRT has faced a series of struggles, unique to the particular British national context, which arguably slowed uptake. A sense that, due to the legacy of slavery, racial oppression in the United States is of a different nature to the United Kingdom gelled with a general preference within British academia for class-based analyses and saw CRT dismissed both on the grounds of its exceptionalism – its application being deemed inappropriate outside of its intellectual birthplace – and for its failure to conform to the basics of a Marxist ontology placing class analysis at the forefront (see Kaufman, 2005; Cole, 2009; cf. Chakrabarty, Roberts & Peston, op cit.). Evolving in different social and intellectual milieu, it is unsurprising, therefore, that comparative histories of CRT by Paul Warmington (2014) and Kevin Hylton (2014) that focus upon the theoretical perspectives developed in the US and Great Britain have identified points of connection but also differences between their respected forms of CRT and attendant methodologies[[7]](#footnote-7). Nevertheless, a general, internationally applicable description of CRT can be given.

As a body of scholarship, CRT is situated within the sphere of critical theory. Often related to the specific thinkers of the Frankfurt School (see Jay, 1973), as used here, the label ‘critical theory’ refers to a broader intellectual tradition. Critical theory first denotes ‘a *theory,* not merely an analysis or interpretation’; in other words, ‘[i]t not only reflects on what is, by describing past or present social reality in the manner of empirical social science. It also raises the issue of what is desirable’, indeed, ‘the descriptive and the normative (i.e. the political) are inextricably linked’ (Keucheyan, 2013, 26). Critical theories, thus, do not subscribe to the epistemological axiom of ‘value neutrality’ as outlined by Max Weber in his *The Methodologies of the Social Sciences* (Weber, 1949). It is emphatically and passionately not, as such, an ‘objective’ research methodology (see: Roithmayr, 1999). Indeed, CRT scholars actively challenge the notion of objectivity and neutrality in research, viewing it as an expression of the dominant ideology.

Second, and related to this, critical theory denotes ‘theories that more or less comprehensively challenge the existing social order’ (Keucheyan, op cit.). In this vein, the purpose of analyses based within a CRT framework is to explore, expose and challenge prevailing racial inequality in society and its institutions; in so doing, ‘CRT theorists endeavour to expose the way in which racial inequality is maintained through the operation of structures and assumptions that appear normal and unremarkable’ (Rollock and Gillborn, 2011).

Underpinning this endeavour are six key principles:

1. the centrality of racism;
2. the validity of experiential knowledge;
3. the important role of ‘interest convergence’;
4. adopting an interdisciplinary perspective;
5. the existence of ‘white supremacy’; and
6. the key fact of intersectionality.

The first five of these principles are detailed, in turn, immediately below; intersectionality is covered in more substantial detail further on.

1. ***The centrality of racism***

The ‘centrality of racism’, refers to the basic insight that racism is not aberrant in society, but rather *the norm.* Moreover, far from being articulated in crude and open manners, it is generally more nuanced,appearing natural and ordinary to people within society*.*

1. ***The validity of experiential knowledge***

Recognising the ‘validity of experiential knowledge’ refers to the central importance of the voices and experiences of marginalised people, excluded from the dominant narratives – with the important epistemological and methodological implications this raises: ‘It is not assumed that their accounts represent one singular truth or reality rather that their position at the margins of racist society means they will be able to make an especially insightful contribution’ (Rollock and Gillborn, 2011; cf. Delgado, 1989). This points to a phenomenological perspective; the resultant utilisation of research techniques such as oral history, interview narratives and counter-storytelling which flows from this focus is discussed and developed in this thesis’s research design chapter.

1. ***The important role of interest convergence***

‘Interest convergence’ refers to the need to recognise the incentive structures in society that dissuade actors from disrupting the racist *status quo.* Arguments here point towards historical examples such as the 1960s civil rights movement to show how, as Bell (1980: 523) puts it: ‘the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality [is] accommodated only when it converges with the interest of whites’; or, in Delgado and Stefancic’s (2001:18) words, how ‘advances for blacks always coincide with changing economic conditions and the self-interest of elite whites’. For example, a previous study applying CRT to education policy in England demonstrated how changes to education policy such as setting by ability, ostensibly undertaken to promote racial equity in teaching and attainment, in fact led to race inequity with white students being the beneficiaries – something the author describes as ‘an act of *tacit intentionality’* (Gillborn, 2005).

1. ***Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective***

Regarding the need to adopt an interdisciplinary perspective, CRT researchers argue that racism is not ahistorical and must be understood in both its historical and contemporary contexts. For this reason they advocate drawing from numerous methodologies and disciplines – such as for instance ethnic and gender studies – which provide tools which can usefully draw attention to past and present experiences. Part of the aim in so doing, is to provide a means by which social institutions can be viewed from the specific perspective of a Black person engaged with them (cf. Solórano and Yosso, 2002).

1. ***The existence of white supremacy***

Despite connotations, ‘white supremacy’ does not refer to the ideologies and practices of organisations that preach racial hierarchy, such as the KKK or neo-fascist groups. Rather, it refers to the need to recognise and conceptualise the manner in which, in political, economic and cultural terms, whites overwhelmingly control social power and dominate resources. The aim, in this more nuanced conceptualisation of ‘supremacy’, is to challenge the taken-for-granted privileges which ‘whiteness’ bestows – and one part of this is the need for white researchers to critically interrogate their own racial privileges (Picower, 2009; Preston, 2007) – something recognised and discussed in the research design chapter.

**1.2.2 Whiteness Theory**

It is within the broad CRT perspective, as illustrated above, that this thesis situates itself, applying CRT’s approach and concepts to the case of Higher Education in the UK. Fundamental to doing so is an emphasis on the aforementioned concept of ‘whiteness’. Due to the centrality of this concept to the framing of this thesis’s analysis, it is important that the concept be discussed and clarified in detail at this point.

In the words of Kincheloe and Steinberg (2000: 178), ‘[q]uestions of whiteness permeate almost every major issue facing Westerners at the end of the twentieth century, from affirmative action and intelligence testing to the deterioration of public space and the growing disparity of wealth’ and ‘[i]n this context the study of whiteness becomes a central feature of any … education for the twenty-first century.’ From this insight has developed a form of CRT labelled ‘whiteness theory’ (Charbenau, 2009). But what *is* ‘whiteness’?

The concept of whiteness can be defined as ‘an advantage of race privilege, a standpoint from which whites look at themselves and others, and a set of cultural practices that often go unseen by white people’ (Cooks and Simpson, 2008: 4). The notion of the ‘unseen’ – or ‘invisibility’, to draw from Ralph Ellison (1952) – is a vital consideration, viewed as one of the most powerful features of whiteness by those who study it. This is because of the positional privilege it provides of being racially unmarked and invisible (see for instance hooks, 1992a; Goudge, 2003; Cooks and Simpson, 2008). There are a number of reasons for this.

First, ‘race’ is understood as ‘a socially constructed category with absolutely no basis in biology’ (Ware, 2015, 27); rather, it is an attribute assigned to ‘people who are not white’ – sometimes still referred to today in general parlance as “people of race” – while white people, by contrast, are equated with human experiences in general.[[8]](#footnote-8) This phenomenon has been illuminated by researchers such as Barbara Young Welke, in her analyses of the historic roots of imagining ‘people’ as ‘able, white and male’ (2010, 63). Yep (2008, 90) provides an exemplar of this process from communication research, where the social location of participants in research is marked differently:

‘While communication of European Americans is generally unmarked (e.g., it is much more likely that we read statements such as “this is how people communicate in organizations” than “this is how European Americans communicate in organizations” unless we are comparing groups), communication of people of color and other individuals at the margins tends to be automatically marked (e.g., “this is how African Americans communicate in organizations”). Such a differential marking practice makes “people”—the generic and default category—to signify “white” without naming itself.’

It is mental conceptualisations such as this that lead to the division between American literature – which while predominantly white affects to speak for ‘the [American] People’ *in toto* – and defined sub-sets such as *African* American or *Native* American literatures.

Whiteness, in other words, refers to ‘the gold standard, the mainstream, the norm’ (Ishizuka, 2016, 38) from which all other identities diverge. The concept thus refers to the ‘othering’ of race,[[9]](#footnote-9) portraying it as an attribute held by those outside of the socially dominant group. This point is elaborated upon by Dyer (1997: 3) when he writes that:

‘most of the time white people speak about nothing but white people, it’s just that we couch it in terms of ‘people’ in general… At the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they’re just the human race’.

It is for this reason that Wallace (2015, 26) refers to the ‘invisibility’ of whiteness as ‘the final, and most difficult to combat, stage of racism.’ The analysis of whiteness thus offers researchers interested in WP one means by which to understand ‘the routine denial of the relevance of race and the persistence of racism’ as affective factors that extend beyond the factors accounted for in the existing formal policy processes already delineated above (Cooks and Simpson 2008: 3).

It is important to grasp, however, that ‘whiteness’ is not the same as ‘white people’. As Leonardo (2002: 31) writes: ‘Whiteness’ is a racial discourse, whereas the category ‘white people’ represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color’.[[10]](#footnote-10) As Gillborn (2005, 488) writes, this is ‘a vital point’ since critical studies focused upon *whiteness,* such as this thesis,are not attacks upon ‘white people’ as such(or, as Bonnett (1997: 189)refers to them, ‘so-called “White” people’). Following Foucault (1969), in *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* ‘whiteness’ is viewed ‘archeologically’; i.e. ‘as a discourse or a series of discourses concerning a matrix of material conditions, social relations, economic, political and cultural issues’ (Wallace, 2015, 34-5).

Critiques of whiteness are, in this manner, focused upon the realm of discourse – what Ware (2015, 26) refers to as ‘the ideas and ideologies of whiteness’ – or rather, ‘the socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of white identifications and interests’ (Gillborn, 2005, 488*;* see Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995: 58–60). As Ishizuka describes, whiteness thus names and upholds a position of social power; it:

‘presupposes belonging, being heard and heeded. It bestows a sense of entitlement, a sense of dominance: “white” = “right.” And its currency is so embedded it is taken for granted, by both whites and non-whites’ (Ishizuka, 2016, 38).

But just as not all heterosexual people are homophobic, nor men sexist, so too white people do not *necessarily,* through their ‘unthinking’ actions and assumptions, reinforce and perpetuate ‘whiteness’. There is a performative dimension to whiteness[[11]](#footnote-11) and as Gillborn writes, ‘[i]t is possible for white people to take a real and active role in deconstructing whiteness’ (although, he archly adds, ‘such ‘race traitors’ are relatively uncommon’ (ibid.)).

If whiteness, then, is ‘a refusal to acknowledge how white people are implicated in certain social relations of privilege and relations of domination and subordination’ (McLaren, 1997: 3), what the body of literature known as whiteness theory seeks to achieve is to make the white cultural and political assumptions and privileges which exist visible, so that white people do not assume that their own position is neutral or normal. The importance of this task is fiercely expressed in the writings of the African American essayist and social critic James Baldwin, who, in *The Fire Next Time* (Baldwin, 1963), wrote:

‘A vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man’s profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man’s equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror.’ (Baldwin, quoted in West, 2004, 81)

All western nations, Baldwin continued, must ‘re-examine themselves and release themselves from many things now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long’ (ibid., 82). Baldwin’s petition was that all of us, but in particular white people, must consciously confront white supremacy in society and avoid the ‘deliberate ignorance and wilful blindness’ (West, 2004, 81) about its degree and corrosive character. To quote Baldwin (op cit.) once more, ‘it is the innocence [of the reality] which constitutes the crime.’ Conceived as a work of praxis in the manner described above, in its own small capacity this thesis follows this dictum.

The importance of the subsequent analysis is thus buttressed by a recognition of the moral necessity that we, as researchers and members of our academic communities, actively seek to confront and understand how white supremacy operates on our campuses, with the aim of providing insights that can be helpful in developing counter strategies, whether formal, informal or non-formal. This is a particularly important undertaking from the perspective of a white woman and feminist studying the lived reality of female BME students. As Mikki Kadiral (2015, 14) asserts, ‘dismantling the oppressive frameworks that dehumanize women of colour must be a responsibility of white women, who benefit from patriarchal ideals of femininity to the exclusion of women of colour.’ With this goal in mind, higher education provides a particularly valuable area of analysis.

**1.2.3 Whiteness and Education Systems**

As covered in the previous section, universities are often invoked as impartial and neutral institutions in debates about education and social inequalities; as also covered in the previous section, this thesis adopts a critical stance, rejecting the idea of universities as objective, forward-facing institutions of learning, open to all regardless of colour or creed. Instead, adopting a CRT perspective, universities are approached as long-established and white-dominated institutions, which are liable to have procedures, practices and a culture that disadvantages non-white people. As Rangasamy (2004, 31-2) explains, looking to the historical development of the higher education system:

‘Universities have evolved over several centuries on the basis of assumptions that heterosexual white men from the economically and socially privileged classes were naturally endowed for a university education. Consequently, the socio-economic and cultural values that govern the operational mode and management of universities, particularly the older ones, are derived from those social groupings.’

Language is not neutral (see: Bakhtin, *et al.,* 1983) and the institutional language of such establishments is, Rangasamy (2004, 30) further argues, deployed ‘to articulate and celebrate’ the experiences of these groupings ‘but also and most importantly to deny the experiences of others’.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Whiteness, according to this argument, has continued to be the standard, the ideal and the norm in theory, research and pedagogy; it is the invisible and universal norm of the knowledge produced in higher education settings (Chestler, *et al.,* 2005; Feagin and Feagin, 1986; Johnson, 2006; Maher and Tetreault, 2003; Wise, 2005; Yep, 2008, 90). A key individual in the development of this line of argument is Toni Morrison (2000, 4) who argues that the birth of higher education (not merely in the UK, although that is the specific focus herein) is intrinsically linked to an ‘unabashedly theological and consciously value-ridden and value-seeking moral project’; although universities have shed off this coat of theological values, she argues, the university is still not a value-free objective place.[[13]](#footnote-13) Echoing this line of argument, Jessica Charbeneau (2009, 14) writes that:

‘while access to social institutions is broadening for people of color, the institutions themselves perpetuate Whiteness as normative. While racism against people of color appears to be abated through policies aimed at increasing access, racism for Whites, or the perpetuation of White privilege, is ever present. Whites see themselves as individually non-oppressive but too often fail to recognize the structures of inequality resulting from their collective privilege.’

It is in recognition of such arguments that the work of another significant theorist, Elizabeth Minnich (1990), focuses upon how educational schooling normally teaches white people to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative and average, but also as *ideal.* This is significant since it embeds a state of affairs whereby when white people work to benefit those not classed as white, this is seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like “us” (*cf.* McIntosh, 2001, 97) – white privilege thus being transmitted through the education system.

The repercussions of this situation – this *idealisation* of whiteness – can, as bell hooks relates, can be ‘tragic’. As she describes: ‘I was shocked and saddened when I first heard black professors at Stanford downgrade and express contempt for black students, expecting us to do poorly, refusing to establish nurturing bonds.’ Such circumstances, she argues, are the result of ‘the internalization of racist perspectives’ (hooks 1989, 80) by black people within universities due to the pressure to assimilate to the dominant, white institutional culture. This ‘internalised racism’ (Cross 1971; Cokely 2002; Woodson 1933; Malcolm X & Haley 1964) is defined by Perez Huber, Johnson and Kohli (2006) as the acceptance of a racial hierarchy, either consciously or unconsciously. It thus involves ‘the internalization of the beliefs, values, and worldviews of the dominant culture’ (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). It is for this reason that hooks prefers to phrase ‘white supremacy’ as a descriptive term for the phenomenon under study, rather than ‘institutional racism’:

‘To me an important breakthrough, I felt, in my work and that of others was the call to use the term *white supremacy*, over *racism* because racism in and of itself did not really allow for a discourse of colonization and decolonization, the recognition of the internalized racism within people of colour and it was always in a sense keeping things at the level at which whiteness and white people remained at the centre of the discussion. In my classroom I might say to students that you know that when we use the term *white supremacy* it doesn’t just evoke white people, it evokes a political world that we can all frame ourselves in relationship to…. And so for me those words were very much about the constant reminder, one of institutional construct, that we’re not talking about personal construct in the sense of, how do you feel about me as a woman, or how do you feel about me as a black person?’ (hooks, 1997)

The result of such processes of internalisation, in Wallace’s words, are ‘black people who want to be “white” or, more to the point, black people who *don’t* want to be “black” or “other”’ (Wallace, 2015, 35). The effect of such internalised racism (aka. white supremacy) can be stark; research by Brown and Segrist (2016), for example, has found a correlation between African American participants who devalued and dismissed an African worldview and its themes and lower career aspirations.

Drawing upon such insights, this research seeks to go further than merely looking at widening access, or present WP policies and structures. It focuses upon the non-formal aspect of universities *qua* institutions while addressing deeper-seated issues regarding the performative aspect of *participation,* an aspect vital to understanding the effects of whiteness on non-traditional students’ experiences (see Cooks and Simpson, 2008, 1), since, as demonstrated by Youdell (2004), certain identities are strengthened and legitimised via acts of reiteration which in turn reinforce themselves. It is this performative constitution of particular identities and roles, which lends whiteness its deep-rooted, almost invisible status (Gillborn, 2005, 6).

**1.2.4 Intersectionality**

Discussing white privilege, however, does not mean that the researcher overlooks other forms of power and privilege. As described above, this research focuses upon *female* students from significantly underrepresented ethnic groups in higher education (British Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean). It is important to keep in mind that race, class, gender, sexuality and other positionalities interlock. This is well addressed via the concept of ‘intersectionality’ which holds that race, class and gender operate together and no one of which is more important than the others; they are interrelated and together configure the structures of society and affect the experience of all aspects of human life (Frankenberg, 1993; Jordon, 2001; Morga, 2001).[[14]](#footnote-14) Indeed, it is highly problematic, as Crenshaw (1989, 57) describes, to treat gender and race as if ‘mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis’. As Anderson and Hill Collins (2001, 3) write: ‘[a]t any moment, race, class or gender may feel more salient or meaningful in a given person’s life, but they are overlapping and cumulative in their effects on people’s experience’ – they are different but interrelated axes of social structure (see also: Harris and Sims, 2002; Collins, 1990).

As figures such as Perry (2002) show, as a framework, ‘intersectionality’ helps us question whiteness’s normative assumptions – being able to experience our multiplicity of different memberships as ultimately fluid. Even within this fluidity, however, it is possible to see that ‘[w]hiteness carries privilege, regardless of existing within a combination of target, or subordinate, identities. The salience of Whiteness remains’ (Charbeneau, 2009, 17). In this manner intersectionality once again raises particular responsibilities for white researchers; as Kadiral (2015, 19) notes, anti-racism is an important area to tackle ‘in order for feminism to become more intersectional, but it is arguably the one area where the least amount of effort has been made by white women.’

It is important, therefore, to always consider race privilege in the context of other social localities of gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability,etc. Yet, as hooks stresses, while it is essential to consider all systems of domination and oppression, this does not mean that all are treated equally regardless of context; what is needed, she argues, is a ‘politics of intersectionality that also privileges what form of domination is most oppressing at a given moment in time’ (hooks, 2009). This thesis focuses predominantly upon race, including gender as a sampling identifier. Other identities, in particular class, are not ignored and are discussed within the development of the analysis itself; however, the analytical emphasis is directed at the first two categories. This comparative ‘privileging’ follows in the path of Wallace’s (2015, 25) identification of how ‘women’s oppression and racial oppression sometimes are seen in combinations which create a third and entirely different category of problems with regards to the black woman or woman of color’ (Wallace, 2015, 25).[[15]](#footnote-15) Bearing in mind the lessons of intersectionality, this thesis focuses its research within this ‘third category’.

**Section 3: Microaggression Theory**

**1.3.1 Gaining Analytical Purchase**

Having explained the “what” of this analysis, the next question, which this chapter addresses, is the “how”. In other words, having explained the subjects of analysis – universities as institutions, with a specific focus on the university experience of female BME students – and the specific focus of the analysis *upon* those subjects – a CRT-informed interest in whiteness and the education system – this next task is to outline the specific theoretical and conceptual toolkit used within this analysis.

The unspoken nature of ‘whiteness’, its invisibility, makes the question of how one can gain analytical purchase upon it a central concern. To this end, this research draws upon microaggression theory, a theoretical approach distinct from CRT and whiteness theory, but which has been used in combination by scholars such as Daniel Solórzano (1998; 2000) and Julie Minikel-Lacocque (2013) to gain insight into racism on US university campuses. The starting point of this analysis is that one of the ways in which whiteness operates is through racial microaggressions – and it is subsequently via an analytical focus upon such microaggressions that this research proceeds.

This section therefore provides a basic overview of microaggression theory, offering a taxonomy for subsequent use in the analysis, and links this to the unique position of this research within a wider review of the literature surrounding higher education and race (both focused specifically upon microaggression analysis and otherwise). As such, it lays the groundwork for the next, research design chapter.

**1.3.2 What are racial microaggressions?**

The term racial microaggression refers to commonplace verbal or non-verbal, sometimes kinetic, behavioural, or environmental indignities that communicate denigrating or demeaning messages to Black people based on their group membership (see Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, 2003; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Psychiatrist Chester Pierce first coined the term in 1969 to describe perpetual, “offensive mechanisms” directed at Black people on a daily basis “designed to reduce, dilute, atomize and encase the hapless into [their] ‘place’. The incessant lesson the black must hear is that he is insignificant and irrelevant” (Pierce 1969, 303). With this insight, Pierce cautioned researchers and activists that ‘one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative miniassault is the substance of today's racism’ (Pierce, 1974, 516).

The concept of microaggressions has becomes a *bête noir* for some libertarian and conservative writers, who link it to a ‘victimhood culture’ (Campbell & Manning, 2014), portray it as a means of ‘exaggerating, or even falsifying offenses’ (ibid.), and proof of ‘mental coddling’ that turns ‘commonplace negative events into nightmarish monsters’ (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Dismissing the importance of such ‘commonplace events’, however, ignores the manner in which these more oblique racial microaggressions are frequently the cause of great damage (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Indeed, when discussed in comparison with ‘old-fashioned’, direct and deliberate racism, microaggressions are described as more threatening and affecting; this is due to the pervasiveness of their occurrence, the difficulty in both detecting and subsequently proving them, and their seemingly innocuous manner of presentation (ibid.). Racial microggressions, as researchers have sought to show, are often subtle, almost invisible, and it is in this subtlety that victims of microaggressions may be left with a sense of hurt, whilst simultaneously asking themselves, “What just happened to me?”.

This subtlety and attendant difficulty in detecting and articulating the effect of racial microaggressions is made all the greater since they often occur without the perpetrator(s)’s own awareness. While they *may* be conscious and deliberate, greater emphasis has been placed – in terms of research – upon what might be deemed *unconscious* exchanges: i.e. the ways in which many individuals, well-intentioned though they may be, actually perpetuate racial discrimination through their words and actions, without meaning to do so and regardless of their actual intentions (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978).

It is for this reason that, as Rollock (2012, 519) describes, racial microaggressions are often dismissed or downplayed as examples of racism not only due to their subtlety, ‘but because of an inherent misconception that ‘nice’ people cannot be racist’. Thomas (2008, 274), for example, dismisses the concept of microaggressions as founded upon ‘an array of clearly irrational reasons for experiencing emotional turmoil’. Yet, as Ladson-Billings argues:

‘... our conceptions of race, even in a postmodern and/or postcolonial world, are more embedded and fixed than in a previous age. However, this embeddedness or ‘fixed-ness’ has required new language and construction of race *so that denotations are submerged and hidden in ways that are offensive though without identification*.’ (1998, 9, emphasis added)

As indicated above, racial microaggressions do not take a single communicative form. They can be articulated, for example, through verbal, nonverbal, or environmental channels. In the first instance, this could involve negative verbal statements made about lack people, cultural values and experiences. An example of this could be asking a person of Black Carribbean or African descent: “why do you always have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down,” the implicit message being that they are disruptive and bothersome – a message tied in with colonialist notions of Black people as less civilised, or even savage, animalistic, unable to control their drives and emotions. Or, with the casual dismissal of concerns about representation within employment with statements such as “I believe the most qualified person should get the job and race should not be considered,” where the perceived coded message is that “race does not matter and white privilege does not exist” – the correlative of which is that the cause of Black inequality is the simple non-equal nature of Black people (see: Sue, 2010, 32-34).

As well as such verbal examples, racial tension or hostility can also be fostered by *non*verbal microaggressions. To give a particularly obtrusive example, President Obama himself has noted all Black men in America (himself included) have been through the experience of entering a store only to have security immediately follow their every move (Huffington Post, 2013); this gives the implicit message that a Black person can be assumed to be (or be more likely to be) a criminal, who will steal and/or is dangerous. Less physically obtrusive examples could include awkward silences, failure to make eye contact, and closed body posture during dialogues about race; these could be interpreted as the individual making these gestures (consciously or otherwise) giving the message “I do not want to talk about this / race is not important / I am not listening or what you are saying is not important” etc.

Environmental microaggressions – that is to say microaggressions that take place on a systemic, or institutional level, rather than through direct interpersonal exchanges – are often more insidious still, having a propensity to go unchallenged. Such environmental/institutional racial microaggressions take place through the output of the media, the educational system, and symbolic representations – whether economic, socio-political or related to the workforce – which mock, exclude or threaten BME people. Take for example, the absence of Black faces on the front bench of the government; Black writers among the staff of award winning television shows; Black history in the curriculum; or *even* Black actors within the cast of a Biblical epic set in *north Africa* (i.e. Ridley Scott’s ‘Exodus’, 2014). The perceived coded message in each case is that “racial diversity – diversity in experience, perspectives and input – is not valued or welcomed, and white experiences are enough to represent all others”. That Black people encounter, process and have to deal with such verbal, nonverbal and environmental racial microaggressions on a daily basis is a generally unappreciated – if at all recognised – fact of their lives.

**1.3.3 Microaggressions: A Taxonomy**

To describe the myriad ways in which microaggressions operate, Sue, Capodilupo and colleagues (2010; 2007) developed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions that comprises three categories: *microassaults*, *microinsults*, and *microinvalidations*. While the three categories may differ in terms of awareness and intentionality by the perpetrator, they all send either an overt, covert, or hidden offensive message or meaning to the recipients. Figure 1. below, from Sue (2010), presents the categorisation and relationship of racial microaggressions to one another. As this tabular illustration shows, Sue and his colleagues have extended the original concept of racial microaggressions to include both unintentional and intentional insults, through verbal, behavioural or environmental indignities.

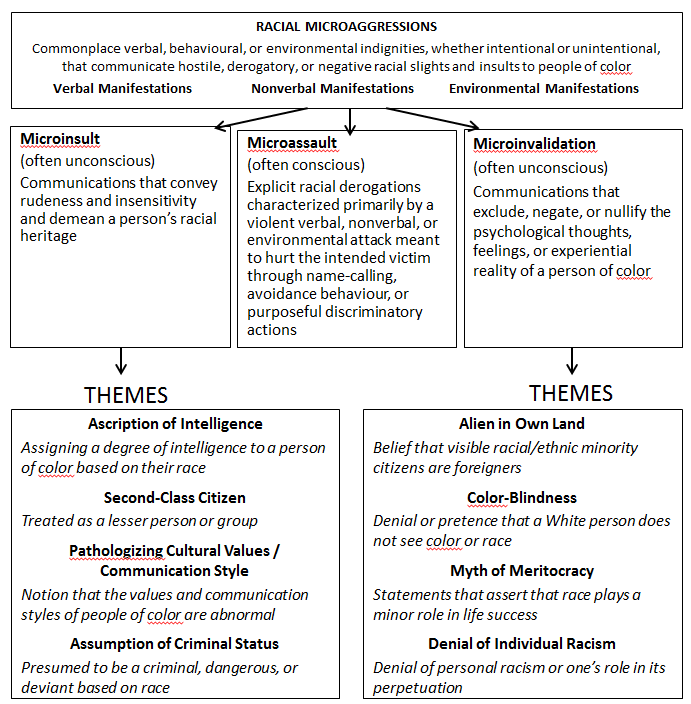


Figure 1. Categories of and Relationships among Racial Microaggressions (Sue 2010)

According to Sue (2010, 29), a microassault is ‘explicit racial derogation characterized by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim by name-calling, avoidant behaviors, or purposeful discriminatory actions’. Microassaults (unlike microinsults and microinvalidations), occur on a conscious level and consist of verbal or nonverbal attacks. They are closest to what most people recognise as old-fashioned racism – i.e. overt and intentional racially-charged attacks and actions, normally with the aim of causing harm and insult, and propagating the superiority of white people and cultural values. Examples include using racial slurs, racial jokes, hate crimes, and discriminatory treatment toward people of colour. As Watkins (2012, 21) notes, however, in contrast with old-fashioned racism, many – although not all – perpetrators of microassaults:

‘maintain a veneer of politically correct racial equality in their public persona. Hidden behind a cloak of anonymity (e.g. online bloggers with anonymous racist posts), provoked by a loss of impulse control (e.g. racist slurs spoken after alcohol or drug consumption), and limited to enclosed, private discussions (e.g. racist jokes told between a group of friends and family), microassaults are often premeditated, deeply rooted aggressions toward people of color.’

For the purposes of this thesis – and in contrast with Sue’s taxonomy – the phrase ‘racialised aggressions’ is here substituted for microassaults on the basis that, as Minikel-Lacocque (2013) argues, the term *micro* risks invalidating the anger and hurt caused by such openly racist acts, and should not be placed in the same category as microaggressions, which are often unintentional.

In contrast to microassaults (i.e. racialised aggressions), microinsults and microinvalidations often occur on an unconscious level in their expression of racist worldviews, and as previously described, are thus more difficult to detect (Sue, 2010). Microinsults are defined as ‘communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage’ (ibid., 29), conveying offensive messages to people of other races – even if the person doing so is unaware of the negative message that their words and acts communicate. For instance, a teacher’s expression of significant surprise at a Black Caribbean female student receiving a high mark in mathematics – “Wow! How did you get so good at maths?” – may be perceived by the recipient as encompassing the underlying message “it is unusual for Black Caribbean women to be good in maths/sciences,” whereas the teacher may assume his or her reaction was innocent, and not racially motivated (let alone insensitive). Another example, in this case nonverbal, would be a white person crossing the street – without recognising the nature of this action – when a Black man approaches, or of clutching their bag, or purse. Such actions could be interpreted by the recipient noticing them as a microinsult as they communicate that the white person makes the assumption (consciously or otherwise) that a Black male is likely to be a criminal and/or violent.

Finally, microinvalidations are ‘communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiental reality of a person of color’ (Sue, 2010, 29). In a similar manner to microinsults, those who perpetrate microinvalidations during interracial exchanges often do so without recognising the messages contained within their behaviour. Confusing one Black British student consistently with another, for example, conveys to them that “all Black people look the same”, negating their individuality. Similarly, a Black person who, upon discussing the disproportionate experiences he or she has had with security screenings, or police stop-and-search encounters, is told that “it’s not a big deal” or “everyone gets asked to see ID at some point” may feel rejection and invalidation as their racial experiential reality is denied.

Far from a concept invented to excuse ‘coddling’ as critics suggest, a growing research literature argues that minoritised[[16]](#footnote-16) people can more easily cope with overt racialised assaults, as opposed to subtle microinsults or microinvalidations, because “their intent is clear” and there is no ambiguity and guesswork involved in their interpretation (see for instance Sue 2010; Salvatore & Shelton 2007). Indeed, Sue (2010) has suggested that subtle microinvalidations may represent the most insidious form of microaggression, due to their dual nature of undercutting essential rights and opportunities for minoritised groups, as well as negating the significance of identity in the lives of minoritised individuals.

**1.3.4 Microaggressions: Effects**

The detrimental effects of overt and obvious forms of racism and discrimination (racism, sexism and homophobia) upon mental and physical health, self-esteem, and identity among minoritised groups, are well documented in the academic literature (Baker & Fishbein, 1998; Barrett & Logan, 2002; Barry & Grillo, 2003; Cadinu, Maas, Rosbianca & Kiesner, 2005; Hamelsky & Lipton, 2006; Utsey, Chae, Brown & Kelly, 2002; Utsey, Giesbrecht, Hook & Standard 2008). It is unsurprising, therefore, that research finds that encounters with racial microaggressions can be experienced as extremely invalidating, emotionally distressing and degrading, communicating as they do racial hierarchies and denigrating non-white norms and values (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue 2010). To quote Franklin and Boyd-Franklin (2000, 33), their research found that:

‘encountering repeated racial slights can create within the individual a feeling of not being seen as a person of worth. This subjective sense of psychological invisibility takes the form of a struggle with inner feelings and beliefs that personal talents, abilities, and character are not acknowledged or valued by others, nor by the larger society, because of racial prejudice.’

Furthermore, as the stress that encounters with such microaggressions induce is generally less visible and thus less obvious, they are often seen as relatively innocuous – not least by their perpetrators (Franklin, 1999); this perceived ambiguity can, however, make microaggressions more damaging, not less, as the constant activity of defending oneself against such attacks has a cumulative, aggravating effect. Looking at this thesis’s specific area of analysis, research has illustrated the deleterious effect this can have upon BME students’ academic studies, as they are burdened with the unrecognised need to continually work within an oppressive climate that diminishes and downplays their experiences (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Watkins, Labarrie, & Appio, 2010). Moreover, the effect of a racist encounter does not end with the encounter itself; rather, as Kohli and Solórzano’s (2012) research has demonstrated, enduring racist experiences can have deeper and more long-lasting impacts upon an individual’s self-perceptions and subsequent views of the world including the aforementioned ‘internalised racism’ (see discussion above).

**1.3.5 Literature Review: Building upon Existing Analyses**

It is this mixture of invisibility and insidiousness that makes the subject of racial microaggressions within a UK HE context so important to understand, illustrate and hopefully counter. However, the overarching concern of this thesis with racism within higher education is far from a new concern. Indeed, as a perusal of the sources cited within the previous discussion regarding universities, CRT and whiteness theory demonstrate, the issue is not lacking in attention, in a general sense. Nevertheless, with its focus on the UK higher education system, a theoretical framework founded upon the analysis of racial microaggressions, and an approach that pays attention to the lived experiences of female BME students (all discussed extensively in the research design), this research offers an original contribution to the academic literature. To explain what this original contribution is, it is useful to situate this analysis within the literature – looking at the three key areas with which it overlaps: research into institutional racism in HE; research into racial microaggressions; and research into racism in the specific case of UK HE.

***Institutional Racism in Higher Education Research***

Research does exist into institutional racism in higher education in the UK, specifically that by Mirza and Arday (2018), Pilkington (2015) and Law, Phillips and Turney’s (2004) edited collection, *Institutional Racism in Higher Education*, which argues that institutional racism has managed to persist in HE institutions irrespective of many years of social change. As Rangasamy (2004, 28) argues in his chapter within the book:

‘Institutional racism is not the proverbial grit in the machine that conventional programmes of race awareness training can remove. Rather, it is organic in nature and function and grows in cunning and resilience with each challenge it successfully overcomes.’

While this thesis follows in the intellectual footsteps of such critical research, it also identifies a lacuna within the current academic literature when it comes to the question of UK universities as white institutions and a specific focus upon minoritised students’ subsequent lived experiences. Such analyses have hitherto been undertaken in the US mainly and even there tend to focus on lower educational levels – e.g. high school, rather than higher education.

Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach (2001, 44-50), for example, have detailed the ambiguity that students of colour – to use the American terminology that they themselves use – face as they navigate between two cultures during their school years. As they write:

‘Latinas/os often learn to identify with an Anglo formulation and perception of “Latin” culture, which disassociates them from the realty of being Latina/o that they have learned in the home. In some cases, the educational experience produces such a state of alienation that the students find themselves either denying their roots or searching for a way to express what has been silenced in the curriculum, organization, classes, and residential and social life of the academic domain. What is more, the greater the educational level, the more difficult it becomes for the student to find her way back home…”

Similarly, Delpit (1995, 177), looking at the experiences of racial minority students in an American high school describes how “[c]hildren made ‘invisible’ [being overlooked as they do not ‘register’ within the dominant white institutional culture] become hard-pressed to see themselves worthy of notice.” Fordham (1996; 1997) similarly showed through her research, how ethnic identity interacts with school success for both low and high achieving female African Americans; whereas low achieving African American students tend to construct oppositional identities to school, high achieving ones often become successful by denying their African American identity and becoming invisible.

Issues of ‘white privilege and racism’ within the American school system are also identified by Wanda J. Blanchett (2006) as the key context within which to place the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, emphasising structural forces including the effect of inappropriate curriculum and pedagogy. The racialised manner in which white administrators conceptualise Black high school students has also been examined by Briscoe (2015) in her CRT discourse analysis of the argument over the closure of a Black high school. Agosto et al. (2015), in contrast, has focused upon institutional racism within educational leadership programmes, focusing upon the faculty rather than the student level in their analysis.

The majority of existing research in this subject area is qualitative (e.g. Allen, 1993; Arbouin, 2009; Burke, 2001; Clarke, 2004; Fenge-Davies, 2008; Redmond, 2004). However, on the subject of non-traditional learners in UK HE, studies have at this point largely taken the form of quantitative studies focused statistically upon who does and who does not participate in higher education. To this end, surveys have been used as a means to identify the characteristic features of participants and non-participants (e.g. OECD, 1977; Woodley, *et al.,* 1987; Tuckett and Sargant, 1996; Sargant, 2000) and to categorise barriers to education access for adult learners (*cf.* Cross, 1981; Apps, 1987). These have, thus far, been predominantly focused on adult learners, though the analyses themselves point out the fact that this grouping is generally related to minority ethnic groups, working class background and women (often with dependent children) (McGivney, 1993).

Nevertheless, British analyses of institutional racism within non-HE education do exist. In older research, focused upon relating the personal experiences of Black British Caribbean and Black British African students, ‘isolation’, ‘alienation’, and ‘invisibility’ have repeatedly been found as reoccurring words in the testimonies from such students (see for example: Blake, 1995, Lyon, 1993). Sally Tomlinson (1983), for example, reported upon how black students expressed a sense of ‘conflict’ and loss of identification with black communities upon entering HE.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In terms of more contemporary analyses, however, among the most notable examples of such research is found in the work of David Gillborn and Nicola Rollock. Gillborn and Rollock have undertaken extensive research into the experience of middle-class Black British families in the education system (Gillborn, et al.,2012; 2014*;* cf. Rollock, 2007). Their work is of particular value since, as identified below, their CRT analytical approach (Rollock & Gillborn, 2011) provides the most direct link, at this point, between microaggression analysis and the UK HE system. The work of Bhopal (2015; 2016a) is also notable in this regard since, while it is not itself grounded in microaggression analysis, the findings from her interviews with BME staff and their experiences of racism identify and illustrate the same phenomenon.

***Racial Microaggression Research***

The majority of microaggression research has also, thus far, focused upon American examples; indeed, much of the empirical research on racial microaggressions has focused on the experiences of African American individuals (Sue et al., 2008; Watkins, LaBarrie, & Appio, 2010) and of Asian American individuals (Lin, 2010; Sue et al., 2007a), across a range of contexts. Furthermore, there are numerous studies, exploring specific contexts of racial microaggressions, such as academia (Blume, et al. 2012; Gomez et al. 2011; Harwood et al. 2011; Housmand, et al. 2014; McCabe, 2009; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Pittman, 2012; Solóranzo, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso, 2006; Yosso et al., 2009), counselling (Constantine, 2007), psychological well-being (Wang et al. 2011; Ong & Burrow 2013), internet memes (Williams, et al. 2016), or sport (Burdsey 2011).

While there is little substantial work on minoritised students’ experiences with and responses to racial microaggressions within HE in the UK, this is a growing area of study in the United States, where the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow has led to a greater historical focus on the politics of race than in the UK. In contrast to the US – ‘the home of identity politics’ (Keucheyan, 2013, 106) and where socialist politics never took root (Nichols, 2015) – UK politics and policy making has been historically driven by a shared assumption that *class* is the basis of British politics and ‘all else is embellishment and detail’ (Pulzer, 1967). Race and the importance of racial equality has as such been accorded a far smaller space in the national conversation. While the late twentieth century saw class’s conceptual hegemony decline within UK politics and academia (Hobsbawmn, 1978; Hall, 1988b; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) it has – despite the lessons of intersectionality noted above – retained this role as *the* central lens through which the British view society and themselves (cf. Fox, 2014; Hickson, 2014, 42).

In the US, by contrast, studies of racial microaggressions in higher education have focused on African American (Constantine, 2007; Constantine & Sue, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Grier-Reed, 2010; Solórzano, 2000; Pittmann, 2012; Watkins, 2012; Willis, 2015), Asian American (Lin, 2010; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007), Latina/o Americans (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Rivera, Forquer, & Rangel, 2010; Yosso et al. 2009; Villalpando, 2003), and Native American (Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011; Reed et al. 2011) students and faculty, drawing attention to the consequences of having to constantly manage and circumvent such acts as part of their university experience.

For example, in a compelling study examining the experiences of African American students at university, Solórzano and colleagues (2000), applied the concept of racial microaggressions to gain insights into how students experience racial microaggressions and how they impact upon the racial campus climate. The study showed how, even if things appear to be fine on the surface, inequality and discrimination were still present ‘in subtle and hidden forms’ (Solórzano et al. 2000, 72). They found that ‘racial battle fatigue’ led to feelings of frustration, left students doubting their capabilities, and, in some cases, resulted in their leaving the university altogether and enrolling elsewhere. The findings of another recent study by Williams and Nichols (2012) on Black women’s experiences with racial microaggressions at university, affirms that in and around college campuses, many Black female students regularly encounter microaggressive forms of discrimination unique to being Black and female, which communicate messages of inferiority, criminal status, abnormal cultural values, and rigid stereotypes.

In the UK, as noted, there is an absence of analyses that draw upon racial microaggression theory to explore the subtler forms of racism experienced by students in HE. Nevertheless, the relevance of the approach to the UK context has been demonstrated by the work, in particular, of Nicola Rollock – already discussed above – who has written on how hard it is ‘to talk about race in UK universities’ (Rollock, 2015). Across two articles, she has employed CRT’s counternarratives and racial microaggression theory to demonstrate the powerful impact that the accumulation of racial microagressions can have within an academic context: the first article developed an account within a fictional British academic setting (Rollock, 2012); the second focused directly on her own experience (Rollock, 2016). In both cases the counternarrative is from an academic’s, rather than a student’s, perspective.

As emphasised in this thesis’s introduction, however, the recent explosion of student-led campaigns such as ‘why is my curriculum white?’, ‘Rhodes Must Fall’, ‘decolonise education’ and ‘#ITooAmCambridge/Oxford/Sheffield’ illustrate the importance and relevance of this the latter perspective in a UK context. When the magazine *Grazia* runs articles noting ‘the daily microaggressions’ BME people face in the UK (Eric-Udorie, 2017), it is evident that the concept has exited the academic field and is finding purchase within mainstream culture. The recent publication of Nadena Doharty’s article ‘applying a racial microaggressions framework to black students’ experiences of Black History Month and Black History’ (Doharty, 2018) is a welcome intervention, therefore, although the focus is upon secondary rather than higher education.

One further notable example is Arbouin’s (2009) PhD thesis, *British African Caribbean graduates: Narratives of educational journeys and career outcomes,* which explores the educational and career experiences of British African Caribbean graduates. Her study offers valuable insights on how the structuring effects of race, class and gender were typically experienced via the frustrations of unfulfilled potential in school, long journeys through post-compulsory education, microaggressions in HE and a general lack of diversity in staffing and curriculum throughout the education system. Additionally, her work illuminates how the student’s outsider status frequently created obstacles to career progression.

This research charts a course between the work of Rollock, Doharty and Arbouin. Like Rollock and Doharty, it draws upon CRT and microaggression analysis, but applies it to primary research with BME students on a UK campus, rather than a fictional academic setting, secondary school education, or detailing the academic experience. Like Arbouin, it uses a narrative approach for data collection (see the following chapter), but combines this with the use of microaggressions theory, while focusing upon the lived experiences of students whilst at university, rather than following graduation.

**1.4.1 Summary and Research Questions**

To summarise the above, the aim of this thesis is to look beyond current narratives of widening participation in British higher education by focusing upon the lived experiences of female BME students once *at* university. In so doing, by drawing upon a CRT perspective and the insights offered by whiteness theory, it seeks to offer a radical new perspective on this issue through the utilisation of an analytical approach, missing from the existing literature on UK HE, of microaggressions theory.

To reiterate the research questions detailed in the introduction, this research sought to address the initial, broadly framed primary research question: What are the research participants’ experiences at university? This initial research question was deliberately broad, allowing participants to determine the salient themes of their experiences themselves; as detailed in the following chapter, via the use of an initial set of narrative interviews, embedded within a constructivist grounded theory approach, the question was narrowed to focus upon the lessons that could be drawn from these female BME students regarding the role race plays in their everyday university experience; was the university genuinely inclusive for them, or did the nature of the university environment disadvantage them in their life as a student? From this, a final research question was developed, asking in conclusion what actions might be taken to change such experiences in the future?

Having clarified and defined the subject of analysis, detailed and delineated the theoretical framework through which it is conceptualised, and provided an initial literature review situating it within the wider research, the subsequent chapter shifts from questions of *what,* to questions of *how,* setting out the research design and strategy via which this critical analysis is carried out.

**CHAPTER 2:**

**METHODOLOGY**

**2.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter outlined the subject of analysis and the theoretical framework through which it is approached; subsequently, this chapter discusses the production of this research project in terms of the epistemology, methods, fieldwork and ethics. Such questions are of fundamental importance; methodologies, in the words of Conteh (2018, 11), ‘are the theories of research in action, in other words the praxis. They are the theoretical justifications for the practical processes through which the researchers seek to uncover, understand and explain the phenomena they investigate. As such they link the questions with the ways in which they can best be investigated.’

The ensuing chapter is structured in several parts. The first (2.2) explains the ‘criticalist’ approach adopted herein, developing an analytical technique that matches this research ethos, drawn from CRT based around biographical narrative interviewing techniques and focus group analysis. As part of this criticalist approach, the second part (2.3) discusses how my positionality as a researcher introduced particular power relations between myself and research participants, and how I sought to address them. The third part (2.4) sets out the research strategy itself – founded in a ‘constructivist grounded theory’ approach – through which the data, once collected, was analysed.

The next three parts detail the practical side of this research: the first (2.5) provides a description of the fieldwork context, covering the University itself, the process of recruiting research participants, and individual profiles for each participant. The next parts return to the previously outlined analytical technique to detail the specific tools employed in data collection (2.6) and analysis (2.7). This is followed by a discussion of the ethical considerations attached to these research methods (2.8).

**2.2 Adopting a Criticalist Approach**

This analysis follows the call for expressly political scholarship that is central to critical theory; the study is committed ‘to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce more just and equitable relations between [people]’ (Young, 2003, 7). As such, it adopts a ‘criticalist’ approach to research – the main points of which are defined by Joe Kinchloe and McLaren as follows:

‘We are defining a criticalist as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions: that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations which are socially and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between object and signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness ); that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely , the oppression which characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable; that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one at the expense of others (e.g. class oppression versus racism) often elides the interconnections among them; and finally, that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of race, class and gender oppression.’ (Kinchloe and McLaren, 1994, quoted in Carspecken, 1996, 4)

It is to this end that this research aims to allow participants the chance to ‘give voice’ to their concerns and thoughts on higher education (Larkin, et al. 2006, 102). Impartial, objective research on issues of oppression – such as in the case of institutional racism – is in the view of this researcher, as Barnes (1996) has argued, impossible; a researcher is either on the side of those who are oppressed, or those who oppress.

This is a far from uncontroversial stance to maintain. From the standpoint of academics such as Ardha Danieli and Carol Woodhams (2005), this emancipatory research philosophy is dangerous. This is because, as they see it, the ‘advocacy element’ at its heart carries risks of analysts selectively gathering data, or choosing research participants, and subsequently cherry-picking evidence from these sources in ‘support [of] their own arguments … rather than accurately representing the views of their research subjects’, resultantly ‘silencing those whose views do not conform to those of the ‘expert’ researcher’ and ‘becoming a form of oppression itself’ (ibid., 282, 288).

But, to reiterate the point from Barnes above, the objectivity that Danieli and Woodhams appeal to is a metaphysical myth, presuming the existence, by definition, of an extra-discursive standpoint from which a researcher can view their subject matter unfettered by the accrued norms of socialisation. To quote Norman Fairclough (1989, 5), ‘people researching and writing about social matters are inevitably influenced in the way they approach them, by their own social experience and values and political commitments’. The difference between an interpretive, criticalist approach as adopted here, and the narrative of its critics such as Danieli and Woodhams, is that the preconceptions upon which the research is based are reflected upon and made explicit by the researcher. There is an ethical imperative to such openness and reflexivity – a recognition that rather than pretending they hold no biases, social researchers should ‘discard the illusion that [their research] in some way mirrors ‘true’ reality’, moving ‘closer to a recognition … that it *is* a social activity (Melucci, 1996, 390).

**2.2.1 Research Method: initial considerations**

This ‘criticalist’ approach, embedded in a CRT framework, brings with it a series of attendant considerations regarding the methodological approaches and tools available to the social researcher. One’s methodology is directly linked to one’s epistemology, providing the question and answer of both what it is possible to know, and how to go about the task of finding this out. Epistemology, moreover, is itself predicated upon the ontological position adopted by the analyst – emerging from their presupposed and unavoidable ‘ontological horizon’ (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 189; cf. Hay, 2007, 59-86). So it is that, as Connolly (2004, 332) notes, ‘a particular orientation to method is apt to express in some way or other a set of metaphysical commitments to which the methodist is deeply attached’.

That this thesis rejects a quantitative approach has already been intimated in the previous chapter’s discussion of existing literature. Indeed, from the epistemological standpoint of this researcher, quantitative methodologies are inherently problematic. This is because the action which they seek to achieve – to quantify social factors, making possible their division into separate ‘sets’ of variables – is based upon an essentially positivist ontology and epistemology and resultant philosophical naturalism: i.e. the belief that ‘similarities between the natural and social worlds are such that they should be studied in the same ways’. This amounts to ‘the idea that the human [social] sciences should strive to develop predictive and causal explanations akin to those found in the natural sciences’ (Bevir and Kedar, 2008, 504). Such philosophically naturalist approaches ‘typically want meaning to drop out of […] explanations’ on the grounds ‘that to give the reasons for an action [is] merely to redescribe the action’ (ibid.*,* 505).

This simply will not hold for any analysis focused upon questions of race and gender (and class), since the relationship between the desire for scientific, statistical representation and the fluidity of discursive categorisations, as conceptualised in the preceding chapter, is to quote Winch (1990, 281):

‘…precisely analogous to that between being able to formulate statistical laws about the likely occurrences of words in a language and being able to understand what was being *said* by someone who spoke the language… ‘Understanding’, in situations like this, is grasping the *point* or *meaning* of what is being said or done.’

Surveys, with their emphasis on scientific logic and statistical data, cannot explain how people see and make sense of their lives (McNeill and Chapman, 2005, 29).[[18]](#footnote-18) Mixed-methods (i.e. mixing both quantitative and qualitative methods) need not be intrinsically antagonistic with CRT-inspired analysis – as seen in the writings of Decuir-Gunby and Walker-Devose (2013). Nevertheless, working within a theoretical framework derived from CRT, whiteness theory and (black) feminist theory wherein an emphasis is placed upon the discursive construction of social identities and the normative importance of individual experiences, quantitative research is rejected, as it is unable to represent the quality of experiences and the complexities of the narratives as is necessary.

If this leaves a qualitative approach the obvious analytical path to take, it does not provide a simple answer to the form of this analysis. To an extent, this is to be expected and embraced; an element of such criticalist approaches is the assertion that the very nature of the research is something that develops in concert with the fieldwork itself. This was elaborated upon by Cheeseman (2010, 59) when discussing his own thesis:

‘My reading, my fieldwork, the writing process have all informed each other … I have followed Harry Wolcott’s (2001) dictum that writing is thinking. This thesis, its supporting ideas, its theoretical standpoints, fieldwork and conclusions, have been constructed together. That is not to say a qualitative approach was adopted without a firm rationale. The nature of my research, as an investigation into HE and student mobility framed via Noyes’ formulation of ‘the group’ is not suited to quantitative research. I am not attempting to experimentally measure the ‘causal relationship between variables’, but to explore qualitative aims, namely values and the social construction of reality.’

As delineated below, the task of outlining a clearly formulated and set method of research, and a strict timetable for fieldwork, similarly proved to be ill-suited for this thesis. Nevertheless, a general approach that fit the purposes of this research project was identified and adopted, based around a biographical narrative approach.

**2.2.2 Developing an Analytical Approach: counterstorytelling**

One key research approach that forms the basis of this analysis is counterstorytelling. This approach, used in CRT studies in particular, focuses upon the use of counterstories, i.e. the ‘stories of those individuals and groups whose knowledges and histories have been marginalized, excluded, subjugated or forgotten in the telling of official narratives’ (Peter & Lankshear, 1996, 2). In the US context – though the approach is not confined to American studies – research based around counterstorytelling has drawn upon storytelling traditions from African American, Chicano, and Native American cultures to expose, analyse and challenge the ‘majoritarian stories of racial privilege’ (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002a, 32; 2002b): e.g. using personal stories or narratives to relay an individual’s experience with racism, and to challenge majoritarian views by allowing for alternate realities to be heard (see for instance DeCuir-Gunby & Walker-DeVose, 2013, 252).

Such counterstorytelling is often presented in three differing manners: (i) personal stories or narratives, (ii) the stories or narratives of other people, or (iii) composite stories or narratives (ibid.). In the first, autobiographical approach, the analyst relates a personal experience with racism (e.g. Guinier, 1998). The third type of counterstorytelling draws upon a variety of sources and data ‘in order to create a group story regarding experiences with racism’ (DeCuir-Gunby & Walker-DeVose, 2013, 253; see also Bell, 1992; Rollock, 2012). This thesis utilises the second form of counterstorytelling – the stories or narratives of other people. The majority of CRT studies in education utilise this approach (e.g. Dixson & Rousseau, 2006), which ‘allows for the telling of another person’s experiences with racism’ through stories that ‘are biographical and situated within the sociohistorical context’ (DeCuir-Gunby & Walker-DeVose, op cit.).

This approach is linked, directly, to the choice of the researcher’s subject of analysis: the experience of British female students of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean ethnic backgrounds (see discussion on student participants below). As a criticalist approach, the aim of this research is broadly phenomenological in nature, seeking to understand the ‘essential meaning’ of their lived experiences, including ‘thoughts, feelings, images, sensations, memories’ (Waters, 2016), etc. This analytical focus resonates with the insight of political sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959, 226), and his recognition ‘that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues’. Far from seeing individual’s negative experiences as university students as an individualist trouble requiring individual remedies – placing the onus to change, to some degree, upon the victim of oppression themselves – this critical approach situates these troubles within the socio-political (and institutional) structures that individual operates within. In doing so it embraces and acknowledges the fact that individual insights can offer extremely valuable data for those seeking to understand (and alter) prevailing structural inequalities, as seen in the research by Mackenzie et al.(2015) into working class lived experiences. As they themselves argued in their subsequent publication:

‘[the] conclusion from the research conducted with our participants – few of whom would claim to be ‘highly educated’ … is that … not only do many policy makers and practitioners have something to learn from them, so too does a significant section of the research community – ourselves included.’ (ibid., 16)

With this in mind, this criticalist research aims to produce a counterstory to re-tell, or counter-tell, the dominant stories regarding (BME) students’ experiences of higher education, specifically told through the analytical terminology of microaggression analysis.

In making counterstories a central component of this research it becomes necessary to develop and adopt a methodology suited for the collection of individual student stories. In recognition of this, a ‘bricolage’ approach (Kincheloe, 2001) to data gathering is adopted, with a number of research tools selected. These include in-depth biographic narrative interviews, the use of focus groups and written responses. The aim, throughout, is to empower and give voice to the research participants to speak for themselves about their own experiences, in their own words. The following sections explain and detail the intended usage of these research strategies.

**2.2.3 Developing an Analytical Approach: biographical narratives**

The use of in-depth biographical narrative interviews is drawn from the work of Wengraf (2001; cf. Rosenthal, 1991, 1993; Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995). Narrative is an essential concept and ‘tool’ utilised by CRT (Cook, 2013, 185). The term ‘narrative’, as used here and in the concept of ‘in-depth biograph narrative interviews’, refers to the organisational scheme expressed in story form; more than this, however, it refers to the process of creating a story, the cognitive scheme of a story, and the result of the process – also referred to as stories, tales, or histories (Polkinghorne, 1988). A universal, fundamental genre, according to Ochs and Capps (1996, 19), narratives emerge early in the communicative development of children as a means of making sense of experience. Indeed, over the last several decades, as part of what was labelled the ‘narrative turn’, considerable systematic work has been undertaken on the ontological, epistemological and psychological aspects of what is referred to as ‘narrative identity’.

From this broad theoretical perspective has developed an elaborate concept of the ‘storied’ character of human experience and subjective identity (e.g. Bruner 1990; McAdams 1993; Polkinghorne 1988, 1998; Ricoeur 1990) that offers valuable insights when designing the research strategy of this thesis. Among the many insights of this literature is the recognition of narrative as a crucial discursive form for ‘assembling and organizing a teller’s conceptualization of who she or he is’ (Ayometzi, 2007, 44)*.* Thus, personal stories (that is to say, stories that relate tellers’ personal experiences) are more than a means to tell another individual (or oneself) about an occurrence or event; they are, beyond this, ‘the means by which identities are fashioned’ (Rosenwald and Ochsenberg, 1992, 1). As Fischer-Rosenthal (2000, 116) states:

‘Given the precariousness of communication, presenting and creating oneself as a ‘person’ seems to be possible only by telling *how* one became what and who one is now. The individual as a dynamic system of plural sub-selves is realised in his or her *life stories* and not through a ‘coerced identity’.’

With this in mind, one of the key benefits of narrative identity theory is its capacity to incorporate temporality into the constitution of the self (in contrast to most sociological conceptions of identity, which have a tendency ‘to locate the self only in relationships and not in time’ (Charmatz, 1991, cited in Ezzy, 1998, 239). As detailed within the work of Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1988, 1990, 1992), narratives have a twofold function; first, they provide a means by which to comprehend how people make sense of time; second, they offer a means by which to conceptualise how it is that individuals maintain a continuous presence through time, without becoming essentialised or ‘fixed’. This, Ricoeur (1991, 21) explains, is achieved via a complex process of ‘emplotment’, in which experience is synthesised in a narrative, connecting events spatially and temporarily with other events to create episodes, which provides them with meaning. In this manner a continuity-of-self is created as individuals organise their experiences in a manner that provides them with a sense of ‘self-sameness’ (Ezzy, 1998, 250).

The work of Ricoeur – and of narrative identity theory – thus provides a means by which to understand the subjective sense of self-continuity that individuals feel as they actively integrate the events and episodes that constitute their lived experience into the plot of their life story. Yet, this process of emplotment is not purely subjective; as Ezzy (1998, 247) states, narrative identities are ‘formed and transformed through the influence of social relationships’ and mediated through institutional structures. These relationships and structures delimit the range of plots from which we can choose, constraining and limiting the potentialities at hand; so it is that people embrace culturally given plots (Polkinghorne, 1988), choosing from a limited repertoire of available stories (Ezzy, 1998, 249), and subsequently situating themselves within ‘social narratives rarely of … [their] own making’ (Somers, 1994, 60).

The stories that we tell about our lives are thus stories that shape and create our identity. From the perspective of this thesis, the stories that the research participants tell, and the manner in which issues of race and gender are raised and situated within their narrative, sheds light upon the extent to which they operate within an oppressively white institutional environment. Recognising this ‘storied’ nature of human experience, an interview design aimed at eliciting stories is vital – and biographical narrative interviews, as a research method, focuses upon the elicitation and provocation of storytelling. Practically, the interview design here consists of two interviews, the first of which is characterised by the restricted nature of interviewer interventions. The purpose of this restriction is to limit interviewer interference with the narratives it elicits, empowering the interviewee to determine *themselves* the most salient themes (aka their ‘system of relevancy’ (Wengraf, 2000, 158)) of their university experience (in the case of this research project).

More controlled narrative interviews will elicit less natural and authentic stories due to a usually stronger audience orientation – a phenomenon evident in increased interviewee metacomments, such as “Have I answered your question?” or “Is that what you want?” (Cortazzi, 2001, 390). Instead, by heavily restricting their interventions during the first interview, the researcher can avoid injecting their own experiences into the interview content. Through the use of open questions and the solicitation of narrative replies, researchers can thus counteract the dangers associated with leading research questions that ‘put words in subjects’ mouths’ (Cohen, 2007, 151), thereby producing distorted answers (see Elliot, 2005; Wengraf, 201; Christofi & Thompson, 2007).

The danger of ‘putting words in the mouths’ of research participants also raises important issues related to the manner in which these interviews are framed from the outset. These are nicely illustrated by a passage from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire, 2004), which, alongside bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks, 1994), stands out as a key text in the area of critical pedagogy, holding profound insights for criticalist research also. Contained within this text is an anecdote about the attempts of a Spanish factory worker to organise co-workers to campaign for better working conditions. This worker, Freire relates, was initially thwarted in his attempts due to a lack of political education and apparent apathy among his fellow workers – until, this was, that informal discussions struck up around card games, at which point political action could ferment. The lesson of Freire’s anecdote, as parsed by Llewellyn and Westheimer (2009, 50), is that ‘formal, direct questions … about ideas or understandings of politics’ can hamper engagement and the display of knowledge.

When dealing with abstract academic concepts this point is particularly salient. Certain terminology and phrases will require extensive explanation if they are to be understood, an undertaking that would involve the researcher providing their own descriptions and interpretations of what they view as the subject of analysis, and in so doing framing and structuring the discussion in a narrowed and artificial manner. For this reason, this research will not be framed, for research participants, in terms of mircroaggressions, ‘whiteness’ or ‘white supremacy’ – especially with all the problematic popular imagery that the latter term in particular raises. Instead, as set out below in the discussion of the research design and strategy (2.4), research participants will be asked to discuss their ‘experiences of university’, as female BME students.

To summarise, this work is not about codifying stories; rather, it is about using storytelling as a means of generating data in a way that allows participants to give voice to their *own* experiences, in their own words, with the least possible direction from the researcher herself. At its heart, therefore, this research approach hears and responds to Les Back’s (2007) call for researchers to develop the ‘art of listening’, by creating the space within which others can tell their own stories in the manner they wish.

An additional point to clarify at this juncture is the particular notion of discourse underpinning the study and provide a brief account of how it is mediated in the processes of the study; this is of paramount importance when it comes to the issue of how interviews themselves are approached for analysis. Interviews, as Conteh (2018, 34) describes, should not merely be viewed as data to be analysed for content, but as ‘socially constructed discourses between interviewer and interviewee’. The data created in an interview is a *joint construction,* with both the content of the interview *and* the process of the interview subsequently under analysis (see Copland & Creese, 2015, 36; cf. Conteh, 2018).

When analysing interview data, therefore, the researcher also reflects upon the process: Are they responding to me as if I am their superior? Do statements of mine offer encouragement to interviewees that alter how they subsequently answer? How did I deal with this? Here one can look at the prosodic features of interviewees’ language – intonation, tone, stress, pitch and rhythm – identifying from these signs that an interviewee found difficulties, perhaps, in dealing with contradictions in the experiences they were describing. Taking into consideration the linguistic features of an interview in this manner can help identify a ‘rich point’ (see Conteh, op cit.) that emerges from the data, offering an analytical value that would otherwise be lost were the focus solely upon content.

As related in the data analysis itself (see section 3.4), such a linguistic focus was of value for this research. In one case discussed, an analysis of the prosodic elements of interviewee speech provided further insight into the deeply emotional impact of racial microaggressions than a focus on the content alone provided (full data transcription of the relevant text appears in AppendixE). This linguistic focus also provided examples illustrating the important role of the researcher as a human instrument (see below, section 2.3.3), specifically how my own role as interviewer impacted upon the interview process through the use of empathetic language.

**2.2.4 Developing an Analytical Approach: focus group analysis**

It was important to find a method via which participants would and could provide detail and depth in rich “thick” descriptions (Rubin, 2012, 6). In-depth narrative interviews were one approach; another was via the use of focus groups. Focus groups can take many different forms (Stewart, 2007, 9), but at its most basic involves a group discussion in which participants focus upon a subject that the researcher introduces. A significant literature has developed discussing, critiquing and proposing strategies for running such groups (e.g. Barbour, 2007; Krueger, 1994; Myers & Macnghten, 1999; Wilkinson, 1998); one key point of particular importance for this thesis is focus groups’ long tenure as a method for working with marginalised groups and participants requiring culturally sensitive methodology (Barbour, 2005, 16).

As Michell (1999) has outlined, combining individual interviews with focus groups in this manner can facilitate the exploration of mutual experiences and identities. Focus groups avoid putting individuals ‘on the spot’ by allowing them to be stimulated into discussion by the conversation of their peers as they desire (Barbour, 2007, 20); within this context who speaks and who remains silent at what points during discussions can also be revealing. This method also reduces the centrality of the researcher – an important consideration, where possible, taking into account the issue of power-balance raised above – in comparison to one-to-one interviews (Marsh, O’Toole & Jones, 2007, 6). Indeed, research undertaken via focus groups of participants creates, by its nature, a *social context* within which data is resultantly generated, introducing a welcome collaborative element to the research project (see Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 10-11).

**2.3 Power and Positionality: The Researcher as Human Instrument**

A PhD thesis is more than just a research project; a PhD thesis is an investigative journey that the researcher him/herself undertakes (cf. Hanrahan et al. 1999). As such, the researcher as a ‘human instrument’ is at the heart of any methodological consideration. The use of the term human instrument refers to the fact that, within qualitative analyses such as this one, the human researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; as Ary et al. (2009, 424) describe:

‘Because qualitative research studies human experiences and situations, researchers need an instrument flexible enough to capture the complexity of the human experience, an instrument capable of adapting and responding to the environment … only a human instrument is capable of this task.’

The purpose of this section is to discuss the difficulties, dilemmas and challenges that arise in an analysis such as this, wherein the lived experiences of female BME students is the primary focus of analysis, when the researcher, as the primary instrument of research, is white. In so doing, it recognises and argues for the need for a conscious ‘positioning’ of the researcher, explicating how this was taken into account in my own case.

**2.3.1 The Position of a White Researcher**

Amongst the aims in designing my research strategy was to conduct ‘non-exploitative research’ (e.g. Oakley, 1981), which validates the experiences and knowledge of those who participate within it. As a white researcher, working within the area of ‘race’, it is therefore incredibly important to critically reflect upon issues related to my role and of representation. Drawing upon criticalist and feminist approaches, the following discussion therefore examines the implications that come with studying individuals’ experiences with racial microaggressions from an outsider perspective (the latter referring to a situation in which the researcher is not part of the ‘lifeworld of individuals or groups being researched’ (Agyeman, 2008, 77)).

The question of who can and should be carrying out research with and about people from minoritised communities has received significant attention in the literature (Banks, 1998; Chadderton, 2012; Tillman, 2002; Milner, 2007) due to the danger of misrepresentation and continued oppression by white researchers researching race (e.g. Archer, 2003). This is far from an abstract, theoretical concern; both quantitative and qualitative research, as Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998, 558) describes, has been used to ‘objectify, exploit and dominate people of color’. Past ethnographic research, it is argued, ‘has been deeply implicated in the oppression of marginalised groups’, primarily through their misrepresentation, as ‘white people have spoken for and about people from other ethnic groups’ (Chadderton, 2016, 6; cf. Smith, 1999; Merriam et al.,2001; Bishop, 2005; Parker Webster & John, 2010). This does not mean, however, that white researchers should abandon the idea of conducting research focused upon issues of race, or oppression (see Agyeman, 2008; Chadderton, 2012; Milner, 2007; Tillman, 2002). What is fundamental, if they are to do so, however, is that the researcher must critically reflect upon issues concerning power structures and positionality (see Kinchloe & McLaren, 1994; Lassiter, 2005; McCoy & Rockricks, 2015; Milner, 2007; Nast, 1994; Pratt-Clarke, 2010; Rosaldo, 1989; Staeheli & Lawson, 1994; McDowell, 1999; Mountz, 2002; Wing, 1997; Wolf, 1996).

The term ‘positionality’ refers to the practice whereby a writer or theorist outlines their own position *vis-à-vis* the study being undertaken, with the conscious goal of making explicit how this position might influence elements of the study – be this the forms of information the researcher collects, or the way in which they subsequently interpret it (England, 1994). In criticalist research, addressing positionality is vital because ‘it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects’ (Madison, 2012, 8). Our own lived experience – our ‘self’, so to speak – is a vital part of the research process, impacting upon data collection and theoretical approaches, affecting interpretations and authorial narratives (Chiseri-Strater, 1996; Reinharz, 2011; Creswell, 2012; Flick, 2004).

Yet, considerations of positionality involve more than creating generic lists of essentialist categories about one’s race, class, ethnicity, gender, etc. By itself, this may say little about the particular researcher’s actual perspective (see Salzman, 2002); after all, even if a researcher perfectly matched research participants in terms of these identities, there is no such thing as monoculturality, and matching researcher and respondents does not erase power imbalances inherent in the research process (Gunaratnam, 2003; Pillow, 2003; Robertson, 2002). It is only when this positionality is reflected upon with regards to the *influence* that it may have regarding the research process that it is of value.

**2.3.2 Exploring and positioning my own role in the research process**

Reflecting upon how my own positionality shaped the research process is difficult and there is no analytical blueprint in how to successfully do so. Indeed, most likely I may never fully understand the complex power dynamics that played out in this project. The following sections are nevertheless attempts at grappling with my own positionality and subjectivity.

Throughout my research I kept a notebook for jotting down reflexive notes on my own positionality and the research process. One of my first entries reads: “All Whites play a part in the reproduction of racism. If it were only a problem of White elites, racism would be more transparent and easier to explain. How am I implicated in it? How have I benefited from my own whiteness? See Leda Cooks reflection on *becoming* white”. While this excerpt does not specifically refer to the research process, it provided the starting point for my reflexivity. Below is an excerpt from the aforementioned reflection by Leda Cooks on how she “became” white (Cooks and Simpson, 2007, 6):

‘White people are both born white and become white. For me, as someone who was born with all the entitlements that being white brings, I was aware of being white only through my difference from the black, Vietnamese, and Cuban folk of my Southern hometown. Race or more specifically and in the vernacular of the time “color”, meant people who were other than white. I learned about race as it was marked on the bodies of people “of color” around me—friends or others who were pointed out as *being* black, or as *having* culture. Implied in this “pointing out” and pointing *to* of others was my family’s invisibility, the normalcy of our whiteness. While we lived in a working class section of a town clearly divided by race and class (rednecks and, later, white trash were the common epithets directed toward many of my neighbors, and perhaps to my own family), we could, nonetheless, take comfort in the invisibility of our race privilege ….’

I am a white, female PhD student, from a middle-class background, raised mainly in a big multicultural city in Southern Germany with one of the largest Turkish minority populations in Germany. Although I had several close friends from different ethnic backgrounds, the secondary school I attended was predominantly white. I have lived in the UK for six years. The first time I became aware of my own white privilege, was probably in seventh grade, when an older, Black, male friend pointed out to me that “people treat him better and with less suspicion when he is seen with me in public”. This was probably the first time I became aware of my own whiteness and my own implication in power structures, rather than perceiving racism as something happening to people.

As a white female researcher I have no first-hand knowledge of being part of an underrepresented group and the target of any type of racism. I cannot understand experientially what it is like being a BME student at the University of Sheffield. Furthermore, being a white PhD researcher in Sociology makes me part of the dominant discourse in an academic subject which has historically contributed to prejudice and oppression by applying a white Eurocentric lens when studying Black lives and experiences (see above).

As detailed at length both in the current and previous chapter, my own assumptions – and biases – are informed by my attachment to Critical Race Theory (CRT). This means that I assume: (i) racism to be an everyday part of the experiences of minoritised people within the United Kingdom; (ii) that research such as that undertaken here should give voice to minoritised students in the form of their own narrative counter-stories; and (iii) that there is a normative purpose in so doing, specifically to confront issues of racism on university campuses with an aim to challenging and changing this situation. As a researcher, I recognise that my affinity for CRT and these conterminous assumptions has directed the way that I analysed my data and identified themes related to experiences related to race within it – something I discuss further in the section on reflexivity below.

* + 1. **Positionality and the research process**

As a white researcher, student recruitment was more difficult than it may have been for a BME researcher since students from the selected backgrounds were not part of my fellow PhD cohort in the department. Once I had recruited research participants I recognised that it was possible that during our interviews students felt that they had to moderate their responses when it came to discussing the subject of race or racism (see Rollock, 2013, 500). From the very start, my personal appearance – with long blond hair – marked me with the ultimate sign/embodiment of whiteness; as Richard Dyer (1986, 40) writes, ‘[b]londness, especially platinum (peroxide) blondness, is the ultimate sign of whiteness’, furthermore ‘[b]londe hair is frequently associated with wealth.’ Being both white and blonde is seen as ‘white ideal’ – something that I had recorded in my reflexivity notes and was concerned about in terms of how students would react to me as an interviewer (possibly seeing me as embodying, or of being a symbol of, white privilege and thus someone to whom they could not relate).

I raised my whiteness at the end of interview, asking participants if they had any thoughts on it, and how it might have influenced the research process. In terms of the responses that I received, one participant stated that she thought that it did not influence what she had said, but added that things might have been more implicit with someone from the same ethnic background. Another said that it was good that I did this kind of research, maybe implying that the research I was undertaking would be seen as biased by white academics if I was Black (a view that Rollock (2013) also encountered in her own research).

Throughout the process of participant recruitment and research I attempted to build trusting, reciprocal and non-hierarchical relationships with students; this necessitated addressing the hierarchies embedded within institutions of higher education – wherein academics (even trainee ones such as myself) are privileged as the sole sources of expertise, contributing to a ‘dominant ‘class system of the intellect’’ (Carroll, 1990; Nagar, 2013). As well as race, I was also aware of age in this regard. While the age difference between postgraduate researcher and undergraduate student is not great in terms of physical years, a power balance is nonetheless instituted between the researcher (as subject of/with authority/knowledge) and participants that must be acknowledged (O’Toole et al., 2010, 59).[[19]](#footnote-19) For this reason, as discussed in greater detail in the later section on ethical issues (2.8.4), I worked hard to develop a rapport with students (Sword, 1999) through informal research information meetings, and spending additional time before and after interviews and the focus group, chatting and drinking tea or coffee with them.

As stated above (2.2.3), interviews (and indeed focus groups) are joint constructions between interviewer and interviewee, and the relationship between them forms a central part of the data elicited (Conteh, 2018). This element of co-construction explains the importance that the linguistic features of an interview, as well as the content, be subjected to analytical scrutiny. In this instance, an analysis of the transcripts provided a useful illustration of why the concept of the ‘human instrument’ is important to keep in mind, identifying examples of how, through my use of empathetic language, I aimed to create a comfortable research environment that encourages research participants to discuss their experiences.

During my second interview with Raashida (see 5.3.1 for full transcript), for example, she related her experience of a member of the teaching staff who made a racist comment. Upon hearing this, I replied “what an awful thing for X to say”, a statement that prompted her to elaborate further on her response to the event (“I thought it might be because he is quite old…”); when, following this, I again stated, “that is awful”, Raashida agreed and again further elaborated upon her feeling. The interview proceeded with further linguistic prompts from me, one an affirmation and question (“Yeah, maybe they do have racist beliefs, but they think it is not socially acceptable to say it?”), the second a straight affirmation (“Yeah”), each of which elicited further reflection from Raashida, who evidently felt encouraged to open up about her thoughts on the experience.

The example points to the messiness of interviewing as a joint construction; while my adoption of a narrative interviewing technique was done so with the express intention of minimising my own influence in directing students, here was a case, in the second, semi-structured interviews, that arguably led the student in a particular direction of thought. At the same time, however, what appears messy can also be seen as necessary; within such qualitative, phenomenological research, it is essential that researchers develop a positive research relationship between themselves and participants, such that allows the latter to feel comfortable enough to share their experiences (Johnson, 2009; cf. Dickson-Swift et al. 2006; Sword, 1999). My empathetic reaction, with language that affirmed their experience, evidently gave encouragement to the student to express themselves in greater detail. What appears from one angle as interference within the interview process, from another, is a valid part of building the trusting, reciprocal and non-hierarchical relationship that allows people the validation they need to feel they have the space to tell their story. Key in all of this is a recognition of the researcher’s position as a human instrument and the subsequent need to reflect upon research dynamics between interviewer and interviewee.

**2.3.4 Personal Care**

One final point that it is important to reflect upon regarding the researcher as instrument is the question of personal care. Any research instrument can break, and working for extended periods with individuals who relate their personal experiences of racism, sexism and Islamophobia – all of which are on stark display in the analytical chapters – and embedding oneself within literatures such as CRT and (black) feminism that emphasises the daily grind of social exclusion, misogyny – of ‘rape culture’ and sexual abuse – and their emotional repercussions will necessarily impact upon the researcher (Lee, 1993, 6).

When a researcher’s aims are emancipatory in nature, with aspirations that their work might offer some ammunition in a battle for social change (however small), this will be particularly the case; and as discussed in the first chapter, being a white, feminist woman, I feel that a moral obligation is attached to my own need to understand and mitigate against white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, op cit.). It may feel somewhat perverse, in recognition of the relative social privilege that a white woman has, to raise the matter when discussing the experience of racism amongst BME students; any such indirect trauma is, of course, not comparable to the experience of those directly affected and unable to remove themselves from these situations. Nevertheless, the potential for stress, grief, and guilt, should not be underestimated or subsequently ignored (see Harris & Roberts, 2003) and it has been something I have borne in mind and reflected upon throughout – being unafraid to seek support from friends and family when needed. Beyond the specific nature and content of my research, there is also the need to recognise and accept that research *always* throws up unexpected problems and stresses that require adaptation to solve – as illustrated in the following section.

**2.4 Research Design and Strategy: Reimagining and Reflexivity**

The first issue to arise during my research that necessitated a reimagining of the research design was the discovery that my initial conceptualisation of the interview process was unrealistic. This was largely due to the nature of my intended interviewees as it turned out that finding students willing to take part in either interviews or focus groups was difficult. The nature of my research meant that, in searching for a specific set of female BME students, the number of possible interviewees was already low at the University of Sheffield. An additional problem was that, even when interested in taking part in the research, students turned out to be incredibly time poor and often unable to commit to dates/times to meet.

As a result, students cancelling arranged sessions shortly before they were meant to take place would be a frequent problem during data collection, and while the students usually asked to rearrange, this was often not practical for the interviewer (this became an even greater problem when, towards the end of my data collection, personal circumstances meant that I moved to live in another city several hours’ commute away. More than once I found myself having taken a four-hour train journey to Sheffield, only to find, on arrival, a last-minute message from the student I had arranged to interview cancelling our meeting).

One response to this was to increase the importance of other research methods alongside the in-depth biographic narrative interviews, with the use of multiple qualitative methods to capture students’ stories and experiences. These include complementing the initial biographical narrative interviews with a second, more structured interview; assigning a more prominent role to the student focus group; drawing on the #ITooAmSheffield campaign outputs as a resource for my research; and allowing students to submit written responses via email. Utilising this mixture of research tools avoids a one-sided perspective on the subject and makes it possible to collect a richer set of data.

A second issue to arise during my research, requiring a re-evaluation and modification of my initial research design, related to my attempt to utilise elements of a collaborative ethnographic approach. The initial aim was that the interviews and focus group work undertaken in this research project would be supported by drawing upon Carspecken’s (1996) broad stages for conducting critical ethnography and incorporating the aforementioned elements of collaborative ethnography such as co-interpretation with participants, engaging students themselves in the research process to determine research questions (see for instance Lassiter, 2005). Collaborative ethnography aims to minimise power imbalances in the researcher/research participant relationship; to this end, I sought to introduce a preliminary fieldwork stage as a means by which to offer students an opportunity to engage, themselves, in the research. In so doing the goal was to avoid *imposing* a ‘reified’ methodology upon the interviewees (Howarth, 2005, 317), in keeping with the overarching ethos of this research design.

As part of the preliminary research stage, I therefore set up several informal information meetings for potential research participants, allowing them to ask questions about the research process by inviting commentary on the project conceptualisation. The aim behind these informal meetings was also to create a less threatening interview environment by allowing the researcher and research participants to get familiar with each other (see Lassiter 2005). In practice, however, only one student turned up for one of the planned informal meetings and I received numerous last-minute cancellations from students that had expressed an interest in attending. This process repeated itself across the information meetings and short one-on-one meetings with students proved to be the only viable route by which to gain student involvement. Not all students saw the need for a meeting before the actual interview and some students preferred hearing about the project briefly before the interview. When the subject of research design was broached, most students professed no thoughts in the issue itself; thus, with a lack of time and possibly interest from students, compounded by the researcher living away from the city, a collaborative approach proved itself to be unfeasible for this particular type of research.

While it was disappointing that I was unable to undertake a full ethnography, as Conteh (2018) illustrates in her own elucidation of ethnographic research, a study does not need to conform to all facets of a ‘traditional ethnography’ to be considered ethnographically informed. Conteh cites Green and Bloome (1997), who identify three ‘distinctive approaches to ethnography’:

* ‘doing ethnography (traditional ethnography which includes a broad, in-depth and long-term study of a social group);
* adopting ethnographic perspectives (narrower approach honing in on certain aspects of everyday life of a social group, influenced by ethnographic methods);
* and using ethnographic tools (relying on ethnographic data collection tools)’ (Conteh, 2018, 17)

This research falls broadly within the second category; it is informed by and incorporates ethnographic principles, ‘recognising and valuing the perspectives of all the participants in the context being studied, respecting equally the knowledge and expertise that all participants bring to the research and designing research that helps us to understand how personal experiences are intimately connected with their social, cultural, political and historical contexts.’ (Conteh, 2018, 246). Such an ethnographic perspective is in line with the overarching criticalist approach that guides this research, in which the voices of research participants and the issue of social justice are central concerns (e.g. Conteh 2018, 13; Hymes, 1981; Lassiter, 2005).

Indeed, the fact that it was not possible to incorporate greater collaborative elements into the research process did not mean the abandonment of the central idea of acknowledging students and researcher as co-participants in the knowledge production of this work. Key to this recognition is the concept of *reflexivity* (see for instance Usher, 1997)*,* which plays a central part in this research. Widely embraced in ethnography, discourse analysis, social constructionist frameworks, and contemporary writings on qualitative methods generally (e.g. Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994), the concept of reflexivity refers to a mental task which guides research choices, requiring researchers to examine how their values infiltrate the field and research process (Lather, 1991, 80). Reflexive researchers reject the universalised claims to knowledge propagated by positivist theorists (Ellsworth, 1992), challenging theoretical approaches that propose a division between personal and interpersonal realms of knowledge; as Clifford (1986, 23) states, after all, ‘every version of an ‘other’, wherever found, is also the construction of a ‘self’’.

Linked to this reflexivity, and the adoption of a range of different methods, this research was based within a *grounded theory* approach (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Straus & Corbin, 1990), specifically drawing upon a ‘constructivist grounded theory’ perspective, as elaborated by Charmaz (2017; 2008). Such an approach complements this thesis’s overarching criticalist approach more than ‘classical’ grounded theory approaches. As already noted, interpretivist, criticalist approaches such as this demand reflexivity, reflecting upon personal biases and recognition that research is a “social activity” (see description in 2.2); constructivist grounded theory reiterates the same points, emphasising the need to take the researcher and research process/co-construction of meaning into consideration.

The preceding section addressing my positionality (2.3.3) thus harmonises with Charmaz’s (2017, 36) description of the need for a ‘methodological self-consciousness’ that ‘requires scrutinizing our positions, privileges, and priorities and assessing how they affect our steps during the research process and our relationships with research participant’. Further self-reflection is required upon such questions as how participants are found, how field notes are written, interviews conducted, etc. All of the latter issues, which ‘raise knotty problems for those interested in critical inquiry’, are addressed herein, either above, at the start of this Research Design and Strategy section (2.4), or below, in my discussions on the Fieldwork Context (2.5). Through such actions, Charmaz states, the researcher can detect and dissect their ‘worldviews, language, and meanings’ to reveal how ‘they enter [their] research in ways [they] had previously not realised’ (ibid., 37).

Approached from this criticalist, constructivist, perspective, it is furthermore vital to recognise that the goal herein is not to simply identify and report the ‘true experience’ of interviewees. Charmaz (ibid.the, 41) notes that ‘[t]o render our participants’ experiences we need to dig deeper into their meanings and actions’, however, ‘our way of knowing is always interpretive of a reality, not a reproduction of it.’ To quote Weedon (1993, 78): ‘While language in the form of different competing discourses does not indeed give meaning to events retrospectively, this meaning is not the reflection of an already fixed reality but a version of meaning’. Yet, as Burke (2001, 67) clarifies, in recognising this fact:

‘this ‘version of meaning’ does not lose its significance, but represents an important resource for deconstructing the meanings and language that shape how we make sense of our experiences within the specific social contexts within which we are situated. By understanding the narration of an experience as a version rather than the uncovering of a fixed reality, we can imagine and create change’.

The actual practice of data coding in this research analysis thus entails an iterative process whereby the researcher constantly moves between their data, their interpretation of the data, and the relevant literature. This has involved, substantively, informal thematic readings of the interviews themselves, literature reviews, the generation of an overarching theoretical framework – drawing upon critical race, whiteness theory and racial microaggression theory – and thematic categorisations of themes as an analytical tool (the latter practice involving the use of interpretive memoing in the form of the aforementioned reflexive notes (McNabb, 2010, 298)). At the heart of such grounded theory is this cyclical process of *theoretical sampling.* This is a process wherein data is collected, coded for themes and concepts, theories subsequently formed by proposing relationships between said concepts. These theories are tested against the next stage of data collection and examination, and another cycle starts anew – a process that continues until ‘theoretical saturation’ is reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The potency of this grounded theory approach is illustrated by the fact that, when I first began interviewing my research participants in the summer of 2012 about their university experiences, I did not explicitly set out to study racial *microaggressions*, but only experiences of minoritised students within a white institution (as befits an approach drawing upon biographical narrative theory). Whilst on first impressions this spontaneity might be viewed as a research limitation – since, had the destination been predetermined, it might have been possible to collect increased amounts of data – it can more readily be considered a strength. This is because the participants’ experiences of racism in the form of racial microaggressions that were raised in the first interviews did so organically without the researcher’s direction, pointing to salience of this subject – and providing the first cyclical step on the path towards a research project founded upon microaggression theory. This research has thus been a dynamic process and the explication of a strict theory and design ahead of time would have been incredibly difficult: the map illustrated so far has, thus, so to speak, been drawn *during the journey*, rather than before it.

**2.5 Fieldwork Context**

To understand the subsequent analysis, it is important to have a clear understanding of the context within which this fieldwork was undertaken.

**2.5.1 The University of Sheffield**

This project’s fieldwork took place over a period of two years from July 2012 to April 2014 at the University of Sheffield. The university is located at the centre of the city of Sheffield in South Yorkshire, a large, politically left-leaning city. The rationale for choosing this research site was threefold. First, as a student based at the university, it was the ideal place to immerse myself in the fieldwork, without having to travel large distances. This was valuable not only for reasons of cost and comfort, but also for flexibility as it meant that, should student participants make last-minute cancellations (which they indeed would), it was easier to rearrange meetings in a city where both were resident.

Second, as one of the Russell Group of leading UK research universities in the UK and a World Top 100 University (University of Sheffield, 2016),[[20]](#footnote-20) the university enjoys a prestigious reputation. Third, the university – as expected of any respectable institution of higher education – emphasises its commitment to encouraging diversity; in its own most recent Equality Report 2012, the university’s head of human resources writes of ‘driving diversity forwards across the university’ and ‘continu[ing] to embed equality throughout the University and in our policies and practices’ (University of Sheffield, 2012).[[21]](#footnote-21) As my research sought to investigate the extent to which universities are the open, pluralistic institutions they purport to be, it made sense that this be ‘tested’ against a seeming exemplar of its kind.

**2.5.2 Student Participants**

As detailed in the previous chapter (1.1.4), this thesis seeks to explore the experience of British female students from the most underrepresented groups in the UK higher education system – specifically, students of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean ethnic backgrounds (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015b). Ultimately, the research participants were mainly of Pakistani and Black Caribbean backgrounds, with the exception of one student of Bangladeshi descent. This reflected the demography of the recruitment site (University of Sheffield, 2016). Most respondents in this study were in their early twenties and undergraduate students, with the exception of one mature postgraduate student in her forties.

When undertaking phenomenological research such as this analysis, Reid et al. (2005) suggest that an optimum number of people for involvement is between three and fifteen. Similarly, Minikel-Lacoque (2012, 10) recommends that, due to the demands that an in-depth case study and biographical interviews places upon the researcher and participant in terms of time and investment, a figure of between six and twelve student recruits is optimum – and that anything over twelve would be unwieldy. This research originally started in the centre of this range, with ten participants involved; however, three students did not attend the first interview, citing issues with time constraints. One student was subsequently unable to attend the second interview as she had graduated by the point of this fieldwork stage and again cited time as a reason that she could not meet up again. The end result was that I recruited six research participants for the full programme of in-depth interviews and included the responses for the first interview from the successful, departed graduate.

In a similar manner to the interview cohort, cancellations led to a much smaller focus group than anticipated. The week that the focus group was organised to take place started out with six participants; however, I subsequently received four cancellations, two mere days before the actual event and two on the day of the focus group, from students who reported that they could no longer attend. Due to the long-term planning of the focus group, necessary as the researcher had at this point moved away from Sheffield, it was not feasible to move the date; however, as conducting a focus group with only two participants was not possible (Barbour, 2007), as a way to generate conversation I agreed to the inclusion of two international students of Pakistani and Indian nationality who had previously emailed me asking to take part (referred to in transcripts as Student Z and Student N). I was very nervous about this decision as I feared that placing the two British participants into the same category as international students would be off-putting. International students face significantly different issues and power structures from British BME students and their experiences are not comparable. (This became clear during the focus group discussions as, for instance, being asked “where are you from?” as an international student is very different from being asked the same question as a home student.) The students were informed about the situation and asked if they were happy with attending the focus group with this new constellation. The responses of the international students were not drawn upon in the subsequent analysis, their role was purely to generate conversation and elicit data from the domestic students being researched. Nevertheless, it is important to note their inclusion as an issue requiring reflexivity on behalf of the researcher – and the subject is discussed below in the section on research limitations.

Two students, however, who were unable to attend the focus group due to time constraints, were nevertheless still eager to participate and asked if they could contribute via written responses to the issues discussed in the focus group. I saw this as a positive means by which I could allow students to contribute and give voice to their experiences via a method that they felt comfortable with and suited their schedule. This fit within the collaborative ethnography literature that – as noted above – I drew inspiration from in undertaking this research, which encourages the researcher to allow participants to find methods of engagement that are best suited to them. Overall, therefore, this research is based upon the analysis of data collected from eleven research participants: seven who were interviewed, two who attended the focus group, and two who provided written responses.

**2.5.3 Participant Recruitment**

One of the most difficult tasks at the start of my research was finding research participants to interview. Due to the previously emphasised time-intensive nature of the interview structure – consisting of two in-depth interviews, as well as an initial voluntary information meeting as part of my preliminary research stage – it was certain that many potential participants would feel too busy, studying or working, to take part. Convincing students to agree to talk to me for roughly four hours across a series of interviews proved daunting; this was not an experience unique to my own research. Indeed, as Cheeseman (2010, 62) states in his own research on students’ experiences, ‘the methodological difficulties involved in its execution’ may explain ‘the poverty of research on student culture’, it being especially difficult ‘to gain access to university students, identify participants, gain their trust and initiate a research dialogue.’

The participants for the present study were drawn from the total population of undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at the research site, with entry to the study reserved to students who identified as female and being of Black British Carribbean, Bangladeshi, Pakistani or mixed-race ethnic backgrounds. I secured approval for the study from the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) via the University Ethics Review Procedure, which included completing the University Research Ethics Form (See Appendix A). Subsequently, following UREC approval, I sent an email invitation to the entire University of Sheffield undergraduate and postgraduate student population, inviting potential research participants to an informal information meeting about the research (see Appendix B). Furthermore, electronic invitations to participate were sent to various student groups and committees whose membership was likely to relate to the research topic. These included the BME Student’s Committee, PakSoc (Pakistani Society), Islam Circle, and Women’s Committee. According to Illingworth (2001), selecting the appropriate websites and lists to send research announcements about a study is an important task in optimising one’s chances of recruiting participants. In my own case, however, the latter targeting was not very successful as, while I did gain an additional potential research participant from it, she was ultimately unable to attend an interview. I had been concerned that attempting to recruit participants from the Islamic Circle directly might limit my research as it would result in my pool of interviewees being drawn from a specific group of women with strong religious identities. Since, however, my contact with the society did not generate any research participants, this did not turn out to be an issue. With the one, previously-mentioned exception, all of the responses from students interested in becoming research participants came from my university-wide emails.

* + 1. **Profile of Research Participants**

To help understand respondents’ social contexts, the following profile sketches of the research participants are provided, based upon my own representations. These are thus, necessarily, partial; it is impossible to portray people in all their intricacies and the aspects noted here are those deemed the most pertinent to the research project. The profile sketches for interview participants are longer than those for focus group participants on the basis that I spent a larger amount of time with the former than the latter, discussing their personal experiences and histories in greater detail.

Due to the different depth of data and involvement, the information provided for students who participated in in-depth biographical narrative interviews is far more detailed than that given for those who only took part in the focus group discussion or provided written responses. Within these profiles, one of the elements that I have noted is when students wear the hijab; this may require some explanation. The diversity and differences of opinions articulated by students wearing the hijab, demonstrate that this group of women arise far from homogenous, as often portrayed in mainstream media or stereotypes. Nevertheless, wearing the hijab is treated as significant since – as the data analysis would demonstrate – as a visible symbol of a minority-religious allegiance, it had the potential to impact upon how the participant was perceived by fellow students or lecturers, generating related data.

***Raashida (Interview Participant)***

Raashida was 22 years old at the time of this research. She is of Pakistani ethnicity and from Hemel Hempstead. She was a final year Sociology undergraduate student and wore a hijab. She has three older sisters, all of whom attended their local college. As she described, she knew from when she was “little” that she wanted to go to university like her older sisters, seeing it as “just the next logical step after school” (Raashida, Interview 1, 1). Raashida is the first person in her family to move away from home to go to university. One of the several reasons for deciding to attend the University of Sheffield was that her boyfriend was already studying there. Before starting university, she took a ‘year out’ to re-take some of her A-levels. Resultantly, she had to get a job. She described her year out as boring; during our first interview, when reflecting upon her first days at the University of Sheffield, she mentioned that she was glad “to do something with purpose again”.

Raashida identified as religious and her Muslim faith played a key role during her university experience. During her second year at university, she decided to start wearing the hijab – something she had never done before – and to become more religious (a subject that she discussed in both interviews). During her time as a student she became a member of the Sociological Society, Islam Circle and PakSoc. When talking about her future plans Raashida mentioned that she would have liked to do a Master’s degree in Sociology – if student fees had not gone up – and that she subsequently plans to enter into teaching instead. Indeed, our second interview took place after Raashida had graduated and started a PGCE at a college near Hemel Hempstead.

***Saree (Interview Participant)***

Saree was 21 years old at the time of this research. She is mixed race, of Pakistani and Lebanese ethnicity, and from London. Like Raashida she was a Sociology undergraduate, however she was in her second (rather than final) year of studies. She took a ‘year out’ before starting university to “figure out what to study” (Saree, Interview 1, 1). When discussing her reasons for attending university she said that both her parents had done so and her father has a PhD in Philosophy, subsequently it was implicitly expected that she would follow in their path.

Saree takes a keen interest in Gender Studies, journalism and feminism. She was an active member at the student newspaper, a member of the Women’s Committee, and considered running for Women’s Officer during her second year at university. She was also doing the Sheffield Graduate Award,[[22]](#footnote-22) and volunteered for the homeless shelter and a conversation club for refugees for several semesters (until her workload no longer allowed time for her volunteering activities). She has published articles for *the Huffington Post* on sexism at the University of Sheffield and the need for a BME officer in the Students’ Union.

When talking about her first months at the university and the difference of living in Sheffield in a shared student house as compared to her life in London, Saree spoke of enjoying the change: “it’s good to have progress and development, I can’t imagine anything worse than staying in the same place for years and not doing anything different” (Interview 1, 3). At the time of interview, she either wanted to pursue a Master’s degree in Gender, or enter into journalism once she finishes her degree. Saree was awarded the Asian Media Award[[23]](#footnote-23) for the best blog during her undergraduate studies at Sheffield.

***Monette (Interview Participant)***

Monette was 20 years old at the time of this research. She is from a Black Caribbean ethnic background and from London. She was in the second year of an undergraduate Physics degree. Monette’s mother was the first person in her family to attend university and had always encouraged her and her siblings to do the same. Monette mentioned that her mother had always emphasised the importance of education and challenged her to succeed in school. Even now at university, she described her mother as a great source of support (Monette, Interview 2, 1). She is a member of the Photography Society, the Hip-Hop Dance Society, a Science and Engineering Champion[[24]](#footnote-24), and a member of a Teach First Student Action Group.[[25]](#footnote-25)

When talking about her degree choice, Monette explained that she chose Physics “to get a good job” and not necessarily because it is interesting. The issue of class came up in this context, as Monette related how, while some middle-class people attend university to study out of interest, her own choice was linked to future career options. As she stated in her own words: “My boyfriend who is more middle-class … he didn’t come to uni to get a job … my family is always like if you’re going to university, you are going for a real reason” (Interview 1, 2). Monette stressed the importance of role models from BME backgrounds at university during our interviews. Upon arriving at Sheffield, she had been initially shocked at the lack of a British Black Caribbean community, as friends in London had told her that there was a big Black Caribbean community. She cited this as a reason that she undertakes tours for UCAS[[26]](#footnote-26) students so that she can provide a positive role model for other students from BME backgrounds.

***Kadira (Interview Participant)***

Kadira was 20 years old at the time of the research and in her second year of an undergraduate Psychology degree. She is from a mixed-race background (white and Pakistani) and lives in Barnsley with her mother and brother, commuting to Sheffield to attend classes. Kadira is the first one in her family to go to university, which she described as a “big decision”, as she “had to start from scratch” since family members were unable to help her with her application or “tell her what it was like” (Kadira, Interview 1, 1). Kadira already worked in a part-time job at a clothing store while at college and said that she “could have easily gone straight into a full-time job” at her place of work; instead, she decided to embark on the at times daunting process of applying to university. She described the support from her further education college and from her father as essential in this process.

Kadira was one of the most enthusiastic students about her actual degree, saying that she “absolutely loves” her course, mentioning several times how much she enjoys studying and learning more about Psychology (see for instance Interview 1, 5). Kadira described Sheffield University as a much more nurturing environment compared to her school experience in Barnsley, where, as one of the only mixed-race pupils, she had been singled out and subjected to racism. She described her hometown of Barnsley as an oftentimes hostile environment towards non-white people, dominated by the British National Party and a mentality of unwillingness to accept people who are different (Interview 1, 3). She was a member of the Netball Society, a Fitness Dance Society, and the Psycholgy Society. She has worked for the university as an Intro Week assistant and provided tours of her department. Moreover, she worked as a camp counsellor for Camp America during her semester break. She reported not being sure what she wanted to do after her degree, but that she might possibly want to pursue postgraduate study in Psychology or train to be a Psychotherapist.

***Alima (Interview Participant)***

At the time that this research took place Alima was 21 years old and in her first year of an undergraduate degree in Orthoptics. She is of Bengali ethnicity, originally from London, and wears the hijab. Before attending Sheffield University, Alima started a long-distance degree in English literature from home, as she was not sure what to study after she completed her A-levels. Once she found out about Orthoptics, however, “a niche degree” that is only offered in two universities in the UK, she started some shadowing in hospitals and applied to the University of Sheffield. When talking about her decision to go to university she mentioned that she had attended a public boarding school since age eleven where the value of education had been emphasised. It was not until after her GCSE results, however, that she had started to take school seriously as she had not previously been aware of her own capabilities (Alima, Interview 1, 1). Alima was a member of Islam Circle and at the time of the first interview was trying “to get into some sports”. She described living with her flatmates and meeting people from different backgrounds and cultures as one of the most positive experiences at university.

***Adila (Interview and Focus Group Participant)***

Adila was 25 years old at the time that this research took place and in her final year of a Medical degree. She is of Pakistani ethnicity, originally from Sheffield, and wears the hijab. Recalling how it was that she came to attend university and study Medicine, Adila said that it was clear to her from a young age that she wanted to work “in the health-related field or something involving people more than anything else” and that the careers advice at the time, with her grades, was to study medicine (Adila, Interview 1, 1). Adila initially started her degree in Medicine in London and then transferred back to her hometown Sheffield to finish her degree at the University of Sheffield.

Compared to the University of Sheffield, her university in London had been more ethnically diverse and offered more inclusive student events outside of the clubbing and drinking culture. When talking about her degree, Adila also commented upon many areas of Medicine still being a “boy’s club” (Interview 1, 8). Unlike many of her peers, who are “the sons and daughters of doctors”, Adila describes growing up with people “who were very much salt of the earth people” (Interview 1, 9). Adila volunteered for numerous charities and societies in Sheffield; these included helping young girls from underrepresented backgrounds to reach their full potential, a Cancer Society, and active participation in political societies. She had taken a year out during her studies to undertake research so that she could gain an additional medicine qualification.

***Safa (Interview Participant)***

24 years old at the time of interview, Safa was a final year undergraduate student studying Accounting and Financial Management and Maths. Safa was born in Pakistan and moved to Britain at the age of sixteen; she has held British citizenship for one year. She wears the hijab. Before starting university, Safa took a year out to finance her student fees. When talking about her decision to go to university, she said that it was not so much about whether or not she wanted to go, but that it was expected by her parents. While Safa felt initially quite daunted by her university experience, she found her place within Sheffield’s AISEC society, a global student network that aims to develop leadership skills in challenging environments. She described this as one of the most important experiences of her university experiences as she learned numerous essential skills through taking part in AISEC events, helping her, ultimately, to overcome her shyness and fear of speaking in public.

***Charlotte (Written Response)***

At the time that this research project took place, Charlotte was a mature, postgraduate student in her 40s, currently completing the second year of her doctoral research project in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences. She is from a Black Carribbean ethnic background. Charlotte attended Lancaster University in the 1980s for her undergraduate degree and Goldsmith’s University for her Master’s degree.

***Kendi (Written Response)***

At the time of the fieldwork, Kendi was 21 years and an undergraduate English Literature student. She is from a Black Caribbean ethnic background and originally from London.

***Eyana (Focus Group Participant)***

Eyana was 20 years old at the time of the focus group in which she participated. An undergraduate Sociology student, she is originally from London and from a Black Caribbean ethnic background.

**2.6 Data Collection**

To reiterate that stated above, the period of data collection spanned from May 2012 to July 2014. In its primary form, this involved the use of biographic in-depth interviews, followed by a semi-structured interview with the aforementioned students. In addition to individual interviews, I conducted one focus group in April 2014 to gather additional data and received written responses to the focus group questions from two students who were unable to attend on the day. Table 1 provides a timeline of the data collection and analysis process.

*Table 1: Timeline of data collection and analysis (July 2012 to July 2014)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Month and Year** | **Activity** |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **May – July 2012** | * Planning and designing of the study * University of Sheffield Ethical Approval * Attendance of Collaborative Ethnography workshop and conference |
| **August – November 2012** | * Preliminary fieldwork stage: e.g. attending meetings of BME Society, Women’s Society, Pakistani Society, Islam Circle and meeting with other relevant people at the University of Sheffield e.g. Student’s Union Women’s Officer and Sheffield Widening Participation Officer * Preliminary Literature Review * Consultation with Academic supervisors * Unsuccessful attempts to involve students in collaborative ethnography through setting up informal information meetings sent out via university wide email list * Change of research design from a full critical collaborative ethnography to a qualitative study informed by ethnographic principles * Preparation of study information sheet, consent forms and invitation letter |
| **December 2012** | * Research Information Meeting for interested participants |
| **December 2012 – March 2013** | * First round of narrative interviews |
| **March – November 2013** | Transcription of interviews  First round of data analysis following interviews   1. Becoming familiar with the data: reading through transcripts, fieldnotes and listening to audio recordings multiple times and starting initial inductive coding 2. Analytical memoing (taking initial coding, further reading of data, writing memos, mini literature reviews) 3. Iterative process of moving between the data and theory back to the data 4. Microaggression theory emerges through this iterative process |
| **November 2013 – January 2014** | * Second, follow-up narrative Interviews |
| **January 2014 – July 2014** | * Transcription of interviews * A new data analysis cycle starts anew, following the previous steps, including testing the newly emerged microaggression theory against the findings |
| **April 2014** | * Focus Group * Collection of written responses |
| **June/July 2014** | * Transcription of focus group * Analysis of focus group discussion |

**2.6.1 Interviews**

The first interview was aimed at provoking stories from students regarding their university experience, using the narrative research paradigm already explicated that focuses upon the elicitation and provocation of narrative storytelling, and was characterised by minimal interviewer intervention. To this end, having asked the student to introduce themselves, I asked the following questions to elicit stories with such minimal intervention by myself:

* “Could you tell me how it came about that you are here today and studying X? Could you tell me a bit about the whole process?”
* “Can you describe your first day at university? Do you remember what that was like? Just take me through the day.”
* “Could you tell me the story of your time at university: all the experiences and events that are important for you, up until now – anything that might pop into your head? Start wherever you like.”

This approach worked well with the majority of students and I did not need to intervene. Some students, however, gave short answers and I was forced to intervene more often. In these cases I followed up with other open-ended questions, such as “What would you say is the most positive/negative experience that you have had at university?” Or, I asked information-based questions, such as “Are you a member of any organisations on campus? If so, how did you get involved?” In each case, the aim was to stimulate storytelling with a minimal amount of guidance. I ended the interview by asking the student: “Can you tell me what made you reply to my email that I sent out?”

The second interview was semi-structured and started by following-up on subjects raised in the previous interviews by the individual student, often asking for furtherexperiences to elicit further story-telling; this involved questions of the form: “You mentioned X, can you give me more examples of situations where X played a role?” Following these initial questions I introduced a vignette on the subject of a woman’s experience of being ‘Othered’ (see Appendix D). Finch (1987, 105) defines vignettes as “short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond”; however, the term can describe any text, image, or similar form of stimuli that research participants are presented with and asked for their response.

Vignettes enable participants to define a situation in their own terms and as such offer a particularly strong method for exploring sensitive topics such as – in this instance – racism in a non-threatening manner (Neale, 1999). This is because, as Barter and Renold (1999) describe, ‘commenting on a story is less personal than talking about direct experience’ and subsequently, ‘is often viewed by participants as being less threatening’. Furthermore, they provide an ‘opportunity for participants to have greater control over the interaction by enabling them to determine at what stage, if at all, they introduce their own experiences to illuminate their abstract responses.’ The method was extremely successful and all of the students loved the vignette. I followed their responses with several other questions on identity and ethnicity. These were:

1. “What class do you identify with? Now and growing up?”
2. “In terms of ethnicity, how would you describe yourself?”
3. “To what extent do you identify with other X people and issues?”
4. “Does race/ethnicity matter at university?”

I also asked, as a final question: “Do you feel free to be yourself in university?” The aim, throughout, was to collect the participants’ stories, allow them to identify meaningful experiences at university, as well as to identify to what extent race played a role in their university experience.

**2.6.2 Focus Group and Written Responses**

**Focus Group**

The focus group interview consisted of in-depth semi-structured questions, aimed at eliciting stories from students about their university experience. These questions were buttressed through the use of two vignettes (see description below) related to racial microaggressions; the purpose, in so doing, was to act as a stimulus to elicit students’ own experiences with racial microaggressions during at university (even before the introduction of the vignettes, however, experiences with racial microaggressions were raised).

I opened the focus group with an ‘ice-breaker’ question after the participants had introduced themselves, the aim of which was to generate stories. This was: “What were your expectations of university before you applied? and were your expectations met?” The primary data was elicited via the use of vignettes; this involved, in the first instance, the students watching a five-minute YouTube excerpt from the #ITooAmHarvard campaign. This campaign was primarily expressed via photographs of Black students at Harvard University displaying signs that described microaggressions that they had experienced during their studies. This included example statements such as “Don’t you wish you were white like the rest of us?”, “Please don’t pet my hair, I am not an animal” and “You aren’t black on the inside”. The video itself included interviews with Black students describing their experiences in their own words.

The use of vignettes in this manner has been successfully used in previous research, including within focus groups (Buttny, 1998; Wilkingson, 1998) to stimulate discussion; the method also suited the CRT approach adopted herein, which, as discussed above, makes use of stories and counter-stories as a means to gather data on subjects’ experiences with racism. Following the video, I displayed images on Tumblr, while we talked, from the #ITooAmSheffield[[27]](#footnote-27) and #ITooAmCambridge[[28]](#footnote-28) campaigns, which took inspiration from the #ITooAmHarvard campaign, with photographs of students holding signs reporting experienced microaggressions on their own campuses.

After viewing the documentary and putting up the images, I asked one question to elicit responses about their impressions of the film: “Is there anything in the video, or in the tumblr examples, that you can relate to or that you have experienced yourself?” After this question, the focus group participants spoke for roughly forty minutes without the need for further intervention on my behalf. Once their discussion had reached a natural pause, I asked about their perspective on diversity and inclusivity in the campus’s culture; I here introduced another dialogue stimulus in the form of several recent newspaper headlines regarding university culture, including issues such as drinking and “Lad Culture”.

The whole focus group lasted roughly ninety minutes, however the conversation could have continued for longer; it was gratifying that the discussion was almost entirely guided by the participants with limited interventions, in the form of the above vignettes, by myself. The focus group proved itself to be a useful tool when utilising CRT as it provided lots of stories – the data received resultantly complemented my in-depth interviews well.

**Written responses**

For the written responses the participants were sent an email containing the hyperlinks to the same #ITooAmHarvard campaign video and tumblrs utilised in the focus group, with the same questions. The participants then emailed their thoughts and answers to these questions back to me.

* 1. **Data Analysis**

The audio-taped interviews and focus group were transcribed verbatim, including long pauses, laughter, stammers and repetitions and were analysed along with the field notes I recorded after each interview and the focus group. Furthermore, where available and deemed appropriate, information about non-verbal communication, such as gestures, from my field notes were included. Having transcribed the data, time was devoted to becoming familiar with it; the transcriptions were re-read multiple times in conjunction with the audio tapes, and field notes, with any points of interest noted each time. Because this study aimed to empower the participants to determine the most salient aspects of their experience, at an initial level of analysis, an inductive and open coding scheme (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was employed. Instead of basing the study on *a priori* assumptions that racism or racial microaggressions would arise, my first level of analysis involved the inductive coding of (i) recurring words and statements, (ii) narratives/stories and (iii) anything relating to reflexivity.

As part of my grounded theory approach, I wrote analytical memos (Glense & Peshkin, 1992) throughout my fieldwork and analysis. It was through these memos that I was able to recognise and refine emerging themes within my data; thus, as noted above, during the initial level of analysis, this method led me to uncover students’ particular experiences with racism and in particular ‘Othering’ as a recurring theme (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Straus & Corbin, 1990). Having reflected upon my data, the field notes that I took after interviews and focus groups and the analytical memos, I coded my transcripts. This involved taking textual data and creating and labelling common categories with the aim of organising the transcripts into thematic “chunks” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

By drawing upon CRT as my analytical lens – and insights drawn from the existing academic work on contemporary racism at universities – I next began the process of identifying various ways in which the experiences that participants related involved them being a target of covert forms of racism. It was from this analytical stage that microaggressions surfaced as a consistent theme – and the analytical framework around which my criticalist analysis would be shaped. Having reached theoretical saturation (Glasner & Strauss, op cit.) I drew upon CRT, ‘whiteness theory’ and microaggressions theory as the combined conceptual lens through which to understand and identify my thematic categories (Creswell, 2003). This process as a whole led me to refine a set of initial skeletal research questions relating to the general experience of minoritised female students navigating a white institution, reorienting them around this thesis’s specific focus upon microaggressions.

In the next stage of my analytical process, I followed up these interpretations with the student participants during the second semi-structured interview. This involved considering emergent themes in the students’ stories, whenever possible holistically – a term that, in relation to this research project, means taking the context of the entire interview into consideration (i.e. all of the stories and utterances, performative aspects, field notes), rather than drawing conclusions from analysing segments in isolation. Both during and following completion of the interviews and focus group, I asked participants to provide whatever clarifications that they felt were necessary and to express any additional thoughts regarding issues that had arisen during our discussion. The aim of this informal process of ‘member checking’ was to foster a sense of trust (Kvale, 1996) and to provide what Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985, 314) characterise as ‘an opportunity to give an assessment of overall adequacy in addition to confirming individual data points’.

**2.7.1. Data Analysis Example**

While the steps involved in this process are clearly explained above, the ‘messy’ nature of the data analysis itself means that it is not easy to provide a clear and simple presentation of how the actual, practical activity was carried out. The above process of data analysis took place over a long period and as illustrated involved an iterative process of moving between the data and theory, and back to the data. This played out across a range of media forms, both physical and electronic.

As a researcher, in practical terms, I found the process of physically writing notes by hand onto print-outs of the transcripts, underlining key phrases and utilising different colours to highlight particular aspects of the texts, far more condusive to analysis than the use of coding software such as Nvivo. As part of this process I was thus able to spread my papers out on the floor, providing me with a clearer overview of the data that aided in the identification of patterns (in so doing, I was utilising a method that Bernard (2000) refers to as ‘the *ocular scan method’* of pawing over data *–* aka ‘eyeballing’ – although I was not aware of the technical label at the time). In later stages I produced physical A5 posters with recurring themes, whilst analytical memos and literature reviews were written in Word documents on my laptop, again being able to look back to my hand-written notes for reference, which I could again spread out on the floor if needed.

In these practical manners I was able to hunt for patterns within my qualitative data, identifying themes to code in the texts, and recording information that underpinned subsequent phases of analysis. Any attempt to convey particular acts of decision-making within this process would by necessity involve some smoothing of rough edges to provide a more linear description of the reasoning involved than may have been the case, marked as it was across and through different media forms (i.e. on paper and harddrives, with highlighters, coloured pens, and computer type) at different points in the analytical process. Nevertheless, to illustrate the ways in which such decisions were made, and to draw out both the discursive nature of the data analysis and emphasise key findings, it is valuable, at this point, to provide a brief example of coded data from the interviews. Specifically, the example chosen is taken from a section of Kadira’s second interview; this text is also the focus for particular reflection in the analytical chapter (3.4) with regards to particular prosodic features – a further outcome of the process of inductive coding – and is included in Appendix E.

Refering to this specific transcription, then: as described above, my first level of analysis involved the inductive coding of (i) recurring words and statements, (ii) narratives/stories and (iii) anything relating to reflexivity. In working on the transcript, one of the first things that I noticed was a repetition of certain themes such as *stereotypes* and *people making assumptions.* These occurred not only in this interview transcript but appeared throughout interviews with Kadira *and* other students. Initially, therefore, I marked these examples, noting a recurring theme that was coming up across student interviews. Also noted was ‘The Jeremy Kyle Story’ as I labelled it – appearing towards the start of the transcript exerpt – that I identified as meaningful (see detailed discussion in the data analysis chapter (3.4)); I noted the prosodic elements, which demonstrated how deeply affecting this experience had been, but also how the story related back to other narratives that Kadira has related during the interviews (for example, her brother being stereotyped in school, a mixed race friend being stereotyped, and her own experience of being stereotyped at Camp America).

The excerpt at hand, as well as the fact that similar themes related to being stereotyped or seen as less capable occurred in other interviews, led me to explore the relationship between stereotypes, racism and intelligence through analytical memos on this topic in the form of a mini literature review. As I resultantly became aware of differences in the types of stereotypical assumptions and student’s ethnicity, I also added a note on this topic: “further reflection needed – are the experiences of being stereotyped as less capable related to ethnicity e.g. British South East Asian students experience different stereotypes from Black British Carribbean students?” After analytical memoing in the form of mini literature reviews, as well as going back and forth between the data and literature, I decided to refine the coding of ‘The Jeremy Kyle Story’, which was initially labelled under the broad theme of “(indirect) racism” with a note “being viewed as less intelligent/ capable”, into a type of microaggression (a concept that had surfaced at this point in the analytical process as a recurring theme), which was coded as “ascription of intelligence/assumption of inferior status”. When coding the data, it was key that this data be viewed holistically – i.e. taking all of the students’ utterances and stories into consideration and viewed not in isolation – and I was able to identify this type of microaggression as having emerged as a common example, experienced by numerous students, resultantly making the decision to focus attention up it.

One final note, at this point, on this particular transcript exerpt, relates to reflexivity (more on which is included in the data analysis chapter itself (see 3.4)). I recorded a reflexivity note, in which I noted that, when introducing the vignette, I had worried whether Kadira might feel that the example was inappropriate: the figure in the vignette is a visibly Muslim woman attending an international conference, which is a different scenario from being a minoritised person in her own country. Luckily, this was not the case and the vignette proved an extremely useful tool that not only helped focus attention away from myself, as the researcher, but allowed Kadira to talk freely; she liked the vignette (“I was really happy to read this”) and it made her feel less alone with her experiences of negative stereotyping. Further reflexivity notes related to this section related to my own reaction to her experience – was I sensitive enough when she displayed her upset? I also reflected upon the fact that she had been similarly upset in the first interview, where she had cried when relaying an example of being singled out in school as the only mixed-race student.

Our conversations after the interviews and my field notes seemed to suggest that she had found talking about this subject useful. With regards to the impact upon my actual data analysis, this reflexivity was important as it helped my process the fact that, in the act of categorising interview data into relatively neat themes, students’ spontaneous emotional reaction cannot easiy be displayed on the page and resultantly is difficult to convey. This was a notion that I kept in mind throughout my data analysis and subsequent write-up, as I sought to do my best, in presenting the qualitative data, to avoid losing the emotional resonance of the students’ own voices, behind academic terminology and categorisation. These reflections also raised ethical considerations related to discussing sensitive issues and power relations (these issues are discussed in the following section (see 2.8.3)).

Through the above description of coded data from a particular interview transcript, I have aimed to provide an illustration of the practical execution of the process of data analysis, guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach. As I previously emphasised, it is never going to be possible to provide a perfect description of a decision-making process that took place across and through different media forms at different points in an ongoing analytical process; however, in providing this overview, I hope to have provided an indication of the process, nevertheless, in particular the iterative nature of such an analysis and the ‘messiness’ ultimately inherent to it.

* 1. **Ethical Considerations**

Conducting research with human participants requires consideration of the potential impact of that research on those involved. As stated in the British Sociological Association’s (BSA) *Statement of Ethical Practice,* researchers have an ethical and moral responsibility towards participants since ‘[s]ociologists, when they carry out research, enter into personal and moral relationships with those who they study’ (BSA, 2012)*.* Elliott (2005), argues that this is particularly salient during the data collection stage of the research project when interacting with participants, but also crucial throughout the analysis and dissemination stages of research.

Ethical considerations have already received attention in the previous discussion about the researcher as human instrument, power and positionality, as the issue of representation is an issue regarding ethics. The purpose of this section of the Research Design is to provide a broader outline of specific issues regarding ethical research practice taken into account in this project. Specifically, it addresses the ethical implications that follow from the research methods adopted, and the ethical guidelines and codes that have informed subsequent practice.

**2.8.1 Informed consent**

Informed consent is a key concern across social science literature and issues of privacy and confidentiality are universally accepted as a particularly salient issue in research involving interviews (e.g. Kaiser, 2009; Kidd & Finlayson, 2006; Lassiter, 2005; Seibold, 2000; Watts, 2008). As stated by Corti et al.,2000):

‘Research should, as far as possible, be based on participants' freely volunteered *informed consent*. This implies a responsibility to explain fully and meaningfully what the research is about and how it will be disseminated. Participants should be aware of their right to refuse to participate; understand the extent to which confidentiality will be maintained; be aware of the potential uses to which the data might be put; and in some cases be reminded of their right to re-negotiate consent.’

This position is reiterated in the British Sociological Association guidelines (BSA, 1992). With this requirement in mind, I discussed and obtained consent (both verbal and written) with each research participant who was willing to take part in the study. All students were provided with a consent form and a participant information sheet with a summary of my study and information about research dissemination, and given time to read it, ask questions and sign (see Appendix C). Furthermore, students were asked if they were happy for the interviews to be recorded and participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time; the students were also informed that they had the right to read all transcripts and that parts of the transcripts could be taken out if they feared being identifiable. Before starting my interviews and the focus group, I briefed them about the overall purpose of the research and the main features of the design, as well as any possible risks and benefits from participation in the research project.

**2.8.2 Confidentiality**

The consideration of mechanisms to protect the identity of research participants is a fundamental concern in qualitative research (e.g. Barnes, 1979; Clark & Sharf, 2007; Grinyer, 2002; Sinding & Aronson, 2007). The British Psychological Society’s code of ethical conduct, for example, stresses the desirability of anonymity, stating that research participants ‘have a right to expect that information they provide will be treated confidentially and, if published, will not be identifiable as theirs’ (Robson, 1995, 43).

In line with these ethical guidelines, strict confidentiality was at the heart of this research. All the names of my participants are pseudonyms, utilised to protect their confidentiality, and all their responses were treated and used in such a way to ensure the anonymity of participants. It is important to acknowledge, however, that anonymisation is not always enough to ensure full confidentiality. The most common threat to confidentiality lies in the writing up of reports and, particularly, the use of quotes (Sandelowski, 1994). Whilst the students in my study may not be identifiable to the general public, there is a risk that they may well be identifiable to their peers or lecturers if they were to read this thesis or subsequent publications. In order to ensure confidentiality, therefore, all students were given the chance to read the transcripts and were told that parts of the transcripts could be removed if they feared issues of confidentiality (this was not the case in my study).

Confidentiality also has to be considered in light of data protection – that is, how the data is stored (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000); for this reason, all interview recordings and transcripts were kept on a password-protected computer, in a secure locked file, which could only be accessed by the researcher, and there was no use of online storage via the cloud.

**2.8.3 Sensitive Issues**

Using semi-structured and narrative interviews as opposed to structured interview schedules can be empowering as it gives participants more opportunities to relay experiences that are meaningful to them (Graham, 1984; Mishler, 1984; 1986). It is for this reason that Graham (1984), for example, advocates the use of ‘stories’ as the basis of informant-structured interviews; his rationalisation is that this approach ‘more effectively safeguard[s] the rights of informants to participate as subjects as well as objects in the construction of sociological knowledge’ (1984, 118). His rationale in making this case is that, due to the narrator’s awareness that they are providing information, their ‘story marks out the territory in which intrusion is tolerated’ (1984, 107). There are, however, complex issues of power at play in in-depth interviews and the potential for exploitation is no less than in structured interviews or surveys (Elliot, 2005, 135; cf. Burke, 2001).

Prior to the interviews and focus group, all participants were provided with contacts to the university’s counselling support services, which were also provided on the research information sheet. This was undertaken in recognition of the fact that even when research focuses on topics that might not be expected to be sensitive or disturbing for respondents, sensitive or traumatic issues can nevertheless come up in in-depth interviews, making these interviews emotionally intense (Clarke, 2006; Davies, 1998; Elliott, 2005; Mitchell, 1996). This was indeed an issue in my own research; for instance, one student started crying while talking about her experiences with racism at secondary school and another relayed sensitive information about a friend’s death. In-depth interviews affect participants and it is important to prioritise the psychological safety of the interviewees.

Strategies that I employed to try to provide psychological safety for distressed interviewees included giving the interviewees time to cry. As Cowles (1988) recommends, ‘[i]f the researcher indicates acceptance of the interviewee's emotional response the interviewee may feel that it is safe to reveal further information, which he or she may have felt was an "unacceptable" response or feeling’. At the same time, I pointed out to participants that they are in control of the research process and that they are free to terminate the interview at any time.

Attempting to create a non-threatening interview (and focus group) environment is also essential here (cf. Elliott, 2005). The majority of interviews were held at university cafes or in seminar rooms on campus, with a minority held at my interviewees’ homes. I was determined to avoid what has been labelled elsewhere as a ‘smash and grab’ interview – i.e. one in which the researcher ‘gets in’, does the interview, and ‘gets out’ without any true interest in the participant themselves (see Liamputtong, 2007). Instead, every effort was made to develop an ongoing ‘rapport’ (Sword, 1999), centred upon the interpersonal relationship between interviewer and interviewee, through the informal research information meetings, and by spending extra time chatting before and after the interviews/focus group, drinking tea/coffee. Having developed such a rapport with participants was helpful in the instances when sensitive issues arose, as participants seemed to feel generally ‘safe’ and were happy to continue the interviews. More importantly, some students expressed a sense of gratitude at their views being valued as research data and that their involvement in the ‘conversation’ had provided them with the impetus to reflect more critically upon issues that they experience daily.

**2.8.4 Reciprocity**

As Trainor and Bouchard (2011, 986) describe, ‘[t]he researcher–participant relationship has the potential to be reciprocal, a relationship in which each contributes something the other needs or desires’; indeed, part of the ethical consideration in undertaking research is ensuring that research benefits the research participants and not just the researcher (Lassiter, 2005; Maiter, et. al. 2008; Diver & Higgins, 2014). During my fieldwork, participants devoted their time, experiences and wisdom to this study, leaving me to question how I can reciprocate their goodwill and cooperation. During all interviews and the focus group, I offered coffee and tea, fruit, biscuits and cake for all participants. This action was not meant as a bribe to elicit student involvement in research, and it was not interpreted as such by students who took it in the spirit in which it was intended, as a way of showing my own thanks for their generosity of time and engagement.

At the same time, all interviewees received an Amazon voucher upon completion of the second interview – and all focus group participants were entered into a prize draw for a voucher. Payment, or in this case providing vouchers, is a more problematic ethical concern as it ‘can be seen as a means of inducement which undermines the free choice of a person to participate in research’ (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000, 84). However, interviewees were not aware that there would be an Amazon voucher upon completion of the second interview, hence, it did not function as a form of inducement, but was a mark of respect for the amount of time they had devoted to the study and was an attempt to give something back. In the case of the focus group, I felt comfortable taking the second view expressed by Holloway and Jefferson (ibid.) that payments can provide a means of ‘equalising the relationship (our money for their time)’.

Reciprocity has wider implications, of course, if it is to go beyond doing research for the advancement of science and is to benefit research participants. A central concern of criticalist research – as outlined in detail at the start of this chapter – is that it act as a conduit for broader social change (Freire, 1970, 1982; Minkler, 2010; Stoecker, 2003). This is an ambitious goal, which criticalist researchers do not always achieve (Lassiter, 2005; Pain & Francis, 2003). In terms of this thesis, reciprocity that benefits participants and aims at impacting the current social situation could include different forms of ‘public engagement’ – such as trying to publish in a newspaper rather than simply behind the pay-wall of peer-reviewed academic journals – sharing research findings via social media or blog entries, and writing to local MPs offering details and a willingness to present research. The latter option is particularly viable in the case of the University of Sheffield where the local (Labour) Member of Parliament is Paul Bloomfield, who prior to his election was the general manager of the University Students’ Union and has a particular focus on higher education policy at Westminster. The aim, in each case, is that this research, upon completion, reaches a wider audience, outside academia.

* 1. **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide a detailed, reflexive overview of the research design and strategy adopted to undertake the ensuing analysis. To this end, it has explained the ‘criticalist’ approach and analytical technique developed – drawn from CRT and based around biographical narrative interviewing techniques and focus group analysis – and discussed the issues raised by my own positionality as a researcher, and the ‘grounded theory’ approach via which I analysed my data. Furthermore, this chapter detailed the practicalities of this research project, describing the fieldwork context, providing processes of recruitment and profiling participants, and detailing the specific methods and tools employed in the data collection and analysis. Finally, it covered issues related to ethical considerations in carrying out this research.

Having now outlined the subject of study and the theoretical framework within which it is conceptualised (Chapter 1), and the research design and strategy developed to facilitate it (Chapter 2), the following four chapters constitute the analysis itself – covering institutional microaggressions (Chapter 3), inter-personal microaggressions (Chapter 4), racial aggressions (Chapter 5) and how students develop strategies of resistance as they navigate the institution (Chapter 6).

**CHAPTER 3:**

**ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL MICROAGGRESSIONS**

**3.1 Introduction: Institutional/Environmental Microaggressions**

Institutional or environmental microaggressions are microaggressions that occur on a systemic, or institutional level, rather than through direct interpersonal exchanges. They are often more insidious than the latter form as they have the propensity to go unchallenged. Sue (2010, 25) defines the term *environmental microaggression* as the ‘numerous demeaning and threatening social, educational, political, or economic cues that are communicated individually, institutionally, or societally to marginalized groups’. They may be expressed through a certain philosophy such as ‘colour blindness’ (Purdie-Vaughns, Davis, Steele, & Dittlmann, 2008; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanches-Burks, 2008) or perceived visually (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978), for example, in the form of individual behaviours or the now infamous statues of the white supremacist Cecil Rhodes. As Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso (2000) note, it is microaggressions such as these that people are alluding to when they describe threatening or hostile environments at work or on university campuses (see also: Sue, 2010, 25-27).

For the purpose of this thesis, I am following Yosso et al.’s (2009, 673) definition of institutional microaggressions as ‘those racially marginalizing actions and inertia of the university evidenced in structures, practices, and discourses that endorse a campus racial climate hostile to [BME students]’. These microaggressive acts appear to be ‘collectively approved and promoted’ by the university power structures (Pierce, 1970, 268) and are experienced by their recipients as a ‘threat in the air’ (Steele, 1997). A clear example of how this ‘threat in the air’ has been identified by research into racism in higher education is provided by Yosso et al.’s (op cit.) research into Kenneth Gon Chicana/o university students (see also: Feagin & McKinney, 2003; Hurtado et al. 1998). As they relate:

‘As a numerical minority with very little, if any, political power, [Chicanas/os] are left socially isolated. Students’ physical world also elicits cultural alienation, featuring campus sculptures, buildings, flyers, and office postings that do not reflect Chicana/o histories or experiences. The cars and clothes of the predominately White student body further evidence the physical reproduction of White middle-class culture.’ (Yosso et al., 2009, 679)

Referencing the works of Kenneth González (2002), and Delgadim, Bernal and Villalpando (2002), Yosso et al. (2009, 679) describe how ‘the epistemological world of the Chicanas/os’ studied in their research ‘featured very little access to Faculty of Color and a paucity of ethnic studies curriculum’, resulting in an ‘institutional maintenance of [an] “apartheid of knowledge” whereby the scholarship and epistemologies of ethnic minority scholars were discredited, marginalised and devalued.

As a further illustration of such phenomena, Sue (2010, 25) relates his own experience of encountering an environmental microaggression as part of a diversity training session, ironically aimed at eliminating the aforementioned microaggression. Following numerous student complaints over the years that the campus climate was ‘alienating, hostile, and invalidating’, an Ivy League University decided to conduct diversity training with the stated aim of making the institution ‘a more welcoming place, for students, staff, and faculty of color’. To this end, said university invited the author to conduct a half-day training session ‘with all the deans of the respective colleges’. Upon looking around this audience, Sue noticed ‘that not a single dean or representative of the office was a person of color’ and that ‘most were men’. As he stood before the group, he commented upon this apparent absence of any visible racial ethnic minority amongst them; addressing the group he asked: ‘Do you know the message you are sending to me and people of color on this campus?’ According to Sue, the only reaction his question elicited from the audience was several participants shifting in their seats, looking at one another and remaining silent. His own conclusion was that the absence that he had pointed out sent several unmistakable messages to students and staff at the university from minoritised backgrounds. These were:

1. “You and your kind are not welcome here”
2. ”If you choose to come to our campus, you will not feel comfortable here”
3. ”If you choose to stay, there is only so far you can advance. You may not graduate (students of color) or get tenured/promoted (faculty of color).” (Sue, 2010, 26)

In other words, that ‘the chances of doing well at this institution are stacked against them’ (ibid.; cf. Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Inzlicht & Good, 2006).

In another study, focused on institutional microaggressions and Native American students, Deyhle and Swisher (1999) found that the educational curriculum, teaching and learning styles, and classroom climate that they studied were unwelcoming, ignoring the cultural and social differences of such students who reported feeling ‘pushed out,’ comparing their university experience to forced compliance or being ‘civilised’. Thus far, the examples drawn upon have all been from research carried out in the United States of America; however, as the data analysis carried out in this section demonstrates, this is not a ‘US problem’ only.

An analysis of the data obtained from the students from the University of Sheffield taking part in this research identified institutional/environmental microaggressions in the form of both microinvalidations and microinsults (Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). These institutional microaggressions directly impacted how the students perceived the university campus climate and whether their presence was valued. Although arguably one of the most difficult types of microaggressions to discern, explain or prove, institutional microinvalidations diminished the value of BME students within the Sheffield campus community, while institutional microinsults sent denigrating messages to students.

As demonstrated below, microagressive themes occurring throughout interviews and the focus group include: a *lack of racial ethnic diversity* in the form of a lack of staff and student diversity; *exclusive social events*; *exclusive university publications;* and a *Eurocentric curriculum*. These findings echo existing literature on institutional microaggressions in higher education settings (see for instance Constantine et al., 2008; Purdie-Vaughns, Davis, Steele & Dittlmann, 2008; Yosso et al., 2009; Sue, 2010). Each of these themes is discussed in detail in the following sections.

**3.2 Lack of Staff Diversity**

“There is, like, one black lecturer, but yeah they are really underrepresented, like I know that some of my lecturers went to really top universities and they were probably from the beginning of the system all the way supported through until the end. There are black academics, but I only ever had one and I have never seen anyone that looks like me in the system… yeah, the majority are white, as always, and they are always upper class or middle class...” (Saree, Interview 2)

A lack of staff diversity and underrepresentation of lecturers from minoritised backgrounds was, as illustrated in the example above, a recurring theme in the interviews and the focus group. This is not an issue specific to the University of Sheffield. Recent research has identified a significant mismatch between staff and student profiles across the UK, with BME staff underrepresented within universities. This is particularly the case at senior levels and in teaching roles (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013; Fenton et al., 2000; Gulam, 2004; Lifelong Learning UK, 2010; Mirza, 2006; Pilkington, 2011; 2013). In 2010, the Equality Challenge Unit’s statistical report, *Equality in Higher Education,* found that only 7% of UK academic national staff are Black, compared to 18% of UK-domiciled students (ECU, 2010). Figures for 2015, again correlated by the Equality Challenge Unit (2015a), found that this figure had only risen to 8.3% of UK academic staff and 2.9% of UK academic managers, directors and senior managers, compared to 20.2% of UK-domiciled students. Most starkly, of 18,500 UK Professors, only 85 were Black – and only 17 Black *and* female – 0.49% of the total (Garner, 2015; Wynne-Jones, 2015).

The data collected during my research demonstrated that BME students experienced this failure to recruit and retain a diverse faculty staff as an institutional microinvalidation, contributing to feelings of isolation and rejection, diminishing their sense of value within the University of Sheffield community. Students raised the issue of underrepresentation and its roots, for example, during the focus group:

A: I mean the thing is, if you look at academia itself, the proportion of female, we are all female here of course [laughter], the proportion of female professors is ridiculous

E: totally

A: and the proportion of female professors from an ethnic minority background

N: is even less

E & Z: yeah

A: you can count them on one hand, basically, and it’s just, I mean the thing is if you look at us, we are all here for a reason, we are capable of potentially becoming a professor so to speak

Z: yeah

A: but for some bizarre reason, this doesn’t happen, there isn’t kind of like, I don’t know if it is the system or the fact that people don’t really want to aspire to that or but…

Z: the thing is if you say that people don’t want to do it kind of, I think it may not be that way, because times have changed a lot and while people from our ethnicity might not have come forward previously, times have changed. A lot of women of our ethnicity have come a long way, you know, to study and things like that, even Master’s, PhDs, we have a lot of doctors. It’s not the people who aren’t going to do it, it’s the system itself.

A: yes, I was going to say that…

Z: It’s just really disheartening…

E: yeah, it is

A*:* it’s demotivating (Focus Group)

As these quotations demonstrate, the group spontaneously raised systemic failure in the form of institutional racism as the possible cause for female BME underrepresentation in professorial roles. The students are far from alone in reaching for this explanation. There is resistance in higher education to acknowledging institutional racism on the side of the institution;[[29]](#footnote-29) however, a growing research literature exists focusing upon this subject (e.g. Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Gillborn, 2005; Iverson, 2007; Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Law, Philips & Turney, 2004; Pilkington, 2011; 2013; UCU, 2012).

The absence of BME staff and failures of the university to recruit a diverse staff – and the sense that this was due to reasons beyond the capability of minoritised candidates – left the focus group participants feeling ‘disheartened’ and ‘demotivated’. In this, their experience echoes findings elsewhere within the research on institutional microaggressions in higher education. For instance, Purdie-Vaughns et al. (2008) found that a low numerical representation of BME lecturers and administrators can act as a symbolic cue, signaling a threat to a group’s social identity.

This ‘threat in the air’ (Steele, 1997) was also raised, during my research, by Kadira. Discussing the subject during her second interview, she said:

“Well for one, in Psychology, all the, I would say, 95% of the lecturers are white males over 40 probably and it’s just like, even the people who are teaching us aren’t from different backgrounds or there’s no black lecturers or Asian or anything other than white British ones and sometimes it’s just like if they’re not going to introduce it into places higher up then how are the places lower down like the students meant to… I don’t know. Sometimes, it’s really demotivating, so say I wanted to become a lecturer, what are the chances that I will actually get to be a lecturer? Even based entirely on gender, there are no females and it’s just like… I don’t know. It’s just so frustrating sometimes to think you’re working hard, doing all this and if you want to get to places like that, it kind of disheartens you, because you don’t see it happening already, so it’s like you have to break through into it” (Kadira, Interview 2)

The phrase “places higher up”, which Kadira uses to describe the university (contrasting it with school, and other ‘lower’ levels of education), is one she also used elsewhere in our interviews to refer to people and institutions with a high educational level and in a powerful position. As her testimony demonstrates, the failure of this “higher up” institution to hire and promote minoritised staff clearly leaves Kadira feeling both bleak and demotivated about her own future. After all, if others cannot achieve these positions (and she sees no evidence that they can), then, as she puts it, “what are the chances that I will actually get to be a lecturer?” Having no role models from her ethnic background to look up to, she is, by her own identification, frustrated (see: Bhopal & Jackson, 2013), as she feels there is no recognition for the hard work of herself or others in a similar position to her. As she puts it, “you’re working hard, doing all this”, yet – as she sees it – racial and gender boundaries prevent people like herself from reaching their full potential. Viewed thus, the concept of meritocracy seems to her (and the others quoted) as less an ideal than an impossibility, even in universities, the ‘traditional bastions of rational thought and enlightenment’ (cf. Singer, 2013).

This sentiment, which finds expression in feelings of demoralisation and demotivation due the lack of staff diversity – i.e. the absence of role models – was also raised by Kendi, who coupled it with a Eurocentric curriculum deemed to diminish minoritised students. As she wrote:

“Almost all lecturers in my department are white. I work really hard and I’m part of this university, yet there aren’t any lecturers that could really identify with me, from an ethnic perspective. Having more black lecturers would yield a much more diverse learning experience. It is also demotivating to see no lecturers from my ethnic background. Coupled with a very white core reading list in such a subjective field as English, it feels demoralising.” (Kendi, Email Response)

Alongside the Eurocentric “very white core reading”, Kendi also brought up here the need for lecturers from minoritised backgrounds, as a source of identification; i.e. staff who can, in her own words, “relate to her from an ethnic perspective”. In making this point, Kendi gives validity to bell hooks’ call for more BME lecturers as a resource for affirming and nurturing students’ ethnic and cultural backgrounds (hooks, 1994). Another claim she makes is that diversifying the teaching staff would yield a “more diverse learning experience”, as she puts it. Here again, her thoughts find acknowledgement and support within the literature.

Research into this subject suggests that diversifying staff in terms of ethnicity and background results in lecturers who possess a multifaceted view of knowledge (both epistemologically and practically) and related skills that they can subsequently bring to their classes (e.g. Bhopal & Jackson, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2005). Indeed, research points towards staff from BME backgrounds being better able to relate to a wider variety of students, particularly for understanding trends and issues where race and racism are concerned, without reinforcing stereotypes (Milner, Pearman & McGee, 2013, 346). Figures such as Fasching-Varner and Mitchell (2013), Lewis et al. (2008) and Picower (2007) have argued that this is due to the fact that, for teachers to build pedagogical relationships with students from across racial barriers, understanding racial identity is an essential skill.

Returning to the powerful symbolic role that the lack of BME staff plays, one interviewee (Kadira) also raised the latter as a contributing factor in upholding a white-supremacist culture amongst students, in the manner outlined in the first chapter (1.2.2):

“… it’s not all whiteness, it’s multicultural. But some people are just so in touch with the history of slavery and things like that … and they just want to keep hold of that and they don’t want it to change. They always want to think of themselves as superior and I guess when they see examples of white people being superior as lecturers or as principals in schools and stuff, that kind of consolidates what they think” (Kadira, Interview 2)

In her statement here, Kadira links racist beliefs to an unwillingness among certain people for things to change: as the context of the sentence itself makes clear, when referring to those who are “in touch with the history of slavery and things like that”, the interviewee means people for whom this history is central to their conceptualisation of Black people, drawing positive connotations from it in the sense that they continue to maintain ‘slavish’ images of Black people – and as such, wanting “to keep hold” of and maintain it.

In so doing, there is a failure to recognise diversity not only in staffing but also ideas – as Kadira puts it, “it’s not all [about] whiteness, it’s multicultural” – with the hegemonic (white) perspective being consolidated by the absence of BME lecturers and principals, as students “see examples of white people being superior”, but not Black ones. To refer back to the literature on microaggressions, these missing examples are a perfect example of a microinvalidation that communicates to Black students that they are inferior (due to possible role-models being absent) and white students that they are superior (as apparently evidenced by the very people who hold positions of power).

* 1. **Lack of Student Diversity**

In a similar manner to this lack of staff diversity, the lack of diversity amongst the student body was also experienced as a racial microinvalidation by some students; specifically, a microinvalidation signaling that they held an outsider status, or that they did not ‘belong’ to/within the campus community. As Kendi describes, for example:

“It was a bit of a shock when I first came here and realized that almost everyone on my course was white. In general, you can count other students from Black Caribbean backgrounds at Sheffield University on one hand. My school was a lot more ethnically diverse. Being a London school, there was a large proportion of people with a Black Caribbean heritage or people from mixed race backgrounds. Sheffield University is diverse in terms of international students, but not for British born students from ethnic minority backgrounds. I haven’t managed to meet any other black people from Caribbean backgrounds yet and I’m in my second year. I sometimes feel like a fish out of water. ” (Kendi, Email Response)

In the above quotation, Kendi describes joining the University of Sheffield student community, and subsequently, suddenly, being surrounded by white people as a “bit of a shock”. The conterminous lack of a Black Caribbean community made her feel like “a fish out of water”, a phrase conveying feelings of awkwardness due to one’s difference from the people around oneself and/or being thrown into a new situation (Cambridge Dictionaries Online). Kendi’s experience and reaction is far from unique, being identified across a range of studies into students from minoritised backgrounds studying at predominantly white institutions (Everett-Haynes & Deil-Amen, 2009; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; hooks, 1996a; 1996b; Patton, 2006; Strange & Banning, 2001; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

The specific lack of a Black Caribbean community was, in fact, mentioned by all four research participants from Black Caribbean backgrounds. Monette, for instance, originally from London, expressed her disappointment of not finding a black community in Sheffield:

“When I found out that I was coming to Sheffield, my friends told me that there was a large black community here, but I found that at the university there is just a large Black African community, so it’s not really, I think there is no, I’ve met three Caribbean students, yeah its very African International dominated, which is kind of a different culture, so yeah there are cultural differences … it’s less diverse, but yeah London is the optimum diversity city in the UK” (Monette, Interview 1)

Similar to Kendi, during our second interview Monette also commented upon the fact that the lack of a Black community at the University of Sheffield made her feel isolated: “I do always feel a bit isolated being the only person from my background, so I’m always like, ‘oh there’s another black person in the X building – I’ll go and say hello!” (Monette, Interview 2) This resembles the same experience that Monette says she had upon entering a secondary school that was very “white and middle class”, having formerly attended a black primary school;[[30]](#footnote-30) as she described: “I felt a bit isolated because I didn’t … it was just like a completely different culture … so yes, it was like being a proper minority again. And I think a lot of ethnic minorities stuck together” (Interview 2).

One of the strategies Monette employed to find a black community at Sheffield was to join the university’s African Caribbean Society. This, however, turned out to be frequented by African International students only – further emphasising the sense that to be Black British is to nevertheless have an external, ‘foreign’ identity within the wider university culture – i.e. to be the equivalent of an International student. Monette was also disappointed that the Society did not put on any events for Black History Month, saying that “they were a bit rubbish – for example it was Black History Month in October and they didn’t… and they have never done any events and they only do parties” (Interview 1).

Both Kendi and Monette’s comments points towards the importance for BME students of having a space to celebrate one’s own history/identity in a culturally white environment. Literature on BME students on predominantly white university campuses confirms that students benefit from social support that affirms their cultural heritage and reinforces their lived experiences (Coon & Kemmelmeir, 2001; Yosso et al., 2009). The need for finding safe spaces with fellow black women is elucidated by Charlotte, who describes her experience at Lancaster University, which she attended for her first degree:

“At Lancaster University, I joined the International Student’s Wives group working as a volunteer (often doing babysitting and having English conversations with women who had travelled with their husbands completing doctorates at that time) just so that I could meet with fellow black women on campus. It was the only environment at Lancaster where I didn’t have to ‘justify”/explain my African heritage and constantly field questions about ‘race’, racism, discrimination, difference etc. There is a tendency for strangers to test out all the pet questions they ever want(ed) to know about issues of ‘race’ with you as though you are an automatic authority on everything to do with being black, or critical race theory, as though blackness is a homogenized, fixed and easily deconstructed universal identity and that everyone who is black is also of the same ‘social class’ (usually perceived as subaltern) with the same lived experience/personality traits/cultural characteristics, etc.” (Charlotte, Email Response)

As the above quotation describes, Charlotte joined the International Student’s Wives group “just so that I could meet with fellow black women on campus”, this, as she goes on to explain, being “the only environment where I didn’t have to justify/explain my African heritage and constantly field questions about race/racism, discrimination, difference, etc.”. Such experiences again speak to the wider research into racial microaggressions at university (e.g., Solórzano et al., 2000) that have, for example, shown how students from BME backgrounds create counter-spaces as a way of resisting racial microaggressions – as well as the creation of counter-spaces (a subject discussed in detail in Chapter 6).

While the focus in this chapter is upon institutional racial microaggressions, the attendant experience that came with the lack of a Black community, and from which Charlotte sought escape, was one of incessant, interpersonal microinvalidations. While interpersonal microggressions are specifically discussed in the next chapter, their relation to the university environment means that this analysis rewards their initial discussion here also. These microinvalidations include constant questions about her ‘black’ experience, “as though you are an automatic authority on everything to do with being black or critical race theory”, communicating messages of her being a foreign and exotic ‘other’ and/or thus part of an inferior group of people who are all the same (“homogenized, fixed … universal … the same”). Even if Charlotte’s white peers intended for these comments to reflect affirmation of Charlotte’s expertise and sincere curiosity, interpersonal microinvalidations such as these can make BME students feel like a foreigner and curiosity in their own country. They communicate to BME students that white students perceive them as different and not “normal”.

Charlotte’s experience points to the important relationship between social support and stress and well-being among university students. This linkage has been demonstrated in a number of studies (see: Felsten & Wilcox, 1992; Lakey, 1989; Reifman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1990). Research finds that, within the academic milieu, outlets of social support can be offered by friends and family, as well as one’s peers, and many BME students resultantly seek out other students and mentors of similar ethnicity for this end (Suarez-Balcazar et al.; 2003; Watkins, LaBarrie, & Appio, 2010). When it can be found, studies demonstrate that effective social support – such as that sought (and not found) by the interviewees – diminishes the distress felt by racial and ethnic minority students on predominantly white campuses (Griffin, 1991; Kimbrough, Molock, & Walton, 1996).

One of the most difficult university experiences that resulted from an initial inability to find other students from her ethnic and religious background – and which was aggravated by a lack of understanding and acceptance of her cultural and religious needs from her white peers – was that of Raashida. She describes her university experience as one in which she felt “secluded” (Interview 1) during her first year. This altered, however, once she joined Islam Circle and Pakistani Society in her second and third year, a change she describes as making her feel (finally?) like a “fresher” (Interview 1). Raashida mentioned throughout our interviews that she felt secluded during her first year; she stated that she was not fitting in with most white students on her Sociology course, who were not interested in doing anything other than clubbing and drinking, and that she mainly spent her free time with her boyfriend (who was of the same ethnic background).

**3.4. Lack of Role Models**

Related to both of these issues – the lack of diversity amongst staff *and* the student body – is the issue of role models, or specifically, the lack of them within the university. For instance, when Monette talks about a recent presentation she did in front of a group of UCAS students as part of one of her student jobs at Sheffield University, she states:

“I think it is really important that … [the students] see ethnic minorities. I know when I came, I would be looking out for somebody, I’d just be looking out for diversity, I always try to do that and I’m signed up as a Science and Engineering Champion, which is just general events run by the uni for the public and so yeah like, for the same reasons it’s important to like, cause obviously Sheffield is diverse, there are a lot of people from different places, so it’s just important to show that to prospective people and the public and what not.” (Monette, Interview 1)

The idea of “looking out for diversity” at a prospective university that a student might want to attend ties in with the previously discussed examples related to students’ sense of belonging and ‘fitting in’. As a black, female Science student, however, Monette is a rarity in her Physics course, where she is “the only Black girl” out of 14 female students, surrounded by a hundred white boys (Interview 1). In recognition of this, Monette made the deliberate decision to sign up as a Science and Engineering Champion[[31]](#footnote-31) with the aim to “show to prospective people and the public” that diversity exists and that the study of sciences is not restricted to white (and male) students.

The lack of role models for BME students was also raised by Adila during the focus group with reference to official, representative roles:

“Ethnic minority students make up 20% of like the whole university campus, but none of them are actually within any sort of role with the Students’ Union… there isn’t any actual representation if you come from that sort of community” (Focus Group).

Just as with the aforementioned issue of staff diversity, BME students clearly notice and are affected by a lack of racial-ethnic diversity among those who allegedly represent them. Saree, too, remarked upon the lack of student union representation during our second interview, specifically addressing a referendum to be held among the student body at the time[[32]](#footnote-32) on whether or not to institute a full time ‘Black and Minority Ethnic Student’s Officer’. Speaking before the referendum result, Saree stated:

“I also hope that students will vote ‘yes’ … Despite Sheffield being rated the best Students’ Union for the fifth year in a row, it is shocking that since its inception, the Union has failed to ensure the representation of the BME community. It’s so important. I have written an article on that for *the Huffington Post*.” (Saree, Interview 2)

Sheffield’s Students’ Union has a BME committee; however, there is no conterminous sabbatical officer (even part-time). For Saree, there was a clear contradiction between the Student’s Union being “the best”, yet simultaneously not ensuring “representation of the BME community” in the form of such an officer. Ultimately, the referendum itself, held during the 2014 Student Elections to receive as large a turnout as possible, resulted in a ‘No’ vote, as the student electorate of which Saree was a member rejected a BME representative position.

For students such as Saree, the rejection via the referendum of a BME Students’ Officer spoke not only of the place BME students held within the union, but to wider social problems also. In her pre-referendum article for a well-known media outlet, Saree had related the possible rejection of such an Officer position to wider issues in British society. These included the lack of media coverage of the death, while in police custody, of Nigerian Durham University postgraduate student Boniface Umale in potentially racially-motivated circumstances; the sparse interest in the recent deaths of over 330 Bangladeshi citizens following a building site collapse; and the comparative week-long front-page attention given to the white victims of the Boston Marathon bombings. This sent out the message to the public, Saree wrote, that the lives of white Westerners were of more worth than that of a Black international student’s or foreign victim.

The University of Sheffield Students’ Union was not alone in trying, during this period, to institute full time sabbatical BME officers. Other universities nationwide also tried to pass such a motion and examples from these other institutions demonstrate the wider resonance of Saree’s point. The Black & Ethnic Minorities’ Association (BEMA) at the University of Birmingham, for example, tried to pass a motion to institute a full time officer. Malia Bouattia, future President of the NUS, but then a representative of the Black Students' Campaign, explained on the university’s website that such a motion was crucial by describing how, ‘during my first year, as a BME student, a Muslim home student, I had suffered a culture shock and was constantly battling with Islamophobic and racist comments in seminars and even when joining societies in the Guild’ and how, ‘[w]ithout the support of a BEMA member of staff and my family, I would have been amongst the growing statistic of BME first year drop-outs at the University’ (Redbrick, 2013). For this reason, she argued, ‘[t]he introduction of this position would be a way for the University and the Guild to finally show evidence of recognising the ongoing crisis which has been swept under the rug for far too long, and proving that they will prioritise Liberation issues’ (Redbrick, 2013).

As at Sheffield, the motion failed and Birmingham was not able to extend the role of its non-sabbatical Ethnic Minority’s Student Officer to a full sabbatical role. Currently, nationwide, University College London has the only students’ union with a full-time BME Sabbatical Officer whose role, as set out on the union website, is to ensure that the curriculum is representative of BME students. Among other actions, in 2013 they instituted a BME alumni network and specific careers/internship advice for BME students – in so doing taking some form of action to address the issues Charlotte raised.

* + 1. **Role Models, Ethnic Identity and Internalized Racism**

Based upon my research, this lack of role models from amongst their peers has evidently had a significant impact upon some students’ ethnic identity, being raised by several students over the course of our interviews. One of the central comments that related issues of ethnic identity to a lack of access to other black people and a lack of ethnic minority role models came from Monette during her discussion of the vignette during our second interview. Due to the richness of the text, Monette’s statement is worth quoting at length:

“But yes, also the thing about not being real Iranian, yes, I’ve had that commented at me a few times and I even refer to myself in that way, which is probably a bit bad, because I was just, I refer to myself as not being “proper black” as in not really fitting in with the majority black culture, I mean by majority Black Caribbean culture, because I’m not usual in that we’re the lowest recruited into higher education and I never really felt that I fit in with other black girls. So I would talk to my boyfriend about me being not “proper black” all the time. I have just come to accept it, because until I meet loads of other black people who have been to university and are just different from our stereotype… there are black students at university, but they just seem very dissimilar to me, which is really mean, but until that happens, maybe when I get out into the working world.

There’s one of my friends who goes to Cambridge and you always see her in photos with other black girls and it looks like she’s had access to those Black people who are, I wouldn’t say exceptional, but they’ve gone all that way and they are not like nerds, they’re normal people, so I feel like I’ve probably missed out because there’s not that community here. I don’t know where that community is either. And I think on YouTube there’s loads of black online dramas that are coming on now and they are portraying more black people that are not stereotypes, so they have good jobs and they’re normal and they’re concerned with normal things and they don’t seem stereotypical at all. And I’m always talking to one of my friends like, “Where are these people in the UK, let alone at uni?” I mean even if we had, we don’t have a lot of Black teachers or lecturers, so you just can’t see it for yourself, so it’s always weird. But anyways there’s a term called “Bounty”, like a Bounty chocolate bar, so you’re white on the inside and Black on the outside, but I don’t think I’ve ever been called a bounty, but I’m sure some people thought I was like … like proper black people are like X, this girl is really weird.”(Monette, Interview 2)

This quotation provides a stark demonstration of how environmental and interpersonal microaggressions are often interlinked and can have a cumulative effect, as in this example, upon Monette’s sense of self.

The lack of Black British Caribbean students at Sheffield University’s campus is, as previously discussed, an environmental microaggression, falling into the category of microninvalidation, leaving Monette feeling isolated and as if she does not belong. As the quotation shows, however, this lack of a black community on campus is exacerbated by her encounters with interpersonal microaggressions in the form of stereotypes about her ethnicity. In Monette’s case, this involved being told “you are not ‘proper’ black”, a statement made on the basis that she did not fit assumed Black stereotypes – a microinsult that demeaned her racial heritage.

Sue, Nadal et al. (2008, 69) have identified the following microagressive themes towards Black people, which have been found to be especially offensive and very common: (i) ascription of intellectual inferiority; (ii) second-class citizenship; (iii) assumption of criminality; (iv) assumption of inferior status; (v) assumed universality of the Black experience; (vi) assumed superiority of white cultural values/communication styles. Not “being ‘proper’ black” can thus refer to a range of racist Black stereotypes; however, the particular microaggressive theme that appears attached to this phrase in this case is the first, *ascription of intellectual inferiority* (Sue 2010, 35) – a common microaggression (Jones, 1997; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Sue, Nadal et al., 2008). Saying “you are not proper black” contains an insulting metacommunication – i.e. that “Black people are generally not as intelligent as whites” – and as can be seen within the previous quotation, Monette herself seems to have internalised this belief, stating that:

“I have just come to accept it, because until I meet loads of other Black people who have been to university and are just different from our stereotype… there are Black students at university, but they just seem very dissimilar to me, which is really mean…”

Here, Monette differentiates herself (‘not proper’) from other black students on campus, to whom she ascribes the stereotypical ‘proper Black’, which she herself recognises as a negative thing to do (i.e. as “mean”). Furthermore, she differentiates these same students at Sheffield from other non-typical black students elsewhere, describing how her friend at Cambridge has, in contrast to herself, “access to those black people who are, I wouldn’t say exceptional, but they’ve gone all that way and they are not like nerds, they’re normal people …”. With this statement Monette draws a line of demarcation between the students on her campus who are “not like her” and those who are intelligent (if not actually exceptional) but at the same time “normal people”, with the underlying assumption that to be black and intelligent is not to be normal, but is an abnormality.

What we can see here is an example of ‘internalised racism’ (Cross, 1971; Cokely, 2002; Woodson, 1933; Malcolm X & Haley, 1964; hooks, 2001), whereby Monette has internalised the beliefs of the dominant culture of Black people as less intelligent and hence, less likely to attend university (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). To reiterate the points made in Chapter 2, this is evidence of the deep and long-lasting impact that enduring racist microaggressions can have upon one’s sense of self and subsequent views of the world (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012).

In *The Soul of Black Folks,* W.E.B. DuBois (1994) referred to Black people’s ‘double consciousness’, the phrase referring to the ‘sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’, the result being ‘two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder’ (DuBois, 1994; cf. Allen, 1996; Ishizuka, 2016, 35). Monette’s statement provides an illustration of this ‘double consciousness’ as, faced with constant exposure to negative stereotypes about her own ethnicity, as well as a lack of access to other people from her ethnic background, she internalised such stereotypes, relating them to her own ethnic identity to the extent that she claims not to feel ‘proper black’.

Adolescents’ exploration of their ethnic identity and subsequent affirmation is vital (Phinney, 1989); this process may include learning about the history and traditions of their group and confronting issues of discrimination and prejudice. Adolescents may discuss such issues with their parents or others as part of this exploration process. Ideally, the process culminates in an achieved ethnic identity, characterised by clarity about oneself as an ethnic group member, which provides a source of personal strength and positive self-evaluation (Phinney and Kohatsu, 1997). Monette, however, was not able to undertake such exploration during either her formative years at the University of Sheffield, or at the school she attended previously which was majority white and where she felt like a minority. Monette has actively sought to engage in ethnic identity exploration via attempts to watch quality Black TV Dramas on YouTube, etc., however, with such wider exploration impossible, she appears to have internalised racist stereotypes about her ethnicity, from which she subsequently feels estranged.

* + 1. **Role Models, Ethnic Identity and Self-Worth**

Like Monette, Kadira also commented upon the importance of having positive role models from minoritised backgrounds. Speaking during our second interview, she said:

“I think it is really important to have role models who are from ethnic minority groups, like the person, who I look most up to as a celebrity is Beyoncé. Not just for her music, but because of the way she presents herself. People respect her as well. They look up to her. They don’t always look at her and just see that she is mixed race. They don’t look at her like that. They recognise her for her talents, all that she’s done in her life and all she’s achieved and that she’ll continue to achieve. So, it’s good to see people like that, but then again, those people are not directly contactable. There’s no one directly in the vicinity I feel that is representative. Maybe to an extent, Jessica Ennis and people like that, but still I feel unless I do something big or that impacts on the world then people, some people won’t be willing to look past who I am, like my ethnic minority and things like that which is so frustrating.” (Kadira, Interview 2)

Beyoncé is Kadira’s favourite celebrity role model not because of her musical talents. Rather, it has to do with the fact that, due to the way she presents herself, others are able to “look past” the fact that she is mixed race (as Kadira herself is) and to see those talents – and that she is subsequently respected and actually “looked up to” by white people. For Kadira, Beyoncé offers a role model of someone who is mixed race, but whom white people do not define by her race – as does Sheffield’s own Jessica Ennis, another well-respected mixed-race woman. While excellent role models, however, both Beyoncé and Ennis are, in Kadira’s words “not directly contactable”, and at the University of Sheffield and in her life in general, there is an absence of role models. Kadira subsequently worries that unless she does “something big or that impacts on the world” – by being a world famous singer possibly, or a gold medal winning Olympian – then people will not “be willing to look past who I am”, defining her by the fact she comes from an “ethnic minority background”, rather than her talents.

The above statement speaks volumes about how the racism and microaggressive acts (see Chapter 4) Kadira had to endure throughout her life (such as, for instance, being singled out in school for “not being white” and enduring racist remarks) has impacted upon her self-worth. This impact was clearly visible, as Kadira fought back tears during the interview; indeed, focusing upon the prosodic (intonation, stress and rhythm) and other linguistic features (e.g. speaker noises) alongside the content of the statement, offers valuable insights into Kadira’s experience of dealing with such racial microaggressions. Throughout the interview, she made adjustments in prosody in order to stress and emphasise important speech portions: i.e. a pause or break occurs before critical words, combined with other prosodic means such as the lengthening of words. In these manners Kadira made use of prosody to emphasise the very essence and most meaningful aspects of her experience to the interviewer. Furthermore, during emotional moments she uses *sotto voce*, the lowering of her voice, as if talking to herself, distinguishing these speech segments from other parts of her narration. Focusing upon the content of Kadira’s statement alone would not convey the degree to which she was affected by the racial microaggressions she described; indeed, throughout the interview, when relaying her experiences with racial microaggressions, she was fighting tears, resulting in speaker noises such as sniffs and clearing of the throat. In illustration of this, an excerpt of Kadira’s interview transcript covering this section is included in Appendix E, marked with coding conventions related to prosodic and linguistic features.

As the main premise of social identity theory maintains, a sense of belonging is implicated in the psychological well-being of ethnic group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), because people attribute value to the groups they belong to and derive self-esteem from their sense of belonging. Ethnic affirmation thus plays an important role in minoritised ethnicities’ self-conception (Phinney, Romero, Nava & Huang, 2001) and racial microaggressions are resultantly experienced as extremely invalidating, emotionally distressing and degrading, communicating as they do racial hierarchies and denigrating non-white norms and values (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue 2010). Indeed, Kadira’s situation is echoed in the work of Franklin and Boyd-Franklin (2000, 33) whose own own research found that:

*‘*encountering repeated racial slights can create within the individual a feeling of not being seen as a person of worth. This subjective sense of psychological invisibility takes the form of a struggle with inner feelings and beliefs that personal talents, abilities, and character are not acknowledged or valued by others, nor by the larger society, because of racial prejudice.’

Fortunately, Kadira, seems to have found one friend and role model in her direct vicinity at the University of Sheffield. When talking about the vignette during our second interview she stated:

“In the last paragraph it talks about another Iranian person arriving at the conventions; that kind of mirrors the mixed-race friend I have in psychology, just because when I see him, I just see how confident he is and I see all the things he’s achieved… I kind of look at him and he gives me self-confidence. It inspires me to come out of my box and be more confident and just think, ‘just express yourself’.”

As detailed in the methodology chapter, the vignette Kadira refers to describes the experience of an Iranian businesswoman, constantly being stereotyped and othered by her Western colleagues, and her relief when another Iranian business man joins their team, who defies these stereotypes, thereby showing her colleagues that she is not an exception from the norm and that not all Iranian people are the same. Kadira compares her own situation at the university, where she has experienced several microaggressions and racialised aggressions (such as racist jokes by peers, strong ethnic group segregations outside the classroom, or being treated differently by lecturers, etc.) to that of the woman in the vignette. In this manner, Kadira’s mixed-race friend serves as a role model for her and gives her the confidence to “express herself” in a less than ideal environment (the university) that lacks other students from the same ethnic background.

As Kadira describes, unlike her white peers, her mixed-race friend can relate to her life experiences and thus offer support to her:

“I do find he has a lot of respect for me. Like we respect each other more than I respect anyone else in psychology, just because he’ll sit down and listen to my ideas, he’ll be supportive of any decisions I do and when someone’s behind you, you just feel more confident in doing what you want to do, that’s a really big thing that has helped me achieve so much already, so I am grateful and it’s just so weird how this mirrors so much of what has happened throughout my life, just because you realise you’re not alone.” (Kadira, Interview 2)

This quotation illustrates the fundamental importance of role models from minoritised backgrounds during BME students’ university experience, which is often radically different from white, majority students who have never experienced racial microaggressions or racism towards them. In Kadira’s case, her friend can relate to these experiences and not only respects and supports her, but also understands her experiential reality. Even here, however, Kadira describes her frustration that people who do not know her friend, stereotype him:

“But, then again, people do stereotype him and people have said to me that they don’t like him and stuff like that and I’m just like, “why?” … they make assumptions about him from one instance or they’ve never actually gone up to him and talked to him and seen what he’s about. They’ve just already boxed him off into something that he’s not, which is so frustrating.” (Kadira, Interview 2)

Her friend, who offers a role model and someone who shares her experiences, thus comes to reinforce her own otherness from the white, majority perspective, as others make it clear to Kadira that his difference – the very thing that offers a source of confidence to her – is a source of negative assumptions within her social circle.

**3.5 Misplaced (White) Multicultural Policies**

Another issue where an institutional microaggression was identified relates to the University of Sheffield’s Alumni network. Problems with the network were illustrated by an exchange of emails between the student Charlotte and several network administrators that she allowed me to see, having raised them as an example of the institution’s blindness to issues of race/ethnicity in its officially produced publications.[[33]](#footnote-33) Charlotte had several experiences with administrators at the University of Sheffield that she found “very problematic” (Charlotte, Email Response, 4); however, the particular issue that she had contacted university administration about in this case was the Alumni newsletters she was receiving. These, she argued, were not representative of the university’s diverse student population, nor did they show any acknowledgement of underlying structural issues that may subsequently need to be taken into account. The disappointment Charlotte experiences in seeking, unsuccessfully, to have this issue addressed or acknowledged represents an example of an institutional microinvalidation.

Charlotte explained her situation in her initial email to the Alumni network, wherein she stated that she “regularly receive[d] Alumni newsletters and read the articles with a keen interest”, however, she was “a little concerned that so few of the articles reflected the cultural diversity of Sheffield’s diverse multicultural and multi-faith student population”. This being the case, she told the Alumni team that “[i]t would be wonderful if you could feature more content about the experiences and achievements of people from Britain’s ‘minority communities’” – giving “former students of African and Asian heritage, alumni who identify as LGBTQ, disabled people, etc.” as examples to illustrate her point. As Charlotte, explained, the current Alumni newsletter felt exclusionary, telling administrators that:

“… the way your newsletter is currently and frequently presented really doesn’t give me any confidence to feel that an entry from me would be welcomed. Moreover, as people from ‘minority’ communities often experience extreme discrimination in the workplace that can have a detrimental impact on career progression (e.g. institutional racism in my case) – and have to develop/utilise a range of strategies to challenge and address such issues in order to achieve their success (as I have) – narratives from alumni that positively encourage others that such barriers to progression are not always insurmountable would be a welcome inclusion to the somewhat ‘rose-coloured-spectacle-style’ entries currently featured as testimonies to the career ‘norm’.”

To help address the issue she raised, she offered a recommendation, asking “Why not circulate a ‘call for entries’ that actively encourages responses to ‘alternative’ paths to success – just to see what you get?” She concluded her email by explaining that:

“My observation is offered as a constructive response from a concerned reader, and is not meant to criticize the good work that you are doing … without offering a solution. But, having received and read this most recent newsletter, I really felt that I just couldn’t sit by (again) – as a passive reader – without sending something to you to see a positive change in awareness (and hopefully, more diverse representations in print) might emerge.” (Charlotte, Email Response)

As her initial email explained, Charlotte noticed two problems with the university’s official publication, in this case the Alumni newsletter. First, there was an absence of voices from former students from minority communities, which led her to feel that an entry from a student such as herself would not be welcome (as such, representing an example of an microinvalidation). Second, she noted how, in the narratives presented of ‘typical’ Sheffield alumni career progression, the newsletters showed absolutely no recognition of the structural issues that people from ‘minority’ backgrounds encounter, such as “extreme discrimination in the workplace that can have a detrimental impact on career progression” and their subsequent need “to develop/utilise a range of strategies to challenge and address such issues in order to achieve their success”.

In ignoring the lived reality of students from minoritised backgrounds, the newsletters’ content again represented a further microinvalidation, trivialising the structural issues such students face and have to struggle within, as well as further playing into ‘the myth of meritocracy’, which sees everyone as afforded the same chances to succeed, regardless of race, class, gender or socioeconomic background. In Charlotte’s own words, the “rose-coloured-spectacle-style entries currently featured as testimonies to the career ‘norm’” within the newsletters implicitly communicate that failure to achieve the types of success given as the ‘norm’ was down to incompetence or laziness, being blind to the fundamental role that structural issues such as race play in students’ successes in life (see also Sue, 2010).

When it arrived, Charlotte found the alumni team’s response to her email deeply disappointing. The administrator’s email thanked Charlotte for her email and stated that “the points you raise about diversity are very important to [us] and to our continued association with the local, national and international community of current and former students.” This, however, was as far as it went in terms of acknowledging her concerns, failing to address the specific points she had raised regarding the lack of minority voices, nor the structural issues that went unaddressed. Instead, the email simply reiterated that their policy was to “include articles from our alumni who come forward to provide them to us” and that they were therefore “delighted that you have responded so positively to the [latest] call” and “very pleased to consider” her for the next newsletter, requesting “a summary of your achievements along with a photograph”.

This reply to her concerns gave Charlotte the impression that the Alumni team had chosen to interpret the content of her initial email as an isolated issue from one individual, without really indicating that they had taken on board the more structural issues she had raised. In her email, Charlotte had recommended the organisation proactively search for and publish a variety of content that was fully reflective and representative of the lived experiences, achievements, challenges and successes of a diverse alumni. The administrator’s response, however, ignored this issue entirely and instead chose to reply to her email as if it were (in their own word) a “positive” response to their current approach, and by offering to “consider” her own inclusion, seemingly close down the issue.

Being disheartened by this response, Charlotte did not submit any such summary and indeed “resolved to ignore any further correspondence and stop reading [alumni] correspondence” – only to receive a later email querying the fact that the alumni team had not subsequently received a contribution from her. As she explained in her reply to this follow-up email, the point of her initial correspondence had been that the existing system was structurally exclusionary, and that addressing it “would, of necessity, require a reappraisal of entire approach to ‘calls for entries’ (in terms of policy and ongoing practice), as opposed to merely reacting on a case-by-case basis as and when individuals bother to submit a concern”, which amounted to the alumni team’s actual response – the latter email compounding the first she received. Finally addressing her points, the final email Charlotte received, responding to her last correspondence, reiterated that it is not the alumni team’s “policy to solicit pieces from particular students” claiming that “this would counter the inclusive approach to our alumni networking.”

Charlotte’s email exchange offers a perfect example of widening participation policies, or policies aiming at creating a multicultural and diverse environment, failing to go beyond superficial formal structures (e.g. recruiting more students from minoritised backgrounds), and that non-formal structural issues (Moon & Bratberg, 2009) remain unrecognised. Indeed, the university alumni publication is an example of the normalisation of whiteness, as well as an example of white defensiveness regarding white privilege (McIntosh, 1998; Jackson, 1999; Martin & Nakayama, 2000).

This general trend is nicely explained by the political theorist Slavoj Žižek (2010). Liberal multiculturalism, according to Žižek, is the hegemonic discourse of modern, Western society – it is, in other words, the ‘common sense’ within which all ‘decent’ people are believed to operate (see: Gramsci, 1971). This means that organisations want to be seen both as diverse *and* as bringing everyone together; as respecting difference *and* as committed to equality. As such, organisations advertise themselves and their messages with brochures filled with colourful faces, the aim being to communicate to the world (and indeed, inwardly to the institution itself), that it is a diverse entity, and that this is a demonstration and the product of its positive qualities or attributes. To advertise oneself as multicultural in this manner is to portray oneself as tolerant, open, loving, hospitable, etc. It is, in other words, a matter of *ethos.*

Yet, this self-proclaimed identity as a diverse institution is more image than reality; indeed, to draw upon Žižek’s Lacanian-inspired terminology, this is a fantasy which supports whiteness, by granting the organisation leave to discount criticisms against it: ‘How can you experience racism when we are committed to diversity?’ it may ask. In this case, whiteness is explicitly upheld by the claim that inclusivity demands that the university maintain, without change, the current exclusionary approach.

**3.6 Eurocentric Curriculum**

The content of curricula surfaced in the analysis as an institutional microaggression in the form of both microinsults and microinvalidations (Sue, 2010), though the two are to an extent interlinked. In the first form, it communicated messages of cultural inferiority and abnormality – specifically, in the form of racist literature on the core-reading list; in the latter, it took the form of both valuing white values and perspectives over BME students’ lived experiences, and the non-addressing of issues of equality and discrimination.

With regards to the latter examples, during the second interview with Adila, when discussing two mandatory courses that she took as part of her Medicine degree, she stated: “I found that it was very much kind of Eurocentric in the way that they see things” (Adila, Interview 2). Eurocentrism refers ‘to standards and values that derive from white European histories and epistemologies about ‘our’ world, but which also ignore and disparage other cultural or ethnic paradigms and lived experiences’ (Thompson, 2001, 34). In other words, it is a form of ethnocentrism – normally heterosexist, classist and fundamentally male in nature, being almost entirely the product of narratives drawn from elite historical narratives (rather than deriving from any form of approach predicated upon the study of ‘history from below’ (cf. Thompson, 1966)).

That white ethnocentrism is an important aspect of what ‘normalises’ whiteness in contemporary Western democracies has been detailed by numerous academics (e.g. Dyer, 2003; Eriksen, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Garner, 2007; Hartigan, 1997; Hylton, 2009; McIntosh, 1997 [1988]). The Eurocentric narrative privileges whiteness by framing it as the normal, ‘natural’ human condition, to the extent that, as already noted, white people are taught to hold the view that far from being ‘a certain race, they are just the human race’ (Dyer, 1997, 3). The broad definition of a Eurocentric curriculum, as utilised here, is thus the same as Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist’s (2003, 64), who define it as a curriculum that is ‘biased towards the white supremacist worldview’.

Adila is not alone in contending that curricula can have Eurocentric biases. There is a growing and substantive literature that looks at Eurocentrism within academic curricula (e.g. hooks, 1994; Sharma, 2004; Yep, 2007; McLaren, 2000; Delanty, 2001; D’Souza, 1991). That such a bias exists is not surprising since, as Perez Huber, Johnson and Kohli (2006) have argued, in the formalisation of a national curriculum – or the identification of what is the canon according to common assent – creating a shared set of nationally-mandated standards of evaluation, is likely to prioritise the prevailing values and perspectives set out in white and upper-class history as the most ‘common sense’ (and universalisable) markers against which answers can be judged.

To adopt a quotation from G.W.F. Hegel (1979, 35), ‘[w]hat is known, precisely because it is *well-*known, is not *known*. In the knowledge process, the commonest way to mislead oneself and others is to assume that something is well-known and to accept it as such’. So it is that, as a universalising voice, whiteness is able to control the “production and dissemination of knowledge” and permeates and saturates the curriculum (Yep, 2007, 89). As a quick, illustrative detour, one can look at the canonical texts of the current hegemonic political discourse – liberalism – as a perfect example of the Eurocentric, and ethnocentric foundations of what is seen as normal (and in liberalism’s case, what is *decent*) within academic curricula.

Liberalism, as well as being the dominant philosophy, ideology and politics (both social and economic) of our time, underpins much of what is termed within the US the ‘Liberal Arts’ – history, literature, and other areas of the humanities and social sciences. Within the teaching of these fields two figures are most prominent as the fore-fathers of liberalism and liberal values: the Englishmen John Locke and John Stuart Mill. Locke, for example, through his arguments against the tyranny of political slavery and in defence of an individual’s right to ‘life, liberty and property’, found his words echoed in the American declaration of independence. Yet, the slavery which Locke is canonised for decrying, and the freedom he called for in response, were both those of the white man ruled unjustly; he himself had investments in the slave trade and helped draft the constitution of Carolina which settled that ‘[e]very freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his Negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever’ (quoted in Losurdo, 2014, 42).

Similarly, Mill, who developed a central thesis of liberalism, the ‘harm principle’ – by which one has complete freedom to act as one wishes, so long as such acts do not cause *harm* to any other (see: Mill, 2006) – and was an early advocate of women’s equal rights (ibid.), simultaneously combined these arguments with a belief in the superiority of the ‘European race’ over other, ‘barbaric’ and ‘uncivilised races’. For the latter, according to Mill, ‘[d]espotism is a legitimate mode of government … providing the end be their improvement’ since freedom applies ‘only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties’, not to ‘those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage’ (Mill, 2002, 45). Like Locke before him, this allowed Mill to advocate freedom as a white privilege alongside slavery as an acceptable subjugation for black people, for whom slavery was ‘one step in advance of a savage’, their being ‘scarcely able’ by themselves to introduce the industrial life from which freedom would bloom ‘until they are … conquered and made slaves of’ (quoted in Losurdo, 2014, 225-226).

These paradoxes within the thought of two giants of the liberal canon – the white supremacy openly present within liberalism’s history and key texts – are rarely part of the curriculum, let alone the question addressed as to how such views may linger within the ideological morphology of liberalism itself (see: Freeden, 1996). This selective popularisation of only part of these figures’ writings as the universal values of liberalism – born of the west (in particular Imperial England), but insights gifted to all peoples, is a prime example of Eurocentrism at the heart of university teaching.

To leave this general example and return to the specific case raised by Adila; I had wrongly assumed her medicine classes were “purely science”; however, as she herself explained, there was a tendency within them to explain things from a Eurocentric, white perspective. This is illustrated via a quote from the second interview with Adila:

I: Do you also feel that, I guess this might not really fit with medicine … I’m interested if you felt that the things that we’re taught, knowledge, which is perceived as valuable, might have also been very white. But I guess the question might not make sense with medicine, since it’s purely science.

A: It’s not purely science though.

I: No?

A: When it comes to sort of questions that you ask, the sort of leading questions that you have, you know straight away the sort of stereotypical situations where you’re gonna have a Pakistani person presenting with a history of a cough which is productive and brings up blood. But straight away you know that the diagnosis is TB, just because they are Pakistani and they’re coughing. And it’s the same with the sort of stereotypes that you get, certain questions where you have a gay hairdresser who’s presenting with a cough. So a gay hairdresser, and you’re meant to think HIV, it kind of primes you for different things. And I don’t know if it’s the holistic or if it’s an element of stereotyping as well, that you’re meant to pigeonhole in a way, to kind of make things easier for yourself when answering questions. And it does kind of fall into the sort of pattern recognition of knowledge which is valuable in order to pass exams, more than anything else. So for example, a woman presenting to her doctor, this actually came up in one of our exams, a woman of Somali background presenting to her doctor with bone pain and weakness. You’d think straight away osteomalacia, just because she’s from a Somali background so she’s more likely to have covered herself up. And she has bone pain and weakness, okay she’s got basically reduced calcium ‘cause she’s not getting enough Vitamin D. But yes, the scenarios of people from BME backgrounds are very stereotypical and from a white perspective. (Adila, Interview 2)

Adila here provided three examples of “stereotypical situations”, in which Medicine students are meant to “pigeonhole” people in order to diagnose them. The first scenario is a heterosexist stereotype of a gay hairdresser with HIV – a common stereotype of gay men in the media, both the professional choice, as well as suffering from HIV. The second stereotypical scenario is a person from a Pakistani background with tuberculosis – the implied reason for this being the substandard and unhygienic living conditions in Pakistan. In the third scenario a Muslim woman from a Somali background suffers from osteomalacia, due to wearing a veil. Adila states that it is necessary to draw on stereotypical knowledge since as a “sort of pattern recognition of knowledge” it “is valuable in order to pass exams”. Stereotypes are discussed in more detail in the next chapter on inter-personal microaggressions; for now, it is simply important to note how a white, heterosexist and European perspective influences the curriculum content.

As noted in Yep (2007, 19), the problem with a white, Eurocentric curriculum is often twofold: on the one hand, there often is a “symbolic and/or virtual erasure” of minoritised individuals or groups of “not having their voices and experiences included in the research content”; on the other hand, if groups or people from minoritised backgrounds are included, they are often objectified, for the purpose of comparing how they deviate from the norm. This objectification can also be tied into implicit warnings against what is perceived as Other. Thus, in the particular cases Adila describes, the example of the gay hairdresser, as well as the Somali woman wearing a veil are offered as paradigmatic examples based upon an implicitly acknowledged understanding that their deviations lead to problems which a sensible (normal) person would avoid: e.g. that a gay man’s sexual practices are a serious risk for society – AIDs being the ‘gay disease’.

As noted earlier, Adila’s experience of Eurocentrism within her curriculum was not singular. In her correspondence, Kendi reported experiencing the curriculum she studies as not only Eurocentric, in the sense of omitting the experiences of minoritised people, but also as culturally biased, portraying Black people in racist ways:

**“**It is a great contradiction when you are supposed to think that the work of a white author is great and yet at the same time it is also blatantly racist. I don’t want this literature to be banned, but it should be taught in a better way. People should be made aware of the racism and it should be challenged. Most of the time it isn’t even brought up in classroom discussions. I also think that the canon in British literature is filled with white men and it’s almost impossible to find any non-white authors on the core reading list. They are not seen as part of the canon. Usually, they will only come up in a specific lecture on authors from certain ethnic minority backgrounds, often at the end of the semester.” (Kendi, Email Response)

Kendi’s example demonstrates two instances of microaggressions – a microinvalidation and a microinsult. Regarding the former, Kendi states that “non-white authors are not on the core reading list. They are not seen as part of the canon”. Such an omission of “non-white authors” from the core-reading list presents a microinvalidation. Furthermore, Kendi notes a value hierarchy placed on authors from minoritised backgrounds whereby, if these authors *are* included, it is “at the end of the semester”. Kendi’s experience here echoes bell hooks (1994, 38), who writes that:

‘all too often we found a will to include those considered “marginal” without a willingness to accord their work the same respect and consideration given other work in Women’s Studies, for example, individuals will often focus on women of color at the very end of the semester or lump everything about race and difference together in one section. This kind of tokenism is not multicultural transformation, but is familiar to us as the change individuals are most likely to make.’

In Kendi’s experience the main part of her degree normalised and glorified white people and white values, while at the same time still denigrating the contributions and lived experiences of Black people. While including as an addendum a ‘black example’ may thus be seen as a good, liberal attempt to introduce a plurality of experience, its literal ‘ghettoisation’ does the opposite by accentuating its position on the fringe – useful as a counter-point to what is normal, and as such valuable in how it relates to other white works, rather than (like the former) in and of itself.

The quotation from Kendi furthermore points to a great paradox, with which some BME students often have to struggle; the “great contradiction when you are supposed to think that the work of a white author is great and yet at the same time it is also blatantly racist.” Here the previous illustrative examples of Locke and Mill raise their heads; in Kendi’s particular case, as part of her degree in English literature, she has to read white authors who are “blatantly racist” – authors who demean and portray Black people in unflattering ways. Faced with such works Kendi raises an interesting question – a conundrum even – of how a BME student reconciles the fact that what they are taught is “great”, contains within it the message that they themselves are of lesser worth that others (i.e. white people – almost always male). Worse yet, there is the fact to be dealt with that their teacher – who holds a position of explicit authority as, to draw upon Lacan’s phrase, a sort of ‘subject supposed to know’ (cf. Žižek, 2006) – isn't even acknowledging the racism, and does not even seem to *see* it. Again, to illustrate the point in Kendi’s own words:

“I don’t want this literature to be banned, but it should be taught in a better way. People should be made aware of the racism and it should be challenged. Most of the time it isn’t even brought up in classroom discussions.”

So it is that, faced with a curriculum she experiences as racist, Kendi is nevertheless resigned to the fact that it is unrealistic that the core-reading list in literature, “filled with white men”, will change, or even have its very nature recognised as such. This is further example of a microinvalidation – whereby racism is neither discussed nor challenged. These examples that arose from my research are far from being outliers: in 2009, a NUS Black Students Campaign’s National Students Survey found that “42 per cent did not believe their curriculum reflected issues of diversity, equality and discrimination.” The report also found that courses designed and taught by white lecturers often did not take into account diverse backgrounds and views (NUS report).

* 1. **Summary**

This chapter has focused upon the research participants’ experiences of institutional (or environmental) microaggressions. In so doing, it has identified five main themes: (i) a lack of student diversity; (ii) a lack of staff diversity; (iii) a lack of role models; (iv) an encounter with misplaced multicultural policies; and (v) a Eurocentric curriculum. Microaggressions were not only experienced at this general, structural level, however; participants also described their experiences with inter-personal microaggressions, the subject of the next analytical chapter.

**CHAPTER 4:**

**ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL MICROAGGRESSIONS**

**4.1 Introduction: Interpersonal Microaggressions**

Unlike institutional/environmental microaggressions, which are more apparent on a systemic level, interpersonal microaggressions occur between people; they entail verbal and nonverbal indignities directed at BME students by fellow students, faculty, teaching assistants, or other individuals in academic and social spaces (Yosso et al., 2009, 667). In my interviews and focus group, respondents reported numerous examples of such interpersonal microgressions, focused upon in this chapter. These include the themes ‘Alien in one’s own land’ (4.2), ‘Ascription of Intelligence / Assumption of Inferior Status’ (4.3), ‘Assumption of Criminality’ (4.4), ‘Pathologising Cultural Values’ (4.5), and ‘Stereotyping’ (4.6). The first category identified were microinvalidations, which in terms of interpersonal microaggressions primarily refer to remarks that diminish, dismiss, or negate the realities and histories of BME students. In this case, these corresponded with the theme of ‘alien in one’s own land’.

**4.2 ‘Alien in one’s own land’**

As Sue (2010, 37) describes, the theme here labelled ‘alien in one’s own land’ ‘involves being perceived as a perpetual foreigner or being alien in one’s own country’. Examples of this microinvalidation occur when British BME students are complimented for speaking very good English, or are persistently asked where they are from, or where they were born. These are all acts that communicate the message to them: “You are not British, you are a foreigner, you are not one of us”. This theme arose during the focus group, when students were shown images from the “I too am Sheffield” campaign and Adila stated that this happens to her frequently:

A: that's one of the examples they have there [photo of the "I too am Sheffield” campaign] that comes up all the time, every single time when you meet someone new, it's kind of like "where are you from?" "Sheffield."

N: It's such a range, people always think I'm American and they are like "what you're Indian?", "you have an American accent, how did that happen?"[[34]](#footnote-34)

I: Doesn't that show something interesting about British society, which we all know is very diverse, but people still feel the need to ask, if they see someone who is not white, as if that means they…

A: yes, it does, because most of the time these sorts of things happen in conversations I have had with someone and I go like, we haven't even exchanged names, but they need to know "so where are you from?" "uhm Sheffield" "where are you *really* from?" sort of thing, it's kind of like, for some bizarre reason, people feel the need to have you in a niche to begin with straight away

N: yeah

E: they have to put you in a compartment and like separate you, that's how some people make friends, you are like me, so I'll sit with you and talk, you aren't and they move on.

In the above dialogue, Adila explains that one of the first things that people need to know about her, even before she has had a chance to exchange names, is where she is “*really from*”. This seemingly innocent question is rooted in the concept, previously discussed in Chapter 1, of whiteness as the normal and default – and therefore invisible and unquestionable – position in British society. From within this hegemonic perspective, students from BME backgrounds are, in Helms’ (1992; 1995) phrase, ‘visible racial/ethnic minorities’,[[35]](#footnote-35) who by the nature of their phenotypical characteristics – e.g. facial features, skin pigmentation – are differentiated from this norm, failing as they do to match the idealised phenotypical features of the dominant (white) group.

In vocalising this message via the form of this question, the individual student is exoticised and Otherised. The fact that Adila’s reply – that she is “from Sheffield” – does not satisfy the questioner entrenches the same microinvalidation, implying further that someone who looks like her cannot *really* be ‘just’ from Sheffield. The hidden message sent to her by the follow-up clarificatory and querying “*really”,* is: “You do not seem like you belong here, so where is it that you do belong?” Adila’s difference makes her a kind of public spectacle, a subject matter open for enquiry, rather than an individual to be engaged with substantively; so it is that total strangers (“we haven't even exchanged names yet”) open their conversations with her by asking, in a barely indirect fashion, what her ethnicity/race/heritage is.

What might ‘normally’ be perceived as a bold opening conversational gambit is possible, in this case, because the person the enquiry is addressed to is an “exotic Other” – a phrase that both Adila and Eyana drew upon throughout the Focus Group (see for instance, p.10). Both recognise the function of this question as a means by which people can be categorised into insiders and outsiders. As Adila puts it, “people feel the need to put you in a niche to begin with”; Eyana agrees, stating that “they have to put you in a compartment and like separate you”. Eyana goes further, describing how in her experience, for some people, the question subsequently operates as a means by which the person asking it can establish, through categorisation, whether they want to make further contact with someone. In her own words: “that’s how some people make friends, you are like me, so I’ll sit with you and talk, you aren’t and they move on”.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Such incidents, where the individual undergoes categorisation – with the conterminous message that “you don’t belong” – and (often) subsequent exclusion, are clearly negative experiences. Alima shared another, similar experience of categorisation as an individual identifiably different to the white norm when, during registration, she was mistaken for an international student:

“Like I don’t think people knew that I spoke English, that I was from here and things like that. Yeah, things, so when I got registered and international and home students, well I didn’t have to do anything about the tuition fees or whatever, so a guy just presumed, because of the way I looked that I was an international student and I was like *“dude, I’m from London.”* (Alima, Interview 1)

This event, which Alima was clearly annoyed about as she recounted it, was mentioned in the context of what she remembers about her first day at the University of Sheffield, denoting that, as one of her first experiences at university, it had clearly had an impact and stuck in her memory.

Exactly the same experience was described by Saree, who mentioned in our second interview how “some people think I’m an international student”. Saree explicitly links such occurrences to the aforementioned functions of categorisation and subsequent exclusion, describing it as “this us and them thing all over again. I can’t be of the inner group” (Saree, Interview 2). Saree described this as part of “an apartheid system of us and them” (ibid.) which had the effect of rendering her ‘invisible’ – a particular issue in social, rather than academic situations:

S: … I’m talking about socialising, like there have been instances where you feel like you are invisible if you are not white, like it’s really strange, like they’ll talk to the person next to you if they are white.

I: You mean during coursework?

S: No, everyone is nice academically, I meant socially if you go anywhere for social events, you just suddenly become invisible, it’s really strange and you just go like *“why are you so narrow minded?”*, it’s just so weird. Again, they do that in England all the time. It’s still so colonial, they still have the attitude we ruled the world and it’s still pronounced in a way, especially when people are more right wing, yeah that’s what I would say.

‘Invisibility’, as an effect of racial microaggressions, has been discussed by Sue et al.(2008, 334), who describe how, in their own research into higher education:

‘Several participants reported a resultant feeling of being invisible because of cumulative microaggressive experiences. These participants felt that their contribution and presence was deemed to be both less valuable and visible than a White person’s. They described a feeling of not being noticed or acknowledged, as well as a consequential feeling of having to “impress” people to gain recognition.’

The authors quote one participant’s illustrative statement: that, “You deal with that as a Black person, there’s a certain real invisibility, or where White people just can’t recognize your face, your distinction, something like that, unless you really impress upon them in a relationship” (ibid.). Similar issues were identified by research carried out by Taylor (1999). Focused on the American higher education system, Taylor’s research found that Native American undergraduates felt isolated and marginalised as a result of covert and overt racism – from the looks that white students gave them, to their categorisation by strangers as ‘affirmative action admits’ and not qualified students (ibid.).

As well as leaving students feeling ‘Otherised’ and excluded, the question “where are you *really from*” is also an attack on their individuality as such, refuting and deriding the complexity of a subject’s identity with a demand for a specifically categorised identification. In this manner, it invalidates the many different histories, cultures and experiences that make up a student’s identity through an attempt to force their identification with only a specific aspect of their complex identities. The question implies that they can only be from one particular place, or that home is a set location; it thus homogenises identities, erasing multiple cultures and the varying degrees of connection a student might feel towards different places. As Adila explains in one of the interviews:

A: When they ask me where I’m from, I say Sheffield, but generally people tend to plough a bit deeper, so *“where are you actually from?”*, so it just became easier to say British Pakistani. My parents are from Pakistan.

I: That must be annoying, people ploughing and that you feel you have to say British Pakistani, would you…

A: I’d much rather just be able to say British, because that’s how I identify myself more than anything else, yeah, I just think it makes it easier for people to compartmentalise. (Adila, Interview 1)

As she describes, Adila identifies mainly as “British”, but feels forced to define her identity via her parents’ heritage (“it just became easier to say British Pakistani”), as people do not accept her reply (“people tend to plough a bit deeper”) that she is from Sheffield.

Just as it forces Adila to choose an identity, the question invalidates the experiences of students whose families have lived in the UK for generations, or students with mixed-race and mixed-ethnic backgrounds whose families might have come from many different places, or who might feel a diasporic connection with multiple homelands. In Adila’s case, she is forced to note that she is Pakistani as well as British – for other students it will be other ethnic or national identifications they would not otherwise call upon. In the way that it denudes the complexity of an individual’s identities, this experience – the demand from another that you adopt a specific, delimited identity – links to the example of students such as Monette (related in the previous chapter) who are told that they are a “Bounty” – i.e. someone who is white on the inside and black on the outside. In each case an individual has an essentialist identity thrust upon them.

Raashida also describes the pressure of having identities thrust upon her. During our second interview, while talking about how people at university view her in a stereotypical manner, she described how people do not see her as an individual but as a “stereotypical Pakistani”:

I: you mean they don't see you as an individual?

R: Yeah, that's right. I'm just part of a collective Pakistani category, yeah, I think first they see me as a Muslim and then they just assume things and then I say stuff like, I'm just talking about home "I did this and then I did this" and then they go like "oh where are you from?" and I'm like "England", but they don’t accept that and they go on "where are you from?", so I say “Pakistan" "oh you're from Pakistan, okay", so I have to say both of those things, I am British.

I: Is that annoying if someone keeps asking you where you are from and it seems like they don't see you as proper ...

R: Yeah it is. Most of the time I'm like I'm from Pakistan and it's not a big deal, but why do you need to know it, it's the first thing, you need to know where I'm from. (Raashida, Interview 2)

When she states that “where are you from” is “the first thing you need to know”, Raashida’s experience directly mirrors Adila’s. Just as in Adila’s case, her fellow students do not accept “England” as a valid answer, asking again “where are you from”. It is only the answer “Pakistan”, which seems to satisfy them (“okay”). Once again, the implied message of this microaggression is that someone who looks like Raashida cannot *really* be ‘just’ from England despite the fact that she was born in Britain and has visited Pakistan only four times to visit relatives (her mother moved to Britain from Pakistan aged thirteen). Nevertheless, like Adila, she is required, under questioning, to define herself as from both England and Pakistan[[37]](#footnote-37) as people feel it necessary to know her racial heritage.

Throughout my long interviews with Raashida, I gained valuable insights into how much microaggressive events influenced her student experience and her life in general. The microaggressive theme of being seen as an ‘Alien in one’s own land’ has had consequences for almost every aspect of Raashida’s life. Even with things that might appear trivial, such as what to wear, she feels restricted by her fear of being seen as a perpetual foreigner – a pressure, she explains, that she did not feel when visiting Pakistan:

I: You were talking about feeling more comfortable in Pakistan than you do in England

R: I think I felt I belong there skin colour wise, because here, I belong here, but people wouldn't think that. I think that's why I feel I have to speak English really loud,[[38]](#footnote-38) so that they can hear and it's because I don't have an Asian accent, I don't have a foreign accent, so they'll know "*ah she is actually from here*", because I think if I had an Asian accent then they would still think "*oh what is she doing here?"* and they can tell from the way I speak that I have gone to school here. You know, this is my home. So yeah, when I'm in Pakistan, that's just me, I don't have to be two people, unless they speak to me, then they would be able to tell that I'm from England, but they still treat you as Pakistani, you just live in England, they don't see you as foreign, you were there and now you have come back, so ... yeah and here I have to constantly remind people that I'm English, because people are just so .., I'm like "look I can wear jeans".

Before I wore a headscarf, I used to wear Asian clothes, just to like shopping or anything, like casual day to day ones, now I don't wear them, because I feel like now that I wear a headscarf, if I wear Asian clothes, people will think I'm not from here and they'll treat me differently, so I don't wear Asian clothes, unless it's like to a wedding or to a special event, I'll only wear them for a reason, because I feel like people will be like "oh that foreigner" and not be nice to me, so I wear English clothes, yeah, but before I wore a headscarf, I wore Asian clothes on a daily basis and wouldn't have a problem with it, because I thought people could still tell that I was English... but yeah I always have to explain to people, sort of like "oh my parents aren't like that", because they just assume "oh but you are brown, you're all the same" (Raashida, Interview 2)

Raashida’s description of herself as having to be “two people”, rather than being just herself, as someone from a BME background in Britain perfectly encapsulates the effect of the microaggression under discussion. Unable to be accepted on the basis of her individuality as such, she is forced to call upon her ethnic heritage, a process that makes her feel disjointed, not whole. It is as if she is split, having to perform – and foreground – different aspects of her complex identity to satisfy the queries of the white majority (an experience that links back to W.E.B. DuBois’s (1994) conception of ‘double consciousness’ and ‘two souls’ (see: 3.3.1)).

The concept of feeling an ‘alien in one’s own land’ is directly enunciated through Raashida’s practice of speaking loudly to advertise her native accent – a practice she undertakes out of a fear that, being from a BME background, she must constantly remind people that she *is* from England and *not* a foreigner, as otherwise they will treat her differently. This fear – of being seen as alien – extends as far as her fashion choices; as Raashida explains in the above quotation, she used to wear Asian clothes, but now feels that, since she wears the headscarf, this would be too abnormal for white people, making her more vulnerable to appearing foreign and to subsequently being treated poorly (i.e. people will “not be nice to [her]”, treating her as “that foreigner”). She describes constantly battling with people’s stereotypical and Islamophobic perceptions of her throughout her university experience (see below), stereotypical perceptions she feels she constantly has to defy (“my parents aren’t like that”, “oh but you are brown, you are all the same”). Living with constant microaggressions has forced Raashida to try to conform to white standards to a certain extent, in order to avoid further racism – it has become easier to not wear the clothes she wants to wear, than fighting people’s (micro)aggressive remarks.

**4.3 Ascription of Intelligence /Assumption of Inferior Status**

All further interpersonal microaggressions occurring in the data fell into the category of microinsults, defined in the previous chapter as ‘communications that convey stereotypes, rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage’ (Sue 2010, 31). The first key theme in this category to discuss is ‘ascription of intelligence / assumption of inferior status’ . As the label describes, this theme refers to occurrences where intellect, competence and capabilities are assigned to a person with a BME background based on their race and often gender (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008).[[39]](#footnote-39) Examples of this microinsult include BME students receiving startled comments from fellow students or lecturers showing surprise regarding their status as students (“people of your background are not usually the sort who go to university”) or their capabilities (“you articulate so well” and “well done”). The metacommunication in such cases is that said BME student is an exception and people of their racial/ethnic background are generally not as intelligent as whites.

This is a common microagressive theme. In studies from the US, for example, the notion of African Americans as intellectually inferior and unable to undertake abstract reasoning has been shown to be a commonly articulated theme (James, 2012; Jones, 1997; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). This is especially salient in terms of educational settings; in their study on microaggressions in the classroom, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) found they occurred frequently, and while cultural/racial as well as gendered microaggressions were observed, the most frequent microaggression types were those that undermined the intelligence and competence of students.

Charlotte described an experience of this microaggressive theme during her time at the University of Sheffield. Discussing how she can relate to almost all the themes raised in the “I too am Sheffield” and the “I too am Harvard” campaign, Charlotte wrote:

“I have received frequently startled comments from people that suggest they don’t expect a person who looks like me to have the accent I do, or be part of a university community at all- in that patronizing, *“Oh! You speak very good English!” “Gosh, you sound so English!”* way” (Charlotte, Email Response).

As the italics relay, ‘shocked’ comments such as “Gosh you sound so English!” patronise the recipient, sending the message that someone who looks like them should be speaking with a lower class, or ‘ethnic’ accent (the two often being considered the same). As Charlotte explains, she is perceived as an aberration by white students (“they don’t expect a person who looks like me to have the accent I do, or be part of a university community at all”), transmitting the metacommunication that people from her ethnic background are intellectually inferior to ‘normal’ white people and so are not normally PhD students.

Monette, also related experiences where she felt that her intelligence was seen as suspect, due to her race; specifically, discussing a period in her secondary school, she raised the following event:

“I was doing the sciences, I was doing maths, chemistry , physics and further maths and I heard passing comments like ‘oh Monette is doing all the sciences’ and there were ten other people doing it. They wouldn’t say that to my Chinese friend, because they assume that she can do that, so I was a bit like ‘oh okay’” (Monette, Interview 2)

The ascription of intellectual inferiority (and racial stereotyping) that Monette identified from such statements is one which, according to research by Sue, Nadal et al. (2008, 69) is very common to Black people. This is a particularly offensive microaggressive theme linked to a long-standing stereotype of Black people as poor rational thinkers, which goes back to the days of slavery. Further research has shown that Black students continue to encounter such stereotypes related to their academic abilities (e.g. Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries- Britt & Turner, 2001; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Strommer, 1995)

In a similar manner to Charlotte and Monette, Adila also experienced passing comments related to intellect. As she described:

“even though people are very welcoming in some ways, I think in some regards it depends on your accent as well. Because I’ve noticed that doctors who wear a scarf for example, that have a stronger sort of accent from where they’re from, so for example South Asia, they tend to be treated in a sort of different way. And just the way that it says here that the passing of casual comments which seem to imply *“well done”.*  That does tend to happen every now and again, and it does seem to, it can be a bit condescending, or maybe even a bit patronising at times.” (Adila, Interview 2)

Anecdotal descriptions of South Asian students who wear a hijab and have stronger accents receiving differential treatment are supported by academic analysis. For example, a study by Woolf et al. (2008) on ethnic stereotypes and the underachievement of UK medical students from BME backgrounds, found that students from South Asian backgrounds were perceived by lecturers as bad at communicating with patients and less capable in practical situations. Like Charlotte, Adila interprets comments such as *“well done”* as condescending, imparting the implicit message to the individual upon which the benediction is bestowed, that “You are a credit to your race/ethnicity – people from your background are normally inferior to white students”.

Adila mentioned a further example of this microaggression in our first interview, specifically in the context of whether or not race matters at university. Race, she claimed, is significant and people differentiate based along these lines, providing several points to support this claim. Some of these points will be discussed in more detail in the section on stereotypes below; with regard to the theme of ‘ascription of intelligence / assumption of inferior status’, however, Adila described a perception that she is seen as “not as intelligent or … capable of answering” as her white peers, and often seen through a lens of Muslim stereotypes:

“I’m just thinking, I mean there is a lot of indirect things, a lot of things where it is kind of like just based on a person's perception of you, they kind of expect you to not be as vocal or not be as intelligent or you know capable of answering or capable of talking for yourself and I think it kind of throws people off, when you do actually reply or do actually give them something in response. Yeah, it's more subtle, it's not kind of overt sort of things, but, it is definitely more subtle and it does make a difference with regards to how people treat you as well and yeah and with regards to how they perceive situations in your life, because they haven't really come across anything similar with regards to their social circles, the Asian culture is very traditional and very different in some regards and can be positive and it can be perceived negative, as well, depending on where you are coming from, so ...” (Adila, Interview 1)

Adila’s statement demonstrates the subtlety of microaggressions – they need not be verbalised but can involve nonverbal acts such as being startled. In this manner Adila is made an exotic other, concluding – in a similar manner to Eyana’s comments, discussed above, regarding the importance of group categorisation – that you might be perceived in a negative or positive way. Other times, however, comments can be less subtle, as relayed by Saree, who stated: “I know that when I got into Sheffield that there were some people that were like, what, how did she get in, she is not white” (Saree, Interview 2).

The final example of this micoaggressive theme was provided in a story that Kadira narrated:

“They just see what you are, what you physically look like and then make certain assumptions about you, is one way to say it. This is quite a recent example but my mum had arranged for us to go and see Jeremy Kyle and we ended up sitting on the front row and before the show started Jeremy was just talking to the audience and asking people certain questions and I was sat on the front row and he was like, “Oh what do you do” or “What’s your job?” or something like that and I was like, “Oh I’m a student” and then he went, “*You’re* a student?” and I don’t know. I didn’t know how to take it but he was kind of like he was shocked that that was what I was doing, that I was at university and I just felt…whenever someone says something that makes you doubt yourself or doubt that you should be doing…that you are doing what you’re doing, then I kind of like close in and evaluate myself. And it’s so annoying that I shouldn’t be questioning myself but when other people make assumptions about you already you’re just like, “well, if they think that then everyone must think that”. (Kadira, Interview 2)

As in the other examples, Kadira attributes the incident to the aggressor’s belief that people from BME backgrounds are intellectually inferior. Her aggressor, in this example TV personality Jeremy Kyle, assumed that by virtue of Kadira’s skin colour she cannot be a student and “he was shocked … that I was at university”. Kadira’s reaction shows the psychological effects of seemingly “harmless” microaggressions, describing how it caused her to “kind of like close in and evaluate myself” and her fears that “if they think that then everyone must think that”.

The microaggressive event impacts upon her cognitive reasoning as well as psychological well-being and leaves her with severe self-doubt (“whenever someone says something like that, it makes you doubt yourself or doubt what you should be doing”) and lowered self-esteem. These effects have been documented elsewhere in the literature on microaggressions; Sue (2010, 99), for example, postulates that ‘microaggressions in the form of insults and invalidations have strong detrimental effects. Evidence suggests that microaggressive stressors can be implicated in the manifestation of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety’. This specific incident provides an illustration of how powerful seemingly innocent microaggressions can be for the recipient.

**4.4 Assumption of Criminality**

Another microinsult mentioned by one participant is the assumption of criminality. This refers to the presumption that individuals from a BME background are “dangerous, potentially criminal, likely to break the law, or antisocial” (ibid., 36; see also Mercer et al. 2011). This theme is “very race specific” (ibid.). In the United Kingdom, analytical studies are presently lacking;[[40]](#footnote-40) however, in the United States of America, where the most significant analyses have been carried out, it has been found to apply mainly to African Americans and Latinos, and – inversely – rarely to Asian Americans, who by contrast tend to be viewed as conformist and law abiding (ibid.). Research also finds that women are less likely to encounter this form of microinsult; however, Monette, who is from a Black British Caribbean background, did report such an experience.

In reply to the question about her most negative experiences at university, Monette relayed the following story:

“Probably sometimes when I go out…when I went out a couple of times…I got kicked out of a pub once because they said they could smell…not a pub (inaudible). They said they could smell weed and they kicked me out. I was like, “I don’t smoke weed!” And then another time when I was working in the pub and the bouncer made like a really racist remark which was a bit like maybe when you go outside and you interact with actual people from Sheffield then you realise you were an ethnic minority and a lot of people are quite ignorant. So that’s probably been my most negative experience.” (Monette, Interview 2)

The messages communicated by these encounters – most clearly in the former regarding drug use – are “*You are not trustworthy”* and *“You are probably a criminal”.* Certainly the incident was interpreted by Monette as an inherent mistrust on the part of white people for whom being Black is associated with criminality – an example of differential treatment that a white student would have not experienced. The result was the denigrating experience of being accused (“they said they could smell weed”) and treated (“they kicked me out”) as a criminal – an event that ranked alongside direct, racist remarks as her “most negative experience.”

**4.5 Patholigising Cultural Values**

The negative ascription of values to BME individuals is further encountered in the microagressive theme labelled ‘pathologising cultural values’. As Sue (2010, 35) describes, this theme has two components: first, the belief that the cultural values of whites (in particular, heterosexual white men) are the normative ideal and second, concomitantly, that those of people from BME backgrounds (alongside those of LGBT and women generally) are abnormal and inferior. The message sent to BME people is “you are abnormal” and/or “you should assimilate to the dominant culture”, with abnormality being defined from a white European male perspective (i.e. that of the dominant culture); this message may be actualised in the attachment of negative normative judgements to cultural values, but also personality traits and attributes, behaviours and even appearance and dress (ibid.).

The first example of one of my research participants experiencing this microaggression was relayed by Adila and relates to the reactions provoked by her wearing of the hijab in a professional setting. Specifically, in her first interview, she narrated a story about her experiences, as a medical student, removing her headscarf before going into surgery:

“Yeah, there are few specific lecturers, who are retired now (laughs), but uhm, I won't mention them, I think, say for example me going into surgery, with surgery you have to take, you have to take like you know a change of clothes and put like a scrub cap on, for me personally, I don't mind taking my scarf off and putting a scrub cap on, if we are doing surgery and while I know that some of my peers, who are similar sort of race and ethnic background to myself wouldn't and I think in some situations it's kind of throwing people that I do take my scarf of and in some situations they seem to be pleased that I take my scarf off, as if it is some sort of thing that would, I don't know, some sort of validation instances for you that they have.

There was one clinician, and it was after like a local surgery sort of setting and I asked to go in with them and they said "yes of course" and then they pointed to my scarf and said "so what are you going to do about this? What do you normally do about this?" and I said, "well normally in surgery I take it off" and they were like "okay, fine. So just take it off then" and at local surgery it is not really the same sort of sterile field aspect that you would have in sort of major surgery where you are cutting into the abdomen or a leg or something like that or any sort of very sterile area of the body, when you are actually going into the body, but it seemed to be quite important to this clinician that I, do you adhere to the sort of, the sort of idea what surgery is, even though the area was far from a sterile place, so that's just one example which came to mind, there probably are more, but I haven't really thought about it .” (Interview 1)

Significant in Adila’s story is her sense that people feel “pleased” when she removes her headscarf, an action for which she receives validation from lecturers. While not an open criticism of her cultural values and wearing the headscarf, experiences such as this represent a microaggression fitting with the theme of pathologising cultural values, as the fact that Adila is willing to remove her headscarf – a symbolic difference from the dress-code of the majority culture – represents an example of her willingness to adapt to or adopt (if not entirely assimilate into) the norms of the majority culture.

This particular example is additionally notable insofar as the request to conform (“okay fine, so just take it off then”) is linked to Adila’s entrance into a professional setting – her cultural values, symbolised in her hijab, are viewed as a problem here (“So what are you going to do about this?”) even when – as at the local surgery – there is no medical justification: the problem is the need to conform to the way things are done, which is to say *to the way things are done within the dominant culture.* Adila’s cultural values are delimited to the world outside – a matter for the private realm, to be dispensed within in the professional. This theme recurred in my second interview with Adila also:

I: I just noted down here that I thought it was really interesting how you said in the last interview, when you spoke about taking your headscarf off in surgery, and how doctors and others seemed to feel validated by you doing so. I was just wondering if you could say more about that, in a way you just have, but...

R: Yeah that's fine. I don't know if it's validated as such, it's just more the fact that they see you making an effort to integrate, I think that's one of the phrases that stuck with me more than anything else. Because someone actually did say to me...

I: Really?

R: Yeah. They were just like, oh it's good to see some integration every now and again, something along those lines. And sometimes they tend to be a bit taken aback by it but they never pass any comments on it, not in front of me anyway. But when I was on obstetrics and gynaecology, which is very much a surgical based speciality, there were a few times when I was in theatres where a lot of people did see me with just a scrub cap on. […] And people feeling validated as such, by taking my headscarf off. I'm just trying to think of other situations, or other points. I think in some ways it does, yeah, I think in some ways do seem to, not value you as such, but they seem to respect you a bit more if you kind of give a bit more. So once again, obstetrics and gynaecology, I don't know if I gave this example before, but the consultant that I was under, she said to me...so we were walking down to the birthing suite, and she was saying to me, so what do you do about your scarf when you're in operating theatres. And I said, well I take it off just because it's more hygienic. And she actually said, oh that's really good to hear because obviously you don't want to be worrying about your scarf falling into someone's abdomen when you're operating and things like that. And it was the tone that she used more than anything else, where it's kind of like the well done tone. So yeah. Think I've gone off topic a bit there. (Interview 2)

What Adila describes is a lived experience wherein her (ab)normal dress is seen as a sign that she is not ‘integrated’, where integration is seen as involving the decisive act of removing her hijab (it is “good to see some integration”), an action for which she receives positive validation (“the well done tone”). As she puts it, “they seem to respect you a bit more if you kind of give a bit more” – giving a bit here involving removing cultural signifiers that differ from the majority dress-code. As with previous examples of microaggressive themes, the pathologising of cultural values does not always involve direct comments but can also take the form of nonverbal cues, as in the case of the consultant Adila describes in her final example, where “it was the tone that she used more than anything else”.

Adila’s experience is far from unique. As Yasmin Hussain and Paul Bagguley (2013, 28) note, ‘‘Funny looks’ from people in white-dominated public spaces’ is a ‘central experience’ of British Pakistani Muslims in the UK – in particular for women (ibid., 41) – where ‘[t]he reactions provoked by women who wear the hijab or niqab’ has ‘given rise to discussions of the gaze in relation to Muslims’ (ibid.,40). Citing Fortier (2008), Hussain and Bagguley (op cit.) describe how Muslim women have become ‘perceived as ‘victims’ of an ‘exotic patriarchy’ that offends Western assumptions’, with the hijab becoming ‘a sign of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ in the popular imagination and the object of considerable debate’ (see also Delphy, 2015). Indeed, the fact that cultural dress such as the hijab makes women more identifiable as Muslims makes it more likely that they will experience related microaggressions (Hussain & Bagguley, 2013,42).

Raashida, who like Adila is from a British Pakistani background and also wears the hijab, relayed several similar experiences from her time at university related to her headscarf and clothing choices. Discussing her teacher placement training, for example, which is part of her postgraduate degree, she tells the following story:

“I'm on placement for a special school, a school for special needs, and it was really good, but on Thursday we went swimming, it's a primary school, so year 3, 4, 5 and 6 and we go swimming with all the staff. It's like four staff and seven kids and I'd said to the teacher on Monday "oh do we go swimming?" and she said "yeah we go on Thursday" and I said "oh because I can't swim" and she said "what not even in jogging bottoms and a T-shirt?" in this kind of judging tone, and I was like "no, I literally can't swim" [both laugh], it's not about my clothes and I was like "I can wear the clothes, I just can't swim" and she was like "oh that's okay, the pool is only up to here" and I was like "oh that's ok, I'll get in then" and she was like "some of our other staff can't swim" and I was like "ok, that's fine", only because I can't swim, she assumed that it must be because of my clothes, but that's not what I meant” [laughs]. (Raashida, Interview 2)

When the member of staff responds to Raashida’s statement with the retort “not even in jogging bottoms and a t-shirt” – expressed with an intonation that indicates a “kind of judging tone” – Raashida recognises this as an example of another person attaching their implicit assumptions about Muslim culture to her own personal cultural experiences: the message she receives is that her inability to swim must surely be due to her abnormal “Islamic fundamentalist” culture, which oppresses women (Fortier, 2008).

As previously discussed in the Research Design, the fact that Raashida’s story contains dialogue indicates that is was a particularly meaningful event for her and while she laughs this incident off in this retelling, she nevertheless brought it up in both interviews. The event is linked in her mind to further experiences of microaggressions, as she followed her story by describing the reactions she received when wearing her hijab in the swimming pool.

Further examples related to this microaggressive theme occurred numerous times during the interviews; for example, after reading the vignette during our second interview, Raashida discussed other people’s perceptions of her due to her race:

“Okay, I read it. Yes, I agree with that, yeah I get it, that's so true, so I'm actually not the only person there, like when these people kind of like look at you like "oh is that what you are saying?" [puts on condescending voice] and really stupid stuff like people talking in a group like "this is what I did at the weekend", "oh yeah I did that, too" and then they go like "oh did you?" [puts on very surprised voice], like what was I going to do? Sit at home? People just assume that I don't do anything, it’s the same in this example, they just assume she does nothing and has nothing and doesn't know anything, rather than maybe she'll be the same as them, even actually at this uni, because obviously we are all postgrads and when I say "oh I'm from Hemel" and my uni is like a ten to fifteen minute drive from here and some people go like "oh okay, so you came here for your undergrad" and I'm like "no I went to Sheffield" "Oh Sheffield!" [spoken with really high pitched voice, sounding surprised and shocked] “like so far away”, "so you lived there?" and I'm like "yeah, do you think I got the bus to Sheffield?". They seem surprised that I didn't go to this uni for my undergrad, just because I'm Asian, we do move out for uni, some of us [laughs], they assume that I have always lived at home and went to this uni and I don't assume that about the English or the non-Pakistani people on my course, I just go "where did you go to uni?", I don't always say "oh did you live at home?" even if they say Hertfordshire and if they are from Hemel.” (Interview 2)

Raashida sounded very agitated while relaying these experiences, which clearly had a significant impact upon her. The experiences she relates involve her being perceived by other people through an ‘Asian’ and/or ‘Muslim’ lens, leading to subsequently surprised responses from them when she does not conform to their presuppositions regarding people with her ‘abnormal’ cultural background.

The examples she gives are specifically related to her university experience. In the first, people react with surprise that she enjoys the same student life as white students from the majority. Their surprise that she does things on the weekend (“oh did you?”) – expressed through a tone that Raashida interprets as patronising – indicates a perception of her as the victim of an exotic patriarchal culture (Fortier, 2008), in which it is expected that she, as Raashida interprets it, “just sits at home”. As in previous examples, nonverbal cues such as the tone of voice, or sounding surprised, or shocked, were key elements of these microaggressive events.

The second example is similar, as her fellow (white) students are surprised that she did not attend her local university for her undergraduate degree, but instead moved away from Hemel to study at the University of Sheffield. Their surprise relates to the fact that Raashida does not conform to her peers’ idea of what a Pakistani woman is like – specifically that they live at home with their parents and do not have the freedom to move away (as she puts it “just because I’m Asian, we do move out for Uni”). In both cases the underlying message in her fellow students’ reactions is that Raashida’s culture is ‘abnormal’. As such examples illustrate, as a microagressive theme, ‘pathologising cultural values’ can be tightly interwoven with themes of stereotyping, which themselves often communicate the message that ethnic minorities are ‘abnormal’: British Asians students, for example, are stereotyped as shy, inhibited and repressed, on the presupposition that their culture dictates and emphasises subtlety and indirectness in approaching tasks (Naik, 2015; cf. Cheng, 2000).

Such experiences were not the preserve of the British Asian students interviewed. Monette and Charlotte, both of whom are from Black Caribbean backgrounds, also described events related to this microagressive theme. These particularly related to cultural standards of beauty and ‘normal’ appearance. During our second interview, for example, when discussing fellow female students from Black Caribbean backgrounds, Monette gave the following remarks:

M: […] I just don’t agree with a lot of…I don’t agree with black women’s attitude to their hair a lot of the time and that’s just what I find here.

I: What do you mean by black women’s attitudes to their hair?

M: In terms of relaxing hair and the weaves and stuff. I think it’s okay but a lot of the time it’s sort of trying to be like a whole other race because that’s not how their hair is. And I know it’s just one small thing but it’s one of the things that highlights like… I just don’t agree with them on and it just links back to so many… it links back to the more Caucasian you look, the more you’ll be accepted as a black person. (Monette, Interview 2)

These comment about black women’s attitude to their hair relate to the effect of being seen as an abnormal Other, with some Black students attempting to assimilate to the beauty standards of the dominant culture to lessen the perception of abnormality. As Monette herself describes, adopting white beauty ideals “links back to the more Caucasian you look, the more you’ll be accepted as a black person”. Monette describes finding actions such as this “a lot” at the University of Sheffield, demonstrating the dominance of this attitude among Black students. This is clearly a long-term effect of microaggressive messages sent to Black women about the abnormality of their appearance, with the resultant effect that they succumb to the pressure to assimilate to dominant, white beauty standards.

The damaging effect of white beauty ideals is well documented in the academic literature (Hall, 1995; Keith et al., 2010; Gordon, 2008; Robinson-Moore, 2008), research indicating how European standards of beauty can have damaging effects on the life trajectories of black women, especially those with dark skin, primarily in the form of internalised self-hatred. Bryant (2013), for example, studied Black woman’s internalisation of European beauty standards through family, peers, the media, and society, and the related outcomes in terms of self-perception, academic achievement, sexual behaviour, employment, marital status, and mental health. According to her research, Black women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of European standards of beauty because these standards emphasise skin colours and hair types that exclude many black women, especially those of darker skin (ibid.;cf. bell hooks). Whether or not Monette’s peers feel self-hatred, there is clearly a pressure, even in a university environment, to conform to white ideals.

The final example of this microagressive theme in action was relayed by Charlotte and relates to the reaction of her fellow students to her hair and appearance. In comparison to Monette’s example, where she discussed the effects of white beauty standards on her contemporaries, Charlotte directly experienced racist remarks about her ‘abnormal’ appearance. A mature student, the experiences Charlotte related occurred thirty years previously, during her time at the University of Lancaster:

“In the 1980s in Lancaster it tended to be people openly touching my hair to feel the texture without asking (I recall a coach trip with two male students sitting behind me touching my hair constantly and laughing, repeatedly ignoring my stares and requests to stop until I couldn’t sit there any more and had to change seats in tears), or groups of men making offensive, sexually-provocative comments about my appearance (most often related to my bust or to my bottom which are perceived by white men as large, but are simply normal). I recall a time when I cycled off campus into town and a group of white men (from their appearance I think they must have been students but I wasn’t sure) shouted out lyrics to the songs “Black Betty!” and “Fat bottomed girls” in very lewd and suggestive ways. There is a certain hyper-sexualisation myth and perception that black women(’s bodies) can be verbally abused and we are insensitive to this assumption of availability that leaves you with the most devastatingly traumatic feelings. I’m writing about things that happened to me years ago, and remember them as if they occurred yesterday!” (Charlotte, Email Response)

This quotation is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter on Racialised Aggressions. In the context of the microagressive theme being discussed in this section, however, it is a powerful example of pathologising cultural values, where a hyper-sexualised ‘Black’ culture is ascribed to Charlotte due to her physical appearance – this in turn allowing people to dehumanise her, to treat her not as an individual, but as a sexual object (a trope of patriarchy, but one amplified through her exoticisation, by white males, as a Black woman (hooks, 1992b)).

**4.6 Stereotyping**

Racial or ethnic stereotyping or labelling was among the most common microaggressions relayed by students during the course of the interviews and focus group. It is therefore worth a brief overview of what stereotypes *are* and the function that they play, as a daily phenomenon; as Gandy (1998, 83) describes, ‘[i]t seems likely that stereotypes become part of our understanding of our surroundings from the first moments of our efforts to make sense of the world around us’. In this manner, stereotypes operate as ‘thought processes’ (Merskin, 2011, 77) that yield what Kasey Henricks (2013) refers to as ‘maps of distinction’ that people draw from and apply during social interactions. Specifically, they function as tools that provide ‘justification, reinforcement and maintenance of the status quo’ through a process ‘that categorises, generalises, and thus stigmatises individuals who belong to particular groups’ (Merskin, op cit.).[[41]](#footnote-41) Being based on over-generalisations of ‘the describer’s imagination of an inferior other rather than with objective information about what the people being described are actually like’ (Holliday, 2007, 1), stereotyping is in accordance with Sue’s (2010) notion of a microinsult.

Several characteristics of stereotypes are important to grasp when undertaking this analysis; thus, quoting from Jay (2007, emphasis in original text), they:

1. *“****originate*** within a group or individual and are caused by a history of socio-political struggle between unequal groups within a region, nation, or society;
2. present generalizations which ***function*** to create or sustain inequalities of value, power, and/or wealth among socially constructed groups (by race, age, sex, class, religion);
3. are intended to harm or have a negative ***effect*** as regards the object of the stereotype, or can reasonably be predicted to do so;
4. ***circulate*** repeatedly and systematically in a culture so that many people in the culture, even those who are the object of the stereotype come to accept them as "common sense" truths;
5. ***disguise or distort*** the truth through caricature and misrepresentation based on only partial aspects of a person or situation;
6. ***appeal to the prejudices*** of the audience, exploiting these by attaching them to emotions of pleasure or hatred that are reinforced often by casting stereotypes within frameworks of ***entertainment****”.*

Fundamentally, stereotypes have to do with power – specifically securing hegemonic discourses – and are hierarchically differentiated; as elucidated by Stuart Hall (1997, 258), through a process of Othering that links together people as an “Us” and conterminously excluding those who are ‘not Us’ as ‘Them’, stereotypes work to maintain inequality and secure social privileges – characterising ‘Us’ positively and ‘Them’ negatively. The result, as Henricks writes, is that stereotypes ‘can, and often do, have self-fulfilling prophesies’ as, ‘[t]hrough interaction, they are often acted upon and become real in their consequences.’ It is for this key reason that stereotypes merit analytical attention in this thesis.

Stereotypes can be attached to a wide range of social identifiers – e.g. age, class, gender, race, sexuality, disability, height, hair colour, or fashion. From the perspective of this research, the key stereotypes being focused upon are race and gender (and religion – in the form of Islamophobia). Regarding the first, in the West the key differentiation is between white stereotypes and stereotypes linked to people from ethnic minority backgrounds. The former are generally more complex, nuanced and entail positive connotations – functioning as symbolic assets for those to whom they are attached – while the latter, in contrast, generally entail more sweeping, one-dimensional and negative connotations (cf. Henricks, 2013) – and as such are experienced/assumed as being liabilities.

To give two examples from the area of education – the focus of this thesis: first, Basit (1997) and Gipps and Gillborn (1996) have noted how many white educators subscribe to and subsequently find their actions directed by popular stereotypes regarding Muslim girls (e.g. that they have low aspirations, are oppressed at home and will be inevitably pushed into arranged marriages). Second, at the level of HE, research carried out in America by Park et al. (2015) identified stereotyping among white students about their peers. Researchers drew upon the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen – a survey of 898 students at 27 prestigious universities across America – that asked white students about the strength of their agreement with a number of statements about African Americans, Asian Americans and Latino Americans (rated on a scale of 1 to 10).

Their findings demonstrated the persistence of racial stereotyping amongst white university students who reported a general belief that Asian-American students were “cold but competent” and black and Latino students “need to work harder to move up”. Beyond these two examples there is a *wealth* of research pointing to teachers’ different stereotypical attitudes towards white, Black and Asian students (Chang & Demyan, 2007; Kember & Gow, 1991; Watkins et al.,1991). As demonstrated below, my research uncovered examples of stereotyping among students at the University of Sheffield also.

While both forms are a type of microinsult, stereotyping is different from the assumption of homogeneity also discussed in this chapter. This is because in the case of the assumption of homogeneity, an individual may be aware (or seem to be aware) of a certain cultural practice, but assumes: (a) that there is no flexibility to the practice or tradition; and (b) every single member of the group engages in such behaviour (cf. Nadal, 2012). Stereotyping, by contrast, is not based on any such knowledge of cultural practices – it can be entirely prejudicial without any evidence basis. It is the difference between the notion that all Muslim women must wear the hijab, and the notion that all Muslim men are violent – one is based on the misassumption that a specific cultural practice of which they have knowledge is universal; the latter is based on an abstract prejudice. Nevertheless, despite such a distinction, it was not always possible to distinguish clearly between the two types of microaggression and the themes are often interrelated.

**4.6.1 You Are All the Same**: **South East Asian Women and their Families**

Safa raised an issue of stereotyping during her interview when she explained her decision to pursue a degree in maths and accounting rather than medicine or engineering:

S: … The subject I chose, I can talk about it. First I wanted to go into engineering.

I: Wow, engineering.

S: When I was in high school back in Pakistan, I always thought, okay, I want to be an engineer. There wasn’t two ways about it. Then I got my results and... I have an elder sister as well. She went into engineering, so I was thinking shall I follow her or maybe I should do something different? Because everybody thinks that, okay, Asians always go into the engineering or become a doctor. I thought okay, let’s do something different.

Safa’s decision to study her particular degree course – a huge decision – was thus taken with a specific recognition *and* rejection of a particular stereotype: that someone with her background will study either engineering or medicine.

This same form of stereotyping was raised by Adila and Natasha also, early in the focus group, as a response to the “I too am Sheffield” campaign slides:

AI: one of the ones, which they had on the Sheffield one, the "I too am Sheffield" campaign, which was something along the lines of "So did you end up going into Medicine because of your parents?" and I think for me, that kind of resonates a lot, you know because of the whole degree aspect and also because there is a bit a kind of an assumption that the reason why I want to do a degree like this, is possibly because of exterior pressures, so it's more kind of like your parents want you to ...

N: I think another one I saw about that was "yes, I'm Indian, no, I'm not doing Medicine"

AI: Yeah, exactly, so there is this kind of like preconceived

N: notion

AI: yeah notions more than anything else

N: and if anyone says "I want to do Medicine", everyone goes like "oh why do all Indians want to do Medicine?"

AI: exactly

Both Natasha and Adila express their frustration about such labelling and stereotyping of their identities; at its most basic, the message behind “All Asians do Medicine” is “You are all the same” – a differentiation that brings the coded message that you are a different species from “Us” altogether – with no uniqueness or individuality.

What they specifically described is a personality and behaviour stereotype about South East Asian women – specifically that they face pressure from parents and that this guides their degree choices as students. This stereotype is linked to a general Western stereotype of South East Asian and Muslim women wherein they are viewed as oppressed, subjugated and domesticated (Aziz, 2012; Gipps and Gillborn, 1996).[[42]](#footnote-42) The latter stereotype was raised by Saree during her interview, specifically related to her experience with a member of academic staff:

“ the bit [in the vignette] about oppressed Muslim women, they constantly go on about it, but not all Muslims are the same, in Lebanon they are really liberal, but people can’t comprehend that, they are so stuck in their ways and see oppression… and they don’t like it if they have to change their way of thinking, because it might mean that everything they have previously believed is wrong, so yeah I have experienced that. One of my lecturers asked me if I believe in arranged marriages and I was just like, you are a doctor and you ask me that question, even academics still have a fixed idea of you, which is shocking, because obviously I don’t and neither do my parents.” (Saree, Interview 2)

Such stereotyping also extends to viewing South East Asian and Muslim women as meek and lacking in confidence (due to the oppressed and subjugated familial upbringing they are stereotyped as having experienced (see: Basit, 1997)). Safa raised an example of exactly this issue in a discussion of her application for jobs and internships during her second undergraduate year and her visit to an assessment centre for interviews:

S: I’ve been to [an assessment centre] and I’m really... when I think about it, I’m really quite annoyed with the one in Bank of America because I felt like I actually did quite well in there and the lady phoned back and she said that “We are really happy with your presentation” that I had to do. It was one to one. It was very nerve racking, but I think it went well. For the interview, they said that I was really nervous, but that was the part which I was most confident about. The lady who was interviewing me said that I was really nervous. I don’t know why she said that because she was saying “Ahh, you’re so small, you’re so cute”, like she was doing “ahh” and I was thinking in my head what the hell is going on? You’re sitting in Bank of America and you’re doing “Ahh, you’re so small and you’re so tiny”. It was like what? But she was smiling a lot, so I had to smile as well [unclear 00.25.15] confident. I got really angry at their feedback. I was like okay, whatever. I can’t be bothered. (Interview 1)

Context is important in Safa’s story; she reports feeling confident in her interview, not nervous, but subsequently treated in a patronising manner – being told she is “small”, “tiny” and “cute”. While not on the surface a racial microinsult, the fact that Safa wears the veil raises questions of such treatment – which made her “really angry” – as the result of stereotyping, specifically an assumption that her ethnicity and religion mean that she is meek and lacks confidence (an assumption which may have coloured how she was perceived at the interview at the time – i.e. as nervous – despite the fact that this was not the case. Research shows that Muslim women who wear headscarves are more liable to experience stereotyping (and general discrimination) as they are “headscarved Muslim women” and thus more identifiable/visible (Aziz, 2012, 6).

Aligned with such stereotyping of South East Asian female students as pressurised by family, subjugated and meek, is a conterminous assumption that they will not be “strong women” in terms of their socio-political views. In other words, they are stereotyped as socially and culturally conservative – as experienced by Alima when interviewed:

Alima: “I mean we have a lot of deep discussions, and people are kind of surprised to find my viewpoints on things, and yeah, they’re like – *“we didn’t know that.”* I think they get mixed up between culture and religion and things like that. But I’ve really enjoyed that, of opening…

I: Yeah, could you say a bit more – when you say people are surprised by your viewpoints – could you maybe give an example?

A: For example, on feminism, women’s rights, things like that, or in the way the media represents women… For example – it’s going to sound really — Basically, you know how the whole Miley Cyrus [laughing] that sort of thing, and I think I was more forgiving of her than other people, because I was just like – “She’s at that age, so 20, 21 – that’s when you explore, and it’s not her fault she’s under the public eye, etc.” But then someone said, “Well, if someone dressed like that in public, they’d get fined for indecent exposure, but she gets millions and millions of views.” Yeah, so that was just one point where I was like – she’s within her rights to – and it’s your choice if you want to go and see that. She’s not forcing it onto you. But yeah, so I was just...

I: Okay, that’s a great example. Any other situations?

A: I don’t know. There’s just generally – there’s lots of issues that we talk about, and then, yeah. But I don’t know – they’re like – they’re just – I don’t know – everyday – not everyday – they’re just the normal topics, discussing stuff like abortion and marriage and divorce and family life, etc. I think that one of my flatmates, she’s never had to think about things. I mean, for example, she didn’t think feminism was needed right now, in today’s day and age, because she’s never experienced – but then she was like – “You guys have opened my eyes a little bit,” because she doesn’t realise how much of an issue it is, or that there was a glass ceiling or things like that, within her world.

Alima is expected to hold socially conservative views – an expectation that results from the previously noted stereotypes about Muslim women (or as she generously describes it, people getting “mixed up between culture and religion”). When she confounds these views – on abortion, marriage and divorce, the glass ceiling, the antics of Miley Cyrus – her friends (initially at least) react with surprise.

This stereotypical perception is reported by Adila also, who described in her interview how people found her pro-choice beliefs surprising:

“I gave my opinion that abortion is perfectly viable and it’s perfectly fine for people to go down that path, because you don’t want to go back to the way that it was pre-abortion when women were dying of septicaemia from failed ones, failed backstreet abortions. And I said that it wouldn’t be something that I would personally do, but I wouldn’t begrudge anyone to do it, more than anything else, and to go down that route. And people found that a bit, not interesting as such, but they found it a bit discordant, with the sort of visual impression that I give. And it was mentioned a few times, just with different, just in different conversations and things like that … as to how I seem to be a bit more open with my viewpoints. (Adila, Interview 2)

The telling phrase in Adila’s account is that people found her views “discordant, with the … visual impression I give” and their remarks that she “seem[s] to be a bit more open with [her] viewpoints”. As an Asian Muslim who wears the veil (the visual impression) Adila is both more ‘liberal’ and less submissive and meek than people’s stereotypical pre-conceptions lead them to expect. In this “discordance” that Adila describes, there may be a further level – having to do with the very notion that someone like her *could* be a feminist.

A: … if you actually label yourself as a feminist in any shape or form, straight away people have like a negative connotation and especially if you are from an ethnic background as well

E: yeah "strong black woman", I get that all the time

A: yeah I get "opinionated hijabi" all the time, kind of like oh you're so fierce and I'm like "oh thank you" (group laughs) but yeah, it's just the fact that it seems that there is like only one little niche that you can occupy at a time, so you can either be like female or you can be a female woman of colour or you can be a female yeah I don't know. (Focus Group)

Tapping into the previous stereotypes of South East Asian and Muslim women noted above, Adila describes how she encounters a belief that being “from an ethnic background”, “a female woman of colour” is viewed as incommensurable with being “a feminist” or even simply “a female”. To identify as such leads to more than the usual negative connotations within a patriarchal society, as there is a specific ethnic retort – that she is an “opinionated hijabi” and “fierce”, an exoticised conception of Muslim women (related to the stereotype mentioned by Eyana of a “strong black woman”).

Stereotypes are also reported regarding other activities – such as smoking, where Muslim women wearing the hijab are not expected to smoke:

Z: one thing which I noticed here is girls do smoke here, it's a common thing, girls do go to pubs, girls do drink here, it's a normal thing here, but if a girl who is wearing hijab is smoking, they are like "Muslim girls smoke?"

A: yeah

N: yeah

Z: what's wrong with you? If British girls smoke, if American girls smoke, if Finnish girls smoke, what's wrong with Muslim girls smoking? (laughs) (Focus Group, 9)

Such stereotyping treats all Muslim women who wear the veil as if they conform to a single, one-dimensional image – a classic microaggression – ignoring individuality. As the focus group conversation continues:

Z: they take hijab as, you know a kind of notion for a thing were people who wear a hijab, something is very wrong, kind of that thing

N: I think it's just because like a lot of the people, who I have spoken to, who wear hijab and stuff, they are like, you know, "doing this is ..."

E: quite committed

Z: yeah exactly, we are committed, but you know there are

A: there are variations

N: I think most Muslims who interact with like the non-Muslim sect of the country, they always meet them, they always meet Muslims who are bang on, five times a day prayer, you know this, know that

A: yeah, no speaking to boys, no ...

Z: this I think varies too, it applies to all religions, because if you're a Christian you can find a Christian who is proper Christian who reads the bible and is very pious and things like that

E: yeah

Z: and you can find the same thing with us as well, like you can find some people who

N: but with Christians it's not so easy to see

Z: that's the thing, that's the thing we wear this kind of hijab and they kind of think that people who wear this shouldn't be doing anything, I just wish people would stop thinking that we are all the same (Focus Group, 9)

In these final contributions, Natasha and Azisa touch on the two key factors at play in this particular microaggression: (i) assuming that Muslim women wearing the hijab “are all the same”; and (ii) how the hijab itself, in its visibility, is seen as attracting stereotyping. Indeed, Eyana – who is black and a Christian – reports that she herself has been guilty of such stereotyping:

N: people also don't understand that there are different kinds of Muslims, you wear hijab, but I'm Muslim

A: they think, for some reason they think that if you wear a hijab you're more pious, you're more committed, you've got ...

Z: yeah

E: I guess I felt that as well, because I'm a Christian, so ok, maybe I don't do everything that like people would believe a Christian should do

A: yeah

E: so I do understand that, maybe I have been ignorant in this sense that I thought that, because those friends who I had, who have worn hijab, have always been really committed to their religion and we always had debates about Christianity as well, that's a long time ago, but I guess, I have been ignorant thinking that as well, so I learned something, that there are more variations like I can see that for myself yeah. (Focus Group, 10)

**4.6.2 Stereotyping: Representing your entire race**

Raashida, who also wears the hijab, reports similar experiences, whereby stereotyping by white people means she is not treated as an individual in her own right:

R: The main thing that I always think of is when I go outside, I always feel like anyone who looks at me thinks “she is a Muslim” straight away… people just straight away think about me as a Muslim, they don’t even see my face, it’s like “oh there’s a Muslim there”… I feel like that every day.

I: so you didn’t feel like that before [you were wearing a headscarf]?

R: No, because I was just a normal person before, I was just a girl. (Raashida Interview 2, 15)

In a similar manner to Adila’s description of how, due to stereotyping of South East Asian and Muslim women, she encounters an attitude that differentiates between simply “female” and “a female of colour”, Raashida feels as if, due to her hijab, she is perceived as a “Muslim” – with all the attendant stereotypes – where once she was “just a girl”. This brings with it a frustration that she is perceived as representing (and being representative of) her entire religion and attendant culture:

“so do all Muslims do this?” … Even it’s only what I say, they assume everyone does that … just because I do it, it doesn’t mean everyone does and they would be like “but you’re a Muslim”, but not all Christians do the same thing and people just don’t get it [sounds frustrated].” (Raashida, Interview 2)

This pressure to represent one’s group is powerful; as Sue (2010, 8) describes, it leads to “heightened awareness that every mistake, every failing and every deficiency exhibited by them would be attributed to their entire group”. With this comes an increased pressure to act, or perform, in a certain way, so as not to conform to particular stereotypes about this group (such as, for example, Safa’s rejection of engineering and medicine as stereotypical Asian degrees). It was discussed at great length also during the focus group:

E: there is one girl who said something which was in a seminar last Thursday and it was really awkward because I hadn't been to that seminar before, I missed the first one, so I walked in and I was a bit late, like five minutes late and I walked in and sat down and it just happened that the topic that we were doing that day was black female (group laughs), black female perspective, it was about a book we had to read and it was a bit uncomfortable when we came to that section and I felt like the lecturer's, the seminar leader's eyes were on me

AI: oh yeah

E: to say something and I hadn't even done the reading properly and I was late (laughs) and I was like I don't really have any input on this, she is American as well, so I don't have that perspective and it was a long time ago, I don't know why you are looking at me, so

AI: kind of the example they gave in the video, where it's kind of like you want me to speak on behalf of my entire race (group laughs)

E: Yeah (laughs), I'm learning as well, I'm literally here to learn about like everyone else and sometimes it becomes a bit uncomfortable because especially in Sociology, where it comes up a lot, there is a lot of things about race and gender

Another example of being stereotyped and the pressure of representing one’s entire group was also raised during this discussion. This time the students commented upon the difference of a white person being stereotyped, versus stereotypes about people from minoritised backgrounds:

A: Ethnicity does play a role, we are immediately more identifiable from the vast majority of our cohorts and that's one of the things that I noticed as well, that if you, there are some people who kind of manage to blend in and pass through and they may crop up every now and again, but for some reason, for some bizarre reason people find me more memorable than the person I was on placement with, so I don't know if it just because I come across as more friendly or if I'm just kind of like a bit more engaging with them or something or if it is just because for some reason I'm just more memorable, but if I say something, it, it, I kind of get that feeling that it may impact on someone's opinion of me and before you know everyone will have that sort of idea that, preconception, because people talk,

E: yeah

A: it starts off as like the girl who asks the question and it's kind of like oh she is the girl who asks the question, and before you know it, it's kind of like, people are like "ahhh" (annoyed voice) and as soon as they open their mouth it's like "aaahh her again"

Z: it's fine if it is a white girl, but with us it's the brown girl, the hijabi girl, the black girl

A: yeah with that it's about the quality, you are asking questions, but with us it would be kind of like "oh yeah the hijab one."

While white people might be labelled and stereotyped as well – in this instance as an annoying girl, always asking questions during seminars – this stereotype is not applied to her entire ethnicity/race. As Adila states, “it is about the quality” of this girl’s questions, while if she were to do the same thing, she would not be perceived as an individual, but the negative connotations would be applied to her entire group.

Interestingly, Eyana picks up the conversation at this point in the discussion and – despite having been frustrated by being labelled as the “black girl” and being expected to speak for her entire race and gender in her seminar – asserted that there are positives, also, to being a representative for her race:

E: but then, part of me is like, it's almost, when I first came, I'm from London, so when I came to Sheffield, it was, everyone kept asking how is it different there and I guess one thing is, yeah, it is not as ethnically diverse, as in London, but I never really noticed that, especially not in my first year, I was just so excited to be here (group laughs) and I almost use that to my advantage, being the only black girl, I wasn't the only black girl, but one of the very few black girls on campus, you are almost infamous, everyone knows who you are and part of, and you can use it for your advantage, so I'm, I haven't had a negative experience being the only black girl or one of the few black girls around and if anything I use it to my advantage, I know people know me because of that and I felt like I could be a good representative,

A: representing your whole race (laughs)

E: yeah, you don't want to be representing, but unfortunately you end up being that

A: that's the thing though, do you want to be a representative or do you just want to be a student and actually study and participate?

E: I wanna be me, but the fact is, the fact that I was able to make lots of friends and aid with getting on with different people, I felt like I was doing a good thing, in that they could see that, I could tell a lot of them hadn't been around many black people before

A: okay

E: so, for that ... but we got on really well, so I felt, okay I'm doing something good, we all mixed and now they can go and say yeah I have mixed with black people and I'm not scared of being around these type of people now, because they are just people.

The fact that Eyana feels the need to show white people who she could tell “hadn’t been around many black people before” that black people are not scary and “just people” speaks volumes about the extent of racist stereotypes being seen as a normal part of the fabric of our society. The microinsult of black people as scary, relates most likely to two themes discussed earlier: “assumption of criminality”, whereby people from her background are seen as dangerous criminals (discussed in section 4.4); and “pathologising cultural values”, whereby people from her ethnic background are seen as having abnormal cultural values, even questioning their status as “people” (see section 4.5). The repeated circulation of these pernicious stereotypes have led Eyana to accept them as a normal response by white people, and unlike Adila, she has accepted the burden of representing her entire race, as a kind of social justice activism by “being a good representative” for Black British Caribbean people and aiding social harmony on campus.

**4.7 Summary**

This chapter identified and illustrated five key microaggressions – both microinvalidations and microinsults – identifiable in the research participants’ narratives. These included the themes ‘Alien in one’s own land’, the ‘Ascription of Intelligence / Assumption of Inferior Status’, the ‘Assumption of Criminality’, ‘Pathologising Cultural Values’ and ‘Stereotyping’. Unlike the institutional microaggressions outlined in the previous chapters, these microaggressions were inter-personal, based on face-to-face interactions with fellow members of the university community. Yet, while the racist assumptions that underpinned these microaggressions were often subtle and possibly unconscious on the part of the aggressor, this was not the case with *all* inter-personal experiences of racism – as outlined in the next chapter on racialised aggressions.

**CHAPTER 5:**

**ANALYSIS OF RACIALISED AGRESSIONS**

**5.1 Introduction: Racialised Aggressions**

As outlined in first chapter on microaggression theory, Sue (2010, 29) defines microassaults as ‘explicit racial derogation characterized by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim by name-calling, avoidant behaviors, or purposeful discriminatory actions’ that – unlike microinsults and microinvalidations – are consciously and intentionally made. Events encountered by research subjects that are generally defined as microassaults include the experience of racial slurs, jokes and linked derogatory comments. Here, however, while Sue’s taxonomy is recognised as the key structure that underpins this thesis’s theoretical framework, the term microassault feels ill-suited to signify and conceptualise such phenomena.

Racial slurs and jokes that are directed at an individual are not the subtle and often unconsciously-made comments that inspired Chester Pierce to coin the term ‘racial microaggressions’. As Minikel-Lacocque notes in her research on racism within an American college, ‘[t]here was no grey area to [such] offenses … the openly racist nature of these comments, as well as the students’ reactions to them’ leading her ‘to question the prefix *micro* being associated with this type of racism’ (2012, 23). Indeed, she warns that ‘attaching *micro* to certain racist aggressions has the ability to maintain power dynamics with respect to racism’ and as such ‘the use of this term may invalidate the anger and hurt caused by such acts as well as empower the perpetrators to believe their actions and words are somehow less egregious than those racist acts not classified as *micro*’ (ibid., 24). In recognition of these dangers, Minikel-Lacocque advocates the phrase ‘racialised aggression’ as a more apt descriptor of such phenomena – this label will subsequently be utilised for the purpose of this analysis.

Within the research data three types of racialised aggressions can be identified: racial jokes, derogatory comments and discriminatory treatment. As with previous themes, these often tend to overlap and do not always fall into clear-cut categories.

**5.2 Racial Jokes and Derogatory Comments**

In this thesis’s research, interviewees described several instances in which they were witness to and/or became the target of racist jokes. This mirrors the findings of a study by Yosso et al.(2009) of racial microaggressions at American universities, which found that Latino/a students on the three campuses where their study was conducted both witnessed and became targets of compulsive racial joke-telling (ibid., 669). Most often surfacing in the shape of offensive verbal remarks articulated as having humorous intentions, with Yosso et al. concluding that this “seems to be a persistent part of the White campus subculture” (ibid.).

Such racial jokes distinguish themselves from interpersonal microaggressions, as usually understood, by their undeniable intentionality. While it could be argued that the individual who makes a racial joke *unconsciously* holds the same racist beliefs coded as comedic, and/or that they may not realise that their attempted ‘humour’ would hurt someone, the conscious telling of a joke is nevertheless intentional (Yosso et al., 2009, 669). Furthermore, the selection of a joke’s content – i.e. the subject joked about – is intentional, since a joke-maker knows that if they want to make their audience laugh, they require the latter to recognise the stereotypical assumptions (in this case racist) that underpin the joke itself. A comedian has to know their audience – and their jokes thus contain the implicit assumption that the message being communicated is one shared (or at least recognised as a subject of humour) by those listening. The intentionality of joke telling is nicely captured by Sigmund Freud’s claim that it is ‘[o]nly jokes that have a purpose [that] run the risk of meeting with a people who do not want to listen to them’ (Freud, 1991, 132). The purpose is to elicit a laugh from a joke founded upon a particular set of assumptions – and people will not want to hear those assumptions if they find them hurtful. This has important implications when it comes to the telling of racist jokes.

Some authors such as Christie Davies (1990) defend racial jokes on the basis that those making the jokes and laughing at them do not usually believe in the stereotypes that the jokes employ, urging people to ‘not also forget that jokes are first and foremost jokes’ (ibid., 119). However, academic research has demonstrated the flaw in such simplistic reasoning. Humour and jokes, as a medium, are more effective at uncritically transferring a message and having the recipient accept it, than normal speech – and when that message is racist, or derogatory, this is particularly worrying. There are several reasons for this.

First, humour lowers our critical faculties due to the seemingly counterintuitive fact that, as Young (2008, 121) explains, understanding jokes ‘requires high processing demands’. This is because, when seeking to understand a joke, ‘the listener engages in *frame-shifting,* hence interpreting new information in light of old information to create “coherence”’. However, although humour fosters increased cognitive processing, it also ‘hinders scrutiny of underlying message arguments’ (ibid.). As Young explains in detail:

In sum, two different forms of cognitive processing are at play in the context of humor. The first is *aimed at humor comprehension and appreciation.* This form of processing, aimed at the reconciliation of competing scripts to see the joke, is *enhanced* in the face of humor. The second form of processing, *argument scrutiny,* is more consistent with traditional dual-process theories’ conceptualizations of cognitive elaboration. Argument scrutiny involves critically challenging the underlying premise of the message arguments presented in a given text. ... Given the excessive demands on working memory required to engage in [elaboration aimed at humor comprehension], I argue that the cognitive resources available to allocate to other tasks will likely be reduced. This depletion in cognitive resources will thereby reduce the message recipient’s ability to scrutinize the underlying message arguments in the text.’ (ibid. 122-123)

As a result, ‘those people whose first reaction was one of humour appreciation generated significantly fewer subsequent thoughts focusing on the premise of the message arguments than other participants’ (ibid., 131). Thus, if a joke is premised upon racist stereotypes and assumptions, those stereotypes and assumptions are unlikely to be critically scrutinised as the ‘audience’ mentally processes the joke’s logic.

Second, Davies’s aforementioned argument that jokes are ‘just jokes’ is in itself an example of another aspect of why jokes are so effective. Young’s research, quoted above, found that alongside cognitive considerations, the *joke form itself* lowers critical thinking, suggesting that, humour ‘may be subject to less scrutiny than serious discourse in part because people *see it as a different form of discourse altogether*’(Young, 2008, 134 [italics added]). As a result, Nabi, Moyer-Guse, and Byrne (2007) argue that jokes act as a ‘discounting cue’, which indicate to the joke’s recipient that it is not necessary to think critically about the message. Furthermore, as Worth and Mackie (1987) argue, when faced with jokes and humour, ‘an audience’s *motivation* to scrutinise message arguments is reduced due to the desire to maintain a good mood’. This is especially important because academic analysis – in this case focused on political humour – has found ‘indications of a sleeper effect’ to jokes, whereby stimuli that was initially discounted as mere jokes, and thus received little message scrutiny, ‘appeared to have increased persuasion over time – perhaps as the discounting cue became separated from the message arguments in memory’ (Young, 2008, 124-125). Resultantly, ‘repeated exposure over time [to jokes carrying a particular message] could foster attitude change’ (ibid., 135).

In the case of racial humour, this is clearly a concern. Racial jokes recycle racial prejudices and stereotypes and laughing at these validates the racist images inherent to them, regardless of the intention of the joke-teller (Boskin, 1987; Husband, 1988); as Billig (2010, 159) describes, ‘[l]aughter at an aggressive joke does not merely express an appreciation of the joke-work but validates the mocking of a particular target’. If Young’s analyses are correct, more than simply creating an atmosphere that is exclusionary, repeated exposure to racist jokes can lead people to accept the underlying premises – a particular worry if BME students find themselves internalising such stereotypes.

**5.2.1 Example from Kadira**

When asked to describe her most negative experience at university, Kadira gave a three-part answer, saying that it was the ethnic segregation on campus (see Chapter 6), derogatory comments and racist jokes. Her frustration with the latter can be seen with a quotation from the interview transcript:

K: “… some of the things I have heard people say, I just feel like, for people who have been able to get into university and are really intelligent, for people to just be saying things like, which are quite derogatory, I just, I don’t know [sounds very frustrated], it makes me feel weird that people who are so, this high up in what they do, are still this un-open to change and they’ve got quite like a narrow viewpoint of what should be what and different things, so I don’t know whether I just assume that this is what they think, just because I have seen, I’ve had so much experience of it, so I don’t know if I just like automatically stereotype them or if it actually happens…

I: Can you give me some examples of when you experienced it?

K: Just like people saying derogatory names about other people or like even messing around saying I don’t know, something negative about them, but as a joke, like for example some people on my course they make these black jokes [sounds angry], which like they think it’s just a joke. Sometimes I laugh along with it, but then I just think, I don’t know [sounds frustrated] I just feel like I have to laugh along with everyone else, or I’ll just look uptight and not very [inaudible] but it’s just like, sometimes when you’re the only one, it’s just not very cool.”

I: Yeah, that sounds pretty racist making those jokes

K: But it is not as much at Uni, I have seen a lot less of it.[[43]](#footnote-43) It is still there, you still see it, even when you go for a long period just thinking, oh things might have changed or people don’t do that anymore, it comes up again and then you just think that I don’t know, I just think it is really depressing and disheartening to see it [sounds very upset]. (Kadira, Interview 1)

Kadira’s reaction to derogatory racial comments and jokes at university was thus a mixture of surprise and frustration expressed at the fact that people “who are this high up” (a phrase she used throughout the interview to refer to people who attend or have attended university) would make such remarks/jokes. In expressing her frustration, Kadira drew upon one of the core ideas that prompted this thesis’s research: the generally-held presumption that universities are ‘bastions of enlightenment’, populated by actors with high levels of education, and where, resultantly, in contrast to other environments populated by individuals with less education and less power, one would not expect to hear racial slurs. Kadira’s own experience contradicted this assumption, the expression of such derogatory remarks signifying to her not only a “narrow viewpoint” but further functioning as a means of reinforcing “what should be what”. In this case, that means establishing to ethnic minorities that they are not equal to the white majority and that (white) people are “un-open” to any change in the established *status quo*, towards equality.

Kadira softens her argument by stressing: “I don’t know whether I just assume that this is what they think, just because I have seen, I’ve had so much experience of it”. Her overall experience, however, in particular with regards to her experience at Camp America and a mixed-race university friend, does not suggest this – a point which will be returned to below. Regardless of intention, the telling of racial jokes by white students caused Kadira tremendous stress – as evinced when she describes other students on her course telling “black jokes, which like they think it’s just a joke”, but leaves her feeling “like I have to laugh along with everyone else, or I’ll just look uptight”, especially when she is “the only one” (the only black student, as well as the only student not laughing).

As Simon Weaver (2011) describes – and as touched on above – the language of humour and jokes is structured and functions rhetorically, using non-literal imagery to convince the joke’s recipient to agree with the message that the joke-teller communicates. To see a joke, Koestler (1964, 84) writes, ‘a listener has to work out by himself what is implied in the laconic hint; he has to make an imaginative effort to solve the riddle’*.* In this manner, jokes operate at a micro-level as a form of what Louis Althusser (1971, 11) called ‘interpellation’, acting as a ‘hail’ to which we respond by adopting a particular subjectivity: in this case the person who ‘gets the joke’, who is ‘in on it’ and is not ‘uptight’ or ‘not cool’; or simply, as Worth and Mackie (1987) put it, has a desire ‘to maintain a good mood’. It is this pressure to laugh along, to demonstrate that you, the subject of the joke, are ‘cool’ with it, that Kadira understandably feels is actually “just not very cool”.

While Kadira states later on in the transcript that there is “a lot less of it”, referring to racist jokes and derogatory comments, as compared to her experience in school, it is nevertheless a clearly painful reminder of how equality is not a reality, even at university. She describes this as a “disheartening” and “depressing” experience, as every time she witnesses racial jokes or derogatory comments at university, she is reminded that the idea that “things might have changed or people don’t do that anymore” – in other words, that people have moved beyond this kind of racist behaviour – is not in fact the case, as she wishes to believe.

**5.2.2 Example from Saree**

Similar to Kadira, who hinted at the power of racial jokes or derogatory comments as a way to keep minorities in their place, Saree had a similar experience with one of the big media societies[[44]](#footnote-44) at Sheffield University. This came up in the context of her talking about how everything is based on power relationships at university. When asked to elaborate on this, she narrates the following story about the arrival of another student who does not fit the typical ‘media society student’ description:

S: “they are all like white, middle-class, straight, like they are not bi or gay, they are all WASP, like you know white and basically they all support each other, like there was this one girl, she was Chinese or Korean and she actually got onto the team, but she told me that there was lots of racism, not racism directly towards her, but they had been like making racist jokes in front of her and she felt really uncomfortable. That’s the kind of canteen culture that you find even at uni, which I find really appalling”

I: That sounds very racist to make jokes in front of her…

S: I know, she told me and I thought that it is so strange that people who want to work in media are actually all, if they did make it, considering how little jobs there are, but if they did all of them, that’s the people that are the next generation in the media, so that’s very worrying. (Saree, Interview 2)

In the above story, Saree describes how the arrival of a new media society member represents a disruption of the *status quo*, where power is held by white, middle-class straight people or what she terms ‘WASPs’.[[45]](#footnote-45) Her use of the word “actually” emphasises that it is unusual that a girl of East Asian ethnicity “managed to get onto the team”. This is particularly the case since, according to Saree, the other members tend to support only their own kind. Consequently, the new member has to endure racism, couched in terms of racist jokes in front of her. Saree is appalled and calls this “a canteen culture that you even find at university”. This echoes Kadira’s experience at the University of Sheffield, although Saree seems less surprised that this kind of culture exists at a university. Furthermore, unlike Kadira, she does not doubt the intention of those making jokes, allowing that they might have seen their jokes as harmless, but instead sees it clearly as a form of intentional racism.

Saree’s experience mirrors the findings of Yosso et al. (2009, 671-2) in their own research, that:

“Racist humor seemed to offer White students a quick and easy method for gaining acceptance, status, and social capital in primarily White networks. When Latinas/os approved of the joke(s), through silence or other verbal/nonverbal cues, Whites granted them peripheral, temporary, or token acceptance. Latina/o students’ open disapproval led to their “voluntary” exit or dismissal from the group.”

Their research findings also explain why Kadira and Saree reacted differently: Kadira was worried about the consequences of not laughing along and of subsequently being excluded; Saree, on the other hand, adopted a different stance, refusing to laugh at racist jokes which she explicitly views as “worrying” – in particular when taking into account the people making these jokes might be “the next generation in the media” – and anything but harmless. She describes having experienced numerous racist remarks and jokes aimed towards her and narrates one example about her own flatmate:

“He was trying to push me yesterday, he was trying to see how far he can go and made some racist jokes, I was trying to eat dinner and he thought it was really funny. Why would you do that? ... I never laugh along with race jokes, some people might do it out of a mechanism or laugh because they think it’s funny, but I never laugh, because it makes it acceptable and there is nothing acceptable about it, whatever the context.” (Saree, Interview 2)

The quoted story occurred in the context of Saree talking about how race matters to white people, the university resultantly being marked by an “us and them distinction” which means that she could never be accepted as being one of them (see the previous chapter on interpersonal microaggressions).

To decide to never laugh along with racist jokes necessitates a particular assertiveness, and Saree did come across as more confident than Kadira during interviews. Assertiveness and confidence are particularly significant in the case relayed by Saree, as the racial aggressor is a close acquaintance of hers with whom she has to share her living space. In such cases the sting of such racialised aggression is particularly wounding, as Saree has to be exposed to the perpetrator daily – her home not functioning as a safe space. As further research has demonstrated, being the victim of racist jokes or remarks saps time and energy (Barnes, Palmary, & Durrheim, 2001; Santa Ana, 2009; Yosso et al., 2009; Weaver, 2011), and in Saree’s case also leads to a very uncomfortable climate in her shared student house (evidenced throughout transcripts).

**5.2.3 Example from Charlotte**

The detrimental and traumatic impact of exposure to racist remarks and jokes also came up in Charlotte’s university experience. In the context of responding to the #ITooAmHarvard video, which was shown to students as part of the focus group, she writes in her email response:

“The experience on university campuses is also quite particular. In the 1980s in Lancaster it tended to be people openly touching my hair to feel the texture without asking (I recall a coach trip with two male students sitting behind me touching my hair constantly and laughing, repeatedly ignoring my stares and requests to stop until I couldn’t sit there any more and had to change seats in tears), or groups of men making offensive, sexually-provocative comments about my appearance (most often related to my bust or to my bottom which are perceived by white men as large, but are simply normal). I recall a time when I cycled off campus into town and a group of white men (from their appearance I think they must have been students but I wasn’t sure) shouted out lyrics to the songs “Black Betty!” and “Fat bottomed girls” in very lewd and suggestive ways. There is a certain hyper-sexualisation myth and perception that black women(’s bodies) can be verbally abused and we are insensitive to this assumption of availability that leaves you with the most devastatingly traumatic feelings.[[46]](#footnote-46) I’m writing about things that happened to me years ago, and remember them as if they occurred yesterday!” (Charlotte, Email Response)

The fact that, although the experience that Charlotte writes about is over twenty years in the past, she states that she “remember(s) them as if they occurred yesterday” and describes the “most devastating traumatic feelings” they produced, points to the significant effect that racist joke-telling can have on black students’ university experience. Such jokes are in some senses less pernicious than microaggressions, where it may be harder for students to pin down what has happened and whether this may be down to race. However, while the message may be more ‘blatant’ in its statement, the nature of joke-telling – whereby humour is understood as a different form of communication which requires lowered critical evaluation – still means that such racialised aggression can be dismissed by white students as unserious, and any hurt caused to BME students discounted.

**5.3 Differential Treatment**

Differential treatment based on race at university can take a variety of forms, such as those explored in the previous chapters on environmental and inter-personal microaggressions. As a form of racialised aggression, they involve those instances where students directly felt that their differential treatment was down to race in a manner far less subtle than those discussed in the previous chapter on interpersonal microaggressions; several such instances were referred to by the students interviewed.

**5.3.1 Example from Raashida**

The first example is a story that Raashida narrated as part of her student experience. The following quotation occurred in the context of her discussing the negative reaction from white students at university to her decision to wear the hijab. In the excerpt below, which is here quoted in its entirety due to its significance, Raashida remarks upon two experiences she sees as related to the fact that she is visibly Muslim:

R: I just sometimes feel like people would be a bit wary of me, especially when we were doing the Race and Racism module, because obviously I'm Muslim and I'm Pakistani, so I got like two things going on there (laughs, interviewer joins in), people were like a bit, didn't want to say certain things, but if I wasn't in the room, they would have said anything they wanted and they felt a bit like "I can't say it" and that's really annoying, because it is like, what have you got to say behind my back and it's not even about me, but about other ethnic people too, but it ... if you are going to say something, say it in front of people, like I do value your opinion, if you're racist then you shouldn't be racist, kind of thing, but like one of my lecturers X [name removed, to preserve anonymity], I had him in third year for a Religion and Belief module, I don't know if I have already told you this, I can't remember what we talked about in the first interview, because there was a seminar workshop on terrorism that week and he said in our group, so you know everyone discuss in groups, like about terrorism and that's fine and then he was talking about Muslims and stuff and other stuff and then my friend, who is also Muslim, but doesn't look Muslim, she is half Egyptian, half English, she is quite English in like dress and everything and doesn't look like, she looks a bit foreign, but you wouldn't think she is like Arab or anything and her name is Sarah, so you wouldn't think she is, and she was in the other workshop for the same seminar and X (lecturer) said to their group, because there were like no visible Muslims and he said "there are no Muslims in here, so say whatever you want about terrorism and stuff" and she didn't say anything, because he didn't know that she was Muslim, and I said to her later, you should have just said to him "uhm excuse me" and see what he said, but she said she wanted to listen to what everyone was saying and she said everyone was quite like vocal about what they thought, while in my seminar everyone was like "yeah, not all Muslims are terrorists", they were very wary of me, I was just kind of like, "just say what you want", yeah I thought that was a bit, yeah...

There are numerous issues at play in this quotation. First, the story Raashida relates ties into the aforementioned theme, whereby Muslims are stereotyped by non-Muslims as terrorists, or terrorist sympathisers. This stereotype portrays an assumption that all Muslims and Islam in general are affiliated with terrorism, disseminating a message that links Muslims to violence, to ‘evil’ actions, and framing them as untrustworthy (i.e. with hidden or mixed loyalties).

Such Islamophobic stereotypes have already been discussed in the previous chapter – and the aim here is not to repeat the arguments from the previous chapter. Nevertheless, the *overt nature* of the case of Islamophobia that Raashida discusses means that it is worth particular focus with regards to this discussion of racialised aggressions and differential treatment: specifically, the fact Raashida’s sociology lecturer made the racist remark in front of students, leaving little room for interpretation, in contrast to microaggressions where the victim is often left wondering what just happened (see Sue, 2010).

Incidents such as this – where a lecturer publicly makes an Islamophobic joke – are unusual. As Watkins (2012, 21) notes, in contrast with old-fashioned racism, many – although not all – perpetrators of racialised aggressions maintain a veneer of political correctness, including respect for racial equality, as a key element of their public persona. That such comments could be made: (i) in an academic setting; (ii) by an individual whose statements came with the authority of someone teaching a module on *Religion and Belief* no less; and (iii) without fellow students condemning them, but instead taking them as an acceptable joke – together clearly demonstrates the normalisation of such Islamophobic views (normalisation both as an active practice being undertaken, *and* as the general situation in which it was received). It is unsurprising, therefore, that Raashida sounded deeply agitated when relaying this experience.

The different reported reactions within Raashida’s study group, and her friend Sarah’s (in which the remark was made), is also telling with regards to this normalisation: The students in Sarah’s group – having been ‘reassured’ by their tutor that they could do so, since there were no Muslims amongst them – were “quite vocal about what they thought”. Raashida’s experience – in which her hijab stood as a clear signifier to the lecturer and students that there wasa Muslim within the group – was quite different however, leaving her with a clear sense that she received differential treatment *as a Muslim*, since her peers (and lecturer we can assume) “didn’t want to say certain things, but if I wasn’t in the room they would have said anything they wanted.” This experience had a clearly negative impact on Raashida’s university experience, as she ends her story by repeating that it made her feel students were “very wary” of her.

The interview proceeded; as I prompted her for more information, she continued:

I: what an awful thing for X to say

R: I thought it might be because he is quite old, like I think he has retired now. I think when I had him in third year he said that it was his last year, so I'm assuming he is quite old, because some, but yeah I was like what are you saying and he would make like quite rude jokes, but it might be because he is old, but I don't really know

I: that is awful

R: Yeah, because I quite liked him until my friend said that and I was like "I don't like him anymore, why did he say that?", why didn't he say it to us, oh there is a Muslim here, but say what you want, because in my group I felt like, just say what you want, because they were talking and looking at me like oh Raashida is here "Oh I love Muslims" (both laugh), so I was a bit like, what did they think I was going to do like hold a gun at them, they shouldn't have racist beliefs in the first place

I: yeah

R: and if you do, you should just say it

I: Yeah, maybe they do have racist beliefs but they think it is not socially acceptable to say it?

R: But they should say it, so that other people can correct them

I: yeah

R: "So why do you think that?", you know, then I could tell them you shouldn't think that, it's not right, instead of being just like "I hate you" (Raashida, Interview 2)

Although she does not say so openly, this must have been a very uncomfortable position to be put in as the only Muslim student. That Raashida was agitated as she relayed this story to me was evident in both verbal (“what did they think I was going to do like hold a gun at them?”) and nonverbal cues, her voice rising and sounding angry as she described events. This situation further refers back to the experience, also discussed previously (see Chapter 4), whereby a non-white student is forced to take on the burden of acting as a representative for their entire race, due to both the lack of a diverse student body, as well as a perception that they (in this case, Muslims) form a homogenous group. This is a situation white British students never have to face.

Two further points raised by Raashida in the above quotes, are (a) the failure of her lecturer to create a safe environment to discuss sensitive issues, such as race, and (b) the missed chance to challenge islamophobic views. As pointed out by previous research (Kinchelo and Steinberg, 2000; Cooks 2003; Miller and Fellows 2007; Yep 2007) discussions of race in the classroom are often highly emotional and create discomfort; hence, it is necessary for lecturers to combine elements of a ‘critical pedagogy’,[[47]](#footnote-47) while recognising the fears and emotions students are facing (Cooks 2003). Raashida’s Sociology lecturer’s teaching abilities did not seem sensitive to issues where race and racism are concerned, on the contrary they left her feeling extremely uncomfortable and angry at the missed opportunity to discuss and dispel stereotypes. This refers back to ideas raised in Chapter 3, where it was argued that there is a need for a more diverse teaching staff, as staff from BME backgrounds are better able to relate to a wider variety of students and because understanding racial identity is an essential skill for building pedagogical relationships with students from across racial barriers. The fact that her lecturer also “makes rude jokes”, makes it rather questionable that he is this kind of person and that racism is something that one will not encounter at university. Let us now turn to another experience, related to interactions with staff at the university.

**5.3.2 Example: Kadira**

“I don’t know if I’m just sensing it, but sometimes when I go and talk to a tutor, or I went and got help once with the statistics part of my course, I just feel like even sometimes some of the tutors, I feel like there’s a negative energy sometimes. And I don’t know what it is, if it’s just me or if it is about the students in general but I just felt like they just wanted to get rid of me as soon as possible. And I didn’t feel comfortable explaining what I didn’t understand, so sometimes, I just rely more on myself to look on the internet or read books, rather than going and talking to someone, just because I feel they feel uncomfortable around me or they just don’t want to talk to me. It’s just an uncomfortable environment sometimes.” (Kadira, Interview 2)

In the above quote, Kadira talks about the university being an uncomfortable environment sometimes. While she described her tutors as very helpful in the first interview, there do seem to be situations where this has not been the case. Kadira explains that she feels sometimes like “there’s a negative energy” with her tutors and that she feels like “they just wanted to get rid of [her] as soon as possible”. The use of the term “negative energy” is one which is also used in Sue (2010) to describe Black people’s experiences when interacting with superiors and there is an uncertainty as to whether certain unpleasant behaviours towards them are based on racial prejudice or on something else. While there is no direct proof that some lecturers treat Kadira differently based on her ethnicity, it is important to note that enduring racist incidents over a lifetime gives minoritised people a better ability to spot incidents related to race (Corteau et al., 2005; Ponterotto et al., 2006; Ridley, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2008; Sue 2010). Furthermore, Sue (2003) notes that the ability “to discern the true motives of their oppressors” is crucial for marginalised groups in daily life.

Sue (2010, 73) uses the concept of *healthy paranoia* to describe this phenomenon:

Healthy paranoia calls for the recipient of microaggressions to give equal or even greater weight to viewing incidents from past experiences of prejudice and discrimination, and not simply by what the offending person says: “*I’m not against interracial relationships, but I worry about the children*.” This statement contains an overt and explicit statement (“I’m not racist”) followed by a more ambiguous one (“I’m ambivalent about interracial relationships only because I worry about the children”). From past experiences of people of color , the coded message of the last statement is really an unconscious statement of one’s own racial bias.”

What Sue points to is the manner in which people from marginalised groups come to view their experiences through their encounters with racism, homophobia, and sexism (etc.). As he continues to explain, with regards to race specifically: “People of colour often state that they encounter numerous White colleagues, neighbours, and friends who often deny their racial biases, but that their behaviour belie such denials” (ibid.). Resultantly, they find themselves living in a “constant state of questioning”, a situation that they understandably find “emotionally draining because of the number of microaggressive events that take place in the course of any given day” (ibid.)

Kadira provided another example, describing a similar situation, during our interview. While the following example did not happen at the University of Sheffield, but at Camp America in the US, it is related to her university experience as she was recruited for her role on Sheffield’s campus. The experience, even if off campus, is furthermore a valuable example in helping understand her experience of differential treatment, which a white student would have not experienced. Specifically, Kadira worked in a Jewish summer holiday camp in Pennsylvania and had a really negative experience due to the fact that she was treated differently by both children and fellow, white British and American staff:

“I don’t know if it was just like a bad place, where I got put, or whatever, but it was this camp in Pennsylvania, it was a Jewish camp and basically it was all these kids that came for 8 weeks at a time and their parents paid like a ridiculous amount of money for them to come, but when all the staff started arriving, I just noticed there was me and this other mixed-race man and then everyone else was white, I think there was one girl from Australia and all the rest were English and (sounds very frustrated) even all the American staff, still made you feel like a bit different and I was like, oh if it is like that in America, then what is ever going to change?, like I realised the higher up you get at university and stuff, there is more diversity and you feel like you can be more yourself and my confidence has grown so much, but then you just think like, I don’t know even when I get a job and stuff, I’ll always assess my situation first.” (Kadira, Interview 1)

Similar to Raashida, Kadira felt that she was treated differently based on her ethnicity and resultantly made to feel uncomfortable. She concludes her story by saying that she “realised the higher up you get at university and stuff, there is more diversity and you feel like you can be more yourself and my confidence has grown so much, but then you just think like, … I’ll always [have to] assess my situation first.” Thus, while she feels that racial equality is a more likely reality “in places higher up”, experiences such as those she has had during her years in higher education have led her to the painful realisation that social positionalities such as race, gender, and someone’s background, affect her treatment. This is something that she elaborated on in the next part of the interview:

I: What do you mean by you always have to assess your situation before?

K: “Like I see what kind of people are around me, what gender they are, their ethnicity and where they are from and things like that and sometimes you just feel like, not that you shouldn’t be there, but it’s just not the place for you, I don’t know” (Kadira, Interview 1)

What Kadira’s explanation demonstrates is another example of *healthy paranoia*, and how accumulated life experiences have led her to the insight that being a woman from a mixed-race background will impact upon how other people might treat her. It is important to keep in mind that Kadira has experienced a lot of racial microaggressions, as well as racism throughout her life already, which have impacted upon her deeply. One of the first things we talked about was the racism she experienced in school and how her hometown Barnsley is filled with BNP supporters. Furthermore, her experience of ethnic segregation on campus and stereotypical views towards her brother in school and her mixed-race friend at university, as well as enduring black jokes on campus, do point towards the enormous stress she must be under on a daily basis. She continued our interview by saying:

“It wasn’t just the staff, who were all together, it was all the kids, they were like getting messages passed down from generations and it was never going to change, it was just like… they weren’t willing to let anyone in, but even when the staff were around, they still made these jokes about different people and I don’t know (sounds frustrated) it’s just like one big joke and you wonder (yeah) if they, if anyone is just ever going to take you for the value that you are. I consider, like I worked so hard to get to where I am (yeah), but then if people have still got these prejudices, then will it be just disregarded or what, because like sometimes, it’s just, you don’t know your place. (Kadira, Interview 1)

The continual presence of racial microaggressions and racialised aggressions thus left her wondering whether “anyone is ever going to take you for the value that you are”. She ends on a bleak note, saying that there are still environments where she is out of place.

**5.3.3 Example from Saree**

Like Kadira, Saree had her own experiences of being treated differently, relaying the following experience in her second interview:

“I never got on with X’s (person she was seeing) friends ever, because some of them were really nasty to me and he was like, yeah I know that you rub them up like all the wrong way and I was like and I have always said this, I said the only reason they weren’t nice to me is because I wasn’t white, if I was white, they would have been really nice to me, like if he has a white girlfriend and he is seeing the girl that I told you about, and I know that they will be really nice to her, because she is white, like do you see what I mean by it’s them who make the difference? … a guy who goes out with a different coloured girl, as in a different ethnicity, like if the guy is white, their friends always find it really weird, they won’t say oh my god you’re black, but you can tell” (Saree, Interview 2).

Saree narrated this story after talking about her housemate’s racist joke, analysed above (3.2). This same housemate is also friends with a person Saree was dating (another university student), which prompted her to start talking about her ex-boyfriend’s friendship group. Being around his friends was an uncomfortable environment, where she felt that she was treated badly and she concludes that “the only reason they weren’t nice to me is because I’m not white” and that “if [she] was white, they would have been really nice to [her]”. She further states that in interracial relationships, guys always “find it really weird”, if a white “guy goes out with a different coloured girl”. This provides another example for the concept of healthy paranoia: the accumulative effect of enduring racist microaggressions and racialised aggressions, helped her to develop strategies to understand when racism is happening. Her use of the word “always” also hints at this situation not being the first time that she has experienced differential treatment by white friends, when in an interracial relationship.

**5.3.4 Example from Charlotte**

Finally, Charlotte’s experience of differential treatment by a lecturer at university is among the most obvious and crass examples of differential treatment reported by students. Her lecturer’s racist behaviour had such a profound impact on Charlotte’s university experience that she decided to change her degree in order to avoid being around this lecturer again. The following quote is from her email response to the question of whether her expectations of university were met:

‘I went up to Lancaster for my first degree and anticipated that it would be a positive experience – which it was for the most part. However, I did experience a very serious and traumatic event in my second year. I had opted to major in geography with a subsidiary in economics after Year 1, but the economics lecturer I had turned out to be someone who found it amusing to single me out for differential treatment. This took the form of laughing at my responses during lecture Q&As and seminar discussions – sometimes setting things up to invite me to answer a question and then give a sarcastic, ridiculing response – which was publicly humiliating. At the time I didn’t know that it was racism – but on reflection realise that it was. Even so, I reported the experiences to my personal tutor and requested to change my course.

Within a few weeks I had switched to philosophy, and I remember that just before the last economics lecture I attended the lecturer (who had been informed of my complaint about his behaviour), waited outside the lecture theatre for my arrival and approached as if to somehow explain himself to me (i.e. to attempt to convince me he had not singled me out in any way, and I’d misinterpreted him). I didn’t meet his gaze and just kept walked [sic] away each time he tried to engage in a justification until he left me alone. Switching to philosophy midway through Year 2 was very difficult (and I know it impacted on my grades), but I did catch up. I will never forget the humiliation of those economics lectures, and university life at Lancaster remains a tainted experience because of that lecturer.’ (Charlotte, Email Response)

Charlotte’s response shows the enormous pressure some students from BME backgrounds face at university. Furthermore, her response points towards another important cue about racial microaggressions and racialised aggressions – the importance of time.

It is interesting how in Charlotte’s case the passage of time has allowed her to understand her own life experience better. While as a first-time student, over 25 years ago, she did not view this traumatic experience as being related to race, she now does. As stated in my Research Design, theories on narrative identity emphasise how we continually reinterpret our life experiences, and how the passage of time and the constant encountering of new experiences allows us to draw on new discourses to reinterpret the past. It might well be that some of the other interviewees will reinterpret some of their university experiences as being directly related to race later on in life.

Charlotte repeated this observation later on in her email response:

‘I know that the experience with my economics lecturer at Lancaster was directly attributable to ‘race’. As a black British student studying in the NW of England in the late 1980s I was in an extreme minority there – the only black person of African descent in my entire economics cohort. I was easy to spot in a lecture theatre and very easy to single out for (what I know to be) ridicule in ways that were intended to confirm to him (and perhaps to some of my white peers) I was not up to the intellectual challenge of university life (because other students found his taunting of me quite amusing). He used his position of power to create a theatre of trauma in a gladiatorial way…and I was his 19-year-old prey…he was probably in his 40s.’

In the above example she reiterates that her differential treatment was directly related to her race and her lecturer’s abuse of power, which she links to a “theatre of trauma in a gladiatorial way”. Her experience is a powerful reminder of how important it is for universities to employ staff who are sensitive to issues related to race and differential treatment.

**5.4 Summary**

This analytical chapter has focused upon the participants’ encounters with racialised aggressions (the term adopted here as a label for what Sue (2010, 29) refers to as microassaults). The data collected in my interviews, the focus group, and written responses found that students experienced three main forms of racialised aggression – racial jokes, derogatory comments and discriminatory treatment. The participants raised fewer examples of such aggressions than they did with the previous two chapters that focus on institutional and inter-personal microaggressions, which is in keeping with the argument of microaggressions theory that such obvious displays of ‘old-style racism’ are less wide-spread (being socially viewed as unacceptable) in comparison to the more insidious, often unconscious racism of microaggressions. Nevertheless, as illustrated above, these racialised aggressions, even if less frequent, once again point to the everyday experience of racism that BME female students have to deal with during their studies.

**CHAPTER 6:**

**NAVIGATING THE INSTITUTION**

**6.1 Introduction**

As the preceding research chapter elucidates, student culture at the University of Sheffield is dominated by white students, who are seen as the ideal, normal and default student. Through the adoption of an analytical framework founded upon the concept of (racial) microaggressions, numerous subtle (and non-subtle) ways students from BME backgrounds are minoritised via their definition as “different” from the default white student have been mapped. Continuing from this point, this research chapter identifies the consequent journeys via which these students navigate university and student life.

The significance of this journey cannot be underestimated. All students, by the very nature of age and situation – as participants within the field of higher education – are undergoing significant developmental processes, the most obvious of which is the process of forming an adult identity. Students from BME backgrounds share this experience to no lesser an extent than their white, majoritarian colleagues; however, on top of this, they are simultaneously negotiating processes of forming ethno (religious) identities. Based upon an in-depth analysis of students’ related responses to the previously recounted experiences, this chapter provides a thick description of how students feel and live this difference; in so doing, it explains the various strategies they employ to challenge and resist both racialised and gendered boundaries and cultural ideologies enforced by the institution and wider student culture.

As before, it is important, to keep in mind that the students from whom the subsequent analytical data is drawn are not a uniform, representative sample; respondents represent very different ethnic and religious, or non-religious, backgrounds. Hence, while certain experiences are commonly shared, this is not always the case – nor would this be expected to be so. Furthermore, this research can offer only a snapshot of this process (a permanent state of becoming (cf. Young et al., 2013)). Nevertheless, three broad themes emerged around which this analysis can be framed: navigating groups; negotiating ethno (religious) gender identities; and clubbing and drinking culture. These themes are interrelated and cannot be clearly separated.

Structurally, therefore, the following analysis is not clearly delineated by theme, but rather treats them as separate but interwoven. Subsequently, the discussion is far from linear; instead, the analytical narrative is structured around the students themselves and their own descriptions, raising and returning to themes previously discussed as and when they become pertinent to the analysis itself.

**6.2 The importance (and difficulty) of finding and forming supportive groups**

For those who attend, the years that individuals spend at university are widely recognised as a key to the establishment of their identities (Ortiz & Santos, 2009; Erikson, 1968). This is because, as developed in the social psychology literature – in particular that surrounding Social Identity Theory (e.g. Tajfel, 1978; 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 1986) – the adolescent years are characterised by a push for categorisation, linked to a need to belong and gain self-esteem. Group membership is both a central product *and* condition of such processes, playing a significant part in individual identity.

Group memberships are also vital as they provide a sense of belonging – of relatedness to place and people – that, as Maslow (1968) outlines, in turn leads to positive emotional, physical and mental well-being. This is incredibly important for students, specifically, as studies have shown the need for belonging to be significant in terms of self-belief and subsequently academic motivation, engagement, and ability to function in learning environments (Goodenow, 1992; cf. 1993; Cornell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Finn, 1989; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Osterbman, 2000; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim & Kasser, 2001; Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 1998).[[48]](#footnote-48)

If support groups are vital to a sense of belonging, which in turn is vital to academic experience, this does not mean they are easily come by. The difficulty for first year students in finding and navigating new friendship groups was clearly articulated by Adila, during her first and second interviews, where she described the difference, in coming to university after having been at school, as:

“like being thrown, well not thrown into the deep end, but [in school] you are in a more comfortable zone, so [in university] you don’t have that sort of safety network to come back to. So more often you find yourself realising that there is a big wide world out there and it can be exhilarating, but it can also be kind of like those situations where you end up thinking to yourself ‘what the F am I doing?’ [laughs]”

She describes how easy it is to fall into “the comfortable rhythm, routine” at home, but how:

“when you start university, everything is very much on you to kind of like go in. No one will really know if you’re not there, so I think the major thing that hit me, the fact that you didn’t, like, have someone who is looking out for you in a way, so you come home and no one will be there, you go to university and it wouldn’t really matter if you come or not, it just depends on your peers, so it depended how closely knit your group was, as to whether or not they expected you to come everyday.” (Interview 1)

New students have no guaranteed support networks – ‘someone who is looking out for you’ – and the closeness of the groups that are formed will have a significant effect on what might be expected from them. Raashida’s experiences in her first year illustrate the importance of group formation – and its difficulties – starkly. When she first moved to Sheffield, she became friends with one of her flatmates, however she moved back to France after a year and while Raashida got on with her other flatmates, they “weren’t like friends” and they were not very social, “which was boring” (Interview 1, 4). As a result, she ended up spending most of her time with her boyfriend, which meant she didn’t “feel like a Fresher” and felt “secluded” because she didn’t get to meet many people and socialise. This was something she would come to regret – but which she linked to the particular nature of university life, based as it is around clubbing and drinking (an issue that is discussed in detail below).

The importance of finding a group, or support network, was raised by Saree in her first and second interviews also. She spoke of the importance of getting out of her room and meeting people. Having lived in a negative environment where she did not get on with her housemates, she related how she had met people through volunteering as part of the Sheffield Graduate Award and was looking forward to living with her friends in the next year (Saree, Interview 1). Friends are important, she stated, so that you have someone who has your back (ibid.), relating how, when she had gone through a period of stress eating, it was her friendship group’s support that had helped her through it. Describing this group, Saree explains how “I’ve got my sister and then I obviously got my parents, but my sister and my friend X are really the most important network and some of my housemates that I lived with last year and we always get on.”

Key to this friendship group was a lack of “the typical girl bitchiness, hierarchy kind of thing” (Saree, Interview 1). This was an important factor also raised by Kadira who described “catty” fights within her psychology classes and how students subsequently “group off”. These groupings are exclusionary; Kadira relates how, in her psychology lectures, there are ‘strict’ areas where groups of girls sit (Kadira, Interview 2) and how when she joined the Netball society, the pre-existing cliques made no effort to include her (ibid.). Saree, too, describes university societies as socially cliquish and hierarchical, making specific mention of the RAG Society; due to the hierarchies and cliques that structure these institutions, Saree believes that she would never make a chair of a society since only people from inner circles are elected (Saree, Interview 1).

The difficulty in ‘breaking into’ such cliques and groups was illustrated by Adila, who describes how:

“the cliques and groups tend to be quite fixed and if you are a newcomer in an environment it can be quite difficult to break into one of those cliques or groups… I think it’s the same for all walks of life and phases of education, isn’t it. … it just felt as though there were more opportunities to mix and that sort of thing and the fact that I just moved around a lot more in different groups, while at uni, I found I ended up being in the group or clique that you end up right in the beginning.” (Adila, Interview 1)

The negativity of an atmosphere filled with ‘bitchiness’ and cliques, accentuated the importance, for Kadira, of forming her own friendship group around herself, stating:

“I don’t think it’s very good [the fights and exclusionary cliques], I find if I concentrate on my studies and the people around me that I actually like and people who bring something to my life, I feel like it’s much better for me and sometimes you just have to let other people do what they want to do” (Kadira, Interview 1)

The importance of this group for Kadira was demonstrated by a story she narrated about how an initial meeting with someone during induction week instantly made her feel less insecure:

“We had more lectures during the course of the week and I was sat next to this girl and she just suddenly started talking to me and she was like ‘are you from Yorkshire?’, because she had a Yorkshire accent too and I was like ‘yes’ and from then on she became one of my best friends here at university. So, I think some people are more drawn to you then others and groups do form, but in a way it’s like a security thing. From that day, I wasn’t as nervous going to university or scared of what would happen because I knew at least one person.” (Kadira, Interview 2)

She also describes the importance of one male friend in particular whose support has been extremely valuable to her during her time as a student:

“He does have a lot of respect for me, like we respect each other more than I think I respect anyone else in psychology, just because he’ll sit down and listen to my ideas, he’ll be supportive of any decisions I make and when someone’s behind you, you just feel more confident in doing what you want to do, so that’s just … that is a really big thing that has helped me achieve so much already, I am grateful…”

To this extent, the experiences Saree, Kadira, Raashida and Adila faced may match those of the majority of students (including around issues of gender). Making friends at university, having a social support group, can be hard to do, but is vital for one’s well-being and self-regard. Unlike the white majority, however, while struggling with this factor, they also face a concomitant and exasperating factor: described across the student interviews is the lived reality of an ethnic segregation on campus in which ethnic minorities have to stick together.

**6.3 Group Navigation and Ethnic Segregation on Campus**

In her first interview, Kadira describes the form that such ethnic segregation takes:

“People of different ethnicities and things like that, I don’t know, they are still kind of, not alone, but they either group together with each other or… they either stick together or they are just kind of like, I don’t know, I still don’t feel it’s all integrated… they are always separated” (Interview 1)

A similar image was communicated in the focus group where students agreed with a statement by one of the international students (Student Z) that there is little ethnic mixing outside the classroom, lots of ethnic segregation – but also self-segregation. As part of the same discussion, Adila described how at school she had had a mixed friendship group, from different ethnicities and racial backgrounds. Before coming to university she had expected a similar situation, where different ethnicities “are all going to be able to interact with each other”; however her experience since coming to the University of Sheffield, was that she had only managed to make friends with other Asian girls with headscarves and/or practicing Muslim girls (“so basically people who reflect me”(Focus Group)).

Adila had reflected on this previously in her first interview; she described her expectation that people at university would be more broadminded than the average person, however, “in a way I found it’s been the converse” as “lots of people got their little fixed perceptions” (Interview 1, 5). These fixed perceptions were linked by Adila to the aforementioned ‘cliquey’ mindset of students to explain the disappointing lack of inclusivity, whereby her friendship group was all “similar” to her.

Segregation of this kind is worrying since, as elaborated by González, Cantú and González (2008, 164), the cultivation of friendships between white and BME students is ‘the only means by which whites can understand the context of another’s culture’. Learning about another’s culture ‘requires circumspection’ about one’s own and ‘openness to severe criticism of the white world’; this being the case, it is within the context of such friendships that, as Lugones and Spelman (1983, 581) argue, white students ‘can understand what it is our [black] voices are saying’.[[49]](#footnote-49) Nevertheless, the above quotations by the students at Sheffield are not unexpected. Indeed, they are in line with findings from work by researchers such as Buttny (1999) who identified the emergence of a ‘new segregation’ on university campuses – specifically in the form of a climate of ethnic separateness. Where ethnic mixing did occur, it could do so *within* the structures of cliques and white exclusion, without disruption. For example, Kadira’s group within psychology is ethnically diverse (with one mixed-race male student, two Asian female students and another from the Philippines); the result, however, is that they constitute the *only* ethnically diverse group on the course, made up exclusively of the ethnic minority students, in a sea of white, exclusionary groups. As put by Kadira: “I don’t know what happened there, but we were all drawn together and then there is usually all white girl groups” (Interview 2).

***University Culture in the UK: Drinking, Clubbing and ‘Lads’***

One of the exacerbating issues in regards to friendship-making is the university culture heavily founded on clubbing and drinking (see Barber & Fairclough, 2006; Dantzer et al.,2006; Gill, 2002; Grubb, 2014; Karam et al., 2007; MacAlaney & McMahon, 2007; Measham, 2008). While not all of the students interviewed pointed to this culture as problematic – Monette, for example – some did and all noted it.

Kadira, for example, described how drinking/clubbing culture is “so part of the fabric” of university life that it is hard to stay away from if you do not wish to be an outsider, noting that there is“pressure to take part in it” (Interview 2, 9). For students across the Anglophone world, choosing to drink is to ‘choose the easy option’ (Hepworth et al.,2016). For Freshers, this is a particular issue, as Kadira describes:

“A lot of the events in first year that the Psychology Society put on, they were based around going out in Sheffield, going to West Street, having alcoholic drinks, playing drinking games and there wasn’t a lot of focus on other activities, which didn’t involve that, so a lot of people either went and got sucked in or they just didn’t go and they didn’t get to meet as many people from psychology, so it’s really not good how it’s run” (Interview 2)

Adila painted a similar picture:

“I think that was the thing that hit me most when I came to Sheffield and when I tried to get more involved with things, it seemed that even things, which weren’t really geared towards like clubs and drinking, the main social activities would be to go to the pub”

Both criticised this culture (as Kadira put it, “You’re paying all this money to go to university and then they just get drunk” (Interview 2)), recognising that it was a problem for some students. Adila noted that a university she attended in London had offered more alternatives than in Sheffield, with lots of different multicultural and ethnic events so that some students were not excluded.

Alima was one such student. She does not drink due to her Muslim faith, a fact that made it difficult on her first day at university when all of the conversations centred around it (Interview 1). She ultimately managed to meet people through other activities such as joining the Islamic Circle (Interview 2) – more on which below – and her flatmates, who are her closest friendship group, are not into clubbing and drinking; nevertheless, she does describe the culture as damaging her ability to socialise with her coursemates who do mainly spend their social time clubbing and drinking (ibid.).

When her flatmates do go clubbing, Alima described staying behind, seeing such experiences as a “good thing” for her “to figure out my values and I still have a good time with them … people understand, they are really respectful” (ibid.). Thus, while it diminishes the opportunities to strengthen friendships among her coursemates, Alima does not view the drinking culture too negatively; in her words, “the literature doesn’t represent it, the fact that you can be sober and enjoy uni – and people don’t think you are boring. People are still nice and respectful” (ibid.).

Not all students experienced such understanding, however. Raashida, for example, found it difficult to socialise as a Fresher, as it was difficult to find people who were not into clubbing and drinking. As she relates:

“Being a Fresher is dominated by clubbing and drinking culture: Everyone thinks that. Even if you read articles about it, about students, it’s all about clubbing and drinking … it’s all about clubbing and how to survive Fresher’s, it’s all about clubbing and drinking. I would say like 95% of it.” (Interview 2)

Raashida described there being an enormous pressure on her to take part in this culture with some of her white, non-Muslim flatmates pressuring her to go clubbing and drinking (Interview 1), something that annoyed her a great deal: “you shouldn’t have to do that if you don’t want to, but I think it is really like, that is the culture here” (ibid.). Ultimately, she found that students who embraced this culture did not want to socialise with her, nor she with them (in her words, “what’s the point of making an effort to socialise with these people… they’d just go clubbing while you stay home” (ibid.)). As a result, she ended up spending most of her time with the international students in her flat – where there was not “the English ‘get out and get drunk’ feel” – and her boyfriend which meant that she did not “feel like a Fresher” and felt “secluded” (ibid.).

Raashida even links her conscious decision of “becoming more religious” and starting to wear the hijab as a way to mitigate the cultural pressure to go out clubbing. As she explains, after her first year, when she went home for the summer:

“I decided to be a bit more religious and put a headscarf on and changed the way I dressed and stuff like that and I used to go clubbing maybe four times or five times, not a lot and then obviously, once I wore a headscarf, now I can’t do that anymore” (ibid.)

The headscarf, in this way, acted not only as a signifier about inner religiosity, but as a marker that (as she saw it) helped communicate that she did not want to go clubbing. She explained this, thus:

“[before deciding to wear the hijab] I don’t think you could tell by looking at me that I was Muslim … in my first year I didn’t and I used to dress differently. I used to wear leggings with, like, a dress or just a top, you know, like really English. I didn’t dress very Muslim, so people would sort of feel like ‘why don’t you go clubbing?’ and I was like ‘oh, I’m a Muslim’ and they were like ‘oh ok, but why? What does that mean? Why can’t you go clubbing if you’re a Muslim?’”

Since wearing the hijab, however: “now people don’t ask me to go clubbing, because they just assume she looks like she won’t go clubbing, because you know, I wear a headscarf” and “now they take it more seriously” (Interview 1). If Raashida found it a positive that her hijab made people see her as someone who did not drink, Adila also saw the negatives: when she, a student who wears the hijab, still chose to take part in events that involved socialising in pubs, she found that “after a while you got funny looks, especially when you got like a headscarf on, it’s just kind of like ‘what are you doing here?’” (ibid.). Being visibly Muslim was thus a hindrance for students wishing to socialise at university, decreasing opportunities for inter-ethnic friendships to be established and nurtured.

***Student Mixing: Examples***

If students such as Adila and Kadira struggled to established mixed-ethnic friendship groups, Alima offers a counterexample to such experiences. Like other students she found herself, in her words, “out of place and just trying to figure out how you are gonna find people”. Religion is important to Alima and she joined the Islamic Circle to meet likeminded people; however, unlike the others interviewed, she did not struggle to make friends across ethnic groups as she was lucky to have “amazing flatmates” (already discussed above in relation to drinking culture). Asked what the best thing about university is for her, she replies:

“The amount of people you meet from different backgrounds, from different countries and cultures and it’s just, I think the weirdest thing has been getting to know, the thing that I find most positive is people have such different views from you on everything, but we still get on weirdly well, like so far my most positive experience has been just getting to know my flatmates, like we would have never met each other in a normal setting and we are up and down England, like everyone is from everywhere and just bonding over, it’s just been really cool, like no one is on the same course, no one is from the same city, but we all get along, it’s been a really great experience.” (Interview 1)

To a degree, Alima offers an example of an ideal type situation – as further extrapolated in the discussion below on drinking/clubbing culture. At other times, ethnic mixing was born of something closer to a structural necessity rather than a more ‘natural’ process of socialisation. Eyana told the focus group that there were no other black students on her course and that she had subsequently had to mix with white – and the few Asian – members of her course; as she related: “I had to mix, I couldn’t be drawn to one group, because that group wasn’t there, so I had to find a different one. My group is all mixed, but I don’t feel it is as cliquey, just because there aren’t many of us to form a clique” (Focus Group).

This experience – that her “group wasn’t there” – was one voiced also by Monette and opens up the issue of how important groups are in terms of identity formation and support. As discussed previously in relation to the lack of positive role models, when Monette arrived at university she found that there was no black Caribbean community in Sheffield and so she joined the African Caribbean Society (ACS). Hurtado (1992) notes that such groups can play a positive role in helping ethnic minority students obtain support within the larger, white institution. In their analysis of the US higher education system, Saylor and Aries (1999) argue that ethnic minority students actively join ‘ethnic clubs and organizations’ when they transition to university as a means of supporting their ethnic identities whilst at the same time becoming involved in the wider student community.

For Monette, however, her experience joining the ACS was disappointing as the society did not put on any events to celebrate culture, but instead focused on drinking and parties (Monette, Interview 1); furthermore, describing the other black girls she met there, she describes a tendency for “relaxing hair and the weaves and stuff” which she views as “a lot of the time” being about “trying to be like a whole other race because that’s not how their hair is” and part of a culture in which “the more Caucasian you look, the more you’ll be accepted as a black person” (Monette, Interview 2). Searching for more students like herself, she failed to find them in what would have seemed the obvious place.Viewing the university as white and middle class, it was this lack – that her group was not there – that caused Monette distress as she fears losing touch with her roots, due to having to adapt to a white, middle-class environment (Interview 1).

What Monette’s experience raises is the importance for BME students that they have opportunities and space to celebrate their own history/identity. Before discussing the creation of such counterspaces as one strategy that students have employed to challenge and resist the racialised boundaries enacted within the institution and wider student culture and facilitate group formation, the issue of how group membership relates to *ethnic* identity needs explicating in greater detail than it has been thus far.

**6.4 The Role of Groups in Identity formation**

As Phinney and Alipuria (1990) have shown, considerations of ethnic identity – being central to such processes of social categorisation and social comparison – are of significant importance for BME students (in comparison to the white majority). The nature of universities as social and learning environments is thus incredibly important, with researchers such as Ortiz and Santos (2009, 6) identifying how multicultural environments – in which individuals have the freedom to express and develop ethnic identities – ideally support and promote the confidence, well-being and subsequent achievements, of BME students (cf. Phinney & Alipuria, 1990).

A multicultural environment does not here refer to what Amartya Sen (2007, 157) calls ‘plural monoculturism’ – a social form in which different ethnic groups exist but do not mix; what is labelled in more provocative style by Slavoj Žižek (2009) as ‘cultural apartheid’. Recognition of the importance for BME students, in terms of well-being and self-esteem, of groups that provide a space wherein their own history and identity can be embraced, explored and celebrated, does not obligate (nor postulate) disengagement with the majority (white) culture.

Indeed, the work of Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001, 112) has furthered the case against any simplistic ontological privileging of the role of ethnic/cultural groups as the basis of positive individual social identity; focused on the study of migrant groups and acculturation, their work illustrates how such groups’ desire to preserve their particular cultural identity does not (inherently) engender a disengaged relationship with ’the dominant culture’ (ibid.). Indeed, on the contrary, research undertaken within school settings has indicated that BME students are better equipped to navigate their educational environment when they have a strong identification with their ethnic culture *as well as* identifying with the mainstream culture (Berry et al., 2006).

Rather than the basis for a culture of ethnic separateness, therefore, the ideal of a multicultural campus climate is that it should promote group pride across ethnic groups while embracing a ‘superordinate identity’ (Ortiz & Santos, 2009, 6) able to unite the student body as a whole, regardless of cultural and ethnic backgrounds (see: Baron & Byrne, 2003). It is not enough to assume that the latter exists and ignore the former aspect of student identification. Ortiz and Santos (op cit.) point out the negative consequences for BME students of being part of an institutional situation in which the opportunities afforded by such a multicultural environment *are missing* – with no spaces existing that are not subsumed within the majority culture; as they state:

‘As students learn ways to express ethnic identity at university, the reactions they encounter affect their self-esteem and self-concept in significant ways. Indeed foundational to theories of ethnic identity development is the idea that self-loathing and rejection of the ethnic self are consequences of an overidentification with the majority group (Whites).’ (ibid., 9)

This was the institutional danger for students such as Monette. As related in the previous chapter’s discussion of ‘Role Models, Ethnic Identity and Internalised Racism’, Monette spoke of the lack of black role-models on campus and how this impacted upon her own sense of identity. She describes how she refers to herself “as not being proper black, as in not really fitting in with majority black culture” and links this to the fact that “I feel like I have missed out because there’s not that community here. I don’t know where that community is either” (Interview 2, 8). The lack of other black students whom she felt were like her – by which she meant educated and in stable relationships (illustrating an internalisation of racist stereotypes) – led her to feel like an atypical black person. Without access to a group, Monette felt unable to explore her own ethnic identity, leading her to look forward to a possible future, beyond university (“maybe when I get out into the working world”), in which she may be able to find other black people to whom she can relate and this would be possible.

With Kadira, who is mixed race, the lack of students from her ethnic background has a negative impact also since, while she does not over-identify with white people, she also cannot explore the Pakistani aspect of her identity. As a result, she feels that she is “not true to who [she] is”, as she cannot know enough about Pakistani culture and history. As she describes:

“to be honest, the majority of people I have been around is white girls and sometimes I do feel like I’ve lost touch with my roots, like I’m not true to who I am, just because I don’t know enough about where my Dad and my Grandma grew up, that culture. I’m just so immersed in this culture that I know. This is not the full me, but this is all that I can show right now, until I can go back and find out some more things about my background and stuff and feel confident enough to express who I am. But now I do feel sometimes I don’t know where I fit in. Like in a black community, I don’t feel like I’m black enough to stereotype, to fit in with that community, but on the other hand I don’t fit in with white people as well. It’s just like, where is the in-between where you can find a fixed balance between fitting in, but also being an individual and also showing your roots.” (Interview 2)

Where Kadira has been lucky, however, is in finding one of her friends who is also mixed race (see discussion in previous chapter on stereotyping), and who, because their own experience “mirrors so much of what has happened throughout my life” has been immensely valuable. Having someone that she can relate to and is in a very similar situation in a very white environment has been positive “just because you realise you’re not alone, but it would be good to talk to someone who had experienced this” (ibid.). This links back to the importance of a sense of belonging, discussed at the opening of the chapter.

As the examples above from the students interviewed for this thesis demonstrate, BME students express unhappiness at both the lack of options for inter-racial friendship *and* the lack of other students from their own ethnic groups with whom they could interact. Far from a contradiction, this illustrates the double-bind that BME students find themselves within: embedded within a white world from which their ethnicity excludes them. This indicates a failure of the university as an institution – to which, as the subsequent section outlines, BME students have developed their own strategies of resistance. This has taken the form, in different manners and to different degrees, of individual identity narratives and the creation of counterspaces.

**6.5 Strategies of Resistance: Identity Narratives and Agency**

As established in the preceding chapters, embedded within a white institution, several of the students interviewed experienced cases of Othering and stereotyping. Such encounters further distinguished their experience from that of the ethnic majority and, as already touched upon, influenced their identity formation, providing the basis upon which individual identity narratives (see: Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Pals, 2006) were constructed.

Othering has received extensive theoretical attention in the areas of race and ethnicity (e.g. Said, 1978; Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Its function is to reduce complexity; related to stereotyping, it ignores individual subjectivity to facilitate the creation of (simplified and generalisable) representations that allow us to categorise ideas and experiences (of others) to smooth our ability to function socially. This is achieved, most notably, by the imposition of (constructed) cultural elements onto people’s opinions and actions as a means of explanation for them (see Dervin, 2009; 2010). In a situation where inter-ethnic friendships are the exception rather than the rule, this is easily done, with stereotypical generalities attached to anything that differentiates from the hegemonic white norm.

As Humphreys and Brown (2002, 439) discuss in their analysis of identity narratives within a UK-based HE institution, ‘[i]ndividuals are enmeshed in a complicated series of intersecting and sometimes competing dialogues in which they become subjugated to some views and resistant to others’, in this way continuously creating and re-creating themselves. Within these processes, identities, as Howarth (2002, 20; cf. 2006) describes, ‘are always constructed through and against [such] representations’, but the simplifications of this Othering is experienced as oppressive by BME students.

As Saree described, the result is a sense of a general refusal (even inability) to accept the reality of a complex identity:

“you don’t fit in, I wouldn’t say you don’t fit in, but anyway you’re kind of like stuck in the periphery, somewhere where you are not completely English, you’re British, but you’re not like even in Lebanon, you’re not exactly Lebanese, because you are from England, but when you are from England, you are not English, it’s really strange it’s kind of like everyone has to put borders on everything… this crazy enforced sense of nationalism” (Interview 2)

Instead, as Adila describes, white students “always have to put you in a niche”; for example, they “suppose that you would be very similar to the sort of person you are hanging out with, even though you might both be wearing scarves, you both have similar backgrounds, but when it comes to your personality it’s completely different” (Interview 1). As she continues: “I think it’s easier for some people to just categorise us… they don’t see the fact that you are born and brought up here and that you are exactly the same as them, but with a slightly bit more alternative perspective” (ibid.). It is this ‘more alternative perspective’ – the complexity of an individual’s identity – that is erased by the process of Othering, categorising into groups of ‘normal’ and ‘Other’.

A refusal to be Othered in this manner – a rejection of the category of Other (Howarth, 2006) – was one feature of minoritised students’ resistance to oppressive institutional structures. The focus group discussion saw the participants *contesting* attempts to Other them either by asserting their membership of the community, articulating their distance from the simplified images others sought to attach to them, or through irony and mockery of the stereotypes themselves.

Monette, for example, asserted her membership of the university community by taking on a role providing tours for UCAS students. She chose to do so because she believed that “it is important that they see ethnic minorities”, because “I know when I came… I would be looking out for diversity, I always try to do that and I’m signed up as a Science and Engineering Champion… it’s important to show to prospective people and the public” (Interview 1). As well as acting as a role model, Monette is actively fighting against the lack of diversity at the university by joining the Teach First scheme. This is because she views education as central in alleviating the inequality that is her lived experience at Sheffield (ibid.).

Another example of this form of resistance can be seen in Raashida’s adoption of the hijab in her second year. This was previously discussed in relation to university’s clubbing culture where the choice to adopt a symbol that asserted her Muslim identity was felt to be valuable as a means of circumventing pressure to go drinking. Discussing the issue further, Raashida describes how the decision to adopt the hijab was related to finding a means by which she could change her university experience after her disappointing “secluded” first year (as discussed above):

“I felt like I didn’t sort of fit in I guess and sort of like re-evaluated my life in the summer, I thought well, I don’t actually know how I came to think maybe like that being more religious would like change how I felt or something…” (Interview 2)

As a way of finding her place (“fitting in”), Raashida made a conscious choice to more clearly assert and signify her Muslim identity than before. A key part of this was a desire to communicate that her faith was something she took seriously – that, as she put it, it was not something she could “take off”, or she “picked and chose” from. To quote Raashida at length:

“… it is like identity and I did think, oh, if I put it on, I can’t take it off, like if I don’t like it or what, if people are like a bit funny with it. I don’t wanna be this kind of person who takes it off again, that would look stupid.

… because before, like in my first year, when I said to someone ‘oh no, I don’t [go drinking], I’m Muslim’, they kind of looked at me like ‘okay?’, but you – they didn’t say it, but you could kind of think – you are not wearing a headscarf and your arms are out and you are wearing leggings and you have a boyfriend. So, it’s kind of like as if you pick and choose and I think it was kind of like, ‘look at me, I don’t do that kind of thing’.

I think people … because if you don’t look like you are religious, people kind of like, not doubt, but they are just kind of like a bit ‘yeah whatever’, you can’t be serious about” (Interview 2)

This symbol of how seriously she took her faith was not only meant for other non-Muslim students, it was also inward facing, a way of make *herself* take it seriously. Before wearing the hijab, she explained, she had on occasions given into the pressure and gone clubbing with white friends; once she wore the head scarf, however, she felt that was no longer an option: “I wouldn’t just give in and go with them, because I would have to take my headscarf off to go clubbing and I’m not gonna go clubbing in a headscarf, that’s even more stupid” (Interview 2).

By embracing her Muslim identity, Raashida consciously resisted pressure to accept the dominant culture – and in doing so found the confidence to be more assertive of her own individual identity. Now:

“I kind of feel like my opinions are more respected, because I respected myself, if that makes sense, so yeah, people listen to me more seriously and they just had a bit more ‘oh okay, is that what you think’, they just listened a bit different if that makes sense” (ibid.)

One downside that Raashida found, however, to adopting the hijab, was that while her opinions were taken more seriously, she also came to be increasingly stereotyped (“at the same time, some people would be like ‘so do all Muslims do this? Is this what you….?’, even though it’s only what I say, they assume everyone does that” (ibid.)). This specific issue – of the constant subjection of Muslim girls to stereotypes and attendant questioning – was discussed in the focus group also. Adila for example, ridiculed the idea that her religion and race “mean[s] that we are the expert who can be called on anything related to race in a seminar… we are seen as a separate, a kind of orientalist product” (Focus Group). The students listed similar examples, mockingly:

E: “you feel like a prop” (10)

A: “you are an example”

E: “you are always the subject of scrutiny” (11)

A: “opinionated hijabi” (12)

E: “strong black woman”

Speaking to the issue in more detail, Adila reports being stereotyped, by the mainstream culture, Othered as an exotic creature who cannot be a feminist – while simultaneously some people who share her ethnic background see her as “Anglo” due to her dry, sarcastic comments and the particular popular culture she likes (Interview 2). Adila sees this as an intra- as well as inter-ethnic problem, noting that some Asian men make derogatory comments if women behave in an “Anglo” way, but that “men can become as Anglo as they desire … they don’t tend to be judged as harshly” while women “are expected to be more compliant” (ibid.). Pressured from all sides, in assertively rejecting these simplistic representations, Adila affirms her individual, complex identity; she is British Pakistani, she is bicultural, identifying most with her British identity.

The assertion of her complex identity is important for Raashida also and something that she discusses at length in the second interview. There, she described how she “used to be like "oh I'm Pakistani, I'm Pakistani, I'm not English" that kind of thing”, but that this changed as she got older. Now, while she still does not “feel English” – “I feel British, I think there is a difference – she describes herself as equally Pakistani and British: “I think as I got older, I'm like I'm British, before I was like 80/20 and now I'm 50/50. Yeah, as I got older I felt more British... because you have to mix up as well.” Like Adila, however, she still feels pressurised to conform to a simplistic representation based on her ethnic identity, explaining:

“I live in England, so obviously I'm not going to be a 100% Pakistani, but I think other Pakistani people do expect that of you as well, so it's kind of hard to get... The English people are like "why are you not English, you were born here and why are you speaking like that", but then Pakistanis are like "why are you speaking English and you should know your own language". (laughs) It's like really annoying and thankfully my family is not like that, it's like you have to juggle it and people don't see that because it's so different and Pakistanis want to keep it all Pakistani and the English people want you to be English but we're like in the middle and you don't know what to do. (Interview 2)

She felt this pressure the least, she says, during visits to see her family in Pakistan:

… when I go there I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders, I can just be free and that might sound weird, but it's just like this strange feeling, like, I'm at home even. I'm home here and I'm sitting on my own bed, but I feel, like right now, I don't feel like I'm not at home, it's only when I go there that I realise that I feel like this when I'm in England. I think it's because I'm in between two things, but when I go to Pakistan people can … if you're from England, people can tell when you go to Pakistan, they can just tell, because the culture is so different.

… I think I felt I belong there skin colour wise, because here, I belong here, but people wouldn't think that. I think that's why I feel I have to speak English really loud, so that they can hear and it's because I don't have an Asian accent, I don't have a foreign accent, so they'll know "ah she is actually from here", because I think if I had an Asian accent then they would still think "oh what is she doing here?" and they can tell from the way I speak that I have gone to school here, you know. This is my home, so yeah, when I'm in Pakistan, that's just me. I don't have to be two people, unless they speak to me. Then they would be able to tell that I'm from England, but they still treat you as Pakistani, you just live in England. They don't see you as foreign, you were there and now you have come back, so ... yeah and here I have to constantly remind people that I'm English, because people are just so … I'm like, "look, I can wear jeans!" (Interview 2)

As with Saree, Raashida’s narrative outlines a case whereby her Othering eradicates the in-between/complexity of her identity, and overlooks her attempts to establish a third space, which transcends the dichotomy of either British or Pakistani.[[50]](#footnote-50) Raashida does not aspire to be either/or and throughout our interviews actively rejected interpellations by fellow students/lecturers, the majority public, and British Pakistanis that force her to occupy specific (subordinate) subject positions. As elaborated in the previous section on stereotyping, for example, she has faced categorisation as both a meek Muslim woman who does nothing on weekends by fellow students, and as a threatening entity whose presence means that people cannot speak freely in seminars on terrorism.

As Raashida describes above, she subsequently feels that she has to remind British people *constantly* that she is not a strange foreign “Other”. In Pakistan, by contrast, she feels that “a weight has been lifted off [her] shoulders” and she “can just be free”; that is to say, she is able to be herself in all her complexity. This is in Pakistan, a country that she has only visited three times and where she experienced a culture shock when she last visited (described in detail in the second interview). Nevertheless, she feels she is more accepted in Pakistan, due to her skin colour (“I felt I belong there skin colour wise”); in Britain, by contrast, she can never be seen as ‘normal’ since her appearance shrouds her ‘Britishness’ (“here, I belong here, but people wouldn't think that”).

Resultantly, Raashida feels that, in Britain, she constantly has to identify herself as ‘one of you’ to fellow British subjects, doing so via actions such as speaking loudly on the bus so as to demonstrate that she does not have a ‘foreign’ accent. In Pakistan, while her lighter skin attracts comments from family, she nevertheless feels accepted as a complex individual (“when I'm in Pakistan, that's just me. I don't have to be two people”); and even when her difference is recognised (i.e. “unless they speak to me”), she is still not Othered. Thus, in Pakistan, while her accent identifies her as from England, “they still treat you as Pakistani, you just live in England”; “they don't see you as foreign, you were there and now you have come back”. This is in stark difference to Britain where “I have to constantly remind people that I'm English”. Lacking the freedom that she feels in Pakistan to just be one person, in Britain, Raashida, like Adila, actively resists the attempts to reduce and erase her complex identity. Though it may appear defensive, it is the opposite of passive as, by speaking up and speaking back (vocally, as on the bus, or even in the clothes she wears: “look, I can wear jeans!”), she consciously asserts the multifaceted nature of her identity.

As the writer and political activist Audre Lorde describes beautifully, such affirmations are essential to resisting the impositions that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy seeks to place on BME women; as Lorde (2001, 177) describes her own situation/experience:

“As a Black Lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from expression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as a meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living.”

All of the students interviewed, in their own ways, provide examples of such crafting and assertion of complex identities through individual narratives; elements that have been highlighted throughout the previous analytical chapters. This resistance – to Othering – is also achieved in a collective way, through a form of embracing the marginality ascribed to their minority identity/ies, doing so via the active creation and maintenance of counterspaces.

**6.6 Creation of Counterspaces**

The role played by space, or spaces, in the development of individuals and communities, has been noted by a range of educational literature. One of the most prominent of these is the ‘third space theory’ advanced by Homi K. Bhabha (2004). This is a sociolinguistic theory of the realisation of identity and community through language and education. Third Space theorists view the process of identity development as occurring through people’s affinity with (and incorporation of) the community’s shared symbols and signs (their ‘artifacts’) that have been accumulated over generations (Hatano & Wertsch, 2001, 78). This is conceived across three spaces – home (signifying everyday knowledge), school (academic knowledge) and a third space in between them, ‘hybrid’ spaces that bring together contradictory knowledges and practices. Inequalities and unevenness of cultural representation – i.e. of the cultural ‘artifacts’ shared – mirror social inequalities more generally (Bhabha, 2004, 245); simultaneously, however, the nature of hybridity illustrates that these same symbols of culture ‘have no primordial fixity’ and ‘can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew’ (Bhabha, 2006). Such spaces subsequently offer possibilities, through their exploration, for the development of new emancipatory identities.

Much of the literature on the potentiality of third spaces focuses upon the classroom – learning environments that are viewed as ‘immanently hybrid, that is polycontextual, multivoiced, and multiscrpited’ (Gutiérrez et al., 1999, 287). Ethnographic analyses such as Gutiérrez et al. have subsequently focused attention upon these spaces and the tensions intrinsic to them, viewing the latter ‘as potential sites of rupture, innovation, and change that lead to learning (ibid.). This current research analysis has not placed the same attention upon the classroom and its practices, allowing students’ narratives to emphasise their own areas of significance to their university experience. Nevertheless, issues related to space and hybridity have been raised in particular in relation to the concept of counterspaces.

Third Space theorists have paid particular attention to ‘borderlands’ (Anzaldua, 1987; Bhabha, 1994) as such hybrid spaces, being special contexts in which cultural and linguistic practices collide and struggle. The concept of the borderland does not apply within the context of this research, however, we can identify a cultural space ‘on the border of the land’ (i.e. on the margin), separate but attached; these areas are known as counterspaces. bell hooks’ writings have emphasised the emancipatory potential of the margin to be a ‘site of resistance’ and ‘location of radical openness and possibility’, rather than ‘a site of deprivation’ (hooks, 1990, 153; cf. 1994). From a university perspective, research focused on the experience of Latina/o students in the US higher education system (Yosso et al., 2009, 676-697; Villalpando, 2003; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005) has detailed how, in response to their marginalisation on white campuses, such students build a sense of community on the margins. In these self-developed social and academic ‘counterspaces’, minoritised students can actively nourish and replenish themselves upon their own ‘home’ cultures (see: Yosso, 2005; 2006);[[51]](#footnote-51) moreover, they ‘allow room outside the classroom confines for students to vent frustrations and cultivate friendships with people who share many of their experiences’ (Yosso et al., 2009, 677).

These can involve both formal and informal activities. In the case of the Latina/o students mentioned, this involved groups decorating their residential spaces with cultural symbols (posters, pictures, etc.), collecting and reading Spanish-language texts, playing music loudly, preparing culturally authentic meals, and simply speaking with one another in Spanish (see: Yosso, 2006). Having such social counterspaces, developing community groups that minoritised students can be a part of, helps bolster BME students’ sense of belonging (Yosso et al., 2009, 679) – which as discussed above, plays an important role in self-belief and academic motivation and subsequent achievement.

The clearest example from the interviews of a student availing themselves of cultural counterspaces was Raashida and her membership – from her second year on – of the Islam Circle and Pakistani Society. Research by Ortiz and Santos (2009, 6) has found that ethnic societies such as these serve various important functions for their student members: shelter from a hostile campus climate for students from BME backgrounds; forums for friendship, affiliation and activism; and a place to reclaim group histories and catalyse students to strengthen the importance of ethnic background to identity. For Raashida, membership provided all three; indeed, based upon her own narrative, it is not over-stating the situation to say that her discovery of these societies fundamentally changed her university experience. This discovery was, in turn, related to the previously discussed choice to adopt the hijab, thereby making her more visibly Muslim – a decision that subsequently opened new doors. As she describes:

“In my first year I only joined the sociological society, because I didn’t just really know there were others… But in my second year, I think I was more noticeable as a Muslim. I got flyers for like the Islamic Circle events and others, so then I think, just because I was visibly a Muslim, [I got invited], I went to some of their stuff, I made lots of friends – like Muslim friends – from the Islamic Circle. And then, I didn’t even know we had a Pakistani Society at this university until my second year and then some of my friends told me about it and I joined it… and in second year I spent a lot of time with Islamic Circle and Pakistani Society friends” (Raashida, Interview 1)

Resultantly, Raashida’s “experience of second year was a lot better” (ibid.). Her first year, she explained, “felt all white”, and subsequently she had felt “secluded”. Now, having found a space in which she could make friends who shared her faith and where she was not pressurised to be a part of the dominant drinking culture, her university experience felt “diverse and was really good”, feeling as if she finally “got to be a Fresher” (Interview 2).

In the Pakistani Society and Islamic Circle, she “found people that were like minded, so then I was like fine, because they obviously had the same opinions as me on that kind of thing [clubbing and drinking culture]”. She still had a relationship with her flatmates, although they were not close, and friends on her course who were not of Pakistani heritage (“they would go clubbing and drinking, but they would also do other stuff”) but, overall: “I found like my group sort of thing after I signed up for the Pakistani society” (ibid.). In this manner, these groups offered a counterspace that had been lacking in her first year – one wherein she was accepted in her complexity and could be who she wanted to be.

Charlotte also found a counterspace in a university group. In this case, however, it was within the group “International Student Wives” at her first university. While not an international student (or a wife) herself, she relates how this space provide a refuge for her from incessant microaggressions (as discussed in the previous chapter on this subject), of questioning her presence in a white environment. She joined:

“just so that I could meet with fellow black women on campus. It was the only environment at Lancaster where I didn’t have to ‘justify’/explain my African heritage and constantly field questions about ‘race’, racism, discrimination, difference, etc. There is a tendency for strangers to test out all their pet questions they ever wanted to know about issues or ‘race’ with you as though you are an automatic authority on everything to do with being black, or critical race theory, as through blackness is a homogenized , fixed and easily deconstructed universal identity” (Charlotte, Email Response)

While, this group provided a counterspace at her first university, however, Charlotte felt that there was not a similar group available at Sheffield University. This was related not only to her ethnicity, but also to the fact that she is “a mature postgrad with a professional working life, a mortgage and family commitments and doesn’t fit into social situations with people who (for the majority) haven’t even started a career yet and are in their 20s, when I’m in my 40s” (Email Response). She explained her disappointment of having been excluded from events by fellow PGR students and how she has a select group that she speaks to socially:

“Last year, I recall that after our upgrade/confirmation presentations informal invitations had circulated to convene in a pub to celebrate the success of the presentations that we’d all given, but somehow I wasn’t part of that informal networking with my fellow students and so saw them gather together and leave in a way that I felt excluded from. I now choose not to notice these things, and never respond to email invitations to convene in a pub any more. I have a select group of fellow PGRs (also mature students) that I speak to socially and simply make small-talk at the photocopiers with all the rest.” (Email Response)

The importance of finding and/or creating/developing such spaces is of huge importance to Charlotte. When asked what kind of advice she would offer other students from the same ethnic background, who are considering Sheffield University, she emphasises opportunities to network and collectivise to develop friendship:

“Your socialization as a ‘minoritized’ person within the wider student body will (largely) be what you choose to make it. Be selective about the friendships you make, and never ever remain in situations where you are constantly required to justify your presence. The SU is unlikely to have anything of substance that will support you in addressing the challenges of being treated differently on the basis of ‘race’. However, keep an open mind and always remain open to any positive opportunities to network and collectivise in ways that strengthen you, and from which you can gain insights for your future” (Email Response).

The importance of friendships has already been discussed in detail, but what Charlotte points to is the capacity of friendship groups to act as counterspaces.

Monette’s friendship group provides a prime example of this fact. As previously outlined, unlike Raashida, she was not able to find the community she was looking for in a university society (the ACS) and while Teach First provided an outlet for her activism, it was in her friendship group that she was able to develop something of a counterspace. As she describes, this group is extremely diverse:

“there’s a lot of people form the Hip-Hop dance society, which is mostly black people, it’s quite diverse, like we always laugh about if people see us hanging out, they must wonder what society we are, because we are like Asians, whites and blacks, Chinese… but like obviously in Physics everyone is mainly white. I live with a Chinese girl, a Pakistani girl and a white girl, two white girls actually, one from Germany and one from Greece originally and we all do Physics. So like I have a diverse friendship group … I have always had a diverse friendship group.” (Monette, Interview 2)

Struggling to develop friendships with other black students (“I do always feel a bit isolated by being the only person from my background, so I’m always like ‘oh there is another black person in the building, I’ll go and say hello’” (ibid.)), she describes feeling as if she is within “an in-between space” and the search to find others who fall within this liminal state:

“Yes an in-between space. Yes, there’s an in-between space. It’s just like about the number of people that are in the in-between, if there’s only five people, then you only have five people to try to get along with. If it is more like 50 then you’re fine. Like I said my friend in Cambridge, she has those people and I feel like not only black people, but anyone from anywhere, I have no problem. It’s just about meeting people who don’t assume that you’re something and who have similar ground with you and don’t feel awkward about it...” (ibid.)

It is in this context that she found inspiration within this diverse group of others who are all “in -between” cultures:

“because all my flatmates, we’re all from different places and we are all fine and I would say we all fit in quite well with the middle ground, except the two, there’s one German girl and there’s one Greek girl and they get on much better with the Physics white males. And then there’s me and Sahar, I get on more with people from the hip hop society, which is quite a cultural mix, so I’ve got Black friends and Asian friends and Russian friends, so we’re not completely comfortable, but we’re not uncomfortable. So yes, somewhere in between. But I don’t think it’s really a place” (ibid.)

Her friendship groups provide the space (a group of “in-between” identities) wherein she can feel connected. This is a situation she has experience of since school, describing how, during that time:

“I didn’t feel like I’d particularly fit in with the Black girls, I didn’t fit in with the White girls. I felt most comfortable with a mixture, like the Turkish girl, the Chinese girl and a Black girl. And then Sixth Form, once the White people that came in were just very different, so I definitely didn’t fit in with them and so I always felt I didn’t have a standard group of people that I could identify with and it’s just usually a pick and mix from all these different groups” (ibid.)

Her diverse group of university friends act, in this sense, as role models. Monette spoke, for example, of her admiration for one of her flatmates, saying:

“I really admire her for being completely who she is as she’s not insecure about being different or worried about other people’s interpretation of her and then in in the first year, I made friends with this girl in my flat and she was an Indian lesbian and she was… not unheard of, but she hadn’t told her parents or anything so it was really interesting and inspiring” (ibid.)

Returning to the discussion of *spaces,* Monette’s friendship group – by her own description an ‘in-between’ space, marked by cultural differences – offers an example of hybridity, of a third space, and demonstrates their potential as a space for transforming perceptions. Whilst they ‘met’ in the classroom, however, it was not the class space that offered this potentiality, but the space the students themselves created beyond it.

Adila was active in several university societies – both medical and political (i.e. for gender equality), but like Monette, it has been her friends who provided a counterspace, and like Raashida, religious identity has played an important role. As she outlines:

“it’s one of those situations where, you know where people who reflect your value systems or in the way someone who is a Muslim would more gravitate towards me, just because of the headscarf. So, it’s just a similar sort of thing to that.” (Interview 1)

It is within such social counterspaces, amongst friends and role models, that the research participants develop their narrative identities, as they navigate an institution wherein racism – whether in the form of microaggression or racialised aggression – is a daily reality.

**6.7 Summary**

If the previous three analytical chapters focused predominantly upon structural and inter-personal racism, the aim in this chapter is to place the focus upon the agency of the research participants and the strategies of resistance through which white supremacy is navigated and resisted. This chapter has thus focused upon the importance, for students – and minoritised students more than others – of supportive groups, charting how, despite the twin problems of an overtly white campus and ethnic segregation, the female BME students who compose this thesis’s research participants, have asserted narratives of identity that resist ‘Othering’ and created counterspaces with friends and role models.

**CHAPTER 7:**

**CONCLUSION**

**7.1 Thesis Aim**

The aim of this thesis has been guided by its initial, broadly-framed primary research question: What are the experiences at university of a group of research participants drawn from the most underrepresented groups in the British higher education system, specifically women from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black British Caribbean backgrounds? The purpose of this initial, deliberately broad research question, was to allow participants to determine the salient themes of their own experiences themselves. Subsequently, through the use of a series of narrative interviews, embedded within a constructivist grounded theory approach, this broad question was narrowed to focus upon the lessons these students’ experiences offered regarding the role race plays in their everyday university experience; was the university genuinely inclusive for them, or did the nature of the university environment disadvantage them in their life as a student? From this, a final research question was developed, asking in conclusion what actions might be taken to change such experiences in the future. Through the utilisation of this methodology, while drawing upon the insights offered by CRT and microaggression analytical approach, this thesis offers a unique contribution to the existing literature on UK HE wherein a study of this nature has yet to be produced.

This concluding chapter summarises the research’s findings and their implications, placing these within the context of the existing literature. It subsequently discusses the projects’ limitations while providing initial thoughts on avenues for future research.

**7.2 Summary of Thesis Content**

Before discussing the overarching conclusions drawn from this research, a summary of the thesis structure and individual chapters’ content provides a useful reminder of how the project itself developed and proceeded.

Chapter 1 clarified and defined the subject of analysis – BME female students’ day-to-day lived experiences at university – and detailed and delineated the theoretical framework – based upon critical race theory (CRT), whiteness theory, and microaggressions theory – through which it was approached. It also provided a literature review covering pre-existing research into the experiences of racism in HE. Key, in this outlining of the literature, is the illustration of how, despite its prominence in research into HE in the US, there has hitherto been an average absence of analyses of UK HE that draw upon racial microagression theory to explore the subtler forms of racism experienced by BME students whilst at university.

Chapter 2 built upon the preceding chapter’s outline of the adopted theoretical framework by delineating the research strategy, via which the research itself was undertaken. Drawing upon CRT, this strategy utilised biographical narrative interviewing techniques and focus group analyses as part of a constructivist grounded theory approach to collecting and analysing data. The chapter covered such necessary concerns as my positionality as a researcher (and how I sought to address power relations between myself and research participants), a description of the fieldwork context, the specific tools employed in data collection and analysis, and a discussion of the ethical considerations attached to these research methods. The following four chapters constituted this thesis’s original research and analysis.

Chapter 3 focused upon the research participants’ experiences of institutional (or environmental) microaggressions. In doing so, it identified five main types of such microaggressions that were experienced by the research participants: (i) a lack of student diversity; (ii) a lack of staff diversity; (iii) a lack of role models; (iv) an encounter with mis-placed multicultural policies; and (v) a Eurocentric curriculum. Chapter 4 focused upon research participants’ experiences of inter-personal microaggressions. The analysis again identified five forms such microaggressions took: (i) ‘Alien in one’s own land’; (ii) ascriptions of intelligence / inferior status; (iii) assumptions of criminality; (iv) pathologising cultural values; and (v) stereotyping. Chapter 5 focused upon the participants’ encounters with racialised aggressions. In keeping with the argument of microaggression theory that such obvious displays of explicit racism are less widespread in comparison to the more insidious racial microaggressions, participants raised fewer examples of such racialised aggressions. Nevertheless, the analysis identified three main forms that such aggressions took: (i) racial jokes; (ii) derogatory comments; and (iii) discriminatory treatment.

The previous three analytical chapters having focused predominantly upon structural and inter-personal racism, the aim of Chapter 6 was to place the focus upon the agency of the research participants and the strategies of resistance through which white supremacy is navigated and resisted. This chapter thus focused upon the importance for minoritised students of supportive groups, charting how the female BME students who compose this thesis’s research participants, have asserted narratives of identity that resist ‘Othering’ and created counterspaces, with friends and role models.

**7.3 Original Contributions and Key Conclusions**

Among the general insights and knowledge that this thesis offers to the academic literature, three significant elements stand out as key, original contributions to the existing academic literature: first, the application of this thesis’s research approach to the UK context; second, this approach shows the whole journey for student participants, extending its gaze beyond formal policies to cover their everyday life experiences; and third, the development of an innovative research strategy that strengthens the internal validity of the research and subsequently can help reduce barriers for wider communications of the key conclusions and their implications. This section will first outline these original contributions in further detail, before delving into the key research conclusions themselves.

***Original Contribution: Application of Research Approach to UK Context***

First, despite their strong pedigree within studies of the US higher education system,[[52]](#footnote-52) a research project of this nature – i.e. an in-depth qualitative analysis of BME students’ university experiences from a CRT perspective, utilising microaggression theory – has not been undertaken previously in a UK context.

In contrast to the US – ‘the home of identity politics’ (Keucheyan, 2013, 106) and where socialist politics never took root (Nichols, 2015) – UK politics and policy making has been historically driven by a shared assumption that *class* is the basis of British politics and ‘all else is embellishment and detail’ (Pulzer, 1967). Race and the importance of racial equality has, as such, been accorded a far smaller space in the national conversation. While the late twentieth century saw class’s conceptual hegemony decline within UK politics and academia (Hobsbawmn, 1978; Hall, 1988b; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) it has – despite the lessons of intersectionality – retained this role as *the* central lens through which the British view society and themselves (cf. Fox, 2014; Hickson, 2014, 42).

This research demonstrates, however, that despite divergences between the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ academies, a similar situation exists within the UK HE context as previously identified and illustrated by research in the US context. The student experiences given voice in this thesis point towards the centrality of race within their everyday life at university and in so doing indicate the value of undertaking further research of this nature in other UK settings (more on which below).

***Original Contribution: showing the whole journey***

The research shows the *embeddedness of whiteness in everyday* student life, which has not been changed by widening participation policies. The thesis brings out how whiteness permeates every aspect of the university experience such as *interactions with peers*, *classroom, curriculum, policy and student culture*. It brings all of these areas together (both the formal educational aspect and interactions within everyday life) through its *narrative approach, thereby allowing the whole journey to emerge*, rather than focusing in on only specific areas. In so doing, it demonstrates the *importance of the lived experiences of the everyday* for students and the reality that it is the whole community and everyday interactions which count, not merely formal policies. In doing so, it sheds light upon the shortcoming of an approach to racial equality reliant upon top-down policies, setting the scene for a more radical approach illustrating a need amongst white staff and students to confront our own privilege.

***Original Contribution: Innovation in Research Strategy***

Second, in combining narrative interviewing with CRT’s counterstorytelling approach, this thesis has developed an innovative research strategy that strengthens the internal validity of such research. By allowing research participants themselves to determine their most meaningful university experiences, this approach avoided imposing themes and issues upon the interviewees, meaning that their subsequent introduction of particular racist encounters was organic, minimising dangers in response bias (Yin, 2009; Wengraf, 2001).

As emphasized in the CRT counterstorytelling literature, dominant groups, when faced with unfamiliar counter stories, will often, initially, reject them due to the discomfort they feel when confronting matters of race and power (Delgado, 1989). Narrative interviews empowered participants by providing them with the chance to talk about their experiences more freely and in a more natural way. Combining this element of empowerment with the increased internal validity and minimisation of response bias provided by this research approach can help overcome initial barriers to communication and ultimately dismissal.

**7.3.1 Key Conclusions**

The research undertaken in this thesis demonstrates that racist encounters were part of the daily lived experiences of the female BME student participants. Across the multiple narrative interviews and focus group undertaken, students related examples of racial microaggressions they experienced, as well as direct racialised aggressions. Rather than finding at university a space free from exclusionary power structures, the students found themselves, by necessity, developing strategies of resistance, through which they navigated the white supremacist university culture.

* The key conclusion of this research is thus that, while examples of explicit racism may be less frequent than they once were, the university context within which the participants study, as currently structured, nevertheless reproduces racial inequalities that nurture *implicit* forms of racism (microaggressions), at both institutional and interpersonal levels.

On an institutional level, these microaggressions are manifest in an underrepresentation of staff from BME backgrounds, a lack of diversity amongst the student body, a white and Eurocentric curriculum, and a lack of representation for BME students within the students’ union. Confirming previous research findings from Sue (2011), such institutional racial microaggressions had a particularly insidious effect upon the participants’ university experience by undercutting essential rights and opportunities, while at the same time negating the significance of race/ethnicity in the lives of BME students.

Regarding the curriculum, for example, the lack of diversity presented students with a symbolic erasure of their lived reality, while certain cases where examples from their ethnic background *were* included served as examples for aberrations from the white norm. Further systemic factors, such as a lack of representation within the student union, left BME students continually working within an oppressive climate that diminished and downplayed their experiences. As pointed out by one respondent, being a student at the University of Sheffield can at times mean living with great contradictions: at a time when Sheffield’s Student Union was voted best Student Union for the fifth year in a row, students voted down a motion for a BME sabbatical officer, an act that left said student feeling bleak.

The personal stories of the student participants illustrated how inertia within university institutions with regards to improving hiring practices – necessary to overcome the disproportionately white academic staff – communicated to them that “there is only so far you can advance”, viewed as evidence, for some participants, of an unwillingness to relinquish white privilege. A lack of staff and student diversity, and the ensuing lack of role models, led some students to feel a sense of conflict and loss of identification with their communities; other students related a resultant sense of low self-worth and feelings of invisibility, where students do not register within the dominant white institutional culture. In each case, the results echo other studies by academics who have drawn upon CRT to analyse the American HE system, such as Minikel-Lacocque (2013); Pittman (2012); Yosso et al. (2009); Solórzano et al. (2000); Sue, Lin et al. (2009) and Watkins, Labarrie and Appio (2010).

On an interpersonal level, the student participants described experiencing recurring messages through their interactions with staff and fellow students that communicated that they were out of place and did not conform to the ideal white norm. One of the most common interpersonal microaggressions, which was raised by all students in the interviews (with the exception of Amina) was “ascription of intelligence / assumption of inferior status”; students were targets of messages that interpreted them as inferior and less intelligent than white students, questioning their status as students.

Another interpersonal microaggression that was again experienced by all students related to “pathologising cultural values”, a microaggression based on the belief that the cultural values of whites (in particular heterosexual white men) are the normative ideal and that BME students’ cultures and values are abnormal and inferior. For instance, each of the students who wears the hijab encountered the message “your dress code is abnormal and you have abnormal values”, or “you are not integrated”, finding themselves defined against the racial hierarchies of white middle-class values accepted by their interlocutor as being the norm. The continual stereotyping that the students faced on a daily basis, both inside and outside the classroom, by fellow students or lecturers (in some cases based on old colonial representations), sent messages that denigrated them, whilst reducing their complex identities and denying their individuality.

**7.4 Research Implications**

This takes us onto the final research question, asking what actions might be taken to change experiences such as those related by the research participants in the future? As reiterated numerous times within this thesis, this thesis is written from a criticalist perspective (e.g. Freire, 1970; Minker, 2010), one that sees the ultimate success of the work contained within it as directly linked to its capacity to act as a conduit for broader social change. This is an ambitious goal, which criticalist researchers do not always achieve (Lassiter, 2005) and it is important not to over-claim the impact that a PhD thesis such as this can achieve. Nevertheless, whilst it would be epistemologically wrong to see within this research the foundation for a universalisable set of prescriptions it is also important not to under-claim the value of this analysis and the potential it has to play in an agenda-setting capacity. A number of valuable lessons can be drawn from this analysis, which offers insights and benefits for both the academic literature and practical policy.

First, this work contributes to the literatures on HE and race in the UK. In particular, it challenges the literature and linked policy focus on widening participation by demonstrating that increasing the number of ‘non-traditional learners’ entering university, while important, is not *in itself* enough to overcome concerns regarding the institutional racism of higher education (more on which below). Approaches focusing on widening participation alone have ignored the systemic, structural problem of racism, which goes beyond recruiting more students from BME backgrounds. This analysis demonstrates the necessity that attention be focused upon the experience of students once they arrive at university, recognising in particular the existence of whiteness as a non-formal power structure within which all members of the university community act. Moreover, there is a clear need to refocus the debate specifically upon racism and racial inequality, rather than simply on equality in general terms, as is the case in widening participation policies (cf. Law, Turney & Philipps, 2002).

Therefore, if the first message of this research is that white supremacy and the normalising culture of whiteness is a fundamental part of the research participants’ lived experience at university, the second is that this situation cannot be ended through institutional tinkering, legislation, or top-down government targets. Race is grossly under-theorised in HE in the UK and colour blindness permeates policy making in a manner reminiscent of Leonardo and Boas’s (2013, 322) description of US public school reform, where:

‘Reforms for education are hastily enacted with uncritical regard for race as a historical and ongoing structuring force. Instead, it is understood as an outcome of problems with the education system or, worse, a variable in research rather than a central principle. Thus the education system and its outcomes may lead to a better understanding of educational problems.’

Here, while open forms of racism are still present – as experienced by the students involved in this research, through racial jokes, differential treatment and derogatory comments – the degree to which the core messages of racial inferiority is still alive on campuses, albeit now cloaked in a more covert form, presents a wider tragedy. Thus, if universities are serious about tackling racism, they need to acknowledge uncomfortable truths about white privilege and the reality of continuing racial discrimination in its newer microaggressive form. To this end, drawing upon the lessons of this research, several practical recommendations are here made:

* + 1. ***Undertake further CRT research to raise awareness of the normalisation of whiteness in UK Higher Education***

As the analysis contained within this thesis demonstrates, CRT research offers a proven means through which to uncover patterns of white supremacy at play in educational institutions. If institutional racism of the kind outlined herein is to be combatted, then further research that addresses the realities of race on university campuses, and the implications for how students learn and develop, is crucial. The salience of race in HE research will only come to the foreground of study and be viewed with the seriousness it deserves when a body of research exists that is able to demonstrate the penalties of the existing system for minoritised students and the importance of bringing about change.

One study cannot entirely uncover the forms of microaggressions that female BME students experience within UK HE, nor how they respond to and resist microaggressions on their campuses. Nevertheless, it is hoped that in its own small way, this research can play an agenda-setting role – alongside pre-existing works such as Rollock (2012; 2017) and Arbouin (2009) – by raising consciousness and inspiring more academics to draw upon a CRT-inspired approach to study microaggressions in UK HE.

The limitations of *this* study can offer important direction for such future research. Many of these limitations have been discussed in the research design, in particular with regards to the centrality of reflexivity in this project. This research focused primarily upon race and gender; however, future work should aim to expand this intersectional approach to bring in further stratification systems such as class, age, religion, sexuality and disability. This research focused upon the experiences of female BME students at one leading Russell Group university with a predominantly white student body. Comparative research at universities with different student intakes and demographics – for example Birkbeck, University of London – will also be important. Furthermore, greater attention and particular focus can and should be applied to elements of this own thesis’s research focus that have been touched upon without in-depth analysis; specifically the important issues of Islamophobic microaggressions (see Nadal et al., 2012) and gendered and racial microaggressions related to ‘lad culture’ on university campuses (see Phipps & Young, 2012; Phipps, 2015; Cheeseman, 2010).

As stated in the Methodology, a more collaborative research methodology proved difficult to utilise; however, further research would benefit from involving students in all aspects of the research, such as at data analysis stage, and offer them more opportunities in the project conceptualisation. Such an approach would provide the potential to further empower BME students by providing them with a central role in discussions regarding race and racial inequality on their campuses, merging “ethnographic practice with activism and citizenship” (see Lassiter, 2005, 152; Marcus, 1999).

* + 1. ***Continue and expand widening participation programs to recruit more students from BME backgrounds; undertake targeted efforts to recruit more BME academic staff; provide greater opportunities for BME staff development and promotion***

As described immediately above, the lack of diversity on campus was a key environmental microaggression raised by research participants. This is important with regards to both student and staff demographics. For this reason, two issues can be taken together here – the need to continue to increase BME student numbers via widening participation *and* the importance of actively working to recruit and promote BME staff. Regarding the first half of this equation, while it is true that widening participation is not by itself enough, it is still necessary (see Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson & Allen, 1998).

With regards to the second, one obvious route forward is that universities sign up to the recently-introduced Race Equality Charter. Formulated by the Equality Challenge Unit in the same manner to the Athena SWAN Charter, the Race Equality Charter provides ‘a framework through which institutions work to identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers standing in the way of minority ethnic staff and students’ (ECU, nd.). As Bhopal (2016) has argued, signing up to the Charter will demonstrate that ‘universities are serious in addressing race inequality’ acting as ‘a springboard to enable more BME staff to be promoted to senior decision-making roles, such as professors, pro vice-chancellors and chancellors.’

* + 1. ***Diversify the curriculum and develop teaching practices***

The adoption by the National Union of Students of campaign positions supporting the decolonisation of curricula (the ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ campaign), the UCU’s ‘witness’ campaign focusing on the experience of BME members in post-16 education, and the 2015-2016 #RhodesMustFall campaign, all provide examples of increased student and academic activism within the UK to expose and counter white supremacy on their campuses. Rather than seeing such campaigns as a threat, universities should respond positively.

A developed literature already exists focused on anti-racist pedagogy (see for example Freire, 1970; 2004; hooks, 1994) and there is not the space here to provide a detailed overview. A useful starting point is the extensive recommendations contained within ‘The Anti-racism Toolkit’, produced by Turney, Law and Phillips (2002) as well as documents from Dadzie (2000), and Leonardo and Boas (2013, 322) among others. In terms of pedagogy, key recommendations include the following: that teaching staff must be trained to critically reflect upon racialised and gendered histories and how they are implicated within them; that race and history must be made part of and *maintained* within the curriculum (see for example Hanchard, 2010); and that race should be taught as a structural and systemic construct, with material, differential outcomes that are institutionally embedded, and through which we are all (unequally) produced.

* + 1. ***Provide race and diversity training for staff and administrators; involve white students in conversations about race and start confronting uncomfortable truths about white privilege***

The above recommendations are far from simple tasks and bear risks: approached without due care, such topics can have negative consequences, reinforcing rather than combatting structural inequalities. The contemporary situation in UK HE makes this all the more important to bear in mind. The tripling of tuition fees in September 2011 and the announcement of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2015 both point towards the further deepening of the marketisation of UK higher education. This trend raises concerns about a ‘tyranny of the majority’ effect as institutions are forced to adapt curricula to achieve maximum ‘satisfaction’ ratings from their majority white, male, middle-class student intake. White staff and students whose privilege leads them to see situations of racism as personal, isolated and atypical events, may take umbrage at conceptions of institutional racism from which they advantage – especially when the latter are paying £9,250 a year in fees.

It is as such ‘crucial that instructors receive proper training and support’ (Orbe et al., 2008, 45), with CRT playing a valuable role here also. CRT focuses upon the capacity of stories and counter-stories to transform the manner in which both groups and individuals approach race as a key issue within contemporary society. At the heart of this approach – discussed in detail in the Methodology – is a recognition that in telling and hearing narratives, both from marginalised and dominant individuals and groups, meanings can arise that give voice to previously marginalised ideas about race. It is for this reason that white students must be directly involved in conversations about race and faced with uncomfortable truths about white privilege.

As well as training, facilitating such paradigm shifts requires long-term engagement and commitment, especially since dominant groups can initially reject unfamiliar counter stories due to the discomfort caused by confronting race and power (Delgado, 1989). Nevertheless, in this manner, dialogue can potentially transform university cultures, but these transformative efforts require participants undergoing alterations in their beliefs, attitudes and how they conceptualise their own positionality in relation to structures of power and privilege within the university institution (and beyond).

* + 1. ***Maintain positive counterspaces for BME students and make an elected BME sabbatical officer the norm***

This study’s findings demonstrate the invaluable role that supportive groups play in providing respite and support for BME students in a white environment. This was particularly true for Muslim students, where faith societies such as Islam Circle provided supportive groups, but for non-religious students also. It was also shown in the disappointment felt when students looking for supportive groups found that those on offer did not celebrate culture and instead focused on drinking, as with Monette’s disappointment regarding the activities of the African Caribbean Society. These findings again chime with the existing research at US university campuses, which demonstrate the importance of counterspaces and community as a response to marginalisation on white campuses (Villalpando, 2003; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2005; 2006; Yosso et. al., 2009).

With this being the case, students’ unions should adopt elected BME sabbatical officers to promote student voices and influence university and union policies positively. They should ensure that they offer more inclusive activities that go beyond clubbing and the student drinking culture, provide support for societies that nurture minoritised cultural backgrounds, and promote events celebrating Black history and minoritised cultures with the aim of encouraging ethnic mixing and the sharing of different narratives and experiences between students of different cultures and ethnicities.

**7.5 The Final Message**

Part of the worldwide fallout following the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has been the increasing prominence and acceptance of the concept of white supremacy beyond the contents of CRT publications (see for example Barrow & Lemire, 2016; Bouie, 2016; Deardon, 2016; Harkinson, 2016; Heer, 2016). A key message of this thesis is that white supremacy is neither solely an ‘American issue’, nor a matter reserved for the extreme elements of the political right; rather, it is a phenomenon that, in its more insidious form of racial microaggressions, forms a part of the everyday experiences of BME students on UK university campuses. Confirming the basic assumptions of CRT, this thesis illustrates that if universities in the UK are to live up to their self-conception as bastions of enlightenment, inclusivity and liberal tolerance, then current approaches, founded on increasing student diversity via widening participation programmes, is not enough. Indeed, policy alone is not enough to bring about the necessary changes; more radical and far-reaching action is required, the nascent elements of which are noted above with reference to key authors, toolkits and voluntary charters. Most importantly, however, the ultimate lesson this thesis hopes to communicate is that universities, students, staff and policy makers need to start talking more about race, racial inequality and of white supremacy and privilege.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A University Research Ethics Form**

**Appendix B Email Invitation to Students**

**Appendix C Participant Information Sheet**

**Appendix D Vignette**

**Appendix E Transcript Excerpt**

**Appendix A**

# University Research Ethics Application Form

# For Staff and Postgraduate Researchers

This form has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)

Tick as appropriate

**Complete this form if** you are a **member of staff or a postgraduate research student** who plans to undertake a research project which requires ethics approval via the University Ethics Review Procedure.

**or**

**Complete this form if** you plan to submit a **‘generic’ research ethics application** (i.e. an application that will cover several sufficiently similar research projects). Information on the ‘generic’ route is at: [www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/review-procedure/generic-research-projects](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/review-procedure/generic-research-projects)

x

**\*PLEASE NOTE THAT YOUR DEPARTMENT MAY USE A VARIATION OF THIS FORM: PLEASE CHECK WITH THE ETHICS ADMINISTRATOR IN YOUR DEPARTMENT\***

This form should be accompanied, where appropriate, by all Information Sheets / Covering Letters / Written Scripts which you propose to use to inform the prospective participants about the proposed research, and/or by a Consent Form where you need to use one.

Further guidance on how to apply is at: [www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/review-procedure](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/review-procedure)

Guidance on the possible routes for obtaining ethics approval (i.e. on the University Ethics Review Procedure, the NHS procedure and the Social Care Research Ethics Committee, and the Alternative procedure) is at: [www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/ethics-approval](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/ethics-approval)

**Once you have completed this research ethics application form in full, and other documents where appropriate, check that your name, the title of your research project and the date is contained in the footer of each page and email it to the Ethics Administrator of your academic department. Please note that the original signed and dated version of ‘Part B’ of the application form should also be provided to the Ethics Administrator in hard copy.**

**I confirm that I have read the current version of the University of Sheffield**

x

**‘Ethics Policy Governing Research Involving Human Participants, Personal**

**Data and Human Tissue’, as shown on the University’s research ethics website**

**at:** [**www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy**](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy)

#### Part A

## A1. Title of Research Project: Widening Participation Student’s Experiences of Higher Education

## A2. Contact person (normally the Principal Investigator, in the case of staff-led research projects, or the student in the case of supervised-postgraduate researcher projects):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Title: Ms. | First Name/Initials: Melina | Last Name: Bangert |
| Post: PhD research student Department: School of Languages and Cultures | | |
| Email: Telephone: | | |

**A2.1. Is this a postgraduate researcher project?**

**If yes, please provide the Supervisor’s contact details: Dr. Jane Woodin**

**and Prof. Jan Windebank**

## A2.2. Other key investigators/co-applicants (within/outside University), where applicable:

Please list all (add more rows if necessary)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Title | Full Name | Post | Responsibility in project | Organisation | Department |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |

**A3. Proposed Project Duration:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Start date: | End date: |
| July 2012? | October 2013? |

**A4. Mark ‘X’ in one or more of the following boxes if your research:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |
|  |  | involves adults with mental incapacity or mental illness |
|  |  |  |
|  |  | involves prisoners or others in custodial care (e.g. young offenders) |
|  |  |  |
|  |  | involves children or young people aged under 18 years |
|  |  |  |
|  |  | involves using samples of human biological material collected before for another purpose |
|  |  |  |
|  |  | involves taking new samples of human biological material (e.g. blood, tissue) **\*** |
|  |  |  |
|  |  | involves testing a medicinal product \* |
|  |  |  |
|  |  | involves taking new samples of human biological material (e.g. blood, tissue) **\*** |
|  |  |  |
|  |  | involves additional radiation above that required for clinical care **\*** |
|  |  |  |
|  |  | involves investigating a medical device **\*** |

\* If you have marked boxes marked **\*** then you also need to obtain confirmation that appropriate University insurance is in place. The procedure for doing so is entirely by email. Please send an email to insurance@shef.ac.uk and request a copy of the ‘Clinical Trial Insurance Application Form

It is recommended that you familiarise yourself with the University’s Ethics Policy Governing Research Involving Human Participants, Personal Data and Human Tissue before completing the following questions. Please note that if you provide sufficient information about the research (what you intend to do, how it will be carried out and how you intend to minimise any risks), this will help the ethics reviewers to make an informed judgement quickly without having to ask for further details.

**A5. Briefly summarise:**

1. **The project’s aims and objectives:**

(this must be in language comprehensible to a lay person)

The research aims to expand the existing literature focused upon widening participation in higher education by addressing a fundamental lacuna within its scope (widening participation refers to initiatives designed to target groups, which are underrepresented within the higher education system and the term can be simultaneously understood as an outcome, process or type of student). At present this literature is predominantly quantitative, focused upon the number of students from non-traditional backgrounds; this research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the experience of a particular section of ‘non-traditional students’ of higher education at Sheffield University.

Specifically, it looks at the experience of female students from significantly underrepresented groups — Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean ethnic backgrounds. The aim, in doing so, is to shed light upon how the experiences of female BME students is affected by the nature of Universities as historically white dominated institutions - and their subsequent insights on widening participation in higher education. To do this, it will ask the following questions:

* Are there non-formal power structures (e.g. race, class and gender) in place, which continue to place barriers to inclusion in front of historically excluded candidates from underrepresented groups?
* How do students experience these power structures?
* How can we change educational participation in order to overcome these power structures?

The research aims to give voice to widening participation students themselves and at its heart is the question of what the stories of a small group of widening participation students reveal about their experiences of higher education.

1. **The project’s methodology:**

(this must be in language comprehensible to a lay person)

The research will draw on forms of critical and collaborative ethnography, narrative interviews, focus groups (spoken narratives) and possibly diary entries (this is not clear at this stage) and aims to empower and give voice to students themselves. The research adopts Phil Francis Carspecken’s (1996) methodology for conducting critical ethnography.

- Stage one: Compiling the primary record through observation and informal conversations

The research starts with a stage of preliminary fieldwork to narrow down research questions for later interviews and focus groups. Furthermore, preliminary fieldwork serves to gain a better knowledge about the situation of widening participation students and to establish research relationships (e.g. for later interview participant recruitment).

It is important not to be to precise when formulating initial research questions, as this can lead to introducing biases to the field and research questions should be general and flexible.

Preliminary fieldwork will include compiling data through observation such as classroom observations, involvement in community groups such as for instance the Pakistan Muslim Centre, university societies (e.g. Pakistani Society), going along to university meetings concerning widening participation and other activities deemed appropriate for compiling a -preliminary record. (Critical) Ethnography requires the researcher to learn about the culture of the research participants as much as possible in order to make sense of what is happening (see for instance Carspecken 1996). Hence, the researcher needs to include the culture and social practices of larger geographic areas from which the students come and to which they return (this could for instance include homes, neighbourhoods, societies etc), in order to explain research findings. Hence, the researcher needs to keep an open eye for new possible sites to conduct (preliminary) fieldwork. A notebook to record things from the preliminary fieldwork such as things that I have seen and heard during visits to societies etc will be kept.

Preliminary fieldwork allows for exploration, reflexivity, creativity and mutual exchange and interaction through the establishment of research relationships. Furthermore, to minimize power imbalances in the researcher – research participant relationship, the preliminary fieldwork stage is seen as an opportunity to engage students themselves in the research process by inviting commentary on the project conceptualization and fieldwork, rather than imposing a research design, as proposed in the collaborative ethnography literature (see for instance Lassiter 2005).

- Stage two: preliminary analysis

The researcher begins to analyze the primary record as it has been built up so far. Research questions should evolve from the field and help the researcher to identify issues to be investigated in the second round of fieldwork (if deemed appropriate) or develop questions for interviews, focus groups and possibly diary entries of research participants on their university experience.

- Stage three: Dialogical data generation

The aim of stage three is to study research participants’ experiences of higher education through narrative interviews—an interview design which focuses on the elicitation and provocation of story telling and is characterized by minimalist interviewer interference. It is argued that, through the heavily restricted interviewer intervention, the interviewer avoids injecting own experiences into the interview content and the study aimed to empower the interviewee to determine the most salient themes of his study abroad experience. Following the interviews, focus groups are used to explore themes that emerged in stage one and two or during the interviews.

- Stage four and five: discovering system relations and using system relations to explain findings

In stage four, the researcher examines the relationship between the social site of focused interest (university) and other specific social sites bearing some relations to it. The way my research participants make sense of experiences in the university environment, for example, is going to be related to the cultural forms they have learned in their homes or communities. The idea is to discover specific system relationships, such as relationships between a university and its surrounding community, or a youth culture and the popular media.

In stage five, the idea is to consider my findings in relation to general theories of society, both to help explain what has been discovered in stages one through four and to alter, challenge, and refine macrosocialogical theories themselves. If deemed appropriate, further interviews or focus groups are conducted with the research participants during these stages to explore system relations.

The researcher keeps a diary throughout all stages to critically reflect on how the researcher’s values infiltrate the field and influence the research process.

**A6. What is the potential for physical and/or psychological harm / distress to participants?**

will make every effort to ensure that research participants feel secure and at ease during the research process. Venues for interviews and focus groups are chosen that are familiar to participants and where they feel confident. The composition of focus groups will be carefully considered with the needs and wishes of individual participants in mind.

It will be explicitly discussed and made clear before any interviews or focus groups that research participants are in control of the whole process and that they have the ability to temporarily stop interviews or focus groups if they find them too distressing or withdraw entirely from the research either for a period of time or completely. Furthermore, for those who disclose information during an interview or focus group (or in any other form), they may later regret, participants are informed at the beginning of the research that they have the right to retrospectively withdraw consent.

In general, interviews and focus groups have the potential to raise difficult and challenging issues for research participants. If the research causes research participants unease, they are reminded that the research process is entirely in their control and that they should only share with the researcher what they wish to disclose and that they can stop at any time.

If research participants experience unease or difficulties after interviews or focus groups and wish to discuss these with the researcher, research participants can do this. The researcher will make no attempt at counselling research participants. However, as proposed in the feminist literature on interviewing (e.g. Oakley), interviewing is about reciprocity and researchers are not only encouraged to listen to interviewees concerns if they seek help from the researcher, but also to share own similar experiences, which might help the interviewee (if applicable and appropriate- this is context dependent). After this conversation, research participants would be offered the contact information to the University of Sheffield Counselling Service and the Student Advice Centre.

**A7. Does your research raise any issues of personal safety for you or other researchers involved in the project?** (especially if taking place outside working hours or off University premises)

**If yes, explain how these issues will be managed.**

This research does not pose any serious issues of personal safety to the researcher. Research sites include the university campus, possibly the homes of the participants and/or cafes or community centres—depending on where research participants and the researcher feel comfortable. In order to minimise any potential danger to personal safety, the following precautions will be taken:

* The rules of the university’s health and safety precautions will be respected and followed.
* I will maintain a respectful and conscientious attitude at all times during research in the private family homes of participants.
* Normal, common sense precautions will be taken such as making visits to unknown areas in daylight, taking well-lit routes to and from the research site, and planning my travel well in advance of the visit.
* Only necessary equipment, including a fully charged mobile phone, tape recorder, notebook and pen, will be carried to research sites in order to avoid any potential for theft or mistaken accusations of theft in the event of my personal possessions or valuables being lost.
* A trusted person will be given a sealed envelope with the address of the research site inside it. They will be informed of my expected time of return from the research site, and in the event that I do not report my return within the time decided, and do not answer my mobile phone, the trusted person will be instructed to inform the police of my whereabouts. The time for my return from the research site will be of sufficiently reasonable length to accommodate normal delays such as over-running or traffic delays. I will be sure to always report to the trusted person immediately upon my return and will immediately destroy the details of the research site.

**A8. How will the potential participants in the project be:**

1. **Identified?**

Potential participants will be identified through preliminary fieldwork at societies and other similar sites, as well as possibly through consultation with the University of Sheffield Outreach officer.

1. **Approached?**

Potential participants will be approached either in person during preliminary fieldwork or via email asking whether they are willing to participate. Those responding in the affirmative would be recruited for the project.

1. **Recruited?**

Potential participants will receive an information sheet about the research and will be asked to sign a consent form.

**A9. Will informed consent be obtained from the participants?**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| YES | x | NO |  |

**If informed consent or consent is NOT to be obtained please explain why.** Further guidance is at: [www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/policy-notes/consent](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/policy-notes/consent)

**A9.1.** This question is only applicable if you are planning to obtain informed consent:

**How do you plan to obtain informed consent? (i.e. the proposed process?):**

As described in A8 above, interested research participants amenable to the project conditions as described in the Information Sheet, and willing to participate, would be given the attached Consent Form to sign prior to interviews, focus groups or diary entries. This would be done in-person to facilitate a clear and full participant’s understanding of the project aims and objectives, project conditions and participant rights.

Concerning preliminary fieldwork and visits to societies, community groups etc, the person in charge, will be asked for permission to attend a community group meeting/society meeting and he or she will be asked to send an email to other members. This email will contain information on the research project, as well as information on confidentiality and that the researcher will take notes during the meeting. Furthermore, the researcher will ask the person in charge of a community group/society etc to get introduced to other members before a meeting starts to alert them to the researcher’s presence. If it isn’t possible to send out emails to all members, the introduction prior to a meeting will serve to inform members about the project, confidentiality and that the researcher will take notes during the meeting.

**A10. What measures will be put in place to ensure confidentiality of personal data, where appropriate?**

Data will be kept well organised in a secure place. Care will be taken to transcribe in a private place. It will be made clear to participants that their responses will be made anonymous. All participants involved will be given pseudonyms, as will any individuals alluded to in the research. All personal data will remain confidential at every stage of the research project— in all data collection, analysis and presentation stages. Pseudonyms will be used throughout in any reference to participants: in all interview transcriptions; in all written research reports for publication in any form; in all presentation on the research, academic or professional. The identity of the participants will only be known to the researcher.

**A11. Will financial / in kind payments (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?** (Indicate how much and on what basis this has been decided)

No financial or in-kind payments of any type are used in this research. All participation will be completely voluntary. Since people are giving up a lot of time for interviews or focus groups and the research goes on for a longer period of time, participants might be offered something at the end of the project to show appreciation for their participation in the project such as inviting them for drinks or vouchers.

**A12. Will the research involve the production of recorded media such as audio and/or video recordings?**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| YES | x | NO |  |

**A12.1.** This question is only applicable if you are planning to produce recorded media:

**How will you ensure that there is a clear agreement with participants as to how these recorded media may be stored, used and (if appropriate) destroyed?**

All interviews and focus group discussions will be recorded for the purpose of transcription. Potential participants will be presented with an Information Sheet (attached) that will describe the nature of the interview recording process, the process of media storage, and its purpose to which this media will be put. There will be the possibility that segments of the interviews will be played in academic and/or professional contexts, but no audio text will be presented if it could, in any way remote or slight way, expose the identity of the participant.

Permission for this will be requested in the initial written consent to participate.

**Title of Research Project: Widening Participation Student’s Experience of Higher Education**

I confirm my responsibility to deliver the research project in accordance with the University of Sheffield’s policies and procedures, which include the University’s ‘*Financial Regulations*’, ‘*Good Research Practice Standards’* and the ‘*Ethics Policy Governing Research Involving Human Participants, Personal Data and Human Tissue’* (Ethics Policy) and, where externally funded, with the terms and conditions of the research funder.

**In signing this research ethics application form I am also confirming that:**

* The form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.
* The project will abide by the University’s Ethics Policy.
* There is no potential material interest that may, or may appear to, impair the independence and objectivity of researchers conducting this project.
* Subject to the research being approved, I undertake to adhere to the project protocol without unagreed deviation and to comply with any conditions set out in the letter from the University ethics reviewers notifying me of this.
* I undertake to inform the ethics reviewers of significant changes to the protocol

(by contacting my academic department’s Ethics Administrator in the first instance).

* I am aware of my responsibility to be up to date and comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data, including the need to register when necessary with the appropriate Data Protection Officer (within the University the Data Protection Officer is based in CiCS).
* I understand that the project, including research records and data, may be subject to inspection for audit purposes, if required in future.
* I understand that personal data about me as a researcher in this form will be held by those involved in the ethics review procedure (e.g. the Ethics Administrator and/or ethics reviewers) and that this will be managed according to Data Protection Act principles.
* If this is an application for a ‘generic’ project all the individual projects that fit under the generic project are compatible with this application.
* **I understand that this project cannot be submitted for ethics approval in more than one department, and that if I wish to appeal against the decision made, this must be done through the original department.**

**Name of the Principal Investigator (or the name of the Supervisor if this is a postgraduate researcher project):**

**Prof. Jan Windebank**

**Dr. Jane Woodin**

**If this is a postgraduate researcher project insert the student’s name here:**

**Melina Bangert**

**Signature of Principal Investigator (or the Supervisor):**

**Date: 25/06/12**

**Appendix B**

Dear all,

It is a sad fact that many students feel their voices do not get heard, especially when it comes to our experiences of university. This is particularly true with students from groups who have, historically, been underrepresented in higher education in the UK.

With the above in mind, this email is an invitation to female students who are from Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean ethnic backgrounds to take part in a research project which hopes to understand your experiences in, and of, higher education.

Run from the School of Languages and Cultures, and mainly taking the form of student interviews, the purpose of this PhD project is to provide a chance to hear voices which often go unheard. While demographics are changing for the better, universities remain predominantly white, male institutions in terms of power and positions; this research is about hearing the experiences and perspectives of female BME students and what you think about university and what it does, or does not do for you.

So, if you are an undergraduate, female student who is from a Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean ethnic background – from any department or discipline! – and you would like to know more about the research project, I am holding a small, informal information meeting which you can come along to and ask questions, and maybe decide if you want to take part as a research participant. I will also be providing cake.

The meeting will be on **Wednesday** the 12th of December at **5pm** in Jessop West (the building across from the IC), Room **G03**.

If you want to come along, please contact meand let me know so I can have an idea of numbers (and therefore cake). Doing so, coming along, would not of course mean you have to take part in the project itself. Also, if you are already interested – but maybe can’t make the meeting – you don’t have to attend to take part either. Send me an email and let me know. If you don’t have time to make the arranged meeting, then please also let me know and we can organise a separate meeting.

Otherwise, I hope to see you on the 12th of December. Thanks for reading through!

Thanks,

Melina

Melina Bangert

School of Languages and Cultures

Email:

Supervisors: Prof. Jan Windebank and Dr. Jane Woodin

Ethical statement: This project has been approved by the University of Sheffield Ethics Committee.

**Appendix C**

**“Widening participation? The experiences of female students from ethnically diverse backgrounds at the University of Sheffield” (The exact project title is not know at this stage)**

**Introduction**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

**What is the project’s purpose?**

This project investigates the experiences of female students from significantly underrepresented groups— Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean ethnic backgrounds – in higher education. A number of formal structures and targeted initiatives were put in place under the previous ‘New Labour’ government to allow a ‘widening of participation’ by such groups. These initiatives can include, for instance, outreach activities by the university, or financial bursaries.

The objective is to collect accounts from members of the aforementioned student groups of their experiences and perspectives regarding the formal and informal structures of the University as an institution of higher education in order to develop a more in-depth understanding of how they affect you on a day-to-day basis and give voice to a group of students who far too often are not heard.

This is a qualitative study of University of Sheffield students based on interviews. All interviews will be audio-recorded, and transcribed. The identity of all participants will in each case remain anonymous.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

**What is expected of participants in this study?**

You would be asked to participate in two interviews spanning a time period of approximately one year. The first will be an unstructured interview and last between 30 and 45 minutes. During these interviews you will be asked about your experiences as a student at the University of Sheffield. The second will be a semi-structured interview lasting around an hour following up on the experiences discussed in the first interview and how they relate to further events from the intervening period. These interviews will be audio-recorded.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

While there are no direct, tangible benefits for those participating in the project, I believe your participation will yield two significant indirect benefits: (1) through the interview conversations, there is significant opportunity to give voice to students, allowing personal reflection on the ways their academic experience has been shaped and affected by the University’s formal and non-formal institutional power-structures; (2) the ultimate aim is to develop understandings which can inform future alterations of such structures which would benefit students from underrepresented backgrounds in higher education in a manner which moves beyond the simple increasing of their entry numbers.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no foreseeable disadvantages or risks for participants in this study. The interviews seek no information that would put you at any disadvantage or risk as a student. Furthermore, you will be kept anonymous at every stage of the research: from data collection, through analysis, to writing and any presentations of the project. Research participants are in control of the whole process and should the interview, for any reason, raise issues felt to be too distressing by the interviewee they have the ability to temporarily stop interviews or withdraw entirely from the research either for a period of time or completely. Furthermore, those who disclose information during an interview they may later regret have the right to retrospectively withdraw consent. I will send you all transcribed interviews and if you feel that any part misrepresents your views or you would like to clarify anything you said, I will be more than happy to do so.

**What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

If for some unforeseen reason, this research project is either terminated or must be delayed, we will notify you immediately.

**What if something goes wrong?**

If you are unhappy with any part of the research process, you may make this known to the researcher (Melina Bangert, XXXXXXX). If you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction (e.g. by the Principal Investigator or Supervisor), you can contact the University’s ‘Registrar and Secretary’.

**Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports, publications or presentations. All participants will be anonymised in all presentation stages of the research. Pseudonyms will be used throughout in any reference to participants: in all interview transcriptions; in all written research reports for publication in any forum; in all presentations on the research, academic or professional.

**Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

The audio recordings of your interviews will be transcribed and will be used for analysis and for publications, as well as illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. All recordings will be kept either in a locked office cabinet and/or on a secure, password-protected laptop or desktop computer at all times. With your permission, segments of the interviews will be played in academic and/or professional presentations contexts, but no audio text will be presented if it could, in any remote or slight way, expose your identity. You can opt out from having audio recordings played in academic or professional settings. All recorded media will be destroyed, upon request, five years following the end-date of the project.

**Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically reviewed by the University of Sheffield School of Languages and Cultures in full accordance with the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee.

**Contact for further information**

For further information, please contact the Principal Investigator:

Melina Bangert

Jessop West

1 Upper Hanover Street

Sheffield S3 7RA

Department: School of Languages and Cultures

Email:

Telephone:

**In Closing**

If you are willing to participate in the study, please keep this Information Sheet for future reference. You will be given a Consent Form to sign indicating you understand the information presented here and that you agree to the research conditions.

Thank you very much

**Appendix D**

Parisa had been coming to international conventions on food processing for several years. She had made several good friends, especially among the Europeans; but there was a gnawing problem which always came back unresolved. She was the only person at the convention who came from Iran; and no matter how friendly and sincere, she knew that her European colleagues saw her in a particular way which just wasn’t her at all. It was from their passing comments, their casual, unguarded turns of phrase, in which they seemed to show surprise when she was creative, assertive or articulate, as though she *ought* to be somehow unable to be good at all the things she did. One of her colleagues did not actually say ‘well done!’ but certainly implied it in her tone of voice. She also felt isolated as the only person from her particular background at these conventions. There was nobody else to represent who she was. It also hurt her when someone said that she was ‘Westernized’ and ‘not a real Iranian’. This seemed like a no-win situation. If her behaviour was ‘recognized’, she was not real; and if she was considered ‘real’, she wasn’t supposed to behave like that.

Then something happened which both confirmed her fears and gave her support. She invited three of her colleagues to see one of the films which was showing as part of a festival of Iranian films at the local university. They came willingly—very interested—and then to another one. When she asked one of her colleagues what she found so fascinating, her colleague replied that she was particularly impressed by the female characters who portrayed such strong women. Indeed, one of them played a major executive role in a film crew. She hired and fired people and drove around in a jeep. Her colleagues said that they had no idea that such women existed in Iran, and that she always thought Muslim women were supposed to be subservient. Parisa was also pleased because the women in the film were certainly what her colleagues would consider ‘real’ Iranians in that they wore the hijab [Islamic head covering], and the women who drove the jeep wore the black hijab and long coat that she imagined fitted the ‘stereotype’.

Shortly after this, another Iranian arrived at the convention. He was educated, worldly, urbane, well-dressed and also extremely articulate. This was no more or less that *she* would expect of an Iranian man; but she was pleased because here was further evidence for her colleagues of the sort of people she belonged to. Moreover, it was very clear that she had tremendous respect for her as an equal, an academic and a professional. Parisa wondered though if they considered *him* a ‘real Iranian’. After all, he wore a tie and didn’t have a beard.

From Holliday, A., Hyde, M., and Kullman, J. (2010) *Intercultural Communication: an Advanced Resource Book for Students* (2nd Edition). Routledge: London, 7-8.

**Appendix E**

*Prosodic and Linguistic Coding conventions:*

|  |
| --- |
| Conventions used for coding the transcript, which emerged as important for conveying meaning[[53]](#footnote-53):   * Pausing: 1 dot (.) for a short pause (for instance when a comma or full stop would be used in written text); 2 or more dots for longer pauses (….), where the number of dots indicates the approximate length of the pause * emphasized words: **Bold** for stressed words * the speed and pacing of delivery: *italics* for words which were delivered with different speed: *s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-d* for slower speed and *condensed* for faster speed * sotto voce: lowering of the voice as distinct from surrounding speech; the participant says something quietly as if to themselves. Indicated through the use of parenthesis: (it was awful) * speaker noises: for vocalisations which are not easy to spell out. Indicated through triangular brackets <coughs> <clears throat> <sniffs> <sneezes> <snorts> <applauds> <smacks lips> <yawns> |

*Interview Transcript Excerpt*

Melina: Okay that’s fantastic. Now I have a little exercise. I thought it might be a good idea to use a vignette, a fictional example. It’s about being represented. I was just wondering if you could read this example and just have a think about it and then maybe tell me if there’s anything in there that you recognise, that relates to you, if there is anything in this woman’s experience that you recognise or can relate to.

Kadira: Okay.

Melina: That would be fantastic. So it’s fictional and it’s a very different situation but I would be very interested to talk about this with you. I’m just wondering, can I quickly go to the bathroom while you read this?

Kadira: Yes that’s fine. I’ll just read this. Yes I’ve just finished reading it. Did you say this is a real example?

Melina: No, it is from a book, a fictional example, but it is based on people’s experiences*.*

Kadira:Actually, I’ve been v-e-r-y **happy** to read this just because sometimes when you feel like you’re on your own, thinking something but then you realise you’re not r-e-a-l-l-y on your own if other people think that way as well…From the first paragraph I can relate to that just because of so many things that have happened. Like sometimes people make off the cuff comments like…I think sometimes people view you in a way that is a stereotype. They don’t view you as an … i-n-d-i-v-i-d-u-a-l. They just see what you are, what you physically look like and then make certain assumptions about you, is one way to say it. This is quite a recent example but my mum had arranged for us to go an see Jeremy Kyle and we ended up sitting on the front row and before the show started Jeremy was just talking to the audience and asking people certain questions and I was sat on the front row and he was like, “Oh what do you do” or “What’s your job?” or something like that and I was like, “Oh I’m a student” and then he went, “**You’re a .. s-t-u-d-e-n-t**?” and I don’t know.. I didn’t know how to take it but he was kind of like he was .. **shocked** that that was what I was doing, that I was at university and I just felt… <clears throat> whenever someone says something that makes you doubt yourself or doubt that you should be doing…that you are **d-o-i-n-g** what you’re doing, then I kind of like … (close in and evaluate myself) <sniffs> . And it’s so annoying that I shouldn’t be questioning myself but when other people make assumptions about you already you’re just like, “well, if they think t-h-a-t then .. **e-v-e-r-y-o-n-e** must think that”.

Melina: I c-a-n-’t believe he said that. That must have been **awful**..

Kadira: Yes, but with my dad as well, he gets really annoyed when people say for example, “That **black** man came in the room” or something. It’s like, why wouldn’t they say, “That man”? They always have to quantify what they’re saying. For example if they wanted to say…they wouldn’t say, “Oh that w-h-i-t-e person came in the room”. They have to differentiate in some way. Sometimes I feel that people have to .. **satisfy** themselves by saying something about another person that makes them appear less w-o-r-t-h-y or something. And it’s something I’m really conscious of when I go for job interviews or I start going for jobs after I finish university because no matter how much I tell people, “You shouldn’t r-e-a-l-l-y be doing that. You shouldn’t be making assumptions or stereotypes”, it’s sometimes so deep rooted in people that that’s their automatic assumption. They make these simple-ised categories so I think they just want to organise things so it is simple for them to complete their role and it’s just s-o **frustrating** sometimes. When people just don’t see you for who y-o-u are and what you’ve achieved and things like that. I think I have achieved s-o much in my life what I’m proud of and sometimes people just want to undermine it by saying something about you.. <swallows and sniffs> On the bit she’s talking about where people said she was westernised and stuff, I also relate with that because even my dad says it sometimes but it’s…not serious but messing about but it’s like, “Oh you’re like a w-h-i-t-e girl” or something. Just because…to be honest that’s the majority of people I’ve been around is white girls and sometimes I do feel like I’ve lost touch with my roots like I’m not true to who I am <clears throat >. Just because I don’t know enough about where my dad and my grandma grew up, that culture…I’m just so immersed in this culture that I know this is not the **f-u-l-l** me but this is a-l-l that I can show right now until I can go back and find some more things about my background and stuff and feel confident enough to express that in who I am. But now I do feel like sometimes I don’t know where I f-i-t in. Like in a black community I don’t feel like I’m black enough…to stereotype, to fit in with that community but on the other hand to fit in with white people as well. It’s just like, where’s the .. i-n- b-e-t-w-e-e-n where you can find a fixed balance between fitting in but also being an individual but **also** showing your roots. And that’s also the thing with my brother who’s at college. He went to the same college I went to but because of the way he dresses sometimes, even teachers have made comments about the way he dresses and stuff and even he feels like there’s a negative energy when teachers talk to him just because of the way he dresses. Even though he’s so intelligent and it’s like they don’t feel he fits the mould. Just because he’s individual, he’s creative, he shows what he’s about but he’s also intelligent. Like they think that can’t marry together.

Melina: Yes

Kadira: And another example from that was when he recently did this piece of work and it was a really modern piece of work and he did an interview with his friend and his friend talked some slang and his English teacher was just like, “O-h that’s all **wrong**”. So sometimes I feel like there’s a mismatch between where the teachers think the worlds are and where the world is actually at. You can’t be current in order to get the good marks or whatever. I think it’s good to have role models who are from ethnic minority groups, like the person who I most look up to as a celebrity is Beyonce. Not just for her music but because of the way she presents herself. People .. r-e-s-p-e-c-t her as well. They look up to her. They don’t always look at her and just see that she’s mixed race. They don’t look at her like that. They recognise her for her talents; **all** she’s done in her life and all she’s achieved and that she’ll continue to achieve so it’s good to see people like that but then again those people they’re not directly contactable. There’s no one directly in the vicinity I feel that is representative. Maybe to an extent, Jessica Ennis and people like that but still I feel that unless I do something b-i-g or that impacts on the world then people, some people won’t be willing to look past who I am <clears throat and sniffs> Like my ethnic minority and things like that which is so (frustrating) <sniffs>. But that sometimes pushes me further because I just think I know I’ve got talent and I will push myself as far as I **c-a-n** go but sometimes when there’s so many hurdles in front of you, you just feel like it’s never ending and some things are just so dependent on chance and what people’s impressions of you are which is so annoying.

Melina: Yes, it m-u-s-t be

Kadira: In the last paragraph it talks about another Iranian person arriving at the convention, that kind of mirrors the mixed-race friend I have in psychology just because when I see him I just see how confident he is and I see all the things he’s achieved. I see that he doesn’t dress like everyone else, he’s not a sheep, he doesn’t follow the crowd. He just does what he wants to do and he doesn’t care what people around him think which is **so** g-o-o-d because I kind of look at him and he gives me self-confidence.. It inspires me to come out of my box and be more confident and just think…just e-x-p-r-e-s-s yourself. Like what’s the worst that could happen is someone’s not going to like you but there’s always going to be someone who’s not going to like you so just be who you are. But then again people do stereotype him and people have said to me that they don’t like him and stuff like that and I’m just like, “**W-h-y**?” and they just say he’s cocky and things like that and I’m like, “You don’t e-v-e-n know him”, but they make assumptions about him from one instance or they’ve never actually gone up to him and talked to him and seen what he’s about. They’ve just already boxed him off into something that he’s not which is frustrating.

Melina: Yes

Kadira: But I do find that he does have a lot of .. respect for me. Like we respect each other more than I think I respect anyone else in psychology just because he’ll sit down and listen to my ideas, he’ll be supportive of any decisions I do and when someone’s behind you, you just feel m-o-r-e confident in doing what you want to do so that’s just…that is a really big thing that has helped me achieve **so much** already so I am grateful and it’s just so weird how this mirrors so much of what has happened throughout my life just because you realise you’re not alone but it would be good to talk to someone who had experienced this <swallows and sniffs> .

1. With such a selection this analysis could also have looked at the case of gypsies and travellers. The particular case study – the University of Sheffield – does not appear, however, to have any such students in its present cohort. For this reason they have been excluded from this analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Institute of Race Relations (2016) provides the following definition: ‘Black and Minority Ethnic [BME] or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic [BAME] is the terminology normally used in the UK to describe people of non-white descent.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Power is here again understood in Foucauldian terms, not as something possessed, but rather *‘exercised* in relations’ (Bacchi & Rönnblom, 2014, 6); power shapes ‘what it is possible to be’ (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit (1968) provided a colourful illustration of this view when they wrote that:

   “The liberal university allows its students a measure of liberty, but only so long as they do not challenge the basis of university education... The university has, in fact, become a sausage-machine which turns out people without any real culture, and incapable of thinking for themselves, but trained to fit into the economic system of a highly industrialised society. The student may glory in the renown of his [sic] university education, but in fact he is being fed ‘culture’ as a goose is fed grain – to be sacrificed on the altar of bourgeois appetites.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ironically, these two discourses share a common opposition to what is arguably the hegemonic view amongst those who govern the university sector: i.e. the increasing marketisation of higher education, wherein students are customers and education a commodity to be consumed (see: Collini, 2012; Bailey and Freedman, 2011; Menand, 2010; Molesworth, *et al.,* 2011; Nussbaum, 2010). This attitude was expressed at its clearest by former Secretary of State for Education, Charles Clarke MP, who questioned the value of studying the classics with the statement that ‘[o]ne of the main purposes of university is to encourage people to think. But education for its own sake is a bit dodgy, too’; students, he declared, ‘need a relationship with the workplace’ (BBC, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The terms ‘widening participation’ and ‘widening access’ are often used interchangeably; as Woodrow (2000) rightly cautions, however, it is important to distinguish between the two. The latter term refers to the simpleinvolvement of underrepresented groups in numerical terms, while the former, more recent term refers to better inclusion in a more fundamental, holistic sense within these underrepresented groups in institutions, subjects and disciplines (see: Tonks and Farr 2003). As Richardson (2010) notes, ‘widening access’ policies pay little focus to the subsequent *attainment* of students once they gain ‘access’, despite notable inequalities of outcome. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also Warmington et al. (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This ‘highly ideological’ (Gates, 1987) process of ascription of ‘race’ was described by Frantz Fanon (1994), in the following statement: ‘When people like me, they like me ‘in spite of my colour.’ When they dislike me, they point out that it isn’t because of my colour. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle.’ What Fanon identified was that whether liked or disliked, as a person who was not white, he was always defined by his ‘race’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Commenting upon this process of ‘othering’, Cornel West (1990, 29) labels whiteness ‘a politically constructed category parasitic on ‘blackness.’’ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See the definition by Kundnani (2014, 313), also, who starts from the opposite direction as Leonard by stating that whiteness ‘doesn’t mean skin color. It’s a level of assimilation and social fluidity’. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. On performativity, see Judith Butler (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rangasamy (2004, 30) goes so far as to make the following stark declaration:

    ‘The use of discriminatory institutional language to exalt and reward the experiences of some while devaluing and degrading that of others was a key colonialist strategy for subordinating colonised cultures. It is ironic that supremacist Eurocentric histories inform the curricula of the teaching establishments of former colonies [and the colonial countries] still.’ (ibid., 30) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) offers valuable insights on the relationship between racism and knowledge production, his work tracing the persistence of Orientalist modes of thinking — often based on simply false and pernicious stereotypes — across disciplines. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. With this intersectionality in mind, bell hooks (1997; cf. hooks, 1981, 1989) refers to the currently hegemonic society as ‘white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’, a phrase she adopted because she wanted ‘to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality’; the phrase white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is thus, for hooks, ‘a sort of short cut way of saying all these things are functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives’. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It is in recognition of this ‘different category’ that Moya Bailey provides the phrase ‘misogy-noir’ to label the particular ‘sexism towards Black women; anti-Blackness that can come even from those who are Black, who were raised by Black women and profess to value Black people’ (Wallace, 2015, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The term ‘minoritised’ is used instead of ‘minority ethnic’ to emphasise the social processes by which certain groups are construed as lesser or outside the mainstream. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This finding is similar to that of bell hooks (1989, 67), writing on the US case. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the minority of quantitative analyses that do exist have a tendency to place greater emphasis on widening access, rather than widening participation (see 1.1.4). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. According to Bourdieu (1996, 18), the relationship is asymmetric in two ways: firstly, the researcher ‘starts the game and sets the rules’ and secondly, the researcher ‘likely enters the game with more social capital, including more linguistic capital than the respondent’. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/about/rankings [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. http://www.shef.ac.uk/polopoly\_fs/1.259222!/file/EqualityReport2012.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The Sheffield Graduate Award is a programme that recognises extra-curricular achievements in local, national and international activities, which involves undertaking work experience and/or volunteering plus other activities that meet the Award criteria. (see: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/thesheffieldgraduateaward>) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The Asian Media Award is awarded to ‘journalists working in local newspapers and internet bloggers to TV presenters and PR experts, the Asian Media Awards is dedicated to highlighting their talent, drive and innovation’ (see: <http://asianmediaawards.com/>) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The Science and Engineering Champions are a group of current University of Sheffield students who are dedicated to promoting the STEM subjects to young people. They work with the University of Sheffield Outreach Team on a range of activities as well as with their own departments. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Teach First aims to increase understanding of the problem of educational inequality in the UK. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. UCAS– the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service in the UK. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See: <http://itooamsheffield.tumblr.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See: <http://wetooarecambridge.tumblr.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Each Faculty at the University of Sheffield has an ‘Equality and Diversity’ committee. While committee minutes do not appear to be made public, a sample of their outward-facing websites points to a focus upon issues related to gender (with support for the Athena SWAN programme and Women@TUOS network); sexuality (linking to the LGBT staff network); disability (linking to the Staff & Disability Network); and entries on parents and adopters. There is no specific attention, however, given to issues regarding race. As an illustration, see, for example: <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/faculty/arts-and-humanities/for-staff/equality-diversity> (accessed 19/11/2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. bell hooks (1994, 3; 1996b) has discussed her own, similar, experience when she moved from a black to a white school as a child. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The Science and Engineering Champions are a group of current University of Sheffield students who are dedicated to promoting the STEM subjects to young people (University of Sheffield Website). They work with the Outreach Team on a range of activities as well as with their own departments. Since the scheme started in 2008, the Champions have worked with young people on STEM taster days, mentored students on residential weekends, developed and delivered academic sessions for inward school visits, revisited their old schools to give talks, represented the University at careers fairs and much more (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The referendum resulted from a motion passed by the Union Council in April 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For reasons of anonymity, administrators’ responses are paraphrased rather than quoted directly. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Note that, as explained in Chapter 2, ‘Student N’ is an international rather than domestic student. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See also the focus group discussion (10) following Student E’s comment, where Student Z points out that she is asked all the time where she is from, while some of her Mexican classmates with fair skinned complexions don’t get asked. Wearing a headscarf also renders Muslim students as visible minorities. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. It would have been interesting to further follow this up, on whether or not Evette had any experiences at university directly related to this; however, the focus group setting did not allow this at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Raashida described the complexities of her identification as both British and Pakistani at length during our second interview (see, for instance: 21-25). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. This refers back to a story, told earlier during the interview, where Raashida explained that she felt the need to talk loudly when in public spaces so that people can hear from her accent that she is not a foreigner. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. With regards to gender, for example, studies in the US have found that “women are seen to be deficient in rational thinking (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. In their study on ‘The Public Identities of the Black Middle Classes’ in Britain, Rollock et al. (2011, 1080) note how stereotypical representations of ‘the black body’ in terms of ‘a vehicle of mystical strength and hyper-criminality’, ‘resist and restrict the possibility of fluid, deiverse black identit*ies…*’ [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Nadal et al. (2012, 25) provides the example of the claim that Atheists do not have morals. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The stereotype is not without some social background; Ghuman (1995, 51) has discussed the social constraints experienced by some South Asian and Muslim girls due to familial pressure. As Ghuman writes:

    Some South Asian parents, though willing for their daughters to continue with their higher education, still restrict their choice of subjects as well as their career aspirations. The favourite subjects tend to be sciences and maths, which are deemed useful for entry into the teaching and medical professions. However, increasingly, the third-generation girls are challenging their families. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. This is in comparison to her experience at school in Barnsley, where she was singled out as the only mixed-race person and victim of differential treatment, a profound experience that impacted her deeply. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Name withheld for reasons of anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. WASP is an abbreviation for White Anglo Saxon Protestant, normally used in an American context to refer to high status members of American society, who are thought to disproportionally control social, political, and financial power in the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Charlotte here provides a clear example of the intersection between gender and race in certain examples of racialised aggressions (see Solórzano, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education and social movement that combines education with critical theory (see for instance Freire, 1970; Hinchey, 2004; Kanpol, 1999; McLaren, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. A review by Becker and Luthar (2002) shows that one key factor affecting the academic motivation and engagement of economically disadvantaged minority students in secondary schools was their sense of belonging. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. The other side of this segregation on campus is the danger, as detailed in research by Cabrera (2014) that it results in ‘white male college students minimizing racism, claiming victimization, and recreating white supremacy’. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Or, indeed, Muslim/non-Muslim, a tension that has been heightened ever since she started wearing the hijab in her second year at university. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Not all ethnic minority students may feel the need for a counterspace. Alima, for example, stands out for the degree to which she feels entirely included as a part of the university community:

    “I feel like I belong here … I feel like I’m part of Sheffield, because of the uni, and I feel like I’m part of the social fabric here… walking through the SU in the beginning, I’d feel really weird, because I didn’t feel like I was meant to be there, but then now, because I sort of feel really at home and just confident… it just feels like a massive community that you’re a part of. It’s like when I was at the ice rink, and you see other people from Sheffield Uni, you just have a random conversation, because you’re part of the same university. That’s the thing, I like just having random conversations with people or just sharing a smile. It’s just everything‘s just so… I just feel like I definitely belong here” (Interview 2) [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See outline in the initial literature review (1.3.5). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Adapted from Conteh (2018: 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)