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Manuel Madriaga

School of Education, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This study sought to examine questions of race in higher education widening access policy and practice in England. I was keen on seeking perceptions and stories of those who do work in this area, raising awareness of higher education opportunities to youth and families from marginalised communities. Sixteen widening access university practitioners from across the country were interviewed to share their perspectives on how their work may be intertwined with race. An unveiling of hope emerged from their stories with an awareness of constraints operating in a racialised academy. Their accounts revealed the extent of their agency, their own discretion to conduct anti-racist work. This paper concludes with an offering of hope, having reworked theoretical idea of scyborg to something new. The s/cyborg, introduced in this paper, signifies the importance of the interplay of agency and structure towards grasping a sociological understanding of hope for anti-racist change.

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The study presented here emerged out of a desire to mark and acknowledge structural racism within a specific policy area of English higher education – widening participation or what I refer to as "widening access"[1] to higher education. The policy objective is to widen access and increase higher education participation from students from "non-traditional", "disadvantaged" backgrounds. Unfortunately, being "disadvantaged" does not include race, although a protected characteristic under UK discrimination and equality policy legislation – the Equality Act 2010. "Disadvantaged background" includes such aspects as one's neighbourhood postcode (to determine the extent of higher education participation), free school meal status, or previous experience in foster care (DBIS, 2016). These "disadvantaged" characteristics are not mentioned or covered under the Equality Act 2010. Race may be discounted in widening access policy because ethnic minority students are viewed as being successful in university participation. This narrative can be traced back to the wording of a government-commissioned report, the Dearing Report (1997, chapter 7, para 7.16): "Ethnic minorities as a whole are more than proportionally represented in higher education, compared to the general population." Despite having

CONTACT Manuel Madriaga manny.madriaga@nottingham.ac.uk, mannyinuk@googlemail.com School of Education, University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK @mannymadriaga

detailed underrepresentation of students of colour in prestigious, highly rejective institutions and that these students have achieved a lower rate of return on qualifications than white students, the Dearing Report wording indicated that ethnic minorities were more proportionately represented in the sector than white students. The latter was captured by political commentators and media as a "success." Pilkington (2009, p. 17) expressed concern about this emphasis of "success", as it pushed other observations of race inequality recorded in the Dearing Report to the periphery, such as African-Caribbean men and Bangladeshi women being underrepresented in the sector, that students of colour were concentrated in "less prestigious […] universities," and that students of colour achieved a lower rate of return on their higher education qualifications than white students.

Given this, I focus on widening access policy and practice, seeking insight on race matters from those who work in this area across the English higher education sector. Repurposing Gillborn's (2005) testing questions on education policy and race, I set off to investigate: (1) what does widening access have to do with race? and (2) what are the racial outcomes and effects of widening access policy? To address these research questions, interviews were conducted with sixteen workers in university widening access in the spring of 2021. The work of widening access practitioners includes working with schools and communities to raise awareness, hopes, of higher education opportunities to children and young people from "disadvantaged" backgrounds.

In the following, there will be a short discussion on hope for anti-racist change in higher education, critically engaging with la paperson's (2017) notion of the scyborg. Not wanting to take away from the imagery of hope illustrated by la paperson (2017), I find the scyborg problematic with the emphasis on "structural agency". So, I have developed the concept further based upon empirical work. I will explain this, adapting la paperson's (2017) scyborg with an alternative offering of the *s/cyborg*. It is this offering that makes this paper significant and a novel contribution to the body of knowledge of anti-racist work in higher education studies. Afterwards, I will present the methods and findings of my study concluding that there may already be pockets of s/cyborg subversive work in progress in English universities as evidenced here with widening access practitioners, which are encouraging examples of practice for others.

Hope in a despairing academy

La paperson's *Third University is Possible* (2017) has been significant for anti-racist scholars in higher education studies across both sides of the Atlantic ocean, in the US (Dache, 2019; Stewart, 2022) as well as in the UK (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2021; Samatar et al., 2021). The credence given to the *Third University* is the author Wayne K. Yang, who uses *la paperson* as a pen name. Yang is widely known for co-authoring integral decolonial educational work alongside Eve Tuck (see Tuck & Yang, 2012; 2014). The significance of *Third University* is its acknowledgement of the academy's colonial heritage and practices, as well as a hopeful offering to eradicate its reproduction. In articulating this hope for transformation in higher education, la paperson (2017, p. 52) introduces the concept of the scyborg. The scyborg pursues their decolonial desires to transform their institutions "only to share that love for Black life, for Indigenous worldings, for their futures." As la paperson

(2017, p. xiv) elaborated, the "Scyborg – composed of s + cyborg – is a queer turn of word … to name the structural agency of persons who have picked up colonial technologies and reassembled them to decolonizing purposes." La paperson's scyborg deviates from Haraway's (1991) concept of the cyborg. The former is not preoccupied about the "technological nature of the body" rather "the scyborg delights in the ways that her agency is extended by the very circuitry of systems meant to colonize" (la paperson, 2017, p. xiv). It is this preoccupation which offers hope in a despairing academy structured by race inequity whether in the metropole UK (Bhopal, 2022; Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2021; Author) or settler colonial states like the USA (Moten & Harney, 2004; Patel, 2021; Wilder, 2013), Canada (Hampton, 2020), or New Zealand (Theodore et al., 2016).

In the UK, which is the focus of this paper, the presence of Black professors has been lacking, with only 30 Black female professors compared to 4340 white female professors throughout the country (Rollock, 2021, p. 2). Moreover, Black undergraduate students have not been accessing higher education in the same way as their white counterparts (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Boliver, 2013), and if they do access similar institutions, they are unlikely to achieve similar degree outcomes as their white counterparts (Advance HE 2020). This is cause for pessimism for people of colour,[2] particularly Black people, working and studying in higher education (Moten & Harney, 2004). It highlights universities as racialised organisations (Ray, 2019; Schachle & Coley, 2022; Vega et al., 2022), which hinders Black progression and achievement. Due to this, the university has not been perceived as a site for transformative utopian possibilities (Webb, 2018, p. 108). It also has been referred to as a place of grieving and hopelessness (Hall, 2021). It is at this point that I reflect upon findings from 16 interviews taken with widening participation practitioners on a study I conducted on race and higher education student access.

Amidst the pessimism, I ask where is the hope for anti-racist change in higher education. In contemplating this question sociologically, there is not much empirical work to draw upon. Though not centred on the study of hope, Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly's (2021) study on anti-racist scholar activists across British universities helped me ponder whether the academy can be transformative. Their work provided empirical evidence that the university was a place of struggle and tension, even to the extent of constraining efforts to engage in anti-racist activism.

The tension exposed by Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2021) was also raised by la paperson (2017). The latter is pivotal to the work here in imagining an alternative, anti-racist, decolonial university. The notion of the scyborg is an optimistic vision of how university worker(s) can subvert the academy's colonial tendencies (see Nelson et al., 2022; Stewart, 2022). The scyborg, for la paperson (2017, p. 61), is plugged into technological grids of the university machine:

> So the scyborg for me, as a "being" who is only analytically meaningful when we consider your entanglements in the machinery of assemblages, is a fitting way to discuss structural agency. The scyborg is a being who is in no way discretely individual. A scyborg is a being in assemblage. Your agential capacity extends beyond your being, into the system's capacity. Your agency is system. This is why I put the *s* in front of cyborg.

While the concept of scyborg offers hope to pursue decolonial work in the academy, it is problematic. The fusing of one's agency with "system" is deterministic, restricting the freedom of scyborg.

S/cyborging towards hope for anti-racist change

La paperson's notion of "structural agency" of scyborgs is interesting considering that structure and agency is usually dichotomous (Bourdieu, 1979; Ray, 2019), not conjoined. It is la paperson's attempt to make explicit that scyborgs, being synonymous with the structural agency, can mask their malcontent and intentions with university cloaks of value-neutrality, objectivity, performativity, and neo-liberal ilk to conduct subversive work. They may appear to be complicit, reproducing the structural processes of colonialism and racism within the academy but have the "structural agency" to actively work against these destructive processes.

However, there is good reason to distinguish structure from the agency, as structural analysis is a useful tool in analysing power and how material resources are distributed according to racial groupings within organisations such as universities (Ray, 2019; Schachle & Coley, 2022; Vega et al., 2022). Unfortunately, not much is said about racial groupings by la paperson. There was discussion of scyborgs being plugged into a system, but not necessarily a system offering a sense of "us", a sense of groupness, or even belonging among the scyborgs. A remark was made about the scyborg being a plurality, and only becoming singular when a "condensation of machines produces intentionality" (la paperson, 2017, pp. 60–61). However, there was no elaboration on how this "intentionality" arises. So, given the lack of clarity, I would suggest a "/" between "s" and "cyborg", s/cyborg to signify the importance of the duality and interplay of structure and agency towards grasping a sociological understanding of hope for anti-racist change.

For hope, I turn towards critical race theory (CRT), particularly Bell's (1992) racial realism. Racial realism is an acknowledgement of the permanence of racism, and as Bell explains, "That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair, and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfilment and even triumph" (Bell, 1992, pp. 373–374). It is recognising the permanence of racism where hope can spring for anti-racist change (Alemán & Alemán, 2010; Blaisdell, 2016). The problem with imagining hope for an anti-racist academy is the lack of acknowledgement that structural racism is *real*. Meer (2022) observed something similar employing Berlant's (1991) idea of cruel optimism in analysing race justice on issues of immigration and health. Instead of resting on the realisation, the cruelty, of racial justice unachieved, Meer (2022, p. 27) maintains a "perseverance of hope."

It is unfortunate there remains a majoritarian narrative in UK public discourse pushed by policymakers that institutional racism in education is non-existent (see Commission on Race and Ethnic and Disparities, 2021). This discourse in the macro-level penetrates policy and practice in meso-level organisations (Ray, 2019), such as universities. Ray's (2019) theory of racialised organisations is integral in analysing structure and agency for this study. With a CRT lens, universities are not colour-evasive spaces where meritocracy reigns (Annamma et al., 2017). They are racialised organisations where the distribution of resources, such as staffing or student admissions, reinforces a race hierarchy within, which in turn influences one's agency (Ray, 2019, p. 17). This is evident in the statistics of race inequality in the UK higher education sector cited above, and what is revealed in this study below.

University widening access policy and the study

Research in widening access has usually entailed secondary analysis of official data (Boliver, 2016), survey work with young people from widening access backgrounds (Ivy, 2010), or interviews with young people (Law et al., 2014). Little attention has been given to those who work in widening access specifically in the English context. The work of Rainford (2019) has been the exception in investigating how widening access policy is enacted by practitioners doing the "outreach" work in general, though not specific to race matters.

It was not difficult to recruit respondents. Having a background as a widening access practitioner and being a special interest convenor for a group that specialises in this area, I was able to recruit respondents for my study via my contacts. This led me to snowball my sample, in which I asked my interviewees to suggest others who may be interested in participating in my study so I could build up my sample to sixteen participants (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). The research was in line with the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines and scrutinised by my institution's ethics committee and approved in Spring 2021. Many of the respondents self-identified as white (see Table 1), though I did not specifically seek information on their ethnicity or gender as I was primarily interested in the policy and practices of widening access and whether race was even considered.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min, and all were conducted using MS Teams (given Covid restrictions at the time) and audio recorded for transcription purposes. The interviews were semi-structured (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Jones et al., 2022), with particular emphasis on asking questions on how race was considered in widening access policy and practice. If they were considered, follow-up questions would lead to conversations about widening access performance measures, metrics, and accountability. They were also asked about the racial composition of their own teams and offices. Given my own racialised identity, I found the interviews uneasy to navigate as I was throwing questions about race with most respondents who identified as white. I was preoccupied with whether they see the racialised world as I do.

Being a person of colour of immigrant parents, currently residing in metropole England, is a factor in how I view and interpret the world around me. My view has also been informed

Table 1. List of respondents.

Self-identified race and gender	Pseudonyms
White male	Aaron
White female	Beryl
White female	Casey
Black female	Denise
White female	Evelyn
White male	Frank
White female	Georgia
White male	Hank
White female	Iona
White female	Jackie
White male	Kenneth
White female	Liza
White male	Marvin
White woman	Nicole
Black woman	Olivia
White man	Peter

by CRT as a research method in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This meant foregrounding and centring on race (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008), which is consistent with the tenets of CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In adopting this stance, I also acknowledge that: (1) white supremacy is endemic in wider English society and reflected in higher education; and (2) that higher education is not value neutral.

The interviews were transcribed, anonymised, and uploaded onto NVivo 12. NVivo software was a platform I employed to organise my ideas, reading through each transcript, which then informed my thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2015). I engaged in a grounded, inductive approach to the work. With my research questions in hand, I ended up collapsing twenty-seven NVivo nodes into two main themes, which I have sectioned in the findings below: (1) marking the racialised academy; and (2) the emergence of the s/cyborg. The collapsing into these two themes signified the duality and the interplay of structure and agency respectively, and empirically. The initial nodes linked to the first theme were related to policy and widening access practice in which respondents explicitly marked race and racism in their work. This was important given the lack of attention drawn to race matters in this area. It was also under this theme where I included nodes of my own observations of the data such as the racial composition of widening participation teams and the precarious work of student ambassadors to do the "race" work. The second theme – "emergence of the s/cyborg" – was conjured through an amalgamation of nodes related to respondent agency, such as their decolonial desires, their desire for inclusion, and their motivation to do the work. The presentation of interviewees' responses is below, which will be followed up by a discussion linking back to the literature.

Findings

Racialised organisation of widening access into higher education

Rainford (2019) suggested that widening access into higher education is perceived as *good work*. The findings below do not question this when the remit is to raise aspirations of young people and ensure fair and equal access into higher education. However, Ray's (2019) theory of racialised organisations offers an analytical lens in weighing-up the widening access agenda spanning from national policy (macro) to university (meso) to individual practitioner (micro).

At national (macro) level, widening access policy has not been race neutral (Madriaga, 2023; DBIS, 2016). Policy has been colour-evasive and ahistorical with its "social class" emphasis, silencing critical discussion on systemic racism in English education (Gillborn, 2008). Moreover, an emphasis on social class inequalities in education has been racialised in public discourse with a moral panic about the underachievement of white working-class boys (Crawford, 2019; Gillborn, 2008). This moral panic has informed education policy from schools (House of Commons Education Committee 142, 2014) to universities (DBIS, 2016). Both Crawford (2019) and Gillborn (2008) have argued that this discourse is not only racist, but based on a misuse of national education statistics, specifically free school meal data, for political purposes. Widening access practitioners interviewed for this study understood that both the discourse and policy emphasis of the white working class in education is racist, as Casey indicated:

> I've been saying for years that I think the phrase "white working class" is essentially just a racist dog whistle because if what you mean is working class, if you think working class kids are disadvantaged then they're going to be disadvantaged by virtue of the fact they're working class, not because they're white.

Not only has Casey unpicked the racist discourse of the white working class, the respondent also has hinted that even the notion of "working class", on its own, may not be race neutral in distinguishing social class from white supremacy. Put another way, one can be working class, but still benefit from white supremacy. It is for this reason that other respondents have expressed concerned. Iona, explained, in so few words, how the discourse is divisive in shifting a white person from having to talk about race:

> The white working class, well, it does bug [me], I'll be honest […] if you're a posh white man at the top, to have a conversation about, ah, the white working class is not worrying about saying the wrong words, not feeling that you're being racist when you're trying to do it and, also, it's more comfortable.

With widening access policy at a national level reflecting this "divisive" discourse (DBIS, 2016; House of Commons Education Committee 142, 2014), universities and widening access offices throughout the sector responded and conjured specific outreach activities in response. This came as a surprise for Denise, who was one of only two practitioners of colour who participated in this study. After learning, on her first day, that her own organisation was funding and managing a widening access project to only benefit white working-class boys, she phoned her aunt to process:

> [A project] was set up originally for working class white males and for me I just didn't know how to digest that information and I remember as soon as I left work on the first day, I called my aunty and I was like, "guess what, did you know that there's a project for working class white males? There actually is a whole project." I was just so taken aback because you just need to look at society.

Denise recognised this divisive issue after her first day of work within her organisation. She marked and questioned the racialised widening access policy and practice. It parallels with Ray's (2019) theory of racialised organisations, that the English higher education sector and the universities within it legitimise the unequal distribution of resources based on race. People of colour were not benefitting from the resources poured into widening access activities. They have not been beneficiaries of this education policy (Gillborn, 2005).

Government widening access policy is not race neutral. It is an act of white supremacy (Gillborn, 2005), particularly when foregrounding the narrative of white working-class underachievement in education. This policy, then, becomes implemented within the higher education sector through individual universities. The individuals, the widening practitioners, carry out the policy. As evidenced above, respondents do see the policy and discourse as racially divisive, and their enactment of such policy *burdensome* (Ray et al., 2022). In addition to their concerns about national policy, there was a worry that the composition of widening access practitioners across the sector was not representative of the communities they have been earmarked to serve, as Beryl remarked:

> … the majority of the kids that you speak to are kids of color and it's an all-white delivery team and we're meant to be role models and be reflective of their experience and have regional accents and stuff, it's like, well, we're not really, are we?

There was self-awareness of the racial composition of widening access teams. A comment heard repeatedly throughout many of the interviews was that widening access practitioners were mostly white, middle-class women, such as Nicole suggesting that widening access practice was "white female-dominated", and Georgia quipping that "I'm a super white middle-class lady and that is the norm."

With this self-awareness, widening access practitioners and their teams across the sector recruited and employed university students of colour to help with the higher education outreach work. This effort was to foreground potential role models of colour and demonstrates in outreach work to children and young people of colour that they *belong* in higher education. These university "student ambassadors" were employed on part-time, fixed-term precarious contracts. However, for some practitioners, it was a challenge to recruit "student ambassadors" for such schemes because those who would apply would be white students for the most part, as Hank has described, "we'd just recruit the same ambassadors to each event. It would be the same four ambassadors, mainly white, mainly white female which isn't representative of the university first and foremost … "

Recruiting for widening access work based on race and ethnicity for employment may be problematic when universities, particularly elite institutions, have a history of unequal student access based on race (see Boliver, 2013; Mathers et al., 2016). Given this, Stevenson et al. (2019) have argued that utilising positive action, otherwise known as affirmative action in the US, for race conscious, targeted interventions is justifiable under the Equality Act 2010. To target recruitment of university students of colour to support outreach activities, widening access practitioners have sought advice from their institutions' equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) teams and human resources. Evelyn spoke about her experience to specifically recruit British South Asians with an Islamic background:

> I spoke to the EDI team, and I also spoke to the employment recruitment service and said […] it's really important that the vast majority of our ambassadors have experience of Islamic faith schools because we're going into Islamic faith schools and/or are from the British South Asian communities …

Evelyn was able to successfully recruit student ambassadors for her widening access project with British South Asian communities. There were other widening access practitioners in the study who were able to recruit for student ambassadors in the same manner as Evelyn and replicate the same success for their outreach activities for students of colour.

It is a practice, however, which highlights universities as racialised organisations (Ray, 2019; Schachle & Coley, 2022; Vega et al., 2022). The hierarchical racial structure is apparent and upheld by widening access practitioners, perhaps *unwittingly* (Macpherson, 1999). Permanent university staff working in widening access, who have been identified mostly as white, middle-class women, specifically recruit, and manage the work of *staff* of colour on precarious work contracts. This hierarchical structure has legitimacy (Ray, 2019), as well as having moral justification (Rainford, 2019). It is painfully reminiscent of the practices described by Wilder (2013, pp. 23–28) of universities in colonial America, such as Harvard and William and Mary, in which "outreach" activities were led by Indigenous students to recruit other Indigenous young people to become university students.

Taking a couple more steps back from calling out English universities as reproducers of colonial practice, I am aware that universities do not have to shift their resources to specifically recruit students of colour to their institutions given the colour-evasiveness of widening access policy (Madriaga, 2023; DBIS, 2016). As mentioned above, the dominant discourse and wider sector policy has focused mostly on social class, particularly this notion of "white working class". English universities have some autonomy from government and widening access practitioners have their administrative discretion to operate as *street level bureaucrats* (Ray et al., 2022). University autonomy is limited to government accountability and annual reporting of widening access performance metrics as a condition for institutions to charge undergraduates the upper limit for tuition fees, which currently stands at £9250-a-year (DBIS, 2016; McCaig, 2018). As evidenced above, there were respondents who commented that the white working-class narrative is racist. Equipped with this view and having discretion in their outreach work, widening access practitioners interviewed here grasped the utopian idea that higher education can become more inclusive and anti-racist (Webb, 2018). In other words, they grasp on to hope as s/cyborgs. This is exemplified with an anecdote offered by Denise. She used her administrative discretion, her agency as a s/cyborg at a local high school classroom composed entirely of girls of colour to call out and encourage, reciting in the interview what she shared to that classroom:

> … I was the only Black student in my class […] You're lucky to go through school with people like you. I said we've come all this way to deliver this information to you to support you so when you do leave school you can make an informed decision about your options. I said how it is now, I said if you leave school, the harsh reality is that we're at the bottom. You don't understand but there's so much that we need to succeed in life and that's the reality. You will get judged. Before you open your mouth, you're going to get judged on the color of your skin, that's a fact.

Her words to the young people did not reflect national widening access policy. Her action did not even reflect the remit of her institution's outreach programme as it was not an activity earmarked for young people of colour. She was only present at the school because it serves young people who hail from neighbourhoods with low participation in higher education. As discussed above, neighbourhood postcode is an indicator widely used as a proxy for social class in England, which sometimes, as in this case, intersects with racially minoritised communities. Denise did not have to air out her concerns to these young women of colour. But she did, laying out how racism is *real* (Bell, 1992). As suggested in the next section, this administrative discretion (Ray et al., 2022), this agency, exercised by Denise is one instance of a subversive, individual act, a s/cyborg act, within a white, colonial university structure to carve out hope for her and others who are racialised like her. It was a s/cyborg act as she operated independently from a "system", or "plurality", a "structural agency" of scyborgs with "intentionality" – whatever that may be (la paperson, 2017, pp. 60–61).

Being R2D2 against the empire (structure and agency)

R2D2 from Star Wars was drawn as an example by la paperson (2017) in illustrating the scyborg with decolonial desires in higher education. Describing scenes from Star Wars, la paperson paralleled R2D2 rewiring the Death Star for subversive, rebellious purposes

with university workers who rewire their own imperialist universities for decolonial objectives. The problem with using R2D2 as an example was that R2D2 was only plugged into the Death Star – the evil empire system – momentarily. In contrast, those interviewed for this study are very much plugged into "the Death Star" beyond the odd moment. Their agency is limited while working in a racialised university where structural racism is unacknowledged. This was evidenced in the case of Denise above.

Considering the realness of structural racism (Bell, 1992), Denise's agency within her racialised university would have been limited (Ray, 2019). There was more freedom to express her views inside a school classroom within a racially minoritised community, outside of her own university. Not only does this give credence to a point made by Webb (2018) that hope for anti-racist change can emerge from a classroom, with its four surrounding walls obstructing the university gaze and scrutiny. But it also raises a question of the extent of agency a white practitioner has within their own racialised university.

With widening access policy and practice supposedly "race neutral", practitioners must jostle, rejig the university structure and processes to outreach racialised, marginalised communities. For instance, Jackie was keen on conducting university outreach activities with the local Gypsy Roma Traveler (GRT) community within her region. GRT young people consistently underperform in education in comparison to *all* other ethnic groups in England (see Crawford, 2019). Observing that the GRT community within her region lived within the same area and shared a particular postcode of "disadvantage", Jackie was able to pour and justify university resources into this ethnic community, "So it was a target ward [neighbourhood], so it meant we were able to legitimately work with that ward and everybody who you speak to about that ward will say there's a big Roma community."

Jackie employed her administrative discretion, her agency, to work with this racially marginalised group. The decision to seek them out, using government widening access criteria as well as local knowledge, to justify resources to this group suggests that Jackie can be considered a s/cyborg. She operated on her own. She did not tap into a system of other scyborgs as la paperson (2017) had professed. Jackie had to do additional work, again her own agency, to recruit GRT students within her university to support this outreach activity. The structure of policy and the university constrained her options. It was only by serendipity that she was able to recruit GRT students through a university multi-faith chaplaincy. She was grateful, and shared that:

> there were two, only two, […] who were at the [university] from that community who were happy to kind of articulate the benefits of higher education […] You've got to really try to work hard to find these connections, find these people and then invest in them as well.

Like Denise's anecdote above, Jackie's action did not reflect national widening access policy and practice with its preoccupation of social class. Instead of being colour-evasive, Jackie's action was race-conscious. She worked within the structural parameters given and employed university technologies and resources available to her. She reassembled them, like a s/cyborg, to serve a specific racialised, marginalised community that most often remains hidden from UK education statistics (Crawford, 2019).

However, Jackie is white. Her agency to take risks and engage in this work within the racialised academy would be considered less in comparison to Denise, who does not have

that white credential (Ray, 2019). Jackie had employed s/cyborg tools in full view of university scrutiny unlike Denise whose work was hidden within a classroom of students. Not wanting to convey a white saviour narrative, which has obvious implications as noted by Crozier (2023), I see the work of Jackie as encouraging. It is contrary to official, colour-evasive higher education policy. It does confirm the realness of racism (Bell, 1992), and how being white is a credential in a racialised university (Ray, 2019; Schachle & Coley, 2022; Vega et al., 2022). Moreover, one's position in the racial hierarchy within the organisation can also structure one's expectations or hope for anti-racist change (Bourdieu, 1979). This is reason for being mindful of Bell's (1992) optimism of racial realism and this paper's attempt at signalling the s/cyborg work.

Jackie was not the only white woman practitioner engaged in this s/cyborg work. There were others. For instance, Iona distributed university resources to a neighbouring community, specifically a project encompassing mostly Black youth in a "disadvantaged" postcode. When she shared her thoughts about her project, she never referred to it as an aspiration-raising initiative towards higher education. It was much more than that, "It's very much about our young people and their families, how confident are they in life? How confident are they about their choices? How are their skills representing themselves? Communicating? We have protest modules and poetry slams." Her widening access activity runs counter to what was laid out by the government (DBIS, 2016), given its specificity of race and not explicitly about raising higher education aspirations. However, like a s/cyborg, she chose to earmark resources to this "disadvantaged" postcode within the constraints of macro policy. Again, like Jackie, Iona did not tap into a "system" of other scyborgs wired together (la paperson, 2017). Her agency was independent of other widening access practitioners across the sector. It was her own decision alone, as a s/cyborg with an awareness of how her options are constrained by structural forces. The interplay of agency and structure is helpful in analysing and engaging in anti-racist work. It should not be easily dismissed as la paperson (2017, p. 60) has attempted to do with foregrounding "structural agency" with scyborg.

Another instance of s/cyborg work involving a white female practitioner employing the colonial machine for decolonial pursuits was Evelyn's widening access intervention. Her work revolved around university engagement with British South Asian girls at specific Islamic schools within the locale. Her journey was sparked by a question from a British South Asian colleague at her university employer querying why students from a local Islamic school were not represented within their high-status institution. The Islamic school was one of the highest performing schools in the country, however graduates chose to attend a less prestigious university nearby. Choosing to attend a university near the family home is consistent with literature on British South Asian women and higher education (Khambhaita & Bhopal, 2015). However, the issue for Evelyn was that graduates of these schools were not considering her own university. To resolve this, she led engagement activities with local Islamic schools, mosques, and Islamic charitable organisations. She found that the children attending Islamic schools did not benefit from any Government-funded university outreach activities. This is because the schools were fee-paying schools, meaning they were considered private schools not entitled to state funding and interventions. Evelyn exclaimed that this was ridiculous:

> … they had large portions of students who would meet widening participation criteria had consistently been knocked off outreach lists for pretty much every university in the local area because they are [at] a fee-paying school so they instantly get lumped into the same bracket as Eton [English school for aristocratic children]. It's like this is ridiculous because this school, the students are paying £500-a-year to be part of the school and often the parents aren't even paying that, it's being paid by the mosques, so this isn't like really rich parents and really rich students. And most of these students would meet lots of widening participation criteria.

Her engagement with the local Islamic community and British South Asian students birthed links with her university. Her work was considered a success by senior managers within her institution and received significant buy-in to the extent that they wanted her to initiate a similar strategy to recruit Black students from London. She indicated that she had to "push back" on this. It was not the case that she did not want more Black students attending her university and travelling over 200 miles to do so. It was that her mission was to remedy her university's marginalisation of British South Asians who lived locally. Again, another example of widening access activity that runs counter to national widening access policy, which even marks the structural processes where students of colour are expected to attend lower status universities (Pilkington, 2009). It is another instance of s/cyborg work, where an agent works autonomously with constrained options, to engage in anti-racist work.

Discussion

The point of this paper is to highlight how widening access practitioners utilised their discretion, their agency as s/cyborgs, took university resources, and directed them to racially underserved communities. This shift of resources to GRT, Black, and British South Asian Muslims, as illustrated above, is not consistent with national widening policy. Moreover, universities across the English sector do not even consider race and ethnicity in their university admissions (Mathers et al., 2016; Stevenson et al., 2019). As indicated above, proxies of social class, such as postcode and free school meal status while in school, are the emphasis in government policy, affirmed by universities' admission processes. Thus, widening university access policy masks existing race inequality.

Discussions of race equity in accessing English education are pushed to the periphery with a problematic white working-class victimhood policy discourse (Crawford, 2019). Most of the respondents confirmed that this white working-class discourse in widening access policy and practice makes them uncomfortable, with a few of them referring to it as racist. Though they are engaged in anti-racist outreach work, there is recognition that their agency is limited, structured by racial hierarchical organisations. It is this interplay of agency and structure, which is evidenced here. This duality should not be so easily dismissed by la paperson (2017), particularly in how these respondents strategised and developed anti-racist work constrained by colour-evasive policy and resources.

Many of the respondents remarked on the composition of widening access teams across the sector as being white, female, and middle-class. However, this only accounts for those on permanent work contracts. Many of the "student ambassadors", students of colour, that work within institutional widening access teams across the sector are employed precariously, during the term time. As noted above, this practice is viewed as legitimate, allocating resources and staffing according to a racial hierarchy (Ray, 2019).

The findings from the interviews also suggest that there is a disconnect between the policy discourse on widening access into higher education and what practitioners *do*, congruent with Rainford's (2019) findings. However, with race at the centre of my study, the analysis of interview data suggests that practitioners, mainly white middle-class women, are operating as s/cyborgs reassembling the colonial tools of the university to support racially marginalised communities (la paperson, 2017).

This subversion is congruent with the notion of decoupling, an aspect of Ray's (2019) framework of racialised organisations. However, this is not a decoupling instance of an institution pronouncing their commitment to race equality policy publicly, and then managers within the organisation reproducing white supremacy on the ground. It is the opposite. It is a decoupling of individuals seeing that their own organisation and its policies reproduce race inequality, and then attempting to work against it. For widening access practitioners, this subversion begins with querying existing policies and initiatives that sustain colonial logics and white supremacy. The subversion then extends to retooling and reassembling such initiatives to smudge whiteness, supporting young Black and Brown students to progress towards higher education.

Conclusion

The s/cyborg is a significant development in sociologically understanding one's agency within racialised organisations such as universities (Ray, 2019; Schachle & Coley, 2022; Vega et al., 2022). It affirms la paperson's (2017) hope for anti-racist, decolonial change without the determinism of one being fused into a scyborg system with other scyborgs. There is individual agency to operate for anti-racist ends as evidenced with Denise, Jackie, and Iona. However, each of them had specific constraints on what they could do. Hence, this is the reason for placing a "/" for s/cyborg to emphasise the duality of agency and structure.

The findings should encourage those trying to find reason to hope in a racialised academy, particularly those who do the "good work" of widening access (Rainford, 2019). There is some degree of discretion, agency, to pursue anti-racist work as evidenced here. However, this research was not explicitly set up to capture one's perceptions of hope for anti-racist change or touch on any notion of a collective sense of hope. It was designed to examine the intermingling of race and widening access policy and practice. So, the next possible iteration of this research is *explicitly* gathering a sense of hope for anti-racist change from university workers amidst the constraints of a racialised academy.

This paper concludes that the widening access practitioners who participated in this study, mainly white women, acknowledge the racist policy discourse on widening access into higher education. They recognise their choices of outreach activities to communities are constrained by this discourse. However, they may not have reflected much on how their own university reflects a racial hierarchy. They may not even recognise that their own agency within the organisation is determined by their proximity to whiteness. This is, of course, how white supremacy works in the academy. The implication of this misrecognition of white supremacy is that children and young people of colour are being sought to become students in the English academy that does not love them (Samatar et al., 2021).

This is a reminder of the significance of Bell's (1992) racial realism and acknowledgement of the permanence of racism within our universities. Being aware of this structural reality is a move towards hope (Meer, 2022), leading to strategies for anti-racist change. I

cling on to this hope, taking some comfort knowing there is some encouraging, anti-racist work as evidenced in this paper. But, of course, more needs to be done to open up possibilities, imaginations, and futures for young people of colour, and the university staff who work with them. May this paper contribute towards working to this end.

Notes

1. I recognise the concepts of "widening participation" and "fair access" are distinguishable. McCaig (2018) refers to widening participation as impacting demand-side, and fair access as impacting the supply-side in examining the English "market" of higher education. But, for the purposes of this paper, I will refer to widening participation and fair access as one - widening access.
2. I have chosen to use the phrase "people of color" to emphasize both students and staff being racialized against a white norm. Phrases such as "students of color" or "staff of color" have been employed by many critical race theorists in the field of education to describe the experience of racialized staff and students (Blaisdell, 2016).

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ORCID

Manuel Madriaga http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2725-1718

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