Routes through higher education: BME students and the development of a 'specialisation of consciousness'

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With changing demographics and the advent of mass higher education, there has been a significant impact on graduate transitions which has led to greater inequalities in access to social support during the transitionary period between undergraduate study and entrance into the labour market. This article explores the experiences of students in their final year of undergraduate study by drawing on 43 interviews with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students. Using Bourdieu, we argue that BME students preparing to enter the labour market display a 'specialisation of consciousness': a set of practices framed by their prior background and experience, choice of university and the support derived from attending university. 'Specialisation of consciousness' is an ongoing process in which BME students identify and understand racial inequalities in higher education and accept the limiting consequences these have on transitions into the labour market or further study. Keywords: bourdieu; race; transitions; inequality

Introduction

Widening participation initiatives often assume that initial access to a university place will significantly impact on students' overcoming disadvantages associated with their social and ethnic background. However, there is a growing recognition that disadvantage is present throughout university and is reflected in outcomes for graduates entering the labour market (Brown, 2014; Bhopal, 2018). Such outcomes are framed within a 'complex, interlinked and multidimensional nature of the factors' (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015, p. 24) including, but not limited to, aspects of students' experiences before attending university, whilst studying at university and following graduation (Bathmaker et al., 2016). Our research explores BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) students' experiences of such

outcomes being constrained within such constellations. BME is the official categorisation used in the 2011 Census to encompass a diverse range of individuals from Black British, Black African, British Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds; despite some shared experiences, there are also differences within and between groups. We argue that BME students develop a 'specialisation of consciousness' characterised by their clear understanding of inequalities faced throughout their lives and an equally clear understanding of university practices that reinforce them.

Policy designed to improve social mobility and implement an agenda of 'widening participation' for under-represented groups within UK higher education has been a staple of successive governments since New Labour's commitment to increase the higher education student participation rate to 50% (NAO, 2002; DfES, 2003). Both Coalition and Conservative governments persisted with 'widening participation' agendas, often within neo-liberal ideological narratives conflating increased marketisation and 'choice' with the potential for improving identifiable problems of diversity and equity within higher education institutions (HEIs) (Ball et al., 2001; Furedi, 2010). Despite significant increases in numbers of students entering higher education, structural inequalities determined by social class and ethnicity affecting university entrance persist (Bhopal, 2018; Reay, 2018). Similar inequalities exist in the labour market (Rafferty, 2012; EHRC, 2016). Universities have introduced measures to address such inequalities, including monitoring institutions in their drive to improve access for disadvantaged students (Office for Fair Access, 2017), and the recently introduced Race Equality Charter to address the BME attainment gap (AdvanceHE, 2018).

Drawing on 43 interviews with final-year BME students, we argue that greater attention needs to be paid to the transitions made, not simply into higher education, but from higher education into employment and/or further study; and how the former impacts the latter. Students described how their consciousness of being disadvantaged formed part of the baggage they carried with them into university. It was also a form of consciousness fostered and reinforced by their university experience. The institutional process of fostering racial inequalities mirrored more widely documented processes by which institutional fields (in Bourdieu's sense) foster and reinforce social inequalities. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999, p. 45) describe a 'racial (or racist) sociodicy' in which institutional practices of addressing racial inequalities are themselves implicated in maintaining pre-existing racial inequalities.

Using a Bourdieusian discussion of the relational nature of different capitals and competition for such capitals (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1993), in which race is also a factor, we argue that students develop the range of practices we describe as a 'specialisation of consciousness'. These are fashioned by habitus, their individual dispositions and characteristics shaped by experience and personal history, and by the 'conditionings' inherent within institutions that foster the reproduction of such habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Black scholarship (Du Bois, 2007; Fanon, 2008) has often identified the discomfort of 'double consciousness'; the internal uneasiness experienced by Black people seeing themselves through the racist gaze of White people. BME students entering the labour market, both experiencing the discomforts of 'double consciousness' and also aware of ongoing racist inequalities limiting their opportunities, might consider challenging the status quo. However, in our research, BME students tended to discuss their challenges in more neutral terms, suggesting something approaching 'complicity' with institutional practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). A 'specialisation of consciousness' emerged in which individuals were conscious of their position and also conscious of the processes by which they accepted such positioning, including the limiting of potential for upward social mobility. In this respect, 'consciousness' was generated through institutional practice as a fixed reference point ingrained through experience and habitus; less the individual psychological drive that Fanon (2008) might identify, and more a habitualised reconciliation of daily realities. Our research discusses the specific circumstances of BME students and UK universities, but it echoes earlier differences between Bourdieu (1962) and Fanon (1965); Bourdieu's analysis of peasant identity and habitus constrained by colonialism in 1960s Algeria, unable to transition as Fanon envisaged into a different revolutionary form of consciousness.

We use 'specialisation of consciousness' to analyse how structural inequalities associated with ethnicity are fostered for individual students within institutional fields ingrained with multiple inequalities. Patterns of inequality determined by prior access to economic, social and cultural capitals, choice of university and university processes allocate students into roles that legitimise and reinforce their personal background and their institution's status (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990).

Transitions from higher education

Reflecting global patterns of change to higher education, the UK has seen both the advent of mass higher education and a move towards a more knowledge-driven economy, having a significant bearing on graduate transitions into the

labour market (Marginson, 2016). An increasingly marketised, mass higher education system has seen significant changes to the demographics of UK HEIs. Greater numbers of students from more diverse social backgrounds, with less traditional educational profiles and biographies, are entering HEIs (Social Mobility Commission, 2015); this is mirrored by an increasing supply of university leavers from both affluent and non-traditional backgrounds (Sundorph et al., 2015). Such structural change 'shapes the ways in which the relationship between formal educational experience and subsequent returns are regulated' (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 7). The Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey identified that 56.1% of full-time first-degree graduates were in full-time work a year after graduation (HESA, 2017). However, graduates from poorer or BME backgrounds were more likely to be unemployed than White, middle-class students (UUK, 2016).

The transition from university to the labour market has become increasingly complex as graduates navigate a wide range of pathways within a diverse graduate labour market (Corak, 2013). Simultaneously, competition for jobs has increased as a result of unprecedented changes in the global supply and distribution of highly skilled labour, particularly in emerging economies (Brown et al., 2011). In an increasingly competitive job market, graduates face the challenge of accessing jobs commensurate with graduate-level qualifications whilst also demonstrating their so-called 'employability' (Tomlinson, 2012).

The graduate labour market is segregated in terms of graduate profiles, with social class, gender and institution of study all influencing employment outcomes—including types of job, level of salary and status (Future Track Survey, 2013; Greaves, 2015). Research on graduates' early experiences of the job market and employers' recruitment strategies confirms this (Britton et al., 2016); consequently, graduate perceptions of the job market tend to be framed by wider socio-cultural dynamics relating to their social class, gender and ethnicity. Employers often place a premium on identifying and nurturing a graduate 'elite' in a bid to win the 'war for talent', which favours graduates from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Brown et al., 2011). Decisions made during this period have been shown to have a significant impact on social mobility and future life choices (Sutton Trust, 2015).

Ethnic inequalities

A wide range of evidence suggests that ethnicity plays a key role in determining educational and employment outcomes (Nielsen, 2012; Rafferty, 2012; Bhopal, 2018). This includes some BME students achieving lower GCSE and 'A' Level

grades (UK public examinations taken at age 16 and 18, respectively) compared to White students (Gillborn et al., 2018). Despite the consistency of poorer outcomes, BME students' experiences and profiles are not uniform and there are differences in achievement and outcomes for different ethnic groups (Bhopal, 2018; Gillborn et al., 2018).

BME students are less likely to leave higher education with a first class or 2:1 degree, the two highest UK degree classifications, and more likely to drop out of university compared to White students (AdvanceHE, 2018; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018; Bhopal and Henderson, 2019). There is evidence of significant BME attainment gaps between degree class attained by BME students and comparable White students (AdvanceHE, 2018). Black students often feel marginalised during their university experience, citing racism, an ethnocentric curriculum and favouritism towards White students (Greaves, 2015; SMF/UPP, 2018).

BME students are often concentrated in newer post-1992 universities that tend to be teaching rather than research focused; ranked lower in league tables than traditional, research-intensive universities, they are often located in large inner-city regions reflecting wider patterns of inequality (Connor et al., 2004; Bhopal, 2018). In particular, the class-cultural profile of BME students is significant because of the different levels of cultural and social capitals possessed by students from different social class backgrounds (Greaves, 2015). Students from poorer BME backgrounds face multiple disadvantages, including the impact of their earlier compulsory schooling on their engagement with education, the choices they make in relation to higher education and the support available to them whilst making these decisions (Bhopal, 2018). Gillborn et al (2018) argue that the role of ethnicity as a key indicator of university achievement is distorted in official and media narratives by systemic, racist misinterpretation of data relating to attendance, achievement and the impact of social class.

BME students continue to face disadvantages once they leave higher education. BME graduates are more likely to be unemployed 6 months after graduation compared to White graduates, and when they do find employment they are more likely to be in jobs for which they are overqualified (Rafferty, 2012). Even when BME groups have similar levels of educational attainment, this does not result in equal outcomes in the labour market (Liu, 2015; EHRC, 2016). BME groups face an ethnic penalty in the labour market firstly in gaining employment and secondly in advancing their careers (Bhopal, 2016). They earn less on average than their White colleagues, are less likely to be in senior decision-making roles and more likely to experience processes of marginalisation and exclusion (based on racism) in the workplace (Trades Union

Congress, 2016; Bhopal, 2018). Racism and discrimination are prevalent for BME employees at the point of entry into employment and during employment (Catney and Sabater, 2015; Bhopal, 2018).

Theoretical framework

Drawing on a Bourdieusian discussion of the relational nature of different capitals and competition for such capitals (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1993), we argue that BME student ethnicity is significant in shaping a range of practices we describe as 'specialisation of consciousness'. These practices are fashioned by habitus, individual student dispositions and characteristics, and by the 'conditionings' inherent within institutions that foster the reproduction of such habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Du Bois (2007, p. 8) describes the 'peculiar sensation' of discomfort for Black identities framed within 'double consciousness'; using a Bourdieusian lens, in which individuals are complicit with the inequalities produced by their institutional fields, this article explores how BME students framed themselves with less overt discomfort despite experiencing discrimination. In order to address both the individual sensation of discrimination and its institutional origins, we deploy the term 'specialisation of consciousness' to suggest individuals' awareness, acceptance and ability to work within personal and institutional inequalities and the processes of its production. Ethnicity, which as demonstrated is significant in determining types of university attended, degree class and poorer employment outcomes, is a key factor in shaping student experience whilst at university.

Reflecting wider sociological accounts (Weber, 1968; Bourdieu, 1990) of decisionmaking processes, research on graduate transitions has tended to challenge assumptions that educational and employment-related decisions are necessarily neutral and rational (Ball et al., 2001). Decisions around future participation in education, training and employment are framed by young people's wider cultural experiences and social networks of influence—such as familial, community and peer relations (Bhopal, 2016). Such perceptions are reinforced within differentiations between universities (Bhopal, 2018). More elite institutions, such as the Russell Group (24 public research-intensive universities including Oxford and Cambridge), tend to select 'better' students, who are more likely to be White and from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Boliver, 2013). Less prestigious institutions (post-1992 universities) tend to recruit students, often with lesser qualifications and with greater numbers from BME and lower socio-economic backgrounds (DIUS, 2006).

Similar stratification is also apparent in employment outcomes experienced by students from different types of institution (Wakeling and Savage, 2015). Progression into postgraduate study is also heavily skewed towards students who previously attended research-intensive universities, with a concomitant relationship towards the likelihood students will be White and middle-class (HESA, 2017). Black students are less likely to make the transition into postgraduate study (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018). The complex amalgamation of status—particularly related to differently valued knowledge production, income (particularly in relation to capital reserves and research funding) and variations in outcomes for students transitioning out of university—demonstrates how the institutional capital of universities comprises an everevolving mix of cultural, economic and social capitals (Myers and Bhopal, 2018; Myers et al., 2018).

Different identities develop through formal education that are largely culturally mediated through social class, gender and ethnicity (Bhopal and Preston, 2011); these inform learners' educational and employment decisions, determined within subjective notions of their future education and labour market potentials (Macmillan et al., 2015). White middle-class students, for example, are more likely to draw upon better-quality social networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) to access employment opportunities. These students understand such social capital subjectively as a natural attribute of their identity. By contrast, Sung (2015) argues that BME identities are often shaped by racialised psychic harm. Drawing upon Du Bois' (2007) and Fanon's (2008) discussions of 'double consciousness', Sung argues that Black subjectivity or consciousness is perceived and framed within a White gaze that generates ideological and structural dislocation. Consequently, BME students may consider that their restricted opportunities are also a 'natural' attribute of their identity.

Reay et al. (2005) identified the significance of the institutional habitus of schools and colleges in which the congruency of a pupil's family and peer groups impacted upon their experience of schools. They argue that class is the most significant factor in these relations, though tempered by ethnicity and gender. Reay et al. (2005) conclude that middle-class or more privileged students are more likely to succeed as a consequence of institutional habitus being more closely aligned to personal habitus. Whilst our findings identify institutional habitus shaping university experiences, it became clear that students' ethnicity played a significantly greater factor in determining student experiences and outcomes. Bourdieu (1993: 97) notes how the expansion of educational qualifications devalues their worth:

> because a qualification is always worth what its holders are worth, a qualification that becomes more widespread is ipso facto devalued, but it loses still more of its value because it becomes accessible to people 'without social value'.

Greater numbers of students attending universities devalues outcomes such as the credentialised capital of a degree. If, additionally, the individual habitus of BME students does not align with the institutional habitus of universities, they will experience a further devaluation of their outcomes. This article explores the significance of ethnicity in framing a student's personal dispositions and learned practices within the institutional shaping of student practice in preparation for what they would do when they left university. We argue that a 'specialisation of consciousness' is evident in which student identity is shaped by the institutional modelling of previous dispositions and behaviours. Whilst the impact of class within different institutional settings is highly significant, a more worrying finding was that within and above class differences, ethnicity over-rides the experiences of BME students.

Methodology

The main aim of the study was to explore the experiences of BME students in their final year of undergraduate study. The key objectives of the study were:

1. To explore respondents' future decisions after graduating; this included postgraduate study, entrance into the labour market or other decisions.
2. To analyse the impact of different types of support available to students duringthis transitionary period.
3. To examine whether ethnicity and class made a difference to future decisions andsupport.

A total of 43 interviews were conducted over an 18-month period between 2016 and 2018 with final-year undergraduates studying on social science and humanities degrees, 20 interviews were conducted at a post-1992 university, 7 interviews at a Plate Glass university (this refers to regional research and teaching-focused universities established in the 1960s) and 16 at a Russell Group university; 27 respondents were female and 16 were male. All respondents were 'home' rather than 'international' students, and were asked to self-identify their ethnicity. A total of 16 respondents self-defined as Black British, 18 as British Indian, 3 as British Pakistani/ Bangladeshi and 6 as mixed heritage. In order to ascertain their class background, we asked respondents to identify their parents' occupational status and whether one or both parents had attended university.

Fourteen of our respondents said that one or both of their parents went to university, and the majority of respondents described themselves as working class.

Access to students was gained via heads of departments and programme leaders. Interviews focused on examining students' expectations of what they intended to do after they had finished their final year and addressed factors they felt would impact upon their decision-making, covering finance, family support, job availability, location and university support. The interview also included questions about the types and level of support received by students at their institution when exploring and discussing their options after graduation. Of the interviews, 9 were conducted via Skype, 2 via telephone and 32 face to face. All of the interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed.

Ethics

Ethical clearance was obtained from the participating university. All interview invitations included a participant information sheet which outlined the study aims, as well as a consent form which was signed and returned to the researcher. The research was conducted in line with the university research policies, the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines as well as the Data Protection Act.

Data analysis

The interview data was analysed by a process of 'thematic analysis' which enabled the generation of codes and the development of themes as outlined in our research aims and objectives. To ensure accuracy, interview analyses were cross-checked by all three members of the research team, which enabled an analysis of the frequency of different themes within the whole context of the interview. As Namey et al. (2008, p. 138) state: 'Thematic analysis moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas. Codes developed for ideas or themes are then applied to raw data as summary markers for later analysis'. Thematic analysis enabled the research team to code and categorise the data into themes so that data could be analysed based on similarities and differences (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Findings

Three distinct patterns of related findings emerged in the research: racisms experienced within the university; expectations of racism within the labour market; and different types of family support available after university. This article focuses on the first and second theme in order to analyse how respondents positioned themselves in relation to their institution. However, we would note the tendency for respondents' accounts to often conflate different aspects of experience within more nuanced and less discrete narratives.

University racisms

BME students readily understood racism as a structural fault line that affected their lives before university and would affect their lives when they left university. Experiencing racism at university was therefore neither unusual nor novel; rather, it was a continuation of previous experiences and foreshadowed future expectations. Colin, a first-generation Black British student attending a Russell Group university, suggested this was 'part of growing up really' and described in some detail how his parents

> ... see this experience as being my gaining knowledge. Obviously. They want to be there when I graduate and see their eldest son with his degree. But also they talk about the 'experience' of being here. Of becoming more worldly wise. Which is true but not as they expected. I've learned some of the old school stuff. Maybe the university wants me the student paying my fees and my accommodation but does not want Colin, the Black man. I feel it and my friends feel it. Even my White friends.

BME students consistently described their ethnicity disadvantaging their prospects as a 'reality', or what Adrian (Black British, post-1992) called 'the real world':

> Outside of the university there's racism. We all know that. It's the real world and the real world does not stop when you become a student. It still happens. It doesn't magically disappear when you walk into a lecture hall. Maybe lecturers hide it better.

The prevalence of covert racism alluded to by Adrian within universities was widely acknowledged, according to Farah (British Pakistani, post-1992):

> It's very hard to pin down. It's more subtle. The lecturers can disguise their racism in universities. How they [lecturers] treat you, it carries on

> when you get a job. It's not as bad in universities as it is in jobs, but it's still there, and it's worse for me because I'm a Muslim.

Farah clearly identified a continuum of racism; a pattern she had experienced before university and which she anticipated would continue upon entering the employment market. Colin identified a 'smoke-screen' of 'black faces and Chinese faces' in the publicity materials for his Russell Group institution, and Farah described her post-1992 institution's high-profile commitment to equality issues as 'irrelevant' and 'just words to look better'. When pressed on how she identified racism amongst lecturers, Farah made clear the near impossibility of evidencing specific instances. She believed that White students often seemed to get better grades (something borne out by her institution's attainment gap), and also described the 'discomfort' of some lecturers:

> Maybe less so around me. Because I'm small and quite smiley... but round the boys, round black boys, they keep their distance. One lecturer, she looks as though she is scared of the boys, all the time.

Farah went on to discuss how she felt some lecturers' performance of being scared (as opposed to being genuinely scared) 'makes the boys seem bad'; as a consequence, ordinary, non-threatening Black students were imbued with qualities of being difficult or potentially dangerous. What made Farah's account so striking was the identification of a racist practice being openly performed and the recognition by a student that this was a racist practice.

Farah's experience of being a student included both observing racist behaviours by lecturers and understanding that such practice conformed to institutional norms of behaviour. Throughout the research, students described covert racisms as the norm, both in specific terms of universities enacting racist behaviours and also from the perspective of their lives being shaped by racism. The emphasis universities placed on their adoption of equality measures, on statements of tolerance and liberalism, and the prominence of BME students in promotional literature was largely regarded as cynical strategies by BME students. Students' own accounts of 'widening participation'-type activities within universities was an understanding of 'racial sociodicy' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999); they were recounting their awareness of the practices of addressing racial inequality as the very processes by which racism was perpetuated. This understanding was not rooted in new experiences, but rather the accumulation of a wealth of experience and expectations about their lives; racism in the university was 'ordinary, not aberrational – "normal science," the usual way society does business' (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 8). In some

respects, the ordinariness of inequality and the processes that fostered inequality mean it is unsurprising that students were conscious of their institutional positioning. The internalised discomfort Du Bois or Fanon might identify became lost, almost subsumed within the practice of being a student; by being complicit in the wider competition for better degrees and better jobs, BME students were accepting and working within processes that reinforced inequality.

Just as Farah identified clear intersections between ethnicity and religion and between ethnicity and gender, Daren (Black British male, Plate Glass) described concerns about being both Black and from a working-class background:

> I do feel generally I am at a disadvantage, definitely based on my social characteristics, so I am from a working-class background [and] I also come from a Black background, so you could say they're both a disadvantage. What I am trying to say is I do feel confident in my abilities in the future, however, I do [also] feel that I am still at a disadvantage compared to someone else who is White, middle class.

This suggests that 'experience' and 'background' become embodied within the practices of individuals. BME students from lower social class backgrounds were effectively on track not just to secure less prestigious job opportunities, but also to a certain extent to accept this state of affairs. Daren also noted:

> There are small gestures made. Friendly advice from some of the lecturers about opportunities. But I feel on the outside. One of my [White] friends was told about the Masters programmes. There is a bursary they offer to 3rd year students. No one told me about that.

In addition, Colin noted something similar in respect of ethnicity and gender:

> I might be out of line saying this but a lot of the opportunities, little things like being paid to attend open days or help out at an event. It is always a White girl.

HEIs demonstrate a process in which the institutional logic of racist discourses constructed at an institutional level transcends the ideological consequences of producing racism, not just through university managers or lecturers, but also in the 'bodies' of graduates, 'in durable dispositions to recognize and comply with the demands immanent in the field' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 58). One repeated refrain of BME working-class students was the need for their actions to reflect the 'reality' of their opportunities. In practice, this included the embodiment of specialised dispositions that limited their potential outcomes: they might observe

and understand institutional racisms, but these were unchallengeable because they reflect the 'reality' of university practice. To understand their positioning, BME students adopted the perspective of the White university even though this was shaped by racism.

Fears of the future: expectations of the labour market

Discussing future prospects for employment following graduation, all the students talked about their fears of exclusionary practices in the labour market (including being unemployed, competition for jobs and underselling based on their qualifications). Black respondents in particular spoke about inequalities related to ethnicity and felt that processes of discrimination continued to exist in the labour market:

> The workplace is getting more and more competitive and when you have that kind of competition, employers can pick and choose who they want. So they might think they don't want a young Black male in this role, they might want to keep their companies and organisations White to reinforce what they represent. (Andrew, post-1992)

Julie (Black British, Russell Group) said

> We have to be realistic and know that racism is out there and exists and it happens when you go for a job. I don't know what we can do to challenge that because people doing the hiring and firing have that power. We do have laws in place, but how do we know that these laws are being followed?

Students were aware that ethnicity would impact on how they were judged when applying for jobs. Even students who anticipated achieving a first-class or 2:1 degree felt that this would make little difference to their chances of actually securing employment; they felt their ethnic identity would trump their degree classification.

> Even though I am on track and have been told I will get a first, I still feel cautious about what this means in reality for me – I don't think it will make that much difference when competing for jobs. If there is a White candidate who has a 2:1 and whose face fits, I really do feel they will get the job over me. I'm not being negative here, I am being realistic. I've spoken to people and it has happened to them, so it will probably happen to me as well. (Steve, Black British, Russell Group)

Black students also mentioned other aspects of exclusion in gaining employment, based on their class. They felt that divisions of class (which they defined in relation to background, wealth, connections and accent) were used to separate workers who were employable in certain types of occupations:

> If you're going to work in a top organisation for instance you have to be a certain way – you have to speak in a certain way and you have to look a certain way. You have to look the part and if you have characteristics that define you as working class – like the way you talk, the way you dress
> – then you don't and won't get the job. (Betty, Black British, post-1992)

This was echoed by Steve:

> It's not as simple as getting your degree, it's related to other things like where you got your degree, how you present yourself and whether that is something that works. You have to be a certain way to fit in, you have to be a certain class and have ways of presenting yourself that are acceptable.

BME respondents whose parents worked in manual and non-professional occupations and had not attended university felt disadvantaged particularly in relation to specific ways of doing and being needed to enter and then excel in the labour market:

> Neither of my parents went to university so I feel that sometimes they don't understand what it's all about. They want me to do well but at the same time I know that to get a good job out there you just have to have more than a degree. You have to be able to speak the language and have a specific way of acting that is accepted – that says you fit in here. You have to have more, either a Masters or some kind of training and experience – which might be unpaid – but those options are not available to me. (Andrew, Black British, post-1992)

It was noticeable that accounts of prospects were often understood to be constrained by the same limitations that students had already outlined in terms of experiencing racism and inequality whilst at university and previously. Obviously, the actual paths their lives would take in the future, including any successes or disappointments, were unknown. In conjunction with the earlier findings about experiencing racism within university, it becomes apparent that BME students are both experiencing racism and inequality and also learning that

the institutional production of such inequality is itself an ordinary, everyday occurrence. We describe this acceptance/complicity in the processes of fostering acceptance/complicity in an inequality as a 'specialisation of consciousness'. Bourdieu's description of competition for capital within institutional fields is useful in this respect because it highlights the complexities of structures and individual practice in which inequalities are reproduced. Bourdieu is perhaps less adept at understanding how racism is particularly understood by BME individuals: less a fluid, structuring element in the wider institutional field of play and more a precise, limiting set of barriers that are clearly demarcated in plain sight.

Discussion: a 'specialisation of consciousness'

Students exhibited a range of emotions and expectations about their futures, and most were excited by the prospect of securing good jobs reflecting their skills. However, many students identified how difficulties associated with their personal circumstances impacted upon their opportunities and suggested that institutional processes reinforced these difficulties. The economies of higher education and the labour market are often characterised as wracked by change and upheaval, demanding rapid adaptation by individuals and institutions. In Bourdieu's account there is a degree of fatalism about individuals' futures marked by 'the unchosen principle of all "choices"' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 61); individual habitus apparently producing strategies to cope with change, but institutions reproducing identities in the image of pre-existing structures. A picture emerged in our research in which universities, despite their public commitments to widening participation, are engaged in imbuing students with characteristics that reinforce their prior status as they enter the labour market.

BME students provided accounts of the inequalities they faced before entering university and discriminatory practice encountered whilst at university. One striking feature was the degree to which this became an unchallenged aspect of their lives. Universities often claim they are producing young people capable of challenging and questioning the world; that was less evident in our research than might be anticipated. Although BME students recognised histories and institutional practices of discrimination, they tended to be accepted as a fixed 'reality'. There was a noticeable gulf between the widely publicised actions of students engaged in protest around causes such as 'decolonising the curriculum' and the BME students in our research (Weale, 2019). This is not to suggest they were disengaged or unaware of such protest; simply it did not feature in their

accounts of engagement with the university, despite identifying and being critical of discriminatory practice.

We have described this conjuncture of an 'awareness of' and 'acceptance of' personal and institutional inequality and the processes of its production as a 'specialisation of consciousness'. By this we are arguing that the legacy of racism within family histories and schooling is sedimented within everyday racisms at university as normal, everyday practice. Even understanding how universities deploy such racism is less a source of overwhelming discomfort or reason to challenge the status quo; rather, it becomes an everyday routine to be worked through. BME students entering university bring their habitus and access to capitals into play within the university's competition for economic, social and cultural capitals. It might be anticipated that some students are less at home, less 'fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 127) because of their ethnicity or lower social economic status. BME students often described their ability to compete intellectually and socially and, in the case of wealthier students, economically. However, they identified that the competition itself was rigged and their efforts actively disadvantaged by racism. Against a backdrop of more competitive labour markets and increasing university participation, for many students securing a degree still remains the only game in town. BME students participate because not participating would mean limiting already diminished opportunities.

For Du Bois (2007) or Fanon (2008) such a moment—the production of Black identities understood from a White gaze as lesser value—would be a signal of extreme psychic harm, but our respondents often appeared resigned to this process. It appeared ironic that students described experiences of 'covert' racism; the ease with which racism was being identified, suggesting it was 'overt' not 'covert'. The 'covert' tag seemed to signal a means of labelling and understanding racisms but removing the possibility of challenging them. In part, this was a process of institutional racism; training BME students to recognise the anti-racist trappings of their universities (their equality policies or promotional materials). In part, it was also individuals reconciling their recognition of discriminatory practice as an everyday reality of their lives. Universities effectively narrowed understandings of racism to specific actions (verbal abuse, for example), rather than wider evidence of racism (systemic attainment gaps, micro-aggressions of lecturers). By participating in the university field, BME students became complicit in a process of seeing themselves through its 'institutional gaze'; still informed by Whiteness, but understood within institutional narratives of diversity.

The process of generating BME students' acceptance or complicity in these processes (e.g. paying fees, living in university accommodation) signals its specialisation. A narrow and specific view of discriminatory practice made acceptable to those most disadvantaged by the practice. Although this research did not explore the perspectives of White students, we might speculate they would be less comfortable with such an account of disadvantage and the acceptance of that disadvantage, despite being its main beneficiaries. For White students, the potential of university education that broadens knowledge by developing a more expansive consciousness remains possible. Entering the labour market, third-year BME students are often burdened with an historic legacy of individual, familial and institutional expectations lower than White students. This is a burden largely accepted as a 'reality' of daily life; a fixed point rather than an over-riding obstacle. Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education, recently argued that degrees should give all students 'the knowledge and the skills they need to achieve whatever goals they set themselves' (Williamson, 2019). For many BME students this is not a true reflection of their degree's value. Competing at university for better grades and better degrees, they are hampered by racist practice and expectations that their experience of university inequalities would be repeated in the labour market. Williamson's optimism was not mirrored by BME students, who were not confident their degree qualification would trump inequalities of ethnicity or social class. Their understanding of everyday realities of racism are well founded and evidenced in patterns of statistical disadvantage related to ethnicity.

Conclusions

Bourdieu describes a 'dialectic between habitus and institutions', such as universities, 'in which there is constantly created a history that inevitably appears, like witticisms, as both original and inevitable' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 57). This is uncannily observable within the 'racial sociodicy' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999) of universities; producing narratives of widening participation whilst simultaneously producing BME students imbued with dispositions and characteristics that disadvantage their futures. These students are never disinterested parties within this process; rather they are engaged and complicit in their engagement with the rules and consequences of the field. Bourdieu recognises their 'interest' as their 'tacit recognition of the value of the stakes of the game and as practical mastery of its rules' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 117). The unequal nature of such practical mastery for BME students indicates the disjunct between realistic opportunities and outcomes compared to their

White peers. Students recognised that the value of the stakes being competed for at university were often diminished because of the 'realities' of ethnicity or 'social class'. This was compounded for many BME students from non-traditional backgrounds who chose less prestigious universities, assuming a relative parity between different institutions and the value of their degrees. BME students without the initial access to capitals generally enter into a lesser game with lower stakes than those with an excess of capitals. Current funding arrangements ensure that all students pay the same fees regardless of institution or social background. In this model, the transfer of economic capital mirrors transfers of knowledge and cultural capital, and the fostering of social networks to benefit already privileged students. Put simply, students from poorer, non-traditional working-class BME backgrounds pay more and get less back.

Students in our research often described their acceptance of university practices that appeared inequitable or racist. The flourishing of inequitable practice within any institutional field is commonplace, and often identified as symbolic violence: 'the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). Respondents, perhaps unusually, discussed openly the detrimental impact of such practice upon them; rather than providing an account of 'hidden persuasion' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 168) they identified obvious, overt discrimination. Their ability to work within everyday racism was partially understandable in terms of their habitus and engagement in a competition for capitals shaped by the 'order of things' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 168); by the underlying social structures of unsaid positioning and status. The acceptance of racism in universities by BME students aware of such racism appeared if not entirely contrary to the complex version of complicity suggested by Bourdieu, at least divergent from its tone of unsaid and embodied behaviours.

The role that racism played throughout the lives of BME students indicates specific demarcations of potential and lost potential (both readily understood in terms of habitus and the competition for capitals). The acceptance of the knowledge of lost potential being enacted upon BME students by those students suggests a different type of fault line in which racism is an everyday limit. This limitation of potential (which breaks institutional rules) is a limiting of access to education and a narrowing of available knowledge. Whilst in part it can be understood through prior histories and family background, within the university it materialises as the reconfirmation of inequalities as natural demarcations. 'Specialisation of consciousness' encompasses a range of racist processes that universities implement in order to preserve their institutional and economic

standing, whilst training BME students to graduate without challenging overtly inequitable institutions and social inequalities more generally. It generates a form of student consciousness that is deliberately narrowed because the student is a BME student. It is educational apartheid. The narrowing 'specialisation of consciousness' embodied throughout the degree ensures that students transition into the labour market socialised by their institution into believing that their lesser positions are inevitable consequences of their individual 'realities'.

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Ethical guidelines

This research was conducted in line with the University of Birmingham (College of Social Sciences) ethics committee and the BERA ethical guidelines.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared and are not available due to our ethical guidelines.

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