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Exploring the experiences of ethnic minority postgraduate researchers in the UK

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Abstract

Racism and inequity remain widespread in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), hindering ethnic minority (EM) postgraduate researchers' (PGRs) prospects. A deeper understanding of the experience of EM PGRs and the obstacles they face is needed. This study endeavoured to explore the plurality of EM PGRs' experiences and generate PGR-led recommendations. As a largely White research team, we also saw the study as a transformative opportunity for ourselves and other academics across the sector. Fifteen EM PGRs enrolled on UK doctoral programmes took part in semi-structured interviews. A reflexive inductive thematic analysis was conducted. Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality were used as backdrops to contextualise the study and its findings. The analysis generated four themes: *disempowerment*, *systemic deficits*, *weathering* and *from surviving to thriving*. The findings indicate that EM PGRs faced multiple challenges during their doctoral journey, which were often triggered and amplified by circumstances specific to their ethnicity. The results suggest that HE environments are still dominated by White norms as well as oppressive systems and attitudes that disempower EM PGRs and stifle their sense of belonging and ability to thrive. Female and international EM PGRs were particularly marginalised. Participants made recommendations for change, including proactive outreach support for EM PGRs and creating culturally sensitive environments to foster positive doctoral experiences for all. Cultural change within HEIs needs to go beyond superficial policies, and to achieve this, academics and HE leaders need to lead by example in generating profound and durable change.

Keywords: Ethnic minority, postgraduate researchers (PGRs), disempowerment, intersectionality, critical race theory (CRT), Higher education

Introduction

Background

Racism and inequity continue to be problematic in UK institutions (Mohdin & Gentleman, 2023), including higher education institutions (HEIs) (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Bhopal, 2022). Consequently, despite the relative higher rate of enrolment in UK universities of “ethnic minority”¹ (EM) students compared to White students, undergraduate (UG) EM students are more likely than their White counterparts to leave HE without a degree (Office for Students [ofS], n.d.). Notwithstanding these adverse continuity rates, EM students remain over-represented at UG level. However, comparatively fewer progress to postgraduate research (PGR) (Arday et al., 2022). Specifically, EM individuals represent just under 20% of the UK population (Gov.uk, 2022a), but EM students make up 27% of the UG population (Gov.uk, 2022b), 24% of the postgraduate taught population. However, they make up only 20% of PGRs (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2022). The figures for postgraduate courses include international students, therefore the reduced progression for UK EM graduate students is even greater than these figures suggest.

Ethnic inequalities persist during the doctoral journey. Whilst all PGRs face common challenges including lack of funding, unsatisfactory supervisory relationships, high workload, lack of job control and role ambiguity - being considered neither student nor staff (Berry et al., 2021; Levecque et al., 2017; Mackie & Bates, 2019; Woolston, 2019), EM PGRs face additional obstacles (OfS, 2020). Research has indicated that Black PGRs are the least satisfied in terms of supervision, skills development, networking opportunities and general fit with the research culture (Pitkin, 2021).

Evidence points to structural barriers hindering EM PGRs. A recent survey illustrates the lack of priority given to diversity within HEIs. The study based on 74 HEIs in the UK and Ireland, showed that less than 50% of HEIs use diversity as a key metric in PGR monitoring, and that diversity does not figure in the top five PGR priorities (Smith McGloin & Wynne, 2022). Lack of funding for EM PGRs is another issue, with only 1.2% of PhD scholarships awarded to EM PGRs between 2016 and 2019, alongside digital disadvantage, prejudice, and

¹ We use the term ‘ethnic minority’ because a survey conducted among British ethnic minorities in 2020-21 showed that they favoured the terminology ‘ethnic minority’ over BAME and that 70% approve of it (Katwala, 2021)

discrimination (Leading Routes, 2019). A lack of diversity within doctoral communities has also been shown to negatively impact upon EM PRGs' sense of belonging and satisfaction with HE (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Pitkin, 2021).

To better understand the inequalities faced by EM PGRs, it is essential to discuss the concept of race. The British legislation aims to protect EM individuals from open racism. However, microaggressions as well as discriminatory systems and practices persist within HEIs (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Bhopal, 2022). Essentially, HEIs remain White dominated institutions that mirror and perpetuate societal inequities and discrimination (Ogbonna, 2017). In addition to discrimination and racism (Ramos et al., 2016), international EM PGRs also have to contend with learning a new language and new research practices (Evans & Stevenson, 2011). Many often experience loneliness and isolation (Cree, 2012), manifest on a personal level (fewer contacts with loved ones), social level (reduced access to networks) and cultural level (having to adapt to a new culture) (Sawir et al., 2008). As international PGRs represents 42% of the total British PGRs population (HESA, 2022), it is important that their voice is represented in research.

Theoretical Perspectives

Two theoretical frameworks are used to *contextualise* the discussion around racism and persistent HE inequalities. The first is the Critical Race Theory (CRT) which posits that “race is socially constructed, and that racial difference is invented, perpetuated and reinforced by society” (Gillborn, 2015, p.278). CRT proposes that racism is entrenched in society (Williams et al., 2018) and that it benefits the interests of White individuals (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). CRT also suggests that actions to improve the welfare of EM populations will only occur if White people directly benefit from these actions. This may explain the tolerance of racial inequality in HEIs and why some diversity and inclusion initiatives have been found to be ‘tick-box’ exercises that enhance HEIs’ reputations but do not advance the individuals they are intended to support (Ahmed, 2017; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020).

CRT also acknowledges the exponential effect of coinciding forms of oppression, including class and gender, which contribute to discrimination especially when they intersect with ethnicity. This concurs with Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality (1991), the second framework, which proposes that social status and identity are shaped by overlapping factors including age, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and privilege (Cho et al.,

2013). As individuals hold multiple identities, there exists multiple intersecting forms of discrimination. For instance, racial discrimination ranging from microaggressions to overt racism are particularly common experiences for female EM PGRs (Woolston, 2019). Ahmed (2017) also pointed out that sexism cannot be separated from racism and its colonial origins. Hence, the needs of marginalised groups, including EM PGRs, cannot be adequately considered unless all their relevant identities are cogitated.

Research Aim

Evidence shows that racial inequalities in UK HEIs remain rife. This is despite several recent initiatives being rolled out, including the 13 UKRI funded projects (worth £8m) to improve access to PGR study for EM groups as well as progression within academia (UKRI, 2022) or the ‘100 Black Women Professors NOW’ aimed at increasing the number of Black female professors (whenequality.org). Commentators have called on researchers to gain better insight into the HEI experience of EMs (Advance HE, 2019; HEPI, 2019; Wright et al., 2021). Doing so will provide universities with a better understanding of the obstacles EM PGRs face. The aim of this study was, therefore, to explore the experiences of EM PGRs in terms of their unique challenges and to ascertain the solutions proposed by those directly affected. The focus on both home and international PGRs was to reflect the almost parity of PGRs in the UK (58% vs 42%; HESA, 2022). In conducting this research, we endeavoured to give voice to the plurality of EM PGRs’ experiences (home, international PGRs, intersecting identities) and generate action-oriented, PGR-led recommendations. As a team largely constructed of White female researchers, working in a widening participation institution as HE educators and PGR supervisors, we also had transformative aspirations for this study. We envisioned it as an educational process that would promote critical self-reflection of our practice and assumptions, and stimulate a constructive dialogue with our peers, especially White peers who may not be cognisant of the unique experiences of EM PGRs.

Methodology

Design

This qualitative study utilised semi-structured interviews. This method enabled us to explore the research questions fully and for participants to provide narratives based on their lived experiences (Bryman, 2016). Data were analysed using thematic analysis (TA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013).

Participants

Purposive sampling involved recruiting EM PGRs from a variety of universities and disciplines by advertising on online postgraduate networks such as psych-postgrads@jiscmail.ac.uk and <https://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/>. The snowball strategy of requesting participants to share the study details with eligible PGRs yielded most contacts. The inclusion criteria were that PGRs identified as being from an EM background and were enrolled in a UK doctoral programme for a minimum of one year. Volunteer participants were contacted by email. Fifteen participants (See Table 1.) aged between 25 and 52 years old (mean = 34) were interviewed. Eleven participants were female. Seven were international PGRs and eight were home PGRs. Six participants were South Asian, three were Black/mixed Black heritage, two were Asian-other, one was South American, one was Arabic, one was Southeast Asian, and one was Chinese. Doctoral disciplines included psychology, healthcare, business, and political science. The exact ethnic background and other demographic details are not provided to protect the anonymity of participants who represented a relatively small group and therefore may be easily identifiable.

Materials

The interview schedule was piloted with an EM research assistant. The questions covered EM PGRs' experience of HE, the support offered by their institution and their suggestions to improve their experience. Questions included: "What support do you think universities should offer to PGRs from EM backgrounds?" and "In terms of being from minority backgrounds, how do you think that's influenced your experience as a PhD student, if at all?"

Procedure

Interviews took place over the phone and were audio-recorded. Prior to this, participants were emailed an information sheet, and they signed a consent form. The purpose of the interview was explained, and the participants had an opportunity to ask questions. Each team member was involved in the data collection. The team was multicultural and comprised four female researchers who were psychology senior lecturers or professors at a London university. Three of the team were White European, educated in Europe. We believed our Europeanness enabled international participants to speak openly about the cultural difficulties of studying in the UK. It also meant that we were able to empathise with the language difficulties some described, as well as the feeling of 'otherness' shared with us. The last researcher was Black

British, her insight as an EM individual informed the study development and the team's understanding of participants' narratives.

Interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. After their interview, participants were emailed a debrief form which included the contact information of the researchers and support organisations. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. TA was chosen for its flexible methodology and emphasis on the experiences across participants rather than on the meaning within individual cases. The methodology used was reflexive inductive TA with an experiential orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The reflexive approach allowed us to embrace our subjectivity and enabled self-reflection as part of the analysis process. The inductive element meant that the analysis was grounded in the data in contrast to a more theoretical deductive approach. The experiential orientation aimed to explore the participants' truths within the context of their experience as EM PGRs.

A systematic approach was used to analyse the data as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). After transcription, the analytic process involved an initial immersion and repeated reading of the data, followed by some distancing, rereading and revision of the data coding and thematic development. Themes were revised as the analysis progressed. This was aided and stimulated by the reviewing process required for this publication. The data were organised into codes based on researchers' interpretation. Codes were then organised into subthemes, then into overarching themes. Subthemes and themes summarised patterns of meaning across the dataset. A table of themes was developed and refined, and the analysis was written up and revised several times until it succinctly conveyed the participants' experiences and the researchers' interpretations. The first author led the data analysis whilst the others carried out independent checks on the coding process, and disparities were discussed. Consideration was given to disconfirming cases.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee. Participants were reassured that data would be fully anonymised, participation would be confidential, and that they could withdraw at any time. To mitigate against any emotional discomfort, participants were signposted to support organisations. Consideration was given to the ethics of a largely White team researching an EM group. However, we felt that a study that evaluated the experience of minoritized PGRs required the input and personal reflection of representatives

from both EM and White academics. Furthermore, it supports the potential for transformation afforded by conducting the study.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis generated four themes that best convey the participants' experience. EM PGR experience *disempowerment* within HEIs, which is confounded by *systemic deficits*, resulting in a *weathering effect* of their internal resources. However, they are also cognisant of the actions needed to allow them to move *from surviving to thriving* within HE. The coding framework is displayed in Table 2. To provide context to the quotations used below, information is provided as follows: H/I refers to home or international PGRs, SA-South Asian, AO-Asian other, C-Chinese, SE-Southeast Asian, AR-Arabic, Sam-South American and B-Black or mixed Black heritage.

(Note to editor: Insert Table 2 here)

Disempowerment

EM PGRs experience HEIs as disempowering hostile sociocultural environments. Many *Layers of disempowerment* exist for EM PGRs, including some subtle, covert manifestations of oppression, which may be enacted unconsciously by the perpetrators but are always damaging to the perceiver. Other incidences are deliberate, overt acts of oppression including racism at both individual and systemic levels.

Covert acts of discrimination work by subversively needling the power imbalance experienced by the EM PGRs. These behaviours include stereotyping, microaggressions and colour-blind strategies. Stereotyping acts as cues of EM PGRs' alleged inferiority, sometimes focused on EM PGRs perceived inability to speak English: "you know people kind of type me of not being able to speak English, they really get surprised when I do speak English well" (Sarita (I/C)). In other cases, balking other's stereotyped perceptions leads to resentment and aggression from White peers:

I don't see him addressing that kind of aggression or resentment towards my other colleagues who are White middle-class, and they also have got a PhD and scholarship. I feel that I get it more because I don't fit that stereotype, and he almost sees it as less fitting. I, as a brown women would have advantages over him. Orna (H/SA)

Orna's experience resembles that of Harper's (2015) Black UG student participants, who were frequently confronted by negative stereotypes and needed to develop coping strategies to address their negative effect. Harper acknowledged that EM students should not have to develop this type of resilience, and that the responsibility for fighting racial stereotypes should not be theirs. However, almost a decade later, individuals within White dominated HEIs are still guilty of this type of racial undermining which adversely affects academic self-esteem and progression.

Similarly, microaggressions remain common in HEIs and often translate into EM PGRs' competence being questioned: "You get a lot of questions asked about your competency and capability. I don't sort of see that ascribed to White students [PGRs]" (Amjed, H/SA). These experiences are not unusual but are often overlooked by White peers who have little experience or understanding of the effect of these behaviours and are themselves protected from racial microaggressions. Other researchers have also noted the damaging effect of microaggressions on the mental health of EM staff and students in HE (Mohamed & Beagan, 2019; Sue, 2015).

Colour-blindness is another form of covert disempowerment illustrated by Mai's (H/B) reflection on a group of academics who disputed the validity of having a Black Society: " 'It's outrageous, why has it got to be Black people, I don't see colour!' " Apfelbaum, et al. (2008) posit that colour-blindness is a strategy used by White people to avoid being seen as biased against EMs. Academics who adopt a colour-blind attitude exemplify a failure to recognise the day-to-day realities of discrimination and racism experienced by EM academics and students. Colour-blindness may stem from believing that White people should avoid appearing racist rather than accept the greater challenge of tackling racist ideology (West et al., 2021). The inability to acknowledge ethnic differences may explain the failure to tackle oppression and provide adequate support for EM groups. The above quote also reveals a level of resentment for supporting Black academics/students to the exclusion of White individuals. The covert nature of these behaviours makes it difficult for others to act against the perpetrators. These acts of disempowerment, by their subtle acts of subjugation, might be overlooked because they maintain White dominance (Solorzano and Yosso, 2001), therefore reducing any incentive for the White majority to act.

Overt oppression is also widespread in HEIs with examples of racist acts at both individual and systemic levels. The doctoral experience should be one of knowledge acquisition and broadening of horizons. Instead for some EM PGRs, it is one of subjugation, with overt racism at an interpersonal level: “I think it’s the fact that it’s higher education and you are just still surrounded by obvious bigots” (Rina, I/SEA). Experiences of racism also extend to supervisory relationships:

He refused leave during religious holidays...he made a lot of racist comments basically by saying that we don’t need people physiologically Indian...things like that, just racist. He would say things about the BAME psychiatric population increasing without evidence for it...that is racist essentially, calling someone’s ethnic background in relation to their mental health. Amjed’s (H/SA)

These examples provide stark evidence of the level of racial abuse tolerated in HEIs. Supervisors’ misuse of power to enact racial superiority is especially disempowering as they should be advocates for PGRs (Mehta & Vavitsas, 2017). A racist attitude hinders the important part of the supervisory role to sponsor and create opportunities for PGRs. Overt oppression is also experienced at institutional procedural levels: “And all this thing has to do with the kind of frameworks and policies that they have in place that do not favour, Black and other ethnic minorities” (Ajay, I/B). Orna’s (H/SA) account of her experience with a senior manager illustrates inequity of opportunity due to discrimination within recruitment processes:

...someone asked about the chances of international students of getting a job in academia in the UK...he said something about the fact that when they are hiring, they have to take account of the background of the students who come to study in [named-university] and that they are more likely to be White, middle-class and they need to think about who will be able to communicate with those students.

Examples of both overt and covert disempowerment appear to reflect an attitude of indifference towards EM PGRs or worse, of blatant disregard for the potentially devastating effect these behaviours can have on their doctoral experiences. They also illustrate the power of discrimination to prevent the academic progression of EM groups. These episodes indicate that despite HEIs’ claims of inclusivity and diversity, discrimination and racism remain embedded in HE and that the ethos of HEIs permits the entrenchment of oppressive practices

(Arday, 2021; Bhopal, 2022; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Woolston, 2019).

HEIs can also generate *Intersectional disempowerment* for EM PGRs, with females disproportionately disadvantaged. In line with the intersectionality theory (Cho, et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991) female disempowerment is exacerbated by the intersection of their gender and ethnic identities: “Black PhD students are very often perceived as aggressive in their tone and things like that when they’re women, Black women...you’re a part of what can be exponentially worse” Alina (Alina, H/AO). Each overlapping minoritized identity, such as ethnicity, class, religion, and sexual orientation, exponentially adversely affect female EM PGRs’ experience, and subjects them to racist and sexist remarks:

... I am Muslim and LGBT and woman and everything...So for example as I say when people joke about my friend who is [names a country], and you know joking about having four wives. And that is not funny to me.

This quote also highlights how microaggressions disguised as ‘humour’ are commonly accepted and used as a tool to disempower EMs, especially females. It is well documented that HEIs are hostile environments for female EM students (Powell & Arora-Jonsson, 2022). **The COVID pandemic further exemplified the disproportionate “burden of care” and suffering experienced by Black British female graduates (Pennant, 2022).** Unfortunately, White female’s experience of gender discrimination and sexism does not heighten their sensitivity to the discriminatory experiences of EM females. Orna’s (H/SA) exclusion from discussions relating to class and gender illustrates the focus on the White female experience to the detriment of EM females:

...when gender is the centre of the analysis, there is not so much attention on women of colour. It’s sort of like well, I am a woman as well but, that’s not sort of being talked about its mainly White female experience. If there is something about class, I am working class as well but mainly the White working class is being talked about.

Ignoring the needs of female EM PRGs infers that their desires are less important than those of White women, and that there is less incentive to address these issues. In fact, actions to improve gender equality have been shown to disproportionately benefit White females

over EM females (Ahmed, 2017). This illustrates the acceptance within HEIs of the structural partiality for the White experience to the detriment of others.

Systemic deficits

The disempowerment of EM PGRs within HEIs stems from systemic deficits. This includes *support deficiencies* which mean that most EM PGRs feel unsupported by their university. One of the key support deficits is the lack of infrastructure to deal with oppression. The number of occurrences of discrimination, racism and microaggressions discussed above, clearly illustrates that HE systems to address and prevent these behaviours are inadequate. Subsequently, EM PGRs often feel “unsafe” within their institutions. Some EM PGRs feel compelled to call-out racist and sexist issues to prevent further subjugation: “Otherwise you are just going to be trodden all over. You really have to make your voice heard and particularly being a woman of colour” Nia (H/SA). However, the lack of appropriate infrastructure to report racist incidents means that EM PGRs do not always feel confident their complaints would be acted on: “I’m not sure if I were discriminated against and I were to go to the university with complaints. I am not sure how they would deal with it” Orna (H/SA). Amjed’s (H/SA) experience provides evidence of HEIs’ lack of desire to act upon these complaints. His report on a racist incident is met with a suggestion that he should seek personal support, thus, shifting the responsibility on to him: “He [supervisor] made a lot of racist comments...They do say that you should speak to the postgraduate advisor, you should speak to the university counselling and support.” As expounded by Bhopal and Pitkin (2020), this shifts responsibility away from the perpetrator and senior managers and focuses solely on the EM PGR. The lack of structures to deal with these incidents and their perpetrators, and the reliance on the courage of EM PGRs to vocalise these injustices, is reflective of an organisation that is not built for the non-traditional PGR and has not yet evolved to support and nurture all students (OfS, 2022). Like most Western institutions, HEIs mirror societal disempowerment of EM groups (Ogbonna, 2019), which accounts for the apathy within HEIs to empower EM groups. EM PGRs are denied respect and growth because of HEIs’ failure to call out racism and establish appropriate reporting mechanisms.

HE support deficiencies also includes a deficit in culturally sensitive counselling and mentoring services. Ethnicity-matched counsellors are considered to have better insights into the issues EM PGRs face: “if we have guidance from someone from a similar culture, people who understand you know the cultural differences and stuff, maybe that would be more

helpful” (Hana, I/SA). Similarly, Ilagan and Heatherington (2021) found that EM counselling clients favoured ethnic matching. Identity-matched mentoring is also considered a helpful idea: “Part of me is suddenly thinking if I had a mentor who was like me, I might find that more beneficial than having a mentor who is a young, White woman, who is half my age” (Mai, H/B). Cross-ethnicity academic mentoring has been shown to be a potentially negative experience for EM academics (Davis et al., 2021). White helping professionals often lack experience beyond their Whiteness and thus, cannot fully empathise with the EM experiences, which can hinder rapport development (Lynam, 2023). For optimal support, EM PGRs need to be able to choose to access ethnically matched counsellors and mentors. White students and academics do not experience the same imbalance of power in these relationships (Sue, 2015) and this may account for the lack of urgency to recruit ethnically diverse mentors and counsellors.

Some systemic deficits relate specifically to *international EM PGRs’ additional challenges* which go unrecognised. These challenges result from the intersection of their EM and international status, and the systemic failure to recognise and meet their needs. Hardships specific to international EM PGRs include sociocultural disadvantages and practical issues such as financial difficulties and visa tribulations.

International students are often at a sociocultural disadvantage compared to their White counterparts because they are socially isolated and cut-off from family support: “...that would have been amazing, to go and get a hug from my parents because yeah, my social support is really shit that would have really helped” Dima (I/SA). The negative effect of social isolation is a common experience across international EM PGR groups (Cree, 2012). International EM also need to learn to navigate a whole new culture: “Everything’s new to me and my environment and your culture and your language” Lina (I/Sam). The requirement to adjust to a new language is a well-recognised added burden (Evans & Stevenson, 2011; Sawir et al., 2008). The dominance of English as the preferred language of academia hinders EM PGR international students for whom English is not their first language. As suggested by Stein and de Andreotti (2016) it facilitates “Western supremacy” within HEIs. As language is an important component of experience, the use of English in academia may impose a Western filter that excludes or alters others’ experience.

The practical challenges encountered by international EM PGRs include financial difficulties, which often stem from exclusion from scholarships and other funding sources alongside high university fees and additional costs including high National Health Service (NHS) healthcare surcharges (Hunter, 2022). Financial hardships have severe consequences for some EM PGRs who often do not have any familial practical support to call on:

Many of us especially international students or whatever, in that fourth year we are in a position of losing our house contract. And I think many of us in fact become homeless, so they live in the office for example. Rina (I/SEA)

Furthermore, the visa application process is complex and adds to the workload of attending conferences abroad. This undermines International PGR's academic development, and adversely affects equity of job opportunities:

We're meant to go to [mentions a country] for a conference. We spend a lot of time, wrote the abstract and it was accepted for our presentation, done your flights...you have paid for the conference...you apply for the visa and they say you have been denied! Ajay (I/B)

Significant financial and bureaucratic hardships endured by international EM PGRs is well documented (Cornell, 2020; Leading Routes, 2019). These issues reduce their educational opportunities compared to more privileged PGRs (Regmi, 2023), and puts additional strain on their mental health and job prospects. Although, with appropriate HEI support and improved flexibility, this could be counterbalanced. However, the experience of the EM PGRs suggests that HEIs lack the impetus to act on the needs of this group, unless the group brings perceived advantages to the institution. Lina (I/Sam) explained her institution's contradictory reaction to her needs compared to those of other international EM PGRs: "their response is completely different when Chinese students come to them and say oh, 'we have this opportunity'. For some reason, they immediately jump onto that!" This indicates that institutions can and will act to support EM groups if it is perceived to benefit the institution in some way.

Weathering effect

The stress of battling oppression within and outside of HE together with the impact of the doctoral workload produces a weathering effect on EM PGRs (Geronimus, 1992), an erosion

of physiological defences and adverse health outcomes. This has a detrimental effect on EM PGRs' *psychological well-being* and *sense of belonging*. The impact of discrimination translates into increased stress levels, a lack of confidence and low self-esteem:

Deep down inside even though I'm doing it all on the outside it's probably had an impact on my feeling of self-esteem. In this society and feeling insecure...I always come from like a weaker platform. That probably has an impact on my performance in the beginning and on my confidence. Zela (H/B)

However, encouragement and appropriate support from within HEIs can have a positive effect on academic self-belief and progression:

I'm constantly worrying about what I'm going to bring, am I at the right level...So when the invitation [PGR scholarship] came it was like gosh people are seeing something in you that you might not have necessarily seen or appreciated yourself. So, I applied and here I am! (Mai, H/B)

In some cases, EM PGR battle serious mental health issues ranging from anxiety to more severe issues including depression and burnout: "...I'm just completely burnt-out...I've been put on mood stabilisers...I've started counselling" Dima (I/SA). PGR students display significantly higher levels of stress and poor mental health compared to the general population (Hazell et al., 2020). The psychological trauma associated with discrimination and racism is well documented (Kirkinis et al., 2021), and chronic stress associated with racial trauma generates a weathering effect. This is summed up by Amjed (H/SA) who attributes EM PGRs' poor mental health to the high expectations of postgraduate research combined with the burden of oppression within HEIs:

I think overall you will see that the mental health in the postgraduate students is quite broad...the way that opportunities are given, or it sums up the way your colleagues talk to you, talk down to you and the interaction you have with some of the people you speak to. So, I think that it the additional layer that happens. And how seriously people take concerns of BAME and equality, discrimination.

The psychological well-being of EM PGRs is further impacted by HEIs' inability to foster a *sense of belonging*. This stems from marked inequalities in terms of opportunities and

treatment, as well as a lack of diversity within the academic staff and PGRs. Consequently, EM PGRs are made to feel irrelevant and excluded.

Inequitable opportunities stem from discrimination and the unpopularity of EM studies with White academics. This leaves EM PGRs feeling belittled because they feel that their studies and cultures do not matter: “I remember that a number of British supervisors said to me why would you do a study on [named country] when you are going to study in the UK. You should do studies on the UK’ Rina (I/SEA). The traditional White-centric curriculum and the creation of epistemic hierarchies (Grosfoguel, 2007), which favour Western studies, fail to take into consideration experiences beyond whiteness and other ways of knowing. This is known to hinder academic success and fulfilment in EM students and progression of EM faculty (Bunce et al., 2021; Regmi, 2023).

Similarly, ghettoising non-white orientated research studies can hinder EM PGRs who want to study issues that affect them. It also emphasises the importance of White academics researching EM-related areas: “the fact that it is largely people from ethnic backgrounds that study these [EM] issues can ‘ghettoise’ and limit, so that others don’t have to worry about this” Idris (H/SA). According to Regmi (2023) experiences outside of the White middle-class experience are marginalised, unsupported, and silenced and our study provides further evidence of this.

A lack of ethnic diversity amongst staff and students in HEIs can result in EM PGRs feeling like they stand out: “...the university is filled with EU nationals and British workers...people of White Mediterranean sort of ethnicity. So as a mixed race it’s small and there’s not many of you” Zela (H/B). A scarcity of EM role models can make EM PGRs feel disconnected, an experience not ascribed to White students from more privileged backgrounds: “I don’t have as many role models, maybe I don’t have as much familiarity with HE as possibly some White students from certain socio-economic background” Idris (H/B). This suggests that HEIs make EM PGRs feel out of place. The scarcity of EM academics is a universal phenomenon and is a direct result of discriminatory and racist practices within HEI (Regmi, 2023). **Bhopal (2022, p. 2131) noted that EM academics in elite universities also experience a reduced sense of belonging and perceive their universities as “White elite spaces”.** The absence of ethnically diverse HE staff is also known to negatively impact EM students’ academic attainment (Bunce et al., 2021; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta,

2007). This may be due to a reduced sense of relatedness which is an important component of motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2008). It may also stem from the alienation of EM students and PGRs from their cultural identities (Shan, 2015).

The imbalance between White men in the higher levels of the university and the visibility of EM populations at lower echelons of HEIs is another illustration of inequity:

It isn't very encouraging when you see... that most senior staff and professors tend to be White, male, middle-class and have a particular cultural background. It is very disheartening when the only kind of, Black or Asian people you see around universities are serving in the cafés or cleaning staff rooms. Orna (H/SA)

Perceptions of 'not belonging' are also heightened by exclusion from social events: "I don't ever get invited to any of the like social events really that are anything outside of the department...I'm a familiar face in the department but people don't really try and push it any further than that" Alina (H/AO). Some EM PGRs are also excluded from social events because they do not drink alcohol. This may reduce access to influential HEI networks and potentially impede progress in HE. Thoughtlessness regarding the role of alcohol in discounting EM groups is a common experience for EM PGRs:

Sometimes I would not go to social occasions cuz I would avoid alcohol. Places where they would have alcohol and they'd have a lot of social occasions there...So those things even that background, I think influence that sort of isolation. Aaron's (H/AO)

From surviving to thriving

EM PGRs' experience of HE underlines the determination required to battle oppression and remain in HE. Discrimination means that EM PGRs work harder than other PRGs and develop specific *strategies* to progress. Despite the myriad of obstacles in their way, their determination to complete their studies illustrates a high degree of resilience. The ongoing battle against discrimination means that they are accustomed to working hard to succeed: "You have to really push and push, you know things don't fall in your lap" (Zela, H/B). Experience of discrimination, often accumulated across generations, has taught EM PGRs to work harder than their White counterparts: "My father always told me that being from a non-White background I had to work twice as hard as other children. I have carried this over to

my mentality that I constantly feel I have to prove myself” (Nia, H/SA). The mantra of needing to work twice as hard as everyone else is widely shared in EM communities including the academic world (Isik, 2021). This illustrates the unfairness of the educational system for EMs. Meritocracy ideology holds that talent and effort are enough to succeed and overlooks social and economic advantages (Littler, 2018). HEIs perpetuate the inaccurate perception that failure is a consequence of lower ability and poor diligence (Littler, 2018; Regmi, 2023). In contrast, opportunities for success in HEIs do not rely on talent and effort alone but also on access to appropriate scaffolding and resources. For instance, EM PGRs are denied appropriate financial capital in the form of scholarships and other capital resources such as fair access to learning support and career progression, resulting in inequity of opportunities despite their disproportionate investment in time and effort.

Another strategy used by EM PGRs is to seek support from others. Supervisory support is however inconsistent. Only five of the 15 participants felt supported by their supervisors. Some seek support from university services. However, EM PGRs often find HE services to be deficient. Instead, they seek practical and emotional mutual support from each other: “We care about each other, and we want to help each other. We also read each other’s work and before I had my progression review a couple of colleagues did a mock” (Orna, H/SA), while others have learnt self-reliance: “I am just used to being lonely...and like, having to do everything for myself” (Dima, I/SA).

Within an equitable HE systems all PGRs should have the same opportunities. Currently EM PGRs need to work harder and must overcome more obstacles than other PGRs. This counteracting of disempowerment is also used by the academically successful Black men in Wright et al.’s (2021) study who took advantage of the unique resources available to them, including their distinctive communities and social capital. Similarly, Black female graduates in Pennant’s study (2022) created their own capital in the form of support networks to succeed and overcome oppression in HEIs.

As expert users EM PGRs offer *participant recommendations* on the changes needed in HEIs to redress inequities and enable EM PGRs to thrive. They are acutely aware of the widely held assumption that they should be the ones adapting to university environments. However, they argue that HEIs should endeavour to make adjustments based on their needs, and that the responsibility to do so lies with privileged White individuals within HE: “...it

[changes within HEIs] can't just come from us, it has to come from people from non-BAME backgrounds...By sharing this experience I hope it does change. But there is a lot of work to do" (Aaron, H/AO). As noted by previous commentators (Locke, 2018) it is important to both avoid a deficit model, which unduly places responsibility on individuals experiencing oppression to overcome obstacles, and to develop solutions that are co-produced by EM groups.

EM PGRs' recommendations centre around improved cultural sensitivity, including better practical support for EM PGRs and the appointment of culturally sensitive advisors:

...wellbeing advisors who don't necessarily have to be from ethnic minority but, who are aware of some of the cultural barriers or some of the issues that they may face. Better funding opportunities for people of minority background to do master's and PhD...extra support in terms of academic writing...more mental health support for people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Orna (H/SA)

Other recommendations focus on culturally appropriate social events that could improve engagement: "...so maybe something like institution barbecue or some local events or some theatre, some movies or something like that you know. Make them [EM PGRs] more engaged." (Hana, I/SA). Culturally sensitive social events could also provide valuable networking opportunities. Hakkola et al (2020) also found that international postgraduate students' sense of belonging was enhanced by socialising within an academic community. This suggestion also fits with Tinto's (2017) model of student persistence and the importance of institutions taking heed of students' perceptions of university environments and adopting to the needs of students and PGRs to improve their sense of belonging. However, belonging cannot be fully tackled until discriminatory practices and racism are dealt with appropriately.

Another important cultural adjustment recommended by participants is that university support mechanisms should involve more proactive support. There is an assumption within HEIs that individuals will self-refer to appropriate services if the need arises, an assumption that is based on profiles of traditional students with implicit knowledge of and faith in HE mechanisms. Instead, participants suggest that support services should contact EM PGRs directly rather than expect them to seek out support services: "I had to seek them out. Usually contact through email or something. I've never had any of them offer to meet me in person to

discuss with them further” Alina (H/AO). Furthermore, supervisors have a role to play in the timely referral of EM PGRs to appropriate services: “...I didn’t know where to go I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t even know about the counselling service, it’s just when I was really really stressed that my supervisor told me.” Hana’s (I/SA). EM PGRs may only feel that support services are applicable to them if personally directed to them by a trusted member of staff. Moreover, a failure to self-refer may stem from both historical mistrust of White centric institutions (Sue, 2015) which are not designed by or for non-traditional PGRs, and EM PGRs’ personal experiences of disempowerment within HEIs (Arday, 2021; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Bhopal, 2022; Pennant, 2022).

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the EM PGRs’ experiences of HE and generate action-oriented, PGR-led recommendations. We aimed to provide the participants with an opportunity to voice their experiences against the backdrop of the White-centric discourse of HEIs. The findings show that EM PGRs face multiple challenges, which are often triggered and amplified by circumstances specific to their ethnicity and result in their disempowerment within HEIs. Participants are denied respect and growth due to HEIs’ failure to call out racism and establish appropriate reporting mechanisms. Inadequate HE systems continue to discriminate against and impede EM PGRs. Their narrative therefore supports the CRT tenet that racism is entrenched in everyday society (Williams et al., 2018) including HEIs (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Bhopal, 2022; Pennant, 2022).

This disempowerment has an adverse toll on EM PGRs’ psychological well-being and their sense of belonging. Since White PGRs are not similarly disadvantaged, they are comparatively privileged and, at times, actions to support EM groups are resisted by White individuals. The CRT concept of the benefit of racism to White individuals (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014) is also reflected in the inertia of institutions to fight racism, ensure equity of opportunity and promote a sense of belonging for EM PGRs. CRT would suggest that these actions represent a divergence away from the best interests of White individuals.

The mutating and intersectional nature of racism (Crenshaw, 1991; Schell, 2020) is illustrated by the added burdens of intersectional disadvantages experienced by female and international EM PGRs. Coinciding minoritized identities adversely affect female EM PGRs’

experience, whilst international EM PGRs are further disadvantaged by their cultural capital, (including language and knowledge of the UK culture) which has less currency in the UK than their home countries, and by a deficit in economic capital. This is reflective of Bourdieu's (1986) concept of undersupplied "capital" and its disadvantageous effect on EM students in education. Capital insufficiencies unfairly reduces EM PGRs' educational opportunities compared to more privileged PGRs (Regmi, 2023).

However, the use of adaptive strategies by both international and home EM PGRs strengthens their level of resilience and their ability to cope with oppression. By integrating CRT's concept of the pervasiveness of racial oppression and Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital and its value in education, Yosso (2005) proposes that EMs have an additional capital, that of *resistant capital*. She describes resistant capital as a way of overcoming discrimination by virtue of the strengths, resilience, and determination of EMs within oppressive contexts, but without ignoring the sources of oppression and inequality. The EM PGRs in our study enact resistant capital by resisting disempowerment through various means and persevering with their studies despite the many obstacles. **This is also documented in Pennant's (2022) Black female graduates' experience of coping within UK HE.** An additional "capital" resource available to EM PGRs, and illustrated in this current study, is their *expert knowledge* and experience of HE as EMs. Consequentially they are an authoritative source of valuable recommendations that can be harnessed by HEIs to transform the experience of EM PGRs.

Implications

Universities that are interested in promoting equity of opportunities in HE need to look at the obstacles to EM progression. This study provides evidence that disempowerment of EM PGRs is one such blockage and makes space for their seldom heard voices to help determine the actions required within HEIs. However, in line with CRT, HEI systems will not change unless the changes benefit White people (Gillborn, 2015). This is evidenced by the poor uptake of the Racial Equality Charter (REC) within UK universities (Advance HE, 2023). Bhopal and Pitkin's study (2020) portrays diversity policies as performative rather than engaging in real changes. This mirrors Ahmed's (2017) finding that institutions put more energy into creating policies than enacting them. Policy documents are used to advance the institutions, by providing "evidence" of good performance and commitment to diversity,

whilst concealing the inequalities these policies should be irradicating. This demonstrates that HEIs institutional *culture*, rather than policies, needs to change but that it is unlikely to do so unless a cultural shift takes place within HEIs.

As suggested by Gillborn (2019), educators have the power to shift the responsibility for social justice from the less powerful EM PGRs to the systems that create discrimination and generate inequalities in the first place. However, it is the inaction of White individuals that hinders actions to improve the circumstances of EM PGRs and facilitate the development of inclusive and culturally sensitive HEI environments. Consequentially, White individuals, especially leaders, need to reflect on the adverse effect of meritocracy on equity in HE, their interpersonal interactions with EM individuals and the extent to which White complicity allows the ongoing oppression of EM groups within HE. This requires regular engagement in professional development that explores White privilege. In addition, targeted training of HEI staff is needed to help avert, recognise, and handle incidences of discrimination and racism. Both personal self-reflection and training are imperative to create a safe space within HEIs where race can be discussed, and discrimination and racism can be tackled. This is especially true for doctoral supervisors who are central to the doctoral experience and PGRs' well-being (Cowling, 2017; Metcalfe et al., 2018). Culturally responsive supervision and reflective leadership could facilitate change in the entire university culture and HEI systems (Gjølterud & Ahmad, 2018).

HE leaders should also be equity stewards within their institutions because they have the power to effect real changes. However, White individuals are often more amenable to engaging in activities that empower other ethnic groups if doing so is also of benefit to them (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Consequentially, a transformative culturally shift is more likely to occur if there are mechanisms in place to ensure HE leadership accountability. In parallel, the narrative needs to continue to emphasize how a truly inclusive HE system can be beneficial for all. Universities should nurture EM PGRs and harness their resilience and unique capital for the wider benefit of HEIs. Diverse HE environments are enriching and lead to innovations and improved efficiency within HEIs (Regmi, 2023), and consequently result in financial reward and intellectual growth.

A cultural shift in HEIs could then result in a more inclusive HE environment where EM PGRs could develop a real sense of belonging. This requires a cessation of attempts to

shape EM PGRs to fit the traditional HE mould (Tinto, 2017), an acknowledgement of current systemic failures and an adjustment of university cultures and systems to become truly inclusive. This should include the de-Westernisation of PGR topics and research methodologies. Cultural inclusivity and diversity of academic and support staff are also essential to improve EM PGRs' sense of belonging in HE. However, diversity of academic and senior staff can only occur if HEIs provide equitable progression opportunities and acknowledge the additional and specific challenges facing EM PGRs, especially international and female EM PGRs. In addition, inclusion requires empowerment through participatory decision-making (Zimmerman, 2000) which enables EM PGRs to take control of and improve their PGR experience. The study participants' recommendations include proactive tailored support for EM PGRs, culturally sensitive support services, and more inclusive social activities. Participants also stressed the need to offer additional practical support for international students, such as financial help and assistance with visa applications. Finally, it is essential that mechanisms are put in place to both provide confidential feedback on supervision and to safely report episodes of racism and discrimination. It is imperative that any initiatives to improve equity are designed with the input of their users and are endorsed and acted upon with true commitment by those in leadership positions within HEIs.

Strengths and Limitations

The participants represented an array of ethnicities and experiences, reflecting the range of ethnicities across EM PGRs in UK HEIs. However, the limited sample size did not allow for comparison between ethnic groups. Furthermore, the sample's gender imbalance might explain the paucity of evidence for the role of intersectionality in male participants. The study may also have been biased by its self-selection nature and, therefore, may have missed out on some positive experiences. Three out of four researchers were White non-British females. This may have affected the interviewing process and data analysis, although this was partly offset by the contribution of a Black female academic. In addition, we believe that our European backgrounds helped us identify with some of the issues related to the lack of British social capital raised by the participants. Our White ethnicity allowed us to reflect on the impact whiteness has on EM PGRs and the role White academics need to play in coalition with our EM colleagues. This study has been transformative for us, even if it is only the beginning of our journey.

Data Availability Statement

Participants of this study did not agree for their full data set to be shared beyond this study, therefore supporting data are not available.

Acknowledgement

This paper is dedicated to our dear friend and colleague Professor Marcia Worrell (1966-2020). She was a great inspiration to all her students and colleagues. The study concept was hers and she was integral to its completion.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant	Gender	International/ Home	Ethnicity
Alina	Female	Home	Mixed Asian
Dima	Female	International	South Asian
Aaron	Male	Home	Asian
Hana	Female	International	South Asian
Ajay	Male	International	Black
Idris	Male	Home	South Asian
Mai	Female	Home	Black
Sarita	Female	International	Chinese
Amjed	Male	Home	South Asian
Orna	Female	Home	South Asian
Rina	Female	International	Southeast Asian
Jayden	female	International	Arabic
Zela	Female	Home	Mixed Black
Nia	Female	Home	South Asian
Lina	Female	International	South American

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Theme 1 Disempowerment	Layers of Disempowerment	Covert Overt
	Intersectional Disempowerment	Ethnicity and Gender Ethnicity, Sexuality, Religion, and Gender Ethnicity, Class, and Gender
Theme 2 Systemic Deficits	Support Deficiencies	Lack of Infrastructure to Deal with Oppression Deficit in Culturally Sensitive Counselling and Mentoring
	International EM PGRs' additional challenges	Sociocultural Disadvantages Practical Challenges: Financial Hardships Visa Issues
Theme 3 Weathering Effect	Psychological Well-being	Lack of Confidence Low Self-Esteem Mental Health Issues
	Sense of Belonging	Inequitable Opportunities Lack of Ethnic Diversity Exclusion
Theme 4 From Surviving to Thriving	Strategies	Working Harder Resilience and Self-Reliance Seeking support
	Participant Recommendations	Responsibility Cultural Sensitivity Culturally Sensitive Social Events Proactive Support

Table 2. Table of themes, subthemes, and codes

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