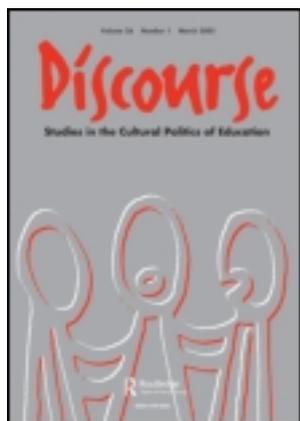


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### A political investment: revisiting race and racism in the research process

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## **A political investment: revisiting race and racism in the research process**

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This paper draws upon a two-year Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study into the educational strategies of the black middle classes to examine the role of race and racism in the research process. Specifically, it explores how my political positioning and experiences of racism, as a black female scholar, shaped not only my engagement with the research but also how I was perceived and positioned by others. This is analysed in terms of three areas: the recruitment and identification of research participants, the interview process and the dissemination of the project findings. While consideration of the researcher's race and racial politics tended to run parallel to or quietly intersect with the project development, fieldwork and analysis, it is argued that these factors, in actuality, play a significant and highly informative role in shaping a broader, nuanced conceptualisation of race and racism that is too often silenced and neglected in race research and the academy as a whole. Informed by Fanon and Critical Race Theory, it is posited that these seemingly peripheral race moments need to be foregrounded, named and analysed not just by scholars of colour but also by white colleagues electing to do race research. Such call to action remains fundamental within a wider socio-political context that increasingly is devoid of meaningful engagement with race and racism.

**Keywords:** Critical Race Theory; whiteness; Fanon; race consciousness; race matching; methodology

### **Introduction**

A growing number of Black feminists have documented their experiences in the academy as a means of drawing attention to and working to disrupt hegemonic paradigms of knowledge and knowledge production which claim to be the only legitimate ways of viewing the world (Egharevba, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Mirza, 2009; Reynolds, 1997). These accounts from the 'liminal space of alterity' (Rollock, 2012a, p. 65) not only help to highlight the complex, intersectional nature of identities and the centrality of whiteness in informing our understanding of racism and feminism (Ladson-Billing & Donnor, 2008; Wynter, 1992) but also to reveal how the centre operates often in subtle yet sophisticated ways to maintain an inequitable status quo (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 2009; Rollock, 2012a). It is important to note that in 'speaking back' from the margins, scholars of colour seek not to enter or become part of the central 'norm', rather they endeavour to reveal how the power and the privileges of whiteness can be disrupted and an equitable landscape secured.

However, as I have argued elsewhere (Rollock, 2012a), 'speaking back' carries risks. It is to challenge and seek to undo the unexamined, taken-for-granted comforts and

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privileges on which institutional norms and practices and the individual actions of the dominant group are based. Rather than consciously engaging with the experiences of racially minoritised scholars with the view that their experiences can offer meaningful insights into inequities of race (Delgado, 1989; Tate, 1997), race and racism become a 'no go' subject area, leaving fundamental issues around the recruitment, progression and experiences of Black and minority ethnic staff unaddressed. Ahmed (2009) details the challenges of naming race in academic spaces which refuse to – choose not to – see race but simultaneously want to celebrate one's (often isolated) presence as a scholar of colour and as a major advance in 'diversity':

The organisation becomes the subject of feeling, the one who must be protected, the one who is easily bruised or hurt. To speak of racism is to introduce bad feeling. It is to hurt not just the organisation, re-imagined as a subject with feelings, but also the subjects who identify with the organisation, the 'good white diversity' subjects, to whom we are supposed to be grateful. (p. 46)

To occupy the academy as a scholar of colour and, moreover, to be racially aware *and* specialise in race and racism presents multiple layers of complexity. Maylor (2009), a Black British female scholar, describes the hurt and frustration she endures when white academics and research participants refuse to engage with her or acknowledge, during the course of fieldwork or conferences, that she is actually an academic<sup>1</sup> as opposed to a junior or a non-academic member of staff. Maylor explains that white team members and colleagues often fail to notice these incidents, and even when the details have been carefully explained to them, they fail to comprehend their significance and the emotional toil they incur. In not seeing racism, and by not attempting to work to see it, white colleagues are also implicated in committing acts of injustice and psychic violence to the minoritised staff (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). And racism, rather than being understood as including attitudes and behaviours of 'unwitting prejudice, ignorance and thoughtlessness' (Macpherson, 1999, section 6.34) often becomes remade as a random individual act of deficient thinking on the part of the minoritised staff, a 'fantasy of paranoia' (Ahmed, 2009, p. 47). Alternatively, the minoritised staff may also experience what Delgado (1996, p. 70) describes as 'false empathy', when recounting incidents of racism to whites. This relates to an emotional state in which a white person believes he or she is identifying or connecting with a person of colour but in fact is doing so only in a facile, superficial way. An example of this might be when white female staff attempt to signal their understanding of racial discrimination by speaking about gender or social class as being the same; an act which in fact obfuscates race.

This paper is interested in how scholars of colour engage with research which has race and racism as its focus and how they carry it out within academic spaces which deny and subjugate race and their experiences as a reality. This includes considerations not only around race matching but also extends beyond this. While Ali (2009) and Maylor (2009) both point, for example, to the burden of being marked within the academy by the colour of their skin – a 'corporeal malediction' (Fanon, 1967, p. 84) – they respond positively to the discernible joy that their presence brings to students and the research participants who are also from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The presence of Black scholars can often serve as an unspoken, humanising act of recognition for participants and students. Their presence through the colour of their skin serves as a kind of signal – a connection – reminding them that there are others like them, who may share similar experiences within a society that otherwise marks them as invisible. However, as Phoenix (1994) incisively reminds us, sharing a racial identity does not necessarily equate to matched perspectives

or politics. Within the research context, a shared racial identity does not inevitably guarantee ease of access or rebalance unequal differences in the distribution of power between researcher and participant. Writing about her experiences during two studies with young people (one group were mothers under the age of 20), Phoenix recalls an incident where a Black teenager refused to take part in the research due to concerns about how the findings and her comments might be used. Phoenix points out that sharing a racial identity in this context did not mean that the young woman was readily reassured that this would prevent the research from being exploitative. An awareness of the way in which research has traditionally been exploitative of people of colour, clearly outweighed any possible impact that the presence of a single Black researcher may have played.

Egharevba (2001), who is of Black African heritage, contends that despite the differing ways in which social identities intersect a common understanding and experience of racism – characterised by a perspective that is ‘Black, postcolonial and antiracist’ (Mirza, 2009, p. 3) – frequently plays a major role in shaping the research dynamic. However, despite this, she does also acknowledge that there were moments during her interviews with South Asian heritage women in which she was cross-examined about her hair, language and culture. Shared experiences of racism while providing moments of connection were not sufficient to ensure that she was regarded as ‘one of us’.

This paper draws upon a two-year study into the educational strategies of the Black middle classes, to examine the role of race and racism in the research process. Specifically, it explores how my political positioning and experiences of racism intersected with my role as a Black female scholar and shaped my engagement with and connection to the research. As I will argue, these aspects of my identity were fundamental to the ways in which I was perceived and positioned not only by project participants but also by those on the periphery of the study. Taken together, it is argued that these race processes form an integral role in revealing the nuanced complexities and significance of race and racism within the research project and within British society more broadly. Further, these aspects of racial identity, race politics and positioning ought not to be limited to the reflections and analyses of scholars of colour, but crucially, should also be named, foregrounded and addressed by white colleagues electing to carry out race research.

### **The research process**

The paper begins with a brief overview of the research project (sometimes referred to as the ‘Black middle classes project’) and its aims. I then summarise my personal and political positioning as a Black female scholar. I am particularly interested here in drawing attention to the elements of my identity that mirrored the selection criteria for project participants since, as will become apparent, this was pertinent to the relationship that I established with others (members of the research team, participants and third parties) and, in turn, informed the sense of responsibility I developed in ensuring the wide dissemination of the project findings and its subsequent impact. These issues are examined in relation to three principal areas: the recruitment and identification of research participants; the interview process and the dissemination of the project findings.

### ***Project overview***

‘The Educational Strategies of the Black middle classes’ is a two-year study, carried out between 2009 and 2011, which examines the educational perspectives and strategies of

Black Caribbean<sup>2</sup> heritage families. The project sought to bring together an analysis of race and social class in shaping the experiences of participants. Black Caribbean families were considered particularly relevant as a focus of study since available research evidence continues to indicate that pupils from these backgrounds experience some of the lowest levels of academic attainment compared with other ethnic groups irrespective of their class position. Black Caribbean pupils from non-manual backgrounds are the lowest attaining of the middle-class groups (Gillborn, 2008; Strand, 2008). Further, research has tended not to differentiate this ethnic group by social class. As researchers we were keen, therefore, to provide a detailed exploration of how race and social class intersect in the educational decisions and choices of these families.

Aware of the increasing number of Black Caribbeans who have a partner outside of their ethnic group, we decided to include families where both or just one of the parents is Black Caribbean (Platt, 2009). Participants were recruited through a range of sources that included family and education websites, Black professional networks and social groups as well as through extensive use of snow-balling via existing contacts within the Black community. Participants were selected following the completion of a brief filter questionnaire that asked specific questions about their ethnic group identification, the age of their children and their occupation. We were interested in speaking with parents who had at least one child between 8 and 18 years, age groups which encompass key transition points in the English school calendar and which would, therefore, yield potentially useful information about the process of school selection, choice and decision-making. With regard to class categorisation, we identified parents in professional or managerial occupations (i.e. NS-SEC<sup>3</sup> 1 and 2) – that is at the highest end of the occupational grading scale – using Government Standard Occupational Classification manuals. Sensitive to debates that centre on the absence of Black men as fathers (Reynolds, 2009), we explicitly sought to include them in our sample. Thirteen of our interviews were carried out with Black Caribbean fathers.

In total, we carried out 62 initial interviews with parents and returned a year later to conduct follow-up interviews with 15 of our original sample, 77 interviews in total. This process was found to be extremely effective in enabling us to explore in more detail themes and patterns in the data that had been revealed from our first set of interviews.

### ***Political blackness***

The research team comprised four members – myself and three colleagues who are white professors. Two are male. Despite the importance of me being a co-investigator<sup>4</sup> on the project, as professors, they held permanent positions in the university compared to my fixed-term, full-time position as the project researcher. This team profile reflects directly the unequal distribution by race and gender of academic staff in higher education (Equality Challenge Unit, 2011) and also speaks of the differences in status and power that often require acknowledgement and ongoing negotiation for the minoritised staff. Statistical data published by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) reveal that Black staff are more likely than other ethnic groups to be employed on short-term research contracts, posts that tend to provide limited opportunities for writing and the development of precisely the type of skills (e.g. grant-writing and teaching) which serve as the criteria for successful career progression. This data also tells us that a significantly higher percentage of white academics occupy professorial roles (11.1% of the white academic population) when compared with the percentage of Black academics at the same level (3.6% of Black

academics are professors). The team acknowledged and discussed these inequities early in the development of the research, coming to an agreement about how journal articles would be authored and, clearly, stating our position in the research proposal:

We are of course acutely aware of the dishonourable history of research undertaken by White researchers which has offered pathological representations of Black communities. Such portrayals arose from a research focus on the perceived differences, inadequacies and exoticisms of Black people rather than a focus on White racism. We are also aware of the impossibilities of stepping away from our raced, classed and gendered identities, and will remain sensitive to the way in which we view the world through these lenses ... We are also sensitive to the way in which the project team reflects the raced and gendered hierarchy within the academy. We have discussed the possible implications for our team dynamics and will continue to reflect on these issues throughout the course of the research. We will ensure that there are opportunities for joint writing as a project team, and that the research officer is lead author on some publications. (Vincent, Rollock, Ball, & Gillborn, 2008 – ESRC research proposal, p. 4)

As a team, we presented with varying biographies and conceptualisations of our own raced and classed identities. I am Black, of Caribbean heritage, my parents arriving to the UK from Barbados in the late 1960s. I often visited Barbados as a child with my parents. My Caribbean heritage, therefore, forms a quietly significant part of my identity, and I often refer to Barbados as home even though I was born in the UK. Had my parents pursued their career interests ‘back home’, they would have been classified as middle class. However, their journey of migration saw them take up working-class and lower middle-class occupations in the UK that seemed poised in perilous uncertainty in the face of ongoing racism.

I initially attended a state primary school, but being strongly committed to the possibilities that education offered (and following the recommendation of a Black teacher who noted that I was being held back by her white colleagues), I was moved to a private girls’ school when I was about 8 years old. I have already discussed, at some length, the awkward and oft painful ways in which I came to race and class awareness in that space and how those moments of otherness continue, albeit dressed in the apparent liberal attire of post-racial progression, into the world of the academy (Rollock, 2012a, 2012b). My understanding of myself as a Black woman in the British context is one which is marked by experiences of racism and otherness. The starkness of this is made all the more apparent when I return ‘home’ to Barbados where the colonial gaze, while present in the island’s history, economy and tourism, is replaced by a discernible lightness of being and sense of belonging.

I would describe myself as having a consciousness or political and lived awareness and experience of race and racism, and I am alert to and work to challenge white privilege and power inequities (Fanon, 1967; Ignatiev, 1997). These processes inform my thinking and practice and, increasingly, shape my reasons for pursuing particular lines of research enquiry. I use the term ‘political blackness’ or ‘consciousness’ to encapsulate these identities, practices and ideologies. It is, of course, possible to be Black and sit outside of or not be committed to race consciousness and activism in this way.

With regard to race and racism, my colleagues were each at different stages in understanding their own whiteness and issues of race inequity. While we acknowledged these differences sometimes, as the project progressed, we struggled to negotiate and hold on to them as a team. On occasion, it became clear that our raced positionalities meant that we recognised different processes and meanings as ‘normal’ or reasonable. For example, while my colleagues pondered over how we might access a large number of

Black middle-class respondents, this quite simply did not present itself as a question in my mind and, moreover, seemed relatively straightforward since not only was I part of that demographic but they – ‘the Black middle classes’ – were an unremarkable and normal part of my personal and professional networks.

### Identifying and recruiting participants

Deciding how we would phrase the advertisement which would invite participants to take part in the study resulted in much debate with regard to conceptualisations of ethnicity and social class.

### *The significance of ethnicity*

To simply use ‘Black’ to refer to ethnicity was problematic since, in the UK, it encompasses those of Caribbean *and* African heritage and, sometimes, also those of mixed (i.e. biracial) heritage. We explored whether it was the ethnicity of the child that mattered or the ethnicity of the parent. For example, would we include a white father of a Black child in our sample? In addition, we noted that there was also a small but growing body of activists who rejected the term ‘Black’ altogether as being steeped in a divisive post-colonial discourse that lacked any meaningful cultural connectivity.<sup>5</sup> We questioned whether by using the term ‘Black’ we might exclude those who rejected self-identification in this way. Our debates were important in revealing something of the messy complexities of identities in the UK context.

Yet while the final advertisement specifically invited response from ‘Black Caribbean’ parents, we were struck by the number of enquiries we received from those of Black African<sup>6</sup> heritage also wanting to take part. We even received an inquiry from the white middle-class mother of a (adopted) Black middle-class child asking for advice and guidance regarding her daughter’s schooling. I suggest that these additional responses speak to the dire political silence around the schooling of Black children in the UK and parents’ deep concern about their children’s experiences within the education system.

Despite having previously worked on several projects which have focused on race, I was struck by the extent of interest that the project garnered with some people even taking the time to detail their views by email. These were often lengthy, passionate and sometimes irate communications from Black members of the public not seeking to take part in the project necessarily but querying and objecting to our proposed examination of a discernible Black middle class:

The matter of middle class education concerns me, the reason being that it starts from a divisory basis, and therefore in my humble opinion, misses the point of undertaking this type of study ... class is laced with severe oppression and (...)<sup>7</sup> any form of oppression is wrong. (Project Communication, Mr A, June 2009)

There are several points I wish to raise and the first one is why would you assume that only middle class black ‘Professional Caribbean’ which itself is a stereotypical viewpoint, make decisions around their children’s education, as opposed to what? Those who are not middle classed and are not making any decisions? (Project Communication, Mrs X, June 2009)

There are, of course, several ways in which such correspondence can be read. As an academic, I found these communications unusual since there seemed to be an enduring assumption that the issues raised had not already been given careful consideration by the team during the design stage of the study. The emails tended to come from Black parents

and/or activists deeply concerned about issues affecting their children and the Black community more broadly. Their messages, therefore, can be interpreted as being embedded within personal biographies and an historical context which has seen Black families continually disadvantaged within the education system (Coard, 1971; Gillborn, 2008; Gillborn, Rollock, Vincent, & Ball, 2012; Tomlinson, 2008) and within society more broadly (Clark & Drinkwater, 2007).

It is also likely, given the history of being studied and observed by white researchers, that there may have been an apprehension and expectation that the study was being carried out by ill-informed white academics driven by an uncritical post-colonial gaze. As Ladson-Billings pointedly reminds us, people of colour are 'often the objects but rarely the beneficiaries of research ...' (2003, p. 416). Understandably, they may not have anticipated that there would be a conscious Black researcher involved in the research or that any white researchers leading in such research would actively demonstrate a critical awareness of race. Finally, it is also feasible that some members of the public simply are not familiar with the various stages and procedures that inform academic research.

### ***Social class as a tool of division?***

The accusation that the research is focused on Black *middle class* was divisive both interested and concerned me. Claims about creating boundaries amongst Black people spoke, to my mind, to an unhelpful and outdated essentialist analysis that presupposed all Black people were the same. As the study progressed, Black colleagues, friends and even strangers, who were aware of my involvement in the research, would approach me to share their views or experiences about being Black professionals, about social class, racism or white people. Those critiquing the focus on Black middle class insisted that any such differences amongst us faded into insignificance in the light of the pervasive experiences of racism that bound us and shaped our experiences. To speak of differences not only detracted from the centrality of racism but also played into the open arms of a white society which was only too ready to embrace any argument that might minimise or trivialise the prevalence and significance of racism.

However, my most common experience was of being approached at both professional and social events<sup>8</sup> and congratulated for carrying out what was regarded as a highly significant piece of research that not only had historic import in terms of the experiences of Black Caribbean people in the UK but would also demonstrate to a naïve white society how the terrors of racism paid little attention to middle-class status. The project would, to their minds, make visible our otherwise invisible experiences. It would highlight the existence of a Black demographic beyond the delinquent criminalised media stereotype with which we had to contend via the low expectations and limiting assumptions of mainstream white society.

Even though I would remind people that there were other members of the team, the fact that they were white meant that they were regarded as unable to ever comprehend the complexities of racism and this, coupled with a recognition of class status and my racial politics or consciousness, meant that I was seen by Black friends and colleagues as having particular responsibility to ensure the successful completion of the study and dissemination of its findings.

### **Reflections about race during the interview process**

Race and racism were a central aspect of the project and, hence, the research questions. As such, the team spent much time discussing how, beyond logistic considerations, we would decide who would carry out the interviews and how my white colleagues would approach (if at all) or rephrase the specific questions that asked about experiences of racism.

#### *The race of the interviewer*

While we agreed that attempts to establish ‘race symmetry’ between researcher and respondents would be suggestive of an narrow, essentialist interpretation of race (Phoenix, 1994), we remained sensitive to the fact that given the study’s explicit focus on race, racism and social class that it was highly possible that there would be issues that some participants might feel less comfortable discussing with white researchers. We finally resolved this by offering participants two choices at the point of arranging the interview. They could tick a box indicating that they had ‘no preference’ with regard to the ethnicity of the researcher or they could tick to state that they preferred to ‘speak with a Black researcher’. Of the 51 respondents who answered this question, the majority (37 participants) indicated they had no preference, while 14 specified wanting to speak with a Black researcher.

In hindsight, I wonder whether we ought to have been surprised at these responses since we were, in effect, presenting participants with options that due to prevalent patterns of race inequality within society, they would not necessarily have expected to have had in the first place. In other words, they would know from first-hand experience that there is a lack of diversity across the professions and would not necessarily have expected to have had the luxury of being able to choose with whom they spoke. In addition, there were a range of cultural signifiers in the leaflet that advertised the project that would have highlighted, albeit tacitly, evidence of power, status and whiteness. For example, the research was based at a high status London university, whose logo (and that of our funder) was clearly positioned at the head of the recruitment leaflet. Our respondents are used to operating in a context in which they are in a minority, and it is highly probable that this shaped their responses to our question about researcher preference. This is a subject that we explored with them during the course of the interview itself. One of our participants, Femi, had originally indicated that she had ‘no preference’ in terms of with whom she spoke. I asked her at the end of the interview to reflect on whether, bearing in mind her original choice, it had made a difference speaking with a Black researcher. This is her response:

Because I studied and worked with majority white people most of my life, I probably feel as at ease talking to a white researcher as I would a Black researcher because that’s what I’m used to really. It may be that I may have couched some of my comments differently had it been a white researcher. I may not have been as explicit about some of my comments. If it had been a white researcher, I think I would have wanted to maintain an image of neutrality, objectivity when it came to race, not necessarily being seen to be as pro-Black as I am, possibly, if it had been a white researcher, I might have toned it down a bit. (Femi, Psychologist)

Femi’s response speaks to the tragic, inescapable relationship between whiteness and blackness, between the oppressed and the oppressor (Fanon, 1967). While stating that she would be comfortable talking to a white researcher, she, nonetheless, explains that had

she been faced with that option, she would have endeavoured to moderate her responses when it came to the subject of race. This is interesting, significant and yet – if we are to analyse this through the eyes of Fanon and Critical Race Theory, both of which emphasise the role of race in shaping our acts and our consciousness – is not at all surprising. While Femi would have acquired a mask of neutrality and attempted objectivity with white researchers, we should understand this ‘act’ as an entirely ordinary and natural mode of operation designed to help her navigate white society and to enable her to retain some measure of humanity in a wider context in which she is minoritised. White researchers, therefore, are not neutral enquirers in conversations about race. They sit within and are part of a wider system of race inequity characterised by performances of privilege, power and entitlement. To be ‘pro-Black’ in this space is to display evidence of race consciousness that seeks to break free of whiteness. It is to reveal whiteness, to upset and disrupt the status quo. And as I have already intimated earlier, disruption is risky work, the reason for which Bergerson (2003) summarises thus:

The underlying problem is that whites do not want to consider race and racism as everyday realities, because doing so requires them to face their own racist behaviors (sic) as well as the privileges that come from being white. (p. 53)

With this in mind we can, therefore, consider Femi’s actions as a shrewd and highly strategic means of survival within mainstream white society (Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent, & Ball, 2011). I say more about this topic later.

### *Discussing race during the interview*

The interview data also allowed us to consider how discussions about race and racism might vary or be differently inflected according to the race of the interviewer. There are, as Leonardo and Porter (2010) maintain, rules and regulations often unspoken that surround and infuse conversations about race between whites and people of colour; Femi’s comment (above) speaks to just some of the acts of compromise and identity management that are required. She is not alone, amongst our participants, in her awareness and navigation of these race rules. Simon, who works as a school teacher, explains that an understanding of what he characterises as a ‘unique Black experience’ plays a significant role in shaping the interaction and tone between interviewer and interviewee:

A Black researcher knows what you are talking about and that is (...) not a Black glove in your hand, [this is not] the 1968 Olympics. It’s not anything like that (...) there is a big thing about the Black experience. And even if we all have individual experiences you know as Black people in general, the Black experience is unique, obviously. My experience as a Black person is not exactly the same [as yours] but there are definitely connections in terms of Black experience. I’m not necessarily saying that a white researcher can’t research Black issues because I think that would be ridiculous and that is not what I am saying but I think, I just think it’s different (...) if there was a white man sitting there I wouldn’t change my answers but perhaps in some of the way I answered the questions ... the question that comes back might not have been the same (...) it may be that the questions when I came back with some of the answers you may have understood the answer and then take it in a direction knowing that you are talking to Black male. And you may be able to relate to some of the experiences.

Simon’s comment is particularly pertinent because it attends rightly to the fluidity of Black identities while, simultaneously, emphasising the unifying impact of racism. Again, we are alerted to the possible dangers of talking about race with whites. In evoking the

image of the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics, Simon like Femi recognises that he could be positioned – misrecognised – as being ‘overly’ Black or militant in his analysis of race because it sits outside of and challenges the comforts of whiteness. While this does not mean that white researchers should avoid race research, he insists that there is likely to be a qualitative difference in the detail, essence and direction of their work. A similar observation is made by Duster (1999) writing in the foreword of ‘Race-ing Research, Researching Race’. Commenting on research, involving white and African-American researchers, carried out with African-Americans about sickle-cell disease, he notes that:

Some of the most important ‘concerns and issues’ never surfaced for exploration with white interviewers, because the group being interviewed never headed down the road to frame the question such a manner in the first place. (Duster, 1999, p. xiii)

This is an interesting and important observation. The inequalities and regulations of race that govern society also come to bear in the context of the interview, shaping its richness and direction. There are common responses to racism that can also take place within the interview setting and of which many of our participants were aware. I mentioned false empathy earlier. Another, common response when talking with whites about racism is that such blatant and irrational injustice must provoke anger.<sup>9</sup> While this obviously can be the case, I contend that racism is such a normal and unremarkable aspect of our lives that many people of colour in fact work to develop a repertoire of strategies and responses (anger may well be amongst them) – a unique form of cultural capital – in order to stay sane. Anger simply does not hold as a long-term strategy:

People of color (sic) sometimes overlook white violence *so they can get through their daily life* [emphasis in original]. Like a child who has been abused, people of color avoid white violence by strategically playing along, a practice that whites, whose racial development stunts their growth, underestimate when they mistake consensus as the absence of coercion. Like abused children who do not possess the ability to consent and defend themselves against the verbal and physical power of a parent, *people of color have become masters at deflection. This is how they secure safety in violent circumstances.* (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 151, emphases added)

Therefore, respondents’ claims that they have no preference with regard to researcher ethnicity – and even in one case retorting to a white colleague who queried this that ‘I would talk to a brick’ – must be understood within this wider context of race politics. Rather than, as Leonardo and Porter contend, not possessing ‘the ability to consent and defend’ ourselves, sometimes we must make a conscious choice about the inevitable pitfalls of acting. Ability may be suppressed and not used because it is dangerous to do otherwise. As Fanon (1967, p. 23) pointedly reminds us ‘it is understandable that the first action of the black man is *reaction* (...) since the Negro is appraised in terms of the extent of his assimilation’. The ‘Black man’ to borrow from Fanon, therefore, learns early on the rules that govern his existence and assimilation in white society. My point here is that discussing race with a white person is fraught with risk. Therefore, for a white researcher to ask a Black respondent whether speaking with them has made a difference is to overlook this politics – to pretend that the regulations and rules of race as conceived, imposed and enforced by whites, do not in fact exist. It is to imply that it is possible to speak freely or to act independently from the bounds of white violence. Since such violence comes in many guises – even in the form of seemingly innocuous research questions about race – the best means for survival, to outdo the introduction of this potentially new violence, this trickery, is to deploy the highly accomplished skill of

deflection. This strategic calculation enables people of colour to retain some degree of safety, something near to a humanising existence within white society.

These are calculations and assessments that I too have depended upon for survival. I speak, colloquially, of ‘sussing out’ whites to determine where they have reached in their journey of race consciousness. I pay attention to the tendency to revert to other inequalities when race is raised, to the willingness to discuss their own whiteness, the preparedness to acknowledge privilege and racial differences and to be proactive in the face of racism. Such experience was present and came to bear during my interviews with Black middle-class respondents. My reaction and subsequent questioning was borne from the positioning of my political blackness even while I retained a rigorous academic lens. Sometimes when some act of racism was mentioned, I simply nodded in empathetic acknowledgement, but even this – a well-placed and paced nod – can be enough to signal a profound understanding of and connection with the issues. Even when I sought to leave my political positioning, quietly observing from the corner of the room, participants’ accounts of their schooling forced it back, demanding involvement in the conversation. This was especially the case with female respondents whose retrospective accounts of their schooling, recalled in me a familiar white gaze that inquired about my hair, my bottom and the colour of my skin. I noted the energy, the passion and the expressions that accompanied the retelling of these formative episodes; their code-switching – momentarily lapses into Patois – to drive home more effectively some historic account. I actively reminded myself to ask respondents to state – for the purposes of the tape and, hence, the doubting or invisible white listener – who they meant by ‘we’, by ‘our’, by ‘they’ and ‘them’ even though we both knew who ‘we’ and ‘they’ were.

As Simon earlier describes, the interview takes its direction from this understanding. Ray, one of the fathers in the project, was one of the small numbers who requested to speak with a Black researcher. He explains, when prompted, his reasoning for this towards the end of his interview:

[It felt justified] in as much as I didn’t feel either patronised or the subject of some kind of false empathy. And very often we ... I find myself in the situation where people think, that’s the truth of what happened to you and [I’m] telling you because I want you to empathise and to [feel] sorry for me (...) because I feel the people who [are like] that haven’t actually experienced and ... or have no true understanding of what it’s like to experience racism or different forms of disadvantage in society. So it’s just a demonstration of the differences in reality and what I didn’t get from you ... I didn’t get a sense of some of the things that I said you were shocked by them or found it disbelieving that in this day and age you have these attitudes and [that] people are still experiencing these things. Because sometimes despite their best intention, I find researchers exist in this little cocoon and they see the world as they desire it rather than as it is.

The solution to this is not simply about race matching. That misses the complexity of racism and raced identities. From a critical perspective, this is about whiteness and blackness both of which are at the dualistic core of racism and race inequality. Thus, we can move away from conceptualising ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’ as mere representations of colour, to thinking instead about them as concepts of political investment and activism:

Politically, whiteness is the willingness to seek a comfortable place within the system of race privilege. Blackness means total, implacable, and relentless opposition to that system. To the extent so-called whites oppose the race line, repudiate their own race privileges, and jeopardize their own standing in the white race that can be said to have washed away their whiteness and taken in some blackness. Probably a black person should not accept a white person’s claim to have done that, but should watch how that person acts. (Ignatiev, 1997, p. 609)

This political standpoint moves us beyond an essentialist conceptualisation of race and raced identities. Therefore, my articulation of ‘sussing out’, in fact, means seeking to determine not only the awareness whites have of their privilege but also as a non-negotiable implicated aspect of this, whether they endeavour to act in ways that problematise and lessen their power and privilege; in short, whether they are moving towards being ‘traitors’ to their race (Ignatiev, 1997). Racism through this lens recognises that becoming politicised – becoming Black – is an ongoing journey or process of growing, awareness and reflection. It requires a preparedness to become immersed in the discomforts of racism and to move beyond a liberal stance. And just as we can speak of whites as being traitors to their race and investing in blackness, it is possible to do the same in relation to people of colour.

### *Fluidity of black identity*

So far, I have set out an argument that centres on a notion of race consciousness and awareness of racism. However, it is important to note that not all participants in the Black middle classes study positioned themselves in this way. Some (a minority) downplayed any personal awareness or experience of racism and regarded the colour of their skin as a mere incidental, non-consequential aspect of their person. The ways in which these particular respondents spoke about race was discernibly less rich and detailed than those who were more closely located within a political notion of blackness.

These less-conscious participants tended to valorise the merits of hard work which they saw as directly and unequivocally leading to reward and success. There was less or no evidence in their interviews of a collective notion of a Black ‘we’ and nor was there much acknowledgement or discussion of inequality and discrimination. I also noted that I felt differently in these interviews; they had a different energy about them. There was no sense of connection which had resulted in invitations to dinner or long heartfelt hugs at the end of other interviews as had been the case with some other participants. Consider, for example, the extract in which I have just asked Miles (senior manager) about the role of ethnicity in shaping his experiences:

I don't put it [ethnicity] high on my agenda (...) I will give you an example (...) I must have been, about 17 or 18 I was a (...) and we were serving at [a prestigious dinner] with (...) 3000 people at [grand historic venue in Central London] and there were a couple of guys with me who said, 'Miles do you realise you are the only Black bloke here?' and I kind of looked around and went, 'Oh yeah you're right'. That is because I don't see myself as being a colour, I don't see people as being White or Black (...) I don't tolerate racist jokes but at the same time I am not somebody who sits there and thinks I should be acting like a stereotype of this or that, I just act in the way that I want to in any situation.

Researcher: And so how do you manage situations that are racist. I mean you talked about that incident when you were 17, but as an adult, how do you manage situations that are about your race?

Very rarely do I feel that there is a racist incident that comes up.

There are several aspects of this extract which warrant comment. However, for the purposes of this paper, I am interested in the way in which Miles not only minimises awareness of his racial identity but, in stating that he does not see colour, actively assumes a colour-blind position that is frequently associated with whites. After all, in order to not see colour he must be aware it is there in the first place.<sup>10</sup> This denial is

reinforced by his declaration that he rarely – despite his workplace being majority white – experiences racism. Within politically Black spaces, he would be regarded as being only symbolically or superficially Black. He lacks race consciousness. If we take as the starting point of our analysis, the prevalence of racism within white society and acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between the coloniser and colonised, then we must view Miles' response as embedded within this same dialectic. Fanon again proves useful here:

Fanon's anger is directed not towards the 'black man' but the proposition that he is required not only to be black but he must be black in relation to the white man. It is the internalization or rather as Fanon calls it epidermalization, of this inferiority that concerns him. When the black man comes into contact with the white world he goes through an experience of sensitization. His ego collapses. His self-esteem evaporates. He ceases to be a self-motivated person. The entire purpose of his behaviour is to emulate the white man, to become like him, and thus hope to be accepted as man. (Sardar, 2008 p. xiii)

Therefore, rather than being free of binds of colour and racism, Miles' reaction is precisely that – a relational act, perhaps originally conceived as a strategy to survive and be successful – within the context of whiteness.

### *Participants' investments*

The 'sussing out' or calculations I described earlier are not simply directed at whites. It is also an act carried out between people of colour to determine their extent of political awareness. Participants knew there was a Black researcher on the project (and in some cases had elected to speak with me), yet this was not enough to give them key information about my political leanings. Therefore, when I arrived to carry out their interview and while formal hellos were being exchanged, I was silently 'checked out'. My natural hair which I tended to wear in twists drew assumptions about my politics and blackness long before I even sat down and interspersed the conversation with empathetic nods (Lorde, 2009; Weekes, 1997). Interviews had been set up by email or, in some instances, over the telephone, so it was only on meeting me that participants who had indicated that they had no preference with whom they spoke knew I was Black. Then, meanings were read into my Black skin, assessments were about my age and, hence, my biography and even my professional status to establish a picture of the kind of blackness that I might embody and the kind of life that I might have had:

It's been easier [having a Black researcher] ... I've made an assumption that your parents are first generation migrated here and I've made an assumption that you've had probably some of the same kind of hardships that I've had. And you might not have. You might've been one of the ones that got dropped off and then put into foster care. You could've had any manner of things (...) Wherever your background was in this country, it's very difficult for it to be easy. (Patricia, Resources Manager, Local Government)

Patricia's comment is interesting precisely because it is an assumption. At no stage during the interview did I share with her aspects of my politics or biography. Yet, in this case, her assumption and the various readings she made of me granted her an ease during the interview. Another participant spoke emphatically of her pride in seeing a 'young' female Black doctor carrying out this research and how this inspired her. In this case, inequalities of gender and race intersect so that within the context of a racist, patriarchal society, my achievement became not the achievement of an individual but instead was

imbued with a wider political significance that overrode the fact that we were strangers and that it was the first time that we had met.

My political blackness and embodied Black identity worked alongside my academic status (i.e. holding a Ph.D.) to facilitate in participants a degree of investment and trust in the project. My presence, connection and blackness minimised, to their mind, the element of risk associated with being 'the researched'. As the project developed, so did the expectation that I would bring the findings to the attention of mainstream white society. I became the conduit for delivering the message – our message – accurately to the masses. This was both a privilege and a simultaneous weight on my consciousness:<sup>11</sup> The emotional profundity of this investment is exemplified by Margaret:

I don't put my heart on the line for anyone and unfortunately (...) there is that degree of trust that I have with someone who comes from a very similar background to me who I'm hoping will be able to say, 'you know what, when she said that, I can't pretend to get into her head but some of the stuff she said resonates with me, so actually when we're digesting this, editing this, I understand what she meant by that'. (...) I don't think that someone from another ethnic background could have understood that. (Margaret, Senior Corporate Manager, Private Sector)

While I was honoured and humbled by the hopes that participants like Margaret and Black colleagues and friends had invested in me as an advocate for our experiences, there were moments during the course of the project that I found this expectation difficult to manage. While I largely understood and had endured similar experiences as those described by participants, I also existed and was carrying out the research within a predominantly white academic space which tended to demonstrate very little proactive engagement with race. I often felt as though I was oscillating between two starkly contrasting worlds. As such, it would feel like a disservice and betrayal to participants, to bring their pained, raced experiences to this world that seemed only interested in race as the subject of voyeuristic research. I shared some of these concerns with my colleagues who reminded me that the study was important precisely because it was naming the experiences of an otherwise invisible Black middle class. While I agreed with them, I retained a burning discomfort about merely sharing our findings through academic journal articles and conferences that would be attended by simply other academics. To my mind, we needed to do more than simply report the findings; we needed to do something that would have a wider significance to the lives of Black middle-class families.

### **Dissemination and impact**

The central finding of the Black middle-classes project was that despite possessing the resources, knowledge and capitals to engage with the education system, Black middle-class parents, nonetheless, encounter resistance, low expectations and a lack of support from teachers and school staff. Their class status served to provide some though limited protection from incidents of racism (Vincent, Rollock, Ball, & Gillborn, 2011).<sup>12</sup>

While the project's findings did not surprise me, they disturbed me. The countless stories of pain, of determination, of frustration in the face of low teacher expectations and stereotyping as recounted by Black families we spoke with across England, frustrated me. I was struck by the countless ways in which parents had sought to engage with their child's schooling but had been met with surprise or resistance. Mainly, I was moved and saddened by the desperate isolation of these Black middle-class parents who were, by and large, working hard to offer the best for their children irrespective of racism. So while we

had plans to publish in various high-status journals and also held two seminar events, for me, this was not enough, and I set about exploring ways of sharing the findings more broadly.

Months before we sent out a press release, I spoke regularly and off the record with select journalists, with whom I had an existing relationship, to alert them to the imminent findings. I managed to secure exclusive coverage of the research in *The Guardian* (a widely read, left of centre national broadsheet). This coverage provoked a flurry of debate largely from a Black professional readership who had not, *The Guardian* latter told us, previously engaged in their online discussions in such high numbers. In fact, such was the response that *The Guardian* ran a special pull-out section the following day, featuring a selection of readers' comments.

My frustration not yet abated, I also contacted two prominent Black politicians, each of whom had a particular passion for education and met with them individually to discuss the research. I worked closely with one to co-host a private event comprising leading Black business people, activists and parents to discuss the research findings and to come up with specific ideas that could be implemented to support Black families in their attempts to successfully educate their children.

I then took those ideas and developed a small pilot study called Parents' Strategies into Education and Employment (SEE), which I am running with the Runnymede Trust. Through this action research, we hold small conversation groups with Black parents to find out from them what their challenges have been when engaging with the education system and how they have addressed them. Parents share ideas and strategies with each other, the ultimate aim being to help them connect with and support one another to eventually develop a wider network of support for Black parents across the country.

It was important to me that the Black middle-classes project did not simply state what I and many other Black middle classes already know – that we experience racism. While this might be news to mainstream white society, I was concerned that the legacy of the project was more than this. The research needed to be *for* us, not simply *about* us. This, in part, is my response to the investment and trust that was placed in me and also is informed by my political positioning.

### Concluding thoughts

I have sought, in this paper, to reveal some of the behind-the-scenes deliberations, reflections and complexities that shaped the development of a two-year study into the educational experiences of the Black middle classes. In particular, I have considered my role as the only researcher within the team who not only shared the same race and class position as our respondents but also would describe myself as being politically conscious or aware. These considerations led me to revisit the debate on interviewer–interviewee race matching, paying particular attention to key factors such as the interview topic and the extent of race awareness or consciousness on the part of the researcher. I have argued that the concern in such debates ought not to be solely fixed on race symmetry *per se*, rather should focus on the political awareness of the researcher and their proactive engagement with the notion of whiteness and blackness.

Having said this, bearing in mind that whiteness is usually evidenced in white people, white researchers electing to carry out race research have a particular responsibility to critically reflect upon and demonstrate awareness of these issues. They must remain alert to and report on the dynamics of race and their responses to it. To do so not only ensures the

development of critically reflexive practice but also remains crucial to making the processes of whiteness visible. To do otherwise, to remain silent about these processes even while researching race is to enact and endorse a paradigm interred in racial division and hierarchy:

Trendy cultural critique that is in no way linked to a concern with critical pedagogy or liberation hinders this process [of decolonization]. When white critics write about black culture 'cause it's the "in" subject without interrogating their work to see whether or not it helps perpetuate and maintain racist domination, they participate in the commodification of 'blackness' that is so peculiar to postmodern strategies of colonization. (Hooks, 1990, p. 8)

Coming from the radical position of my blackness, the Black middle-classes project needed to live beyond the white ivory towers of the academy, to be more than journal articles to be read by other academics and to be more than the focus of debates at seminars and conferences. It needed to be political; about changing the lives of those of us in the margins.

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### Notes

1. That is, member of faculty.
2. Within the UK, the term 'Black Caribbean' is used to refer to Black families who can identify their heritage as being from the Caribbean. It is a term that can be applied to first-generation Caribbean families (who migrated to the UK in significant numbers in the 1950s and 1960s) as well as to subsequent, younger generations.
3. National Standard, Socio-Economic Classification.
4. In other words, contributing equally to the project development, design and funding application.
5. These campaigners seek to reclaim the use of 'African' as more appropriately defining the identities of those of Caribbean and African heritage (The African Or Black Question <http://taobq.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/TAOBQ>, accessed 17 November 2012).
6. That is those Black families who can identify their heritage as being from the continent of Africa. As with 'Black Caribbean', 'Black African' can apply across generation and is not limited to those born in Africa per se.
7. Within quoted text, '...' denotes a pause while '(...)' indicates where text has been edited for brevity or clarity.
8. These social events included dinner parties, public talks and gatherings that largely attracted a Black middle-class demographic mainly of whom had initially met through professional circles. Sometimes the boundaries between my professional and social networks blur. Experiences of racism and class position serve or inform, in some ways, the boundaries of Black middle class space.
9. This in itself can be regarded as a type of false empathy.
10. Although clearly due to issues of power, this has different implications for a white person compared to Black.
11. One Black colleague laughed when I explained the situation to him, referring to it as the 'Obama effect' to denote the high expectations that many Black people across the world had invested in the first, then recently elected, Black President of America. The Black middle-classes project began in 2009, the same year that Barack Obama began his first term.
12. While the definition of middle class varies, quite fundamentally, these findings echo research about the African-American middle class carried out in the USA (e.g. Lacy, 2007; Moore, 2008; Patillo-Mckoy, 1999).

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