



Book review: Bhopal, K. and Myers, M. (2025) *Race, racism and higher education: ethnic minority students' transitions to and from university*. London: Routledge.

Shocked, not immune: confronting the enduring realities of racism in higher education

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Race, racism and higher education (HE) offers an accessible and critical exploration of issues relating to race, elitism, and whiteness that are found in universities in the UK. Central to the book's empirical analysis is a beautiful articulation of the ugly and destructive impact of racism through the voices of students.

The book is underpinned by a framework drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's capital theory, which Bhopal and Myers use to explore how privilege and inequality are reproduced in HE. Yet while Bourdieu's framework helps illuminate class-based privilege, it is less effective in capturing the lived realities of racism. Many of the racialised experiences described by Bhopal and Myers would be more effectively illuminated through Critical Race Theory (CRT) and cultural community capital, particularly the work of Tara Yosso (2005), whose concept of community cultural wealth gives us a more nuanced understanding of racially minoritised students' strengths. The book itself offers some indication that 'Bourdieu is perhaps less adept at understanding how racism functions and how it is particularly understood by BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) individuals who are themselves experiencing racism' (p.142). Indeed, the book would benefit from a central intersectional framing that integrates class, gender/sex, and race, offering a richer understanding of how these unique sites of inequality interact within HE as told through the racialised experiences of students with intersecting characteristics.

That said, Bhopal and Myers surface racialised experiences in a profound way. The book conceptualises 'whiteness' as property, as something that someone has. Yet the notion that not possessing whiteness limits outcomes requires further unpacking. While I agree with the premise, I think the way it is framed places too much emphasis on the individual needing to possess whiteness, rather than recognising whiteness as embedded within a colonial matrix, where an individual's perceived proximity to whiteness is what ultimately limits opportunities. There would also be benefit in considering the differences between 'ethnicity' and 'race'. Such examination would be important, especially given the book's focus on how racism (as a system of racialised inequality and discrimination) impacts the lived experiences of different BME backgrounds, rather than specifically racially minoritised groups.

The book is insightful about ethnic capital and the specific expectations and motivations associated with different ethnic identities. I loved how the varied experiences from a diverse range of students were discussed. It was striking to read about the value attributed to degrees and the many factors impacting on students' perception of the value accorded to degrees. The analysis on familial capital was particularly insightful; the links to cultural norms and expectations offered an important conversation that is all too often missing from policy discussions. Bhopal and Myers have eloquently surfaced issues with the hidden curriculum—the unwritten rules, beliefs, values, and customs that exist alongside the formal and informal curricula.

In chapters 5 and 6, Bhopal and Myers offer extensive analysis of the relational issues associated with the under-resourcing of students and the impact this has on individual students' agency and different forms of capital (including familial and social capital). This is a key aspect of some of the relational structures impacting access and transition through universities, particularly in 'elite' (see p.20) universities. That said, chapters 3 ('Racial inequalities in higher education') and 4 ('University racisms: processes of exclusion') could consider more structural dislocation and the 'white gaze' and how this is manifest in policies, practices, funding regimes, and regulation across the sector, rather than only within 'institutional habitus' (p.8).

I was a little disappointed to see 'degree attainment' referred to throughout the book rather than an acknowledgement using appropriate language of the structural issue of 'degree

award'. It sometimes felt that there was a deficit positioning of students that did not reaffirm what is clear in other areas of the book about how systemic inequality and under-resourcing lead to inequality of opportunity. I think the roots of racism, anchored in a system of capitalism, rather than a focus on its relational impact on students as 'disadvantaged', could have been further explored. I do not suggest that these themes were not acknowledged by the authors, but I would have liked to read more critical engagement with the structural, entrenched, and dominant issue of capitalism. The book effectively illustrates through relational analysis how social capital is inseparably linked to broader cultural and economic structures. However, it is my view that the authors could have provided deeper structural analysis, given that capitalism, in maintaining stratified, racialised hierarchies, is at the core of the book's focus.

In chapter 7, I would have liked to see more depth of challenge to persistent myths. For instance, it is acknowledged that an increase in participation does not necessarily mean increased social mobility. So, what is the policy of widening participation seeking to achieve? While it is true that Black students, for example, are under-represented in 'elite' universities, it is also more difficult for Black students to be offered a place, even when they have the same grades as students from other racialised groups (Boliver, 2016). The discussion about student engagement and support is multifaceted and rightly places some emphasis on institutional responsibility. It explores staff attitudes and responsibilities within this context and the need to be more understanding of students' needs. But, again, I think an emphasis on collective systems of support, rather than individual relations, could be raised here, centring cultural humility and empathy in order to address specific racialised factors and experiences beyond those typically considered (such as work, caring responsibilities, and access to information).

I was pleased to see some discussion of progression and transition to the graduate labour market in chapters 8 and 9. The discussions mirrored some of the observations shared in previous chapters and provided insights into the signalling effect of degrees and identities of individual students in the labour market. I think some analysis of employers' policies, systems, and practices around recruitment and selection, alongside representation in senior leadership, would have added value in the same way that there was acknowledgement and analysis of the need to create compatible and comparable education systems to support widening participation initiatives in higher education.

Bhopal and Myers provide insights into difficult themes. It is refreshing to read a text that lays bare, through student voice, the normalcy of everyday racism faced by racially minoritised students. I was also heartened to read about the performative and superficial processes associated with decolonising as being distinct from important research and scholarship in this area. The final chapter puts forward a clear analysis of these important issues and leads the reader to the incisive statement: the 'recognition of racist outcomes being normal is a key element legitimising universities' reproduction of inequality, while maintaining a façade of liberalism' (p.156). There is an illuminating analysis relating to the 'racial sociodicy' of universities (p.158), which equates the myth that is social mobility and its negative impact on the opportunities and outcomes for BME students.

The conclusion addresses, at least in part, my earlier observation regarding the authors' application of Bourdieu throughout the book. Bhopal and Myers note how '[r]acism, unlike other inequalities experienced by the students we spoke to, did not emerge within the same process of social structuring Bourdieu identifies' (p.160). In explaining that race and racism were identified as an explicit, unfair limitation compared with class or gendered differences, the conclusion amplifies the need for CRT and intersectionality to be fundamental to the theoretical framing and lens used to understand BME students' experiences. I am hugely grateful to Bhopal and Myers for writing this illuminating text and especially for centring the voices of students to ensure that this message is heard by the HE sector.

What is fundamentally important about this book is its central message: the permanence and perpetuation of systems of racial differentiation and discrimination that have a life-long and generational impact on the opportunities and outcomes of racially minoritised students. The authors lay bare the normalisation of everyday racism in HE and, in doing so, remind us of the urgency of sustained, critical engagement with these issues. And it is here I end my review with Toni Morrison's powerful reminder in 1998 that we should forever remain shocked and never be immune to the ugly, life-damaging impact of racism: 'I insist on being shocked. I am never going to become immune. I think that's a kind of failure to see so much of it that you die inside. I want to be surprised and shocked every time' (thepostarchive, 2019).

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