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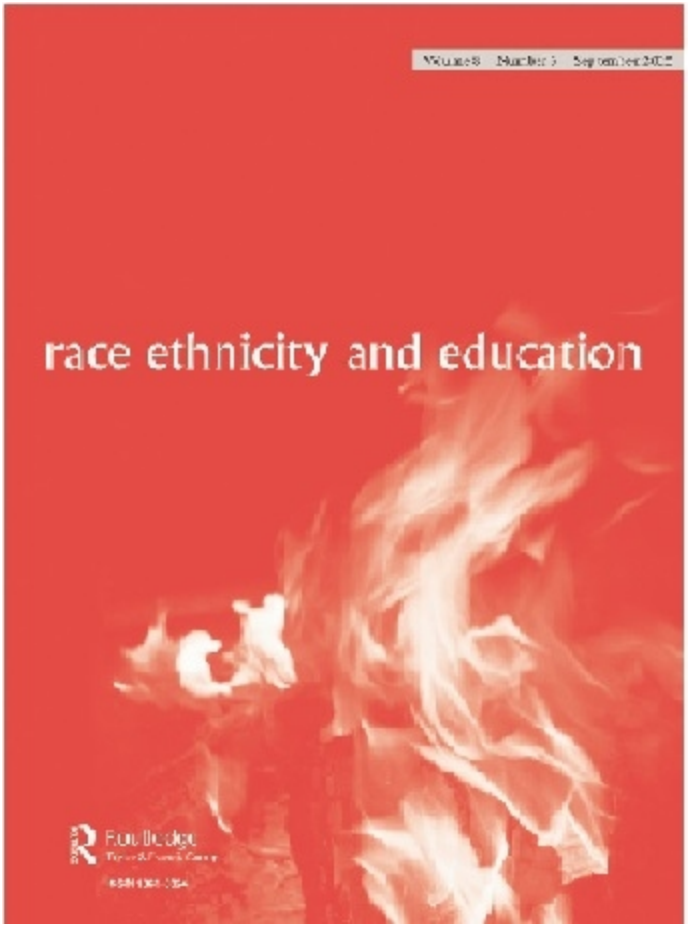

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‘Black or Minority Ethnic’ (BME), female, and dyslexic in white-male dominated disciplines at an elite university in the UK; an exploration of student experiences.

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Abstract

This study offers an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the intersectional experiences of two 'black or minority ethnic', female dyslexic students as they navigate university spaces within white-male dominated disciplines. The participants kept reflective journals for three weeks after which they took part in a one-to-one interview discussion structured around their journal entries. Following multi-level analysis using IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis), the participants' experiences are discussed under two themes: why does that happen? and should I be here? Following each themed discussion, the authors present their personal reflections upon the emotions and tensions they experienced as part of a black researcher, white-researcher partnership.

Intro and literature

About this study

This study began with the aim of better understanding the experiences of a small number of students in higher education who both identified as 'black or minority ethnic' and had been identified with specific learning difficulties, or dyslexia. However, it also became an exploration of the tensions, and realisations we experienced as a partnership of a black British woman (Xxxxxx) and a white British woman (YYYYYYY) with different cultural backgrounds and quite different experiences in education. Xxxxxx is an experienced English teacher in higher education with involvement in student support, and YYYYYYY is a lecturer in Psychology and Education with a background in teaching and research in specific learning difficulties (SpLDs). Xxxxxx and YYYYYYY are equal authors of this paper.

In the write up of this study, we felt it was important to acknowledge the ways in which our relationship to one another as researchers and friends, and to the research topic, the participants, and the data, interacted to produce the conclusions presented here. As such, each theme in the discussion section below will be appended with first-person reflections from Xxxxxx and YYYYYYY. In keeping with the storied approaches in much critical race theory (Gillborn, 2008) we hope to push against the tendency to present the findings of research as impersonal and neutral, and to instead centre the personal via the construction of dialogue between YYYYYYY and Xxxxxx. We tried to be as open as we could to what emerged between us in

both the slow and in the snatched conversations, and in the pauses between conversations, with a recognition of the tension in seeking to stretch collaborative spaces beyond the neat individual boxes provided by the university (Wyatt et al. 2018). For these reasons, we will also slip in and out of the first person perspective as we write.

We use the phrase 'black and minority ethnic' (often shortened to BME) in this article in keeping with much of the UK-based literature in the field, though we recognise that this is not an ideal label, nor one accepted by all who are identified as such by the institutions in which they operate. After discussion, we agreed to avoid the shortened 'BME' in our writing, and instead to use 'black and minority ethnic' in full. We also use the words 'black', 'Asian' and 'mixed-race' in recognition of the categories used by statistics-gathering agencies, and in recognition of the terms used by our participants to describe themselves. At certain points we also use 'women of colour' (or similar) as an umbrella term to talk about women who identify or are categorised as 'black' or 'brown' or 'Asian' or 'mixed race', though again we recognise that this term is not preferred by many, and is more widely used in the US than the UK where this study is based.

Why this study?

Many students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds progress to higher education in the UK; indeed, 'black', 'mixed' and 'Asian' students are over-represented as a proportion of the overall higher education population (Office for National Statistics 2012; UCAS 2016). However, these broad statistics hide the fact that black students are under-represented in so called 'higher tariff' universities (UCAS 2016) and that 'black' and 'mixed' students are more likely to drop-out of university when compared to their 'white' and Asian counterparts (hefce 2017a and 2017b). The picture gets very complicated when other demographic information is considered: students from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to drop out than those from more privileged backgrounds; whilst women and students with disabilities in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance are less likely to drop out (hefce 2017a and 2017b). Students with a label of specific learning difficulties (including dyslexia) continue to be the largest proportion of the disabled student body (and getting on for 6% of the overall UK domiciled higher education population, HESA 2016/17). We could not find figures relating to students who were both 'black or minority ethnic' and dyslexic, though even if available, these would have been misleading due to the likelihood of underrepresentation of 'black or minority ethnic' students in categories such as dyslexia and autism (the considered 'property right' of white middle-class students' Gillborn, 2016: 50).

As many studies in the academic tradition do, we have presented the numerical picture first to present one broad-sweep perspective, but agree with David Gillborn that statistics can be used as a way to mask injustice (Gillborn 2008:14), and can serve to situate the 'problems' of educational participation within individual students. The statistical story constructs differences in enrolment, attendance and attainment as 'technical problems that are amenable to diagnosis and appropriate remedies' (Collins and Bilge 2016: 164) without recognition of structurally embedded elitism; it also implies that the answer is simply to get more underprivileged people into the elite academy, which is not in itself emancipatory (Giroux 2011) and is arguably more about the capitalist agenda than a desire for greater fairness (Mirza 2009: 120). Attending to the numbers or to the degree classifications students receive can serve to hide the elements of everyday educational experience for black and minority ethnic students, which are not measurable or boxable, but complex, situated, sometimes subtle, and inseparable from the wider political context (Gabriel 2000). We (as educators, policy makers, students and researchers) should not be 'seduced' by the selective picture these numbers paint, and we should be equally wary of the use of this picture to support the lack of urgent action on institutional racism (Pilkington 2013). When we do refer to the statistical picture, we might better refer to 'educational debt' instead of the 'achievement gap', in recognition of the discursive power such terms can have (Mendoza, et. al. 2016: 75). The design of this small study was chosen, therefore, to allow for exploration of the subtleties of experience for black or minority ethnic dyslexic students within elite higher education spaces designed around a 'white', 'able' norm.

There is increasing attention in some academic fields to the experiences of black and minority ethnic students in western education which offers a counter-narrative to the story of numbers. Much of this work has progressed alongside Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw et. al. 1995; Delgado and Stefanic 2012), and Black Feminist approaches to research (Collins 2009). In such research, feeling out-of-place has emerged as a common theme in the lives of black or minority ethnic people in 'white' institutions: (e.g. Ahmed 2012 and 2017; Dortch and Patel 2017; Puwar 2004). Alongside this is both recognition that black students are locked out of the loops of privilege which help to carry many white students along their route to 'success' (Roithmayr 2014); and attention to the interlocking consequences of lower teacher expectations for black students (Gillborn et. Al. 2012; Osler 1999; Tomlinson, 2016), with pressures for black students to perform or resist particular racialised ways-of-being in and out of the classroom (Abdi 2014; Morris 2016).

There is evidence in the literature that students identified with specific learning difficulties (including dyslexia) experience particular challenges to participation in higher education: these are commonly presented in the literature as to do with difficulties with study strategies, assessment, reading and writing, organisation, and confidence (Farmer, Riddick and Sterling, 2002; Mortimore and Crozier 2006) and are often explained through reference to theories of cognitive deficit (see Nicolson and Fawcett 2008 for an overview). Being labelled with dyslexia means encountering particular assumptions about one's learning, literacy and intelligence in formal educational contexts (Collinson 2010; Cameron and Billington 2015a). In the field of critical psychology and disability studies, there is more research which looks beyond the cognitive to conceptualise the difficulties dyslexic students experience as products of the selectively disabling discourses dominant in western education; that is, those discourses which tie 'literacy' to morality and 'intelligence', and which situate 'success' and 'failure' within the individual (Cameron 2016; Cameron and Billington 2015a and 2015b; Collinson 2010; Madriaga 2007); and here the parallels and overlaps between ablism(s) and racism(s) in education are visible. That is, both ableism and racism can be understood as 'normalising processes that are interconnected and collusive…racism validates and reinforces ableism, and ableism validates and reinforces racism.' (Annamma et al. 2013: 6).

The concept of intersectionality; that is, 'the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in various settings' (Delgado and Stefanic, 2012) has been a useful one in research which explores the educational experiences of students of colour. Race and gender and ability do not operate independently, 'but build on each other and work together' (Collins and Bilge 2016:4). That is, being both a woman and black in western higher education means coming up against particular assumptions and barriers specific to the interplay between constructions of 'gender' and Race' (see Dortch and Patel 2017; Gibson and Espino 2016). Social class likewise intersects with race and gender to weave further nuanced patterns of experience (Rollock 2012; Ferri and Conner 2010). The literature is noticeably quieter on the ways in which 'race' and 'dyslexia' can intersect for students (Hoyles and Hoyles 2010, though, have made an attempt at this). However, there is a growing interest more broadly in intersections between 'race' and 'disability': 'DisCrit' studies is a field exploring the intersections of 'race' and 'disability' to show how 'racisms and ableism inform and rely upon each other in interdependent ways' (Annamma et al. 2013; Connor et al. 2016). The position held in the current research is that institutional racism, sexism, classism, and ableism collaborate in the subtle devaluation of individuals outside of the white, able, male norm and they do so in collusion with neoliberalist

ideology and meritocratic myth (e.g. Collins and Bilge 2016; Cameron and Billington 2015a; Law 2017; Phoenix 2009; Ferri and Connor 2010).

Methodology, data collection, and analysis

This study is based upon the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). It purposefully attends to the detail of a small number of participants in order to allow for an in-depth, nuanced analysis of experience with reference to the intersections of race, dis/ability, class, and gender. The aim was not to generalise from the experiences of our participants, Riya and Evelyn (not their real names), but to finely interrogate the accounts and sense-making of their personal everyday experiences (after Smith 2011) as gathered via journal and interview.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is recognised as a useful approach to research within the tradition of critical race theory (Ahmed 2012) because it allows for careful attention to the minutiae of everyday experiences often overlooked by larger studies and helps to locate the broader view from the 'margins' (Rollock 2016). It also recognises that researchers are in-the-world and of-the world, and that their experiences and positions will necessarily shape the interpretations they make of others' stories and reflections (Larkin, Watts and Clifton 2006).

We invited students at one 'elite' university in England who (had been) both identified as 'black or minority ethinic', and as dyslexic to take part in the study. We asked the two participants (Riya and Evelyn) who chose to take part to keep a personal journal for a period of three weeks during semester time. Here they made a note of where they were, what was happening, how they were feeling/ what it was like, and why they thought they felt like this. The journal entries acted as a starting point for the interview discussions. We decided that Xxxxxx would conduct the interviews. This was largely because we felt that, as women of colour, our participants would feel more comfortable sharing personal experiences, which were likely to touch on 'race', with another woman of colour.

Xxxxxx drew upon the journal reflections in shaping her questions using the following format (or similar): 'In your journal you wrote about……; please can you tell me more about that?'. Xxxxxx built in follow-up questions as appropriate. YYYYYYY transcribed the interviews, and undertook the initial (more descriptive) analysis of the transcribed data. This involved brief 'coding' of each line or sentence of text which took the form of a short word or phrase to describe what was

happening or what the participant said they were feeling. Our analysis moved gradually from the more descriptive, to the more overtly interpretative. As we shifted our attention from the descriptive to more conceptual or linguistic elements, we asked how Evelyn and Riya made sense of what they were feeling, and how we made sense of the sense they made of what they were feeling? We met as researchers to share our evolving analyses, to note points of convergence and divergence in one another's interpretations, and to combine and question our insights. Throughout this process we held in mind the circular, 'hermeneutic', approach to phenomenological analysis; in other words, we moved from attention to a particular detail within a conversation, to the interview as a whole, to the broader context, and back again to the detail (see Smith 2004). Our different lived experiences clearly led to some different interpretations; however, we often found we had moved towards similar points in the text and had scribbled similar comments in the transcript margins. Our joint exploration eventually brought us into agreement on the construction of two key themes (see below). The themes were constructed to present those elements we identified as common to both participants, with attention to the ways in which these common experiences were differently nuanced; as well as to elements of experience which were not shared.

This research was granted ethical approval by a suitable higher education institution.

About the participants and their participation

Evelyn and Riya were both studying at an elite UK university, in male-dominated, techno-scientific departments on courses leading to professional accreditation in white-male-dominated, elite occupations. Both women held their education in high esteem, wanted to do 'well', and had been studying hard. Both women talked about falling behind, being slow compared to their peers; both experienced some element of self-doubt and a feeling of not belonging; both talked in some way about not looking or sounding 'right' in certain learning spaces. However, whilst they were both visible as black or minority ethnic women, and both experienced difficulties with certain aspects of academic literacy, Riya and Evelyn came from notably different socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Riya was of South Asian heritage, and she described herself as coming from a 'disadvantaged' background. Her studies were financed through funding allocated to economically disadvantaged students. Growing up, Riya had lived in a number of different countries due to the high unemployment rate in her British hometown, and English was not her first language. Evelyn, in contrast, was brought up in relative privilege. She had attended a private school in England, and English was her first language. Evelyn described

herself as 'mixed' racially, though at one point in the interview discussion she also used the word 'black' in relation to herself in a particular educational context.

Findings and reflexive discussion

We have chosen to present the students' lived-experience under two themed headings only: 'Why does that happen?' and 'Should I be here?'. Under the first heading 'Why does that happen?' we draw attention to the ways in which Riya and Evelyn try to understand why they find certain educational spaces and activities particularly hard, and how they make sense of their own, and others', assumptions and reactions. Under the second heading 'Should I be here?' we shift the focus to Riya and Evelyn's perceptions of whether, or how well they 'fit' the academic or professional 'ideal'. It is here we recognise some of the intersectional labour; that is, we discuss the discursive 'work' surrounding the categories of personhood constructed for Riya and Evelyn.

Transcription guidance:
… = removed section of text
[]] = overlaps in conversation
Underlining = unexpected spoken emphasis

Why does that happen?

> *I'm constantly arguing with myself hahaha…I'm like trying to figure out what's rational and what's not rational. haha. Um.*

(Riya)

Sometimes, Riya and Evelyn felt they found aspects of their study particularly hard; sometimes they connected these difficulties to dyslexia, or dyslexic-type characteristics. For example, both participants talked about difficulties with time: difficulties keeping up in class, difficulties meeting deadlines, difficulties in reading quickly or in reading enough, difficulties taking notes in time, difficulties in processing information or understanding what someone has said quickly as those around them. In her diary, Evelyn wrote about her dread of her first lab class, which she explained in the interview: "cos like, I'm just so slow at, like, understanding things…it always takes me around to get my head around stuff." Ordering information, breaking it down and drawing information out of text is something Evelyn says she has difficulty with: "I just really struggle". Likewise, Riya wanted to use the writing support available, but said, "I just never get

time"; she often found herself working in the studio right up to "the last minute" despite "starting early" and being frustrated with herself for missing deadlines. Unsurprisingly, in a competitive, neoliberal university, both Riya and Evelyn frequently compared themselves negatively to their peers in terms of their speed and understanding. Evelyn, for example, said "just, I do feel like people just absorb information quicker than me and understand it faster than me". However, Riya and Evelyn also spent significant effort wondering about other reasons for their experienced difficulties. For example, Riya wondered if it was "just me as a person"; or whether it might have been something to do with her cultural or ethnic background: she asked, "what's wrong? Is it just because of where I'm coming from?". She also wondered whether her difficulties were more about her socio-economic disadvantage, which she felt meant she could not travel the world to view first-hand the different approaches to design, or whether it was all down to a system not constructed for her. Trying so hard to understand why things were not going well on her course was exhausting for Riya. She appeared to be always torn between knowing she was structurally disadvantaged, but worrying that her difficulties were still her fault.

Riya talked about her experience of studying in different spaces: she recognised it was important that she spend a good deal of time in the design-studios at university, where there is equipment and support, and where much of the course work progresses, but this was not an easy place for Riya to be. Riya was hard on herself for not going into university study places more often, and tried to make sense of her preference as to do with comfort and convenience:

> Riya: *I know I should be working in studio like, a lot, do a lot of time, but I usually stay in my room, which is the worst thing I could do.*
>
> Xxxxxx: *hahaha why do you do it?*
>
> Riya*: I, because it's quiet, and all my stuff, all my stuff is in there. I hate hate carrying things to (the studio) and and then you know, before you get, for your food, in like, my kitchen, like, well, you cook the food in your kitchen and want to stay at home, but if I'm like in here, I'll usually have to buy it….. It's just distance, just convenience that I like. I think it's just an environment thing, like where should I, where do I work the best? and this year didn't work out as well… If I had stayed in the studio my semester, would probably have least got a decent, I would have been slightly happier.*

In the extract above, Riya understands that being 'successful' on her course means spending time in the design-studio at university, yet she found she often stayed at home, in her room. She is in some ways happier studying at home, yet paradoxically, reflects that she would have been 'happier' had she spent more time in the studio. In these extracts she explains her 'choice' about where to study with reference to her preference for the 'quiet' and the 'convenience' of home, and the additional cost of buying food, rather than cooking it; but there is arguably more going on here. Riya's experience in university spaces appeared to be shaped by a number of different intersecting characteristics; the departmental learning spaces were populated by mostly white, mostly male, and mostly highly socio-economically privileged students; the course required high productivity, adherence to tight deadlines, and it nurtured peer-competition; being 'worldly', confident, and well-off appeared to be necessary for success. In seeking reasons for difficulty, Riya turns first to blame herself for opting for the 'convenience' of home as the place she feels she works the best, and she then regrets this with the statement that if she had stayed in studio, she would have got a 'decent [grade, result]'. She connects this to a potentially 'happier' self, and in doing so also situates the fault for her unhappiness with her own 'choice' to stay at home. There is a no-win situation for Riya in this: by being in studio she is presented more directly with the material, social and ideological pressures which limit her participation, yet at home, where she feels somewhat protected from these, her access to human and technical support, and indirectly to the potential for a sense of belonging, is cut off. Our interpretation of Riya's experiences led us to consider certain university spaces as particularly hard for a female, black or minority ethnic student to be in. We noted her following words about whom she felt more comfortable with on her course:

> Riya*: I feel more comfortable when there's brown people, yeah, more ethnic diversity…If it's just the white people and me, I I was less, say, say, … I would feel a bit freaky unless I have a good set of experiences and I don't know.*

Riya said she felt that if she had had better grades, she would have been more confident in these circumstances. And we also noted her following words about feeling 'left out':

> Riya: *I feel very, I don't know if I feel like, I don't know if I feel left out, sometimes, but, I feel like everyone's really intelligent. Everyone has really good experience and I feel like I'm the only one who is from a disadvantaged background.*

In the extracts given above, Riya talks through and tries to make sense of her feelings about university spaces. She recognises that how 'freaky' she feels as a 'brown' person in a white space is mediated by the ways in which she is positioned as someone without 'good grades', and the confidence that can go with these, and as someone from a disadvantaged background who has not had access to "really good experience". Nirmal Puwar's concept of 'space invaders' is useful here: spaces are not neutral, but historically and ideologically shaped; 'spaces become marked as territories belonging to particular bodies' (Puwar 2004: 141). Riya's position as an 'invader' in the studio space is arguably 'contradictory and tenuous' (after Puwar 2004: 119), as well as tiring ("I need a holiday, that's what I need, to not be bogged down, you know, about all of these issues…" - Riya).

In the same breath as intimating others' superior 'intelligence', Riya makes connections to intersections of class, and to what is 'good' (and thus what is, in contrast, 'bad'). She appears to be battling with discourses which construct 'intelligence' as an individual's natural characteristic, which is something tutors and other students seem to have, and with those which acknowledge the roles of the social, economic and cultural in deciding what 'intelligence' looks like. However, although in one sense a 'space invader', and so discursively constructed as out-of-place, her tolerated presence may serve to confirm the superiority of her white male peers. That is, Riya's tutors' and peers' superior 'intelligence' in fact relies upon the inferiority of others' 'intelligence' for its existence and meaning (Ranciere 1987/1991:6).

In exploring answers to the question 'why does that happen?' one thread through Riya's talk is her idea of 'right' and 'good' as types of experience, intelligence, people and talk she sets up in contrast to the types of experience or intelligence she has, the person she is, and the way she talks. One example of this is Riya's discussion about not having the 'right' words when she speaks:

> Riya : *I'm not putting it in the right words [but]*
> Xxxxxx*:* *[you] <u>are</u> putting it in the right words*
>
> Riya: *yeah. Um, so yeah, um.*
>
> Xxxxxx: *it's interesting that you say "I'm not putting in the right words" cos you said that a lot in your writing. That you feel like your words are not <u>right</u>. Do you think that you started to feel that you weren't clear when you started your course, or have you always*

felt like that? Like your words are not right?

Riya*: I've always felt like that to be honest, because, especially when I am in the groups, I'll always end end up saying something I try, I don't want to say, or not not want to say, it just doesn't sound right, and I have to rephrase it, and and, if they, what happened I'd go back by myself and tell myself that I'm stupid? [sort of thing]*

Xxxxxx: *[mmhmm]*

Riya: *so.*

Xxxxxx: *but do other people in the group say, oh Riya, what does that mean, or? What does [that mean? I don't understand you?]*

Riya: *[yeah. Sometimes, yeah.]*

L: *ok. yeah. hmmmm.*

R: *and they usually say I'm quiet, and then I'll have to raise my voice and then sometimes, there is the case I don't understand, and I like, sometimes I ask questions and, and I ask, I've been told to say it again or rephrase it, which is like hhhrrr*

Riya talks about her words not sounding 'right' in terms of volume, clarity, and control over what she says, and she connects this to a feeling that she is 'stupid'. Similar feelings have been expressed by other (white) dyslexic students in university spaces (see Cameron 2016); but of particular interest to us was the way in which Riya's experience with difficulty getting her words out is tied to her positioning as a 'disadvantaged' racialised student whose 'voice' is otherwise set apart from the voices of her wealthy, white, peers. Riya's accent marks her out as someone for whom English is not a first language; moreover, Riya implies that, because she has not had the financial and cultural capital her peers have experienced, she has less to talk about, or that she has little of value to add to a conversation. In combination with the subtle speech difficulties dyslexic students sometimes experience (Stackhouse 2006), Riya is subject to the covert racism and elitism which position her voice as less valid and valued in elite higher educational spaces. Below is an additional extract which illustrates this connection:

> Riya: *it's funny cos like orig, like because every time I do presentations um, I my words just doesn't come out right. Always sound weird, or, I just sound like I have a lack of confidence or I have very little to say, really little to say, you know, elaborate, hhr I just, you know, I don't really know how to, yet…..um, it's been like last year was like that. I said stuff, but I said it very little. And I felt like, uurrgh, you should like elaborate, but I don't know how to, and I still struggle with that.*

Although Riya was very conscious of her visibility as a (dyslexic) woman with brown skin in her department, when she spoke, she became yet more visible as someone 'other'; someone who sounded 'weird'. However, by speaking less, she felt she was still marked out as less confident and capable. Again, Riya finds there is no way to escape her positioning as less-than, as either to speak or not to speak interacts with her own and her peers' assumptions about race, (dis)ability and (in)competence. The social confidence which might have helped Riya to cope with word-slips which can accompany dyslexia is undermined via the surrounding swirl of intersecting discourses and positionings which together construct what a woman with brown skin and a not-quite-place-able accent is expected to say and do within an elite-white-male dominated technical learning space. 'Cultural boundaries are drawn around who belongs or not. The way you speak, the way you look, the way you dress…' (Mirza 2009: 45). Language has a particular power in marking out what belongs to whom and who belongs where. 'To speak a language is to take on a world' (Fanon [1952] 2008: 25), and for Riya, fully belonging to her departmental community demanded mastery of the particular language of the elite white university, as well as the 'right' skin, and gender.

If we turn back to Riya's talk about her choice to study at home, rather than in the studio with the understanding that to speak in the studio space means to become super-visible in the ways we have suggested, our understanding that home is more comfortable, as well as less expensive and more convenient, becomes more nuanced and urgent (the preference for, and the avoidance of, certain learning environments over others for racialised students is a recognised issue in the literature, e.g. Ahmed 2012; Mirza 2009)

For Evelyn, on the other hand, the practical element of her learning alongside peers was something she was enjoying, and gaining confidence in; nevertheless, she noted that she stood

out, and spent some time wondering why this might be, and as for Riya, she talked about others' reactions to her speech and her skin colour. Below is an example extract.

> Xxxxxx: *and then you said "this is something I'm quite sensitive about because people tend to assume that I'm from a slightly more deprived background than I actually am. I believe this could be because of my accent and the colour of my skin."*
>
> Evelyn: *yeah.*
>
> Xxxxxx: *How did you kind of, come to that?*
>
> Evelyn: *we, I was just, so, everyone's always like, "oh, you went to private school?" Like "Oh, you you live in quite a nice, well, not so much you live in a nice area", but people tend to be surprised that I'm not from like a slightly less, deprived background, and I don't think I come across that badly, and I don't think my accent's that bad, like, I know I have a (Southern English) accent but, it's never struck me as, never before, it's until I came to university that I realised people saw me in a different way than I saw myself, it's like the first, just a few comments were made like, oh, 'XXX'* and I'm like I'm <u>not</u> I'm really not like that, and I don't know why people saw, why people see me like that, and I thought well, the only difference is that I am like mixed race, so maybe it's that. I don't know why, or maybe it's the way I come across, I don't know, it could be a compliment, like I don't come across as pretentious, but then then again, like I don't think a lot of my friends come across as pretentious, but they still come across as you know, well-educated.*

**(term to describe people with a strong Southern English accent of this sort: masked for reasons of confidentiality)*

Evelyn spoke with a gentle Southern English accent, indistinguishable from the accent of many of the students at her university. In her diary entries and in her interview talk, Evelyn was perplexed by others' attention to the way she spoke, and by their assumption that she would be disadvantaged. There seemed to be a disproportionate interest in her background, along with the barely concealed confusion of white peers trying to reshape Evelyn to fit a stereotype of a

poor black girl. As for Riya, Evelyn is forced to rethink about herself, and to question her speech: “I don’t think I come across that badly, and I don’t think my accent’s that bad.” The talk of ‘bad’ (versus ‘good’?) mirrors Riya’s, and opens the doors to further self-categorisation according to ‘goods’ and ‘bads’, ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’. In a way she says she had never had to before, Evelyn “realised people saw me in a different way than I saw myself…”. As student who also experienced difficulties with speed of processing and with some aspects of academic literacy, it appeared particularly difficult to pin down explanations for odd or perplexing reactions; and here Evelyn again echoes Riya in her efforts to try to work out why she is having the experiences she is: “I don’t know why people saw, why people see me like that…”. She wonders if it could be this, or could be that, and yet she is left wondering why others who have a similar accent are not similarly picked out, and are assumed to be well-educated. Evelyn is arguably recounting experiences of microaggressions, ‘a form of systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place’ which are ‘layered, cumulative and often subtle and unconscious’, and which are mediated via institutional racism and rooted by white supremacy (Pérez -Huber and Solorzano 2015:302).

Reflections: in conversation, Xxxxxx and YYYYYYY

> Xxxxxx: *The one thing that I know is that this project has taught me to protect myself. Sitting here scrolling through this, my heart is pounding so hard. Experience of this project has re-taught me an invaluable lesson, listen. Listen to your Self, listen to your heart, listen to your gut. There is a feeling that I have known since I was very little, a feeling that your very being is under scrutiny within certain spaces especially white, (upper) middle class spaces in which the people have generally been raised to believe that they are more civilised, more educated and well versed in all that is perceived as good in the world.*
>
> YYYYYYY: *Yes – when we talked together about our separate initial analysis of the transcripts, I was hit by how personal this was for you; how you were not able to undertake research like this, and then simply go home without metaphorically carrying it with you. We could both be equally engaged in the research process, but not equally exhausted by it.*

Xxxxxx: *My experience listening to the participants for this project was painful. I slept more than I have ever slept, I began to frequently remind myself that that my Life was valuable and that if I allowed it, the said life would soon become the property of an institution that was never built for me, nor anyone of African descent, nor any other background that is not western European.*

YYYYYYY: *And meanwhile, for me as a teacher within higher education, my easy membership in an institution is not something I ever had to recognise. I can choose not to see the barriers and microaggressions faced by students and staff of colour.*

Xxxxxx: *A student who does not look like or sound like the expected (read: white British, middle class, non-regional accent) student within such an institution is inevitably going to face microaggressions that are often difficult to explain. As a result, certain groups will often stick together. Most people prefer ease, comfort and it can be extremely uncomfortable to try to share your experience with friends who want to dismiss or make light of the painful nature of being shut out of something that you have every right to access. The British way of shutting out what is perceived to be "other" is to incrementally and subtlety silence the voice and therefore the self-worth of the subject. Often times the student doesn't even realise that this is happening until they start to question themselves with the all too familiar "maybe it's just me" or "it might just be in my head."*

YYYYYYY: *which is exactly what our participating students started to question!*

Xxxxxx: *Yes, and, if there is no support network in place to enable that student to find the light in those experiences, a place of shared laughter and solace, they can be at risk of dropping out or worse still becoming isolated but seemingly coping because their work is being submitted.*

Should I be here?

[P] eople look at you and they're like 'she's not serious about this' or 'she's not going to be a good (professional)'.

(Evelyn)

The discussion under this theme brings together some of the ways in which Riya and Evelyn questioned their belonging in university spaces and in their chosen future professions. Although Riya and Evelyn are again separated by differences in self-perception of their abilities, and enjoyment of the course, they nevertheless follow similar discursive tracks in their recognition that (white) university (techno-design focused) spaces hold certain expectations for what a 'successful' student or professional looks and sounds like; and that being black or brown, and female, isn't it; and neither is it one who may struggle fundamentally with the pressure of multiple and overlapping deadlines, and who may not find it as easy to perform an idealised articulate confidence through particular forms of written and spoken English.

We begin this time by introducing an extract in which Evelyn recounts an experience she had in a practical class:

> Evelyn: … *so, it's just, so we did um, we had a project, and um, we just had to (complete a technically complicated task), and it was really hard, and a lot of people struggled on it, and there was this final step that most people couldn't do, and about like a few, and like say about twenty percent of people did it, and I'm like, I was one of the twenty percent that did it, and I was really happy with myself, and we we were talking about how difficult it was, and I hadn't said whether I had done it or not, and the guy just assumed I hadn't and he goes, 'well, you've still got time to um, to try it' and I went, 'oh, that's fine, I've done it'. It's the fact he assumed that I wouldn't have been able to do it, and like, he didn't say that to anyone else, he just said that to me. yeah.*

Evelyn's experience of having others on her course assume she is less capable than she is is one that repeats itself. Evelyn found this immensely frustrating: "when I do well, people always act surprised", and she continued,

> *I'm like, 'why are you surprised?' like, I never said that I wasn't good at it, I never said anything, yeah and there's that added pressure that people assume that I'm bad that I am going to be bad, so if I make a mistake, it's going to prove them right, so I have to work harder to prove them wrong…*

Evelyn felt this experience was a lot to deal with gender expectations, which she had to continually work to exceed. These expectations came from her tutors as well as her peers:

> *They (tutors) always assume that the guy is better than you. And some guys, the way they talk to me is that they always assume they know more than me…*

In instances where Evelyn did find something hard to understand, it appeared that tutors easily positioned this as to be expected, and quickly compared her to male peers whom they seemed to naturally assume would be able to understand more easily: 'my tutor said, and she was like, "of course", "of course he gets it"…' or her male partner in class. In other words, if we recognise that students identified with dyslexia are often students who can take slightly longer to process and sequence information, and to articulate ideas through academic speech and writing, we begin to see a recipe for complexity in the ways in which a student is perceived when these differences are judged in an interaction in which negative assumptions about gender, race and ability are meshed. Evelyn has to work harder not only to be considered the equal of white male peers, but she has to do this whilst having a learning difference which in some ways plays into the implicit stereotypes of race and gender she is also subject to.

Evelyn appeared to be very aware of the ways in which others positioned her, and it was upsetting. Of her white, male peers, she understood "yeah, they just turn up, they just turn up and they're like, 'oh: you look like a (professional)'". Such underestimation of female students of colour in male-dominated fields is discussed in depth by Sheree Gibson and Michelle Espino's (2016) in their work with black female engineering students. These students, as for Evelyn, were 'resigned to proving themselves as competent to their peers and faculty' and were very aware that their male peers assumed they were less able (Gibson and Espino 2016: 56 and 64). In recognising the discourses at play here, Evelyn was able to push back, and to some degree step out of the position offered to her. Her confidence, and achievement on her course were invaluable in this. Riya, however, likely subject to the same assumptions, did not appear to share Evelyn's confidence and was not reaching desired levels of achievement. Without the confidence to resist, and with waning energy levels, Riya appeared to return more consistently to herself as the problem. If, as Evelyn noted, "[B]eing a black woman, people assume that you're not as well-educated, or from a slightly more working class than you actually are", and they assume that you are unlikely to be very capable, Riya's 'disadvantaged background' and dyslexic-type difficulties are likely to have been interpreted by her peers and tutors as not unexpected. In turn, Riya is also unsurprised, as her situation confirms for her that she does not

fit and does not have enough confidence or sufficient access to the 'right' kind of cultural knowledge to find her place.

Riya appeared to be moving towards the conclusion that she wouldn't be able to succeed on her course: "I'm sort of losing, yeah, I'm sort of losing the hope to be honest…I feel like there's no point trying because, it just seems like people coming from a good background are more likely to excel. I feel like the system is more designed for them." Riya in fact had more experience than many of living in different countries and with different cultural and linguistic communities, yet this knowledge and experience was not treated as an asset for her design work; it was the 'wrong' kind of cultural capital. This is interpretable as one way the university 'excludes certain forms of knowledge and ways of knowing', even to its detriment (Gale at al. 2017: 15-16).

Riya returns to talk of 'good' and 'right', during which she becomes tied up in a discourse which constructs 'affluence' as 'good' and as something to connected to 'the right kind of people', and something she should feel lucky to be around: "I think I'm very lucky to be here." This produces a distressing tension within her own narrative between the pressure not to appear discriminatory or complaining towards her peers, and her frustration at the injustice of participating in a course at an institution that is set up for people with much greater privilege. However, there is also some suggestion that Riya sometimes starts to internalise the story that she as an individual is in some way deficient – the story that perhaps she just needs to try harder. If the position offered to her by a powerful institution and its representatives is consistently an inferior one, it is unsurprising that she begins to accept this identity. 'Those excluded from the world of intelligence themselves subscribe to the verdict of their exclusion' writes Jacques Ranciere ([1987]1991: 16), and we recognised this as in our analysis of Riya's talk. Riya knows that she has not had access to the very things which have helped her peers to gain experiences which are valued by the department, and she knows the system is not set up with her in mind, yet she is bound by a feeling that she is flawed, that she should be grateful and recognise how lucky she is to be alongside what is 'nice' and 'right':

> Riya: *Everyone's coming from really nice, affluent backgrounds as far as I can see, um, we've been really lucky to be with the right kind of people, and I find it really hard to put myself together, feel like I belong somewhere, because they don't really coming from the same kind of environment as me, so…*

The feeling of not-fitting, not belonging, is explored in detail by Sara Ahmed in her self-reflections upon her own student experience: 'it was an experience of not being white, of being made into a stranger, the one who is recognised as "out of place," the one who does not belong, whose proximity is registered as crime of threat.' (Ahmed 2012: 2). But also relevant here is the restricted access to what is 'good' and 'right' and 'nice' for the 'non-white stranger'. 'Goodness' becomes 'ideological property' of white people (Broderick and Leonardo, 2016: 57) and something which under white supremacy the student of colour may apparently be permitted to mimic, but not to own.

In the non-semester periods of the year, Riya goes home to what she describes as a disadvantaged area, which she finds depressing, and at home, she said 'I don't have those kind of um, I don't have the right people to go around and travelling' with, and she connects this to not being able to "talk about stuff, you know, normal things. I'm usually quiet, and I don't know what to say". In terms of socio-economic background, gender, and ethnicity, Riya feels she stands out, and within the department she says 'I feel like I'm the only one'. Within the broader profession, Riya does not know of any woman from her background who is practising. Riya was apparently wondering whether it was worth being on her course at all.

Evelyn had the cultural and linguistic resources to push back against some of the sexist and racist assumptions she came across, though with great effort:

> *I worked really hard with my tutor group to like, and being really quite vocal in my, during the tutor group, to prove that I am, that I'm like, right for this degree and I'm worthy to study it…*

But for Riya, this route was not an option, because she did not have access to privileged ways of talking, and was thus not able as easily to signal her 'worth'. Evelyn recognised that it was not fair that the women on the course had to prove they deserved their place in a way that men did not:

> *I think it's unf, I really think it's unfair that other, cos there're going to be other girls like me that are doing exactly the same thing.*

And although Evelyn had found that eventually "people do change their minds about you, and they treat you like a normal, like every other (professional), like they would treat a male (professional)" , she nevertheless still experienced episodes of self-doubt about whether or not she could become a successful professional.

> Evelyn: *what is this going to be like if I want to go into industry, like if I fall behind, and it's like bad for the company, and like, i could, I might not lose my job, but I mean, it might make it hard for me, to still like it. I just, yeah, I just don't like, I don't like being behind. I want to keep up with everyone. Yeah, and it's annoying when you've tried hard, and maybe someone else isn't trying as hard, but then you're still behind. there's nothing you can do …*

It is likely for any student undertaking a challenging university course to wonder at some point 'should I be here?' but our position in this research is that female students of colour who have specific difficulties with certain aspects of literacy and processing of information at speed (SpLDs or dyslexia) experience disadvantage in certain learning environments which is greater than the sum of the '-isms' which make up those discriminatory parts (Mirza 2009). In other words, certain forms and performances of western 'literacy' are ideologically tied to perceptions of 'goodness' and 'rightness' and 'intelligence', which are dynamically bound to the discursive constructions of women and black or brown bodies as the evidence for (and contrasts to) the 'goodness' and 'rightness' and 'intelligence' of white, male bodies. There are racialised positions which appear to counter these binaries, such as the popular caricature of the Asian 'nerd' (Saran 2015) or the 'model minority' (Mirza 2009:30), but the 'intelligence' here is discursively attached to docility and social inadequacy, and for Riya, this stereotype presents yet another identity which she has fallen short of: "Although I do sound like hhh I'm a very nerdy person, but, um, no, cos not kind of doing so well."

Reflections: in conversation, Xxxxxx and YYYYYYY

> YYYYYYY: *I remember you said to me how white people tended to relax after they heard you speak with a 'nice' English accent, as if that somehow made them forget you were black. When I open my mouth in academic spaces, I'm often heard as not having an 'accent'; and I am often surprised how little people question whether or not I have my facts right. I think they maybe assume I am right.*

> Xxxxxx: *There is a way in which white English ears seem to pay attention to a middle class southern accent. This has inevitably crossed the seas on which the colonisers imported this mind set into every nation in which they settled. Subsequently, ears in Sri Lanka will be attuned to the very same accent discrimination as would ears in Somerset in England. I was always very aware of this both in employed posts and as a student. There is a reaction, a very unsubtle reaction, that appears to be both irritancy and lust all at once. There is a definite frustration, which one may surmise to be rooted in the experiences of European attempts to enslave the African experience. The lust and hatred dichotomy has long hovered over the experiences of European gaze of people of colour but how this manifests in an academic setting is often no different to how it plays out in any other context. Why would it be? Accents hold currency in countries that have been built on the profits of colonisation; for those seen to be the products of such a history their speaking with such affectation will always give rise to visceral responses within their respective institutions. How such students navigate those waters is an often, subconscious survival skill that can take its toll on some more than others.*

Conclusions

Riya and Evelyn had been led to question the ways in which they were seen and valued by peers and tutors, and to wonder whether or not they belonged, or could belong in their chosen field. Moreover, these experiences were prominent, frequent, and at times exhausting. Whilst Evelyn had more positive experience in comparison to Riya, this did not result in escape from racialised, and gendered assumptions around her abilities and worth. This work chimes with the work of authors within the DisCrit field who recognise the importance of attention in research to 'routine interactions' as sites for the reproduction of 'common sense beliefs about ability, race and racialised communities' (Mendoza et. al. 2016). It also highlights some of the ways in which 'goodness' can come to be seen as the 'property' of some and not others and can become 'a mode through which dis/abling occurs' (Broderick and Leonardo 2016: 56).

This research is a tentative step towards understanding some of the experiences at the intersections between 'specific learning disability', 'sex', and 'race' in higher education in the UK. It is also a story of the potential value, the risk, and the uneven emotional labour attached to undertaking race-centred work in a black-white partnership. It is a story of hearing and not-

hearing. The words of authors Dagmar Alexander and Jonathan Wyatt taken from their own reflections upon the collaborative process between each other, between themselves and the research participants, and between themselves and the recorded words of participants are fitting here:

> *We always fail. That's what comes to me now as I reread your words. We always fail in the sense that we can never claim "fullness," can never "do justice" to those whom we bring onto the page. Nor do justice to each other. Like now: This will fail. This will fail you. It will be something but never enough and always too much.*

(Alexander & Wyatt, 2018: 106)

Sara Ahmed writes '[T]hose of us who arrive in an academy that was not shaped by or for us bring knowledges, as well as worlds, that otherwise would not be here.' (2017). We find in this research what students of colour already know, that is, that these knowledges and worlds are actively, if unknowingly, devalued in the often unremarkable, unnoticed mundanity of the everyday.

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Details of changes to paper for clarity on resubmission

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1. We have changed the word 'are' to 'can be' on p. 3, as per the advice of reviewer 1:

(statistics ***can be*** used to mask injustice)

2. We have added 2 new extracts on p.2 and pages 21-22 in red. These additions respond to the comments of the second reviewer who asked us to consider our collaboration as authors a little further.

3. We have added 2 new references to support no. 2 above.

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