White Atmosphere and pedagogic violence: female Muslim graduate's experiences on an undergraduate degree in a Russell Group university.

"I'm not saying how staff treat 'them' just generally the atmosphere I do think that some people feel left out and isolated just because they're a bit different". Samiyah

Abstract

This chapter draws upon qualitative interviews with recent Muslim graduates from the Sociology programme of a Russell Group university. It brings together Bohme's (2017) theory of atmospheres as arenas with certain emotionally charged moods with Matusov and Sullivan's (2019) account of pedagogical violence to reflect upon the graduates' experience of university, its learning environment and assessment. It will show how the 'White atmosphere' of the university, in learning and non-learning contexts, and its pedagogic violence in the forms of summative assessment, epistemological pedagogical violence produce isolation and disenchantment with education for Muslim students. This has the potential for diverse outcomes in terms of future careers. The chapter will analyse recent empirical data using theoretical resources that are new to or rarely used in this area.

Introduction

This chapter draws upon qualitative interviews with recent Muslim graduates from one department of a Russell Group[1] university. It brings together Bohme's (2017) theory of atmospheres as arenas with certain emotionally charged moods with Matusov and Sullivan's (2020) account of pedagogical violence to reflect upon the graduates' experience of university, its learning environment and assessment. It will show how the 'White atmosphere' of the university, in learning and non-learning contexts, and its pedagogic violence in the forms of summative assessment, epistemological pedagogical violence and students' ambivalence around pedagogical violence produce isolation and disenchantment with education for Muslim students, with the potential for diverse outcomes in terms of future careers. The chapter analyses this empirical data using theoretical resources that are new to or rarely used in this area.

Principally framed by the theory of atmospheres and pedagogical violence we also draw upon discussions of the 'racial economy of emotions' (Bonilla-Silva, 2019) and the

[1] The Russell Group is a consortium of twenty-four world-class, research-intensive universities in the United Kingdom.

pedagogical self (Harris et al, 2017). Each of these has its own scope and limitations, but we argue are complementary for the purposes of our analysis. Part of our concern here, then, is drawing critically and reflexively on these wider theoretical developments in sociology and more generally how this might contribute to giving voice to Muslim students in developing a transformative critique of the White university.

The data was generated as part of a wider project on the first degree awarding gap between ethnically minoritised students and White British students in a Russell Group social science department. Institutional data showed that the department had a persistent awarding gap over several years and the department wished to understand the underlying reasons for this in terms of the experiences of a cohort of recent graduates (i.e., those that had graduated from the 2021 academic year) from ethnically minoritised backgrounds. They were thus part of the 'COVID-19 generation' of students, but that is not an aspect that we have the space to examine here. 18 out of the 22 graduates of colour participated in our interviews and these have helped us to understand the pervasive and negative impact exclusion and discrimination has on the student experience and their ability to achieve. Those interviewed were all UK Home students, and for the purposes of this chapter we have focused upon the experiences of the Muslim students, who all, incidentally, happened to be women. All but one originated in the local region, and their final degree classification were bifurcated between first class and third class/pending. Recorded qualitative interviews were conducted online by the first author of this chapter, all data have been anonymised and the interviewees given pseudonyms. The interviews were semi structured focusing upon school experiences, academic experiences and wider social lives at university. The data were analysed and coded thematically. Whilst much of what the female Muslim graduates experienced is discussed in this chapter, they framed it in more general terms of being religiously minoritised as Muslims along with other minorities. Some of this, specifically around alcohol or issues such as protests around Palestine and how some White non-Muslim graduates responded to these, were specifically Islamophobic. This raises an important theme of a sense of solidarity across different groups of ethnically minoritised students, whilst still recognising the specificities of the experiences of Muslim women.

The 'White atmosphere' of the university

The concept of atmospheres has in recent years become the focus of extended debate and elaboration (see e.g., Bohme, 2016; 2017a; 2017b; Griffero, 2014; 2017; Griffero and Moretti, 2018; Julmi, 2017; Low 2016). These contributors and others obviously all begin

from a recognition of the commonplace metaphor of the atmosphere of a place as communicating something real yet intangible to people, a mood that has an emotional impact on people (e.g., Bohme, 2017a: 2), yet there are divergences between them. They also have quite diverse origins and applications in critiques of ecological sciences (Bohme, 2017a: 1), aesthetics, architecture, organisation studies (e.g., Julmi, 2017) and urban sociology (Low 2016). For our purposes here, it seems a very useful way for thinking about the sense of intangible racism, sexism and Islamophobia that many feel in certain places and times and the emotional states that this produces in minoritised subjects (see e.g., Anderson, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Tate, 2016). Bohme's discussions have been criticised for suggesting a universal response to atmospheres (Low, 2016: 175) and therefore being Eurocentric. However, some using the concept have noted how the effectivity of atmospheres is dependent upon structural inequalities such as racism (e.g., Low, 2016: 177; Del Gurcio et al, 2018), and we would add, in this instance, Islamophobia.

Atmospheres are produced by the co-presence of people and things, and Bohme (e.g., 2016; 2017a; 2017b) in his various publications has emphasised how, although atmospheres are 'intangible', they have an emotional impact that people experience and are often capable of articulating this impact in some form. This is where we would like to draw out a connection between the debates around the concept of atmospheres with discussions of the 'racial economy of emotions' (Bonilla-Silva, 2019: 1). The White atmosphere of a university, such as the one where this study took place where Black, South Asian and Muslim students are visibly ethnically minoritised, resides not just in the 'difference' of the majority of students and staff, but also the everyday images, i.e., on the walls of departments and other public areas. There are some exceptions to this such as the recent development of large cohorts of taught postgraduate students from China, and the predominance of Black, South Asian, Muslim and East European support staff such as cleaners. Thus, the racialised and secular atmosphere of the university from our perspective impacts upon ethnically minoritised Muslim students emotionally. It enables 'race' to 'come to life' as Bonilla-Silva has expressed it: '… race cannot come to life without being infused with emotions, thus, racialized actors feel the emotional weight of their categorical location' (Bonilla-Silva, 2019: 2).

His discussion here is especially insightful for our argument as, although he does not reference the contemporary debates about atmospheres, he argues that racialised emotions: '… need not be the product of social interactions, [and] can surface from looking at a picture, reading a newspaper, watching a movie, or walking into – or even thinking about –

a location.' Bonilla-Silva, 2019: 2). The White atmosphere of the university, or even just recalling it in an online interview context, may generate racialised emotions, which in this context also have a religious aspect. Hence the discomfort felt and expressed (Bonilla-Silva, 2019: 12). A final theme of his discussion of the racialised economy of emotions that we explore below is how racialised emotions are ambivalent (Bonilla-Silva, 2019: 13). Whilst the Muslim female graduates described to us were feelings of alienation, loneliness and disengagement from the curriculum, their White and non-Muslim peers, the university, the academic staff and their department, they also praised certain aspects of all of these and their enjoyment of them.

The pedagogical self and pedagogical violence

The Muslim female graduates referred to a range of themes that might be identified as constituting the pedagogical self that included: the central role of the lecturers; dialogical encounters with peers and inter-subjective recognition of the self in the 'other'; earlier educational experiences and a new (academic) literacy to name past and current experiences (Harris et al, 2017: 359). On the other hand, they also referred to a range of 'psycho-social and relational harms' that others have analysed as pedagogical violence (Matusov and Sullivan, 2020: 439)

In their research, Harris et al (2017) found that Black and Muslim students in their study had the opportunity to 'reinvent themselves' in the context of a youth and community work course. We find the concept of a pedagogical self a valuable way of conceptualising student experiences. However, whereas Harris et al (2017) found an instance of the pedagogical self being positive and providing opportunities for self-reinvention, what we want to suggest is that the pedagogical self is caught between contradictory logics. Primarily, these are the desire for education on the part of ethnic and religious minorities and the White institution of the university. For each of the themes identified by Harris et al (2017), we can identify parallel but contradictory logics. For example, encounters with peers might be dialogical but also involve micro-aggressions. Furthermore, the inter-subjective sense of the self of the 'other' might be experienced as more alienating in the context of a Eurocentric curriculum in a White university. Rather, the pedagogical selves that we encounter here might be best thought of as the product of a site of friction between the structural racism and Islamophobia of the Eurocentric White university and anti-racist and anti-Islamophobia resistance. Although principally concerned with compulsory education, many of the themes of pedagogical violence (e.g., Bourdieu and Passerson, 1990; Foucault, 1995) are visible

within the university context. Central to the idea of pedagogical violence is a lack of student choice and voice with respect to the curriculum, assessment, peers and teachers, time and location, forms of communication, and assessment. Consequently, students '… are expected to submit their will, desire, heart, mind, feelings, behaviour and attitudes for non-conditional cooperation…' (Matusov and Sullivan, 2020: 440), and the racialised, secular Eurocentric character of this is what comes through in our interviewees experiences of the university. Although both students and lecturers may be motivated by a 'love of their subject' they are hemmed in by bureaucratic rules on the one hand (Matusov and Sullivan, 2020: 441) and Eurocentric epistemological violence on the other. Whilst recent writers such as Matusov and Sullivan (2020) have pointed to a broad range of pedagogical violences, we wish to highlight their necessarily racialised and secular forms. Summative assessment by ranking students in ways that have implications for their future careers is often picked as a powerful form of pedagogical violence as it encapsulates the non-negotiable character of Eurocentric educational demands and may have the effect of discouraging students from expressing ideas that do not fit these assumptions.

Navigating the White atmosphere of a Russell Group university

The Muslim female graduates told us about their reactions on first arriving at the university. For example, Halima Ali came from North West London and was very complimentary about the area she was brought up and completed her schooling in;

> I've always been brought up in an ethnically diverse area so, I'm from [London borough] … so, that's very diverse as in there's loads of people that live here from different backgrounds. South Asian, Somali, people from all around. And so I'm very used to a diverse background especially because, being in London, you're very used to that on a day to day basis. So, my schools were mainly Somali, and Bengali and then my college was mainly just West African and East African and then some South Asian...

She contrasted the university with the area she came from. Although she expected the academic staff and the students to be predominantly White, she still found this a shock:

> I didn't expect it to be as white as it was, honestly. I think that was something that kind of shocked me, I thought because it's [a Russell group university] maybe there would be like a more diverse group of people. But I didn't actually process that it would be as white as it was, the whole university.

Over time, this became progressively more of an issue for them as students, as they became more conscious about their skin colour, their religious identity markers and the lack of diversity within the classroom which became problematic for them fitting in. It was at this point that pedagogical violence began to make itself felt more explicitly. For example, according to Sana Rashid:

> Honestly, I don't think I enjoyed university as a whole just because, I don't know, I feel like I never really fitted in. I just feel like it was a very predominantly white university. And not even just that it was a predominantly white university, I feel people were from very different [ethnic] backgrounds to myself. So, I always just kind of felt out of place and never really wanted to contribute in certain classes and lectures and stuff just because I always felt, what if my answer's not right, what if I sound stupid…

This final point about 'feeling stupid' illustrates how the white atmosphere structures the pedagogical violence of the forms of communication (Matusov and Sullivan, 2020: 440), where Sana self-reflexively modified her pedagogical self (Harris et al, 2017) initially in a negative way considering leaving the university. For Sana, this alienation from the department and the university reached such an intensity that she was going to leave because it got too much for her, but then she spoke to an ethnically minoritised male member of staff, who incidentally was not a Muslim:

> … at one point I felt like I didn't want to be there anymore…I spoke to [lecturer X] about that and they obviously opened up about … being a lecturer of colour and how their experience has been. And then it made me realise it's not just me that feels like this. And, you know, you could be someone that works at this institution and still feel like that … was very, very helpful.

This encounter demonstrates the critical importance of the role of ethnically minoritised and Muslim academic staff in over-coming crises for students of colour. The resonance (Rosa, 2019), the responsiveness and mutual recognition of a shared alienation, described here is almost palpable, and what is even more positive is how this reached across differences of gender, religion and ethnicity.

Samiyah had a similar experience with a different male member of staff and talked about knocking on their door just because he was Asian and a Muslim,

> [Lecturer's name], I met in first year and I didn't know who he was… I just knocked on his door once and I spoke to him, and we just had a conversation and I remember since the first conversation I ever had, ever since I struggled in uni with

> my personal circumstances, he always pushed me and he believed in me. I'll never ever, ever forget that, and he encouraged me to take on opportunities. He always wanted me to be, you know do, do the best. He told me to never quit [university]. ...If I didn't have someone like that from the beginning, I would probably have quit [university].

The Muslim female graduates had concerns about their programme being predominantly of White middle-class girls. This created a challenge for them in terms of not feeling they really belonged in the department, difficulties making friends and raised questions in their minds about whether they could continue with their degree. Samiyah, for example, talked about trying hard not be seen as another 'Asian girl' (e.g., Ahmed, 2001; Bagguley and Hussain, 2016) on the course, so her proactivity was designed by her to dispel the stereotypes people had:

> I would probably not have been recognised for my talent. I'd probably just be seen oh as that Asian girl just doing her work, just I guess a number on their statistics. I had to showcase my talent and showcase my potential to prove, … but I had to kind of do what I had to do for my own sake, if that makes sense, to increase my own prospects.

Ambivalence

The diverse racialised and religious identities of the academic staff in the department was also one of the sources of emotional ambivalence for the graduates. One of the main things that Halima Ali, for example liked about the university was being taught by 'non-White' academics. She contrasted this with her other negative experiences, and also the experiences of her friends at other universities:

> Although there were things which were negative it was like, at the end of the day, I still had lecturers who weren't White you know? And that's something that's different. Because I know a lot of people who went to university and they are shocked when I tell them, "Oh I have a lecturer who is black, oh I have a lecturer who is Pakistani, oh I have a lecturer that's actually Muslim." People are shocked because their lecturers are all White, they have never had someone that was different…, they've always had the same kind of lecturers, the same men, always men that are White and older. That's something that I'm proud that I had, because I had people from all different backgrounds actually teaching me.

Ambivalence is one of the main themes of Bonilla-Silva's (2019) analysis of the racial economy of emotions, and it is one of the main ways in which the White atmosphere of the university makes it presence felt. For example, Sana Rashid touched upon the lack of diversity within the department and the university, despite praising the campus and her degree programme:

> Sometimes, I think most times, the uni is amazing as in obviously it's a really nice campus, it's amazing. And the actual course, the … degree, I feel it's really good. But as a whole I just feel it's not, it's not diverse enough. And I feel that played a really big part in my experience. So overall I feel like I had more of a negative experience than positive …

The exclusionary nature of social activities

For Muslim students, the normative practice of social activities amongst students were experienced as exclusionary. This is an important often neglected aspect of what we are here referring to as the White atmosphere of the university. It is not just a pedagogical experience, but also a wider social experience that is frequently overlooked (for exceptions relevant to this paper see for example: Islam et al, 2019; Islam and Mercer-Mapstone, 2021) in discussion of racism and Islamophobia in higher education. The university has for many years employed a Muslim chaplain, and prayer rooms have been available in several buildings across the campus since at least the 1970s. In contrast to this quite good provision, according to Sana Rashid, the majority of social activities at university are mainly centred around "going out" (i.e., clubbing and partying) and drinking. This was especially exclusionary for the Muslim female graduates, particularly during welcome activities that are typically organised at the beginning of the academic year (i.e., commonly known as Freshers week):

> … the fresher's week, I didn't really get involved because I felt it all revolved around going out, drinking, and that's all stuff that I don't do….There was so much pressure on fresher's being all about socialising through going out and drinking it kind of, once again, excluded you … it kind of limits how much of a friendship you can make with people. And then it just kind of makes you think well, what is the point of trying to make friends because it gets to a point where there's, well no I can't do this, or I don't do this. And it's like trying to explain your beliefs to someone.

Samiyah Iqbal also described how she felt excluded by the dominant 'drink and drugs' culture and talked about one White woman who did not drink with whom she therefore formed the only friendship from her first year with:

> I think she's middle class, so she obviously used to go out, but she didn't drink so she had similar issues to me because I didn't drink, and she didn't drink… I don't want to talk about drink and drugs. I'm not interested in that. I want to talk about you know, "Are you okay? How is your family doing?" We talk about what we like, we go out to eat but doesn't have to revolve around drinking, going clubs etc.

Anaya did not go to social events organised by students in the department again because they were organised around alcohol, 'the [social events] … were mainly at a pub, and I don't think I went to much … I'll just feel uncomfortable'. In this way, we can see how the atmosphere of events revolving around alcohol produced racialised and Islamophobic emotions for the students.

Epistemological violence in pedagogical spaces

For Muslim female graduates of colour, discussions within tutorials were dominated by a secular White lens and this was difficult in several ways for students who felt they were seen as experts on race, ethnicity or religion, in the case of Muslim students. This created a different dynamic in the tutorials and needed to be paid more attention to when allocating tutorial classes from the perspective of our graduates. According to Mariya Khan, for example:

> I was one of the very few people of colour in the class. … having all White students, they're going to have a very set or very White experience of the world…tutorials need to have inclusivity and understanding I guess people from different backgrounds, but unless they [the White students] actually talk about it or are interested in learning about it, they're not really going to know our perspective.

In a series of episodes that illustrate not just the racialised atmosphere of the university, but also its Islamophobic atmosphere and how this translates into forms of pedagogical violence, Amara Jackson felt that she was treated differently by some academic staff because she started wearing the hijab during the first year of starting university:

> … they wouldn't take me as seriously as someone else, such as a White student. I don't think they would really ask me to answer questions in a classroom … I don't know if it was malicious or anything, I think I just wasn't taken as seriously for

> when to answer questions or things like that. No one would really ask me to do anything, I was left out most of the time.

She also felt marginalised by the other students:

> If I was in an all-White class, no one would speak to me, honestly, I'm not even going to lie, but I don't know if that was me or because I wear the hijab, I don't know. So, in group work, no one really engaged with me, no one would take me seriously, but I don't know how I would change that…People reacted as if I wasn't someone they could be friends with.

A particular theme that illustrates the dilemmas of epistemological violence and the racialised, Islamophobic character of the pedagogical violence of the university relates to teaching about race and who teaches these topics. For instance, according to Halima Ali:

> When it comes to race modules and lectures on race, I don't know if this is a far stretch but I feel like if it's only possible for it to be taught by a person of colour…. It's more comfortable for people of colour in the room. Because I've been in slavery modules where it's been a White person telling me about slavery, and I don't know why but it just makes me really uncomfortable. Already, you're having looks because you're talking about black people and you know, people look around, oh, there's a couple of black people in the room. So, I feel like that needs to be a thing where the person who's delivering this module is someone of colour because it does make me feel comfortable having certain histories spoken about by certain people.

Isolation

The isolation that the Muslim female graduates experienced directly arose from the White atmosphere of the university more generally as well as the pedagogical violences of their programme of study. Indeed, this White atmosphere may be argued to be something specific to certain subjects and disciplines within Russell Group universities, whilst some degree programmes and disciplines may have significantly higher proportions of Muslim students and academic staff of colour. Sana Rashid's experiences illustrate this point well, where she suggested her university's faculty should be more diverse in order to create a more positive experience for students of colour:

> Just kind of making it a bit more diverse and inclusive because although, like I said, there is more minority students going to these universities, I feel like a lot of them have very similar experiences to myself where you always kind of feel like the outsider or not fully included within the university… because of the social events

> and stuff. So, I feel like doing more to kind of include everyone. I was left out most of the time.

Muslim female graduates also discussed how they 'got on' with their peers, and most of the interviewees talked about having few friends in the university or in their own department. There were a few who had a number of friends and who were from different backgrounds. These students often remained connected with friends from home rather than developing new friendships on their course or more widely across the university. For students still living at home, they socialised up to a point but had more connections with friends from home. Students did comment, however, on how there were very few social events that they felt comfortable attending, and also students preferring to keep themselves to themselves which made it difficult to make friends, according to Samiyah Iqbal: 'there was a lack of community … like with the students. Everyone was doing their own thing, the lack of support'. She goes on to argue:

> I used to speak to everyone, socialise but I never connected and clicked with anyone. I used to just do my work, stay focused, help people when they need, talk to them when I need to, but I didn't really want to build anything just if I didn't click with them because that's just not me.

Amara Jackson did not enjoy her time at university because she largely spent the three years at the university on her own, and she particularly highlighted her negative experience of living in university halls of residence which are normally the hub of students' social lives:

> I didn't enjoy my university experience; I don't want to lie. That is not solely because of the university, I think that is because I'm quite an introvert, so, I didn't really make any friends except for one. So, I didn't really enjoy myself…., I just didn't get along—Not that I didn't— with the people that I lived with, we had nothing in common, let's say. I didn't have anything in common with anybody near me in my halls, even on other blocks, so, I didn't really want to make friends with anybody.

Career ambition

Despite their many negative experiences of university, the Muslim female graduates in our study retained powerful senses of ambition for their own futures reflecting findings from the literature of the past twenty years or so (e.g., Ahmed, 2001; Bagguley and Hussain, 2016). In a comment that almost expresses how she 'survived' university, Amara Jackson expressed great optimism for the future and was going to start work in the new year (2022),

'I start work in January…I'm going to work for refugees in London'. Sana Rashid was also waiting to start her job in central government. Most of the Muslim women who were interviewed in this work had clear and highly ambitious career plans:

> I found a job in the civil service … which I'm still waiting on a start date for because the actual security clearances take forever. So, I'm still currently just working at my part time job until I get a start date. …I wasn't too sure exactly what I wanted to do. But then when I came across this role, I was like, oh this sounds like something I'd be quite interested in because it's research so it's a research analyst.

There were however some of our graduates who were undecided on the jobs they wanted to do resulting in various kinds of temporary employment. These kinds of temporary routine jobs before establishing a more 'middle class' career are commonly found amongst humanities and social science graduates more generally, but ethnic minority students in the UK have been found to struggle more than White students to establish themselves in the labour market (Lessard-Phillips et al 2018). For instance, Anaya Habib who was still working to fill in the time whilst she is looking for a job.

> I'm just working in [retail shop] as a Christmas temp…I'm hoping to go into research or policy… Before I wanted to go mainly into research. But now I'm open to both research and policy.

In another example illustrating this issue, Mariya Khan is currently undergoing 'Kickstart' [2]training with the aim to secure full time employment in the NHS:

> I am doing a Kickstart training. A Kickstart employment for six months at the NHS doing admin… I do like working for the NHS and yes, that's basically it, answer phones and stuff like that.

In a similar fashion Halima Ali went into an internship, and in the longer term has plans for doing a Master and PhD in education to work with children, but following her graduating:

> … I did a theatre marketing course like an internship and then trying to figure out what I want to do. So now I'm trying to get into a role which is a housing officer role through a graduate scheme so, the housing officer role is based in London and so, I've applied for that recently.

[2] Kickstart was a scheme aimed at unemployed 18–24-year-olds at risk of long-term unemployment and has now closed

Conclusion

To summarise, our Muslim female graduates can be described as having an alienating experience of university in the sense as recently theorised by Rosa (2019: 178-9) where social interactions are experienced as: '… external, unconnected, non-responsive, in a word: mute.' (emphasis in the original). This he contrasts with 'resonance' where social relations are responsive, where 'each speaks with their own voice' (Rosa, 2019: 175). What we hope to have demonstrated through this discussion of our research exploring Muslim female graduates' experiences is that the atmosphere of the White university lacks resonance for them. Its racialised and often Islamophobic atmosphere is alienating for them along several dimensions. The White atmosphere of the university could be transformed through cultural recognition where there is less emphasis on cultural practices involving alcohol, and this would have to be at all levels of the institution down to departmental level. The university would also have to be much more proactive in the recruitment of staff and students in all departments at all levels of staff from non-White backgrounds. This should be underpinned and led at the institutional level through leadership and policies focused upon religion and belief and inequalities related to them. The pedagogical violences (Matusov and Sullivan, 2020) of the curriculum, assessment, peers and teachers, time and location, forms of communication, and assessment produced alienating effects for the Muslim female graduates. However, these were experienced with a degree of ambivalence. The Muslim female graduates retained their valuing of education, in spite of often almost over-whelming negative experiences and this is evident in terms of the additional training and careers that they were embarking upon. Whilst ongoing debates about the decolonisation of the curriculum are currently centre stage, pedagogy and assessment need to take a more negotiated and student led form. University rhetoric makes much of the themes of belonging and community, yet within this, institutions need to increasingly recognise and act upon the recognition that they are not singular universal communities, but each university is a community of communities.

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