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DOI:

[10.1080/03075079.2021.2020746](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.2020746)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Bhopal, K 2022, 'Academics of colour in elite universities in the UK and the USA: the 'unspoken system of exclusion'', *Studies in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.2020746>

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To cite this article: Kalwant Bhopal (2022): Academics of colour in elite universities in the UK and the USA: the 'unspoken system of exclusion', *Studies in Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2021.2020746](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.2020746)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.2020746>



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Academics of colour in elite universities in the UK and the USA: the 'unspoken system of exclusion'

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the experiences of academics of colour in elite universities in the UK and the USA. Drawing on interviews with 34 respondents and using a critical race theory perspective, the findings indicate that academics of colour experience racism in the White space of an elite university. To counter the racism they experience, they develop 'safe spaces' in which they find empathy and support from other academics of colour. A key finding from the study suggests that despite having negative experiences in elite universities, academics of colour have contradictory feelings about their positions. They disassociate themselves from the racism by recognising the status and prestige associated with working at an elite university. This article suggests that in order for academics of colour to be fully included in elite universities, institutions must acknowledge racism and their own Whiteness to work towards cultural change.

KEYWORDS

Race; CRT; elite universities; racism; privilege

Introduction

Elite universities are defined by their excellence in teaching and research. They are identified by their names and locations and are known globally for regularly scoring highly in league tables, often ranking in the top 10 of all universities in the world (QS World Rankings 2020; Times Higher Education World Rankings 2020). In the USA, these include members of the Ivy League¹ (such as Harvard and Yale) and in the UK Oxbridge² (Oxford and Cambridge). Their exclusivity is based on highly selective entrance processes and the domination of their alumni across economic, social and political spheres. Historically, such elite universities have played a significant role in graduating future prime ministers and presidents (Karabel 2005). However, elite universities have been criticised for their lack of student and staff diversity. In 2019, only one in five students who gained a place at Oxford university was from a Black and minority ethnic background,³ with the majority from independent fee-paying schools dominating admissions (Coughlan 2019). Whilst there has been some progress in admitting students from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds and state schools to Oxbridge, they continue to be underrepresented compared to White students and those from independent fee-paying schools (Weale 2009). Similarly, in the USA, White students are more likely to attend private non-profit institutions compared to those from other ethnic groups (National Centre for Educational Statistics 2020) (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_reb.asp). Elite universities have also been accused of racism towards staff and students. Students in Oxford have complained about racism and racist incidents not being taken seriously (Weale 2020). Following the #BlackLivesMatter protests, students at Oxford's Oriel College voted for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes, a British imperialist

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(Mohdin 2020). In 2019, Harvard University was accused of discriminating against Asian American applicants, but the case was rejected by a federal judge (*New York Times* 2019). The impact of attending an elite university significantly affects future life chances and social mobility, 'Beyond symbolic meaning, considerable evidence suggests that attending an elite college rather than a non-elite one means that a student is more likely to graduate, to earn more and to hold a position of power' (Warikoo 2016, 17). Through a process of overt selection in the hiring process, students from elite universities are allocated top jobs (Rivera 2015). Students who attend elite universities develop a clear understanding of their destinations after graduating, they specifically focus on jobs which are prestigious and high earning, '... status processes on college campuses are central in generating preferences for the uppermost positions in the occupational structure' (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016, 20). Drawing on interviews with 34 academics of colour working in elite universities in the UK and the USA, this article uses a critical race theory (CRT) framework to examine how racism is central to their everyday experiences. The following sections outline the literature and theoretical perspective, followed by the methods and findings sections.

The experiences of academics of colour in predominantly White universities

The last 10 years have seen a significant increase in a diverse student body in the UK and the USA. There is evidence to suggest that a diverse staff body is important to the success of recruiting a diverse student population (Bhopal 2018). It can also help to enhance the learning environment for students of colour particularly in relation to support and mentoring (Harper 2012). Consequently, higher education campuses have been engaged in efforts to recruit and diversify their faculties. Research has focussed on the job satisfaction of faculty of colour (Niemann and Dovidio 2005), tokenism when faculty of colour are hired (Jackson 2008) and issues of marginalisation and isolation that faculty of colour experience in higher education (Griffin, Ward, and Phillips 2014). Research has explored how discriminatory practices restrict the recruitment and retention of faculty of colour (Villalpando and Bernal 2002) in which negative climates associated with equality and diversity issues result in faculty of colour experiencing micro aggressions in interactions with White colleagues (Chang 2002; Patton et al. 2014). Reyes and Halcon (1988) suggest that the difficulties associated with being a scholar of colour in a predominantly White institution include not having a sense of belonging and being an outsider. Others have found that academics of colour have to balance the needs of their students with their own objectives including applying for tenure and developing a publications record (Stanley 2006). Turner, Gonzalez and Wood's research (2008) found that academics of colour experience isolation, lack of support and mentoring for their work in an environment in which their research is often devalued and seen as self-serving (Turner and Myers 2008). They are also expected to take on additional committee work compared to their White colleagues (Reddick 2011) which results in them occupying lower positions in the professoriate (Gasman, Abiola, and Travers 2015). Recent research (Smith 2016) suggests that in order for institutional change to take place, universities must see diversity as central to their mission and use it to inform inclusive leadership resulting in real strategic practices with greater accountability. Such an approach can be used to develop more equitable hiring practices resulting in positive change demonstrating a greater focus on inclusion, diversity and equity.

There is little research which has explored the experiences of academics of colour in elite universities. Research that does exist has examined the role of White senior leaders in elite universities (Moody 2011) and explored how the dominance of Whiteness perpetuates power structures that have existed for centuries in elite universities (Wilder 2013). Other studies have focussed on the teaching experiences of faculty of colour (Stanley 2006), the coping strategies they use to counter racism and issues of equity and representation (Perna et al. 2006). Recent research (Siegel, Gregory Barrett, and Smith 2015) has found that the reputation of elite universities has a significant impact on the experiences of faculty of colour; for example, reasons to work in elite universities include financial investments in research and other academic opportunities (Barrett and Smith

2008). Other research has explored the experiences of academics of colour in predominantly White institutions (Griffin, Ward, and Phillips 2014) but has not analysed this in relation to how academics of colour occupy and navigate *elite* academic spaces. This article, therefore, presents original research on the experiences of academics of colour in elite universities in the UK and the USA.

Critical Race Theory

CRT was developed in the early 1970s in legal studies, and since then has been used extensively in education (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). The basic principles of CRT include the permanence of racism and an analysis of power structures based on White supremacy which work to discriminate against people of colour.

The concepts of racial realism, interest convergence and Whiteness as property are used in this article to examine how racism is central to the experiences of academics of colour. Other principles of CRT include intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) and the use of counter storytelling as a method to construct the real experiences of people of colour (Solorzano and Yosso 2001). In line with other scholars (Harper 2012; Patton et al. 2014), I argue that CRT provides a useful critical lens to question, challenge and analyse how elite universities continue to marginalise academics of colour. Racial realism – the central tenet of CRT – acknowledges that racism is a normal feature of everyday life (Bell 1992) which has historically influenced policy making in the USA (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Perez and Solorzano 2015). Racism continues to be part of the everyday lives of people of colour, Harper, Patton and Woodenstate, ‘A CRT lens unveils the various forms in which racism continually manifests itself, despite espoused institutional values regarding equity and social justice’ (2009, 390). Racism takes place through racial micro aggressions, ‘... subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal and/or visual) directed towards people of colour, often automatically or unconsciously’ (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000, 60). The use of racial micro aggressions helps to examine how academics of colour in elite universities experience day-to-day racism in predominantly White spaces.

Interest convergence is used to explore the ways in which White groups will only support advances of racial equality when such interests converge with their own (Bell 1980), ‘... white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for blacks only when such advances also promote white self-interest’ (Delgado and Stefancic 2000, xvii). In this sense, elite universities will only invest in equality and diversity policies if they benefit more from such policies than academics of colour. An investment in such policies gives the illusion and appearance of addressing racial inequality, when in reality the policies make little difference. Such policies are often based on a ‘tick box’ exercise often used to increase the public profile of universities to portray public images of equity and diversity.

Whiteness as property is used to explore how Whiteness, which was initially constructed as a form of racial identity, developed into a form of property. ‘Possession – the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property – was defined to include only the cultural practices of whites. This definition laid the foundation that whiteness – that which whites alone possess – is valuable and is property’ (Harris 1993, 1721). Leonardo defines Whiteness as ‘... a racial discourse, whereas the category “white people” represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin colour’ (2002, 32), it is also,

... a racial perspective or world-view ... whiteness is supported by material practices and institutions ... as a collection of everyday strategies, whiteness is characterised by the unwillingness to name the contours of racism, the avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or group, the minimisation of racial legacy, and other similar evasions. (Leonardo 2002, 32)

Whiteness as property and White privilege is used in this article to examine how academics of colour are excluded in the White spaces of elite universities. In addition, I examine how White privilege is perpetuated through actions and processes which reinforce unequal economic and social outcomes for academics of colour in White elite spaces (Leonardo 2002). I use the concepts of racial realism and

interest convergence to explore how racism is central to the experiences of academics of colour in elite universities. I examine how elite universities employ academics of colour to present a *public* picture of inclusion, when in reality their experiences continue to be dominated by racism, marginalisation and exclusion.

Methods

The two universities that were selected to participate in the study regularly score highly in the QS World Rankings (2020) and Times Higher Education World Rankings (2020). Beacon⁴ university is an elite private Ivy League university in the USA. It consists of approximately 7000 undergraduate and 14,000 postgraduate students. Its history, influence and wealth have reinforced its reputation as one of the most elite universities in the world. Only 5% of all undergraduates who apply to Beacon gain a place.

Prosper university is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the UK, founded in the thirteenth century. It has approximately 12,000 undergraduates and 10,000 postgraduates. In 2019, it was one of the top-ranked universities in the UK in all major league tables including the *QS World Rankings* and *Times Higher Education World Rankings*. In 2021, approximately 17,000 students applied of which 31% received an offer.

Access to the universities was obtained by contacting Deans and Heads of Faculty in the Social Sciences who provided data on the numbers of academics of colour, who were subsequently contacted via email. A total of 49 academics of colour were approached to participate in the study, of these 40 responded. The remaining nine were contacted again, but did not respond. After several respondents dropping out, a total of 34 respondents participated in the study. As a female academic of colour I was aware of my own positionality in the research process, and that my own identity enabled me to gain access to academics of colour. Many respondents reported feeling comfortable speaking openly to an academic of colour about their experiences of racism. In turn, I was able to empathise with their experiences and in some instances (when asked by respondents), I shared my own experiences of racism, and the challenges I faced as a female scholar.

A total of 19 respondents participated from Beacon university: of these 11 were women and 8 were men. All of the respondents were born in the USA; two were of Indian heritage, two were mixed heritage (White/Black) and all others were African American. All but three of the respondents had obtained their PhDs from Beacon, the remaining three received their PhDs from other Ivy League universities. Three were lecturers, four assistant professors, two associate professors, three senior lecturers and five were full professors. All of the professors and one associate professor had achieved full tenure.

A total of 15 respondents participated from Prosper university: 8 were women and 7 were men. Five were Indian (international), one was British Indian, two were Pakistani (international), two were Black British, two were African and three were African American. Out of the 15, 10 participants had received their PhDs from Prosper; the remaining 5 had received their PhDs from other elite universities in the UK or Ivy League universities in the USA. Four were professors, three readers, one associate professor, four senior lecturers and three were lecturers. Nine of the interviews in the USA and five of the interviews in the UK were conducted via Skype; all other interviews were conducted face to face and were digitally recorded and transcribed. Ethical clearance was obtained from the participating university and in line with the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines (2019).

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis was used as a basis for identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting different themes identified in the data set (Boyatzis 1998). The advantages of thematic analysis included its flexibility (Braun and Clarke 2006) in highlighting differences and similarities in the data set. Once the data were coded, the different themes were identified which linked different sections of the data together. Themes were identified from which codes were used to categorise the data (Nowell et al. 2017). The following

sections explore the findings focussing on everyday racisms, the use of safe spaces and the positioning of academics of colour as outsiders and insiders.

Everyday racisms: 'It's silent, it's not spoken about'

All of the respondents in both universities spoke about the racism they experienced, often on a daily basis. Some discussed how the racism was subtle, and took the form of micro aggressions, whereas others spoke about more direct overt forms of racism. Respondents at Beacon discussed this in relation to the 'pretence' of equality which was portrayed as part of the public image of the university. In addition, the racism they experienced was dismissed and not taken seriously by their colleagues. Jack⁵ who was African American had been at Beacon for five years as an assistant professor, and spoke about the subtleties of racism.

The racism here is silent, it's not spoken about. It's that silence that makes it covert and it happens in small, silent ways that are hard to articulate. So when it happens it's hard to go beyond it – hard to pinpoint the actions of others in one specific way. So you can't actually do anything about it. But it's about the image of Beacon, image is everything, how we are seen not just here in the US, but in the world, yet our colleagues don't take it seriously anyway.

Academics of colour were constantly reminded that the elite space was a *White* space which they had to navigate. The White elite space was the property of White groups which worked within the normativity of Whiteness. By being present in this space, academics of colour were challenging the normativity of Whiteness. Jack went on to describe how racism was reflected in positions of tenure.

One of the specifics about thinking about the acts of racism is looking at who gets tenure here and who does not. I know lots of academics – all of whom have been people of colour who have given so much to Beacon and they have worked hard at their portfolio and been told now is the time to put in for your tenure – but then to be told at the end, that either it's not the right time or being refused it.

Neema of Indian heritage (born in the USA) who was an associate professor also mentioned tenure as an example of racism. Academics of colour who were encouraged to apply for tenure were often refused. This refusal was based on the university maintaining its White normative identity through a process of continually perpetuating White privilege.

I am in the process of writing my tenure application and I have seen White professors who are so confident when they have done theirs – and they have been right to be so – because they have been successful – but to me they fit the mould of Beacon – of the type of professors that Beacon wants – they are all White.

At Prosper, respondents said the racism they experienced was overt and direct. Lynette a Black⁶ British lecturer spoke about the assumptions of her White colleagues as to why she was employed.

I have had people say to me that I must have been employed here because I am Black, because I am ticking a box so that Prosper looks more equal and shows that it is addressing the race question. They want to look good to the outside world.

By employing academics of colour, elite universities gave the *appearance* of being inclusive. Through a process of interest convergence, a diverse staff body was used to enhance the reputation of the elite university in a marketised higher education system used to attract fee-paying students. This performative exercise was enacted to benefit the diversity agenda of the university. Consequently, elite universities failed to address the individual and institutional racism faced by academics of colour.

Dhanwant, a British Indian professor, discussed how she was often challenged by porters and other staff at Prosper.

*I have been questioned about my status as a professor. It has been challenged by porters and other staff. This in itself is an interesting form of racism, because by denying me entry into these spaces they are telling me I don't belong because **I am not one of them because I am not White, I am brown** (original emphasis).*

Dilip, a British Indian assistant professor at Beacon, also emphasised the overt racism that took place in his department.

*I find it fascinating how different ways in which racism plays out. I was recently hired here because of all the stuff on decolonising the curriculum **is seen as a thing now**. I was told – outright – by one of the senior academics – that I was only hired because I am a person of colour and because they need someone to teach on race – and because they knew me, I was seen as an insider, and someone who ticks the ethnicity box (original emphasis).*

Whiteness in the elite space of the university was demarcated by boundaries defined through White norms of acceptance. Consequently, academics of colour were never seen as equal to their White colleagues. This was reinforced by the elite and prestigious status of the universities. In this space, academics of colour challenged the normativity of Whiteness and elite exclusivity. White academics protected their own spaces of privilege, and did so by marginalising academics of colour so that they ‘know their place’ (through processes such as being refused tenure). The need to maintain and hold on to White elite privilege was also reflected in the overt marginalisation of academics of colour when they were seen as ‘token’ appointments. In this sense, elite universities worked to reinforce the *status quo* of White privilege which was demonstrated through the perpetuation of Whiteness and White privilege as part of the ideological and behavioural norms of elite universities (Bhopal 2018). Racist institutional norms were reproduced in elite universities through cultures of acceptance and belonging. Many academics of colour reported feeling invisible in the elite space of their institutions. Their visible presence was due to their university ticking a box to demonstrate their inclusivity. The majority of academics described feeling ‘overwhelmed emotionally’ by continually having to justify their positions and to fight against racist stereotypes.

Safe spaces: ‘we can vocalise our experiences of racism’

All respondents at both universities said they automatically navigated towards other academics of colour in their institutions. They used this as a support mechanism and as a way of coping with the racism and exclusionary practices they experienced. These ‘safe spaces’ were created informally. Shandra, an African American assistant professor at Beacon, said,

It’s something you automatically do as a person of colour, you see someone else who is Black and you will automatically navigate towards them. It’s because they have more than likely had the same experiences.

Jacob (African American) also an assistant professor at Beacon said he made connections with academics of colour based on his involvement on specific committees.

I try to make the connections with other Black colleagues on the same committee. I just navigate towards them. It happens without thinking about it, you know they will accept you.

Deborah, a professor at Beacon, had set up an African American academics network in her faculty.

I set it up many years ago when I first came to Beacon. It grew from there and now we meet regularly and it provides support in numbers. It also helps us to have a voice and feel safe to say things in an environment where we know we will not be judged and accepted at face value.

Similarly at Prosper, Mary, a Black associate professor who had also set up a similar network spoke about how important it was for these support networks to be formalised.

It’s very important to have support systems so we have set up a Black staff network. It provides a safe space where we can vocalise our experiences especially around racism. We have seen the benefits of it – both in emotional support but also in the academic support that Black scholars need.

‘Safe spaces’ were seen as providing academics of colour informal support that they did not receive from their departments. Solorzano, Ceja and Yossrefer to these as counter spaces, which, ‘... serve as sites where deficit norms of people of colour can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained’ (2000, 70). Solorzano and Villalpando

(1998) have argued that academic counter spaces are positive and beneficial for students of colour as they enable them to cultivate their own learning in a supportive and nurturing environment. Similarly, in this study, academics of colour felt safe sharing their experiences of racism and made it a priority to seek out such spaces. The spaces enabled them to fight against the cultural-deficit discourses in higher education (Valencia and Solorzano 1997). Due to the existence of racial realism as experienced by academics of colour, safe spaces were used as a means by which academics of colour challenged White privilege and White normative practices. Such spaces were used to reinforce their intellectual value and scholarship.

Outsiders inside: 'You may have entered the building, but that doesn't mean you get a seat at the top table'

The majority of respondents had all completed their PhDs at either Beacon or Prosper, or at other elite or Ivy League universities. Paul, a Black assistant professor at Beacon, discussed the value and significance of gaining a PhD from Beacon and the currency associated with this.

Beacon is unique in that almost all of the professors here have gained their PhDs from Beacon. They tend to recruit this way. They recruit grad (graduate) students who study here, so they get a job here. Because I didn't get my PhD from Beacon I am seen as an outsider and my PhD is not valued in the same way if it was had I got it here.

Fred, a Black assistant professor who also did not get his PhD at Beacon said,

If you have studied here, you are part of an inside special exclusive group. So they can recruit that way. There are certain types of students who study here, who do PhDs here – who then ultimately become the professors. They are the ones fit into the Beacon professor mode.

Aby, a Black senior lecturer, suggested that the exclusivity of hiring at Beacon was used as a mechanism to keep outsiders out and insiders in.

Beacon has its own rules and mechanisms of workings. Because it is Beacon it can do whatever it wants. Of course it hires its own, in fact there are jokes people make during the search process – along the lines that if they've not been a member of the last club as a student then how can they join it now?

This system of reproduction worked by reinforcing and reproducing privilege and once individuals entered Beacon as a student, the system of privilege would be rewarded with *additional* privilege. Similarly, Aisha (born in India, associate professor) said being a Prosper graduate carried a great deal of currency which was used to reinforce the elite status of Prosper.

*It would be hard for any outsiders to get a job here at Prosper. It's not a coincidence that almost all of my colleagues have been students here. Employing them is an open mechanism to keep out the riff raff – to keep them in their place and it's saying that we only want a certain kind of person – **someone who is one of us**. But if you are a person of colour, you may have entered the building but that doesn't mean you get a seat at the top table (original emphasis).*

On the one hand, respondents felt ambivalent about their status in elite universities, but on the other hand, they were drawn to the sense of eliteness because they knew the status and privilege associated with working at such prestigious universities. Fred, an African American associate professor at Beacon, expressed it as,

That feeling of always wanting to be part of the elite and you are part of it you have a legitimate entitlement to it. It's an exclusive group that deep down everyone wants to be a member of. All of my friends envy my position because it's a name and that name is exclusive.

Respondents spoke about the conflicts they experienced being part of an elite institution which also discriminated against them. Anil, an Indian associate professor, said,

Lots of academics are quick to criticise Prosper. That makes me feel slightly worried that they are openly criticising their employer who is paying them a handsome wage with so many benefits of being here. If they are criticising it so much, why are they still working here?

Troy, an African American assistant professor also discussed his conflicting status

When I was a grad [graduate] student here, those of us who wanted to become professors wanted to work here at Beacon. But we were quick to criticise the professors and the institution for many of its misgivings – particularly around race – but we didn't want to give up that status.

Despite feeling conflict in their positions at elite universities, academics of colour still wanted to be part of them. They said their positions gave them a sense of power by being in the best universities in the world, but at the same time they were conscious of the racism they experienced in the elite space. All respondents were aware that the elite space was also the *White space*. Their presence in the elite space gave them access to career opportunities and advancement yet and they continued to experience racism despite occupying professorial roles. Whilst previous studies have found rapport with colleagues (Barrett and Smith 2008) this study did not find this. Instead many of the respondents reported feeling like outsiders in their universities, particularly when issues of race and inclusion were not taken seriously.

Respondents spoke about other examples of their outsider inside status. This included having to work harder than their White colleagues, being overlooked for promotion and an assumption and expectation that they would be interested in departmental equality roles, and teaching courses related to diversity (Stanley 2006; Turner and Myers 2008). These assumptions were based on expectations from their colleagues which operated within a White normative framework.

Conclusions

Racism continues to be part of everyday life for academics of colour in elite universities in the UK and the USA. CRT reminds us that racism is commonplace for people of colour (Delgado and Stefancic 2001) and education is not exempt from this. Patton (2016) argues that the USA higher education system is based on a history of White supremacy which continues to reinforce racism and consequently, racist and White supremacist conceptions of knowledge are reproduced and subsequently, rewarded. As Banks (1995) has argued, there exists a socially constructed 'colour line' which continuously perpetuates the dominance of White groups. Race and racism are used to justify and reinforce the intellectual inferiority of academics of colour, to ensure that policies are in place so that they are excluded from White elite institutions which continue to maintain the White privileged structures of control (Harper, Patton, and Wooden 2009). White elite institutions work to protect the interests of privileged White groups to perpetuate and reinforce their own positions of power and White supremacy.

By using CRT, this article has explored how racism remains central to the experiences of academics of colour in elite universities. Respondents spoke about how they experienced covert and overt racism in which they were always seen as outsiders which reinforced the need to seek out 'safe spaces' where they were able to find support from other academics of colour. This research confirms the findings of previous studies which have shown how academics of colour continue to experience racism in the White space of the academy (Stanley 2006; Turner, Gonzalez, and Wood 2008). Academics of colour commented that they were a minority in their faculties which contributed to their positions as outsiders, and affected the process of tenure. Similar findings have been found in previous research (Jackson 2008). The original findings from this study suggest that academics of colour feel they are positioned as outsiders, at the same time they occupy a position of privilege by being an insider in an elite space. This contradictory disassociation from the elite space suggests that respondents did not want to leave the institution due to the status and prestige associated with being an academic at an elite global university. The 'safe spaces' that academics of colour sought when they joined their institutions enabled them to have a sense of shared empathy with other academics of colour. Safe spaces enabled them to feel supported and validated. This has also been found in previous research (Stanley 2006). White privilege and the preservation of Whiteness as property manifested itself through individual actions and structures which reinforced

unequal outcomes for academics of colour. Furthermore, through a process of interest convergence, academics of colour were employed by elite universities but only as a 'tick box' exercise and as 'token' appointments which worked for the benefit of the institutions. Where diversity and equality policies did exist, these often ignored individual experiences of racism, as Hiraldo has argued, 'When higher education ignores the existence of systematic racism, diversity action plans become ineffective. Instead, these initiatives work to propel and reinforce structural and institutional racism' (Hiraldo 2010, 55).

Implications for research and practice

This research has highlighted the experiences of academics of colour in elite universities in the UK and the USA. It helps us to better understand how academics of colour navigate White elite spaces and how they are positioned within them. It also outlines how racism continues to be a reality for academics of colour and how White privilege dominates. Further research is needed to explore the career trajectories of academics of colour in comparison to that of White academics (such as recruitment, promotion and tenure). In addition, it would be useful to examine how diversity policies are used in elite universities and the impact they have on equity and inclusion. Whilst universities are keen to diversify their academic profiles, what is needed from universities is a clear acknowledgement that the experiences of academic of colour will be different from those of their White colleagues. This acknowledgement must follow in actions which address the marginal experiences of academics of colour. In addition, support mechanisms to advance the career trajectories of academics of colour must be put in place, but a recognition that these exist within a racist framework in which Whiteness and White hegemony are the norm. This must include a clear recognition that academics of colour do not feel accepted in the White space of the academy. Universities must acknowledge that a significant culture change is needed to address structural, institutional and individual racism. It is only then that we can move towards developing an inclusive, socially just space in higher education – for all academics, regardless of their race.

Notes

1. The Ivy League consists of eight private research-intensive universities in the North East of the USA. These universities regularly score highly in university league tables based on excellence in research and teaching. They are the most selective universities and are considered the most prestigious in the world (QS World Rankings 2020).
2. Oxbridge is the name given to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge which are the oldest and wealthiest universities in England, UK. Similar to the Ivy League, they are highly selective and regularly score in the top three of universities in league tables, and are also considered the best universities in the world (QS World Rankings 2020).
3. Black and minority ethnic is a term used in the UK.
4. Beacon and Prosper are pseudonyms.
5. All names are pseudonyms.
6. Black is the term that was used by academics of colour in the UK, as opposed to African American which was used by those in the USA.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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