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Running head: Reflections from a white researcher

Title: Decolonising dental educational research : Reflections from a white educator/researcher

Abstract: While there is an emerging scholarship on decolonising dentistry, the debate about reflexivity, positionality and white privilege in dental educational research and practice is still at a developmental stage. This article aims to contribute to this nascent debate by contemplating the question- is it appropriate, or possible, for a white researcher to undertake decolonisation work in dental education? If so, what would it entail or 'look' like? To answer this important question, the author offers a reflective account of their ethical and epistemological journey with this very question. This journey begins with how I, a white researcher, first became aware of the everyday racism experience by my racially and ethnically minoritized students, the whiteness of dental educational spaces and how my white privilege and position as a dental educator consciously and unconsciously implicated me in these processes of exclusion and discrimination. While this revelation led to a personal commitment to do better in my practice, both as an educator and a researcher, I continue to struggle with my white ignorance and white fragility as I strive to make my work more inclusive. To illustrate this, I discuss an ethnodrama project on everyday racism that I lead on and how, despite choosing a more democratic research method, hegemonic whiteness continued to make its presence felt through my 'going it alone' method of work. This reflective account reaffirms that regular and routine self-reflection is key to ensuring that racialised inappropriate and damaging assumptions, frameworks of thinking, and ways of working are checked for. However, my praxis won't evolve through critical introspection alone. I need to be open to making mistakes, educating myself about racism and anti-racist practice, asking for help and guidance from my minoritized

colleagues and more importantly, committing to working *with* people from minoritized communities rather than *on* them.

Key words: decolonisation, white privilege, reflective practice, everyday racism

There has been an upturn in interest in decolonisation. While there is no shared definition of decolonisation (e.g. de Oliveria Andreotti et al., 2015; Price et al., 2022), scholars agree that decolonisation is a process that ‘unsettles’ and challenges the long standing, and hitherto unquestioned social, economic, cultural and intellectual arrangements that have privileged white minds, bodies, actions and institutions since the beginning of capitalism *and* recognises how whiteness and white privilege actively erases, marginalises, and dehumanises non-white, Black minds, bodies, actions and knowledge (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Wilson Gilmore, 2020). From this normative position the remit of ‘decolonisation work’ has grown and fragmented over the past decade resulting in a multi-pronged attack on racial injustice. These include, but are not limited to: decolonising the curriculum, problematising the lack of ethnic diversity within occupations, and positions of power and authority in society, and expanding an epistemic critique of western/white/Eurocentric knowledge production to include additional theoretical and methodological tools, such as intersectionality, critical race theory, and anti-racism work (hooks, 1984; Khoo et al., 2020).

Despite these calls for transformative action on racial injustice in all its facets, the support for decolonisation work, as any critical movement, has not been universal or straightforward. Despite an initial flourishing as grassroots, student led activism in South Africa, UK and US, it has been noted that the decolonising project has had limited impact in some European countries (Khoo et al., 2020, p.61). Even in the UK, where decolonisation has gained institutional recognition in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), decolonising work runs the risk of being downgraded to ‘a metaphor’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012) or co-opted into the neoliberal machinery of HE and transformed into an ‘institutional taming’ or ‘strategic

advancement’(Shain et al., 2021, p. 921) exercise. Many enthusiasts express a desire in undertaking work informed by the critical values of decolonisation to redress injustices in knowledge production and reproduction. However, the lack of a common definition of decolonisation and framework to ‘doing’ decolonisation means that many are unsure as to how to proceed (Khoo and Vered, 2020). For these reasons, we can approach decolonisation as an epistemic, ethical and political movement (Khoo et al., 2020) that is still evolving and maturing.

Dentistry too has been impacted by the decolonising movement and a nascent scholarship on decolonising dentistry is emerging. Dentists and social scientists working within the discipline have been keen to explore how power, coloniality and whiteness is produced and reproduced in the profession and its systems of knowledge production. Work includes commentaries (e.g. Ali et al., 2020; Bastos et al., 2018, Bastos et al, 2020; Kayido and Mellish, 2021; Lala, Baker and Muirhead, 2021; Lala, 2022; AUTHOR, 2018), position statements (e.g. American Association of Public Health Dentistry, 2020; Anonymous, 2020; General Dental Council, 2020), special issues of dental journals (e.g. Community Dental health (June 2020)(Jamieson 2021), Journal of Public Health Dentistry – June 2022) and studies involving the application of intersectionality and power analysis to dental research and practice (e.g. Fleming et al 2022; Lala, 2022; Lala, Baker and Jamieson, 2021; Muirhead et al., 2020; AUTHOR 2022; Raskin and Fleming, 2022). This article supports these decolonising endeavours, and their articulation of why this work is needed. However, as a point of departure, it contemplates the questions- *who* should ‘do’ decolonising work in dentistry? *What* does decolonising work ‘look like’ in dental education?

Consideration of ‘who’ should undertake decolonising work is important for progressing decolonisation work, especially in the UK context. It is widely acknowledged that UK dental

academia is predominately white (Diversity in Dentistry Action Group 2021; Lala, Baker and Muirhead, 2021; Neville, 2018, 2022). These white academics are statistically more likely than their minoritised colleagues to undertake or commission decolonising work. Is it appropriate or possible for white people to engage with and lead on this critical reflection work? Critical race theorists, black theorists and other decolonising scholars remain cautious, contending that the two mutually reinforcing processes of white privilege (McIntosh, 1989) and white ignorance (Mills, 2007) can strategically deflect and derail such a project. However, if white people are not best placed to undertake decolonisation, then the other option is that it becomes the responsibility of historically underrepresented ethnic groups. Ahmed(2007) among others remind us how decolonising work, just like equality and diversity work in higher education, is often 'left' to those who are most affected by the discriminatory and exclusionary structures that decolonisation work endeavours to overturn and are administratively burdened with the task of instilling change. The ensuing 'emotional labour' this work commands leads to burnout, a sense of over-responsibility for eradicating racial injustice, being personified with the struggle for change and being blamed for shortcomings (e.g. Ahmed 2022). What is the way ahead on this thorny issue? Can a middle ground be found between, or in addition to, these two options?

It is important to acknowledge the academic work undertaken, historically and contemporaneously, by those from historically under-represented ethnic groups in dentistry. Recognition of their work within the discipline and its worth to the profession is one of the principles of decolonisation. However, to assume that decolonisation work should only be undertaken by those from racially minoritised background is erroneous, egregious, and racist. White researchers need to accept that institutional, social and epistemic asymmetries persist

(Khoo et al., 2020) within their own academic practices and UK dentistry as a whole and demonstrate an awareness of and willingness to change their research and pedagogic practices. Reflective practice is recognised as an important tool in decolonising work, as a strategy to dismantle white hegemony (Price et al., 2021). Critical reflection or conscientisation as termed by Freire (1973) refers to a form of reflection that is sensitive to oppressive processes, connecting self-awareness with an understanding of the influence of wider macro-structures. This journey of self-discovery is experienced as self-affirming and empowering but also motivating change or action. Engaging in such reflective work represents a form of 'slow scholarship' (Mountz et al., 2015), requiring a commitment of time, intellectual space and energy to engage with the ethical and epistemological tensions and contradictions that decolonising research raises. Unsurprisingly, many can struggle with this dynamic, iterative and confrontational mode of self-inquiry and fail to transition from reflection to reflection-in-action. As a result, the critical reflective work expected in decolonisation research can be experienced as affecting, uncomfortable and unpredictable. As a process of personal change, it will be interlaced with feelings of high emotions, of reflective breakthroughs and ethical and methodological cul-de-sac's and failures as the researcher tries to grapple with the epistemological grip of white privilege. Anthropological, feminism and qualitative research are attuned to the personal challenges that all research presents and have a tradition of recording and sharing reflective accounts of the challenges experienced during a research study (e.g. Anderson, 2021; Arnstead, 1996; DeLuca and Maddox, 2016). Such a mediative approach to the challenges experienced when conducting decolonised research is rarely discussed in educational research (see Matthews, 2021), less so for dental educational research. It is

important to discuss the challenges associated with checking for white privilege more widely if we are to encourage more white researchers to pursue decolonisation work and promote it as a worthy intellectual pursuit in its own right. Only by normalizing the epistemological discomfort that goes hand in hand with decolonising will we create 'an honest dialogue' about the anticipated and unanticipated difficulties involved in 'doing' decolonisation, and make all researchers more appreciative of the methodological and epistemological journey that must be undertaken in the name of decolonisation (DeLuca and Maddox, 2016, p.285).

What follows is a reflective account of how an educational project I undertook about dental undergraduates' experiences of ethnicity in their undergraduate studies sent me on a path of critical self-reflection regarding my own white privilege. This journey has not only called into question my research and pedagogic practices but also inspired an earnest desire to create change for students from traditionally underrepresented ethnic minority backgrounds. This account follows its own narrative, as I confront my own biases and begin on the 'critique', 'challenge', 'learn' and 'change'(Khoo et al., 2020, p. 54) cycle of decolonising work. The deliberations and choices made here speak to the specific issues raised within the project but also to the positionality of the researcher (white, female) and my own disciplinary training as a sociologist. As a result, it doesn't offer a 'one size fits all' approach to decolonising dental educational research. In fact, a standardised approach to decolonising dental education goes against the spirit of decolonising work and its calls for different voices and plurality of experiences. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this reflective account will make a useful contribution to the emerging field of decolonising dental education and provide food for

thought for all dental educational researchers, but especially those who identify as white, that decolonising work, while difficult, is not impossible.

A vignette

MD and JC are dental students at a predominantly White university. Though they are in different years (MD is a third-year student and JC is a fourth-year student) they spend a lot of time together because they are the only Black students in their respective years. MD has found a recent rotation on oral surgery to be particularly challenging. There are no Black dentists working in the oral surgery department and she feels conspicuous as the only Black dentist on clinic. One patient asks her 'Where do you come from?' but didn't believe her when she said that she is British. The same patient follows this up by asking where in Africa she's from. She also struggled to deal with a complex extraction. She felt embarrassed when her clinical supervisors criticized her in front of her peers for not asking for help sooner. She was upset when the same supervisor gave her a fail mark in her logbook for that procedure. A white student had a similar experience with a challenging tooth extraction a few hours later but got constructive feedback from the same clinical supervisor and a C grade in her logbook. MC recalled her experience with the clinical supervisor and the different feedback she received compared to her peer. JC said "That happens all the time in the clinic. There is no point complaining to anyone, they won't 'get it'. All you can do is put your head down and work doubly hard to get your pass mark."

What is the issue?

This vignette, though fictionalised, is representative of the testimonies I collected during my exploratory study into the experiences of underrepresented ethnic minority students at one UK

dental school in 2018. It became clear from the one-hour semi-structured interviews conducted with 9 students from a range of ethnic backgrounds (white British, Black British, British Arabian, and Black British) that their ethnic identity actively prefigured their interaction with others, peers, and staff alike. Unsurprisingly, students who identified as white recalled an unremarkable undergraduate experience, where educational and clinical successes and challenges were filtered through the lens of self-efficacy. Dental school for them emerged as a meritocracy, a level playing ground, inclusive to all. A more problematic image of dental school was recalled by ethnic minority students. The colour of their darker skin, accent, and name (all known codifiers of ethnicity) became public properties, readily available for public and social commentary, scrutiny, and discussion under the guise of workplace banter, jokes and storytelling. These apparently innocuous social conventions allowed for racist views to be shared unchallenged (Essed, 2001/3). Such experiences of racial microaggressions, defined as 'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group' (Sue et al., 2007, p.273) indicate a culture and climate that is rife in everyday racism.

Disrupting everyday racism: some methodological, ethical and epistemic concerns

Everyday racism is a potent form of racism found in all commercial, professional, workplace and educational setting, not least UK dental schools (Essed, 2001/3). However, it presents as a pernicious form of racism because it 'hides in plain sight' by being couched in everyday practices and interactions. It also has a cumulative impact on wellbeing through its omnipresence (Williams and Williams-Morris, 2000) across micro- and meso-level settings

contributing to a process of 'weathering' or how daily encounters with discriminatory structures and processes result in living in a constant state of stress (Geronimus et al., 2006). While Black and other minoritised scholars have been writing about everyday racism and the social and health impacts of racial discrimination for decades (e.g., Williams-Williams-Morris 2000), I was genuinely taken aback the depth and breadth of everyday racism experienced by some of the students involved in the study. Up until this point, my understanding of racism was essentially academic. However, it wasn't until I worked through the data, read and re-read the testimonies, heard the sobbing on the recordings, the anger and 'fight' in students' voices, that I realised that what the study had elicited were the participants 'outlaw emotions' (Jaggar, 1989), those raw emotions that 'bring to consciousness our 'gut-level' awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice or danger' (Jaggar, 1989, p.196). Verran (1999) argues that it is important to acknowledge when research/practice makes the researcher, feel uncomfortable or uneasy. The experience of 'disconcertment' is a productive part of the research process because it foregrounds hitherto unanticipated or underappreciated moments of moral and ethical dissonance as well as provides an opportunity to re-connect with the purpose of undertaking research.

With further reflection and reading of other researcher's reflective experiences on researching sensitive topics, I slowly distilled why and how this research presented 'ethically important moments . . . the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research' (Guillem and Gillam, 2004, p.262). These ethical moments were 3-fold:

1) situated ethics of the fieldwork: Research projects involving ‘human subjects’, including this one, are subject to an Institutional research ethics board (IREB) review. There, issues of consent, confidentiality, data security and the risks and benefits the research poses to participants are raised for consideration and expedited through the completion and independent review of university facing and participant facing documents. While such a bureaucratic system helps to streamline and secure due diligence, risk minimization and non-harm (Monaghan et al., 2013, p.69), the structural rigidity of the process and its focus on satisfying its administrative benchmarks runs contrary to the ‘practical’ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) or situational nature (Calvey, 2008) of research ethics. As Monaghan et al., (2013, p. 68) have said, ‘ethics are part of an ongoing process that is always subject to negotiation and renegotiation rather than reification outside the research context’. This acknowledged tension between procedural and practical or situational ethics provided the first experience of disconcertment for me and my study.

At the planning stage of this study and in my ethics application form I recognised that this research could result in distress for the participants. To mitigate this risk, names of student counselling and support services and related websites were included in the participant-facing documentation. This gesture was deemed sufficient by the IREB from a ‘procedural ethical’ perspective, namely the ethical choices and decisions made when seeking approval from university ethics committees (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). However, when I examined the interview transcripts it became very clear that such accommodation was wholly inappropriate and inadequate. The situational ethics of the research (Calvey, 2008) namely, the ethical issues raised by these research encounters and the distress caused by recalling experiences of racism

necessitated a different response to their disclosures. The affective and affecting nature of the interview data raised the question of my responsibility to the participants and this project beyond the expectations of standard institutional ethical review process (Perez, 2019, p.158). I had a responsibility to the research participants that went beyond the procedural ethics approach and resonated as a duty of care to the participants. Working through the data, I realized that I simply could not capitulate to the standard academic norms for 'writing it up and publishing it'. To do that would be in Willis' words (1972, p.121) to write/tell 'only half the story'. The participants had trusted me with very revealing and uncomfortable experiences, and I felt a responsibility to acknowledge these disclosures and to treat them with the respect they deserved. I needed to find a way that would 'allow a degree of the activity, creativity and human agency within the object of the study to come through into the analysis and the reader's experience'(Willis, 1972, p.9)

2)positionality of the researcher: The second unsettling aspect of this research emerged with the realization of how entrenched and mutually reinforcing power imbalances, privileges and inequalities were in my everyday professional practice and work.

Positionality is an important aspect of any research endeavour acknowledging that researchers have multiple identities (age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability etc.) which shape and determine their experience of the world and the work they conduct. As a result, researchers can never assume a 'neutral' standpoint in relation to the subject of their enquiry (Adamson and Davison, 2000; Bourke, 2014). Nevertheless, IREB processes still claim that the goal of objective, bias-free research is possible, if one adheres to its protocols. A common way in which the procedural ethics approach of IREB tries to account for positionality is to check for power

imbalances between researchers and participants. When planning this small study, I was aware how my identity as a member of the teaching staff would introduce bias at the data collection stage. To offset this risk of bias, I employed an independent qualitative researcher, with no previous links to the dental school, to conduct the fieldwork (Hoong Sin, 2007). From a procedural ethics perspective, this (i.e., singular) recognized complication or contradiction arising from my positionality (i.e., the power imbalance between teacher/researcher-student/participant) had been curtailed and neutralized. However, the more I worked with the data, and the more I reflected on the research process, the more I realized that that was a fallacy. My role as dental educator directly inserts me into this hierarchical and discriminatory context; the appointment of an external fieldworker only achieves a temporal injunction against the inequalities that operate here. I am part of an educational system and culture that discriminates against ethnic minorities.

Such a revelation sat uncomfortably with me. As a member of the teaching staff, I am implicated in the scenes they described, either as bystander or as perpetrator. This reflection led to profound feelings of 'guilt' (DeLuca and Maddox, 2015) - guilt at not 'seeing' everyday racism before and how my everyday interactions with students and staff are implicated in its reproduction in the school. The realization led me to reflect- why? Why hadn't I not seen it before? I assumed that my positionality as a white, cis woman, a sociologist by discipline, and an economic migrant to the UK, would have made me more open to seeing racial inequalities in my workplace. My self-identification as 'other' was also rooted in my own experiences of racial microaggressions about my Irishness while living in the UK (see Hickman and Ryan, 2020 for more discussion about the racialised experiences of Irish people in the UK). As I have

experienced everyday racism, surely, I could see it and call it out? Further reflection and reading on the phenomenon of 'white ignorance'(Mills, 2007) brought me to the realization that I was using my identity as 'other' as a complex defensive manoeuvre, exonerating me of the sins of omission and allowing me to continue to maintain my white power and privilege (Alinia, 2020, p.251). First, I assumed that my own feelings of not belonging precluded me from being racist. Second, I was playing my 'insider-outsider' status ambivalence to my own advantage, loaded it in favour of exoneration rather than accepting that in this context, and for my students, my whiteness rather than my racialised Irishness was more prescient. This line of thinking coincides with notions of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018); an attempt to shirk off all semblance of responsibility by assuming a position of 'innocence' in relation to what is going on in my workplace and society more generally (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p.10). Once I had acknowledged that my 'blindness' was a self-serving ploy of hegemonic whiteness I was then able to confront how my white privilege (DeLuca and Maddox 2015; Perez 2019) affords me social status, prestige and protection 'within a system of higher education cloaked in whiteness'(Behm Cross, 2017, p. 886).

3) **ethics of representation** (Pickering and Kara, 2017): The final dilemma posed by this research was the question of how to write up and disseminate the findings of this study. Overwhelmed by a duty of care to participants and conscious of my own culpability in their experience of everyday racism, I next had to confront the question- who is this research for? or as the sociologist Howard S Becker keenly observed, 'Whose side are we on?' (Becker, 1967). A series of reflective questions quickly emerged- Why am I doing this research- is it merely self-serving or do I want the research to contribute to a change in the educational experiences of

underrepresented ethnic minority dental students? Who should be my target audience- the dental educators who produce and reproduce everyday racism? The dental profession more generally? Or should this research be shared with as wide an audience as possible, giving voice to those silenced by everyday racism? What sense of responsibility, if any, should I accept in relation to the disturbing and painful findings it elicited? If the goal of the research is to bring about change and action, how might this be achieved? Is it possible to affect change in dental educational settings if I only use traditional academic routes of dissemination?

Again, black and other scholars are sceptical of the motivations for many white academics to get involved in decolonisation work (Matthews, 2021, p. 1119), with some seeing such academic interest from white researchers as a self-serving strategy that affords them academic and social kudos. White scholars of decolonisation can push out Global South or minoritised academic voices from the debate (Moosavi 2020 cited in Matthews, 2021, p. 1117) or can provide them with a 'new' research interest to occupy (Hooks, 2021). Equally, their interest in decolonisation can signal their strategic alignment with the 'accountability' agenda that is emerging around decolonisation in higher education (Behm Cross, 2017, p. 880), putting them on the 'right' side of the debate.

While cognisant of these critiques, additional reading reassured me that another way was possible for me to contribute to this field without perpetuating these power asymmetries. Anthropology, feminism, and critical race theorists are in broad agreement that white researchers can contribute to work on racism but need to regularly reflect upon and 'check' for their white privilege when researching minoritised group experiences. Equally important to this process is the acknowledgement that conventional academic (read here as white, Eurocentric)

knowledge production erases, silences and misrepresents traditionally excluded subjects and their story of subordination (e.g., Das, 1996; hooks, 1986; Lorde, 1985; McIntosh, 1984; Montecino 1995; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Feminists are critical of how, in its attempt to uphold academic norms as 'definitive' mode of knowledge production, academic writing capitulates to masculinist and apolitical logic (PARISS Collective, 2020) by promoting/popularizing/validating a model of academic writing where data becomes separated from the relationships and circumstances that produced it. Black feminist theory is keen to highlight how creative approaches speak more to the personal experience of those discriminated against, seeing it as non-hierarchical mode of expression compared with the colonality of academic writing complete with its racist/imperialist/colonial overtones and codes and assumptions (Lorde, 1985). Art based research too is critical of the ways traditional academic knowledge production and dissemination mutes the affective and political aspect of peoples experiences (Rieger et al., 2014, p.134). It posits that since the arts trades in and facilitates 'subjective interpretation and construction of personal meaning'(Rieger et al., 2014, p.134) that drama, images, sounds(spoken or recorded), and other art based artifacts are better situated to amplify the 'feelings, sounds, nuances and movements of human experience . . . to communicate the relevance of research findings within audience everyday lives and . . . value engagement of multiple knowers within a given context'(Rieger et al 2014, p. 134) than conventional academic writing. As a result, more diverse and culturally appropriate forms of knowledge production, such as storytelling, family histories and parables can offer a powerful counterpoint to the 'master narrative'(Montecino, 1995, p.293) of conventional academic writing.

By following these veins of thought I broadly concluded that an arts-based approach would offer a more productive, considered, and inclusive way to engage white and non-white audiences to the effects of everyday racism in dental school but without re-traumatising or exposing minoritised students. After this cycle of reflection, I felt sure that this methodological decision would not further strengthen or entrench power asymmetries between the researched and the research.

The intervention

Following from the three discontentment's outlined above- duty of care to participants, my white privilege and guilt, and the ethics of representation- I decided that the next step from my exploratory study into the experiences of underrepresented ethnic minority students in dental school should not be a standardised academic output. I recognised that if this work had the potential to ensure change and raise awareness of the everyday racism experienced by dental students from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds it should be done via creative means and have dental students and educators as its primary audience.

From the range of research-based theatre formats that are available, from monologues, dialogues, plays, to participatory performances, improvisational theatre and readers theatre (Cannon, 2012), I settled on the medium of ethnodramas as my mode of dissemination. An '(E)thnodrama is a performance-based methodology that uses qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews, field observations, and public documents; after analyzing and interpreting the data, ones uses ethnodramas to represent the data through a dramatic script' (Sweet and Carlson, 2018, p.190). Ethnodramas have an established record of being useful in promoting anti-racist work by creating a space where different voices and experiences can be

heard and expressed to incite an affective response, reflection and action (Goldstein, 2001).

The creative platform of a drama also affords an element of anonymity to the initial research participant's testimonies alongside the potential to challenge the audiences' attitude towards everyday racism (Sweet and Carlson, 2018). In addition, ethnodramas ensure the possibility of representational justice (Fraser et al., 2004). As a creative format, it gives voice and space to the vagaries of everyday racism that are typically obscured in the mechanisms of the everyday-snatched glances, rolled eyes, tones of frustration and exacerbation in voices, and other verbal and non-verbal ways in which white people silence or shut down minoritized students. The dramatic format also invites us(White audience) to 'witness' what is happening but with a measure of creative distance so we can begin the process of processing and interpreting what is unfolding.

Over a 30 month period (the project was extended by a period of maternity leave and then delayed by COVID-19 restrictions placed on fieldwork over the first and second lockdown in the UK), I worked with a creative writer and Person of Colour, Dr Edson Burton, with experience of writing ethnodramas to create a playscript capturing some of the elements and impacts of everyday racism played out in everyday educational settings. Funded by an ESRC Impact Acceleration Award(A100109-104) research transcripts from my original exploratory study were shared with the playwright (such data sharing approved under ethics application) to produce a fictionalized scene based on an amalgam of real events.

The ethnodrama depicts two students, Ada(pronounced Ad-daah, Nigerian name meaning 'first daughter') and Lauren(white), in discussion with their white supervisor about an upcoming group presentation. A difference of opinion over the direction of the presentation quickly turns

into an open conversation about Ada's academic ability and contribution to the group presentation from the peer and supervisor. The scene also demonstrates how language operates- from the mispronunciation of Ada's name, to talking over each other- as a tool to validate and invalidate people and their contributions.

The ethnodrama was written as an online educational meeting and was filmed using Zoom. The decision to write it as such, with three actors on screen in separate windows throughout, was both practical and creative. Filming restrictions were still in place at my university (May –June 2021) and the move to record the ethnodrama online allowed us to complete the project before the funding ran out (July 2021). Writing it as an online meeting was in keeping with the new ways of teaching experienced during the pandemic. Migrating the filming online also meant that the preparations and rehearsals for filming also changed, requiring more input and support from a Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) officer in the Faculty. All team meetings, read-throughs of the scripts, rehearsals and filming were mediated via Zoom. However, as is common with video conferencing technology, some meetings were beset by technical and bandwidth issues. Despite these technical issues, a 10-minute ethnodrama was recorded in June 2021.

Postscript

Over the past 18 months, I have presented a description of this intervention at two conferences and added the video to an inventory of BAME related resources compiled by my host university. Despite these academic outputs, I knew that the work was not complete, and another phase of work was needed- designing and piloting a learning package to accompany the ethnodrama described above- and transforming it into an educational resource for students and staff alike.

In my mind I had slowly, but consistently, moved through the cycles of decolonising work as laid out by Khoo et al(2020, p.54)- I had 'discovered' and *critiqued* dental school as a white space, *challenged* myself to find a new/more democratic way of framing and re-framing the issue of everyday racism for a wider audience to engage with. By writing academic outputs on this work, I developed new *learning* on how racism operates in dental schools and would next focus on scaling up this intervention for audiences in a range of educational and professional settings ('*change*'). However, when I submitted an earlier version of this manuscript for review to this journal, the insightful and constructive feedback it received clearly articulated that my decolonisation work was not only incomplete, but flawed, and damaging to the minoritised communities I was trying to stand in solidarity with. While they welcomed my reflective work as a white researcher keen to learn and do decolonisation work, they questioned whether this intervention was as 'challenging' a method as I had presumed it to be and directed me to (re)read Audre Lordes's essay 'Dismantling the Master's Tool House' and reflect on the motto 'Nothing done on us without us.'

The subsequent period of reflection and reading brought me to the realisation that I was still blinkered to the covert and overt ways my white privilege continues to shape my ways of working. Viewed through Lorde's powerful metaphor and provocation of 'Dismantling the Master's House,' I originally felt that my choice of ethnodramas and working with a POC playwright were appropriate tools needed to dismantle and unsettle the epistemological standpoint of a white, dominant culture viewing audience on the topic of everyday racism. However, there were other aspects of my work which remained uncritiqued and troublesome. While the playwright had creative license and authority over the script, attended all the rehearsals, giving the actors notes on how to play their characters and interpret the script, I selected the actors (with the help of a white actor colleague), the (white) video maker, and had control over the budgets and the/my academic outputs. On reflection, I was perpetuating another aspect of white power, that of 'the hoarding of power'(Gassam Assare, 2022). Creative control was 'given' to the playwright, but I had 'real' control- control over the budgets, costing, and booking actors and video maker. I could rationalise that my role was just a bureaucratic necessity- a need to produce an agreed deliverable and output as efficiently as possible, and

before the end of the funding cycle. However, it is acknowledged that bureaucratic systems, especially university academic structures are heavily coded as white, and therefore exclusionary by definition to non-whites, non-academics (Ray, 2019). Related to this is a notable lack of engagement with students or other creatives from racially or minoritized communities in the drafting of the script, associated academic outputs, or making of the short film. Independently, but also in their sum, these tactics amounted to a figurative and substantive exclusion of minoritised communities from their own experience. To this charge that I 'went it alone', again Lorde's writing offers a powerful warning. 'Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression'(Lorde, 1984, p2). There is symbolic violence associated with my failure to work more collaboratively with racially and ethnically minoritized students and colleagues: allowing my white arrogance to reassert itself and claim with impunity that 'I' know best. It also smacks of the 'same evasion of responsibility, the same cop-out'(Lorde 1984, p.2) that ghettoizes or selectively determines what minoritised people 'can' and 'can't do' in 'my' research. Moreover, there is a real risk of ventriloquism occurring, where I filter out or edit the students experiences through my white lens, and produce something that would only deliver 'acceptable' amount of change, change that was deemed 'allowable' by a hegemonically white system (Lorde 1984, p.1).

When viewed through this critical lens, I accept the reviewers' reservations about my decolonising work, and I am grateful for the opportunity that this review process has given me to learn and relearn these important ethical and epistemological points. However, I am also struck by how, in retrospect, this intervention would have been more authentic and more impactful if the writing process was a collaboration between the playwright and minoritized dental students, and if an open call for minoritised actors was made. It was clearly a missed opportunity that an inclusive research approach was not taken from the beginning, with a working agreement drafted up between all parties that adhered to the principles of co-production and presented all(students, creatives and academics alike) with the equal opportunity to shape this intervention at all stages- the writing phases, filming and subsequent dissemination. In this respect, the minoritized communities themselves would be at the heart of the knowledge production and through their co-production of the ethnodrama be empowered by the opportunity to learn on, reflect on and strike back at oppressive systems and structures (Durose et al., 2012).

Conclusions

There is consensus that decolonisation work is important, but less agreement on how to operationalise this work, as well as address the substantive concerns about the involvement of white academics and how white fragility, white privilege and white ignorance can distort and

derail decolonisation work. This article does not offer a magic bullet for resolving these prescient challenges/threats to decolonisation. In one way, it confirms the epistemological grip of whiteness for white researchers even when they are making a conscious effort to subvert or break away from its hegemony in their practice. The reflective account presented here recalls this white researcher's ongoing struggle with the ethical, epistemological and methodological contradictions they were confronted with as they continue on this journey to decolonise. The decision to write up and share my struggles with 'decolonising while white'(Matthews, 2021) has two purposes- first, to help better articulate and 'own' the contours of my own journey to critical reflection, oscillating back and forth between 'my vulnerabilities and privilege'(Behr Cross, 2017, p. 886), and second, to announce the utility of reflective practice when negotiating the perils of white fragility, privilege and 'white ambivalence'(Matthews, 2021, p1117) when trying to decolonise ones practice.

What are the implications of these reflections? What conclusions can we draw for other white researchers interested in decolonising dental education?

First, all researchers need to accept that epistemic struggle, uncertainty and discomfort are part of the decolonising process. The ethical and epistemological challenges outlined above record how white privilege, white ignorance and guilt pervaded my research practice. I feel strongly that these struggles need to be recorded and openly discussed because these struggles are 'legitimate, acceptable and served as a valuable part of my research process'(DeLuca and Maddox, 2016, p. 293). However, I wouldn't have been able to appreciate these epistemic and methodological tensions if I hadn't given time and space to acknowledge and sit with these

emotions and conflicts (Ahmed, 2004), and opened my work up to the scrutiny of minoritized scholars and decolonisation experts. This can be difficult to achieve from a personal and professional perspective. At a personal level, it is unsettling to realise the extent to which conscious and unconscious biases inform your thinking and practice. It is also humbling and revelatory to be made accountable for these biases by the minoritised communities you are claiming to 'help' and the wider community of scholars whose academic field you want to learn about. Professionally, in the age of the neoliberal university, there is ingrained pressure to produce multiple academic outputs in a timely manner. The work pattern of academia runs contrary to the slow scholarship needed to do effective and meaningful decolonisation work. The decolonisation movement needs to lead by example and support new ways of working and producing knowledge, where time and space allowing researchers to process all the emotional, ethical and epistemological shifts that decolonisation work invites is seen as legitimate parts of the research process, and where creative and first person testimonies/reflective practice accounts are accepted on an equal footing to journal articles and conference presentations. However, more fundamentally, all disciplines, but especially health professional education needs to see decolonisation less as a 'threat' to the Western episteme but rather as indispensable tool breaking new theoretical and epistemological ground, as we grapple with the complexities of delivering healthcare to a society marred by unprecedented levels of war, conflict, social fragmentation, intricately clustered socio, economic, cultural and racially patterned inequalities and environmental collapse. Wyatt's (2022) article offers one approach for how decolonisation work can be transformed into a sustained research enterprise within the field of health professional education. This includes reflecting on who makes up our

research team and who is missing and spotlighting the merits of critical race theory and epistemological ignorance as theoretical and methodological tools integral to the establishment of this new framework of thinking. This, and other writings in this vein (e.g. Paton et al 2020), will help prove the utility of decolonisation to health professional education.

Second, decolonisation work testifies to the cunningness of hegemonic whiteness and the tactics it deploys, from white ignorance and white fragility, to ensure its hegemonic hold on society. This research project taught me this invaluable lesson. At the start of the project, I saw myself as a double 'migrant', as an 'imported specialist from other lands'(Norman, 2011, p.787) being non-clinical and being a non-British, and so bracketed from the discriminatory practices and experiences that my research revealed. However, this research has taught me that this standpoint perspective was not only naïve but also racist. My relationship with the field isn't only determined by my interpretation of my relationship to the nexus of power; the 'complex web of power relationships'(Grosfougel, 2017) that defines and reproduce racism are enshrined in the organisational culture and structure of dental school(Grosfougel, 2017) and my racialised Irishness afforded me white privileges which I am directly benefitted from, whether I aware of this or not. It is also an ethical and methodological conceit to think that decolonisation work can be undertaken as a solitary research endeavour by white researcher. Decolonisation work demands full and equal representation, and unfiltered self-expression and self-determination of racialised minoritized communities in all aspects of research. When white researchers only allow minoritized groups highly edited or curtailed input into research on and about their life experience, all the work confirms is the self-aggrandisement of the white researcher and reaffirms the continuation of white systems of oppression.

Third, for decolonisation work to be considered effective, it must not only draw attention to injustices and discrimination but also involve a plan of how to address or tackle these issues (DeLuca and Maddox, 2016, p. 295). This article documents how critical reflection changed the trajectory of the initial study, diverting it away from traditional academic route with limited impact and audience towards a path where there is potential to reach a wider audience and affect change in educational practices. However, academics undertaking decolonisation work should not only think of their sphere of influence is limited to academic circles. Armed with an understanding of the power asymmetries that permeate racism and lets whiteness operate

unchecked in work setting and academia, researchers working with decolonized epistemologies should also call racism out in all settings. However, this can be difficult to achieve. Behr Cross(2017, p. 885) reminds us, even when we experience moments of white fragility and are cognisant of its ideological effects, white people can still struggle to speak up and out on behalf of racial injustices in higher education. Having more reflective accounts on this aspect of the decolonising work, in addition to those that focus on decolonising research itself, would help to counter the many cultures of silences that ensure the status quo for the benefit of a White majority society.

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