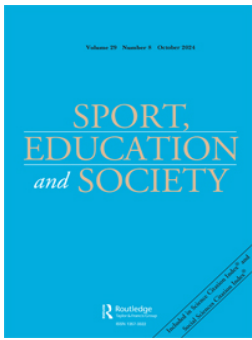


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# Playing by white rules of racial equality: student athlete experiences of racism in British university sport

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## ABSTRACT

Inequalities related to racial identity are consistently reported across social institutions, not least education, and sport. These inequalities consistently challenge ‘post-race’ narratives that rationalise racism down to individual prejudices and poor decision-making. This paper presents part of the findings from a wider a twelve-month research project commissioned by British University and Colleges Sport (BUCS) to explore race equality. This wider research privileged the voices of non-White students and staff in an exploration of race and equality in British UK university sport. ‘Non-white’ was chosen as a race identifier to focus on Whiteness, the normalised, raceless power that reproduces itself both knowingly and unknowingly, to ensure racial ‘others’ remain subordinate. This paper presents the findings of the student voices. In this study a research team of academic and student researchers explored the experiences of 38 students across five universities. Generating case studies from each university, the data was analysed from an Intersectional and Critical Race Theory perspective. Two core themes relating to negotiating Whiteness were developed from the data analysis which reflected experiences of university sport as predominantly White spaces; ‘Play by the Rules’ and ‘Keep You Guessing’. Racial abuse was subtle, camouflaged in comments and actions that happened momentarily and hence were implausible to capture and evidence. For incidents to be addressed, evidence had to meet a ‘beyond doubt’ standard. Students were required to consciously negotiate racial bias and abuse to ensure they did not provide a justification for abuse. Navigating racialisation and stereotypes, plus White denial, was additional emotional labour for students. This mechanism of silencing the victim served to normalise racism for both the abused and perpetrator. The conclusion explores potential ways of disrupting these mechanisms of Whiteness in placing students’ welfare at the heart of university sport.

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Race; whiteness; higher education; student experience; physical activity; sport

## Introduction

Attention to race, racism, and racial difference have developed at strategic and policy levels in both higher education (Winter et al., 2022) and in sport (UK Sport, 2022). As academic fields of study, both

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areas have a long history of critical analysis of racialised marginalisation. Recent research on racial discrimination in sport has drawn attention to the detrimental impact racialised experiences and racism have upon individuals, and the mistrust and exclusion that results (UK Sport, 2022). Cases of racial abuse in UK sport are not a rarity, for example, six Yorkshire Cricketers have been found guilty by the Cricket Disciplinary Commission for historical use of racist language towards their teammate, Azeem Rafiq (ICEC, 2023). Research has also reported on the ineffectiveness of UK Sport policy to produce greater racial diversity and equality, particularly within grass roots sport (Dwight & Biscomb, 2018; Spracklen et al., 2006). Other research has examined the interactions between racial, ethnic, and gender identities in sport participation (e.g. Adjepong, 2015; Ratna & Samie, 2017) and racial inequality in policy and provision of sport coaching (Rankin-Wright et al., 2016). Association Football has received significant attention in relation to the structurally and culturally embedded nature of racism (e.g. Burdsey, 2006, 2011; Cleland, 2014; Cleland & Cashmore, 2016).

Like sport, research within Higher Education reports deeply embedded racial inequalities experienced by both staff and students (Mirza, 2018; Osbourne et al., 2023). Recent studies, for example, demonstrate the rise of islamophobia (Akel, 2019), an attainment gap between White and Non-White students (Bunce et al., 2021; Mahmud & Gagnon, 2023), inequalities in mental health and well-being experienced by Black students (Arday, 2022; Stoll et al., 2022), and this has been accompanied by student led movements such as 'Why is my curriculum White?' (O'Neill, 2023). At the intersections of the two fields of education and sport, university sport is a valuable arena for examining the construction of race and racism in explaining and addressing the experiences of non-White students. This paper presents part of a research project commissioned by British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) to better understand the experiences of the racialised 'other' in university sport. BUCS was founded in 2008 and is a membership organisation, with approximately 165 affiliated UK universities and colleges. BUCS administers and adjudicates competitive inter-university sport and supports universities in promoting greater student physical activity. This research paper privileges data that focussed upon students' experience of university sport, specifically, those who do not share the racial identities of the majority of those who coach, administer, and lead British university sport. The aim of the study was to take seriously the voices of these students who train, compete, and participate in competitive sport and physical activity organised by their university. The purpose was to explore racialisation and its impact upon the students' experience.

Analyses of sport and race indicate the value of paying attention to how specific racial, gendered, and classed subjects are constructed and treated in social spaces (Hylton, 2008). University sport, as a series of social spaces, lies at the intersection of sport and education in which both are constructed by discourses and practices of meritocracy (Dixon, 2021; Morley & Lugg, 2009). UK higher education has a modern history of being a liberal space, marked by the provision in law of successive education legislation that has established legal duties to secure freedom of speech for members, students, and employees (see e.g. Education Act, 2011). The mass increase in students studying in higher education, diversification of university level education across different institutions, and the internationalisation of student bodies, have been key features of the university sector in recent decades. This diversification of students' racial, ethnic, class, and gender identities studying for degrees, has increasingly been matched by an ethical obligation to take issues of equity, inclusion, and diversity seriously and universities place great emphasis on their credibility as places of excellence and the inclusion of diverse groups (Bhopal & Henderson, 2021; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Koutsouris et al., 2022). Competition and greater regulation within the university sector have placed university staff under pressure to ensure students' progress through their studies, and graduate with good honours degrees (Tomlinson, 2018). Data on access, retention and success is used to track student attainment from school to beyond graduation, particularly concerning students considered to be 'non-traditional' such as those with working class or non-white racial and ethnic backgrounds (Cotton et al., 2016). Universities have thus become spaces in which the racial and ethnic identities of students receive attention across academic and other spheres of university life such as sport and physical activity.

Student sport is a space in which wider societal normativity is reflected particularly relating to gender, class, and race (Arday, 2018, Arday, 2021; Bhopal, 2022). However, the construction of higher education as a liberal, inclusive, and equitable space can hide practices and cultures that work to marginalise 'difficult' and different bodies (Puwar, 2004). As a result, the experiences of non-White students can be attributed to their failures to assimilate into university culture rather than any structural and institutional Whiteness (Harper, 2012). In the USA, the experiences of Black student-athletes have been explored from several perspectives including mechanisms that support success in White universities, the relations between athletic and racial identities and academic success (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018; Bimper, 2014, 2017; Steinfeldt et al., 2010), and the consequences of experiencing racism and microaggressions (Beamon, 2014; Lee, 2017; Singer, 2005). Underlying this body of research is a narrative of being positioned as racially 'other' and the role of White normativity in reproducing discrimination and racialised experiences. In a rare UK-focussed study, Leslie-Walker et al. (2022) explored the motivations and challenges experienced by female West African students in their engagement in university sport and physical activity. Cultural insensitivities, unrelatable marketing, and training/match schedules clashing with the academic timetable were key barriers to students' sustained participation. Phipps (2020) has explored the perceptions of student union officers towards the inclusion of LGBT+ students in university sport and revealed a dearth of policy and practice relating to inclusion, in addition to tokenistic gestures towards improving access and sustaining participation. This study thus makes an important contribution to a small yet growing field of research exploring non-White students' experiences of university sport and physical activity.

### **Critical race theory**

The project is structured from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective (Hylton, 2005; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT is characterised by five 'precepts' (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The first precept is that race should be centralised in analysis, but it intersects with other social categories; racism works with and through other lines of inclusion and marginalisation (Hylton, 2012). The second precept is that there should be a focus on challenging overarching structures of Whiteness. A focus on Whiteness and racialisation, as 'a process of categorisation, a representational process of defining another' (Miles, 1989, p. 75) supports analysing 'the processes that privilege and limit people on account of their heritage and related social background' (Hylton, 2008, p. 6). One effect of these processes is the rendering invisible of 'whiteness and the power that is privileged by it', which 'remain untheorized, unexamined and invisible' (Hylton, 2008, p. 6). In higher education, 'race and racism is seldom named or foregrounded thus serving to maintain a racially sanitised norm ... to preserve the institutional image as neutral, colourblind and progressive' (Rollock, 2018, p. 322). In education, Whiteness is often associated with cultural capital (Wallace, 2018). It is not a position adopted by all White people, rather it is a process imperceptible to those who benefit from the unseen privilege it affords (Evans et al., 2020; Touchluk, 2010) and it involves an assumption that White people do not live racially structured lives (Thuram, 2020). The third precept of CRT claims a commitment to social justice; fourthly, to centring experience and the voices of those affected by racialisation to tackle the more usual deficit of storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002); and fifthly, that analyses should be historically situated and transdisciplinary.

Informed by CRT, the focus on racialisation and Whiteness within this study aims to challenge 'post-race' narratives that rationalise racism down to individual prejudices and poor decision-making (Hylton, 2005, 2021). Recognising the role of Whiteness in racism prompts an analysis of the interplay between the micro, individual level, and the macro, structural or institutional level. Post-race narratives and colour blindness have developed alongside the 'lie of meritocracy' (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 58) rationalising racism into individual prejudices and 'heat of the moment' insults (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Long & Hylton, 2002). From this position, sport is seen as a place where fairness is operationalised in rules and by officials to ensure competitive encounters are

ethical and a fair result is achieved. However, sporting contests necessitate rivalry and physical domination that can lead to the racialisation of non-white bodies (Burdsey, 2004; Campbell, 2020; Long & Hylton, 2002). These studies demonstrate the role of Whiteness in defining customs and practices in a process that directs attention away from itself and onto those that do not fit these norms.

Race and racism, in intersection with other identities, continue to be worthy of analysis in sport and education because of a need to understand how structural power manifests in discriminatory encounters. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) demonstrated how people are multiply located within social systems and whilst these different social locations may decentre one another, they function collectively. As a result, no person possesses a single gender position, racialised position, etc. Intersectionality thus helps researchers to explore overlapping architectures of interdependent, identity-specific discrimination and disadvantage (Collins, 1990). In this study our data generation and analyses centre upon the voices of students. The larger research project commissioned by BUCS also explored institutional policies and power through the voices of strategic and operational staff. This dual approach enabled an analysis of the experiences of individual, institutional, and structural levels of racism, or exclusion.

In this study the research question posed was, what are non-White students' experiences of university sport and physical activity? Non-White was chosen to centre Whiteness in the lexicon of discussions about race among the funding organisation and case study Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). All terms used to discuss race are problematic, because they are an arbitrary means of categorising people. Yet discussions about racial inequalities are difficult without using a term of classification (Hylton, 2015). Skin colour varies significantly between racial groups and may also be shared by people with very different cultural identities. The legacy of the use of racial categories to exploit and position non-White skin as fundamentally different and inferior to White, means race is experienced explicitly and implicitly in everyone's lives through the privileges and discrimination they experience. For many racial groups, reference to skin colour represents an acknowledgement of the historical struggle and achievements against endemic racism. Whilst non-White has a prefix that suggests something is lacking, the research team, which included Black and Mixed-Race academics and students, chose this term to bring Whiteness to the foreground in the exploration of students' lived experiences within university-led and -organised sport and physical activity.

## Methodology

Students' experiences of sport and physical activity are spread across different contexts and are experienced through different intersecting identities including, gender, class, race, and ethnicity (Rankin-Wright & Hylton, 2020). This spread of experience also means that it is not easy for participants to compartmentalise their lives before, during and beyond university. A qualitative research approach was therefore considered the most feasible means to explore the nuances of participants' experiences and how their identities are produced through and within different contexts.

The wider study was commissioned through a partnership of researchers geographically spread across the UK and took place over an eighth month period between October 2022 and May 2023. This facilitated the development of a multiple case study approach based upon the five university sites at which the research was conducted. (Stake, 2013). Data for this research was generated via semi-structured interviews conducted by trained and employed student researchers. Interviews were conducted with students who participated in university sport as recreational or BUCS competition participants. Interviews were conducted individually, in one encounter and lasted from approximately 40 min to an hour. Interviews were conducted through a mixture of online and face to face encounters as preferred by the participants. Student researchers enabled a decrease in the power differential that can occur between staff and students (Seale, 2010). Nearly all the student interviewers were from a non-White background. This meant that the research was 'with' and 'by' students experiencing racialising and racialised university sport (Bhopal, 2022; Hylton, 2012). Recruitment of both research participants and student researchers was sought via a blend

of communication channels within the organisational structures of sport at their universities, and subsequently through snowballing. Participants were asked how they identified themselves, which revealed the limitations of the normative racial identities used by institutions, with many participants identifying with a mixture of national and ethnic values. The participant sample size was based upon the trending themes developed through the iterative process of data collection and data analysis, the limits of participant recruitment and the timescales of the research agreed with BUCS. This resulted in 38 student interview transcripts being included in the study.

Ethical approval was sought from the lead university research site and when obtained, each partner university applied to their own ethics committee for the research to be granted ethical status. As a result, the same research project was considered and approved independently, and suitable steps taken for responding to a comprehensive range of ethical concerns posed by the research: consent, data security, participant confidentiality, anonymity, and ethical care for participants and student interviewers potentially re-living stressful experiences (Legerski & Bunnell, 2010). For example, the student researchers were taught about ensuring that interview locations and formats enabled confidential and free discussion without risk of others overhearing. This included checking in with participants during and before the interview, particularly when experiences of racism were being recalled. Whilst absolute confidentiality could not be guaranteed, participant identity was protected by anonymising transcripts and removing direct means of connecting data to a particular participant.

### **Data analysis**

A small sample of data from the lead university site was read through by the students and staff to obtain a sense of the student narratives and to identify initial patterns and potential themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Reflexivity was supported through small group analysis at each research site. This was developed further via regular research team meetings involving all the research sites. At the end of this process each university research site presented their initial analysis and from this the team co-constructed an analytical framework constituted by the agreed dominant patterns developed from sample data. The lead researchers from each of the university research sites shared the analysis framework with their local research team, including student co-researchers, to support the analysis of their own student data set.

During this phase there was a strong emphasis on assessing and identifying similarities and differences in interpretations within the local research team, in addition to ongoing, critical assessments of the overall effectiveness of that framework. Lead staff from each university research site met frequently to share sample data and analysis from each of the university research sites. These discussions functioned to monitor parity and any further insights and adjustments to the analytical framework. As a result of this process, five case studies were produced corresponding to each of the university research sites. These case studies were then employed to draw together the key findings of the research (Zach, 2006).

### **Findings**

The findings are informed by a CRT framework where Whiteness and White neutrality are a focus of analysis. Analysis of the student data produced two core themes of *Play by the Rules* and *Keep You Guessing*, both characterised by an overarching idea of *Negotiating Whiteness*.

#### **Negotiating whiteness**

Across the case studies students' experiences centred upon an ongoing process of negotiating Whiteness that had different intensities depending on the context. White spaces being places of risk was normalised, within which non-White students were exposed to being 'othered'. 'Othering' ranged from lingering in the background, to explicit hostility, to being fetishised as 'exotic':

I was like the only sort of like BAME person so they like, some of them would describe me as exotic. I found that so weird. That's just such a weird way to describe people ... like I was some sort of rare species, because everyone else is so White on the team.

This 'othering' made non-White students feel:

Uncomfortable and a bit different from everyone else, because if I was born here and I was White, for example, they probably wouldn't be asking those questions.

Negotiating Whiteness was less evident when students' identities were welcomed and understood in their teams and institutions, and they had positive experiences. Students viewed sport as an important social space that could enrich their sense of belonging and well-being. Sport added a dimension to students' university life which was derived from feeling a sense of purpose that was produced when the objectives of teams and squads aligned with personal desires and goals. Sport contexts within which students and staff were able to share the diversity of their backgrounds and associated identities provided a strong sense of belonging. Coaches played a key role in mediating continued sport participation, particularly when they recognised commitment and effort to develop. For example, a coach running a participatory recreational activity was reported to:

Get me, if you know what I mean, like he understands and asks what we want to get out of our session ... I feel like we have a say and can help decide the direction.

Where non-White identities became the focus of attention, rather than their identities as athletes, the students had to make decisions about how to respond. These decisions were labourious, wrapped in emotional challenges and impacting their sense of safety, belonging, and inclusion. For example:

I think it's hard because I think you realise what you're having to do. It's something that's quite tiring I suppose. Like you are having to consciously think about how you're acting within the space.

The students used their prior experiences of sport to navigate university sport and evaluate associated spaces and contexts. Adverse experiences prompted students to assess whether they felt a new team would provide the necessary support to negotiate racism, weighing up 'if something goes badly, who do I know is going to be behind me ... who is the person or who are the people that you know are going to understand?' When faced with a racially homogeneous squad, the answer in this example was 'no', and student decided it was safer to fulfil a coaching role instead of trying to play. The need to negotiate different contexts brought with it a need to *Play by the Rules*, or behave according to what was expected, even if that meant not being authentic to themselves. The students experienced a requirement not to play up to racial stereotypes, such as the 'angry Black man or woman'. Racism had a hidden element, camouflaged in unowned comments from crowds, hidden in overly aggressive play, or in language with implicit racist undertones that gave it a *Keep You Guessing* quality.

### ***Play by the rules***

Non-White students needed to negotiate an additional set of rules in responding to racial tropes about Black athleticism, different expectations from coaches and officials, and overt racist slurs used by opponents to gain a competitive advantage. The experience of these hidden rules for non-White students served to govern actions and reactions to racism so as not to upset racial conviviality and a veneer of meritocracy and fairness. Importantly, the responsibility to respond lay with the victim because it is through their reactions students felt they were additionally judged.

### ***The double-edged power of racial tropes***

Black students reported feeling like they had to play up to racial tropes such as Black bodies being naturally stronger and less inclined to be strategic competitors:



So, my friend, when describing her, everyone always used, you know, adjectives like powerful, strong, fast, but she's actually, really clever, in terms of understanding the game as well but nobody would talk about that. It's all about her physicality ... but there were White players that are way stronger than her.

Concurrent with the application of these tropes, non-White students reported that they should also consequently, be 'naturally' good at sport:

I feel like people assume, like automatically assume, that we're athletes, like just naturally athletic and it's like, uh, I got zero coordination here! [I was asked to play a netball match and] I was like 'I don't want to have to shoot. I can't, OK, I'm sorry, I know it's a lot like basketball, but I can't play basketball either'. I felt like everybody was looking at me like 'what kind of Black person can't play sports?'

Despite being open and resisting the trope associating a Black racial identity with athleticism especially in sports like basketball, for this student there was a consequence; a residual slight on the legitimacy of being Black but not 'naturally' good at sport. Another consequence of the application of athletic tropes to Black players was also experienced in a felt distrust and manoeuvring to positions that were less strategic:

So, in rugby you see it quite a lot, sort of these stereotypes come out, and I've experienced this too, like where Black players aren't trusted to hold key positions and get put into positions where they can be athletic. It's like that's all we are, athletic, and we can't be, you know, playmakers, like be trusted in strategic positions.

This 'stacking' of players in positions seen as requiring strength over tactics demonstrates how one of the earliest analyses of Black experiences in sports is still relevant today (Long & Hylton, 2002). Perceived racial profiling in BUCS teams was evident particularly in traditional sports. For some students, playing in White-dominated teams, there was a disconnect between perceived talent and those who made the first teams. There was a perception that to be selected for the first team students not only had to negotiate the needs of the team and its established players, but also penetrate the social networks between players and coaches, and between team members.

### *The additional labour and rules of belonging*

Social networks within sport societies, squads and teams provide important strength to their ongoing functioning. Research has consistently reported on the resources and dispositions required to enter and maintain good standing in masculine (and White) university sport cultures (Sparkes et al., 2007). Social networks are built through training, competing, and socialising, providing the environment for bonding and a sense of togetherness to grow. This was often, even in more participatory sports, based around drinking alcohol. For many student participants in this study, drinking alcohol was not an activity with which they regularly, if at all, engaged. Participation in this aspect of White social life was expected to be part of a squad. Not attending alcohol based 'socials' created a distance to the social ties and cultural capital built around the partying culture.

Conformity to, and negotiation of, the White norm came first, and if followed by a sense of acceptance, more authentic identities could be exposed, and for example 'A little bit more of your Black can come out and play'. Fitting into required adaptation and actions that contradicted their authentic identities: So, what I do is to actually adapt to their own culture or their way of thinking... Like what was said earlier, going out for drinks after games, that's not me. So sometimes I have to do that just to feel like I belong. It's not ideal that I have to always adapt and change my way of doing things or my way of thinking or my cultural beliefs in order to be a part of the group.

For students negotiating very White spaces, fitting in created a mental and emotional load that was coupled with high stakes mediation of their belonging and a legitimate place within a team. Students felt compelled to maintain their membership of the team's social network and to negotiate how this affected their credibility as a player, questioning whether they really wanted to undergo the 'mentally draining' effort to be part of a team.

Those who had achieved sporting credibility prior to university sometimes chose to reject this additional labour required to assimilate to the White norms present in university squads. Competing

in less prestigious spaces, required less labour to fit in and was an option that some students chose to take, such as lower performing teams focused on participation over competition.

For some students this additional labour and negotiation of Whiteness in their sporting lives created a need to seek spaces of shared language, music, and clothes, a context in which the shared experiences of university could be enjoyed without the need to 'explain everything'. Choosing to physically seek the support and kinship of other non-White students was an openly racial act that White students did not have to negotiate. Non-White students were conscious of its racial character because it offended a White-centric sense of inclusion:

Like when we sit together or are chatting, you know sometimes they [White teammates] or the coach will come up and say is everything OK? Like us being close is a threat or sign that we're not happy. I mean sometimes, but we're just hanging out! You know like we can be friends!

The desire to be authentic in some instances brought with it the tension of dealing with teammates and coaches 'fishing' for social connections using racial tropes such as talking in slang. This was used to try to ingratiate themselves with Black athletes through the mimicking of racial tropes, resulting in racially homogenising and caricaturing Black identities. Doing so also created the suspicion of a hidden agenda, whether it was genuinely meant as humorous banter or something more sinister.

### *The rules of negotiating discrimination while competing and training*

When reflecting on being racialised while competing, students recalled getting a feeling that something was not right and that there was a difference in how they were being treated which they were unable to identify. This included a feeling of being visually 'othered' by the power of the gaze from White-dominated spaces where for example:

Everybody is looking at you and you just have to shrug it off and try to focus on the sport'.

A belief that on occasions decisions by officials were biased, particularly in team sports, were commonly reported. White officials were reported as treating non-White players differently to White players, particularly when a White team was playing a racially diverse team. These beliefs were aggravated by the existence of additional hidden rules in how non-White players should respond to perceived unfair decisions and perceived discriminatory judgement by competition officials who were from the opposition university:

Their [White] umpires were brutal. I think one of the umpires made a comment like 'your attitude stinks'. And then one of her netballers, she got the ball intercepted from her, she ripped off her bib, threw it on the floor, and I said, 'what about her attitude?' And [the umpire] said, 'well, you know, she's upset'. Whereas I pull my face at her call and my attitude stinks? And she nearly wants to send me off the court! It's as if the penalties are much greater. So, then you have to actually play smarter, which in itself is harder. You just have to walk away from the situation, let the others deal with it, because I do get penalised more, it feels like that. Maybe it's just in my head, but I feel like I get penalised more for voicing my opinions or, just like little, things like rolling eyes like they're like, 'oh, you can't do that'.

As this player suggest by wondering if it is all in her head, students might doubt their perceptions and feelings. A second example indicates how non-White students were aware of rules governing how they could be perceived when responding to officials' decisions in the heated moments of competition:

Some of my other White teammates would get quite angry or get quite upset, be able to swear or walk towards officials. Whereas I'm very aware of the weight that comes with having Black skin and being perceived as this thug, making sure that you avoid that position before it gets there ... you self-govern your behaviour where you don't put yourself in that position.

The risk of being stereotyped governed this student's response, but his impression of leniency towards White teammates was also evident. Awareness that a reaction would be received harshly and hence having to 'self-govern' was a lonely and isolating experience, as this student explains regarding being seen as a 'snitch':

I did feel like I need to report it, but it's a social stigma, where if you snitch, you'll be wrong or you'll be like everyone will look at you as a snitch for rest of their time there ... so I just like had to put up with it, so I don't feel left out even more. If it's a group and one person makes that joke, and then nobody else stands up, I probably will keep quiet because it's as if their silence is agreeing with it.

This self-governing behaviour was required to negotiate the Whiteness and secure membership of the group. It aligned with the need not to upset the inequitable racial conviviality demanded by Whiteness, signalled through the silence of others.

The explicit use of slurs directed at students to gain a competitive advantage was also reported. Explicit racial abuse was reported as isolated, sporadic incidents, experienced most when competing at another university. Although not a regular experience for individuals, these incidents demanded negotiation:

People would drop the 'N' word, would drop the 'C' word, as a way to wind you up, to get a rise out of you. So if you're doing well, it's one word that will trigger you like no matter if you're in a good mood or a bad mood, if you get called a 'Black C', you're just like, sorry? What did you just say? And sometimes I do bite back, but most of the time it's just like, 'you're pathetic, if you're going to this length to get a rise out of me, it's just a bit embarrassing'.

Some students shared how teammates would stick up for them, or step in when unwanted and unwarranted attention and abuse was being experienced. Participating in sport could thus be both inclusive and 'othering' at the same time.

Decisions by the students to respond explicitly were swayed by the credibility and availability of witnesses. However, these were also balanced against the support they would receive from coaches and other players, particularly if their behaviour would bring harsher treatment from officials. Students were required to continually negotiate not only the experience of perceived injustice, but also how to react and consider if this might create more adversity. In this way the victim became the focus of attention, rather than those with responsibility for the moment in which the incident occurred. These rules worked to ensure their reactions were silenced, so as not to provide justification for the insult. Explicit reactions worked to help the perpetrator gain the desired advantage by increasing the risk of loss of concentration and focus whilst competing.

The perceived need to be silent and to move on functioned to help to make the experience intelligible by positioning silence as a choice. Resistance to perceived injustice had to be balanced with potential impact on long term inclusion. Silence thus was a governed response, a need to play by White rules or risk social exclusion or further abuse. The power of Whiteness to create and legitimise silence from both non-White and White students was evident. This power worked to ensure White and non-White students maintained the veneer of racial conviviality by not challenging racism contained within jokes and banter which meant 'tread[ing] incredibly carefully' (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. xi). The hidden set of rules that governed students' responses worked to normalise the existence of structural racism. Choosing to ignore racial abuse was a common strategy students used to avoid confrontation. Confrontation risked offending White fragility to issues of race and ethnicity and exposing students to exclusion. However, not confronting disrespect and the use of racial tropes normalised their existence. A dual set of rules applied in these instances, those that permitted White ignorance, but thereafter expected the response to such ignorance to be negotiated in a non-confrontational way. Not playing by these rules and reacting created a risk of confirming the racial tropes used against the students in the first place. In this sense, a lose-lose situation was produced; not conforming to racial tropes such as the 'Angry Black man or woman' was an important rule of inclusion into White space, even though tropes were used to 'other' non-White identities.

### ***Keep you guessing***

The unowned, anonymous, and implied racism that the students reported kept students guessing, either as to who the perpetrator was or whether behaviours and comments were intended as racial

discrimination. The hidden dimension of this racism worked alongside the need to 'play by the rules'. Students often talked about a feeling, a look, and a sense that the space they were in was not safe:

You know you get a feeling like, we turned up to this really White uni and you know, we are like a diverse team, you turn up to play and something's not right – the looks you get, the feeling in the air. Like this has some hostility that could turn. So, it makes you think 'right OK this is it, you've got to watch it here 'cos it could turn ugly'.

If students had not yet experienced racism in university sport, there was an expectation that it probably would happen in future. Students recalling racism within competitive sport spoke about it as part of the ongoing momentum of a game, often taking an implied form, camouflaged in sly comments or anonymous calls, where its 'keep you guessing' quality made resistance challenging. Even when the behaviour was more overt, it still had an unowned quality. For example:

All the [opponent] did to me all game was kick me and I was like 'I know what your issue is with me. Because you laugh and joke with the rest of my team. But you need to be big enough to say it and own it'.

The physical violence here had to be attributed by the victim to her skin colour as a 'best guess' for why it was happening. The speed with which some comments came and went made reporting difficult as students would question 'did that just happen to me?'

Students who had experienced racism whilst competing in BUCS shared how it was often hidden in the anonymity of a crowd:

They had spectators in a bay and all the spectators were shouting and some were racist things to me and my teammates. But it's just pathetic really sometimes, how do I explain it, sometimes I feel with racism, it's not so much the words that they're saying it's the intent that they see it, there's some people who just say words to get a rise out of you without understanding the meaning behind the actual word, so someone could say something to me really racist and call me a certain word. But they are just saying it to get a reaction.

Racism here was covered via anonymity in a crowd and legitimated through the White silence of others. For this student, whilst there was a doubt about the intent, this racism was reconciled with seeing it as a morally abject way to gain advantage. Students reflect upon racial abuse as a means to 'sledge' players, in other words, to put them off their game and obtain an advantage. Specifically, to 'get a rise' and provoke a reaction that would confirm a racial trope, taint them with guilt, and win a decision from an official.

More covert, implied racism, termed microaggressions were commonly reported by students studying in majoritively White institutions. Whether consciously intended or not, this form of racism had a cumulative negative impact on their sense of inclusion and belonging. These racial aggressions could be prolonged, permitted by hidden behaviours that taunted and 'fished' for an explicit retaliation and evocation of a racial trope. For example:

Throughout the game when the ball would go out of play, and we had this White player, and they would only send the ball back to him. What happened then was the captain asked the referee and they pulled their coach and said 'why are you doing that? This is out of order' which sparked, you know, a big issue. They said 'oh, we're not racist'. But nothing went any further, what's the grounds? Yet it was blatantly racist. The guys came back really upset about it. They said 'I'm never going to [University X] again because there's just White people that treat them like dirt.

Here the racist action was concealed in a team's decision to insult the non-White players by using the White player on their team as a vehicle to signal racial exclusion. Some recognition of objections from the coach and team captain were made by the game officials, however, they were left to doubt the legitimation of the claim by a counter-denial. Students often reported that the pressure of maintaining the momentum of the contest and the privileging of evidence with a 'beyond doubt' quality meant racism went unreported. Thus, racism became a normalised expectation that would often go unchallenged. Challenging racism, as has been discussed, created dilemmas and risks produced by Whiteness which were not surmountable.

Racist comments could also be more subtle, through the undertones used:

I don't know if it was a coach or just a fan, but we were just at the game and then I think he just kind of, I can't remember but he said a snide comment that wasn't overtly racist but had that undertone. I was mid-game, so I couldn't just stop like that, call the guy out or anything, I just carried on and ignored it. And then after the game he [White bystander] gave a smirk when he was leaving. It made me feel very angry at the time. What he said was, I think it was 'boy'. Something along the lines of 'boy'.

The weaponising of the term 'boy' to abuse a player midgame, followed through with implied ownership, used the momentum of a sport context to create the conditions to depower the student from seeking justice. 'Boy' is a term, when directed at a Black man, that invokes abhorrent connections to the treatment of slaves and ongoing subordination of Black men. It works to delegitimise personhood and reduce identity to a child and a servant that is inferior to a White person. Initial anonymity, followed through with implied ownership through a facial gesture, minimises the evidence which the victim would have to rely upon to seek justice. Importantly, the initial anonymity and ongoing flow of the game made it difficult to raise the experienced abuse at the time, and this works to normalise its existence. The potential trauma and impact of arbitrary unowned racial abuse demanded victims to depersonalise it and align it with ignorance. As a result, students were kept guessing about the efficacy of the environment in which they were competing.

Explicit racial abuse that occurred within the flow of a game would go unreported or unexamined because competition officials did not hear. However, even in circumstances where there were witnesses there was no guarantee of action. In this example, a player-coach did not feel empowered to stop the game:

A teammate was involved in a tackle and the [White] opposition player was not happy with the challenge and he racially abused our [Black] player. [Member of staff] luckily witnessed this and heard it clearly but [the abused player] walked off the pitch and sat out. It was taken to their Head of Sport but they are suggesting it's 'alleged racism'. What? Staff heard this and they had statements from them. BUCS says we have to resolve it between us first, but [the other university] are ducking responsibility and how do I know if they will really take this seriously? They could fob us off. Where is the justice here?

This example demonstrates how time and distance from an event provide the opportunity for White silence that avoids responsibility and requires the victim and their institution to hunt for evidence to prove that the racism occurred. The word 'luckily' here suggests that without a credible witness such as a member of staff, the incident may not have been addressed at all. This attests to severe limitations in the systems and policies that govern the reporting and management of racism that were also found when analysing the staff data.

When students suffered these incidents, few felt they had support within either their university sport system or within BUCS to pursue a complaint. The 'keep you guessing' nature of racism, made seeking justice very challenging, more so, than when racial abuse was explicit, because systems and policies demanded conclusive evidence. Many of the experiences of racism were not pursued as complaints because the onus of responsibility was placed upon victims to drive them through the system. Denial on the grounds of insufficient evidence and 'word against word' reflects the paradoxical power of the label of racist. It evidences how institutional reputation trumps individual experience. Racism hidden in the anonymity of crowds, in under the breath comments, or with ambiguity in meaning, does not produce conclusive evidence. Therefore, the need for evidence, during or after the heat of an incident, creates the conditions for the normalisation of structural racism hidden behind individual comments. As a result, when perceived racist incidents were followed up, the label of 'racist' was more powerful than the experience of receiving racist abuse. To the students who had suffered these experiences, social justice was an illusion, and their experiences of racial abuse were subordinated for the sake of reputation management.

## Discussion

Recent research studies in UK Higher Education (Akel, 2019; Bunce et al., 2021; NUS, 2011; Osbourne et al., 2023) and UK sport (Burdsey, 2004, 2011; Cleland, 2014; Cleland & Cashmore, 2016; UK sport,

2022) report the common phenomenon of being 'othered' and the subject of racist abuse. This was also the case for the students in this study in which racism was sporadic, hidden in the anonymity of a crowd, in an under the breath comment, that could be said to be misheard or misinterpreted. This 'kept the students guessing' at what had been said to them and the intent behind it, and indicates an opportunistic, ambiguous form of racism. Students were stuck between ignoring and reporting racist comments and suffered significant detrimental impact upon self-esteem and belonging from the cumulation of these experiences (Akel, 2019; Osbourne et al., 2023; UK Sport, 2022).

Racism is not always contained within overt abhorrent comments but 'happens by way of Whiteness' (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 108). Whiteness works to 'other' non-White students at an individual, cultural, and systemic level in university sport. The findings of this study provide insight into the additional set of rules Whiteness creates for Non-White students, Specifically how these serve to govern their silence when responding to racial tropes. Examples of these troupes included, Black athleticism, different expectations from coaches and officials, and racism used by opponents to gain a competitive advantage. Osbourne et al. (2023) reflect how in UK Higher Education White students can project their Whiteness onto Black students and thus decide who belongs. In this study these hidden additional White rules were projected onto the students, functioning to govern their actions and reactions to racism so as not to upset racial conviviality and the veneer of meritocracy and fairness. Osbourne et al. (2023) also reveal the process of silencing Black students and the day-to-day self-management required to avoid stereotypes, avoid attention to difference and thus not allow students to be their authentic selves. Silence in this study was not just a means of similarly negotiating inclusion into White spaces but was also a form of self-preservation and resistance to racism, in which intent to harm was depersonalised and attributed to abject morality.

The risks and events of being racially abused was laboursome, wrapped in emotional challenges and impacted their sense of safety, belonging, and inclusion. 2002). These findings concur with those of Akel (2019) and Bunce et al. (2021) who report on the experiences of non-White students in their academic studies, particularly the exclusion produced through fetishisation, cumulative microaggressions, explicit racism and distant relations with White staff and students. This research helps to exemplify how Whiteness determines the rules of inclusion. Whiteness in this study not only necessitated conformity to its cultural norms to maintain a sense of inclusion; it also posed a consistently perceived risk of being 'othered' and abused, whilst concurrently demanding the potential victim to play by additional set of hidden, paradoxical rules. These rules demanded not responding to confirm racial tropes, but were then in turn, used to abuse the victim in the first place.

The findings of this study also help to show how Whiteness infiltrates systems and processes that are intended to address racism, however, enable its continuity. This is reproduced through their neutrality, reliance on undisputable evidence, lack of data gathering and analysis, and dialogue with minority groups keep non-White experiences as subordinate to White. Students had to be 'lucky' for racial insults to be heard or observed by people who held sufficient power to convince a system that the insult was 'fact'. The need for evidence after the heat of racist incidents created the illusion of justice (Mirza, 2018), however, the labels of racist and racism worked to ensure that institutions sought 'beyond doubt' evidence that a student or students competing on their behalf were responsible.

This was structurally reinforced by a BUCS complaints system that required universities to work through disagreements themselves before involving direct investigation lead by BUCS. The lack of evidential facts often meant these investigations rarely resulted in action and the student's interests slipped through the intended safety net of due process and social justice. Opportunistic, ambiguous hidden racism that was evidenced through the students' voices, would continually fall through this net and as a result, racism was left to go cold, sanitised into statements and evidence, often unremembered and left unaddressed. Osbourne et al. (2023) report how the privileging of White experiences to deflect and deny responsibility at a student-to-student level produces 'acceptable' racism. The findings of this study illustrate how this works at a systemic level, how racism is operationalised

within a White-centric system that normalises the status quo and 'the bureaucratic conceit of equality and diversity policies' (Mirza, 2018, p. 6). Structural racism supported by institutions built in Whiteness is reflective of 'structures that determine and cyclically remanufacture racial inequity; and institutional norms that sustain White privilege and permit the ongoing subordination of minoritized persons' (Harper, 2012, p. 10).

## Conclusions

The findings in this paper resonate with other enquiries into British university sport (Phipps, 2020) that equality and inclusion are not viewed as requiring ongoing enactment. To not be complicit in the reproduction of acceptable racism, there is an urgent need for BUCS and their member HEIs to commit to robust mechanisms of reporting racial abuse and supporting non-White student-athletes' participation and inclusion. This requires collaboration between organisations and student-athletes to listen to experiences of imbalances in power, commit to practices that are anti-racist rather than inclusionary. In this study racism hid in momentary, opportunistic, ambiguous, and anonymous spaces. Combating this requires in the moment action and processes that supports active antiracism bystanding (Mulvery et al., 2023), rather reliance on post-game investigations that mean the passage of time and a search for incontrovertible evidence sanitise experiences or deter complaints. Conscious management of sports competitions before, during and immediately after games is required, with responsibilities agreed and spaces created for issues to be raised and aired. Such responsibilities and plans of action will rest upon those who have been tasked with a duty of care for the student-athletes, coaches, competition officials and player representatives.

Centring player welfare, the ethos of the competitive encounter and the values that the latter define, would serve to ensure that assumed codes of conduct do not become the means through which racism evades social justice. Empowering students to use a mechanism which communicates through to officials the experience of racial abuse as closely to the moment as possible would counter the silence demanded by Whiteness. Issues raised should be followed up at the end of the fixture, with game officials, coaches and the players concerned. A system of mediation is also required to ensure universities reach socially just outcomes when racism is raised. Such a system needs to be part of reporting that allows the prevalence of these issue to be monitored and evaluated.

As part of the commitment to social justice in CRT (Hylton, 2008; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) this project is working for change with BUCS and HEIs, to tackle the contradiction in HE between opportunity/empowerment and marginalisation (Mirza, 2006). It is incumbent on those with a duty of care for students, particularly coaches and officials, to manage environments effectively to ensure racism is not reproduced on the grounds of lack of evidence. These findings suggest there is a need to address the current perception of competition officials possessing latent racial prejudices that produce a perceived unfair treatment of non-White competitors. There is also a need for honest consideration of the layers of credibility that coaches, and established players create, and the nature of the inclusiveness that is defined as a result. Doing so will create consciousness of what type of student athlete is welcome in a squad or team. Evaluation of the values that lie at the heart of this credibility and the extent to which it is controlled by coaches and players is a central requirement of claiming to be an inclusive sport system.

The data reflects an urgent need to break White silence by delegitimising racist slurs and the reproduction of racial tropes through White resistance. Calling 'out', resisting racism in its tracks, calling 'in', appealing to a perpetrator's humanity to critique racism and calling 'on', recruiting a perpetrator to an anti-racist stance, are example approaches that can be applied to different contexts to break the silence incurred by Whiteness (Ross, 2019). Crucially, the breaking of White silence creates the space for the impact of racist jokes and banter to be legitimately shared. It takes the onus away from the victim to negotiate racial conviviality and makes tackling prejudice, both an individual, and a collective responsibility. Moving from silent bystander to an ally is key to the process, which cannot

be delegated to one-off catch all training. It should become an implicit part of a sport system's values and way of operating both within and between other universities. With this comes the need to consider White norms as the problem, not those that differ from them.

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