



**Maynooth
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National University
of Ireland Maynooth

Department of Sociology

Maynooth University Special Topic Thesis

*“An examination into race relations at Maynooth
University”*

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Table of Contents:

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Literature Review	6
Methodology	16
Discussion of Findings	22
Conclusion	32
Bibliography	34
Appendices	37

Abstract:

This research was conducted in order to examine the lived experience of ethnic minority groups at Maynooth University. It will question the impact that race has on these experiences and whether or not there is a problem of discrimination and racism here at Maynooth University which was inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and the voices and experiences of marginalised ethnic groups finally being brought to light and given a space. Assisted by and building on existing literature and discourse, this research will further provide a space for staff and students of colour to voice their opinions, concerns and experiences. In order to achieve this, this study will use primary research data compiled through 11 semi-structured interviews and participation in a Student Race Equality Forum.

Introduction:

Black Indigenous people of colour (BIPOC) have long documented their experiences of racism in every walk of life. From micro – aggressions in quick interactions, to fully fledged hate crimes and acts of violence. Racism is not a new phenomenon, but one that has been culturally ingrained not just in our societies values and beliefs, but our institutions and systems also. The Black Lives Matter movement was a formative part in my interest on this topic, as it was this movement that really highlighted the extreme inequalities that BIPOC face on a daily basis and how, as a white person, peer and colleague it is not just enough to be passively not racist, in order to truly make a difference we need to be actively anti-racist.

Although the Black Lives Matter movement has been established since 2013, the protests and riots of 2020 are what really brought it to light. These protests, sparked by the murder of George Floyd, brought around a new discourse about racism that many people never would have talked about before. People of colours voices were finally beginning to be heard and listened to. The aim of this research project is to examine the lived experiences of POC at Maynooth University and what role race plays in these experiences. The BLM movement has brought the experiences of many POC to light, and it is my aim to see whether these experiences have changed and improved now that their voices are hopefully being heard.

The significance of this research project lies in the fact that many people don't acknowledge and realise that racism is simply not just violent acts or serious hate crimes, but that they can manifest themselves in many different ways, all of which lead to deeply traumatic consequences for the people and communities experiencing this racism. A point that I have noticed while conducting my research for this research project is that there is a lack of

reporting and academic discourse surrounding the experiences of POC'S on college campuses especially in an Irish context, and so by conducting my own research and retrieving valued and much needed data, I am filling a gap in discourse that must be filled. By gaining the experiences of these individuals and communities in a formal education setting, using the new discourse that the Black Lives Matter brought to light, we can use this data to improve on campus life and acknowledge any gaps or failures that are contributing to these negative experiences and whether or not the BLM movement has brought around the change it wanted.

This research project will firstly begin by reviewing the already existing literature around race and racism in higher education, an examination into and definition of race and racism and then finally it will outline the theoretical framework which will be used to guide this research project, which will be W.E.B. DuBois' theory of double consciousness and the veil. The methodology used in conducting this research will be outlined and any ethical concerns will be addressed and finally, chapter 4 will summarize the findings of my fieldwork research and analyse them in relation to the already existing literature.

Literature Review:

Maynooth University:

As this research will primarily focus on the experiences of BIPOC in Maynooth University specifically, I was curious as to what measures are in place, or being put into place, at Maynooth University to combat racism and racist encounters on Campus. There is an Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Interculturalism (EDI) committee in the University that “promotes the principles of equality of opportunity for all employees and students at the University; and support the University’s principles and values of equality, inclusiveness” (EDI n.d). In 2018 Maynooth University, in collaboration with this committee, released their “Maynooth University Equality and Diversity Policy” (Maynooth University 2018). Within this Policy, a “framework for the University to meet its obligations as an equal opportunities employer and public service provider” is provided, within which the category of race and racism is discussed. This is not just about blatant racist encounters on campus, but also about equality of opportunity, equality of access, and any other systemic forms of discrimination students and staff of colour may face. While my research will mainly focus of their lived experiences on campus, it would be negligible for me to ignore the systemic obstacles that these groups may also possibly face. This EDI office also releases their annual “EDI Report” which aims to “highlight key achievements in the space of Equality and Diversity at Maynooth University and to celebrate the diversity that exists within our community” (EDI, 2018:4). Included in this report is statistical breakdowns of the staff and student body in terms of categories such as age, race, gender and disability etc. For example, in the 2019/20 report, 78% of staff were identified as Irish, 15% as EU/EEA and 7% as Non-EU/EAA (EDI

2021:26). Data collection only began in 2018, so these statistics may not be completely representative due to limitations, but as I will outline at a later point, we cannot wait around for this data and statistics to be released in order to wait around and solve racism.

A discussion panel held on the 28th of June 2020 called the “Race Equity at Maynooth University - Panel Discussion with Students” was conducted by the Students Union in collaboration with the previous President of the University Dr. Philip Nolan. In this discussion panel, Bukky Adebawale the, at the time, VP of Student Life shares her experience of being a black woman at Maynooth, and how she was afraid to even run for the role as “she was a black woman and not many people can relate to black women” (Maynooth University 2020). Stating how she “didn’t experience too much racism in college, although I did experience a lot of microaggressions”, this highlights the need to allow minority student voices to be heard and for a space for them to openly express these experiences and concerns. As will be mentioned later in chapter 3, this Student Race and Equality Forum is now an annual event “designed to facilitate conversations on what can be done to break down barriers for ethnic minority students in Maynooth University and to discuss how diversity, inclusion and race equity can be promoted in the University” (Maynooth University 2022). Coming on from this, Maynooth University have now released their online “Speak Out” online reporting tool, which is an “anonymous reporting tool available for students and staff, to disclose incidents... will help you to find information and contact details on relevant Maynooth supports and specialist external support” (EDI 2022).

Higher Education Ireland

A point that I discovered while conducting my preliminary research for this portion of the project was that there is little discourse about the black students experience in Ireland, and

Maynooth University included. Bríd Ní Chonail (2021:51) highlights this in her paper Black Lives Matter and Higher Education in Ireland, noting that there is a “paucity of Irish research on the experience of Black students in the Irish higher education sector”. This paucity highlights the lack of a standardised ethnic data collection forum in Ireland. Without this data, we are unable to gain a true understanding of the experiences of these minority groupings, thus allowing people to remain blissfully unaware of the severity of the situation, and no solution will be created and implemented. Surrounding the lack of research and data available on the experiences of black students in Ireland, Adeyale et al (2020a) and Adeyale et al (2020b), provide a very useful anecdotal discourse on the experiences of black students in Ireland. One student expresses their frustration when people say that racism isn’t as bad in Ireland as it is in other places (Adeyale 2020b), as they feel that this undermines their experiences and anxieties. It is this viewpoint, that I myself as a white student can corroborate with hearing many times especially after the killing of George Floyd, that is hindering the progression of anti-racist campaigns, protests and policies. If people don’t even believe that there is truly a problem to be solved in the first place, then a solution and end will never truly be reached.

Following on from this, Adeyale (2020a) highlights the experiences of black medical students and nurses in particular in Ireland. Due to the racism that they experienced out of placement etc. and the complacency of their white student counterparts, they expressed a need for lecturers and modules to discuss how to handle racism while out on placement. Although Maynooth University does not have a nursing programme, the principle discovered in the above research can still be transferred over. Courses and modules where placement is required should incorporate some form of education or workshop on how to deal with racism encountered during placement. Highlighted above was the complacency of white students, so these educational workshops should be held for all students to hold the white students accountable in this complacency.

Although we have highlighted that there is a gap in data surrounding ethnic minority students' experiences of racism in higher education in Ireland, that does not mean that the data is completely null. The National Athena SWAN Ireland Intersectionality Working Group is an Irish committee in conjunction with the HEA with the aim to “develop a cross-sectoral approach to collecting data on staff and student ethnicity in the Irish higher education sector” (Athena Swan 2020:1). In this document, they do express a view that resonates with my own. That although data collection is useful in the tackling of racism on campus, we cannot wait around for these data collection systems to be established and data to be collected. Racism is a known and long established social problem, and one that we can't wait around for someone at a later date to solve and even with statistics and data, the true lived experience of racism and discrimination will not be highlighted either.

Race and Education

The institution of higher education is one that has been built on, and perpetuated, the inequality that BIPOC encounter at a systemic level (Mirza 2018; Arday 2018). It is well documented that BIPOC staff and students face a range of inequalities and institutionalised barriers that their white counterparts have the privilege of avoiding. From lower retention rates and lower grade attainments for BIPOC students (Arday 2017; Kempny and Michael 2021; Akel 2019), to the exclusion of BIPOC staff from permanent, full-time contracts, less credibility amongst colleagues and less representation in high, powerful leadership positions (Bhopal and Pitkin 2018; Kempny and Michael 2021; Mirza, 2018), it is clear to see that it is not just on an individual, personalised basis that these marginalised groups are discriminated against, but it is inherent in our institutions around us, it is systemic and works to disadvantage one group in subtle and harmful ways. It is the foundation for which our very societies have been built on

(Salter, Adams and Perez 2018). The Macpherson report defines institutional racism as (Mirza 2018:7)

“The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin.

It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people”.

Higher education is a structure of knowledge, it is a producer of knowledge. In every aspect - from the curriculum that is taught, to the representation we are seeing in the staff and student body, the colonial representation that it holds and the exclusion and discrimination that it produces and perpetuates – it is systemically marginalising individuals of ethnic minority groups (Arday 2018).

For BIPOC academics, they are statistically significantly less likely to gain employment and have access to employment opportunities in higher education than white academics (Arday 2017). In Kempny and Michael (2021:12), it is highlighted that only 48% of people from minority ethnic groups had permanent contracts, which is in stark contrast to the 71% of white Irish staff on full time contracts. This inherent labour market privilege that white academics have is apparent in the lack of representation in academic leadership also, as Mirza (2018:6) puts it, the walls that build and surround higher education institutes are “walls of exclusion”. Hiding behind, box-ticking, tokenistic efforts for inclusivity and diversity. Many BIPOC staff members have recounted their experiences of not receiving the same push for promotions, or feeling excluded and ‘othered’ by these exclusive group. Due to this, they are less likely to be on the highest pay range in comparison to their white colleagues (Bhopal and Pitkin 2018).

Within higher education institutes, there is a persistent ‘glass ceiling’ that BIPOC staff members are faced with. They can see the end, they can see their goals, see where they could possibly go but something out of their control is stopping them from doing so.

Although outright racial attacks and explicit racism are far less documented and accounted for, both in terms of staff and students, microaggressions were frequently cited as becoming the new form of ‘accepted’ racism (Bhopal 2014). Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour” (Akel 2019:7). This form of everyday racism can present itself in many different ways. They’re often hard to quantify and identify, but can lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion (Arday 2017). They are much more subtle than overt racism, but can be in the form of heightened scrutiny surrounding their work, their contributions minimized or downplayed, which Kempny and Michael (2021) link to an overall deprofessionalisation of BIPOC academics. Where white academics are encouraged to progress due to their ‘potential’, BIPOC academics consistently have to prove and show their achievements to achieve the same standing or opportunities. Cultural barriers also present themselves here, with many academics saying how their cultural segregation and lack of ‘fitting in’ meant they were being excluded from these informal communities and settings where networking and progression opportunities present themselves.

For BIPOC students, the lack of representation and relatable role models is highlighted frequently (Akel 2019). As white students and staff members, there is representation in every level, corner and dimension of higher education. We are able to set goals that we know we are able to achieve, as we see ourselves in those positions. A lack of representation can have serious consequences for the hopes, dreams and aspirations of the BIPOC students. Although the numbers have increased, there is still an underrepresentation of BIPOC students within higher

education, with 98.2% of all UK students in 2015/16 disclosing their identity of which only 21.8% identified as BIPOC (Bhopal and Pitkin 2018:9). White students are more likely to achieve higher grades and they were more likely to gain employment within the first 6 months of graduating. It has even been revealed in the Akel (2019:11) report that black students are 22 times more likely to have their university applications investigated in comparison to white students. These figures and experiences highlight the fact that it is just not individual, subjective, personal forms of racism and discrimination that BIPOC communities are faced it, it is a systemic and institutionalised form of marginalisation and exclusion that inherently benefits the powerful white who are allowing it to continue.

Race and racism

Race and racism are not new phenomena. For many centuries, race has been used as a way for white groups to justify their slavery of Africans. It was a process of dehumanising these groups, making them inferior to the superior white race. What was once put down to biological inferiority, we now see as socially constructed hierarchy of whiteness, ingrained in our institutions, our cultures and our everyday lives (Salter, Adams and Perez 2017; Smedley and Smedley 2005). Although many white people nowadays are more heightened, more aware of these issues of marginalisation and discrimination, with overt racially motivated incidents and forms of discriminated being strongly prohibit and frowned upon (West, Greenland and Van Laar 2021), it is a pervasive and stubborn social norm that has revealed itself in more implicit, ‘under-ground’ ways’. It is a complex phenomenon that is fluid and tricky to define. Some people, such as in West Greenland and Van Laar (2021:1137), define racism as just differences in responses to individuals based on race. To others however, it goes deeper than this. To David Wellman (Tatum 2017:81) he defines it as a system of advantage based on race. It is socially constructed and culturally communicated, but has penetrated into the systems and institutions

that guide and reinforce these beliefs in subtle, implicit ways. Although many white people prefer to use the first definition as it rids them of any fault. This ‘colour-blindness’ (West, Greenland and Van Laar 2021) downplays and ignores the cultural and structural barriers that these marginalised communities face, one which is inherently beneficial to white people. As Tatum (2017) outlines, one does not have to be racist in order to benefit from racism. Passive racism, even when the white person is not themselves racist, they are still contributing towards it, as when you are not being actively anti-racist, you are still contributing to that system of oppression. Implicit racism, or attitudes that are automatically by the mere presence BIPOC, often function without a person’s full awareness or control (Dovidio, Gaetner and Kawakami 2002). Implicit stereotyping also interplays here, as it is normally these culturally created and perpetuated stereotypes that inform these values and beliefs (Sekaquaptewa et al. 2001).

DuBois and Double Consciousness

For the purpose of this research, I am going to refer to W.E.B. DuBois’ theory of ‘double consciousness’ as the theoretical framework that I will use to guide my analysis of my findings. As we have discussed above, there is a systemic and institutionalised marginalisation of ethnic minorities that penetrates our everyday lives. For DuBois, this ‘global structure of oppression, exploitation and exclusion’ is central to his sociology (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020). He theorised that black Americans were born with a ‘veil’ that separates them from the white world and its privilege (Nowrouzi 2015). In his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois describes his first experience of realising he was “different from the others...shut out from their world by a vast veil’ (DuBois 2019). Also known as the colour line, white people project their belief and construction of what ‘blackness’ is onto the veil, which is then like a one-way mirror that black Americans see themselves through (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020). It is then through this veil that black Americans then begin to construct their identity, leading to what DuBois coined as

‘double consciousness’. He outlines the internal conflict that ethnic minorities face as they had to navigate what it was to be both black and American. They are forced to navigate two identities, and live with the fact they hold two different identities (Lyubansky and Eidelson 2005). They hold their own identity, belief system, values but they are forced to also see themselves through the eyes of a dominant white, repressive society. As DuBois describes in *The Souls of Black Folk* (2019):

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.

This theory of double-consciousness and the idea of the ‘veil’ allows us to assess deeper the feelings and experiences of BIPOC staff and students in higher education settings as, as we have seen above, there are many structural barriers that they face when trying to reach education and leadership roles, achieve academic grounding etc. The navigation through this institution having to prove your worth when your white peers are getting chosen and highlighted for their ‘potential’ highlights this idea.

Conclusion

As we have seen from above, race and racism is a complex, fluid issue that seeps and works its way into our everyday lives in subtle, hidden ways. It is not anymore an individual, subjective issue that can be learned away, but it is systematic marginalisation and discrimination against these communities. In institutions like our higher education systems, there are barriers that these communities face that are being perpetuated and reinforced by the lack of acknowledgement from the white population who created and is continuing to reinforce this

issue. BIPOC members in these institutions outlined their experience of feeling undermined, undervalued, placed at a systemic disadvantage purely because of the colour of their skin. Data collection on both the demographic and the lived experience of this demographic still remains vastly underdeveloped in Ireland, which is continuing to allow this hidden form of marginalisation continue to seep in the everyday lived experiences of these marginalised communities.

Methodology

Research Method

My research intended to investigate the experience of people of colour on Maynooth University campus and how race is a possible determinant of these experiences. My main aim was to examine how race both positively and negatively affected the experiences of both staff and students here at Maynooth. In order to do this, it was important to explore the lived experiences of these groups, to determine their own personal thoughts, feelings and perspectives on the issue. Due to this, an exploratory research design was undertaken. Exploratory research seeks to “find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them” (Chambliss and Schutt 2019:35). I used a constructivist/ interpretivist paradigm, which is concerned with lived human experiences because reality is socially constructed (Mackenzie and Knipe 2006). Because of this, I decided that the best and most suitable approach would be to undertake a mixed method research approach which “incorporates quantitative and qualitative methods and/or techniques in a single study” (O’Leary 2017) and by doing so, I was allowing for more methodological diversity and with the hope that both approaches would complement and back up each other’s findings. Although my main data collection approach (one to one interviews) was qualitative, which “captures social life as participants experience it rather than in categories the researcher predetermines” (Chambliss and Schutt 2019:233), the use of surveys as both a sampling technique and a way to authenticate and confirm my interview findings meant that there was also an element of quantitative research involved also. I conducted 11 face to face, in depth, semi structured interviews with both students and staff members at Maynooth University. The use of one to one interviews meant that sensitive topics such as racial discrimination could be

discussed in a more open and comfortable manner, one that the strict use of surveys would not provide. I also attended a student race equality forum held by the Equality, diversity and Inclusion (EDI) office in Maynooth which was a focus group type setting that allowed a discussion between students of colour, staff members and the Students Union.

Research Sample:

For this research, purposive sampling was undertaken, which is “a type of nonprobability sampling method in which the researcher uses his or her own judgment in selecting sample members” (Rubin and Babbie 2017: 376). Students and staff at Maynooth University were purposely selected to discuss their lived experiences at Maynooth University, with the majority being people of colour. I did interview three white students and one white faculty member for the intention of examining whether there were discrepancies between what staff and students of colour were experiencing on campus and what their white colleagues and students were aware of. The majority of respondents were identified through a snowball-sampling technique which builds a sample through a series of referrals (O’Leary 2017). To begin the process of sampling, however, I undertook what Glesne and Peshkin (1991) define as backyard research, which begins in your own institution or with friends and family. I also recruited respondents through the distribution of a survey, in which I asked people for their contact details if they would be willing to partake in further research.

Name	Race	Position
Alan	White	Student
Ciara	White	Student

Lorna	White	Student
Abbie	White	Staff
Kate	Black	Student
Niamh	Black	Student
Bonnie	Black	Student
Sarah	Black	Student
Claire	Black	Staff
Saoirse	Indian	Staff/Student
Colleen	Chinese	Staff/Student

Selected interviewees - names changed for Confidentiality

Conducting the Research

At first I attempted to recruit respondents solely through the survey as to increase the reliability and validity of the research. The survey created was an online survey to allow for greater accessibility in hopes of increasing the sample pool to allow for greater generalisability of the data. I distributed it using social media, sending the link through friends and family and also posting it into any college group chats that I was a part of. This proved unsuccessful however as the response rate yielded was lower than what I expected. To combat this, I began a snowball technique with friends that I interviewed and the few respondents that I did receive from the survey.

6 of the 11 interviews were conducted through Microsoft teams. This was due to the convenience aspect for both parties and due to people feeling more comfortable with Covid-19

regulations. The remaining 5 interviews were conducted in person, on Maynooth campus in either a coffee shop, empty classroom or staff offices. All of the questions asked, apart from the introductory race and age demographic questions, were open-ended questions. By asking these open ended questions, the respondents were able to elaborate greatly and go into detail about their experiences here at Maynooth which allowed for a very rich and interesting conversation about race, racism and Maynooth Universities responses to these problems.

I also attended a student race equality forum which was hosted by the EDI one night. This allowed for another fruitful discussion to be had between students and faculty. It is an annual event that is held and allows students of colour to voice any concerns or queries they may have. I gained permission to use findings from the forum in this research project from the organiser and participants and also used it as a networking opportunity to find more respondents. I wanted to make the sample pool as representative as possible as to once again increase generalisability but time constraints, the small sample size and the subjectivity of this topic meant that this research project could not be generalised to the whole population of people of colour at Maynooth University.

Ethical Considerations:

Due to the sensitive topics of race and racism in my study, there were a number of ethical considerations that were addressed during the course of my research. To make sure that I conducted the research in the most ethical way possible, I used the American Sociological Associations Code of Ethics as a guide. These include (Chambliss and Schute 2019:72):

1. *To protect research subjects.*
2. *To maintain honesty and openness.*
3. *To achieve valid results.*

4. To encourage appropriate application

To begin, each respondent was made clear of what my research was and its nature. Their confidentiality and anonymity was stressed throughout as, due to the nature of the topic and the status of some interviewees within the University, there were some reservations about this issue. Consent was obtained from all respondents involved either through the signing of a consent form for any in person interviews, or through recorded, verbal consent in the case of online interviews. All questions were screened prior to the interviews by my supervisor, but respondents were informed that they were under no obligation to answer anything or discuss anything with which they were not comfortable.

All participants were aware of and consented to being recorded. All online interviews were recorded and kept on my laptop, which is only accessible by pin, under pseudonyms and in person interviews were recorded on my mobile in a pin locked app also under pseudonyms. Also, all interviews were deleted after transcription.

Analysis of Data

After each interview, I transcribed it and then printed it out, allocating each person a spot in a file. Once all of the interviews were conducted, I began the process of coding which is classifying or categorizing individual pieces of data (Rubin and Babbie 2009). I read through all interviews and highlighted any significant details and once all of the interviews were completed, began analysing them for any dominant themes that emerged across all interviews, and any similarities and differences that emerged also. The main themes that emerged were the issues of representation, discrimination (both conscious and unconscious) and how welcoming the campus is to people of colour.

The main restriction that I found when conducting my research was the sample population being researched. Although the population was quite representative with interviewees being

from black/African, Indian, Chinese and Islamic backgrounds, I would have liked to have heard more from people from the travelling community, more males and more people from lower class communities. This would have led to greater diversity, which would give a more accurate depiction and understanding of the topic being researched.

Discussions of Findings:

Introduction

The following chapter outlines the three core themes that arose during the research process. These are subjects and ideas that arose frequently throughout my fieldwork research, and outline the lived experience of BIPOC communities here at Maynooth University. Although racism and racial discrimination is evident within our society, there is still a scarcity around the experiences of these issues in Irish higher education institutes (Ní Chonaill 2021). The aim of my research was to contribute to this and hopefully provide more discourse around the lived experiences at Maynooth. The following section will be split into three main categories of representation, discrimination and the environment created at Maynooth University.

Using DuBois' theory of double consciousness and the veil, these themes will be used to highlight and discuss the lived experiences of BIPOC communities at Maynooth, and how their race interplays with and contributes to those experiences.

Representation and diversity:

Maynooth University openly prides itself on being a vastly diverse and equal opportunities college, stating in their 2019/20 EDI report that it was designated as a University of Sanctuary (EDI 2021: 2). Throughout the fieldwork process, there were mixed reactions in relation to diversity. Alan stated his opinion that *"MU is really good.. we're really multicultural"*, with Niamh also sharing her belief that it's *"a really diverse college"*. Many students commented on the lack of diversity within both their classes, and the lecturers that they are getting taught by. For example, Bonnie mentioned that her class is *"majority white...like a small percentage of BIPOC"*, with Ciara and Saoirse mentioning the lack of

diversity also. These results were also found in the survey responses in which the majority (14 out of 18 respondents) noted the fact that their classes were majority white. In the 2018/19 and 2019/20 EDI reports, both showed that over 90% of the student body at Maynooth is white and Irish. Linking back to the literature review, we can begin to see a real-life representation of the institutional barriers to education that were presented and mentioned. Akel (2019:8) brings to light the attainment gap in higher education, highlighting the 25% gap between black and white students. This was highlighted by Claire, who discussed the *“institutional racism and low grade attainment of black and ethnic minority students”*. Another important and interesting aspect that was highlighted was the discrepancies between faculties and departments. Linking in very well with the findings from Kempny and Michael (2021:18), which reported that those in STEM disciplines were more likely to report higher levels of diversity than those in Arts and Humanities. This was highlighted in both the survey, with one anonymous respondent stating, *“computer science feels decently diverse with a decent mix of white, black, and Asian students”*. Saoirse provided some very interesting insight into this. As she is an Assamese Indian exchange student, she described how many Indians go into technical and data sciences due to the job security that it affords. Outlining why so many Indian students are very job driven, she describes how:

“You have to understand that our visas are only valid until we get a job... that’s why I think so many Indians go down that road like data science or engineering or science because after that they can get a job here”

She discusses how she always *“up on her feet to do anything and everything to secure my position in academic discourse”* which corroborates well with the feelings of academics in the literature review who feel that they are having to prove their worth and their merit and work harder to be afforded the same luxuries and privileges that their white colleagues do

(Arday 2017). The theory of the veil and double consciousness tie in well here. Where DuBois talks about feeling his “twoness as an American and a Negro” (DuBois 2019), ethnic academics also often recall this feeling of ‘twoness’ seeing themselves as not just an academic, but as an academic with a systemic disadvantage due to their race.

When asked about what representation meant to them, many students discussed it in terms of how important it was to them. Kate recalls her experience of meeting another black student who wanted to go into teaching, describing how

“Talking and meeting someone who wants to do teaching is rare and meeting someone who is black and wants to teach, that is teaching it as well, it’s just like slim to none. It was amazing when I was talking to her I was so inspired”

This resounding sense of hope is a theme and emotion that was found through many interviews, and highlights the importance of having role models and leaders in higher education that are able to mentor and guide these students (Arday 2017). Sarah shares how *“when I see people of my colour reach their goals, and reach where they want to go, it honestly motivates me to keep going”*. Abbie also highlights the fact that it is not just about aspirations, but it is also about having their voices heard, showing how if problems surrounding racism and discrimination do occur *“it might go unnoticed by the people perpetrating the problem simply because no one from the community is there to raise that issue”*.

As we have seen from the literature review, there is a severe under-representation of BIPOC staff members in higher education. At Maynooth University, 78% of staff are white and Irish according to the 2019/20 EDI report (2020:26). This was highlighted many times throughout both the interview process, at the Student Race Equality Forum 2021/22 and in the surveys also. Even when there were discussions about diversity within the student body

and discrepancies between whether people viewed it as diverse or not, the overwhelming majority of respondents highlighted the lack of diversity within the staff of Maynooth University. Abbie details her experience as a lecturer in the humanities in where she *“knew of people who applied for jobs here and didn’t get them...and I wonder to myself why even though I knew they were very qualified”*. Sarah recalls an incident where she accidentally went into the teachers bathroom and *“how they knew I wasn’t a teacher because of my skin tone...there’s barely any black lecturers at Maynooth”*. Lorna was able to point out and name all of her BIPOC lecturer and those in her Department of Applied Social Studies, highlighting how it is majority white. She does raise a point however, of how *“we’re in Maynooth in Ireland and that’s just the way Ireland is”* alluding to the fact that the demographic of Ireland is largely white with the CSO showing that 91.7% of Irelands population is white (CSO 2022). By asking this, we are downplaying the experiences of these communities and undermining the institutional and systemic barriers that they face in attaining these positions (West, Greenland and Van Laar 2021).

Kempny and Michael (2021) highlight how greater diversity and representation at a staff level can lead to greater levels of social integration and inclusion of staff from minority groups. Saoirse discusses how, since she is Indian, she would feel comfortable talking to the other Indian staff member due to them sharing the same, or a similar, culture.

“I might talk in a certain manner or use certain kind of words/ tonality which is acceptable in my culture but not so much here in Irish communities. I’m always scared that I’m being rude or too harsh”

These cultural barriers are just another way that staff members in higher education settings express feelings of marginalisation and isolation (Arday 2017).

Representation in the curriculum was another aspect that got brought up during the course of my research, with Claire highlighting the concept of “*decolonising the curriculum*”. As Akel (2019:18) highlights “greater representation in the curriculum should provide all students with the opportunity to personally relate to their subject content, whilst also giving students the opportunity to learn outside of their lived experiences”. Sarah discusses her reaction when she saw a module about African society “*I was actually shocked when I opened the student web, and I could see that there was an African society class course*” highlighting the joy she felt when she was able to learn and hear about her very own culture. Speaking about her experience teaching sociology, Claire describes

“You have a canon of knowledge that comes from Marx, Weber Durkheim...students don’t have that body of knowledge from black scholars who are well placed to answer questions on society... it’s all about white knowledge”

Discrimination

When asked about the topic of discrimination and racially motivated incidents, there was a very mixed response. Although most said they had not experienced any outward form of racism or discrimination, there was an increased discourse around microaggression and more subtle, hidden forms of racism and discrimination. As was shown in the literature review, BIPOC academics and students are often put under more scrutiny and often their work is undervalued (Kempny and Michael 2021). This is reiterated in Claire’s experience as a tutor, where she discloses

“There were times in the classroom where I did feel uncomfortable as a tutor, I was put under more scrutiny...mostly from mature students, they would always try and question me more or try and see if I knew what I was speaking about”

It is in this scrutiny and deprofessionalisation of BIPOC voices in the classroom that subtle, covert discriminatory sentiments are produced and reproduced. That feeling of being an outsider was also highlighted by Claire. This also reinforces what DuBois theorises about the veil and double consciousness, as again, these staff members are not just being viewed as academics but are being viewed as ethnic academics, which is inherently harmful to their academic standing.

The on campus security was a surprising theme that arose in both the interviews and during the Student Race Equality Forum. Abbie anecdotally recounts an incident that occurred at the start of this year, in which

“Students were being loud in a class room and a lecturer called security on them. The security then said that they couldn’t approach the students and that because the security guards were white and Irish that they would quote the race card and the lecturer agreed with them”

This incident is highly problematic as the lecturer, who is a part of the social studies department, should be more aware of the consequences of their actions. This colour-blindness (West, Greenland and Van Laar 2021) of “Oh I would have called security even if they were white” not only weakens and undermines these experiences, but also that as a member of the social science faculty, they should be aware that the consequences for calling security on students of colour are worse than if they were to be called on a group of white students. During the Student Race Equality Forum, Islamic students who were part of an ethnic group society on campus talked about how many ethnic societies agreed not to hold events in the John Hume Building in Maynooth anymore due to that being where the security office is stationed. There was a fear, from experience with security and racial profiling on campus, that they would be heavily policed there and actually observed their attendance rates drop when there are events

held in the John Hume building. This goes beyond feelings of uncomfortableness; this is a marginalisation of a community/communities that have every right to use and avail of their space without fear. Islamophobia “is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that target expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness” (Akel 2019: 27). Although they didn’t report any outward islamophobia, they did highlight how they felt excluded from being able to enjoy the University campus fully as there was no access to halal food on campus, a situation they described only getting worse post-covid, even after being brought to the attention of staff. The last final note from the Student Race Equality Forum was the lack of access to a dedicated prayer space on Campus. A situation that Alan believes “*if Ireland had some sort of religious thing that needed to be followed, we’d sort it out for ourselves so why can’t we do it for other people*”.

Saoirse describes her experience at Maynooth tutoring with the same sentiment that a lot of students and faculty of colour have mentioned and talked about, which is the process of staying quiet in the face of unconscious racism (Akel 2017). Describing an incident in which “*some students were being kind of racist, but they didn’t know that it was racist*” and how she didn’t want to cause a fuss or ‘shake the bush’. This feeling of having to stay quiet for fear of claims “of hypersensitivity or trouble-making when challenging racism” (Arday 2018:193) means that a lot of the time, BIPOC academics and students have to suffer in silence, with this being corroborated by Saoirse saying “*I suffered. I don’t know why I suffered, and I just kept quiet*”. This may stem from the fact that a lot of BIPOC students and academics are told to “suppress their suffering whilst remaining stoic and professional in the face of overt racial discrimination” (Arday 2018:32).

An area or topic that came up was the topic of reporting incidents that did occur on campus. As was mentioned in the literature review, the EDI office recently released their new ‘speak out online anonymous reporting tool’. Prior to this however, there was a reservation amongst

individuals, both staff and students, when the topic of reporting came up. Many people reported feelings of unnerve and low levels of confidence when asked if they would feel confident reporting issues, with Sarah responding *“it’s hard to trust a person of a different colour when they’re to ones that have offended you”* talking about how difficult it would be talking to a white team or member about a racially motivated incident. Feelings of anxiety and lack of trust were reported by Niamh and Saoirse, with many respondents commenting that they wouldn’t even know where to report it in the first place. This highlights a need for more aggressive forms of anti-racist campaigns at Maynooth University. As highlighted in Kempny and Michael (2021) and in Houshmand and Spanierman (2021), there needs to be active involvement from white academics, staff and students in order to respond to micro-aggressions. As Abbie points out *“it always falls on the effected people to do the educating”* which can become tiring and a burdening to these groups who consistently have to repeat themselves. Any campaigns that do occur frequently talk about how to cope and to deal with racism, instead of actually addressing the issue of racism itself. As Abbie describes *“resilience...it’s very neoliberal the idea that you have to develop your own resources to deal with a difficult situation rather than improving the situation itself”*.

Environment created at Maynooth University

All respondents detailed the warm and welcoming environment that Maynooth University created. Both Saoirse and Niamh outline their experiences and reasons in applying for Maynooth, with Saoirse saying *“I chose Maynooth because it was a bit secluded, it wasn’t in Dublin City. I’ve heard so many stories about Dublin City”*. Many black students commented on having used the upstairs of the Phoenix building, which is mainly occupied by black students and is seen as a safe space for black students. Sarah details how

“the first place that I went when I came to college was Phoenix just so I can feel comfortable and know that there is black people in our community... I feel like it’s a safe space for the majority of us”

This was not the case for everyone, however, with Kate and Niamh both stating how overwhelmed and intimidated they felt. Referencing Smedley and Smedley (2005) and how they discuss the concept of inter-ethnic conflict which resonates with what Niamh outlines when she details her experience:

“I’m Senegalese, how a Senegalese person acts would be different than a Nigerian so when I went there, I felt scared... like I wasn’t welcomed there. The way my country behaves is just different or something”

In terms of creating a welcoming and hospitable environment for BIPOC communities at Maynooth, many respondents recounted their experiences of feeling hopeful and inspired during the Black Lives Matter protest. Since this is what initially sparked my interest in this topic, I was interested to hear about it from the people who had been personally affected by the issue. The following quotes highlight the feelings and sentiments that some respondents had:

Claire: When I looked at most of the protests, I think I felt hope because most of the people that were there protesting were young white people and I said to myself there’s hope because the young white people, they are kicking up against this, they are realizing this injustice and they want a better world.

Bonnie: It’s amazing to see, it’s giving them a platform now to voice their opinions and people are actually listening... I think it’s the best thing that could have happened to be honest

Sarah: I’ve seen a lot of white people coming together and supporting it and it made me feel 10 times better I can see that although racism isn’t fully gone, it’s improving.

Conclusion:

As we can see from above, race and racism at Maynooth University is a complex and fluid issue. It is subjective to each and every person but there is a set of underlying themes that emerged across all of the different fieldwork research that I conducted. The overarching themes of representation, discrimination and the environment created at Maynooth University emerged throughout with many different subthemes coming across also. The lived experiences of BIPOC communities, groups and individuals were highlighted and brought into the wider context of discourse surrounding race, racism and higher education.

Conclusion:

The aim of this research project was to examine the lived experience of BIPOC staff and students here at Maynooth University and how race relations interact and influence these experiences. The negative and positive effects were highlighted and outlined, from racial discrimination, systemic discrimination and a wealth of negative emotions in comparison to the community built, a growing want to combat and address this issue and a growing access rate to both staff and students in the BIPOC community.

The institution of higher education, as we have seen from the literature review, was one built on the demise and marginalisation of those in ethnic minority groups. It is a system of oppression built on the foundation of creating and perpetuating the success of white elites and the under representation of minority groups. Issues of accessibility and retain rates were discovered, and the issue of representation particularly in leadership roles was addressed. By outlining how race is a social construct and how racism is more than just a subjective, individual form of discrimination but actually an institutionalised system of oppression, we highlight what needs to be done in order to address this issue.

The purpose of this research was to fill a gap in academic discourse around the experience of BIPOC in higher education institutions in Ireland. The lack of data around this issue means that it is harder to gain a true understanding of just how prevalent this issue is and if we do not truly understand the magnitude of an issue, we are not going to be able to truly address and solve it. As highlighted above, however, that does not mean that we should wait around for this data to be collected in order to begin to truly acknowledge this issue. Racism and the systemic oppressive nature of higher education needs to be addressed here and now, not to be waited on for someone else in the future to come and solve. It is an issue and change that will take time, racism and discrimination will not be unlearned and solved

in a day. A societal and institutional shift needs to occur, one that could take years, decades even centuries to occur. Although the end point of this issue, if there even is to be one, is uncertain, what is certain is that change needs to begin here and now with us.

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