EDI, "Whiteness" and Researcher Careers

Carola Boehm

Centre for Creative Industries and Creative Communities, Staffordshire University

Abstract (300 words max):

As of January 2022, there were only 38 Black female professors in UK Universities (Arday, 2022), representing 0.16% of all UK professors. This is in contrast to 165 black professors (0.7% of all professors), and to 6,980 female professors (39.6% of all professors) from a total of 23,525 professors in the UK (HESA, 2023). This paper will be presenting various debates of recent years around academic diversity, coloniality and "whiteness" in UK Higher Education and reflect specifically on what this means within a Research Culture / REF context. It will present some of the critical underpinnings, problematise our mainstreamed EDI-contextualised approach and focus on what implications this has for supporting researcher career progression at the professorial level. If "invisible and uncontested whiteness moulds the social-cultural and intellectual imaginaries within higher education (…), suppressing alternative ways of perceiving the world" (eds. T. Welikala & C. Boehm, 2023) then it will and demonstrably has already affected our progression into more diverse, socially just, academic research cultures. This presentation offers a lot of avenues for delving deeper into this subject, provides an example of how "whiteness" has affected interdisciplinary career progression, and puts forward some strategies for moving forward.

EDI, "Whiteness" and Researcher Careers

I recently finished a 2-year collaborative effort to critically debate and find different academic perspectives for writing about "whiteness" and "coloniality" in higher education (Boehm, 2023). And as I am a professor sitting on UK universities' research committees, professorial conferment and REF steering groups, my scholarly involvement with these critical debates around institutional exclusionary practices is increasingly changing my thinking for the day-to-day work I do in these research committees. I find myself often raising the issue of "whiteness" that is built into our structures, definitions, ways of working, career trajectories and funding. The cause of this is the subject of a whole special issue (eds. T. Welikala & C. Boehm, 2023), and it is so human-typically complex, including being one of definition, conceptualisation, privilege, class, and yes, let's throw some coloniality into the mix as well.

I often think of the quote of my co-wandering scholar Thushari Welikala, who expressed it so succinctly when she said that "invisible and uncontested whiteness moulds the social-cultural and intellectual imaginaries within higher education (…), suppressing alternative ways of perceiving the world" (Welikala, 2023). This is specifically relevant to knowledge production. "Whiteness" here is such a different concept to EDI. It might not be the perfect word for the concept, but the best we have in the English language, as it does not build upon a deficit model around the less-empowered individual.

"Whiteness" is not an aspect of being white but is defined by the ways in which institutions are still enacting power structures, practices and identities that have been formed as part of the white-dominating Western world (and colonialism). This dominating power can be so

entrenched in our institutions, our cultures, and our sense of selves that "whiteness" can endure long beyond and even without white power.

More importantly, "whiteness", unlike EDI, is not in perpetual deficit mode. The concept of diversity, as understood within EDI, is defined as a state or quality of being different or varied (Collins English Dictionary), thus putting the focus on the person or entity that is different from a seemingly common norm, potentially asking them to shift in behaviour or being "supported" in "adapting". However, the concept of "whiteness" shifts the focus onto the structures, the institutions, the entities that exhibit certain characteristics that exclude or disadvantage specific individuals. The focus here is on the whole institutions to change or adapt.

So, when I am sitting in professorial committees, I now cannot help but be conscious of my own overly "whiteness". When the external evaluators consider the applications of more diverse, often female applicants, and when they critique a lack of focus in their applications, or a lack of depth, I now look for the applicant's often-apparent wider interdisciplinary profile that speaks of something that I – until now – was not as explicitly aware of. I now question a particular mainstream view on not only what good science or good research should look like, but also what we in the Western (white) world think about what the evidence of a solid career progression ought to look like.

So when the professorial committee chairs throw their (still mostly white male) hands in the air, and ask "but what can we do if the applicants do not demonstrate the rigour and depth required within our institutional guidelines or standards?", I would like to see more radical affirmative action. When presentation or focus or depth is in doubt, I would like us to discuss the neutrality of our own systems, rather than focusing on the application in question. For instance, I would like us as an academic, research community to take a bit more time for a more rigorous, robust and deeper soul-searching of why we continually still end up with such small numbers of female, black professors.

Rather than considering mentoring or coaching or supporting these individuals to construct more solid professorial applications, I often find myself questioning the very structure on which these guidelines and policies were built. Because – and this is the thing – they were built, developed, and authored still mostly by white men, and often at a time when the awareness was only emerging of how our colonial, white, and predominantly male past influenced our institutions of today.

We ought to be much more aware of those influences. We all know our institutions exhibit an institutional "whiteness", but we seem to continue to wring our white hands (as mine are too!) without substantive commitment to really affect change. It might be an extreme stance, but I cannot help and think that where we are is this: *We have a tendency to call on EDI as the answer to this issue and be done with this. Through structured EDI processes, we continue to fiddle around the edges, justify progress through statistics, and laude minor incremental improvements. But by relying on incremental improvements and by having dedicated professionals who oversee all this, we tend to much less involve the much wider university community in a much deeper debate towards gaining awareness and understanding. Thus, we continually reaffirm pervasive meritocratic systems we were taught to believe in.*

A study in 2019 suggested that there were just 25 female black professors active in UK HE (Rollock, 2019). Only two of them had been a professor for more than 10 years. HESA data from 2021/22 suggests that of January 2022, there were only 38 Black female professors (Arday, 2022) (0.16% of all professors), compared to 165 black professors (0.7% of all

professors), compared to 6,980 female professors (39.6% of all professors), compared to the total of 23,525 professors in the UK (HESA, 2023).

Intersectionality bites.

So, I ask myself, what would it actually look like for HEI institutions to do something about this? What would it look like to make a step-change?

I do not have detailed, worked-out solutions to hand. The journey to close those exclusionary gaps will include providing intersectional data. It will also include dealing with our universities' interdisciplinary research conundrum with a deeper understanding of its phenomenological and ideological context (see Boehm, 2022). It will also include understanding the diversity of knowledge production models (see Boehm, 2015), and it will include understanding identity formation in a 21st-century context (eds. C. Whitchurch & G. Gordon, 2009; eds. R. Barnett & R. D. Napoli, 2007). Most of all, it will need dedicated time and space for a much deeper dialogue that would allow us to get used to and embody the change needed, foster the empathy required to make us all activists for changing to much more diverse, colourful futures.

As one example of the dialogues needed, take the subject of interdisciplinarity, for instance. Our funding bodies often display the desire for more interdisciplinary research, as we have accepted that the greatest challenges to humankind are of an interdisciplinary nature. But research is often situated within systemic disciplinary structures that support predominantly undergraduate learning. I have written about this dichotomy for more than 10 years now - how in the UK, we are still only slowly emerging from an ingrained mono-disciplinary consciousness (Hepworth-Sawyer et al., 2018; Boehm, 2008, 2007). And everyone suggests they are doing it, but reality looks a bit different. However, until recently, I had lacked the understanding to connect this to whiteness in the academy, or to coloniality, or even to gendered practices.

When it comes to balancing our commitment to a deep mono-disciplinarity approach to science with new, innovative ways of thinking in terms of broad interdisciplinary branches of our disciplines, we still often fall into thinking that the way to achieve rigour is using depth from a multi-disciplinary line of enquiry, rather than breadth through an interdisciplinary one. And so, we judge those academic applications that have "jumped around different disciplines" and suggest that they lack depth, or they lack focus. What we want to see is evidence of a deep research engagement, as depth is very easily equated to rigour, specifically in our white, male institutionalised Higher Education systems. Basically, we often still tend to prioritise a deep mono-disciplinary approach to a broad inter-disciplinary approach, even though this is just not what the world needs right now, and even though this can very much be considered a gendered issue.

My lived experience is that I happen to know more female academics who have broader interdisciplinary expertise, and I happen to know more men who have deep mono-disciplinary expertise. I only recently started to wonder if that is also to do with the privileged positions that men more often inhabit than women. Women often need to be more agile in their academic career journeys, due to childcare arrangements, carer responsibilities, caretaker roles in professional positions, job insecurities, and the ever-existing white noise in the background of every single female academic career that exists due constantly being the gender that finds itself less in positions of power. Female careers are evidenced to be more fragmented (Minello et al., 2021; Bhopal & Henderson, 2021; Aiston & Fo, 2021). Statistics evidence that female academics are afforded to move jobs more often than men, but I now wonder if there are related research-relevant statistics that

prove that they are also afforded to therefore move from adjacent discipline to discipline; moving from one university to another, one department to the next, affords one to adjust to a new research environment. I certainly was afforded to do this in my own career to explicitly maximise the chances I had to further my chances of success in bidding, career progression or job security.

Add to this the intersectionality of non-white, non-European academic identities, which come with different ways of communicating, presenting, learning and structuring their knowledge. I find it consequently follows that the areas of perceived weakness and most likely attracting critique of an application within a professorial conferment process are potentially much more plentiful. More angles of attack or critique, at least, than for those academic communities which feel comfortable in a mainstream, predominantly mono-disciplinary, linear research, classic scholarly output, less career hopping, traditional research council-funded model.

Thus, I think it would be somewhat foolish to believe that our guidelines for promotion, or our standards for conferment are neutral. I think it is time to look at the "whiteness" of our REF-related guidelines and research environment-related infrastructures, policies and systems and consider if they are not geared unnecessarily towards prioritising a specifically male, white, colonially-originating ideology of what good knowledge production should look like, and so subsequently influence what we look for when we look at researcher careers.

To note and disclose: I am white, I am female, and I do have - what a dear black colleague has called once rather affectionately – a "white defensiveness". But the work for supporting more diverse forms of knowledge production and more colourful career progression should not only be a burden on those who have been held back by it and thus burdening them even more, something that is labelled in the race-theoretical academic literature as "racial battle-fatigue" or "ontic burnout", "epistemic exploitation" (Rollock, 2021; Dunne, 2023). It is a dialogue with which we all need to deeply engage.

This presentation will be presenting various debates of recent years around academic diversity, coloniality and "whiteness" in UK Higher Education and reflecting specifically on what this means within a Research Culture / REF context.

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