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## **Our voices matter: young black women's experiences of identity formation within higher education**

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### ARTICLE INFO

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*Article history:*

Received 19 October 20  
Received in revised form 16  
February 2021  
Accepted 06 April 2021

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*Keywords:*

Black, Asian and Minority  
Ethnic  
Otherness  
Intersectionality  
Identity  
Critical Race Theory  
Black Women  
Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

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In today's social context and Higher Education (HE), a disproportionate number of Black students experience alienation, discrimination and sense of 'otherness' because of the racial and/or ethnic identity to which they belong. The intersection of their racial and gendered identity is potentially and undoubtedly influencing their university experiences more generally – positively and negatively. Kimberlé Crenshaw asserts that Black women are more likely than any other ethnic and gendered group to experience double jeopardy and oppression because of this dual identity. The voices of those that belong to this intersectional group remain under-researched within the UK context. Using a qualitative approach, a case study and phenomenological strategy, this study explores whether the intersections of race and gender identities can influence educational experiences. It also explores the factors that have contributed to the overall educational experiences of Black women. Data was gathered from four Black students from a university in the North of England, using semi-structured interviews via Skype. The research revealed that race was a salient part of their identity that influenced and had the potential to influence their university experience, more so even than their gender. It also revealed the racial obstacles and challenges that have influenced their university experience as a Black learner and as a Black woman.

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### **Introduction and Rationale**

In light of recent events, current political and social contexts, Black learners and racial discussions tend to be placed at the forefront of the agenda and headlines. 'Black' is an inclusive term used to refer to the ethnic backgrounds – 'White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, African, Caribbean and any other Black/African/Caribbean background. Media and newspaper articles referencing 'universities failing Black students', Black and White attainment gap and Black students being less likely than their White-counterparts to obtain a first class honor's degree, are becoming extremely difficult to ignore the existence of (Adebisi, 2019; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Kwayke & Ogunbiyi, 2019; Makoni, 2019). Much of this information has been written and discussed about the individuals affected by it, rather than listening

to their voices. In 1996, gaining access into HE for those who self-identified as Black was once seen as difficult and challenging (Bird, 1996). Amongst this, entering these institutions often left the majority of Black learners experiencing discrimination, institutional racism, isolation and a sense of 'otherness'. Whilst today's society is becoming a diverse institution, this is still a continuing concern that a proportionate number of Black students routinely face on a daily basis, which has embedded itself within the educational system (Kwayke & Ogunbiyi, 2019; Husbans, 2019). Ethnic pupils, in particular Black woman, are more likely to experience negative outcomes due to their dual identity (Kwayke & Ogunbiyi, 2019; Patton & Croom, 2017).

According to research conducted by the National Union Students (NUS) (2011) on Black, Asian and

Minority Ethnic ('BAME') students experiences of further education and HE, they frequently discussed and expressed concerns of routinely experiencing inequality, and common concerns which linked to their academic success. Widely held and perpetuated stereotypes based upon their race, feelings of alienation and exclusion were all issues that were raised within the NUS study (NUS, 2011). Whilst this study explored the experiences of BAME students in general, this homogenous term is incapable of capturing the individual experiences of the ethnic minorities categorized within it. This problematic term dismisses the intersections of race and gender that co-exist for individual ethnic groups (Akel, 2019). According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2019), in the year 2018/2019, 7% of Black students and 4% of Mixed students enrolled into HE in England. Nonetheless, the number of Black students enrolling remained the same since 2014 with no increase. The number of Black women that enrolled within the year 2018/2019 was unidentifiable. Having this relatively low percentage of Black students entering university, puts into perspective many questions that need to be addressed – most prominently, why there are so few Black students entering university and if the intersection of race and gender influences educational outcomes and experiences. Discussions about their educational outcomes and identities are rarely acknowledged within the UK context and are underrepresented in the field of research (Adegoke & Uviebinené, 2018). This research is based on the notion that these Black women are experts in their own lives, with a story and experiences to be shared with society. Furthermore, it allows these Black women's voices to be uplifted, valued and acknowledged when considering potential change within the educational system. The research questions are:

1. Do race and gender identities influence students' experience of HE?
2. To what extent do Black students feel or sense experiences of 'otherness?'
3. How do these experiences of race, gender and their intersection impact their identity formation?

## Literature Review

### Intersectionality

Intersectionality is now a widely used analytical framework and metaphor that has been taken up by

feminists, scholars, practitioners and activities in understanding and analysing the complexities of class, gender and race discrimination (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Carastathis, 2014; 2016). Indeed, intersectionality has transformed how the multiple identities are discussed and perceived, especially race and gender amongst Black women within the United States (Shields, 2008). Crenshaw proposes that through looking at an individual's experience from multiple perspectives, we can analyse how race intersects with gender and how this can potentially influence oppression and marginalisation amongst Black women in social contexts (Andrews, 2018; Meer, 2014). Jones and Day (2018), highlight that through an intersectional approach we can understand Black women's unique experiences of HE. Whilst, the prominence of the intersectional theory has been strongly linked with the work of Crenshaw, scholars and feminists have argued her standpoint on the theory (Strunk & Locke, 2019). Crenshaw proposes that by analysing and examining this through gender and race identities, we can view the possibilities of oppression and disadvantage that Black women experience (Andrews, 2018; Walby, Armstrong & Strid, 2012). The main weakness of this theory is that Crenshaw uses this framework to grasp the ways in which social identities limit and or affect the access of solely Black women's experiences (Walby et al., 2012). Carbado (2013) asserts that it is possible scholars are viewing the intersectionality as solely focusing on the interlocking of race and gender of Black women due to the arguments of double jeopardy. The greater the number of marginal identities to which an individual belongs, the more disadvantage they are likely to experience (Carbado, 2013). Thus possessing the interlocking components of marginalised race and gender, Black women experience both racism and sexism in social contexts (Carbado, 2013).

### Identity

Researchers have recognised that self-identity is one of the most important aspects of academic success and experiences amongst Black students (Ross et al., 2016). According to Ross et al., (2016), in order for Black students to be successful in education, they have to divide their cultural norms and values and adopt to society's norms. Thus, increasing their identity confusion and sense of self.

Many individuals in a diverse, multi-cultural society may still question who they are, alongside other questions related to identity and self. Questions remain regarding how racial and other social identities intersect with one another to influence an overall sense of self (Christidou, 2015; Howard, 2000; Jones & Day, 2018; Rogers, 2018). According to Rogers (2018), there is a degree of uncertainty around the term 'identity' as it is a multi-dimensional concept. Despite this term being impossible to define exclusively, identity has been defined as an experience of coming to and recognising one's self, based upon beliefs, values, lifestyle, personal experiences, behaviour and social identities (Thomas, Hacker and Hoxha, 2011). It has been seen as the concept of defining one's self by questioning who they are and which social group they belong within (Howard, 2000). A further definition of identity is given by Hasberry (2019) who describes identity as developing across many social identities - gender, race, sexual orientation and many more. Biases and stereotypes may lead to feelings of confusion around their identity, questioning them to think about who they are and who they should be (Jones & Day, 2018). It is evident from research and wider reading that the majority of ethnic minority groups, particularly Black women, that their racial identity is important, and that they may identify with it more than that of their gender.

Nonetheless, it is clear that all definitions have an underlying concept which centres the individual and their sense of self-identity. According to Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996), from research that has been conducted with African American adolescents within the US, racial and ethnic identities seem to be the two important aspects of identities for Black women. For some individuals, it may be difficult for them to separate their 'Blackness' with their 'Womanhood', since no single axis identity can explain ones experiences more generally (Jones & Day, 2018). However, due to the little scholarly attention on Black women's identity, it seems difficult to draw upon a conclusion and/or to understand their identity within the UK context (Jones & Day, 2018; McLean & Syed, 2015). With the majority of research being conducted within the US on identity formation with Black students, this is a neglected issue which needs to be discussed in order to understand the co-existing of

identities amongst Black women solely.

### **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

The tensions and contradictions evolving around race and racism have primarily led to scholars and theorists speculating around this issue in the field of research and education both in the US and UK (Andrews, 2018; Cabrera, 2019; Strunk & Locke, 2019). The CRT is considered an important and useful framework in analysing and examining race and racism in ethnic minority backgrounds. Therefore, this framework is exceptionally important in understanding the lived experience of Black women in society and the intersections of their identities. Whilst CRT is seen as a framework focusing merely on race, racism and power (Andrews, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), it is also concerned with social justice and equity, by recognising the importance of giving a voice to people of colour (Strunk & Locke, 2019). According to Cole (2017), without capturing the unique voices of marginalised and oppressed ethnic backgrounds, we cannot understand their experiences and push for change within these institutions.

In the 1970s, CRT first came about as a movement and framework from scholars and activists focused on studying the close relationships of racism, race and power in the United States of America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Generally, CRT examines how racism is operated within social contexts and in society: structural and through individual actions. Solórzano and Yosso (2002), view CRT through a larger lense, taking into consideration the social identities that can create oppression and marginalisation - race, gender, class and/or sexual orientation. For this instance, it would be race and gender that may co-exist for ethnic minority people that may create oppression and marginalisation. According to Cabrera (2019), CRT was not necessarily used to represent a racial theory and was in fact invented to help scholars and activists to develop theories about racism within society

### **Methodology**

This research was adopted for a qualitative case study and a phenomenological strategy which is a well-established approach and is prominent in exploring racial and gendered experiences amongst Black women (Hasberry, 2019; Owens, 2016).

Jensen, Laurie (2016) and Seitz (2015) assert that case studies allow researchers to gain a detailed picture and understanding of an experience and or an issue. Aware of Black womens' invisibility within research, it was essential that this approach was adopted to allow their voices to emerge and to focus on the interpretations and agency of the participants (Denscombe, 2017). The aim was to explore and argue the experiences of identity formation, the intersection of race and gender, and the factors that have contributed, alongside the obstacles and challenges that have impacted their educational outcomes. This would be established through data analysis - exploring their experiences, thoughts and feelings.

### Sampling

A purposive sampling was adopted to recruit participants who conformed to the research criteria. Based upon the aims of the research study, Cohen et al., (2018) and Gray (2018) assert that this sampling is used to select a particular group of individuals, who conform to the researcher's judgement. Four Black women from a University in the North of England were recruited who met the fixed criteria. To adhere to the research questions and aims, a criterion was sought. To participate within the research, participants had to self-identity as one of the below ethnic backgrounds:

- 1) White and Black Caribbean
- 2) White and Black African
- 3) African
- 4) Caribbean
- 5) Any other Black/African/Caribbean background.

With regards to ethnicities, three participants self-identified as White and Black Caribbean and one as African British.

### Research Ethics

Before conducting any research, ethical approval was sought and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines were adhered to throughout the research process. To protect the participant's identities, their names were replaced with pseudonyms which were chosen by they themselves, and their personal information was stored in a locked folder only accessible to the

researcher. Prior to conducting the interviews, participants were emailed a participant information sheet and a consent form, which outlined the purpose of the study and disclosed how their data would be used and stored. All participants were informed that their interviews would be audio-recorded and consent was obtained from them upon interviewing. Before interviewing commenced, participants were asked if they were happy to be recorded and that they consent to be a part of the study.

### Method of Data Collection

This research was carried out through the use of digital means of semi-structured interviews via Skype. Skype is now an extensive, new mode of communication, that is being used more by researchers (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). According to Braun, Clarke, Gray (2017), Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst (2017), Skype offers an alternative means of collecting data and overcoming the challenges and limitations of face-to-face interviewing such as: noise disruption, inconvenience of meeting up, setting a time and participants not feeling comfortable in sharing their personal experiences in person. As Lee (1993, p.3) points out, the sensitive nature of a topic may be "some of society's most pressing social issues and policy question", in which to an extent this study partly explores. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to enable participants to have that proximity and distance in sharing their personal experiences relating to the intersections of their social identities. Whilst Skype presented some benefits, it was not without its limitations. Braun, Clarke and Gray (2017) assert that technical issues during the interviewing stage can slow down the research process. During an interview with a participant, I experienced technical issues and poor connection, which caused a glitch within the interviewing. Although I experienced this issue, it was quickly mitigated through patience and a professionalism. The interviews approximately lasted between 12-17 minutes and were audio recorded with consent from the participants beforehand.

### Positionality

Denscombe (2017) asserts that a researcher's values, beliefs and identity cannot be removed from the analysis of the data but, can be acknowledged as a strength. The personal characteristics – race,

gender, age, sexual orientation and social location, is said to influence aspects of the research process and the potential for bias (Cohen et al., 2018; Gray, 2018). Due to the social identities – race, gender, age and social location that were shared amongst me and the participants, this had to be acknowledged in regard to the interpretation and analysis of the data. The identities that myself and the participants shared were not eliminated but acknowledged as a strength in sharing their personal experiences and establishing a rapport based upon the shared social identities.

### Who Am I?

As stated above, I am reminded that the social identities and personal characteristics shared with myself and the participants can have the potential to influence data and the analysis. During the research process, I was a fellow student at the University in the North of England and I identify as Black British female, which links to the ethnic backgrounds that the participants had to conform to. I was aware that I would share racial, cultural and gendered identities with the participants. Nonetheless, it was expected that these identities would assist in connecting with the participants more generally, especially as an ‘insider’ researcher. Whilst my positionality is an important aspect of my research process, I have to be mindful of this throughout the whole study. Because of the racial and gendered identities that I share with the participants, it was likely that I would understand their stories and experiences of the intersections of race and gender at university. I felt culturally connected to the participants and understood the stories and experiences that they shared with me as Black women/students. To ensure my researcher self and social identities did not influence the interpretations and analysis of the data, all interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed using a software, and then reviewed using The Listening Guide (2008) and Thematic Analysis.

### Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis (TA) alongside The Listening Guide (LG) (Doucet & Mauther, 2008) were used to analyse the data. Using the Listening Guide was effective in aiding the researcher to listen and view each audio-recording holistically. The data was transcribed,

and the transcripts were coded in terms of reoccurring themes and patterns that were identified. Coding of the transcripts enabled the researcher to highlight the similarities and differences amongst participants.

### Analysis and Discussion

The Listening Guide (2008) and Braun and Clarke’s (2006) TA, allowed the researcher to generate data on Black women’s’ experiences from a racial and gendered perspective, highlight the complexities of identities and the interplaying nature of race and gender on their university experience.

The LG is seen as a voice-centered and feminist methodology that gives attention to the voices of those who may have been silenced or unrepresented in research (Woodcock, 2016). Following the steps of the LG (1) familiarising myself with the data, (2) generating initial codes and reading deeper into the data, (3) searching for reoccurring themes, (4) reviewing themes and (5) refining and naming themes and/or patterns aided in the analysis of the data (Doucet & Mauther, 2008). This enabled me as the researcher to listen, understand and present voices of the participants (Petrovic, Lordly, Brigham & Delaney, 2015). Nonetheless, it brings an authentic voice and provides space for the participants voices to be evident in the research. Whilst the LG provides a voice-centred aspect to the process, the TA also aided in identifying, recognising, describing, analysing and reporting themes that were found (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). The TA conveyed rigour, trustworthiness, consistency and insightful findings from my research, also providing a rich and complex account of the themes and patterns found (Nowell et al., 2017).

### Intersection of race and gender identities

The interplay of race on the university experiences of the participants – predominately socially and academically. The analysis of data revealed that race has a greater chance of influencing Black female students’ experiences in comparison to their gender. Furthermore, the intersection of both identities can influence how they are perceived.

Sarah stated:

‘[...] you’re a woman okay people can see that. But you’re a Black woman which is a

lot more obvious. And so, you do stand out [...] when you're a Black female then it's like harder than I've ever seen'

Mae shared the same view, asserting:

'So, I think being a Black woman is we experience a lot of different things than to a white woman [...] so I feel like it is important to put the two together and not just separate. I do feel like both of them are like quit big factors'

Sarah voiced the same view, stating:

'I feel like my experience of being Black has a stronger influence on my time in the university than my experience as a woman in terms of a learner. Yeah'

Niamh then stated:

'I do feel like it did [...] so I don't feel like as much because I'm a female, but more so because of my ethnic background [...] more so my ethnicity been the barrier'

The above extracts of the participants suggest that they were a minority in a largely white environment. Based upon Keisha's extract it is clear that she is identifying that the intersection of being Black and a female is a struggle in itself, rather than the separating of her identities. "*So you do stand out*" emphasizes the point of including her racial/ethnic background as a whole and not just referring to herself. This point acknowledges the racial characteristics that Black women possess that make them and herself '*obvious*' and '*standout*', such as skin colour and hair texture. These characteristics are ultimately what make them visible.

Thomas et al's., (as cited in Jones and Day, 2018) study found that young Black women thought that their blackness and womanhood were both salient identities. The findings from this research are in line with the intersectional framework which suggests that the intersection of race and gender identities are an influence on the marginalization and oppression amongst Black women (Andrews, 2018; Meer, 2014). Sarah's statement '*being black has a stronger influence*' implies that she was with the majority rather than minority in terms of being a female. This links to the feelings of standing out due to the colour of her skin and texture of hair, which thus attracts significant attention from others.

According to the findings, it can be determined that race played a more dominant role in their experiences as a learner, on their course and in the classroom, in comparison with their gender. Nonetheless, identities do not need to intersect to create disadvantage as one identity alone can pose oppression and a sense of 'othering'. In this case, it was their racial identity.

### **Divergence in Race**

The lack of cultural connection and relatedness in connection with their race, was echoed by all. The self-determination theory (SDT) asserts that for greater wellbeing, success and motivation, individuals need to feel a sense of relatedness and social connection to those around them (Bunce et al., 2019; Deci & Ryan, 2017). Without the ability to feel socially and culturally connected, individuals will feel disconnected and 'othered'. It was revealed through their extracts that by having little to no Black students who share the same ethnic background as themselves on their course, can be quite daunting and can have the potential to influence their university experience more negatively. The lack of cultural belonging amongst their fellow students can influence that sense of 'othering' and 'otherness' unconsciously. For Sarah, this sense of being 'othered' was linked to her physical attributes:

'[inaudible] I think I visually stand out because [inaudible], the colour of my skin, the texture of my hair, those are things that mock me quite separately'

Mae further expressed her personal perspective, making a connection between her feelings, questioning that lack of relatedness to others and how she may be perceived by others around her.

'[inaudible] There's not many Black people there. Sometimes it kind of makes you feel like you might not be seen in the same way as others'

Likewise, Keisha expressed her feelings:

'I was very upset cause there's no Black people [institution] and I was just like, what the heck? How am I going to survive here.'

Niamh further emphasised her personal perspective.  
 ‘I was the only Black one and I think that’s why a lot of people didn’t get me’

What is being portrayed by the participants is that race is a salient identity that separates and differentiates them from their White counterparts. It is clear that the lack of relatedness and connection influenced how they think they are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves. Kwayke and Ogunbiyi (2019) propose that Black students are identifiable and hyper visible in HE. Thus they stand out more so than any other racial and gendered background. Nonetheless, all participants are highlighting and reflecting on the situation of not seeing others who racially self-identify as themselves. Thus, expressing the feelings of ‘othering’. Jensen (2011) defines ‘othering’ as the notion of differentiation between ‘them’ and ‘us’ as a cultural process. It is the action of excluding or alienating a group of individuals based upon apparent differences (Akel, 2019). Findings from Bunce et al’s., (2019) study found that majority of students asserted their psychological needs of relatedness were not thoroughly fulfilled, which had a negative influence upon their wellbeing and experience. The accounts from the participants support Bunce et al’s., (2019) findings of the lack of cultural connection and relatedness.

### **The Complexities of racial identities**

Amongst various racial identities, being Black, was recognised as a complex identity for all the participants. Fluctuation between how they would identify themselves racially from being ‘Black’ to ‘White and Black Caribbean’ stretching to including more than one racial identity, demonstrated confusion in terms of how they perceive themselves. Keisha asserted:

‘I think that being Black is resilience on another level [inaudible] knowing that the world we live in sees your colour as the lowest level than anything else’

Keisha’s excerpts illustrate the complexities of what being Black means in today’s society. The viewpoint and feelings towards her racial identity and how her ethnic background is perceived by wider society, highlights an unconscious, negative spotlight. What is being portrayed is the struggles and challenges that her racial identity poses for both

herself and other Black people. This links to further points which reference a feeling of standing out due to the physical, racial characteristics. Thus, her Blackness being visible is creating the sense of ‘otherness’. Hasberry (2019) proposes that minority ethnic backgrounds are most likely to identify with their racial identity more passionately than any other aspect of their identity. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that some Black people may have experienced many obstacles and challenges in society, such as racism and discrimination, but have managed this through the act of resilience. This holistic perspective highlights the realization that society sees her skin colour not her gender before anything else. Jensen (2011) proposes that this includes stigmatizing people of colour, distinguishing between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Seeing ‘us’ as inferior to ‘them’. The analysis illustrated a more personal opinion on an outward-looking perspective. Despite society being diverse, it is clear that Keisha knows that being Black can be seen by society as inferior, small and shallow in comparison to any other ethnic background. Although Keisha illustrated her personal perspective, Sarah noted the problematic issues of identifying as Black:

‘Sometimes I would refer to myself as Black, if I was trying to highlight myself as a part of a racially oppressed group here’

What is being illustrated by Sarah is the negative connotations of the term Black and the complications of identifying racially. The uncertainty of identifying racially highlights the difficulties surrounding ethnic backgrounds. On the whole, this highlights the complexities of how race is viewed and therefore how you should view yourself. There were a wide range of perspectives on the complexities of how to racially identify, which caused confusion in terms of having to conform solely to a racial identity.

Mae noted the confusion of how she would racially identify and expressed the concerns of all her racial identities being important to her.

‘It’s tricky because I’ve got many races like my mum is half Liberian, Half white. So, she’s African and White and then my dad’s full Caribbean. And normally, when I’m going to fill out a form there is no option for like White and White and Black, African, Caribbean. it’s hard to kind of differentiate between the two because I’m used to saying

I'm White and Black African, but then I'm also Caribbean so it's, it's kind of a bit confusing'

What Mae has portrayed is the confusion and contestation of ethnic minorities having to fit into one of the recommended ethnic groups (Cousin 2002). Cousin (2002) proposes that for some individuals, ethnicity is seen as a form of their identity that has multiple strands. However, his ethnic monitoring processes are limiting individuals to conform to solely one ethnic background or circle 'other'. This creates difficulties as to which ethnic identity is more important to them. Cousin's (2002) study reinforced and linked to Mae's point of feelings of confusion and concerns in having to determine what racial/ethnic background was the most fitting to them. This rejects the notion of having multiple ethnic identities.

On the whole, it is evident that these participants share some uncertainty at times as to what racial group they would define themselves as. Despite this, the findings from this research are in conflict with Erikson's theory of identity development but are in line with Cousin's (2002) arguments around the ethnic monitoring process. As mentioned in the literature review, CRT focuses on race, racism and how it is socially constructed within society (Gillborn, 2015). As stated in the literature review, CRT sees that social identities such as race, gender and other identities can create oppression and marginalisation, which was highlighted by Sarah *"If I was trying to highlight myself as a part of an oppressed group here."*

### Relationships with Peers

Through analysing the data, an unanticipated theme of the participants' relationships with their peers on their course, seemed to be a mixed discussion. Some participants felt their relationship with their peers was overall positive, whilst others asserted it was often complicated and challenging. Sarah emphasised the complicated relationship she had with her peers:

'[inaudible] and I definitely felt a lot of pushback from classmates when I was looking at sort of topics of race [inaudible] I feel like peers, it's a mixed job.'

Niamh also illustrated her feelings and personal opinions and asserted:

'My undergraduate course, I definitely felt [hesitant].. I wouldn't say people treat me differently, but I just ... you know when you don't feel accepted'

For the participants, it's clear that their relationships with their peers was seen more so in a negative spotlight. Kwayke and Ogunbiyi (2019) propose that the relationships students have with their lecturers and peers are central to their academic and university experience and can alone make Black students feel isolated and be a reminder of them being a minority in regard to their race. Niamh stated that the reasons why her relationship with her peers was complicated was due to the inappropriate comments, derogatory language and jokes made, alongside the assumptions based upon her racial identity as a White and Black Caribbean woman.

### Conclusion

Black women continue to feel and typically are largely underrepresented or silenced when researching experiences of this particular group. Here we focus on race and gender and the intersections of these which can shape the experiences of Black women.

Using semi-structured interviews with women who identified as either White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, African, Caribbean and or any other Black/African/Caribbean background, we sought to gain an understanding of their experiences with the intersection of social identities.

The findings from the participants illustrated that whilst both the intersections of identities (race and gender) are important, their race was an aspect of their identity that had an influence on their time at university as a Black individual. Gender did not influence their experience in a negative light, more so positively due to them being a 'majority' rather than a 'minority' with their gendered identity. The lack of connection and relatedness (Bunce et al., 2019) amongst others around them culturally and racially, along with visually standing out due to their racial attributes, were amongst the reasons that their race was considered to be a greater factor than their gender. By exploring the participants



thoughts, feelings and experiences of their time at university, I was able to gain greater understanding of the extent to which Black students feel or sense experiences of 'otherness'. Surprisingly, the participants highlighted and expressed that their racial identity was a salient factor in making them feel that sense of 'othering' in a way. The findings of this study showed that the lack of relatedness and connection with others who shared the same cultural, racial and ethnic background, created this threat and risk of feeling 'othered' by those around them. Not surprisingly, biases and attributional judgements made against them due to their racial identity on their course also surfaced this sense of 'othering' due to being misunderstood by their peers. The lack of understanding on their identity and self by others left participants feeling that they did not necessarily fit in and may be perceived differently to other ethnic backgrounds.

It goes without saying that although this research was relatively small scaled, it offers a platform to the little to no research on Black women and their intersections within the UK context. It has listened to the voices of those who are directly impacted, and acknowledged their voices and narratives concerning what it actually feels like to be a Black woman in HE in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Finally, this research study could be valuable in many social studies contexts that wish to understand solely Black Women's experiences at the heart of the intersections of their identities. It becomes imperative in potentially aiding in improving their experiences, opportunities and relationships more generally.

## Recommendations

Whilst this study has explored Black women's experiences of HE, drawing upon the intersectionality of race and gender, it is critical that more qualitative research is conducted. The gap within UK research shows that more research around these under researched and minoritized group needs to be acknowledged. The researcher recommends that other social identities are also considered so as to grasp a better understanding and bigger picture of their lived experiences.

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