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# Where is “race” in prison studies?

by Jason Warr

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## About the working papers series

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# Introduction

More than 20 years have passed since Phillips and Bowling (2002) highlighted the need for criminology to focus on the experiences of racialised populations in the criminal justice of the UK. Eight years have passed since the Lammy Report (2017). It has been five years since Phillips, Earle, and Parmar (2020) followed both of these and asked, *“Dear Criminology: where has all the race and racism gone?”*

Despite the odd blip of attention (often by the same authors), this focus is one that is still not mainstreamed in British criminology, law, criminal justice studies, and policy. Dr Angela Charles (2025) recently published critical and intersectional research exploring the experiences of Black women in prison. Yet this is the first major work of this type undertaken in England and Wales. For decades, despite the issues of disproportionality faced by Black women, there has been silence from the academe. We must take these omissions seriously. We need to continue to explore, explain, and communicate to the public, policy makers, and practitioners exactly how contemporary British penality is still haunted and shaped by our racist and colonial history. These are not ideas that we should hide from or deny, but tackle head on.

It is important that we ask why the issues of racism, processes of racialisation, and their effects remain so marginal within prisons research? This is the question that I was asked to address at the event held by the Zahid Mubarek Trust, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the death of Zahid at the hands of his known and flagged racist cellmate, in a prison plagued by interpersonal bigotry and institutional racism. The conference, *Race in Prisons: Learning from the Past, Shaping the Future*, brought together practitioners, scholars, campaigners, and policy makers to discuss the state of affairs and how momentum in tackling these issues, especially in the face of resurgent and mainstreamed ethno-nationalist and racist hate in the West, could be maintained. This is especially important as an inquest was completed on the 7th November 2025 into the murder of Sundeep Ghuman (36), who died on 19th February 2020 after sustaining serious head injuries the day before whilst locked in his cell in Belmarsh prison with his two cellmates – one of whom was a known and flagged racist. Twenty years after the murder of Zahid and the same issues pertain (Inquest 2025).

There are lessons just not being learned within our criminal justice system (CJS), and in prisons in particular. This is aided and abetted by the epistemic desert that exists in relevant research and policy. I propose five overlapping and interrelated factors that I believe have resulted in this absence of sustained focus, despite some key contributions, on how issues of racism and racialisation effect contemporary prisons and penology. These are not presented as definitive answers to the posed question but, in the philosophical tradition, as a provocation to further conversation.

The five interrelated factors are:

## Where is “race” in prison studies?

Ignorance	Fear	Maginality	Concept Problems	Whiteness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Unaware of how deep racialised ideas are in society</li><li>● Unaware of impact</li><li>● Prejudices</li><li>● Biases</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Not wishing to offend</li><li>● Getting it wrong</li><li>● political diffidence</li><li>● Repercussions</li><li>● Discomfort</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Seeing this as a “Black” issue</li><li>● Seeing it as fringe or minority research</li><li>● REF/impact agendas</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Lack of clarity over terms of reference</li><li>● Race/ethnicity distinctions</li><li>● Avoiding the legitimisation of ‘race science’ concepts</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● CJS is a white space</li><li>● Norms/mores of CJS space, advocacy, and research is racialised and classed</li><li>● Lack of representation</li></ul>

## A note on language

Throughout this paper I use the terms *racism*, *racist* and *processes of racialisation*. These terms are used to discuss the implications and legacies of racialised thinking that have haunted our conceptual reality since their cynical adoption in Britain’s early imperial and colonial period. You will note that I do not use the term ‘race’ without highlighting it with the use of inverted commas. This is to denote that the term is illegitimate, has long been discredited, and I do not wish to perpetuate the racist logics of ‘race’ science (i.e. that there are human subspecies). There is but a singular human race: *homo sapiens*, and we are a genetically homogenous species. To continue to use such a prejudicial concept, regardless of its longevity and endemicity, that implicitly suggests different is both inappropriate and dangerous. This is especially important in a world where such logics are once more being weaponised and perpetuated to further white supremacist and ethno-nationalist ideologies.

## Epistemic Ignorance

The first factor is that of epistemic ignorance: a widespread lack of understanding about the depth and persistence of racism in British society and its institutions. The event at which this paper was initially presented occurred in an area of London surrounded by the legacies of the East India Company. This institution was in operation from 1600, when it gained the Royal charter for all Eastern trade, to its dissolution in 1860. In that

period, it was largely responsible for the (outsourced) colonial project in South and East Asia as well as connecting trade in Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean. Yet few people now understand either the import of that 'Company', their conquests, and trade in opium, tea, slaves, and textiles, for the wealth of Britain, nor their role in embedding racial concepts in our historical imaginary. This general ignorance is indicative of a much deeper problem in our society.

**People are just unaware of how deep racialised ideas are in our society** – Since the 1980s, in the British public attitudes survey, somewhere between 24 per cent and 31 per cent of the representative sample have stated that they have openly racist beliefs/prejudices. This exists because Britain has largely failed to engage seriously with educating children and people about a) the country's racist and colonial history; b) how toxic these ideas are; and c) where these ideas came from and why they were created. Not teaching these issues in any systemic way, and allowing those voices who deny the reality of these facts to dominate the space, means that we have created widespread ignorance about racism.

This results in people being systematically ignorant of how deep racist ideas run in our society, how they are maintained today, and how these ideas continue to influence contemporary penality. Nearly 40 years ago Paul Gilroy (1987) highlighted how the '*Myths of Black Criminality*' in the UK were grounded in British colonial ideas of the 'black' savage (who was cast as violent, irrational/impulsive, insensate, hypersexualised, predatory, immoral, and incapable of assimilation). He highlighted how these ideas were constructed in the authority structures of the colonies and imposed on native populations, then imported back to this country, in the collapse of Empire. There they became buried in the collective consciousness of the British citizenry. There they remain. This leads them to be imposed by our Criminal Justice System (CJS) upon the minoritised descendants of the colonised. Yet, almost half a century on, and significant numbers of scholars, students, CJS researchers, policy makers, practitioners, Ministers etc. are still unaware of these legacies. Or worse, if aware, either deny them, or do not take them seriously.

This produces a number of effects:

- **Blindness to impact** – To paraphrase a quote by the French author Andre Malraux, in ignorance, blindness flourishes. This systemic ignorance of racism causes people to become effectively blind to its impact. There is no awareness of how deep the relationship between our colonial past and contemporary carceral logics are. They do not see the racism embedded in the structures of modern penality. They have no frame of reference for direct awareness or understanding. Consequently, scholars do not build their enquiries in such ways that may capture such realities and experiences. I have read work on prisons in England and Wales (even those published since the Lammy report of 2017(3) – who notes that here in the UK there is greater disproportionality in racialised imprisonment than there is in the US) where there is no mention of how the topic of discussion is experienced by racialised and minoritised populations. The omission may not be deliberate, but it is still significant.
- **Prejudice and dismissal** – This is not to discount any direct prejudices that individual scholars may have. There are those who operate in our field who, even if they were not ignorant, not blinded, to the experiences and impacts of racist structures and ideations, just would not pursue research in this area because they do not see it as worthy of investigation. This is particularly important to note when we exist in a policy framework that is

more informed by internationally funded think tanks and special advisors, who push very specific agendas, than it is by scholarship, research, and evidence.

- **Biases** – A more prevalent issue is one of topic bias. As researchers it is easy to become focused on a very narrow topic field (i.e. children with complex mental health needs in custody; substance misuse of high frequency offenders; pregnant women in prison; classed pains of imprisonment, etc.). This effectively creates a researcher and methodological/variable bias that precludes examination of broader nuances experienced by sub-sets of your sample/population. This is particularly true in studies that are dependent on complex statistical analyses – where the experiences of small subsets of the sample may not be statistically significant. Unless you are specifically looking at the experiences of racialised and minoritised populations these methodological biases may actively occlude those experiences from your enquiry.

## Fear

The second major factor is fear. There is a great deal of anxiety generated when tackling issues of racism and processes of racialisation in the humanities and social sciences. This is especially true for those working on criminal justice issues. Crime and justice already carry significant political charge. When this is coupled to discussions of racism and racist politics and legacies here in the UK, there is an amplification of that political charge. There are both internal and external factors which impact on people's ability and willingness to tackle these topics. Together, these factors create a chilling effect that discourages sustained inquiry.

Firstly, there is the internal pressure linked to not knowing enough or lacking confidence in the topic. Given the breadth of scholarship on issues of racism and processes of racialisation (i.e. constructed and imposed ideations of 'Blackness') this may seem surprising, but it is common. Secondly, fear can be generated by external pressures and actors, particularly those acting in bad faith. This is concerned with the implications of speaking out and exposing the problems of racism against a toxic political and ideological backdrop.

This latter point becomes a problem in our current political climate where racist, nationalist, and xenophobic politics and politicians have become increasingly visible in UK public life. These voices are frequently amplified through the media. It is they who are promoted to prominence in the news, who get to frame media focus, determine salient talking points, and push back against and silence dissenting voices. The current (and constructed) focus on non-white immigration in the UK (whilst simultaneously denying its centrality to our economic stability) is perhaps the most obvious evidence of this. This prominence, and the political and media power that comes with it, can have a radical chilling effect on scientific discourse about racism and processes of racialisation. In this context, speaking openly about institutional racism can attract hostility and backlash. This environment discourages researchers from addressing racism directly, particularly where their work challenges dominant political narratives. Similar dynamics can be seen internationally, including in the US, and may intensify in the UK if neo-nationalist parties gain further influence.

Fear produces several effects:

- Not wishing to offend – In work on racism and racialisation, scholars, students, and advocates often express anxiety about causing offence. This concern is directed both towards those affected by issues of racism, racialisation or those who work in prisons and the wider CJS. There are two distinct issues here:
  - **Firstly:** as it relates to those who are racialised, this fear (like the ‘getting it wrong’ point) is based in the degree to which people are unfamiliar and unused to this work and talking about these issues. There is an epistemic uncertainty in relation to the concepts, theories, research, and evidence from studies on racism and racialisation. To some extent this is understandable given academic and research specialisms (more on this point later). However, this can be understood as a form of toxic politeness – where fear of offending actively means people either absent themselves from this topic, or a blind eye is turned to both the issues and those beset by them.
  - **Secondly:** as it relates to not wanting to offend those who work in prisons or the CJS this is a more confounding issue. This could be about maintaining access and not risking upsetting those with power over you as an interloper into the closed world of prisons by conferring legitimacy to the idea that they work in, perpetuate a racist institution (which some will translate into accusations of personal bigotry). However, it could also be related to not undermining the work done in such institutions to tackle the problem of institutional and interpersonal racism. In both cases, the result can be an absence of investigation and reporting.
- **Getting it wrong** – we also see experts in prison studies and research not actively engaging in the complex analysis of, e.g. ‘Blackness’ in prisons because they are afraid that, without a grounding in a very different literature, they will get things wrong. Whilst it is good that researchers and commentators are hesitant to speak on that which they do not understand, or have the expertise in (unfortunately, in the prison space this is not always the case), it does create evidential lacunae. This represents a different form of epistemic uncertainty to that described above but, nevertheless, also results in a wilful professional inattention to issues of racism and the impacts of racist policies and legacies in prisons.
- **Discomfort** – a point that we will return to later is whiteness and the impact that operating in ‘white spaces’ can have. However, it has long been noted in the social sciences that there is a reluctance for white scholarship to address the issues of racism (see Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi 2001). One reason is dissonance. There is a reluctance from scholars to confront their own privileges and complicity in racist structures and ideations, as to do so is to upset one’s ontological security in relation to self and society. Who amongst us is good at that? Nevertheless, this discomfort results in a denial that simultaneously obscures the realities faced by racialised and disadvantaged groups in prison, and delegitimizes scientific enquiry into those issues. This prevents robust discussion on resolving the problem, not just in prison scholarship and research, but more specifically in the white penal commentariat who are granted platforms beyond academic publishing.
- Political diffidence – This is an increasing problem in academia. This relates to not wanting to step into areas that are seen as sensitive or politically fraught due to the potential for backlash. In this context it arises where racist ideas are becoming increasingly weaponised in mainstream politics, and racist attitudes have once more crept out into open expression. This is particularly true in online and virtual spaces where tech platforms seem to reward racist conflicts and challenges. Furthermore, just like the 1970s, we now see very open racism being expressed (normatively) as the expression of ‘legitimate concerns’. Challenging this can be exhausting and dangerous – especially when it is likely to incur the wrath of many faceless trolls in the social media and

commentariat space. In a precarious academia, where scholars have little protection, they become diffident and wary of venturing into such treacherous waters.

- **Censure** – The problems faced by researchers are not just confined to digital spaces. In an increasingly precarious scholarly labour market, making yourself a target for bad faith actors by challenging the racism and racist attitudes in our policy and criminal justice practice can have significant impacts. The risk of censure, cancellation, and direct action against individuals by students, our institutions, criminal justice agencies, and even the State is a very evident threat. Where writing a thesis that covers the racialised politics of smell,<sup>1</sup> or exposing ‘racial profiling’ by porters at a university,<sup>2</sup> can result in hate mail, rape threats, and overt and ongoing harassment, tackling more problematic and ‘charged’ topics can have real-world, devastating consequences. During one scoping exercise in a prison in the North East of England and Wales in 2013, a colleague of mine at the time witnessed prison officers being racist towards Black prisoners from London. My colleague reported this to our liaison in the senior management team. Subsequently my colleague was subject to Security Incident Reports (SIRs) every time they visited the prison. Eventually, the Governing Governor suggested that my colleague be removed from the project in order to maintain good working relationships. Here my colleague was censured via the weaponisation of the prison’s security apparatus; not because they posed a GOAD<sup>3</sup> risk, but because they had spoken out against racism in the prison. These experiences reinforce the message that addressing racism carries consequences, further discouraging engagement.

## Marginality

The next theme is epistemic marginality. This refers to how certain topics are relegated to the margins of the scientific field. This tends to happen when a topic is seen as irrelevant at a particular time. This typically occurs if it is of negligible interest, unlikely to produce sufficient evidentiary weight as to be of use, or that it is only of special interest to a minority group. In each case, we find the topic either falling out of fashion as a scope of enquiry, or becoming largely overlooked in the general research landscape. In both circumstances the topic increasingly falls further down the *ordo momenti* in terms of scientific enquiry.

We have seen this in relation to prison studies in England and Wales where issues such as gender, class, or culture have often taken precedence over racism. This reductive attention has underplayed the extent which these issues are both intersectional and entangled (see Charles 2025). For instance, ONS (2021) data shows that ethnic minority groups are much more likely to be located in lower working approximated social grades than white groups (excluding white traveller communities). Yet we do not see much acknowledgment of this in analyses that focus on ‘traditional working classes’ in prisons.

Ignoring the need, and opportunities for intersectional analysis limits our understanding of how prisons operate. It is not just about exploring racism and processes of racialisation, it is about an intermediate investigation into how institutions of social control operate within our society. Prisons operate in our name, but if we do not fully understand what they do, and why, in a way that goes beyond the official narratives, then we fail as a civic body. Seeing the problem of “race” as a marginal concern, rather than one that is central to the operation of penalty, only perpetuates that failure, and compounds the harms that occur.

There are three forms of epistemic marginality:

- **Seeing this as a “Black” issue** – As Bulmer and Solomos (2004) noted over twenty years ago, for the last decades of the 20th Century racism research was, despite some notable exceptions, largely left to racialised and minoritised scholars. Unfortunately, here in the UK, this pattern has pertained. The investigation of racism and racialisation are still often seen as a topic of research that belongs to the domain of (especially Black) racialised scholars. At best, this reflects a desire to give up space. At worst, it marginalises topics of research in which the majority have little to no ‘skin in the game’. Patterns of attendance at academic events continue to reflect this divide. At the 2023 British Society of Criminology conference I organised a panel on *Decoding Racism and Coloniality in Contemporary Penality*, with colleagues Drs Angela Charles and Esmorie Miller. Only two white scholars attended that panel, the rest were Black or Asian. This was a trend that repeated across several panels that focused on racism in policing, victimology, and courts. Despite the problems and harms being discussed, it seemed to only be given epistemic import by Black and diasporic scholars.
- **Seeing it as fringe or minority research** – The result of seeing this as a ‘Black’ concern is that whilst issues of racism, its legacies, and the harms that emerge from it in prisons (and society) are seen as well grounded, they are perceived as a fringe rather than central concern. Something that is studied elsewhere, by others. This is different from not seeing the topic as one of legitimate concern (dismissal). Rather, it is not seen as a central unit of analysis within mainstream penology. This reinforces a cycle where the perception of novelty and distance breeds and reinforces the impression of marginality. For prison scholarship the result is the same – studies of racism and the experiences of racialised others do not become centralised as a foci of research and analysis in the majority of penological research.
- **REF/Impact agendas** – The two above issues are compounded by the increasingly metric-driven landscape of higher education in England and Wales. Prevalent in the lives of academics is the Research Excellence Framework and the push for ‘impact’. The bureaucratisation of the evaluation of research and the emphasis on impact and alignment with policy priorities discourages research that challenges political agendas. Despite repeated rhetorical commitments to the idea, dealing with racism, processes of racialisation, and the legacies of both in prisons and the CJS are far from front line concerns of any political party in the UK. This encourages investigation and scholarship in areas of political expedience, rather than those of critical importance. Equally, research outputs that do not adhere to the formalised model of the ‘research article’ are less likely to be scored at levels required for submission to the REF<sup>4</sup> and are thus, actively discouraged. This has a stifling effect on the type and nature of publications being produced, limiting dissemination beyond academic institutions.

## Conceptual Problems

Writing about racism and processes of racialisation also raises conceptual challenges. Social science concepts are often specialised. Sometimes these concepts can contrast or even conflict with those used in other realms of understanding (public, policy, practice, etc.) or different jurisdictions. Within the natural and social sciences, we create concepts that allow us to both distinguish and explain specific phenomena. However, sometimes, especially when there are disparate and/or critical models of investigation occurring simultaneously, this can result in overlapping and/or competing terms of reference for those concepts. This can result in a seeming lack of

concept clarity. Though this is not really the case, it can seem that way from the outside, and for those who do not have sufficient familiarity with the knowledge and terminology being utilised.

This issue is particularly acute in social scientific discussions of “race” where multiple epistemic and ideological traditions are informing work in this area. In the US, where much of the critical literature on racism emerges, the concept of “race” is used as a legitimate descriptor, but one that needs to be divorced from its roots in the pseudo “race science” of western colonialism, white supremacy, and related eugenics movements. However, increasingly in Europe this term is not used (see point below), and concepts of ethnicity or heritage are used instead. This can result, for the unwary or unfamiliar, in some confusion. There are a number of implications to this that may also impact on utilising racism as a point of analysis in majority research on prisons:

- **Lack of clarity over terms of reference** – This issue relates to the jurisdictional and ideological positions on the concepts of “race” outlined above. This is especially true in terms of the concepts of institutional, structural, and systemic racism where there is a distinct lack of conceptual coherence across disciplines and jurisdictions. In some contexts, systemic and institutional racism are conflated together, whereas in others, systemic racism relates to a macro level of understanding on the degree to which structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism exist within a state. That there are differences in these term definitions has resulted in denial, (deliberate) misinformation, disinformation, misinterpretation, disinterpretation, and broader conceptual cloudiness. Over the last 15 years multiple government ministers, as well as Chief Constables, deny the existence of both structural and institutional racism in their drive to reframe this as an individual, rather than a cultural or system problem. A further consequence is that this lack of coherence can allow pernicious others to commit what is known as an *inflation of conflict* fallacy in such a way that it muddies the discursive pool. This is where bad faith actors exaggerate the amount of disagreement over the conceptional definitions of racism, in order to invalidate claims made about, and conclusions drawn from research on, racism that rely on those definitions. This allows them to vocally dismiss work on racism in society, policing, or prison; and can contribute to the diffidence and anxiety that scholars may face when considering adopting racism as a focus of attention.
- **Race/Ethnicity distinctions** – These concepts are not synonymous, both are problematic. However, a problem arises when attempting to reconcile US scholarship, where the concept of ‘race’ is taken as a legitimate concept to describe the bio-cultural heritages and packaged ideations of characteristics imposed on groups, with European contexts where ‘ethnicity’ is often preferred for similar descriptive purposes. Having two distinct sets of concepts doing the same descriptive work can cause a number of epistemic problems for researchers trying to operationalise them in research. This can, and has, resulted in confusion and acted as a barrier for those who want to enter into this space. This is a problem that is only going to grow where we have manipulated large language models (so-called AI) that both flatten concept use to symbol correlations of the most frequently utilised forms, as well as push the very predatory and dominating agendas of their right-wing, rapaciously capitalist, owners.
- **Avoiding the legitimisation of ‘race science’ concepts** – This presents a particular, and growing, problem for UK critical scholars. Increasingly we find researchers who do not wish to legitimate the use of the concept of “race” (which is seen as a zombie concept – i.e. long disproven to have any legitimate use as a referent, but which still

ambles on in our language and cultural imagination wreaking havoc as it does so). Its continued use is seen as perpetuating the illegitimate idea that there are distinct biological species of humans. Consequently, many scholars prefer to talk about racism and processes of racialisation (the legacies of the illegitimate concept of "race" having been utilised in socio-political contexts for centuries as a means of oppression). However, this adds further complexity in developing and designing research where concept clarity is necessary.

## Whiteness

This is a more complex and controversial issue. If the concept of "race" is itself poorly understood, then the construction of 'whiteness' is even less recognised or examined. Yet the logical consequence of constructing and imposing ideas of "race" on others, is that ideas of a white "race" have also been explicitly constructed. While racialising descriptors such as Blackness are commonly acknowledged, we often fail to recognise that this process simultaneously produces and reinforces whiteness. In doing so, whiteness is positioned as the standard, the norm from which the racialised "other" is rendered a deviation. Whiteness here then is both extremely present, but also strangely absent from our understanding of racism and racialisation.

The clearest explanation of this absent/visible duality is presented by Garner (2007). Garner notes that whilst conceptions of whiteness saturate western societies that racialize others, whiteness itself becomes invisible by blending into the background. In this way it remains largely unchallenged and unchallengeable in terms of those societies' collective sense of themselves. However, given that it shapes the moral and behavioural landscape of society, it can have pernicious effects on the racialised other who inhabits or navigates that society.

Elijah Anderson (2022; 2015) offers an important contribution when it comes to understanding the implications of this issue through his descriptions of being Black whilst having to navigate and exist within white spaces. Anderson defines white spaces as those within which dominant white, middle class, norms and values not only shape activity and experience, but impose those norm ideations on all those who enter those spaces. This creates expectations of conformity to those norms, values, and activities, even if that means suppression of one's own cultural mores and norms. When the racialised other does enter into those white spaces, not only are they forced to confront the expectations of white norms, but simultaneously the 'deviance' that their racialised self represents. They are inherently alien, within an alien space. This creates burdens for the racialised person that is not seen by the white population who are simply not subject to the weight of that dissonance. They experience the space not as alien, but as comfortably normal. This is the root of their white privilege, inherently they belong, are accepted, where racialised others aren't.

Both these issues of whiteness and of white space have both material and epistemic implications for investigations of racism in prisons:

- **Prison as a 'white' space** – CJS in Anglo-dominant western societies are exemplars of 'white' space. It is within these systems and spaces that the dominant socio-cultural norms are encapsulated within formal laws, rituals, language, and practices. Within these spaces the bodies, cultures, and identities of racialised groups are

constrained and remade in the idealised image imposed by and through processes that benefit, dominant white, affluent, middle-class society. This is more evident in prisons, where those ideals of change and alterity are built into the very ethic of the institution. They are designed to 'whiten' (and re-class) those racialised people who are incarcerated, through constructing ideas of both risk, and risk mitigation (rehabilitation) which forces them to adhere to the white ideal (see Warr 2022). When prison researchers are operating with an uncritical adherence to the idea of rehabilitation as the desired outcome of criminal justice intervention, then processes that are inherently racist and racialising are just not seen as such.

- **Practices of whiteness in prisons** – Scholars can remain blind to the racism and racialisation that emerges from the very practices of the prison. This blindness can arise because of an implicit alignment between the disciplinary 'change' agenda of the prison/CJS, and their adherence to that as a goal of justice. A further problem is the routinised nature of those issues. In other contexts we see harms and abuses hidden behind the routine and legal practices of institutions. In these instances, harms/abuse can arise through a toxic combination of subversion by predatory agents/offenders, and the complicit turning of a 'blind eye' of colleagues and superiors.

However, with institutional racism, it emerges not from subversion, but from within the underlying ethos and routines of the prison as it operates in service of a white, Anglo-dominant society. In this case, the very processes that the researcher expects to see blinds them to the racialised harms occurring in the due course of those processes. When this happens, their whiteness becomes a determinant in the absence of racism as a unit of analysis.

- **Lack of Representation** – A completely different issue related to white spaces is that of representation. Both academia and the reform or third sector arena remain largely white spaces. Outside of specific organisations and committed high profile individuals, the vast majority of those who operate in these spaces are not from racialised or minoritised backgrounds. This creates a twofold problem.
  - **Firstly**, when this area of research and advocacy is also seen as a 'white' space, it alienates those who have direct experience of the racism and processes of racialisation that are central to our penal institutions. The benefit of having system impacted individuals in these conversations is that they are able to see what may be hidden to others. However, we must avoid tokenism in this regard. This is where racialised people, with system experience, are brought into these white spaces to put a Black or Brown face on the *status quo*, or agenda of others.

Although some progress has been made, I have witnessed numerous junior colleagues from racialised and minoritised groups, particularly those researching racism in the CJS, leave academia and/or changing their research focus. This often occurs because they feel there is not a space for them (especially if they challenge the lived experience hegemony or the tokenism that can be rife in the sector).

- **Secondly**, there are significant narrative implications. We know that it is the emotive and emotionally resonant 'story' that can change the minds of policy makers and the public, as it humanises the harms that exist. However, I question the truth of this when we move beyond tokenism to revelations of racism and

legacies of harm. Especially when this exposes the racist harms within systems our society is wedded to, or agendas that lie at the heart of 'progressive' organisations.

I fear that we are seeing a form of what Miranda Fricker (2007) would call *testimonial injustice* play out in this regard. Testimonial injustice occurs when an individual's account is disbelieved purely because of some facet of that person's being, rather than the probity of their claims. In the narratives of racism in prisons (and the wider CJS) this may also be occurring precisely because those stories force us to confront the privileges and potential complicity of our broader society in these harms. Historically, such accounts engender push-back, rejection, and whitewashing of the problem. If, as I fear, this is true, then those stories do not have the impact they should and do not get centralised in our research or advocacy in the way that the accounts of white or model minority prisoners do.

## Conclusion

This paper does not seek to offer a comprehensive explanation of why the issue of racism is absent from our work on prisons. Rather, it is intended as a provocation to a wider conversation on why, decades after the first scholarship on racism and processes of racialisation in our CJS, we still fail in this regard. What I have presented here is a few points that I think contribute to why the academia consistently fails to include racism (its legacies and impacts) as a central unit of analysis; why we instead maintain a superficial exploration of these issues by focusing on raw examples of disproportionality, rather than any deeper theorisation and historically grounded explanation. The five points here are set out as interrelated issues. They should not be read as individual issues. If we are to redress the issues set out here, and the fundamental problems of profound and ongoing racism within our prisons and CJS, we cannot tackle them individually. We need, and must, take them all on.

Throughout, I have noted the re-emergence of overt and toxic racism within mainstream UK politics. No longer do people fear to express opinions that only a decade or so would have been anathema. Expressions that would have been career-ending little more than a decade ago are now routinely voiced by MPs and government ministers. Political actors openly dog-whistle extremist elements of racist society by littering their speeches with reference to racist conspiracies like the 'great replacement' (the claim that white populations and cultures are being lost in Europe and the US due to immigration and mixed heritage births). No longer are there consequences for espousing this racist rhetoric; instead, it is presented in terms of 'legitimate concerns' and platformed on mainstream media. The political context cannot be ignored within our research and scholarship. We must be aware of the silencing it will engender. We have been here before, and we know what harms accrue and are suffered when we allow ourselves, our research, our campaigning, our fight for rights and protections to be silently silenced.

We need to ensure that we include the issues of racism, its history, its structures, and its legacies in our thinking, our operationalisation of questions, our research design (even if it is in negation), our methods, and as units of analysis. We need to make sure that we centralise the relevant literature in teaching research methods, and that we continue that through into our evaluating research proposals. This will help us to create future

prison researchers who are reflexive in considering their own positionality in relation to, and understanding of, these issues.

We also need, as peer reviewers, to be consistently asking of prison research "*where is the racism?*". As reviewers and editors, we can change the perspective of the field by being consistent in asking the question and making authors account for, and justify, its absence. There may be a legitimate reason for not including it as a frame or unit of analysis, but this should not be the default position. It is only when we start to change the methodological landscape in this way will we see an eventual cultural shift in the prison research of the future. It is only when we have achieved this that we will begin to truly understand "race", racism, and processes of racism in prisons and systems of penality. Until then we remain in the dark, and harms will continue.

## Recommendations

Below are ten points of recommendation that will begin to tackle the five interrelated issues set out above:

1. Upskill researchers, policy makers, and practitioners on the issues of racism and processes of racialisation that still exist in the current penal landscape.
2. Build researcher confidence in terms of speaking on, and including, theories of racism into their work. This must begin in researcher training and continue throughout their career development.
3. Develop greater mechanisms of peer and institutional support for academics producing work in this area that includes coherent working between line-management, press offices, and HR.
4. Establish processes to confront the wilful denial of the issues faced by racialised populations, especially when this means facing one's own privileges, prejudices, and permissiveness. Our discomfort should not be the ground upon which harms experienced by others is built.
5. Push the Justice Select Committee, the various HM Inspectors, and other preventative mechanisms to centralise the issue of racism as a specific and sustained focus of concern.
6. As editors and peer-reviewers, when evaluating research proposals and submitted works on prisons we need to be consistent in asking where the racism is.
7. We need concept clarity across disciplines and jurisdictions. Failing that, we need outputs to be explicitly clear on how they are using such concepts so that their work can be cohered easily with that of others.
8. We need robust forms of fact-checking and corrective measures that can counter toxic (and manipulated) influence of large language models and AI
9. Actively challenge, name and tackle tokenism that occurs in academic, reform, and policy spaces, rather than allowing it to masquerade as meaningful inclusion.
10. Humanise the experiences of racialised others (as we have with children and mothers) so that their accounts and voices are not seen as dismissible threats to the status quo. This is increasingly important in a world that is progressively dehumanising these populations.

# Notes

- 1 See BBC report on what happened to Dr Ally Louks  
here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cjryy5dprn9o>
- 2 See the case of Dr. Priyamvada Gopal  
<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2020-06-23-cambridge-university/>
3. GOAD = Good Order and Discipline
4. Scoring well in the REF, which can impact on a universities funding, is dependent on research active staff returning research outputs that are evaluated as being 3\* or 4\*. Outputs that are unlikely to reach this score are now actively being discouraged. For more REF details see: <https://2029.ref.ac.uk/>

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