Helen Burchill
Scholarship Winner 2024

Belonging and Transforming

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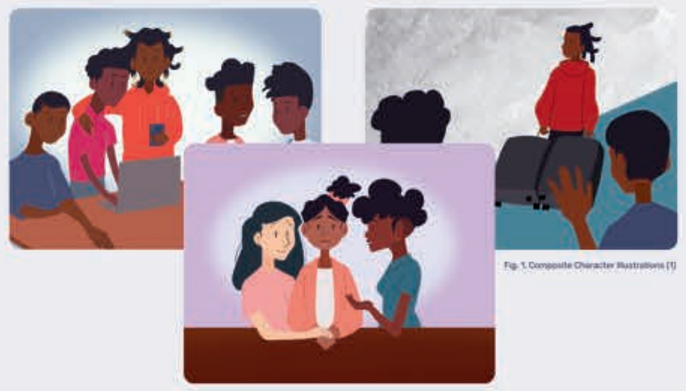

Fig. 1 Composite Character Illustrations (1)

An Exploration of Racially Minoritised Students' Sense of Belonging and Transformation at University

Why is this important?

- Non-continuation rates are higher and attainment rates are lower among Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in the UK compared with White students (Neves & Brown, 2022).
- Diminished sense of 'belonging', taken as an essential foundation for achievement, has been linked to poorer academic outcomes for racially minoritised students than for White students in the UK (HEFCE, 2015; Millward, 2021)
- Black students in UK HE are significantly less likely to feel they experience a sense of belonging (Neves & Brown, 2022).
- Some forms of education transform students to fit with existing systems; others transform students to be critical, practice freedom, and creatively discover how to transform the world (Shaull, in Freire, 1970).
- Transformative learning develops through "struggling productively" and "feeling heard", which creates a sense of being valuable in the community and belonging (Murdoch et. al., 2020).
- There is a gap in knowledge concerning the connection between belonging and transformation, particularly as it pertains to racialised lived experience of undergraduate students in UK HE.

Research Questions

1. How do racially minoritised students make meaning of belonging and transforming at university?
2. What is the relationship, if any, between belonging and transforming at university?
3. How does race impact students' sense of belonging and transforming at university?

Reflexivity

As a white researcher exploring the lived experiences of students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, I have needed to consider my positionality carefully.

My methods were selected to empower participants and enable infinite responses based on deep reflection over time – something a survey or structured interview would not permit.

I participated in a collaging activity myself to experience first-hand the impact on the self, reflecting on the emotions it surfaced in me before asking others to do the same.

I created a time-map (Manathunga et. al., 2019) to consider how I bring a white lens to my data collection and plan how I will counter this. My chapter 'Impact of Race on Belonging and Transformation' will be read by a critical friend of Black Caribbean heritage to vet for white lens.

Fig. 2 Researcher's Time-map

Methodology

This study took an arts-based ethnographical approach, situated within a constructionist ontological paradigm, informed by decolonising methodologies (Smith, 2012) and Critical Race Theory's counter-storytelling tenet (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

'Photo walk'

Photo-voice discussion

Non-stick collage

Fig. 3 Three-stage method

Methods

A three-stage multi-modal method was employed.

1. Students photographed anything which resonated with a sense of belonging/ transforming or not belonging/transforming at university.
2. They brought these for a 1:1 recorded discussion.
3. Later, the participants met as a group to create individual non-stick collages on 'belonging in the Business School', and their group discussion of these was audio-recorded.

Fig. 4 Participant Beatriz's photo - 'Power Cut'

Fig. 5 Participant Prince's photo - '[Un]-Failing Over'

Purposive Sampling

	Male	Female
Black British African	3	1
Black British Caribbean	1	0
Mixed Black&White British	0	1
Mixed Black&White Portuguese	0	1
South Asian - Indian	1	1
Chinese	0	1
Other Asian - British Filipino	0	1
Total		11

Fig. 6 Table showing ethnic background of 11 participants as self-declared

Analysis and Findings

Three overarching themes were generated and named from the transcripts, using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022):
1) **I'm part of this mess, it's so good**
2) **Just know who I am**
3) **They're not going to understand what I go through**

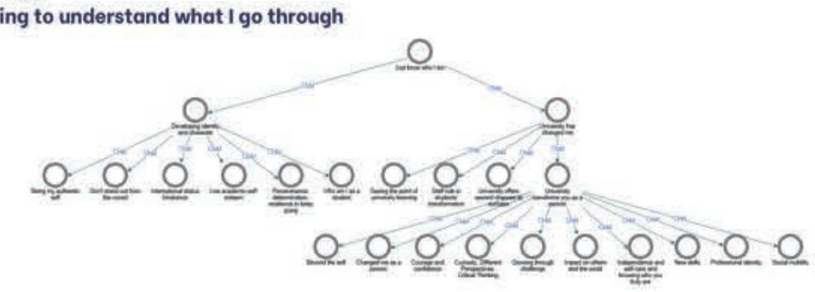

Fig 7 Thematic Map Coded in NVivo

Fig. 8 Model showing the inter-relation between Belonging, Mattering, Transforming the Self and Transforming Beyond the Self

A model was then developed to visualise the three forms of belonging evidenced in the dataset: ***Relational Belonging***, ***Structural Belonging***, ***Contributory Belonging***, and how these relate to ***Transformation*** *and* ***Mattering***

Two compounding factors beyond the control of the participants were identified - Race and Covid19 - represented in the model as 'the weather' (Sharpe, 2016:104) which was ever-present in the participants' lived experiences throughout the study

Fig. 9 Participant Aisha's Digital Collage

Fig. 10 Participant Uma's Non-stick Collage

Fig. 11 Participant Gamu's Non-stick Collage

Fig. 12 Participant Sean's Digital Collage

Fig. 13 Composite Character Illustration (2)

Fig. 14 Composite Character Illustration (3)

Conclusion

Belonging at university can fluctuate, pass, increase and decrease, retract and build back. Transformation through education is permanent. No participant demonstrated any evidence of transforming then losing this sense of transformation thereafter.

Initial transformation is experienced in relation to the self only, and depends upon relational and structural belonging; deeper transformation is gained through, not just belonging and feeling valued, but adding value, impacting the community and making a difference to other people's lives. This leads to a sense of mattering.

Belonging and transformation are linked. The first two stages of belonging result in self-transformation (resilience, skill acquisition, self-efficacy, independence). The third stage of belonging is required to enter the deeper phase of mattering (being missed, offering insight, contributing to change, making things better).

Racism causes frequent interruption to sense of belonging at university for students of minority ethnic heritage. This causes isolation and a desire to drop-out. Universities must support and enable racially minoritised students to feel valued through relational and anti-racist pedagogies which build belonging. Then, through criticality and "feeling heard" (Murdoch, 2020) students can enter the contributory stage of belonging to increase 'mattering' and sense of adding value.

Contribution to Practice

40 recommendations for universities, including a focus on building relational belonging and structural belonging in Year 1, and contributory belonging in Years 2 and 3

Creation of composite character video story for staff/student training to address whiteness, increase compassion for racialised lived experiences and enable greater belonging and transformation for students of colour

Contribution to Method

Development of digital collaging as a viable non-stick arts-based visual method of counter-narrative data collection, particularly useful for remote participation.

Environmentally sustainable method for group participatory research across geographical borders.

Related Literature

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