Research article

Intra-action between academics and their areas of expertise in the quest for social equality in academia and society: a posthuman perspective

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Abstract

This article uses a posthuman perspective to analyse the intertwined relationship between some academics as social beings and their areas of expertise. It focuses on the intra-action between the academics and their areas of expertise to express their self-perception, resist essentialist discourses of who they are experienced as within the university setting and advocate for social justice both at the university and in wider society. Using empirical evidence from this study, linguistic, racial and religious discrimination in academia based on perceptions of accent, 'race' and religion are uncovered. The study also reveals intra-action between the academics and their areas of expertise to make themselves, including their social and organisational environment, happen by moving beyond stereotypical understanding of the world. The study argues for the need to acknowledge the pertinence of social issues such as 'race' in British higher education, rather than viewing them as irrelevant to academia. The study contributes to the existing literature on inequality and higher education by reimagining a just higher education and society using a posthumanist lens. It also has implications for policy in terms of the

contribution of a single-language policy and the predominance of 'Whiteness' in higher education in creating and perpetuating perceptions of diversity as a problem rather than a resource for growth and bridging gaps between communities.

Keywords social (in)equality; higher education; intercultural education; society; human-to-non-human relations; social action

Introduction

This empirically based article is situated within the field of intercultural education. It is part of a larger study conducted by the author (Kebabi, 2022) on the personal lived experiences of a group of well-established academics in the UK who have come from different national backgrounds (European and non-European). I use the term 'national' backgrounds because this is where the participants come from. However, I do not use the participants' nationalities as a category of analysis. Furthermore, I have not specified the participants' nationality to protect their anonymity, as well as to minimise unconscious bias which may arise from using names that reflect the academics' national backgrounds.

Even though the core focus of the larger study concerned the lived experiences of these academics in their personal everyday lives outside the university context, some academics drew on their experiences within academia, which I find significant to highlight. In this article, I focus on the ways in which these academics enact their sense of who they are as social beings and respond to experiences of exclusion within academia through their areas of expertise. It is crucial to uncover these experiences of academics within the university setting to emphasise the prevalence of discrimination and inequality in academia, as well as to sincerely act on such practices and eradicate them. Experiences of linguistic, racial and religious discrimination, which will be demonstrated in the data below, are not exclusive to academics; their experiences could potentially resonate with professionals in a wide range of workplace environments.

In this article I focus on the interplay between some academics and their areas of expertise from a critical posthuman perspective. I approach this perspective as a lens through which human relation with the material and non-material world is revisited; this is by bringing to the fore the way in which the academics draw on their areas of expertise to enact agency and voice inequality. This is in such a way thatthe academics' areas of expertise become an integral part in their self-positioning vis-à-vis how they are positioned by others. In this sense, critical posthumanism is used to destabilise human superiority over other entities, such as artefacts, animals, nature and places, and it demonstrates how intercultural encounters are shaped through intra-acting with the material and non-material world. I argue that the areas of expertise of the academics are non-human entities by drawing on Pennycook (2018: 445), who interrogates the demarcation between 'humans, and other animals, humans and artefacts, humans and nature', and Fenoulhet (2020), who illustrates interconnectedness between human and non-human subjects by drawing on her own personal experience of translating the novel *Eva* by the Dutch writer Carry van Bruggen. During the process of translating the novel, Fenoulhet and the various other entities used in the process of translating the novel such as a Dutch dictionary, paper and pencil, and the database are constituent parts of generating excitement and making the translator (Fenoulhet) rediscover her sense of identity in relation to the events and the characters in the novel. In this regard, Fenoulhet (2020: 500) argues that 'agency can be distributed across things as well as people'. While the notion of non-human could be understood in relation to materiality, I argue that non-human also encompasses non-material, abstract and intangible entities such as emotions, naming and death (Kebabi, 2023).

I use the term 'intra-action' to demonstrate my position towards the relationship between individuals, objects, environments and so forth. This type of interplay between the academics and their areas of expertise, manifested in the data through which the academics enact agency to illuminate their experiences of discrimination and voice their endeavour for a socially just academia and society, is, in my understanding, best captured using the notion of intra-action. Barad (2007) argues that intra-action conceptualises agency as not an exclusive practice pertinent to individuals, but as a dynamic of forces. So rather than taking human dominance and superiority at face value, I argue for enmeshed agencies of all different living and non-living organisms (Barad, 2003; Braidotti, 2013, 2019; Chappell, 2018; Ferri, 2020; Kell, 2015; Page, 2018; Pennycook, 2018; Ros i Solé et al., 2020). This understanding of the relationship

between human and non-human entities offers pathways for creative research and new understanding of the material and non-material world and human entanglement in the process of 'becoming' (Ros i Solé et al., 2020) which results from intra-action between humans and other-than-human elements.

Through this intersection, the academics defy grand narratives (Amadasi and Holliday, 2018) about them based on the perceptions of 'race', accent and religion, and attempt to make change at the levels of the university context and wider society. They do this by bringing their lived experiences of discrimination inside the university setting into intra-action with their areas of expertise.

The data discussed in this article are generated from semi-structured interviews and observation of the ways in which the participants discuss their lived experiences and the ways in which they use their areas of expertise to contest inequality towards them in academia. I approach the interviews as an interactional event (De Fina and Perrino, 2011) in which reported narratives by the participants emerged. The article converges with existing research on inequality in British higher education by Arday (2018), Arday and Mirza (2018), Bhopal et al. (2018), Hobson and Whigham (2018) and Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury (2018), among others, who demonstrate that racism, the predominance of 'Whiteness' and inequality based on perceptions of gender, religion and culture permeate British higher education. The article also builds on these studies by contributing to the growing scholarship on the intertwined relationship between humans and materiality in education by Chappell (2018), Chappell et al. (2021), Craft (2013), Jiang and Tham (2023), Page (2018) and Pedersen (2023), among others, using a posthuman perspective to argue for accommodating multiple agencies in rethinking higher education. While the aforementioned studies in education use posthumanism to recreate new ways of designing and delivering learning and engaging with students, peer teachers and community partners by decentring human exceptionalism and centring communication between living and non-living organisms, I use posthumanism to reimagine a just higher education and wider society. I illuminate the untangled relationship between the academics in this study and their areas of expertise in their quest for making and advocating for change in higher education and in wider society.

In the following sections, I explain the article's methodological and theoretical orientation. I then present and discuss the data using a posthuman lens and relevant literature. Later on, I also discuss the data and the theoretical underpinning of the article. Last but not least, I provide my conclusions.

Methodological and theoretical underpinning

Formal email invitations were sent separately to 14 male and female well-established academics at a university in the UK. These academics come from different European and non-European countries, and they have been living and working in the UK for a considerable number of years. Nine of these academics showed interest in contributing to the research. In this article, I present data from four of them.

Table 1 includes details about the participants and the dataset used in the article (their pseudonyms, interview dates and the duration and location of the interviews).

Table 1. Information about the participants and interviews

Participant	Interview date	Length of the interview	Interview location
Jordan	19/07/2018	1 hour and 18 seconds	An office in a university setting
Kyle	29/05/2018	1 hour, 8 minutes and 31 seconds	An office in a university setting
Alex	16/05/2018	56 minutes and 11 seconds	An office in a university setting
Sam	22/05/2018	1 hour, 39 minutes and 34 seconds	Sam's office

Throughout the study, I considered ethics at the level of complying with Canterbury Christ Church University's formal procedures. I also considered ethics at the level of practice by ensuring the academics'

protection during the research process and after the findings were disseminated. This was achieved by anonymising any information which might compromise the academics' identity. This information included their national backgrounds, their names, their religious affiliation, the language(s) they speak that are associated with the countries they come from, gender, explicit description of their physical characteristics and accent, their department affiliation and areas of specialism, and the places they live in the UK. I used general references in square brackets. I also used ellipsis ('…') to indicate that some original words were cut because they are not important to the analysis. The academics' protection was also achieved by respecting their preference to meet in the places they suggested, and their willingness to share with me what they chose to discuss about their lived experiences.

To 'disturb the data' (Kebabi, 2022, 2023), first I assigned gender-neutral names. I purposefully chose Western names, which are by implication 'White' names, to interrogate the concept of 'Whiteness' in relation to naming by decentring essentialist understanding of the question of 'to belong or not to belong?' (Beck, 2003: 45) based on perceptions of 'race' and accent (Kebabi, 2022), and to bring the academics' views of who they are into the centre. Even though most of the academics in the larger study come from a so-called 'White/Western' background, some of them were discriminated against based on perceptions of 'Whiteness' and/or accent by 'white perceiving subjects' (Flores and Rosa, 2015; Rosa and Flores, 2017; also, see Kebabi, 2024). Second, I 'disturb the data' by using 'White/Western' names for the academics who might not be, in one way or another, considered 'White/Western', to divert attention from stereotypical beliefs and to minimise the unconscious bias which may arise from using names that reflect the academics' cultural and national backgrounds. Anonymising the language(s) that the academics speak in the countries they come from serves to defy the essentialist tendency of associating a specific national culture with a 'single named language' (Baker, 2022). In my understanding, this approach, which can be described as 'disturbing the data', allows us to focus on the participants as individuals, rather than viewing them through the lens of the countries they come from, what they look like and so forth.

I use a qualitative research design that acknowledges and engages with intersubjectivities of both the researcher and the research participants (Clifford, 1986; Holliday, 2016; Holliday and Macdonald, 2020). To gain an understanding of the academics' lived experiences and their world views, I employed semi-structured interviews due to their flexible nature in allowing interaction between myself and the academics in the study. The data generated from semi-structured interviews and observation of the ways in which the participants discuss their experiences were analysed thematically. My approach to thematic analysis is inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006). My analysis of the data is organised around two main phases. Each phase consists of steps that I took to enable myself to generate data and to organise it in a way that forms a storyline which reflects the academics' realities. The first phase involves analysing the academics' discussion when I met them for the first time, as well as during the interviews. This consists of noting interesting points, pursuing these notes and generating further questions in the interview meetings. The second phase of the data analysis concerns further analysing the data after the interview meetings were completed. This was accomplished by transcribing, indexing, drawing connections between the data, revisiting the whole data, organising the selected data into a table and further arranging the data on A3 paper. After transcribing the interviews, I organised the identified themes and selected extracts on to A3 paper. Then, I revisited the data to ensure coverage of the 'full' picture of the themes.

I use a posthuman perspective (Braidotti, 2013, 2019; Pennycook, 2018) to analyse the ways in which the academics intra-act with their areas of expertise to enact agency to resist essentialist perceptions of them inside academia, as well as to make change at the level of academia and wider society. The relevance of this critical posthuman perspective to critical intercultural communication lies in revisiting the tendency of conceptualising intercultural encounters within the binary relationship between self and human other, and broadening the horizon for conceptualising human-to-non-human relations which have been overlooked in intercultural communication studies. In this regard, Auger and Dervin (2021) argue for the need to think about our intercultural encounters beyond human subjects, and to accommodate interactions between living objects and non-living objects.

The posthuman perspective I use questions the separation between 'humans, and other animals, humans and artefacts, humans and nature' (Pennycook, 2018: 445), and the long-established understanding which positions humans at the centre of existence and as guarantors of meaning. This theoretical lens also advocates for interconnectedness between humans, objects, places and surroundings (Pennycook, 2018). In this sense, the study promotes the involvement of, and interconnectedness between, a range of 'players' (Chappell, 2018: 2) in this process of challenging

discriminatory discourses and advocating for social equality in higher education and wider society. Decentring binaries of belonging and centring interconnectedness between different entities and multiplicity in ways of being is also reflected in my approach of 'disturbing the data' to resist framing individuals' sense of being and belonging as inherently linked to their national and cultural backgrounds, 'race', language, religion and so on. While these categories, among others, could be used to enact identity and belonging, they become problematic and should be interrogated when they are conceptualised as determinant of one's sense of identity and belonging.

In the following section, I discuss data about intra-action between the academics and their areas of expertise to highlight and contest discriminatory perceptions of them, and to make change inside and outside the university.

Intra-action between the academics and their areas of expertise

Even though only some academics discussed their experiences in academia, probably because the core focus of the study was about their lived experiences outside the university context, these experiences in academia are powerful and highly pertinent to current debates on racism and inequality in higher education. Furthermore, the fact that these academics chose to discuss their experiences of linguistic, racial and religious discrimination in the university setting despite being aware that the study focuses on their experiences outside academia means that they wanted to share and highlight their experiences in academia.

The data show an interplay between the academics' experiences of inequality and their areas of expertise in that the academics use their areas of expertise to voice and challenge stereotypical discourses about them inside the university because of perceptions of 'race', language and religion, as well as to advocate for social equality and tolerance between people. As such, the academics' areas of expertise become a central part in the process of 'becoming' and the quest for making social change inside and outside the university. As demonstrated throughout this article, the notion of intra-action is used to explain entanglement between the academics and their areas of expertise. This notion has been used by many researchers in more or less the same vein. For example, Barad (2003) and Ros i Solé et al. (2020) have used the notion of intra-action to refer to the entanglement between humans, environments, objects and so forth, whereby agency is not exclusive to humans, but also pertains to non-human others and emerges when all designated 'things' are working inseparably. In this sense, the understanding of human exceptionalism and dominance over other entities is challenged and decentred by promoting 'new subjectivities' and 'sites of minoritarian expression' (Ferri, 2020: 416). In this study, my use of the notion of intra-action is aligned with Barad's (2003) and Ros i Solé et al.'s (2020) use of this notion, in which the academics' agency to enact activism for social equality within the university and wider society materialises from the intertwined relationship between the academics as social beings and their areas of expertise as abstract non-human entity. Based on this, as well as on the data presented below, it can be argued that the academics in this study can be best described as activists due to their role in contesting inequality and creating spaces for dialogue and promoting social equality at the university level and in wider society through research and teaching. Some of the data presented below have been discussed in the larger study (Kebabi, 2022), and some other pieces of data have been generated from the raw data set for this article. The data below emerged while discussing the ways in which the academics perceive themselves in their personal everyday lives, when their professional status as academics is not highlighted. However, these academics wanted to bring their experiences in academia into the centre, as will be shown below.

In the following interview extract, Jordan experiences linguistic discrimination because of perceptions of accent, which he contests through his area of expertise:

> The weirdest thing that ever happened was that I was living in [a country] before [a specific year], and I have some influence of [an accent] in my own accent … When I came here, and there's one of my colleagues very senior, like age wise, he could not understand me; he kept correcting me. That, you know, was frustrating and annoying, but also a lot of what he was correcting was the [pronunciation of words in a regional accent] influences. So, I would say [a name of a place, with /u/], and he says [the same name, with /ʌ/– change of tone, stronger tone]. (Jordan, interview)

The perception of whose language practices are legitimate is salient. The difference in accent is not tolerated; rather, one version of speaking English appears to be advocated for and imposed on Jordan, through him being 'corrected' on his pronunciation. I analyse this episode of discrimination from a raciolinguistic perspective (Flores and Rosa, 2015; Rosa and Flores, 2017).

This develops the idea of the White gaze (Flores and Rosa, 2015) to discuss the interplay of language and race in producing hegemonic realities and conaturalising these categories as sets (Rosa and Flores, 2017). These categories include a broad range of semiotic signs, such as 'physical features, bodily comportment and sartorial style' (Rosa and Flores, 2017: 5). While racism takes different shapes and forms (Essed, 2002; Garner, 2004), as far as the data of this study are concerned, both skin colour and accent are the semiotic forms through which the participants are discriminated against and rendered foreigners. Within this raciolinguistic perspective, the White perceiving subject, which includes the White listening subject and the White speaking subject, are core notions (Rosa and Flores, 2017).

The White listening subject hears and enacts language used by minority language communities as inferior and non-normative because of perceptions of 'race', and the White speaking subject idealises and perpetuates language tendencies linked to Whiteness (Flores and Rosa, 2015: 151). Even though Jordan comes from a European background, which by extension can be argued to be associated with 'Whiteness', among other things, he appears not to 'conform' with how 'the British' speak in the eyes of his colleague. This interpretation of the way Jordan's accent is perceived is further manifested in the following extract, in which his accent is framed as a question of 'adaptation' in Britain:

> This person said: well, in Britain you should adapt a little bit. So, things like that. I think, it really destroyed my confidence and, you know, you feel constantly, you somehow need to give more in terms of, you know. I don't really know how to make up your own accent. That made the struggle worse, but, then, I began to have therapy. On the other hand, it made me engaged very much with BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic people] and think how I can change that. It made me more interested in [a field of studies which looks at accent] in [an area of expertise]. It was not very bad, but it made me feel pretty shitty honestly [laughing] for a long time. (Jordan, interview)

From the perspective of the White listening and speaking subject represented in Jordan's colleague, it appears that Jordan's 'language practices are unfit for legitimate participation' (Rosa and Flores, 2017: 7). Jordan is perceived as someone who is not making efforts to 'adapt' in Britain and to become part of 'the core', and that he is rather placed in 'the periphery' (Delanty, 2009: 11). This difference in accent, which is framed along essentialist and colonialist discourses that fix the realities of difference (Bhabha, 1994), serves to produce and reinforce hegemonic realities about 'British English'. Jordan's lived experience in academia converges with a study by Bhopal et al. (2018) on the prominence of 'White' and 'middle-class' norms in academe which included 1,200 BME (Black and minority ethnic) and non-BME academics in the UK. Their study showed that more BME academics consider leaving the UK than non-BME academics, encounter obstacles to career progression, and lack support and opportunities. The study also showed that, like Jordan, BME academics do not feel accepted in 'White space of the academy' (Bhopal et al., 2018: 132), experience racism and feel like 'outsiders'.

However, Jordan contests this reality of difference through his area of expertise by bringing this lived experience and other closely related experiences into the centre, and he challenges the discriminatory ideologies they communicate and perpetuate.

The following interview extract emerged from my interest in pursuing Jordan's statement during the interview that 'accent is very important'. I asked him to further explain this statement, and this is his reply:

> Researcher: You have talked previously about language, and you have said that accent is very important. Can you say more about that?
>
> Jordan: Yes, well that's my research and that's how my experiences in a sense inspired my research. It's about performance of identity through language; it's about the accent. So, in terms of my personal experience that inspires it. Like in [a show] when I was [a performer] in [a country] and somebody saying, Oh! I don't understand what he's saying, and I'm thinking, really! At the beginning, I was getting upset about it, but then I started thinking; in [a country] when you have two people from [a region], for example, no one can understand, and yet you

put them on [a show] and it's a great [an accent spoken in a region]. So, it's the idea that native speakers have the right to not be understood. I'm thinking how you perform foreignness and how, also, you know, the lack of representation of accents in [an area of research] and public space. Because, in general, in English language, the foreign accents are spoken for, not spoken for themselves. They don't have that agency of representing themselves. (Jordan, interview)

Despite the impact of this, and the episodes of discrimination reported above inside and outside the university, on Jordan's well-being, he uses them as a resource in his area of expertise to contest them and to advocate for social equality. I argue that this relationship is characterised by intra-action in that both Jordan and his area of expertise influence each other. He uses his area of expertise and further develops it to capture his lived experiences, which also resonate with many other individuals and connect with the wider social issue of idealising one language practice and rendering individuals with a different language practice deviant and inferior (Rosa and Flores, 2017). This social issue is closely connected with the idea of '(non)native-speakerism', as will be discussed in the following extract. Furthermore, his area of expertise becomes intertwined with his sense of 'becoming' and makes him 'happen' (Kell, 2015). This is a means through which he highlights and critically engages with the discriminatory practice explained above, as well as creates new pathways for research and making change at the level of academia and society, as is also shown in this extract:

I started exploring foreign accent in [a setting] and that's in practice a revolution in research. I was trying to use my foreignness as a platform for translation. I was thinking how I can translate well the fact that I am not from there and sound different, and people may not understand me. I'm doing research on [using many languages in a setting] looking into people's Englishes. I think that my experiences help me because I speak English and [another language]. If there is some sort of strange construction, I want that construction to stay because I want those different Englishes to be represented. But there are things which have to be polished like any other language. (Jordan, interview)

Intra-action between Jordan and his area of expertise in terms of introducing new perspectives in his area of research and the influence of this on his own sense of 'becoming' and accomplishment, which also extends to academia and wider society, is further manifested in this extract. His lived experiences presented so far are the resources he draws on to defy stereotypical and exclusionary understanding of difference in language practice. Through this, Jordan challenges essentialist grand narratives (Amadasi and Holliday, 2018) of 'native speakerism' and advocates for the idea of world Englishes, whereby different types of English are celebrated and accepted. Holliday (2006: 385) argues that 'native-speakerism' is a pervasive ideology within English-language teaching, which 'originates within particular educational cultures within the English-speaking West', and is widespread outside the English-speaking West, 'as well as inside the English-speaking West'. Holliday (2006) defines 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' as social constructs that serve to present 'native speakers' of English as objectively superior and competent and to render 'non-native' speakers of English as lacking capacity and as being deficient.

This intra-action between Jordan and his area of expertise, wherein both entities influence each other and are entangled, emphasises the enmeshed agencies of human and non-human others in the process of 'becoming' and creating new pathways for engaging with difference in language practice.

The following interview extract and the rest of the data show intra-action between the academics and their areas of expertise to defy racial and religious discrimination in the quest for social equality both in academia and in society:

The curriculum within my [a particular] programme, one of the things I have done is to introduce [a show about a continent]. Within that, some students would never know that [a continent] is somewhere. They think it is a city and stuff like that. Suddenly, they come across this module, you know, and they all study about the culture. They perform [an activity which relates to] that culture, you know, and have discussions around how things work within that culture, and how it is different or similar to your own culture. For me, that's a massive influence on people because my students … some of them come from … even these students [from an ethnic group]. By [an ethnic group], I mean people whose parents are here maybe [some

nationalities] and all that. Some of them come to our course and they learn things they've
never learned before, you know. That's for me a massive way of influencing. (Kyle, interview)

What appears to be unfamiliarity with the continent in question on the part of some students is an
opportunity for Kyle to make her students experience what she refers to as 'the culture' of that continent
and to learn about it. She can do this by practically engaging with it through students' minds and bodies,
and by drawing threads between the 'culture' they come from and the 'new culture'. In this sense, these
students can be described as nomadic subjects (Braidotti, 1994) in that they 'travel' to a 'new culture'
through the activity they perform. Even though not much information is provided about the students'
perspectives about their engagement with the 'new culture', Kyle states: 'some of them come to our
course and they learn things they've never learned before, you know. That's for me a massive way of
influencing.' This appears to suggest that knowledge about, and appreciation of, cultural difference are
achieved.

Intra-action between Kyle and her area of expertise, as well as between the students and the activity
they perform to experience a 'new culture', serves to create new ways for engaging with the world and
making impact on our lives, since we are socially made, and influence and get influenced by the world
around us. This entanglement between both human and non-human entities manifested in Kyle and
her area of expertise, and in the students and the activity they performed, which by implication brings
both Kyle and the students into an intra-relation that represents a posthuman approach to teaching
and learning. This is characterised by 'material-driven dialogue between human and other-than-human'
(Chappell et al., 2021: 2070), which resonates with Page's (2018) and Chappell et al.'s (2019) arguments
that knowledge about ourselves and the wider world emerges from the entanglement of various entities:
teachers, students, ideas and so forth, rather than from unique human subjects, and that these enmeshed
agencies are vital in how we interact with our environments.

In the following interview extract, Alex brings his area of expertise to challenge racial stereotypes
based on perceptions of 'race' and religion:

> One shortcut that people use in this country now is that when they look at you and your name,
> they immediately think, OK! You are a [reference to a religious group], and they start wondering
> what your views are and where your sympathies lie. I am aware of my skin colour, my name
> and my religion, and that some people perceive me based on these features. These are a fact,
> but they have never stopped me thinking of myself as internationalist. So, it is really important
> to make students see the world through international lenses. You might not like it, but that's
> OK. Last year, I started this project called [a label] to help students in this country. It is really
> important to make students see the world through international lenses. Ideas are powerful,
> and it's important that students, children, young people are exposed to all kinds of identities
> so that they can make up their minds in what they believe in and why, and, also, for the sake
> of coexistence and tolerance. (Alex, interview)

Layers of subjectivity and intersecting axes of difference (Crenshaw, 1991) are omnipresent in the
ways in which Alex discusses his identity perception. He challenges perception of him based on
'race' and religion through his area of expertise, whereby he attempts to engage students and other
members of society with the idea of being 'different' in a non-essentialist way. He advocates for
multiplicity of 'identity' through a series of events that are part of a project that he created at a
university. Alex's advocacy for diversity and embracing multiple 'identities' through education can be
said to be aligned with Hobson and Whigham (2018), who, as White male lecturers grappling with the
concept of 'race' in their teaching, unlearned their unconscious bias about the inherent superiority
of 'Whiteness' and became advocates for reconsidering White privilege in higher education. The
convergence between Alex's account and Hobson and Whigham's (2018) autobiographic work lies in
rethinking the predominance of 'Western-centred' world views, which categorise the West as essentially
superior, and which render the rest of the world as inferior and deficient.

The entanglement between Alex and his area of expertise in making an impact in the lives of
different categories of people is further manifested in the following extract from Alex:

> The reality is no matter how internationalist you are, the way you look, and your name is a fact
> that can define you. I think of myself as internationalist. I have been an [activist] all my life in
> terms of advocating for social justice and human rights, and what has to be improved. I am

extremely cautious of any kind of nationalism because it is destructive. Nationalism is based on exclusion, and single identity. As I was talking to you last week, I have always thought of multiple identities, that we all have lots of identities, and that is what makes you a rich human being. Being internationalist means wherever you are, whether you are here or in your country or any other country, you live your life by your principles and by your ideas and struggles of social justice and human rights. (Alex, interview)

While Alex's feelings of being framed within perceptions of 'race' and religion are shaped by racialised experiences which reinforce Whiteness and power, he moves beyond such an essentialist grand narrative (Amadasi and Holliday, 2018), by asserting 'self-oriented identity' (Zhu, 2016: 232) as 'internationalist', as well as by advocating for his self-representation, which also connects with many other individuals, through activism. Alex's experience of being racialised, and his quest for equality, connects with Arday's (2018) research on being racialised and marginalised in academia, and his struggles and at times incapability to disrupt normativity and White privilege in academia. In resisting reductionist views of the world, including people, Alex rejects the idea of nationalism in general by arguing that it promotes fixation of 'identity'. I specifically criticise 'methodological nationalism', which Billig (1995) calls 'banal nationalism'; this is because this form of nationalism promotes division between people and emphasises the 'either/or' binary of nationality (Beck and Sznaider, 2006: 9), which Alex also challenges by promoting multiplicity of 'identity'.

This interview extract is another manifestation of racial prejudice based on perceptions of 'race' towards Sam by his students:

I sometimes feel, I might not be correct, but what I feel is, because I look different when I go into students who have never seen me or have never interacted with me, they all look at me: Oh! this is alien. Who is this guy? (Sam, interview)

Sam appears to be critical of the way he believes his students might perceive him in the sense that he 'interrogates' his assumption that, because of what he looks like, he is perceived as an 'alien'. He explicitly indicates and acknowledges that such a belief might not be 'correct', and that it is based on his own feelings. This experience can be said to relate to Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury's (2018) experiences, as well as to other academics' accounts that these researchers reported, in that 'Whiteness', perceptions of deficiency of 'non-White' academics, and promoting Western knowledge and ways of knowing, permeate the lives of 'non-White' academics. Nevertheless, Sam's scenario unfolds in such a way that what might seem to be conflicting perceptions of Sam are decentred by connecting with students and showing care for them, rather than by dwelling on essentialist and rigid understanding of difference:

But this perception changes like that [a clicking noise with middle finger and thumb, meaning very quickly]. When I interact with them, and I wish them well, I develop that connection very quickly. I work for them. I sort of try to inspire them because some of the minority students feel a bit inspired, and we can do it. There is association between me and them. We may have different tolerance levels, but as long as we can happily appreciate and live together. (Sam, interview)

It can be said that Sam could have opted for a clear-cut interpretation of the reason he feels 'alienated' by his students, which is difference in perceptions of 'race', in which discourses of 'us' versus 'them' is the fuel for enacting and perpetuating essentialist understanding of difference. However, Sam interrogates his own assumption by drawing on 'threads' (Holliday, 2018) which are represented in engaging with his students and endeavouring to inspire them through his role as an academic. Like Jordan, Kyle and Alex, discussed above, Sam is 'committed to social justice [whereby, he creates] educational experiences that promote both teachers' and their students' personal and social flourishing, so that they can enact social justice ideals not only in their classrooms, but also in their wider lives' (Gandolfi and Mills, 2023: 583). This creates multiple ways for intra-acting, allows more insights and actants and offers new pathways for learning from diverse perspectives which can lead to richer ways of 'becoming' (Chappell et al., 2021: 14). Therefore, the posthuman understanding of intra-action between multiple entities and agencies is also manifested in this scenario.

Discussion

Uncovering some of the experiences of some academics in the UK who have come from different national backgrounds has revealed linguistic, racial and religious discrimination in British higher education, and that the academics' self-perception is positioned within competing discourses which are essentialist and non-essentialist in nature. While the academics encounter prejudice from members within the university because they look and sound 'different' and come from 'different' national backgrounds, these academics defy such 'xenophobic and parochial forms of representation' (Bonnett and Carrington, 1996: 271) by using their areas of expertise to challenge essentialist perceptions of them and to advocate for social equality within the university and wider society.

The critical posthuman perspective employed in this study is crucial in conceptualising the human-to-non-human relations represented in the academics as social beings, and in their areas of expertise in enacting agency. This is to illuminate and contest exclusionary representations of them which are based on perceptions of language, race and religion and to advocate for equality in the context of the university and larger society. This theoretical lens questions the separation between human and non-human others; rather, it emphasises entanglement between living and non-living subjects. I use the term intra-action to interpret this intertwined relationship between the academics and their areas of expertise. While the academics use and broaden their areas of expertise to project agency in voicing their experiences of discrimination, their areas of expertise become a significant part of defying essentialist discourses of the world, as well as in the academics' sense of 'becoming' (Ros i Solé et al., 2020). This intra-relationship between the academics and their areas of expertise emphasises a posthuman perspective of an equal relation to human and non-human others by destabilising hierarchies and binary relationships, and by acknowledging 'minoritarian' or 'outsider' views, which are also referred to as 'rhizomatic subjectivities' (Ferri, 2020: 412–13).

While this article illuminates experiences of inequality and prejudice against academics within their workplace environment, that is, the university, it also converges with other contributions in a wide range of fields whereby professionals face linguistic, racial and religious discrimination and other forms of inequality. In this sense, inequality based on perceptions of language, race and religion is not exclusive to academics from diverse national backgrounds, and these categories of differentiation do not represent an exhaustive list of the forms of inequality that academics and professionals in general encounter within their workplace.

In tackling experiences of academics in the context of the university, this article emphasises the need for 'institutional action on racism' (Arday and Mirza, 2018: vi), opposes 'the pervasive myth that higher education is somehow beyond the perpetuation of racial inequity' (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018: 144) and builds on existing studies, discussed throughout the article, by using a posthuman perspective to illuminate the entanglement of human and non-human entities, represented in the academics and their areas of expertise, to enact agency in the quest for social equality in academia and wider society. The study also has implications for policy in terms of the role of establishing and promoting a single language policy and idealising 'native-speakerism' in curricula and the university, the predominance of 'Whiteness' in higher education, and reiterating essentialist political discourses of diversity as an issue in exacerbating prejudice in the university, a place which is supposed to be a safe environment for every individual. This article has potential for bringing academics, researchers, students and policymakers together to sincerely discuss and problematise inequality in higher education in the quest for social equality.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Canterbury Christ Church University ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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