

**Decolonising The Higher Education Curriculum at Durham University: An Investigation into  
the barriers and challenges.**

## **ABSTRACT**

BAME students in the UK have argued that they feel under-represented within the education system as their histories and ancestral narratives have been omitted from mainstream discourse (Abou el Magd, 2016). This issue has led to a movement known as 'decolonising the curriculum, in which several universities across the world are currently participating. This article examines decolonisation based on transforming Durham University's psychology curriculum, one that has been criticised for focusing on Eurocentric and Westernised ideals. In two semi-structured focus groups, this study was able to uncover two content and process related barriers presented by academic staff within higher education. Furthermore, the project identifies how universities could support staff in actively participating in the decolonisation process. From these findings it can be concluded that decolonisation of the psychology curriculum can be done however, it will require time and a big shift in the research and publication process. Moreover, this shift will have to be implemented in the hiring process within universities.

**Key Words:** Decolonisation, Curriculum, Psychology, Durham University, Barriers

## **INTRODUCTION**

Literature on decolonising the curriculum does not adhere to a single or cohesive view of decolonisation; nevertheless, there is a common view regarding the decolonisation of psychology. Decolonising the curriculum refers to creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum; concerning what is being taught and how it frames the world (Peters, 2015). Therefore, a decolonial turn for psychology would mean moving away from the assumption that the individual is the central unit of analysis in ways that overlook people's social, economic and political contexts (Kessi, 2016).

Previous literature has explored the process of decolonisation within higher education however, this research is limited. Senegal & Lez (2020) investigated the challenges to decolonising and found 4 prominent factors which interfered with the decolonising attempt in South African higher

education: Time, lack of content, resistance to change and perceptions of western superiority regarding research. Noor (2021) identified the lack of POC researchers as another prominent barrier to decolonising attempts within the curriculum. Arguably, non-western scholars are at a disadvantage when it comes to research publications due to biases by reviewers and journal editors regarding criteria evaluating the quality of research. These criteria tend to be based on Eurocentric views which research focusing on non-western ideals cannot reflect.

Other studies have explored issues of representation within UK universities. Schucan Bird & Pitman (2020) found that a majority of the reading lists of universities did not represent the diverse local student body, but represented the demographic profile of academic staff closer. From this study, the researchers argued that further research was required to explore the views of students and staff regarding diversifying reading lists, the meaning of diversity and addressing barriers to decolonising criteria. Such research has been considered vital to decolonising the curriculum movements, specifically for the teaching of psychology because this area has been criticised for focusing on research involving participants who are Western, educated, and from industrialised, rich and democratic countries (WEIRD) (Keith, 2018). However, there is a lack of research focusing on academic staff and how their input in the process of decolonising the curriculum could be managed, or encouraged despite their importance in shifting the trajectory of teaching. Therefore, this study aims to understand the current barriers to decolonising the psychology curriculum at Durham University. Furthermore, what is required to support staff in this process of decolonising the psychological curriculum?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Design**

This study used a qualitative research design to capture a detailed understanding of the perceptions and thoughts of 4 Durham university professors; the interviews were conducted in the

form of focus groups, spread out over 3 weeks. Professors were interviewed two at a time and were disclosed the aims of the study.

### **Participants**

This sample was opportunistic therefore, the recruiting process entailed emailing specific professors that were thought to have the most value to the current research. Although, not all those who emailed responded, those who did and agreed to participate were used in this study. These individuals included one cognitive psychology professor and three social psychology professors.

### **Procedure**

The focus groups centred around 3 questions: What does decolonising the curriculum mean to you? What are the barriers to decolonising within the psychology department? What would decolonising the curriculum look like in your areas of research? These questions allowed for an open discussion of the process of decolonising the psychology curriculum within Durham University and an understanding of future steps required to further the process.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

It was discovered during the interviews that a majority of the psychology academics outside of social psychology were unaware of the meaning of decolonisation or the process within their field. They acknowledged that their knowledge of decolonisation to be limited and superficial; one professor quoted “I struggle to understand how the process of decolonisation would apply in particular in my fields and kind of cognitive psychology”.

Nonetheless, all the academics shared a reformist perspective for decolonising the curriculum to make it more diverse and inclusive. However, due to the opportunistic sample used within this study, this may be unrepresentative of the larger perspectives of academic staff in the university. The following paragraphs demonstrate the themes derived from Focus groups 1 and 2, regarding the current barriers to decolonising the psychology curriculum at Durham as summarised in table 1.

**Table 1.**

<b>Content Barriers</b>	<b>Process Barriers</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• WEIRD research superiority</li><li>• Lack of academics</li><li>• Lack of POC focused psychological research</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Time</li><li>• Lack of support</li><li>• Lack of access to research</li></ul>

### **Content Barriers**

#### **The superiority of research conducted in WEIRD countries by White researchers**

An interesting barrier to the process of decolonisation within the psychology department was a lack of understanding regarding what the decolonising process entailed. There was an open discussion on the reading lists, a point drawn by Schucan Bird & Pitman's (2020) study which identified the importance of diversifying reading lists within universities. However, one academic argued that intentionally incorporating POC academics into reading lists is possibly problematic, as it placed too much emphasis on the researcher as opposed to the findings. Furthermore, it was argued that it could be considered a performative task, which interrupted the process of teaching and the learning of students which tends to be based on the most supporting evidence. However, this highlighted a very vital issue within higher education and research which Senekal & Lenz (2020) found regarding the pedestal western psychology was placed upon. One academic argued to incorporate more POC academics to lecture slides and reading lists, there needed to be a balance between demonstrating the most significant research, and diversifying research. However, one can challenge this solution by arguing the only reason there is an issue of needing to mediate between presenting the "best" evidence, as well as diverse evidence is because non-western research tends to automatically be deemed less valuable (Noor, 2021). Therefore, for this balance to be achieved, there is more that is needed to be done in rectifying biases towards non-western scholars, and non-western research.

### **Lack of content & access to current content**

Like Senekal & Lenz (2020) the focus groups brought light to the issue of a lack of content produced which did not centre upon western ideals, or WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic) communities. Furthermore, it was acknowledged within these interviews that there is a very minute number of UK research that centres on the psychology of Black individuals, and even less on Asian psychology. This is a problem for the process of decolonising the curriculum because for this to be fruitful there is a need for more POC researchers to explore the study of POC. Also, there is a need for the study of psychological theories and models rooted in philosophies other than that of the West. One professor also pointed out that research which had been done outside of Western ideals was often inaccessible to Western universities, which is another barrier presented for academics attempting to diversify their research.

### **Process Barriers**

#### **Time**

A lack of time was drawn as a common theme within the focus groups; academics emphasized that the responsibilities of professors were based on a first-come, first-serve basis. To professors, this meant that if decolonising the curriculum was not implemented as a priority, it would never become a shared goal. This would subsequently lead to the process of decolonising the curriculum becoming a checkbox which would not manifest into anything worthwhile. This finding was in line with Lindauer & Pritchett's (200) findings, similarly to Senekal & Lenz's (2020) study in South Africa. However, professors discussed the possibility of sessions implemented for academics to learn about decolonising, arguing that "decolonisation and decolonial research is a thing in and of itself, people have the expertise, it is not something any academic can snap their fingers and just do".

#### **Lack of support from the university**

Another prominent theme drawn from these interviews was the lack of support from universities. This problem presented itself in two ways; one example was the lack of communication

with staff regarding protocols for penalisation surrounding sensitive topics discussed within lectures and seminars. One professor discussed the climate of fear in academia, and the anxiety brought by teaching and discussing topics potentially triggering to students; such as the history of colonisation and race. However, this was refuted in another focus group by another academic, who argued racial topics were rarely a problem to discuss within their lectures, quoting “psychological students are quite open to talking about racism”. This professor argued that the anxiety could also be a lack of emotional confidence, preventing academics from being open to accepting their faults in their teaching of potentially triggering topics. Arguably, there is a lot of emotional threat in taking the time to speak about racism or implementing diverse teaching. This highlighted as a barrier, the lack of safety felt by academics within the university, but also the issue of what decolonisation means within Durham University. However, not all psychological teaching that focuses on those who are not Caucasian is necessarily triggering, therefore this highlighted another stigmatised view of decolonising the curriculum and what it means to teach diverse models or ethnocentric/transcultural psychological research.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the current barriers to decolonising the psychology curriculum at Durham University. Furthermore, what universities could do to support staff in this process of decolonising the psychological curriculum. From the findings two conclusions can be drawn: Despite the barriers discussed, one prominent barrier that was not brought up yet overshadows those identified is the fact there is no clear understanding of the process of decolonisation within Durham University. Although, there was a common understanding of what processes could contribute to decolonising the curriculum for example, diversifying reading lists, more intentional hiring processes to increase POC academics; furthermore, allocating time to educate academic staff on decolonisation. However, these solutions do not address the root issue as for true decolonisation of a curriculum, there needs to be a decolonisation of psychological research and the institution. Begum & Saini (2019)

write “decolonising goes beyond shoehorning POC onto reading lists but decolonising the academy itself” (Begum & Saini, 2019, p. 200). Therefore, academics have a responsibility to not only question the lack of representation within psychology; but also challenge it, along with the structural racism perpetuated by the lack of POC voices and views being represented. Future faculty interns can use this study to develop projects which support academic staff in their process of decolonising the psychology curriculum.

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