A response to 'Seeking equality of educational outcomes for Black students: a personal account': A sociological perspective

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Introduction

As sociologists with a keen interest in supporting anti-racist research and educational initiatives, Taylor's paper providing us with an engaging and insightful interest to a contrasting disciplinary approach to achieving equality in educational outcomes for Black students through her psychologically-informed analysis. Indeed, we laud her commitment her to a theoretically-driven account of her attempts to enact anti-racist practice in her field of work, with an illuminating analysis of the potential utility of Ryan and Deci's (2000) 'self-determination theory' to frame her emergent findings. Furthermore, Taylor's willingness to both acknowledge and share her privileged position as a White female within her academic field and, in particular, her appreciation of the importance of adopting a reflexive position within the course of her engagement with her Black student population and research participants. These principles are ones which we would strongly advocate as fellow researchers with an interest in producing effective anti-racist research and practice which can challenge the endemic inequality evident within education for Black students, and the specific domain of Higher Education.

Nonetheless, despite these shared principles which also underpin our own sociologically-informed approach to the issues explored in Taylor's paper, from our perspective a number of central issues remained under-explored within Taylor's paper to our sociologically-trained minds – as one would expect for relative intruders within the contrasting domain of psychologically-oriented research! Therefore, whilst we found Taylor's work to be a highly informative account which demonstrates the clear utility of a psychological approach to the issue at hand, our response to the paper will attempt to illustrate the contrasting benefits of a sociological analysis of the emergent data and issues accounted for in Taylor's paper. In this light, we hope to demonstrate the benefits of a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of

racism and anti-racism in education, thus engaging with Taylor's account in a constructive yet contrasting analytical dialogue.

A sociological challenge to the 'universality' of self-determination theory

As noted above, we very much subscribe to the importance of theoretically-informed analysis of racism and anti-racism in educational research, and Taylor's use of self-determination theory in her paper illustrates the importance of contrasting theoretical perspectives on this issue. Nonetheless, from a sociological perspective, one particular claim made by Taylor which we would challenge is her presentation of self-determination theory as a "robust and universal theory of achievement and wellbeing" (p6). Whilst such claims may or may not be acknowledged within the domain of psychology, it would be fair to say that sociologists of 'race' would argue that any claims of universality for any single theoretical approach in relation to this complex issue are perhaps over-stating the utility of said theory. Indeed, whilst self-determination theory would undoubtedly shed a great deal of insight at agency-level of sociological or social-psychological analyses of the lived experiences of racism for Black students, we would argue that this emphasis would ultimately fail to grapple with the complexities of the social structures which have maintained and perpetuated the ongoing racial inequalities endemic in the domain of education (and society more broadly).

For example, Taylor insightfully discusses these systemic racialised inequalities in British society with regard to the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating the devastating gaps in terms of mortality and employment-related issues. However, this evidence also underlines the importance of embracing the complexity embraced within sociological analyses; the COVID-19 pandemic has shed a light on not only the racial inequalities evident in health outcomes during the pandemic, but equally the intersectionality between ethnicity and socio-economic status which has played a role in exacerbating the risks faced by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups. As has been highlighted in numerous analyses of this phenomenon (Bhatia, 2020; Chaudhry et al., 2020; Chedid et al., 2020; Otu et al., 2020), and as acknowledged by Taylor, the over-representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups in front-line, 'key worker' employment roles throughout the pandemic has heightened the risk of exposure to COVID-

19. This racialised stratification of employment within British society thus demonstrates the importance of an acknowledgment of the intersection between ethnicity and various other socio-demographic factors within academic analysis, as is embraced within sociological accounts of racism and anti-racism.

To this end, we would therefore advocate the importance and utility of contrasting sociological theoretical accounts of 'race' which embrace such empirical complexities, such as the approaches of scholars aligning with theories and concepts such as Black Marxism and Critical Race Theory (CRT), amongst others. These theoretical approaches all place emphasis on scrutinising the over-arching social structures and institutions which perpetuate racialised inequalities within contemporary British society, illuminating the inherent institutionalised racism within the educational, economic, and social hierarchies of Britain that lead to the intersection between ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, and socio-cultural marginalisation. For example, the work of the eminent scholar W.E.B. DuBois (1935) speaks to the central arguments of Black Marxism advocated in the work of Cedric Robinson (1983) in relation to 'racial capitalism', with both scholars illustrating that the any analysis of racial inequalities must also be informed by a critique of the negative effects of capitalism and neoliberal ideologies. Furthermore, the work of the work of bell hooks (1981, 1994, 2000) attempts to centre and reposition the narrative on the racialised lived experience, and for sociologists, such theoretical analyses are well-placed to explain the racial disparities highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to healthcare access and experiences, explaining why ethnic minorities have being disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

With specific reference to Taylor's paper, we would therefore argue that it would have been interesting to see Taylor offer some more engagement with – or at least acknowledgement of - sociologically-oriented theoretical approaches, such as Black Marxism or CRT, within her analysis. Notwithstanding the challenges of achieving such as complex multi-disciplinary approach within a single paper, the potential benefits of engaging with scholarship from contrasting fields outside of the domain of psychology offers potential for added criticality in relation to the wider social structures within which the context of Taylor's educational practice is situated, and particularly their impact on her Black students' educational experiences. Despite the fact that CRT appears to have achieved 'bogeyman' status in the

eyes of the current Conservative government in the UK, and the fact that that the humanities more broadly have become marginalised within neoliberal educational policy, we would contend that the importance of the social sciences for radical and critical thought is illustrated within the emergent empirical findings in Taylor's paper. Indeed, it appears that if opportunities for discussion of such phenomena - and sociologically-orientated learning outcomes - were built into the early stages of the Social Work course discussed in Taylor's paper, it may have enhanced the empathy of White students in light of the racialised divide mentioned by the Black participants in Taylor's intervention.

Embracing the power of reflexivity, Whiteness, and White privilege

Following on from these latter comments about building the empathy of the White students discussed within Taylor's paper, a second key argument we would emphasise within our response relates to the importance of embracing the power of reflexivity for White academics within their anti-racist research and practice. Indeed, this is one of the central areas of shared endeavour evident with the work of Taylor and our own past research on this topic (Arday, 2018a, 2018b; Hobson and Whigham, 2018, 2020), and we wholeheartedly endorse Taylor's frank and honest reflections on her own limitations as a researcher and educator in this regard, as we have equally sought to do in our own discipline. This reflexivity is important to acknowledge the historic exploitation and extraction of racialised lived experiences by White scholars. This positionality is important and thus requires integration within all analyses of racism and anti-racism by White academics.

As Taylor acknowledges, this endeavour is a complex and extensive individual journey, and one which we all have to complete as anti-racists, regardless of our own ethnicity. Indeed, for the lead author of this response (Stuart), as a White academic this process of self-reflection and development with regards to understanding of anti-racist practice remains in its embryonic phase, and will continue to present a number of theoretical, empirical and pedagogical challenges as part of the role of becoming an effective ally to anti-racist causes. In this regard, it is illuminating to Taylor's honest appraisal of her own experience in this regard and her sharing of the various activities she has conducted to improve her knowledge

and experience. Indeed, we hope that our response will add some additional sociologically-informed texts to her extensive list of texts she has embraced as part of this journey!

To this end, it is apparent in Taylor's account that this journey is bearing fruit in her both her relationships with her Black students, both as students and research participants. This is evident in the shifts in pedagogical practice advocated in Taylor's paper (which we will turn to in the subsequent section of our response), her warts-and-all explication of her own development as an individual, and her ability to critically reflect upon some of the endemic problems within the domain of education.

For example, we strongly advocate the importance of challenging the prevalent terminology used within the domain of Higher Education of the 'attainment gap', and wholeheartedly endorse Taylor's arguments regarding the necessity to illuminate the impact of institutional failings and broader social structures through the switch to the notion of the 'awarding gap'. We agree that it is essential to acknowledge the deficit approaches universities and academics have used to systemic portray Black and Minority Ethnic students as being comparatively academically weaker than white students. As sociologists, we would, however, also emphasise there is a concomitant risk of framing all Black students as completely lacking agency to overcome the social inequalities caused by social structures and to close the 'awarding gap'. Acknowledging the interaction between structure and agency is important to sociologists to understand both vicious and virtuous circles of this nature with regards to educational outcomes.

Nonetheless, we would also encourage Taylor to further reflect upon a number of further issues and questions which we have personally grappled and struggled with to continue on this journey. For example, on page 2 of her paper, Taylor's frank reflections on her childhood beliefs about fairness illustrated the impact of her sheltered upbringing and lack of formal education on racial differences in her own schooling; however, there is little acknowledgement of the potential impact of informal education or her witnessing of racism in society within her childhood socialisation, and we would advocate further retrospective reflection on such experiences. Furthermore, above and beyond Taylor's arguments on her developing conceptualisation of fairness, we would encourage further explicit reflection upon

how her Whiteness and White privilege impacted upon her positionality and analysis in the current paper, as there is scope for further elaboration in this regard. Finally, it would be interesting to see Taylor share the continuing flaws and failures she still makes despite her ongoing development as an anti-racist ally in this field - as we all inevitably do as White anti-racists and allies with good intentions. In order to re-assure other apprehensive White scholars who at the very beginning of their development as anti-racists, such warts-and-all reflections on our ongoing flaws illustrates that anti-racist practice will remain a lifelong development for all White practitioners.

Pedagogical challenges for anti-racist education

Our final core argument in our response centres on the pedagogical challenges in successfully achieving anti-racist practice in education, in light of the reflections offered in this regard in Taylor's paper. On this topic, we wholeheartedly agree with a number of the arguments presented by Taylor with regards to, firstly, the importance of scrutinising 'colour blind' approaches to education, and, secondly, the benefits of decolonialising the curriculum to ensure that the content of course is cognisant of contributions which can challenge the White, Eurocentric orthodoxy of many fields in Higher Education. Indeed, we agree that colour-blind approaches with regards to anti-racism lure us into a false sense of security which neutralises racism as an instrument for violence and oppression. However, we would also caution that such endeavours are often more challenging to achieve in practice than they are in principle.

For example, Taylor's paper illustrates her willingness to abandon her previous philosophy of adopting a 'colour-blind' approach which endeavoured to treat all students as equals, and, as we allude to above, there are good reasons for Taylor's advocation of explicitly acknowledging issues of racism and racial discrimination wherever it presents itself within educational practice. Indeed, educational practitioners who adopt a 'colour-blind' approach which **also** seeks to explicitly denounce the existence of historic, socio-political institution are indeed highly problematic, and should undoubtedly be challenged. That being said, we also contend that adopting a 'colour-blind' approach to treating all students as equals is not necessarily a problem in itself when teaching on topics or content which do not necessarily evoke issues of

'race' or racism; in some regards, discussion and acknowledgement of race, ethnicity and racism in every teaching session and interaction is in fact counter-productive, and assumes a heterogenous experience for all racial and ethnic minorities. Indeed, as cautioned in the work of Leonardo (2004; Leonardo and Porter, 2010), there is also a risk of lapsing into 'safe space' discussions when 'race' is explicitly discussed within lectures and seminars, and such discussions can ultimately benefit White students and staff more so than their Black peers. Given this, we would argue that discussions on race must always be situated pedagogically and have a clearly identifiable educational purpose for all students.

Furthermore, such discussions must challenge gatekeepers to knowledge and claims to knowledge in an attempt to de-centre a dominant White Eurocentric curriculum, in line with Taylor's articulate arguments regarding the benefits of decolonialising the curriculum. Nonetheless, this aim is again easier said in principle than achieved in practice, and there remain a number of practical challenges in **truly** decolonialising the curriculum in certain fields of academia. For example, in our field of sociology, centuries of racial inequality in academia will take time to overcome in order to ensure that the leading theorists cited in fields such as sociology are fully reflective of contemporary society, and the same is true for many other academic disciplines. Where this is the case, there is therefore also a need to explicitly acknowledge the colonial, racialised nature of the curriculum, as well as the influence of this on the theoretical approaches and positions of key thinkers in various disciplines. Whilst it remains a logical place for education practitioners to start, it is not always as simple as reviewing reading lists and lecture slides to add more contributions from Black, Asian, Latino, and non-English writing scholars. Acknowledgment of the long-term nature of the goals of decolonialising the curriculum are therefore important to emphasise.

Finally, in relation to this theme of pedagogical challenges in achieving anti-racist education, we would conclude our response by praising Taylor's constructive suggestions and recommendations for other academics striving for anti-racist education practice. Taylor's comments provided us with further ideas which we will ourselves use within our own practice, whether in face-to-face teaching or within broader educational policy within our own

institutions and departments. In this spirit, we conclude our response by proffering our own suggestions for pedagogical tools which we have found useful in our endeavours to this effect.

Firstly, we have found that a useful start-point for attempting to educate all students in anti-racist practice or understanding is to explicitly name and discuss the nature of Whiteness as a 'race' and the associated privileges of Whiteness. For example, using activities such as Peggy Macintosh's (1989) 'Unpacking the Knapsack' has proven a useful method for stimulating discussions of white privilege, and acting as a catalyst for the critical questioning regarding 'race' and ethnicity for all students advocated by Hacker (1992). These activities have helped to encourage White students to learn in the 'affective' domain, thus endeavouring to increase their abilities to empathise with racialised experiences of their Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicity peers, whilst respecting the boundaries of alterity in acknowledging that White students will never be able to truly experience or understand the malfeasance of racism.

Furthermore, whilst cognisant of the arguments of Leonardo about the risks of 'safe space' discussions, we continue to advocate the importance of such discussion where they have a clear pedagogical purpose. However, it is important that White academics proactively and consciously challenge the inherent student-teacher power hierarchies for **all** students, regardless of their ethnicity, as part of a broader culture of effective andragogical practice. In this light, White academics should wherever possible defer to those who can teach from a position of knowledge on racism and ethnic discrimination, and should share the platform we are privileged to have as educators with both students as co-creators of knowledge and others who can educate our students from an informed position. Importantly, however, the sharing of personal narratives of racism and ethnicity from students should always be encouraged on a purely voluntary basis; forcing students to revisit potentially traumatic personal experiences has a number of moral and ethical risks that far outweigh the assumed educational benefits of their peers.

By sharing these reflections of the challenges and problems we have faced in our own anti-racist practice, we therefore hope we have concluded our response in the collegiate and constructive manner we advocate for ongoing research on effective anti-racist practice. Taylor's paper is another welcome addition to this growing body of work in the domain of the psychology of education, and we hope we have constructively illustrated the complementary nature of our sociologically-informed perspective on her illuminating arguments and empirical findings.

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