"My Stomach Churns": Belonging and Strategies for Belonging for BME Students in a White University

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Abstract

Student engagement and more recently belonging are concepts that have been used to explain awarding gaps for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students. However, Trowler (2010) asserts that much of the student engagement literature is essentialist in nature and treats minority groups as homogeneous. Additionally, much of the research into the experiences of BME students has taken place in more diverse UK universities. This research uses narrative inquiry to address that gap to explore the individualised experiences of belonging for BME students at a predominantly White university.

Firstly, I developed a new analytical framework of student belonging, based on existing literature, to support the analysis of student interviews and to provide new insights into student belonging at university.

Narrative inquiry may be considered a 'field in the making' (Chase 2005:651). As a result, I present new ideas on narrative analysis and reporting using a combination of approaches including Labov and Waletzky' (1967) structural analysis, socio-cultural analysis (Grbich 2015) and creative non-fiction.

The title of this thesis is a quote from Janice about how she feels coming into university. It summarises the feelings of many BME students who find that the institutional racial climate of university challenging. I describe the different strategies that BME students adopt to deal with predominately White universities based on their interactions with the institutional culture, staff and peers. These strategies predominately focus only on the academic aspect of university and getting emotional support from outside university in the form of family and wider friends. Barriers to engagement, such as having to work and commute, further distance BME students from wider university engagement. A 'one size fits all' approach to student belonging will not work for the students highlighted in this research and universities need to take a more nuanced approach to helping students develop a sense of belonging.

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1. Introduction

This research is a qualitative, narrative inquiry into the experiences of BME students at a predominantly White university. The aim of this first chapter is to outline how I started this research and the rationale behind it. In this chapter, I will discuss why the topic of BME student belonging became an area of research interest to me as an academic in higher education (HE). I will introduce some of the key literature to provide a rationale for the project and outline my research questions. I will also briefly discuss why I decided to use narrative inquiry as my research methodology. I will identify the gaps in the literature and research which this project addresses. Finally, this chapter will finish with an overview of the structure of the whole thesis.

1.1 Background

Before starting this research, I had lived and worked in large Northern (English) cities for a decade and was aware of how race and ethnicity was a part of everyday life. I arrived in the late nineties, in Bradford; a city that was experiencing racial tensions that culminated in the 2001 riots triggered by neo-nazis attacking Asian-owned businesses. Travelling to work by bicycle made me aware of how segregated the city was as I passed through White suburban neighbourhoods and then into Asian neighbourhoods as I moved closer to the city centre. Racial segregation was a fact of life in the city but also reflected in the universities students attended. Students from the least diverse neighbourhoods tended to attend the least diverse universities and vice versa (Gamsu & Donnelly 2017).

In 2012, I moved further south to a much less diverse university with a small but still significant BME student population. I was asked to lead an institutional research project looking into the experiences of BME students to address 'awarding gaps' (differential proportions of students being awarded a 1st or 2.1 degree based on ethnicity which are larger for Black students than all other ethnic groups). By this time, the UK HE sector had been struggling to address persistent 'awarding gaps' for all BME groups that had been clearly identified in the mid-2000s (e.g. Broecke and Nicholls 2007). The experiences of certain BME groups at more diverse universities, for example Asian students at Bradford University or Black students in London, had been extensively studied but this was less true for BME students at less diverse universities. The most interesting aspect of the institutional research I was asked to do, was the qualitative data collected from Asian and Black students which offered far greater insight to address the awarding gaps than the quantitative data.

At the same time, the 'What works? Student Retention and Success programme' had produced its final report (Thomas 2012) and had identified belonging as a key factor in the student experience and as a potential area that could be used to address 'awarding gaps'. However, both this research and my own institutional research felt like attempts to fix inequalities without really understanding what was happening. Quantitative data about 'awarding gaps' seems unable to illuminate the reasons behind them and qualitative research has shown us that the reasons are multifaceted and complex (Singh 2009). What I wanted to do with this research was to address the gaps in the literature to better understand the experiences of belonging for BME students and how they responded to less diverse campuses.

1.2 Research Questions

This study aims to contribute to this area by researching the belonging aspect of BME students' experiences. This research specifically explores the experiences of different BME students at a predominantly White university as this HE environment is less researched. It will aim to explore how these students' approaches to their sense of belonging are shaped by the HE environment and the factors that contribute to their perceptions of belonging or not belonging.

The key questions the project seeks to answer are:

- How do different BME students experience belonging at university in the UK?
- What do BME students' university experiences reveal about their strategies for belonging in HE?
- How is race /ethnicity a factor in their experiences and strategies of belonging?

The project will elicit the stories told by BME students about their experiences in HE and their sense of belonging through in-depth interviews. To answer these questions the research will be directed to the following:

- Document stories of different BME students' experiences in HE with a focus on belonging.
- Analyse narratives from BME students identifying how they perceive belonging and how they respond to their experiences of HE.
- Identify common and contrasting themes in the narratives of BME students' sense of belonging in the HE environment.
- Reify from the narratives how significant others, such as peers, academic staff and family, impact on BME students' sense of belonging.
- Explore how other factors in the HE environment, such as curriculum or policy, impact on BME students' sense of belonging.

1.3 Why a narrative methodology?

The background section offered a very brief story of the genesis of this project. You may wonder why I have written the opening to the thesis in this style. This style is integral to the

nature of this research because I have chosen to use narrative inquiry as the means to research the questions I have identified above.

Narrative is used in this thesis in three distinct but coherent ways. Firstly, to achieve reflexivity my own narratives will be interspersed throughout. The aim is to challenge and consider my own biases and perspectives in order to reduce them and to make it clear to the reader my thinking so that claims that are made can be judged reliably. Secondly, narrative is used as the research methodology; data was collected narratively and analysed narratively. Finally, the data and analysis will be presented in narrative forms using creative non-fiction. This is to retain the power of narrative to make an impact on how people see the world. The aim of the research is to try to influence academics and senior leaders in UK HE who are invariably likely to be White. This is the primary audience for this research. For this constituency to understand the situation for BME students, narratives are important as they cannot draw on first-hand experience to inform their practice. It is this constituency that has the power to bring about practical changes in policy, teaching and assessment practices to improve the situation in British universities. Until a majority of White academics and managers understand the seriousness of the situation, then reducing awarding gaps and improving belonging for BME students will be hard to achieve.

1.4 Why is this field of enquiry important?

My research is original and significant several of reasons. Firstly, belonging for BME students is under researched particularly in the UK and has not considered differences in ethnicity and BME students' experiences. Secondly, the research that has been undertaken about the experiences of BME students in the UK has tended to focus on universities in or close to large cities such as London or Birmingham because of the greater ethnic diversity at those universities (e.g. Read, Archer and Leathwood 2003, Dhanda 2010). My research will focus on students at a university with a majority White student intake in a smaller urban area. There has been some research in the UK looking at the student experiences of BME students at universities which are less ethnically diverse with smaller proportions of BME students (e.g. Davies and Garrett 2012 or Jessop and Williams 2009). However, this has not been on the scale of research in the United States looking at Black or Latinx students' experiences at what are termed 'predominantly White institutions' (PWIs).

Thirdly, a higher proportion of research into student belonging and the student experience in Higher Education has focused on students in their first year of university (e.g. Hoffman et al. 2002, Johnson et al. 2007, Hausmann, Schofield and Woods 2007) with a focus on initial belonging rather than sustained belonging over time. The focus on this study will be

on students who have been at university longer and their sense of belonging towards the end of their degree. Initial belonging often revolves around making friends, settling in and getting involved in university activity. Whereas this research is more interested in institutional and structural issues of belonging in higher education that might not manifest in a student's first year. The emphasis is on students being able to recount their experiences from a longer time perspective.

1.5 Overview of Thesis

The second chapter explores the literature on belonging in HE, the student experience and student engagement. I start with an historical overview of diversity in UK HE as well as US HE; where significantly more research and discussion has taken place on diversity issues. I then provide an overview of definitions of belonging and how belonging has typically been measured. In the third part of the chapter, I explore the interplay between ethnicity and belonging and how different factors have been shown to impact BME student belonging. I conclude by drawing these factors together into an analytical framework. The framework brings together different conceptions of belonging (e.g. Hagerty et al. 1992, Baumeister and Leary, 1995), literature on campus climates and diversity (e.g. Kuh et al. 2005, Jayakumar and Museus, 2012), the concept of environmental press (Stern and Pace 1958), students and staff interactions and wider factors that may impact a student's belonging. This framework is then used later in the thesis to analyse and discuss my data.

The third chapter discusses my methods and methodology, starting with a discussion of possible methodologies before focusing on narrative and narrative inquiry (drawing especially of the work of Kim 2016) as the means to be able to answer my research questions and aims. I then discuss data collection and why I chose to use in-depth interviews. I then explain my data analysis process and discuss the importance of the audience for this research (White university staff) and how this impacts the reporting of the data. Finally, I explore ethical considerations, such as race of interviewer effects (Gunaratnam 2003) and discuss issues of quality in research to address my own subjectivity and reflexivity.

The fourth chapter relates to the data analysis and findings for each of the participants individually. Firstly, I provide context for the research by discussing the university and city where the research took place. Then, I use my analytical framework developed in chapter two to discuss the findings related to each of the seven participants in turn.

The fifth chapter links together similar and disparate experiences of the participants and discusses them in the context of the wider literature introduced in chapter two. Firstly, I

discuss the impact of institutional factors such as campus climate on the participants' sense of belonging. Secondly, the chapter looks at student choices and individual factors related to belonging. Thirdly, I explore peer interactions and their impact on belonging before finally highlighting the importance of staff / student interactions for developing a student's sense of belonging.

The sixth chapter brings together all the findings and literature to summarise this research in relation to the research questions. The chapter highlights the key factors from the research data that impact the students' experiences of belonging at university. I discuss the different strategies employed by each student in relation to their experiences of belonging. This chapter also addresses the limitations of this research. The final chapter offers recommendations on how universities and staff can improve BME students' sense of belonging and discusses suggestions for further research.

1.6 A note about terminology

I use the term, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) throughout the thesis. I realise that this is not unproblematic; very few individuals, who would fall into the BME category, would identify as BME. One of the key aims of this thesis is not to homogenise students and encourage those in higher education to see the individual. However, a term like BME is used to group diverse students together and risks homogenising the experiences of that very diverse group of students. Even taking the more specific ethnic categories used in UK statistical analysis, such as Black African, this still groups together students whose families come from different countries, who speak different languages and have different cultural backgrounds. What I hope this research shows is that these students are not homogenous. The experiences of any student are diverse and different to any other student although there may also be parallels and similarities.

However, accepting all that to be true, the term BME is used because it is a term that is widely recognised in the sector and the UK literature. Therefore, in describing the literature, it acts as a shorthand that is widely understood. The proposed audience, White academics and HE managers, would recognise the term and thus it does not act as a barrier to understanding the thesis; in order to create a shared understanding we must use shared language. I prevaricated over variations such as Minority Ethnic (ME) and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME). BME was the more common term used when I started the thesis. It still tends be in wider use in reports and documents and is still the term used by Government in official documents, although BAME is becoming the more standard term now in the UK. I do not want to get into a political discussion about what is the most appropriate term here. Terms such as

'racially minoritised' or the American term People of Colour are not used because they have neither official status nor clear consensus on their use. There is no agreed term that satisfies everyone in this debate and but at least BME seems to have had wide usage and broad understanding. However, over time language changes and so my apologies to future readers if, as seems highly likely, the term BME is superseded by different terminology.

Equally, I use the term White to refer to students who are not BME. This also groups together students who come from different cultural heritages but again it is a widely recognised and understood term.

It is also worth noting that I draw extensively from literature from the United States of America (henceforth referred to as the US) where the term Students of Colour (SoC) is often used and where specific ethnic groups differ in their categorisation to the UK, for example African American or Latinx. In trying to be consistent in my own writing, I will translate SoC directly to BME students except for direct quotes, discussions on specific ethnic groups and where the original meaning intends something different.

2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter will be to review relevant literature in relation to my research topic. The first section takes an historical perspective on how UK and US higher education has become more diverse and the implications of increased diversity summarising the key impact this has had on the research into the students' experiences of university. The second section will explore the concept of belonging and how it has been interpreted in educational settings. The third section will look at belonging in relation to higher education. The fourth section will focus specifically on belonging for BME students in higher education looking at the factors that may impact on a BME student's sense of belonging. At the end, the literature will be distilled into an analytical framework that I have devised to conceptualise belonging and inform the research process. This will help inform this research and be useful for subsequent research in the area of belonging in higher education.

2.2 Diversifying higher education

Firstly, a brief historical perspective of higher education will help to set the context for much of the current debate around belonging for minority students in higher education. As an educational developer in higher education for the past decade, these historical and current debates have influenced my own thinking about the student experience. Knowing some of the influences on my thinking will help with an understanding of later chapters focusing on the analysis.

I am going to focus on both the UK and the US context. Although the UK and US higher education systems are different, US models of student engagement, transition, retention and student experience have tended to dominate the discourse in UK higher education and so are useful to understand the current UK debate. Alongside this race and ethnicity research is much more established and mature in the US literature and offers a great deal of potential insight for UK universities.

In the 1950s, universities were largely mono-cultural when it came to ethnicity, class and gender. However, that was soon to change with the move from an elite system of higher education to a system that allowed access for all, often called massification. Massification is usually defined as having occurred when a national higher education system reaches a 15% participation rate and a diverse student body (Trow 1973). This occurred in the US in a large-scale expansion during the 1960s and early 1970s. By 1974, there were five times as many students in US higher education than in 1951 (Gumport et al. 1997). The UK experienced a

doubling of participation to 14% during the 1960s as a result of changes brought about by the Robbins Report (1963). However, the main increase in participation in UK higher education occurred two decades later between 1988 and 1994 (Booth et al. nd, Dearing 1997). There was a fear at the time that university expansion would cause the loss of 'academic intimacy', that had been the tradition of UK higher education, due to larger classes and standardised teaching (Scott 1993).

Under an elite system with low participation rates, students in US and UK universities tended to be White, male and aged 18-22 (Gumport et al. 1997). With massification this changed and in the 1970s and 1980s US higher education found itself grappling with the challenges of teaching a more diverse cohort of students. It was during this period that some of the defining research on the experiences of students emerged. Vincent Tinto's student integration model (Tinto 1975, 1993) was concerned with attrition rates and in understanding why students dropped out of university. His model looked at academic and social integration and how students might need to separate from their home 'culture' to integrate into the academic culture of higher education. Tinto's model was widely used in higher education in relation to student persistence; achieving almost paradigmatic status (Braxton, Milem and Sullivan 2000).

There are a number of conceptual and empirical critiques of Tinto's model. Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson (1997) argue the evidence to support the model is lacking. William Tierney in particular has been critical of Tinto from a cultural perspective. One key cultural critique is against the notion of 'integration' in which the emphasis is on individuals having to 'fit' into the dominant culture (Tierney 1992). Given the history of higher education that usually means having to fit into a White, middle-class, male environment; an environment that universities have struggled to change. The risk is that BME students are then required to perform a sort of 'cultural suicide' (Tierney 1999) in order to integrate. Acknowledging the problematic connotations of integration, researchers have suggested the notion of 'cultural integration' (Quaye, Griffin and Museus 2015) which places the emphasis on institutions to bring in cultural elements to help become a bridge between the diverse lives of students and the university. This highlights the reciprocal nature of integration (Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie 2009) that requires effort on the part of both institutions and individuals. Subsequent use of integration will refer to this meaning of integration rather than the meaning critiqued by Tierney (1992).

Tinto's work has been influential in the UK in looking at student induction, transition into HE and the first-year experience. As a result, the cultural issues with Tinto's model are

often embedded within induction and transition activity in UK higher education. Additionally, student transition is an under-theorised term and has often been strongly associated with first year induction activities; the 'transition as induction' model (Gale and Parker 2014). Gale and Parker (*ibid*) propose three different conceptions of transition: induction, development and becoming. Using this model, Tett, Cree and Christie (2017:403), looking specifically at 'non-traditional students,' argue that "transitions are not one-off events that occur when students first enter universities but are part of an on-going process that develops over time and is affected by students capacity to engage with, and become part of, the university community." This conception of transition as 'becoming' potentially has strong links to belonging for BME students as it rejects the normative notions of transition that have become common practice in HE (Ecclestone 2007, Gale and Parker 2014).

As well as Tinto's theory, Astin's (1984) model of involvement has been extremely influential in higher education. Astin's research established a connection between the amount of time and effort students put into university and the learning and developmental gains that result. This input-environment-outcome approach has influenced a significant amount of subsequent research. The connection between student time and effort in educational purposeful activity and the impact on student outcomes has been emphasised many times in the literature (e.g. Chickering and Gamson 1987, Pascarella and Terenzini 2005, Gibbs 2010a). Astin's model has arguably proven even more influential and less prone to critique than Tinto's model and it forms the basis of the notion of student engagement which emerged in the mid-1990's. One of the key definitions of student engagement used today draws on the model:

> "Student engagement represents two critical features… The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities…" CPR (2019)

George Kuh and colleagues' work at Indiana University has been highly influential in the student engagement agenda. They have provided a model and definition of student engagement based on substantial evidence of the factors involved in student engagement from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE was piloted in 1999 and launched across the US in 2000 (CPR nd) and has been administered every year since and now reaches over 1000 US universities. Kuh et al. (2005) identify five practices that create student engagement:

1. Supportive campus environment
2. Student- faculty interaction
3. Active and collaborative learning

4.   Enriching educational experiences

5.   Academic challenge

UK universities were slower to embrace student engagement due to national policy drivers. UK Governments' concerns about funding and value for money have focused universities' attention on retention, completion, employment outcomes and student satisfaction. An example was the development of the National Students Survey (NSS), with a focus on student satisfaction (e.g. Burgess, Senior and Moores 2018), which was introduced in 2005. One problem with this approach is that the focus is on a particular student experience, as measured by the questions asked, that may not reflect the diversity of experiences of BME students from different ethnic backgrounds.

The recently introduced Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) further emphasises a policy focus on student outcomes. The public nature of TEF encourages universities to improve the metrics being measured. However, the complex relationship of different student outcomes and the challenge this presents in being able to improve them has resulted in the UK higher education sector looking to the student engagement literature in order to support that improvement. The inclusion of student engagement questions from the 2017 NSS onwards highlights the shift in the UK towards student engagement as a key means of improving student satisfaction, student outcomes and the overall student experience. As a result, student engagement has become one of the key lenses through which universities in the UK view the student experience. As Trowler (2010:2) notes,

> "With higher education institutions facing increasingly straitened economic conditions, attracting and retaining students, satisfying and developing them and ensuring they graduate to become successful, productive citizens matters more than ever… If student engagement can deliver on its promises, it could hold the magic wand making all of this possible."

The addition of a sense of belonging to the student engagement literature in the UK came with the publication of the 'What Works? Student Retention and Success programme' report (Thomas 2012). This highly influential report focused on how universities could improve retention and success. The need for universities to create a culture of belonging for students was one of the key recommendations of the report. "We are confident that the range of issues examined … provides powerful evidence of the importance of student engagement and belonging to improve student retention and success" (Thomas 2012:10).

One of the complications of student retention and success is that not all groups of students are equal. In the UK, what has been observed in retention, completion, attainment and employment rates is that these rates are lower for BME students than White students and that they vary depending on the specific ethnic group with attainment particularly impacting

Black individuals and employment rates lowest for Pakistani and Bangladeshi individuals. Broecke and Nicholls' (2007) detailed analysis highlighted the disparities in attainment between BME and White students over a decade ago. Subsequent analysis has confirmed that accounting for related factors such as prior attainment and social class there is still a penalty for BME groups that cannot be easily explained. In order to recognise the institutional factors that impact on attainment, the attainment gap is increasingly being called the 'awarding gap'. Research has shown though that a narrow focus on attainment (or awarding) only is insufficient and the situation is too complex (Singh 2009) to single out the causes of differential awarding rates from the wider experiences of students in higher education. As a result, student engagement and belonging have not only been used to address student success more broadly but also have been used to try to understand and address the 'awarding gap' for BME students (BIS 2014).

In summary, what we see in the UK are three intertwined factors that influence the sectors thinking in relation to the student experience: NSS / TEF, student engagement and belonging. In broad terms higher education institutions are asking themselves:

- How can we satisfy students?
- How can we engage students?
- How can we help students to feel a sense of belonging?

The aim of answering these questions is to improve student outcomes, including for BME students and other disadvantaged groups, and to improve the reputation of the university. However, what seems to be missing in the debate, especially with the belonging question, is a nuanced understanding of satisfaction, engagement and belonging that accounts for the experiences of different ethnic groups. There appears to be an assumption that if we find answers to the questions then they will apply equally to all students. Yet over 20 years ago in the US, Hurtado and Carter (1997) raised the issue that a sense of belonging was a significant concern for minority students. They found that Latinx students often encountered a hostile campus climate that negatively affected their sense of belonging. However as noted earlier, in the UK belonging only emerged as a general concern in HE in 2012 (Thomas 2012) and the impacts of belonging on BME students is still under-researched.

Having set the historical and current context for belonging in UK higher education the rest of this literature review will draw upon the concepts of student engagement and integration, environmental press and motivation to explore belonging for BME students in higher education. At the end, I will summarise these ideas into a single theoretical framework which will be used in the analysis and reporting of the research.

2.3 Belonging

Sense of belonging (or belongingness) is a key concept used to understand human motivation and behaviour. The psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954) placed belongingness as the first of our psychological needs immediately after our basic needs of food, water, safety etc. Although he points out that at the time there was very little research into belongingness and Maslow did not define belongingness. In a wide-ranging literature review in 1995, Baumeister and Leary concluded that "…human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong" (Baumeister and Leary 1995: 522).

However, precise definitions of belonging have proven to be challenging. Thomas (2012) points out that belonging is a concept that has both psychological and sociological traditions and that an understanding of belonging for students in higher education would draw on both. As a result, in this section I will try to draw together different ideas of belonging in order to arrive at the conceptual understanding of how belonging is being used in this research.

2.3.1. Belonging: definitions

Given that a range of psychological theories have identified belonging as a key component of human motivation (Maslow 1954, Baumeister and Leary 1995, Glasser 1986), it comes as no surprise to find that students at university would need to feel a sense of belonging during their studies. Accepting this to be a basic assumption, the question becomes what is belonging and how might it be achieved? In summary and as will be discussed in this section, belonging appears to depend on two crucial elements; close relationships (e.g. Fiske 2004) and involvement in a system or environment (e.g. Hagerty et al. 1992). As a way to conceptualise the multifaceted and differing views of belonging, I have chosen in this thesis to label these two crucial elements 'contact' and 'fit'. For me these two terms summarise the key to belonging and will be used to help explore the concept of belonging. The reason I have chosen to separate out these two elements of belonging is because I believe that a student's sense of belonging may be generated by a mix of the two concepts of contact and fit in different amounts and different ways. It will allow me to take a more sophisticated analysis of my data than just the single concept of belonging.

A need for belonging drives human behaviour into creating close relationships and interpersonal attachments with other people (Baumeister and Leary 1995, Fiske2004). Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that for a sense of belonging to be created these relationships need to feature regular personal contact, affective concern and have some degree of stability over time. New relationships such as those developed at university require

time to develop and therefore usually need regular personal contact. The affective concern and stability over time allows those developing relationships to create a sense of belonging; just having contact with someone else does not automatically create a sense of belonging. Similar terms such as closeness, relatedness (e.g. Goodenow 1993, Ryan and Deci2000) and connectedness (Strayhorn 2018) have also been used. Each of these terms emphasises that for belonging to be created the contact between a student and another person at university needs to go beyond a mere transactional exchange. There needs to be a connection, a closeness and some shared interest. The contact element of belonging encompasses the quality of individual relationships for the student and how they contribute to their sense of belonging.

The concept of fit is more complex than contact and less clearly defined in the literature. For example, the original attachment theory focused on the relationship / contact between two individuals (e.g. Bowlby 1982). However, the scope of the term attachment was then expanded so that attachment can be to environments and groups and not just individuals. Therefore, an individual could form a strong attachment to a friend or tutor (as in close contact) or to a society and even to a place like a university (as in a sense of fit).

Prentice, Miller and Lightdale (1994) identified two different types of groups: common-bond groups and common-identity groups. In common-bond groups, members have close relationships and attachments between each other and this creates an overall sense of group attachment and belonging. However, in common-identity groups, the group attachment occurs as a result of a shared identity and does not require close relationships between group members (France, Finney and Swerdzewski 2010). This latter type of group may help to explain how people create attachments (and subsequently belonging) to place. The notion of 'school spirit' common in US universities can be an illustration of this. Some students may turn up and support their university sports team thus developing a strong sense of attachment and belonging to the university (Glass and Westmont 2014). However, they may never form strong interpersonal attachments or close relationships with other people at the university in any other context. They may feel a sense of belonging because of the shared experience but the relationships they have with others in that moment may not extend beyond the specific context. A student in this situation may not have the contact element of belonging but would have the fit element.

Hagerty et al. (1992: 173) defined belonging as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part." They identify fit as one of two dimensions of belonging and define it as whether the person feels that their characteristics are congruent with the wider group, system or environment (Hagerty

et al. 1992). The nature of such characteristics can be problematic to a definition. Strayhorn (2018) notes that it might then be assumed that being in a homophilic group, such as a group of people from the same ethnicity, is a precondition for belonging. Same-race groups may well be far more comfortable environments. However, what matters is whether an individual perceives themselves to have congruence with the wider group or environment regardless of the characteristics involved. Belonging should be able to occur in heterogenous groups and environments.

One common feature of definitions of belonging is a sense of being valued. Hagerty et al. (1992) write about valued involvement, Goodenow (1993) refers to being accepted, valued and included and Strayhorn (2018) highlights feeling cared about, respected and valued by others in the university community. This suggests that belonging is created when an individual gets feedback from others that their contributions to and membership of a community have value to the community. Fit is therefore about having a sense that we have a shared interest or something in common with others and that what we bring to the community is valued.

A further complicating feature of fit is the scale on which it operates. Contact, as I have defined it, is about relationships between individuals. Fit, however, operates at differing scales. Fit can apply to a small group, a department, a university and even a whole community. Hagerty et al.'s (1992) definition of belonging takes this even further and argues that people, when referring to their own sense of belonging, also talk about objects, physical and social environments and spiritual dimensions. Pace and Stern's (1958) model uses the term 'environmental press' to describe these wider aspects of practices, policies and culture of the university. One of the key elements of their idea was that the needs of individual students differed and that the presses of universities differed. They were interested in whether there was or should be congruence between the needs of the student and the press of the university to create a 'fit'.

Finally, Strayhorn (2018) decided that he would not use the term 'fitting in' when discussing belonging. He uses this phrase as a particular conception of fit that presupposes that an individual has to change something about themselves to fit in rather than being accepted for who they are. My definition of fit is not about students having to change themselves but whether they see environments in the university where they would be welcomed for who they are. Whilst having to be someone you are not might gain individual friends, it is unlikely that this would create a lasting sense of belonging. Fitting in and a sense of fit are not the same concept.

Two other elements of belonging need to be clarified: needs and perceptions. Whilst all human behaviour is motivated by a need to belong, the nature of that need will vary considerably between individuals. For example, introverts and extroverts have very different needs in relation to other people. Secondly, what should be clear in this discussion of belonging is that it is about the individual's perception in relation to their wider environment and individuals in the environment (Bollen and Hoyle 1990). As a result, in exactly the same context two individuals could report a very different sense of belonging and equally two individuals with a strong sense of belonging may have derived this sense in very different ways. Goodenow (1993: 26) highlights this in the context of an educational setting as "belonging and support may be differentially important to different students." This is important because it highlights that the very nature of belonging will tend to resist 'one size fits all' interventions designed to increase a sense of belonging. The notion that belonging interventions will have the same impact regardless of who the intervention is with becomes problematic.

2.3.2.   How belonging is defined in attempting to measure belonging

Definitions of belonging are varied and terms are often used interchangeably. However, I have attempted to define belonging based on the varied definitions in the literature in a way that makes sense to me and would assist in my data analysis through the use of the terms contact and fit. Differentiating contact and fit means that I can analyse individual interactions and relationships separately from group situations and dynamics. I accept that this might not be the most logical split for other people. I suspect that the logic of separating individual from group / community factors may in part be as a result of my own introverted nature and preference for individual interactions. My concern from the literature is that the focus tends to be on group interventions and addressing fit (as the main element of belonging) which risks having no impact on a large group of students whose sense of belonging is derived more from contact than fit. This concern will be discussed more in this next section which looks at how belonging is defined by how researchers have attempted to measure it.

Meeuwisse, Severiens and Born (2010:542) were honest in highlighting their concerns that their own six point belonging scale may not have been appropriate to actually measuring belonging in any meaningful way, noting that "it is possible that the concept of sense of belonging is more complex than we assumed." This is a problem because regardless of definitions, it is the measurements of belonging that gets reported and influences actions taken in educational settings. In theory, definitions of belonging should be accurately represented in measures of belonging but this has proven to be challenging in part because

measuring something as complex, qualitative and personal as belonging is always going to be problematic.

A number of self-report scales have been developed for educational settings. Most have been in terms of sense of belonging for children in school settings (e.g. Goodenow 1993, Willms 2003, Akar-Vurul et al. 2013) or extra-curricular settings such as youth programmes (e.g. Anderson-Butcher and Conroy 2002). Some belongingness and related scales have been developed in the university context, such as the belongingness survey in the UK (Thomas et al. 2017) and the University Attachment Scale (Prentice, Miller and Lightdale 1994 modified by France, Finney and Swerdzewski 2010).

As can be seen from the items in these various scales, the picture in relation to measuring belonging is far from clear. Different sense of belonging scales focus on different components of belonging. Many scales do not appear to measure the close relationship element of belonging but focus on the general sense of fit, hence my concern to deliberately highlight contact as a crucial element of belonging. For example, Akar-Vurul et al. (2013) identified contentment in school, a general sense of being happy and fitting in as good measures of belonging. The university belongingness items (Thomas et al. 2017) included just one contact-type question related to student-staff relationships out of six belongingness items. Anderson-Butcher and Conroy (2002) found that items related to security (e.g. feeling comfortable in an educational context) and membership (e.g. feeling accepted in an educational context) were the items they felt best measured belonging. Measures which I would consider relate to fit rather than contact. However, Goodenow (1993) found that although acceptance and inclusion were important factors in sense of belonging, she also found that positive peer relations and perceived teacher support (both measures of contact) were also important factors.

The measures of belonging also tend to address the environmental context in limited or narrowly focused ways. The educational measures usually refer to belonging within the context of a place, e.g. the school, youth club, university, and sometimes measure the social element of belonging in relationships with the teacher or to peers. However, we know that organisations have unwritten norms (Schein 1992) and that fitting in and belonging in the organisational environment depends on congruence with those unwritten social norms (Fiske 2004). The research conducted by Akar-Vurul et al. (2013) is pertinent here because they found that their obedience to school rules sub-scale was a good measure of overall belonging. However, I am not aware of any university belongingness measures that explicitly address the cultural and social elements of the environment.

One of the noticeable differences between scales used in the university context versus other educational contexts is the size of the place at which belonging is measured. With universities being much larger organisations than schools or youth clubs, scales measuring belonging at university have needed to grapple with the question of what part of a large organisation is relevant to measuring belonging. Prentice et al. (1994) used the attachment scale focused at the level of social clubs at university. France, Finney and Swerdzewski (2010) adapted the scale to measure attachment at the level of the whole university. Whereas, Kember and Leung (2004) and Thomas et al. (2017) use scales that measure belonging at both the departmental and the institutional level. Thomas et al. (2017) found from their data that overall, the mean scores for the belonging questions related to the department were higher than the belonging scores related to the wider university; although this was not consistent across universities or subject disciplines. Cashmore, Scott and Cane (2011) using the same scales found a mixed picture in terms of where belonging was located. Hurtado and Carter (1997) felt that belonging is more likely to be closely related to smaller networks rather than the whole institution. It would appear that researchers feel that a sense of belonging may be created in different parts of a university.

The large variance in the scales used to measure belonging illustrates that there is no agreed definition of belonging. However, the notion of fit, whether expressed as membership, acceptance, comfort etc., is an important part of belonging in addition to the contact element of close or positive relationships. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use 'fit' to refer to the environmental, cultural and common-identity group elements of belonging. This includes notions such as community, membership and involvement. 'Contact' will be used to refer to the interpersonal elements of belonging. This includes concepts such as individual attachment, close relationships, affective concern and common-bond groups. These two terms form the elements of the belonging dimension of my analytical framework.

2.4 Strategies for Belonging

As already noted, belonging is an affective concept that links to behaviour. This relationship between the perception of belonging and behaviour is problematic in the literature. Perception and behaviour are often conflated when discussing educational experiences. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) uses an affective measure (sense of belonging) and a behavioural measure (participation) (Willms 2003) as proxies for student engagement and experience. As discussed above Akur-Vurul et al. (2013) found that belonging correlated with behavioural measures (obedience to school rules), as well as affective measures (contentment and fitting in).

Johnson, Crosnoe and Elder (2001) argue that there needs to be a clear conceptual distinction between the behavioural components and the affective components of the educational experience.

In addition to this conflation, there is disagreement about the cause and effect between behaviour and affect in educational experiences. Opinion in the student engagement literature seems to suggest that engagement (in the behavioural sense) is antecedent to belonging (in the affective sense) (for example see Wolf-Wendell, Ward and Kinzie 2009 and Thomas 2012). Whereas in other literature, such as health and psychology, engagement is seen as a consequence of a sense of belonging (e.g. Hagerty et al. 1992). The behaviour of engaging in the educational experiences of university and the feeling of belonging may be mutually reinforcing. Students who engage in certain behaviour may increase their sense of belonging; an example might be joining a student society. Alternatively, other students might not want to join a society unless they feel a sense of belonging first.

A further complication is that the historical lack of diversity in higher education has created a set of normative student behaviours and experiences associated with students being away from home for the first time. There is a risk that student engagement and belonging research also becomes normative to a particular type and view of students. Living at home or having to work whilst studying are seen as barriers to students being able to *"…to fully participate, integrate and feel like they belong in HE…"* (Thomas 2012: 5). The current debate about belonging places the university at the centre. In order to persist and succeed students need to engage in certain ways at university often associated with what is seen as the 'traditional' full-time, away from home student.

This leads to three concerns about the current belonging debate in higher education. Firstly, what counts as positive engagement and belonging is often seen from the perspective of the university and not the student. Other activities, which are important to the student, can be perceived as negative engagement or non-engagement (Harper and Quaye 2009, Trowler 2010) by the university; an example might include political activism. This political activism might help create a sense of belonging for many students but may be seen as negative and disruptive by the university. This is particularly relevant as recent grassroots campaigns led by students to decolonise higher education such as 'Rhodes Must Fall', 'Why is my Curriculum White?' and 'Why isn't my Professor Black?', demonstrate. Each of these campaigns have been met by resistance from the university concerned or from White students. This may create a disconnect for the student where what they need in terms of feeling a sense of belonging is not seen as important by the university.

Secondly, students are moving between different environments during their studies: home, university, work. A focus on belonging just in the university sphere does not consider the students whole life and the impact this might have on their study and success. Students will strive to create a sense of belonging at university. However, should this not be achieved, will that be problematic for their studies if they have created a sense of belonging elsewhere in their lives? Does a sense of belonging at university have to be central to a student's success? Given the multiple ways in which students engage with university is the debate about belonging too narrowly focused?

Thirdly, models of engagement and the means by which students create a sense of belonging often emphasise the social aspects of university. They focus on co-curricular activity which may not be accessible to some BME students due to financial, cultural or religious reasons. In the UK, BME students are less likely to engage in university based co-curricular activity than White students and are more likely to be involved in family and religious activity outside university (Stuart et al. 2011). BME students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) will spend most of their academic time with peers and tutors of a different ethnicity, they may not want to spend their social time in those spaces as well, especially if they perceive the university culture as hostile or unwelcoming to BME students.

The conditions created by universities and the wider environment are largely outside the control of individual students. What students can control is their own actions or strategies for belonging. As a fundamental factor in motivation, "the need to belong should stimulate goal-directed activity designed to satisfy it" (Baumeister and Leary 1995: 500). Very little has been done to understand what actions students engage in to create a sense of belonging in university and how their response to the environment impacts on whether they act or not to satisfy a need to belong at university. It may be that creating a sense of belonging at university may feel unattainable and so students put their effort into finding belonging elsewhere. Much research has focused on measuring students' sense of belonging at university linked to various influences and factors such as educational background, personal factors, family support, campus climate and so on. Certain groups of students have been found to have a lower sense of belonging and this correlates with outcomes such as degree attainment. However, what remains unquestioned is whether these correlations are linked in any causal way. Does belonging have an impact on student outcomes or is it that the same factors which impact outcomes also play a role in belonging? For example, the quantity and quality of staff-student interactions may impact both outcomes and belonging. The relationship between belonging and outcomes is currently unclear. Research has also focused on institutional efforts to create a sense of belonging. What is missing is an understanding of the conscious (and sometimes

unconscious) choices students make in relation to belonging and university. Although, universities might aspire to improve the campus environment, improve student-staff relations and other factors linked to good outcomes and belonging, the reality is that students have to deal with the situation they find themselves in today, good or bad. How they do that might shed light on what is important.

2.5 Race, Ethnicity and Belonging in Higher Education

One factor that has started to emerge from the educational literature in relation to belonging is how different characteristics can impact on a sense of belonging. Socioeconomics, ethnicity and other factors related to 'non-traditional' students have been investigated and have been found to influence a sense of belonging for students. Given the focus of this thesis, the next section will explore the literature on belonging at university related to ethnicity.

Researchers in the US have led the way on investigating how students from different ethnic backgrounds interact with universities and what impact this has on them. Factors affecting both the fit and contact elements of belonging have been investigated and shown in some cases to be different depending on a student's ethnicity. Institutional factors that impact fit in universities are structural influences (Kahu 2013), the campus cultural climate and university curricula.

2.5.1. Structural influences

One of the defining features of universities worldwide is their categorisation into mission types, e.g. research-intensive, teaching-focused etc. The way a university is positioned impacts on the institutional culture and the behaviour of academic staff in relation to whether the focus is on students and teaching or on their research. In the UK, all BME groups are more likely to attend a teaching-focused university than an elite, research intensive university (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018). The mission type of the university tends to influence the demographic make-up of the university. For example, the likelihood of going to an elite Russell Group university is strongly predicted by whether a student has been privately educated and is from a non-widening participation background (e.g. White, higher socio-economic status and so on) (Hemsley-Brown 2015).

The location of a university also has an impact on the proportion of students from BME backgrounds. BME students make up a higher proportion of the student body in universities situated in large cities, such as London, Birmingham and Manchester, when compared to more rural locations or universities in smaller towns and cities (HESA 2020). This largely reflects where BME communities are located in the UK. BME students can be worried about

discrimination and being isolated studying away from home in a less diverse location (Connor and Dewson 2001). BME students are more likely than White students to study at a local university and commute from their parental home (Woodfield 2014).

As Harper (2012: ix) reminds us, Black, Asian, Chinese and other minority ethnic students "are not born into minority status or minoritized in every social milieu." BME students often choose a university so that they are more likely to study with peers from a similar ethnic background because they know this should feel more familiar and give them a greater sense of belonging. Even in these circumstances, in almost all UK universities these students are a minority group with White students and staff being the majority ethnicity. As a result, BME students are more likely to interact with peers and staff of a different ethnicity than White students. Changing the compositional diversity of a university is often the first step in addressing this. When BME groups become better represented this potentially creates a better environment for cross-cultural interactions (Quaye, Griffin and Museus 2015). Whilst undergraduate BME students are well represented in the UK (O'Shea-Poon 2016) compared to the overall BME population, there is still an issue of under-representation in academic staff (just 6.5% of UK academics were BME, Advance HE 2018).

One consequence of this may be that BME students will spend more time in 'counterspaces' seeking refuge from White dominated spaces and seeking support and belonging from other students of the same ethnic background (Park 2014). These demographic factors may also impact BME students' belonging through a lack of fit or communal potential (Braxton, Hirschey and McClendon 2004); the idea that students perceive they can become members of university sub-communities that share similar beliefs, values, culture and goals. This may be exacerbated further for those BME students who choose to study at a university with a low proportion of BME students, often referred to in the literature as predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Harper's (2009) concept of 'onlyness' may be important in understanding belonging for these BME students. 'Onlyness' is where a student may be the only person from their ethnic group in their class. It captures the sense of isolation and discomfort this may bring and the potential negative impact on belonging.

What the literature shows is that demographic factors, location and mission type influence the choice of university that BME students attend and play a part in their resulting sense of belonging. The next section will look more closely at the cultural climate of universities, especially the racial climate to investigate the impact of climate on belonging.

2.5.2.   Campus cultural climate

The literature supports the need for supportive campus environments and cultures to improve student success (Kuh et al. 2005). Culture is a widely used lens to help understand the institution and the impact it has on the student experience. Notions such as cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) have been widely used to analyse the university experience. For 'non-traditional' and minority students, the cultural aspect is often framed as: these students lacking the (unspoken White, middle class) cultural capital required for university. Students have to build their cultural capital to fit in rather than universities adapting and accepting different cultures. Yosso (2005) argues for a reframing of cultural capital in relation to minority students to consider the wealth of different capitals that they bring. She highlights capitals such as linguistic capital (BME students are often fluent in two or more languages), navigational capital (the skills developed from having to navigate often hostile institutional settings) and familial capital (different cultural perspectives on family and the support this provides). Currently these capitals are not taken into account and BME students are having to adapt to the dominant university culture. This can often require additional cognitive load and effort for students leaving them less time and energy to exercise the cognitive abilities needed for achievement in higher education (Greene, Marti and McClenney 2008).

The campus *racial* climate is one institutional factor that has consistently been seen as important for belonging for BME students (Harper and Quaye 2009, Johnson et al. 2007, Hausmann, Schofield and Woods 2007). Jayakumar and Museus (2012) describe a typology of campus racial climates from Eurocentric to diversity-orientated to equity-orientated. An underlying assumption in the first two campus climates is that it is the individual student's responsibility to fit in. An equity-oriented culture recognises institutional and historic barriers and engages diverse voices in decision-making, policy and curriculum.

It seems there is much work to be done before most universities have an equity-oriented climate. In the US, BME students report being marginalised, socially excluded and subject to racism (e.g. Harper, 2013). Black students were least satisfied with the campus racial climate (Johnson et al. 2007) and a hostile climate contributed strongly to a lack of belonging (Tovar 2013). We are starting to see evidence of this emerging in the UK as well (NUS 2012). There are clear differences in satisfaction in the NSS by ethnicity (HEFCE 2014) with Black students being far less satisfied than other students (NUS 2011). BME students describe a lack of inter-ethnic integration at university (Stevenson, 2012). As a result, Harper (2013) has

argued that BME students might not socially integrate with the White university culture or peers but instead exist in a parallel race-based culture.

Similar findings have been shown to occur in international students when having to adapt to the different culture whilst they study abroad (Krause 2005). Not only are universities unwilling to accept cultural differences of home BME students but the literature also shows disregard for the cultures of international students. Issues of belonging for BME students are often mirrored in the experiences of international students. Glass and Westmont (2013) note a lack of meaningful contact between and the parallel social existence of international and home students. For example, international students often get involved in international societies or societies based on their home nation (Jackson, Harris and Crawford 2015). What the research with both BME students and international students shows is that universities struggle to create diverse campus cultures that feel welcoming to students who are not White, home students.

2.5.3.   University curricula

The same parallels that are seen in university cultures with international students are also seen in the curricula at university. Both international and BME students have been critical of the western, Eurocentric nature of much of what is taught in universities. The debate on the whiteness of university curricula has recently gained momentum due to the 'Why is my Curriculum White?' campaign started by students at University College London in 2015 and subsequent similar campaigns at other universities. NUS (2012) research identified that nearly half of Black students did not feel that the curriculum adequately reflected issues of diversity. For many BME students, Eurocentric curricula can make them feel marginalised and reduce their feelings of belonging. The "dominant culture sends signals to students about who is valued— and if a student does not feel valued, they are much less likely to succeed" (NUS 2011: 6). One of the key critiques of attempts to make the curriculum more diverse is that an 'infusion' approach is often taken. This is a mono-cultural model where diverse or international perspectives are added into the curriculum in a piecemeal fashion (De Vita and Case 2003). Most students are savvy enough to realise the inadequacy of this approach and describe the curriculum as "patchily diverse" (Jessop and Williams 2009:95). De Vita and Case (2003:392) note that "sadly, there appears to be little widespread self-reflective dialogue about cross-cultural pedagogy and its role in UK HE."

Sabri (2017: 3) identifies that the White, Eurocentric curriculum creates injustice because of "a matter of misrecognition and lack of value attached to non-dominant cultures in our society." The fact that BME students do not recognise themselves in the curriculum impacts assessments. The parts of the curriculum that resonate with BME students may be

limited and they may struggle to demonstrate the passion for the curriculum in their work. Sabri (2017) gives examples of where BME students are struggling to find the relevance of the curriculum to their own ideas and practice. This can be demotivating and ultimately impact on their success.

The university environment, in its broad sense of culture, structure and curricula, has an impact on BME student belonging because of the historical whiteness associated with universities. The environment is a complex system of interactions between the individual (staff and students), the social and institutional structures (Baird 1988). Having considered the institutional side, the next sections look at the individual and the interactions between staff and students and between students and students.

2.5.4. Individual factors

This section will look at the impact of student characteristics (outside of demographic factors), behaviours and choices and how they impact on their university experience. Pace and Stern's (1958) notion of environmental press aimed to look at the match between the environment of the university and the needs of the individual student. As has been discussed, BME students are trying to do this in their choice of university. Once they arrive at university having made those choices there are other individual factors that then impact on university outcomes and belonging.

Personality traits have been found to be predictors of a range of outcomes at university. In psychology, the 'big five' personality traits are a popular area of research and they have been researched in the context of students and their university outcomes. Of the five traits, student conscientiousness and to a lesser degree openness are the two that have been found to be predictors of better achievement (e.g. Dollinger, Matyja and Huber 2008). Conversely, agreeableness and extraversion have been suggested as traits that help students to integrate at university (Burras et al. 2013). Stevens and Walker (1996) noted that having a positive outlook was linked to better transition in higher education. However, personality trait research has tended to narrowly focus on performance (Harvey, Drew and Smith 2006) and not on other aspects of the university experience such as belonging.

There is also evidence to suggest that there are characteristics of some groups of BME students that may impact on their university outcomes and belonging. For example, it has been suggested that BME students tend to be more extrinsically (rather than intrinsically) motivated by factors such as employment outcomes than their White peers and that female BME students often report being the least confident group in terms of their degree outcomes (Cotton, George and Joyner 2010).

In terms of behaviours, there is good evidence that a range of student behaviours positively impact outcomes. As examples the total number of hours that students put into study (Gibbs 2010a), working and cooperating with other students (Chickering and Gamson 1987) and taking a 'deep' approach to learning (Marton, Hounsell and Entwhistle 1984) are all linked to better outcomes. Specifically, in relation to sense of belonging, Kember and Leung (2004) found that students who actively used a range of coping mechanisms reported greater belonging. These mechanisms were getting support, negotiating arrangements and sacrifice in the four domains of self, work, family and friends. For example, students who negotiated time and space for study with their family reported a greater sense of belonging at university.

Coates (2007) classified student's behavioural engagement into four different styles: collaborative, intense, passive and independent. Both the deep approach to learning and the styles of student engagement illustrate that it is not just innate characteristics of students that are important but that students also choose to act and engage in different ways in response to the environment and how they feel at that moment in time. Sense of belonging may influence whether students choose to behave in educational purposeful ways and whether they choose to engage.

Whilst individual personality differences clearly will have an impact on a student's experience, given the diversity of personality, it would be extremely unlikely that this would explain large scale ethnic differences in outcomes and student experiences. The next area of consideration is the interactions between staff and students.

2.5.5. Staff Interactions

Many models used to understand the student experience separate out the social and the academic context of university. Tinto (1993) wrote that an educational institution consists of an academic and a social system. Students can engage to different degrees in the social and academic life of the university. However, making a clear distinction between the social and academic contexts of a university has been problematic. Beekhoven, De Jong and Van Hout (2002) point out that because the two contexts are so interrelated it is difficult to distinguish between the two. As an example, contact with academic staff has been categorised as academic, social or a mix of both (Beekhoven, De Jong and Van Hout, 2002). From a practical perspective, what is easier to distinguish is whether the contact and interaction is with staff or with other students regardless of the nature of that contact. Although the role of the academic and social sphere will also be discussed given that there seems to be strong evidence to support the idea that BME students focus on the academic sphere in their interactions with peers and staff.

Initial sense of belonging has been related to positive interactions with academic staff (Hausmann et al. 2007), empathetic staff understanding and perceived staff support (Hoffman et al., 2002). Byfield (2008) noted that Black students who successfully reached university identified teachers who had racial empathy and were non-judgemental about race as being crucial in their success. The personal tutor role plays an important part in staff- student contact (Cotton, Kneale and Nash 2013, Stevenson 2012). However, there is some concern over the quality of tutoring (Stevenson, 2012), unconscious bias (Milkman et al., 2014) and racial micro-aggressions (Harper, 2013, NUS, 2012) in Higher Education. All of these can hinder positive interactions between BME students and predominantly White staff at universities given that 90.6% of UK nationality staff identify as White compared to 77.3% of UK students (Advance HE 2018).

Bean and Metzner (1985) argue that non-traditional students, including BME students, are less likely to have both the intensity and duration of interaction with the key agents (peers and academic staff) of socialisation in universities. Therefore, arguing that social integration will have limited impact on retention for non-traditional students.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) identify that having high expectations of students is important in university education. However, the 'anti-intellectual' myth surrounding the academic performance of some ethnic groups is well documented (e.g. Cockley 2003). Unwittingly or otherwise, this myth can mean that staff have lower expectations of some BME students, particularly Black students (Stevenson and Whelan 2013, Stevenson 2012) which does not go unnoticed by the students. Bensimon (2005) cites examples of what she calls a deficit cognitive frame of thinking for some academic staff in relation to BME students. Staff with a deficit cognitive frame, although valuing diversity, often 'explain away' ethnic differences in attainment and belonging as socio-economic issues or due to prior educational experiences.

2.5.6. Peer interactions

Research has shown that a sense of belonging is enhanced by peer to peer conversations about the course and perceived peer support (Hurtado and Carter 1997, Kember and Leung 2004, Hoffman et al. 2002). However, the racial dimension of peer interactions can have negative impacts on belonging. Cross-racial interactions can be problematic for BME students as there is evidence that White students do not want to work with students from different ethnic groups especially when work is graded (Harper, 2013). For BME students the benefits of peer support often come from peers of the same ethnicity. For example, Harper (2013) identified that Black men gained significant support from Black peers who helped them

navigate and feel valued in the White dominated university. This support ultimately contributed to the students' success.

There also appears to be a difference in the impact of peer interactions dependant on the context of the interaction. For BME students, formal peer to peer interactions (those relating to academic work) were positively correlated with sense of belonging but informal, more social interactions were not correlated with belonging (Meeuwisse, Severiens and Born 2010). Hausmann, Schofield and Woods (2007) found that increased academic integration for Black students led to increased sense of belonging. They also found that Black students experienced less peer support at the start of their degree courses. These findings seem to suggest that peer support is particularly important for BME students' sense of belonging within the formal, academic sphere but not the social sphere. This emphasises the important role of the institution in facilitating peer support within the formal curriculum. It also questions the need for social integration and belonging within the university to increase sense of belonging.

The findings on both peer and staff interactions for BME students contrast with the findings in relation to White students who appear to gain increased sense of belonging from informal rather than formal peer and staff interactions (Meeuwisse, Severiens and Born 2010). In contrast to BME students, White students seem to experience a negative relationship between sense of belonging and increased academic integration (Hausmann, Schofield and Woods 2007). The reasons in the literature for this difference are not entirely clear. One possible explanation may be that BME students' prior racial experiences lead them to take a strong focus on academic achievement and hard work in the academic sphere as a way of mitigating racism (Vincent et al. 2011, Byfield 2008). BME students often feel the need to prove that they are exceptional in order to justify their presence at university (Harper 2013).

2.5.7. Wider Context

Increasingly, university is just a small part of a student's life whilst they are undertaking a degree. Many students live at home with family and have jobs. What impacts on student belonging, engagement and their overall experience has as much to do with their wider life outside university as it does with what happens at university. This next section looks at what factors may impact on a student's sense of belonging that are outside of the university.

It is likely that the role of a student's parents and home community may have a different effect on belonging for BME students compared to their White peers. One reason for this could be the differences in the lives of minority students outside of the university (Meeuwisse, Severiens and Born 2010). The research and models of student success had originally focused on traditional White students who lived on campus. It has been shown that a positive campus

residence experience leads to increased belonging (Johnson et al. 2007). However, today's students are less likely to be resident on campus (Kuh et al. 2006). For these students, community and home impact may be an important factor in belonging and success. Evidence suggests that parental support in creating belonging was found to be more important for BME students than White students and connections to external communities were found to be important for Latinx students (Hurtado and Carter 1997), which may also be true for other ethnic groups. For example, Black parents often take a watchful and circumspect approach to education (Vincent et al. 2011) knowing that their ethnicity means their children do not always get a fair experience. For those students living with their parents this may mean their parents take a more active role in the students' university education.

The wider community beyond the family may also play a factor. Students are part of a range of groups outside university. These may be religious groups, interest groups, political groups etc. BME students may be drawn to such groups to counterbalance a lack of belonging in PWIs.

One of the significant factors impacting students' experiences is whether they are 'commuter' students. There is a range of literature that suggests commuter students have a different university experience to residential students (Maguire and Morris 2018). In the UK, the term 'commuter' student overlaps with other terms such as local student and can be defined in different ways. Maguire and Morris (2018) use two dimensions to help define commuter students: distance from term-time residence to place of study and whether they cohabit with non-students. The needs of commuter students can be overlooked by institutions (Smith 2018) especially where commuter students are a minority. The proportion of commuter students at a university can have a significant impact on institutional culture with a high proportion leading to a culture of lower expectations and commitment by students to a transformational learning experience (Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010):

> "Commuter universities lack well-defined and -structured social communities to establish membership. Commuter students typically experience conflicts among their obligations to family, work and college (Tinto 1993)" (Braxton, Hirschey and McClendon 2004).

The fact that many BME students live at home, commute to university and work means that they have less time to spend in the university community. Given those circumstances it is likely that a sense of belonging at university would be more difficult to achieve for these students compared to 'residential' students.

2.6 Analytical framework

So far, I have navigated the literature in relation to my research questions. This last section brings together various key ideas discussed and combines them into a framework to analyse my research. The first consideration is the wider context. The ability of and the time available for BME students to engage and feel a sense of belonging at university is dependent on their personal circumstances and their commitments outside university. These commitments might be a need to earn money or family commitments. Students' family and social situation outside university may contribute to or limit a sense of belonging at university. The wider context may even compensate for a lack of belonging at university.

The second consideration is the nature of belonging. In this thesis, I am using the idea that belonging has two distinct but related components: fit and contact and that a sense of belonging can be created by either or both components. I think it is important to separate out the fit and contact elements in the context of discussing the experiences of BME students in a predominantly White institution. Fit may be problematic for these students given their minoritized status in the university. Equally it may be that fit is not problematic but rather contact with peers or staff represents the area of concern.

The third consideration is how fit and contact are created through interactions with peers and staff. Students may feel like they fit in with their peers in a wider sense and have good contact with peers or they may choose to have close contact with a limited number of peers and not feel like they fit in. Interactions with staff at university may contribute to a sense of fit. Students may choose to build close contact with staff as a means of feeling a sense of belonging.

The fourth element draws from Stern and Pace's (1958) idea of environmental press. The first part are the individual factors related to the individual needs, personality and behaviours of the student. The individual needs will impact on a student's interactions and the kind of belonging that works best for them. Some students will feel a need to fit in and other students may prefer close contact with either peers or staff. The second part are the environmental institutional factors. These institutional factors would include campus climate, structural influences, student demographics and the nature of the curriculum.

This can be summarised in the figure on the next page which shows the different elements impacting on belonging. This framework has informed the collection, analysis and reporting of my data.

Figure 1: The different factors that impact on belonging. Belonging, based on my literature review, is composed of Fit (how a person feels they fit into a social environment) and Contact (close personal relationships). Whether a person feels a sense of fit or contact depends on: institutional factors, such as curricula and institutional demographics and campus culture, staff interactions, peer interactions and individual factors, such as needs, personality and behaviours.

Belonging is also impacted by the wider context of a student's life, such as the need to work, family and social life outside university.
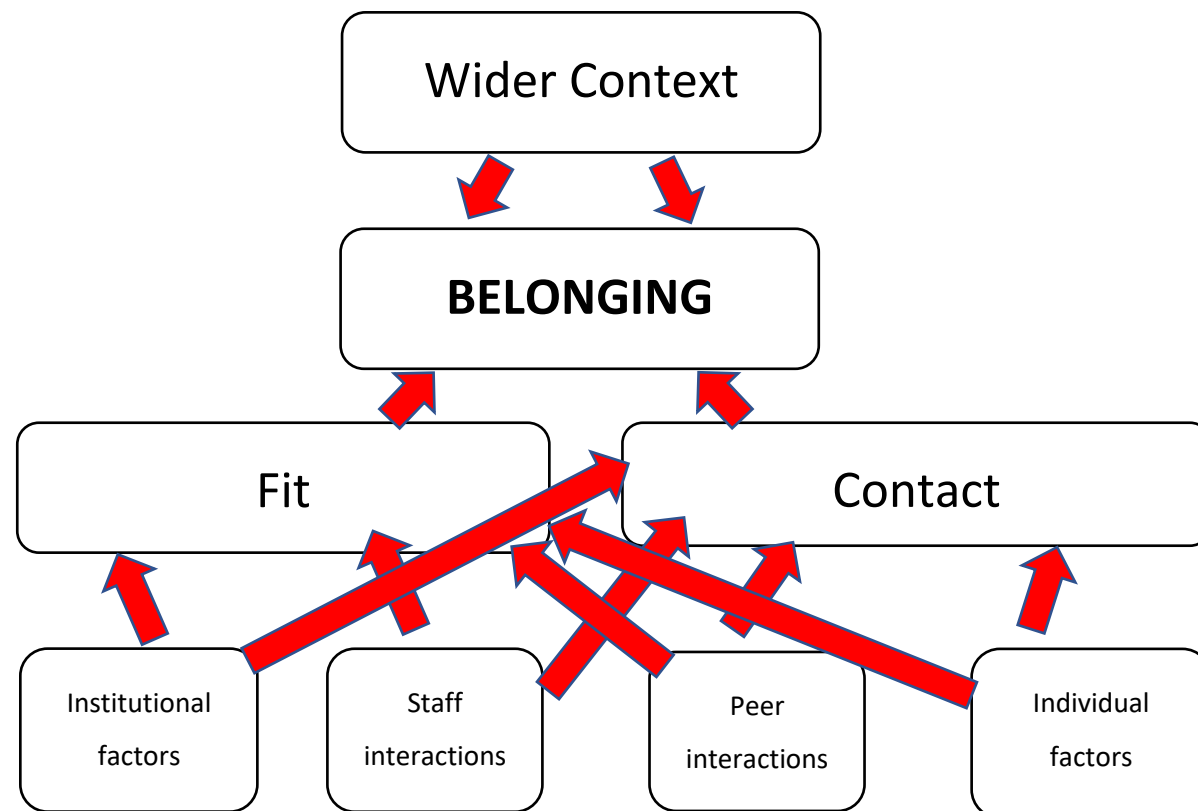
3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is about the philosophy, methodology and methods behind this research aligned to being able to answer the research questions. As outlined in the introduction chapter, this research is in response to a concern in the UK higher education sector about the 'awarding gap' for BME students and more broadly a concern about the experiences of BME students. This research is about the student experience and belonging and how White academics and managers can understand those student experiences. As such, I have chosen an interpretivist approach based on narrative inquiry. The data collection method was narrative interviews and the analysis used a holistic approach to narrative including the use of creative non-fiction and fictionalised accounts. This chapter will explain these choices and the methods used.

The first section will discuss the interpretivist research paradigm and how it connects to narrative inquiry and includes a creative non-fiction story of my own rationale for the approach to this research. The second section explores narrative and narrative inquiry with a focus on the difference between event-centred and experience-centred narrative. Subsequent sections deal with the practicalities of methods from data collection, to data analysis and data reporting. These sections link the chosen paradigm and approach with the specific methods chosen. Finally, I will debate the ethical considerations in this research related to the methods chosen and the sensitivity of the research topic.

3.2 Interpretation: "If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending"

(Atwood 1985:39)

This section title highlights two important points I want to emphasise in the methodology chapter. The first is that Atwood, a Booker prize winning writer, throughout the novel *A Handmaid's Tale*, makes frequent reference to the nature of narratives. The protagonist is telling us in this quote that as the storyteller, she has control over the story. She can shape the story and present the reader with what she chooses to reveal. This highlights the constructed and interpreted nature of narratives.

Secondly, narrative research as a methodology also has choices in terms of the paradigms that support the collection and analysis of data. Choosing narrative research does not limit the researcher to a particular paradigm and so the choice of paradigm is an important aspect to address in this chapter.

Most authors on the research process advocate that researchers should clearly state the ontology, epistemology and methodology that underpins their research (e.g. Grix 2004); broadly speaking the paradigms that underpin the research. These paradigms form a *"basic set of beliefs that guides action"* (Guba 1990:17) in the research process.

However, this can be problematic because there is a bewildering range of perspectives, approaches and terminology (Crotty 1998, Gray 2014). Often the same research terminology is used differently dependent on the social science discipline (Grix 2004) or even within a discipline. This is particularly problematic in educational research, which has been influenced by a range of other disciplines such as psychology and sociology.

Narrative is at the centre of this work for reasons explained in the introduction and further elucidated later in this chapter. Narrative has influenced the research approach at all levels. Kim (2016) offers an approach to theory that helps situate narrative research within wider paradigms. She describes theory at three levels: Macro, Meso and Micro. Narrative research sits at the meso-level; it is a theoretical framework at the methodological level (Kim 2016). Different narrative researchers, whilst employing similar methodology, may be influenced by different paradigms at the macro-level of theory.

As already stated in the literature review and in explaining the nature of belonging, I think that any real understanding of a person's belonging cannot be measured in a survey but starts with experience and their interpretation of their experiences. Belonging is personal, a perception, and is created in many different ways dependant on individual preferences. This is my reason for choosing to take an interpretivist stance at the macro-level.

One of the early definitions of interpretivism as distinct from objectivist and positivist approaches is the difference between *Verstehen* (understanding) and *Erklären* (explaining). Positivist paradigms favour explanatory approaches to knowledge whereas interpretivist paradigms favour understanding (Buchanan 1998, Creswell 2014). My research questions are framed around understanding. I am not looking for causality but rather an interpretation of how participants make sense of their university experience.

Within this interpretivist stance, there are a range of different approaches that could be taken. Interpretivist researchers prefer qualitative methods (Willis 2007). There is a coherence between an interpretivist view of the world and qualitative data as a means of understanding that view (Thanh and Thanh 2015). Yet, this still leaves a wide range of choices about which qualitative methods to use.

3.2.1. Possible methodological approaches

Early on in my thinking about the research I found critical race theory (CRT) (e.g. Delgado and Stefancic, 2012) to be a powerful way of educating myself and thinking about the topic. Based on reading methodology literature, ethnography and critical theory were two approaches that were able to draw upon CRT and were considered at the start of the research. Kim (2016) identifies that ethnography, critical theory and critical race theory are all paradigms that have been used in narrative research.

I rejected critical theory early on because Bohman (2005) argues that critical theory "must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation." This is not the intention of the research or the research questions. Clandinin and Rosiek (2009) describe narrative research as having a pragmatic relational ontology that recognises individual lived experiences as a fundamental interpretivist reality. They contrast this with a critical theory approach which rejects individual experience as influenced by macro-social structures which are the important objects of research. For a critical theorist larger structures influence individual experience. For the narrative researcher, individual experiences influence larger social structures as much as the opposite (Clandinin and Rosiek 2009). Whilst I find critical theory personally appealing it does not seem to help with the specific focus of my research.

CRT places an emphasis on experiential knowledge (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012) which aligns with my research aims and questions. Ethnographic or auto ethnographic methodologies tend to be favoured by educational researchers using CRT. Ethnography's focus on the social construct of culture (Marshall and Rossmann 2011) ties into CRT's notions of experiential knowledge and the socially constructed notion of race. Ethnography would have been effective as a way of generating data to answer the research questions. Observing the students' experiences and reactions in detail and seeing incidents at first hand would have been useful data to help answer questions about belonging.

However, I decided that ethnography was unsuitable for four key reasons. Firstly, as a White researcher I am uncomfortable with an ethnographic approach given the topic of the research. Historically, there are issues with the idea of observing and speaking for the culture of others, particularly as a White scholar (Chadderton 2012, Tuhiwai Smith 1999). The second was my own role within higher education. My role as an educational developer, someone responsible for the development of staff, creates a tension in being present in certain student settings, for example formal taught sessions. I have previously taken part in a staff-student shadowing activity and found navigating access to other colleagues' classrooms was

problematic. My third issue with ethnography is the level of immersion required. Whilst attending on site teaching and study would have been feasible, I was also interested in the social and home contexts of the students. Observing these aspects of the student experience would have been very time consuming (given I was also working full time) and potentially disrupting for the students and may have changed the dynamics of those outside spaces. Fourthly, I am interested in individual differences in belonging and highlighting the diversity of students' experiences rather than a single cultural approach to belonging. Ethnography studies culture-sharing groups (Cresswell 2007) and sometimes struggles with capturing the complexity of individual stories (Cook 2013) which is the area I wanted to focus on.

Having rejected one of the key methodologies of CRT, I was also wary of using CRT to inform the research due to ongoing debates about the topic. Critical theories in general often provoke vehement hostility towards them (Kincheloe and McLaren 2000). Marxist scholars argue that the focus of inequality reveals itself more strongly in class differences rather than racial differences and therefore the focus on race in CRT is problematic (e.g. Cole 2009, Hill 2009). David Gillborn, a critical race theorist, has written often about the critiques on CRT (e.g. Gillborn 1998 and 2009). In the end, it was a consideration of my potential audience that persuaded me to step away from CRT. Whilst I personally find CRT a useful tool for viewing race inequality, it is clear that others do not and I do not think that CRT offers the most persuasive approach for my largely White academic audience. As Lingayah, Khan and McIntosh (2018:16) note when discussing race equality "language and messaging matters, and can be significant in persuading audiences." The language of CRT can be alienating for some White people.

One final approach I considered was phenomenology. Like this research phenomenology starts with experience and subjectivity (Husserl 1982). However, my research is not concerned with the essence of the experience of belonging for BME students. Belonging in this research is used as a lens to see how different BME students navigate White spaces and how White institutions could improve those spaces for BME students. Therefore, phenomenology was rejected.

The approach that I did decide on was narrative inquiry within an interpretivist paradigm directed by the theoretical framework outlined in my literature review. This was in part influenced by my role and my reaction to working on diversity which I am now going to outline as a short vignette. This vignette outlines the start of my journey to this research topic and the methodologies and methods employed.

3.2.2.　The Red Flag

Imagine, if you can, a nondescript room deep in the heart of a university. Its white walls unadorned. The harsh light of fluorescent tubes bounces off the tables set out in a rectangle. Around the tables sit a group of academics and administrators in animated discussion. For those familiar with the territory, you may have figured out correctly that we are in a university committee meeting. For the rest of you, pray to whichever higher powers you believe in, that you never have to become familiar with such a scene. However, if you were in this meeting you could look down at your papers and see a table of figures with a red flag. You run your finger along the row containing the red flag and note that this row is showing data about BME attainment. Taking your attention away from the papers, you start to listen to the conversations going on around you. One of the academics is saying something about social class. "Surely our BME students are more likely to come from poorer backgrounds," he says, "we need to provide more support for poorer students. This will reduce the attainment gap."

"The problem is we don't have enough data to say for sure that this is a real issue," pipes up his neighbour. "The gap seems to change significantly year on year. Maybe it is just due to differences in the cohort."

"Yes, in our department the gap halved this year without us doing anything particularly special to address the issue."

"OK, OK," interjects the pro-vice-chancellor. "I think you are right. We need to investigate further before we can draw any conclusions and come up with some concrete actions to take us forward. However, we do need to keep monitoring and come up with some way of addressing this. We can't have red flags[1]!"

This is a fictionalised account that summarises many of the committee meetings I have been involved with. For me, it sums up institutional and national failure to properly acknowledge and address differential awarding outcomes for different ethnic groups. We always seem to need more data. Questioning the statistics is always an excuse for not wanting to challenge White privilege.

So, I get invited onto more committees to 'deal' with the issue. A sop to keep me occupied and the institution from taking real action. As I sit in those committees, frustration pulsing through my body, I wonder how it might be possible to show to a largely White audience what BME students have to confront and to get them to act. "Audiences – including policymakers – do not necessarily respond to facts or the weight of evidence" (Lingayah, Khan and McIntosh 2018:16). The academic debate surrounding me seems at odds with the strong emotions I am feeling. Yes, data matters but so do people. Maybe change was not happening because it was the wrong type of data to really bring about change. What then might be the right kind of data? For me, I felt that stories were the way forward. As human beings we are

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[1] Many UK universities use a system called RAG; Red, Amber & Green, in reports to highlight how well they are doing on various metrics. Red stands for below benchmark or a serious concern. An area that is red is often described as 'red-flagged' or as having a 'red-flag'.

storied creatures who lead storied lives (Booker 2004). *"We are as a species addicted to stories"* (Gottschall 2012: xiv). Narratives are a powerful part of our understanding of the world. Maybe narratives can help convince where the current data does not. We need to talk, tell stories and share experiences especially when White academics and managers don't have first-hand experience of the challenges facing BME students.

Why do I use a story of my own experiences in this way? It is because this is the context of and background to my research. Secondly, it highlights my approach to this research: narrative, emotional, interpretivist. And finally, it reveals something about me, the researcher. These are the elements which will be discussed in this chapter.

The chapters that come later will illustrate the stories of the students who participated in this research but this chapter is the story of my research. The identity and background of the researcher inevitably drives the way we conduct research (Malterud 2001). The way the research is carried out is intrinsically informed by how we think and who we are (Clough and Nutbrown 2002).

In concluding this section, I was very conscious of the words of warning from Kim (2016) who reminds us that our theories and paradigms should not act as a 'Procrustean Bed'. Students have their own theories and perspectives that may be different to the researchers and we risk 'chopping-off' or stretching their stories as Procrustes did to his guests so they would fit exactly into his bed. The next section will discuss narrative and narrative inquiry in more detail.

3.3 Narrative

This section will look at what I mean by narrative, the nature of narrative inquiry and my approach to narrative inquiry. Narrative is an ordered construction of how life is perceived (Webster and Mertova 2007) which seems well suited to the nature of belonging and to help to answer research questions one and three. Narrative also helps to understand human actions (Webster and Mertova 2007, MacIntyre 2007), the why question, (Reissman 2008) and so can illuminate the second research question about how students and those around them act to create a sense of belonging. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that experience happens narratively and research into educational experiences should be studied narratively. Narrative is the way that we make meaningful sense of the world and our actions within it (Bruner 1991, Polkinghorne 1988). I am aware that not everyone feels that all humans understand their experiences narratively (Strawson 2004). However, I am what Strawson (2004) would call diachronic and narrative in my understanding of self; I have an overarching

sense of narrative in my life and see past and future me as part of an ongoing sense of self. As this chapter outlines, the research is very much influenced by the researcher and the choice of narrative not only feels like a good way to conduct this research, for the reasons I outline in this chapter, but also has personal resonance. From a practical perspective, it may be that some participants are 'episodic' in their sense of self (Strawson 2004) but that does not mean they are not able to recount stories of their university experiences even if they do not see the person in them as part of their current self. Therefore, I do not see this as a barrier to conducting a narrative study.

3.3.1.   Definition of narrative

There is some debate over the differences between story and narrative and what constitutes a narrative (Riessman 2008). For the purpose of this research, and following from Polkinghorne (1988), story and narrative are used synonymously. I am aware that others may argue that there is a subtle difference. For example, Frank (2000) notes that we tell stories not narratives and that narrative is the underlying structure of a story which the teller may not even be aware of. Given this research is not about the structure of narratives (more of which I will explain later in this chapter) the distinction is not relevant here and even Frank admits that he often uses story and narrative interchangeably.

Specifically, in this research narratives refer to personal narratives of the experiences of students at university. These narratives could be written, such as in a diary or blog, or spoken, as in an interview situation. As I will explain later in this chapter, I have chosen interviews as my data collection and so subsequent discussion of narratives will centre on spoken personal narratives. Within a definition of spoken personal narratives there are more or less strict interpretations. Labov's (1972) structural analysis approach equates narrative with specific events. However, many narrative researchers see this as too restrictive and take a broader meaning (e.g. Squire 2013). The definition used in this thesis draws on that broader meaning that describes any speech that has sequence and consequence as a narrative regardless of structure:

> "Whatever the content, stories demand the consequential linking of events and ideas. Narrative shaping entails imposing a meaningful pattern on what would otherwise be random and disconnected". Salmon and Riessman (2008: 78)

3.3.2.   Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry is still a 'field in the making' (Chase 2005:651) and there is no single narrative inquiry methodology. However, there are certain features that are coherent across much of narrative inquiry research. The use of language to tell our narratives means that

stories are not a facsimile of our experiences (like a video recording) but are symbolic interpretations of experience (Hendry 2010) and 're-presentations' of experiences in story form (Squire 2008). Because narratives are socially constructed, they are positioned in relation to an audience in order to engage and convince that audience of the veracity of our experiences (Riessman 2008). As a result, we constantly reconstruct our stories so they are rarely exactly the same on each telling (Squire 2008, Josselson 2006). In short, the nature of narrative means stories constructed by the teller from experiences and open to interpretation.

This means that this research involves multiple acts of interpretation:

- The student interprets the purpose of the interview situation and my role and chooses to talk about some things and not others.
- In the immediacy of the interview, I interpret what is being said and ask further questions based on that interpretation.
- In my analysis of the recordings and transcripts, I make similar but also different interpretations of what was said.
- In writing the thesis yet more interpretation happens through the writing process.
- You the reader are engaged in interpreting what is written here based on your own perceptions.

As a consequence, the narrative researcher needs to pay attention to the nature of narrative and to think narratively (Phillion 2002) in the research process. As an example, during interviews, the researcher has to be aware of how the story is being constructed and notice what is said in order to probe in more detail; what Josselson (2004 based on Ricœur 1970) might describe as the hermeneutics of faith. However, the researcher also needs to be aware of that which is not spoken or that which is downplayed (the hermeneutics of suspicion, Josselson 2004). The consequence is that a reflexive stance is needed and I kept detailed records of decisions made during the research process.

3.3.3. Event-centred versus experience-centred narrative

Whilst there are broad similarities in narrative inquiry, there are also methodological differences. One difference is experience-centred versus event-centred narrative research (Squire 2008). The distinction is the extent to which the focus is on the 'told' or the 'telling' (Mishler 1995). Event-centred narrative research, drawn mainly from Labov (1972), focuses on the telling: the way the story is recounted. Analysing narratives this way is often described as structural analysis (Mishler 1995, Riessman 2008). Experience-centred narrative research focuses more on the told: the content of the story. Each approach has their benefits and

drawbacks. A focus on critical events, means that the event-centred approach can be advantageous in dealing with the complexity of narrative analysis (Webster and Mertova 2007). However, the more holistic experience-centred approach is potentially richer and more comprehensive (Patterson 2008, Squire 2008).

For many narrative researchers, experience is the key to understanding narratives and narrative research (Kim 2016). Within an experience-centred approach there are two different ways of looking at the narratives. Drawing on Mishler's (1995) categorisation, Squire (2008) describes them as either being interested in content (similar to Mischler's 'realist' category) or context (similar to Mischler's 'functional' category). Riessman (2008) uses different terminology to describe the differences: thematic for a content focus and dialogic / performance for a context focus.

Although researchers are all in broad agreement about possible divisions between narrative methods, the exact nature of the differences between methods is subtle and open to interpretation. I have created a table below which for me summarises the three categories of narrative research.

Table 1: Comparison of different definitions of narrative research categorised into event-centred and experienced-centred narratives

	Event-centred narratives	Experience-centred narratives 1	Experience-centred narratives 2
Mishler (1995)	Structural	Realist	Functional
Squire (2008)	Structure (narrative syntax)	Content (narrative semantics)	Context (narrative pragmatics)
Riessman (2008)	Structural	Thematic	Dialogic / performance

This research will focus on experience in terms of content and themes; it is the content of students' stories showing how they belong in HE that are important. However, that is not to exclude the context completely especially the racial aspects of the students studying in a predominantly White institution. A content focus aligns more closely with the framework outlined in the literature review where the aspects of the framework, such as staff interactions and peer interactions etc., can be considered as content themes. However, these narrative themes differ from thematic analysis in other qualitative methods such as grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis because the data is not as fragmented (Riessman

2008). The narrative whole is important so that the sequence of the narrative is maintained, and the story is kept intact (Riessman 2008).

Having discussed the philosophical and methodological aspects of this research the next section deals with the more practical aspects of methods and the choices which were made in carrying out the research

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1. Site of study

The first choice to be made was choosing a data collection site. The rationale for this research was to explore the experiences of BME students in what might be termed a predominantly White institution. The research that has been undertaken about the experiences of BME students in the UK has tended to focus on universities with a highly diverse student population centred around major conurbations such as London or Birmingham (e.g. Read, Archer and Leathwood 2003, Dhanda 2010). There has been some limited research in the UK looking at the student experiences of BME students at universities with little ethnic diversity (e.g. Davies and Garrett 2012 or Jessop and Williams 2009). My research will focus on students at a university with a BME student population between these two extremes but still with a majority White student intake. The site chosen has a similar proportion of BME students at undergraduate level as the national UK average (currently 22.7%, Advance HE 2018). The majority of BME students study at post-92 institutions (ECU 2008) which is also the same as the chosen university site. Importantly, the site is outside any of the UK's largest conurbations. This is significant because then aspects of the wider environment in which the students are situated, such as the city or workplaces, are also predominantly White. This is in contrast to sites where most of the similar research has taken place which have large areas that are not predominantly White.

3.4.2. Research participants

The second decision was about the criteria for choosing participants. As already stated in the introduction, a lot of research has focused on initial belonging for first year undergraduates and the first year experience in general has been well researched. For this research, I was more interested in sustained belonging that lasts beyond the induction period. This period often gives a false impression of the overall undergraduate experience because universities put a lot of effort into organising events and making students welcome which may not be sustained. Secondly, I was not looking at any specific minority ethnic group but more interested in getting a range of different experiences.

The inclusion criteria are:

- Must be a current home, undergraduate student on any course at the chosen university but not in their first semester at the university (with a preference for final year students who could reflect on a longer period of time at university.)
- Must self-identify as from a BME background.

The complexity and detail created in collecting and analysing narrative interviews suggests a small sample size (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The focus on understanding the detail of student belonging takes precedent over capturing multiple stories trying to seek common themes and saturation. The initial plan was to conduct 8 to 10 interviews.

However, after obtaining ethics approval (further discussion of this later in the chapter), recruitment of participants proved challenging. Institutional limits on emails to students meant I was unable to directly email students about the study. The only direct electronic route to students was an opt-in mailing list for research participants which proved ineffective. As a result, I used two strategies; direct to students via physical means such as posters and via relevant student societies and indirectly via academic colleagues who were able to mention the study in lectures or online. It was the latter which provided me with all my participants. This was not a surprise to me. In previous work (Currant 2015), I had noted a reluctance at the research site for BME students to come forward to talk about this topic without first having built a relationship with the researcher. I do not work directly with undergraduates so working through academic colleagues meant that they had built a relationship of trust with students and were able to refer that trust onto me.

Ideally, I would have liked a larger pool of volunteers in order to be able to randomly choose a selection but over the course of a year of recruiting only seven students volunteered. I realise that this may have biased who took part and may have influenced the findings. However, I think there were a broad range of views and experiences, both positive and negative from the students interviewed, as will be discussed in the later chapters. Given the sensitive nature of the topic it was important that students were willing participants wanting to tell their stories and had not been influenced to come forward by others. It was important that the students were willing to talk openly and not be afraid of being able to voice any concerns they had. I have included an excerpt from my reflective research diary on my thoughts during recruitment in appendix 9.1. The details of each student and their stories are in the next chapter.

3.4.3. Data collection method: interviews

There is a range of methods that allow for the collection of narratives. However, interviews usually form the backbone of most narrative inquiry (Riessman 2008). In addition to interviews, focus groups allow for narratives to emerge (Freidus 2002) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also suggest a range of field texts that support narrative inquiry. These can include participant observations, notes on interviews or focus groups immediately after the event and reflective accounts sometime after the event. Existing documentary evidence such as policy documents and letters can also be analysed narratively. Although traditionally reliant on spoken or written data, narrative inquiry can also encompass visual data such as video and photographs. The key is that all the forms of data need to be able to tell a story which can be analysed narratively.

I was interested in the students' stories that had not been told so felt that interviews and focus groups were the best options for data collection as I felt reflective written accounts (or blogs) might be onerous particularly for final year students (the key participant group) approaching their final assessments.

Focus groups tend to create collective narratives. This social aspect of constructing narratives has been found to be important by Duster (2000) when discussing race-related topics. He described a 'synergistic feature' to the focus group discussions that revealed more information than the interviews. In a sense, focus group members were performing their stories for their peers rather than the researcher. However, that collective narrative may suppress narratives of difference within the group. With my focus on stories of difference and individual belonging, I felt that interviews were better suited to my research than focus groups. I wanted to resist seeing BME students as a homogenous group with a set of common issues to be addressed. As Jessop and Williams (2009:96) note

> "ethnic categories have limited value in shedding light on the twenty-first century student experience, against the backdrop of a changing student demography, and the variety of ways in which students self-define mothers, commuters, residential, mature, working, male, female etc."

I used interviews which allowed in-depth insight into the complexity (Cousins 2009) of BME students' experiences and individual difference. This was supported by a reflective field text that recorded my thoughts and the processes used during data collection and analysis.

There are different types of focus in narrative interviews. Life history methods such as biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM) have an open interview style that looks at a person's whole life. My research is defined in terms of what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call the three-dimensional narrative landscape of temporality, sociality and place. My narrative

focus is on stories bounded in a limited time frame, space and place, i.e. the students' time at university, their social ties whilst studying and being in this particular city for study. However, that is not to say that stories outside that boundary did not emerge. This highlights the need for a flexible approach to interviews to allow the participant to tell their story as they see fit. The in-depth interviews focused on eliciting narratives of students' personal experiences of university and belonging using the approach of Schütze (1977 as outlined in Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000): Initiation, Main Narration, Questioning Phase, Concluding Talk (see appendix 9.7).

As Mertens (2010) reminds us in interviews the researcher is really the instrument not the interview schedule and hence the need to think narratively (Phillion 2002). This is something I had foremost in my mind when interviewing. My job was to encourage stories from participants and let them construct them in their own way.

To start, I used an open question about their experiences at university. In many cases, this elicited lots of talk and stories from the participants but in other cases, students needed a bit more specific questioning about aspects of their university experience such as peer interactions or interactions with academic staff. After listening to participant responses, I would then use clarifying questions picking up on words that the students had used. For example:

> Participant: "Us three ethnic minority students were supporting each other, the three of us, and then the rest of the group, they were together… (further 3 minutes of talk)"
>
> Interviewer: "So just to take you back a sec, you said there's three of you supporting each other?"
>
> Participant: "Now it's more than three, because the other students started. I think now it's about five. It's five, and one of them just became a student rep. She is a student rep this year, so she's, you know, she's from an ethnic minority, so we're actually happy that she is…"

During the interview, I would cycle through the initiation, narration and questioning phase multiple times to elicit different stories of the student's experiences at university using my framework to direct the initiation questions and be guided by the specific experiences mentioned by the students.

The interviews took place on a campus chosen by the student in order to use the environment to help prompt the students to think about their university experiences. They took place in either meeting rooms or classrooms. Interviews were audio recorded and I took written notes of key words and phrases spoken by the student so that I could go back and ask

clarifying questions. Interviews took between 30- and 80-minutes depending on how much students had to say and were transcribed afterwards.

After each interview, the participants were asked to complete two short self-report measures of Belonging and Attachment (a closely related concept), both of which have been specifically written for university students:

- France, Finney, and Swerdzewski (2010) - University Attachment Scale (see appendix 9.8.1)

- Yorke (2014) - Belongingness scale (see appendix 9.8.2).

The purpose of this was to provide extra context to help understand each students' overall perception and feeling about the university. Although the scales were not directly related to narrative research, the results were used as a compliment to the interview data to help aid interpretation and analysis. For example, responses on feeling respected by staff members in the department could be matched with the stories the participants told about staff interactions or their sense of feeling at home at the university could be used to help interpret peer interactions. The scales were used in a similar way to a 'member check' that allowed me to check my interpretations against the perceptions of belonging that the participants reported. The scales also provided additional useful information that helped frame the narratives of the participants, especially the question on close friends. These two scales were used because they are two of very few scales that have the specific university focus to the questions.

3.5 Analysis

Narrative data can be 'messy' and difficult to analyse (Kim 2016), so my approach to analysing the data drew on a range of different methods to achieve my desired goals and make sense of the messiness. The first goal in the analysis was to retain the stories as complete entities rather than fragmenting them through coding and to retain the sense of the whole person rather than reducing the interviews to a series of quotes. To achieve this, once the interviews were transcribed and before any formal analysis, I wanted to start to make sense of the interviews by writing down my immediate thoughts and memories of the interviews and the impressions of the students as a form of diary (example in appendix 9.3). This allowed me to step back from the detail of what was spoken and try to see the big picture. It gave me a text to keep the 'whole student' in mind for later on when more involved in the detail. I then borrowed from the approach taken in socio-cultural narrative analysis which attempts to resist the application of frameworks and the breaking down of the stories (Grbich 2015). At the same

time, I kept in mind Kim's (2016) idea of 'flirtation'. She describes this as free association, playing with ideas and being sceptical. For me, this was about thinking of different ways the participants' stories could be interpreted and not restricting myself to preconceived ideas or imposing my own notions. These approaches provided an overarching set of principles in dealing with the data.

Additionally, to this and at a more practical level, the narratives were analysed using a process based on the idea of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction (Jossellson 2011). Construction occurs during the interview and the transcription. Deconstruction is about understanding the stories and the themes and ideas present. Reconstruction is about re-storying and the final interpretation.

For the deconstruction and reconstruction, I was guided by Grbich's (2015) approach that suggests five steps in the analysis of data:

- Identify boundaries
- Explore content and context
- Compare different peoples' stories
- Link stories
- Interpret stories

When interviewing research participants, you are dealing with the spoken word of participants who are expressing their stories 'on the spot'. As a result, their stories can jump, stop halfway through, go on a tangent and are not neat delineated stories that you would find in carefully constructed writing. Therefore, this necessitates the requirement for identifying the boundaries. Although I am more interested in content rather than structure, Labov and Waletzky's (1967) structural analysis of narratives provides a useful tool in identifying the boundaries of stories (Paterson 2013).

Labov and Waletzky (1967) proposed that oral narratives have the following structural elements: Abstract (summary of story or story set-up), Orientation (the context of the story), Complication (the main body of the story), Evaluation (commentary about the meaning of the story to the teller), Resolution (conclusion) and Coda (not always present but bringing back to the present and connecting the story to other events).

In my analysis, these elements were used broadly to help identify boundaries. Firstly, I located the participant's abstract, which often occurs at the start of a story. Then I separated out the evaluation element from the referential elements: Orientation, Complication and Resolution. Evaluation tends to get woven into the story, but also the narrator steps outside

the story briefly to evaluate (Labov 1972). Evaluation is very much the core of the narrative (Riessman 1993), its purpose is to express "the point of the story and crucially, how the narrator wants to be understood" (Paterson 2013: 32). Identifying the evaluation allows you to understand the narrator's perspective on the story. The referential elements are the actual story itself although Patterson (2013) disputes that simplistic interpretation arguing that referential elements can in fact be included to support the point of the narrative rather than being actual events.

However, Labov and Waletzky's approach has a narrow definition of narrative and the framework is particularly difficult to use with fragmented or partial stories (Bold 2013). There are also other types of stories not just specific events that occurred to the narrator. Examples include stories that happened to friends or family or stories that might have happened (e.g. if I had not done this then I might have ended up…). Therefore, data does not always conform to the structure of Labov and Waletzky (1967). This was clearly evidenced with my own data, what I did was try to identify the start and end first (abstract if present, orientation and resolution), then find the bulk of the story (complicating action) and then pull out the evaluation elements. There were also large parts of the transcript which did not fit this event structure but nevertheless was storied and useful data. For example, in Michelle's stories the chronology of events was not always clear and events merged into one another (See appendix 9.3.1). In many places, for example for Kingsley, a lot of his commentary was not about a specific event:

> "I really dislike when ethnic minorities segregate themselves from everywhere else… just integrate and mix with everyone else."

Although not a specific story this was clearly an important aspect of his experiences of university and his approach to being at university.

The next stage in the analysis was to explore the content and context and start to interpret meaning in the stories. This involved writing impressionistic notes and annotations on the transcripts followed by summarising the key aspects of each story and identifying themes (see appendix 9.4 for example). Themes in this sense are not outcomes of coding or the traditional qualitative thematic analysis but a way of analysing longer pieces of data than coding would do in an attempt to keep the context of the data (Saldaño 2016). One key issue that needs to be addressed was that the elements of a single story can be temporally spread across the interview; parts of the story can resurface and gain elaboration at different times in the interview. To resolve this, the next step was to take the more holistic approach of socio-cultural analysis and group together lines from the transcript that are linked by a single theme

to form a scene (Grbich 2015). The result of these two processes is that the interview transcript is rearranged into a series of 'scenes' that focus on a particular topic.

Once I had a good sense of the individual stories and had started to reconstruct those, the next stage was to compare stories across different participants. I was looking at whether there were similar stories or themes. Part of this stage was thinking about which stories would best illustrate the ideas being expressed and the themes discussed. At this stage, the idea of the composite story (Solórzano and Yosso 2002) becomes important. Can different participants' stories be combined to form a single composite story together that better illustrates the findings?

At this stage in the process the analysis, interpretation and the reporting of findings become inextricably linked. In wanting to maintain the holistic nature of the participant stories, decisions must be made about which stories to use. Not every single story can be used in its whole form (Bold 2013). Some stories will be chosen that also illustrate other stories or parts of other stories. Sparkes (2002:15) argues this point further:

> "…we can no longer relegate the production of our scholarly works to an apparently mechanical and minor aspect of the research, that is, the 'writing up' stage. Quite simply, writing and representation cannot be divorced from analysis, and each should be thought of as analytic in its own right."

3.6 Data Reporting

The final stage then is how to reconstruct and present the data to the intended audience. The idea of the audience has been the integral part of this whole research. The Red Flag story I wrote at the start of this chapter is about the audience. My own experience was facing institutional inaction about race equality issues and I felt that one approach was to move away from numbers towards understanding the human stories that sit underneath data about 'awarding gaps'. Narrative was for me the way to achieve this. However, it is more than just collecting and analysing narratives it is also about presenting narratives to the intended audience of White academics and managers to bring about an emotional engagement with the data collected and get them to act. They are the people who have the power to improve the situation. It should not just be the role of BME students and staff to do the work to help White academics and managers understand the issues but White staff, like myself, need to do so also. Eddo-Lodge (2018, loc.21) describes the "emotional disconnect that White people display when a person of colour articulates their experience." Sometimes White people take words

from other White people more seriously; White people have to have conversations about race amongst themselves.

Tracy (2010:844) identifies resonance as one of her eight key measures of quality in qualitative research.

> "I use the term resonance to refer research's ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience… researchers can engage in practices that will promote empathy, identification, and reverberation of the research by readers who have no direct experience with the topic discussed."

This last point is particularly true of many colleagues in higher education with positions of power to influence what happens in the university; they have no direct experience of this research topic. One of Tracy's (2010) methods of achieving resonance is through 'aesthetic merit.' As a result, I felt that the use of creative non-fiction and fictionalised composite counter stories (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002) would be the way that I could achieve this. Rather than only using quotes taken from the interviews or counting the number of occurrences of a theme or idea, creative non-fiction and fictionalised stories will help to show the emotional impact of the student experiences and sense of belonging. The purpose is to create accessible, vivid and creative texts that engage the reader on both an emotional as well as an intellectual level by tapping into humanity's inherent affinity for stories. As I was creating the stories, I tested them out at conferences and I noted that Black colleagues found that they resonated with their understandings of the student experiences. This gave me confidence tin the accuracy and representativeness of the stories and that they were not being distorted by my own perspectives.

'Vividness' and 'creativity' are two more possible measures of quality according to Whittemore, Chase and Mandle's (2001). Kim (2016:140) notes that for decades narrative researchers have used creative non-fiction and fictionalised accounts to "speak to the heart of the reader's social consciousness" that can be a more effective means of describing lived experiences than simple factual exposition.

Researchers have used a range of other devices borrowed from fiction to report their data. Clough (2002) for example, argues that fictional writing has a legitimate place in educational research. However, unlike much creative fiction, these 'fictionalised' stories are based on real people and real events (Carless and Sparkes 2007). Creative non-fiction and fictionalised accounts in a research context draw on the words of participants but presents them in a more coherent fashion. As Kim (2016) acknowledges, any narrative research involves narrative smoothing whereby the researcher renders the participant's account in a coherent,

engaging manner that will appeal to the reader in a way that the disjointed nature of the interview transcript will not. This was the final stage in my analysis.

To illustrate, the *My Stomach Churns* story in the next chapter was creative non-fiction based on a single real event using Janice's words, my words and the moments shortly before and during the interview. The *Dear Diary* story was a fictionalised account based on a series of events outlined by Melissa but with fictional elements added to mould and join different parts into a single narrative.

This approach was used to supplement the use of quotes drawn directly from the transcript to give that more vivid picture. I realise that in the process of creating these stories that they are based on my interpretations. I tried to keep them true and recognisable to the students but their purpose was about the impact on the audience and their ability to bring about change.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Clough (2002:92) considers that we 'ask about an inquiry, not "Is it qualitative or quantitative?" but "Is it moral?"' BERA (2011) outlines six responsibilities to participants that are relevant to my research: voluntary informed consent, openness, right to withdraw, detriment arising from participation, privacy and disclosure. All of these elements were considered in my ethics submission which was successfully given approval by the university research ethics committee (UREC). Once participants had volunteered to be interviewed, they were given the participant information sheet (appendix 9.6) and the consent form (appendix 9.5). Participants were given my contact details and told that they could withdraw at any point. Participants were then asked to choose their own pseudonym for the purposes of anonymity and confidentiality. This is particularly important in this research as the number of BME students in some parts of the university is small and there is a risk of identification. Therefore, in reporting this research, as well as using a pseudonym, I have not given precise ages or specific course details for the students. This is also why I have not included full transcripts in the appendices; I cannot guarantee that the transcripts (even if I tried to redact portions) would not make it easy for someone to identify the students.

Once the interview had taken place and been transcribed students were offered the chance to review the transcript. Students were also offered the chance to review any of the stories that I created. However, they did not take up this offer.

Besides the procedural ethical considerations described above, I was conscious during this research that both the topic and the methodology were challenging ethical areas that

needed to be approached carefully. Narrative inquiry is a complex, relational endeavour between researcher and participants requiring an 'ethical attitude' towards those relationships that transcends simple procedural aspects (Josselson 2007). Much of the ethics of the relationship is implicit. For example, how much detail participants reveal of their lives is implicit, hard to predict in advance and will differ with each participant. Simply ticking off the 'ethics' box and moving on is insufficient as ethics is an ongoing consideration throughout the research process. Josselson (2007) goes on to argue that all six responsibilities (BERA 2011) are somewhat simplistic and risk infantilising participants, for example in discussions around detriment and distress. Participants will reveal what they want to, they will shape the narrative in their own way dependant on the rapport that the researcher builds with them. What is required is a reflexive, considered ethical approach at all stages of the research that treats the participants and their stories with respect. There were two key areas that I spent a lot of time considering in advance of the data collection: the interview process and the analysis process. I will look at each of these in turn.

3.7.1.   The Interview Process

I felt that being able to conduct a good interview was an important ethical consideration such that students had a positive experience and the time they had given was used effectively. Within the interview process I felt that two aspects needed addressing: interview skills and race of interviewer effects. My skills as an interviewer were going to be crucial in the data collection, especially given that the interview was mostly unstructured (see interview schedule in appendix 9.7). Before conducting the interviews, I embarked on a level 5 coaching qualification. Coaching conversations require many of the same skills as conducting unstructured research interviews, such as developing rapport, deep listening skills, questioning skills and intuition (Starr 2011:83). Intuition can be important and Starr defines it as:

> "A coach may spot what's missing from the conversation…from a simple remark, they may unlock an issue…The way we explain this kind of behaviour is to call it intuition. Intuition is actually an ability we all have, and one we can develop into a skill."

This is similar to the idea of the hermeneutics of suspicion and of faith outlined earlier (Josselson 2004). The coaching course allowed me to enhance these skills and I feel capable of listening intently, having rapport and empathy, and using non-directive and open questions. I think the openness of the participants in speaking about challenging experiences illustrated that this personal development helped in the research.

The second consideration is that of 'race-of-interviewer effects.' As a White researcher, I interviewed students from different ethnic backgrounds. There has been considerable debate

around race-of-interviewer effects and 'racial matching' (researcher and participant being the same race) in interviews (Twine 2000, Gunaratnam 2003). Some arguments in support of racial matching were political rather than methodological in nature (Twine 2000). One key methodological argument to support racial matching is 'ethical sensitivity' (Papadopoulos and Lees 2002). This view is that racially matched researchers will have better access and co-operation, have a richer, insider perspective on the interview, and will have a genuine interest in the welfare of the community (Papadopoulos and Lees 2002). However, support for racial matching rests on problematic assumptions about the nature of race, as well as the nature of research and the researcher (Gunaratnam 2003). It is not a question of whether race of interviewer effects exist but rather in what circumstances might they occur (Gunaratnam 2003). An interviewer insensitive to culture, not willing to listen closely or using questions that make racial assumptions is likely to create these effects.

Researchers and participants bring with them complex ethnic identities (Gunaratnam 2003) as well as multiple other dimensions of identity (Troyna 1998) such as background, location, class and gender (Mirza 1998). Racial matching, at best, would be based on crude and broad racial categories and may not be the aspect of relevance in the relationship between participant and researcher. It can be helpful to have shared understandings but they can also hinder (Johnson-Bailey 1999); assumptions may be made about meaning and agreement by not having to be explicit.

For me personally, I reject the notion that I do not have genuine interest in the welfare of BME students and that creating "immutable boundaries between cultures" (Trahar 2011: 42) would hinder this work when its role is to create greater understanding of BME students' experiences for a largely White HE workforce. What appears more important is that I took an ethical stance that is reflexive, open with participants and involves listening and showing a genuine interest in participant stories.

There are ways that I conducted the interviews which help with the race-of-interviewer effects. Gunaratnam (2003) notes that questions asking for opinion cause greater bias than other types of questions. In narrative interviews the researcher asks open questions that invite narratives that focus on personal experience and not opinion. For example, "tell me about you first week of university?" invites the participant to tell that story as opposed to "Do you think you belong at University?" which may make the participant think about whether the question has some hidden racial assumptions and is opinion-based rather than experience-based.

3.7.2. The Analysis Process

The ethical considerations of the analysis are based on the nature of narrative (as already outlined in the earlier section) as open to interpretation, socially constructed 're-presentations'. Additionally, in using creative non-fiction and fictionalised accounts this issue of interpretation becomes even more explicit. What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to be explicit, so you the reader can make your own judgements about the research and its conclusions knowing that it is my interpretation that has been a crucial part of creating and analysing the data.

Our identity and our values are an integral aspect of interpretivist inquiry (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba 2013) and so argue that researchers need to consider the axiological underpinnings of our approach to research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). They (*ibid*) propose that the type of research I am doing is value-bound. Griffiths (1998) argues that instead of trying to take a dispassionate and objective approach to research you can improve the research by having a political or ethical position as long as this is acknowledged. This position in relation to research is not without its critics and remains somewhat controversial (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007). Educational researchers, such as Martyn Hammersley, have been critical of this approach to qualitative work in general (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) and particularly in relation to marginalised groups and anti-racist research (Hammersley 1998, Hammersley 2008). A 'partisan' approach to qualitative research can create a conflict between the researcher's beliefs and the data they collect (Gomm 1993) leading to a bias which impacts on the quality of the research.

The counter-argument is "that bias is not an inevitable consequence of political commitment" (Blair 1998:15). With one potential consequence of the objective approach being a defence of the status quo and an uncritical approach to educational research (Gillborn 1998). Given the topic of research, Denzin and Lincoln (2013) highlight the researcher as a 'multicultural subject' and argue that value-free inquiry is not realistic in social sciences.

The way out of this for the researcher is in reflexivity. The dialogic construction of narratives and the interpretivist nature of narrative analysis requires the researcher to take a reflexive approach and to record their own reflections, thoughts and processes during data collection and whilst analysing the data. I kept an online diary during the research process from recruitment (see appendix 9.1 for an example) and through the data analysis process (for an example of my reflections during data analysis see appendix 9.2 and 9.3). I then kept a paper diary during the writing up phase. I needed to be clear about my own positioning and values in relation to how the data is interpreted (Griffiths 1998, Josselson 2004). I needed to

make sure to present fictionalised stories that are based on participants' accounts and not biased by my own ethnicity and cultural context. As narratives are unique and unlikely to be easily open to corroboration, reflexivity and keeping detailed accounts of data collection and analysis also helps to bolster the case for the research being valid (Riessman 2008).

To illustrate the interpretation aspect, I am going to use an example from the analysis. This is from Salah's interview. Salah had mentioned not seeking help and initially I had interpreted this as related to issues of self-confidence, self-consciousness, ability and his dyslexia, based on the following:

> "...that's how, on a personal level, I felt about asking for help. ... I don't want to hinder someone. I don't want to expose my ignorance and that self-consciousness kicks in. Where you're like, oh this person will think I'm thick."

This was also influenced by similar issues expressed by Melissa and Janice. I felt there was a linked theme. However, on further reflection and analysis, the lack of help-seeking behaviour was more related to machismo, and Salah's self-image of what it meant to be a man. This opened a different theme and linked more to gendered behaviour about help-seeking that informed the 'Focus Group' story in section 5.3.2.

> "Q: So, you said, you find it difficult to ask for help, would you be able to tell me a little bit more about that?
>
> A: Yes, I can, it's, I guess coming from a background, whether it's ethnic or macho-ness, you kind of want to be able to do things, or you're taught that you have to learn on the job and do it"

Salah does struggle with written English because of dyslexia and being in a home where English is a second language but that part of his story is more about overcoming challenge and having pride in being able to achieve despite the struggles he has with writing. *"How did I come, I'm still, I'm amazed I've come this far, I failed all my A Levels and I'm in University in my last year!"*

This example highlights the need not to treat individual quotes in isolation of the whole. 'Cherry-picking' quotes to suit a purpose is often a criticism levelled at qualitative research. I have been careful to illustrate here that I was interpreting the whole of the data provided by the students not just those aspects I found important. However, narrative researchers realise that interpretation of narrative is never definitive or final (Andrews 2008). How the data is reported in this thesis is just one way it could have been presented. Decisions had to be made as to what to focus on; not everything mentioned could be covered here.

3.8 Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the rationale that led me to the methodology and methods to explore the research questions. I started at the philosophical and paradigmatic level and then moving into the more practical considerations. In discussing methods, I have tried to be explicit in what I was doing and give examples to illustrate the collection, analysis and reporting of data so that the reader can draw their own judgements. As any good storyteller knows, one rule to try to adhere to is 'show, don't tell'.

I have explored the nature of narratives and narrative inquiry and the ethical implications of such an approach. Layered on top of this were discussions related to ethnicity, participants and my own. I also explored considerations about the intended audience, a largely White audience of HE staff, and the implications this had for my research and especially my data reporting.

The next section moves into the analysis phase and looks at the participants in this research. It gives background information on them, gives their stories and explores their major concerns and themes.

4. Findings: The students

"We lived in the gaps between stories" (Atwood 1985). This quote alludes to the notion of minority stories or counter-stories (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012) in contrast to the majoritarian stories (Lyotard 1979). It is about surfacing individual stories that might not be heard. In a predominantly White university, there is a risk that the student voice is White and ignores the voices of minoritised groups which may be a concern at Midfordshire University.

In this first chapter that reports the findings of the research and discusses the implications for belonging, I am going to present a summary of the university and the city followed by presenting the students and their overall feelings in relation to belonging. An understanding of these elements of place and people is important to the overall analysis and thesis. The sections on each student will be divided into the four elements of the framework from the end of the literature review (section 2.6): individual and institutional factors, peer and staff interactions, belonging: fit and contact and wider context. In some cases, the wider context subsection will not be present because it is sometimes difficult to separate this from other aspects and it will be included in the other subsections.

A short biography of each student is placed here to help the reader understand their individual context in the analysis that follows. It is important to be aware that even this small snapshot of students highlights the diversity of the student body that can get hidden behind the BME label. In understanding something about the individuals, I hope that the reader will be persuaded that at the heart of the BME attainment gap lay individual students who are simply looking for human connection and support. In the next chapter I will compare and contrast experiences, but this chapter will focus on the individuals.

4.1 Midford

Place, as in the university and the local context, plays an important part in the student stories, as would be expected in any story (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Midford is a small city in central England that attracts a wide range of people for employment, study and tourism. The city itself is quite diverse in terms of ethnicity, nationalities and socio-economic factors but Midfordshire County is far less diverse. The city of Midford is universally liked by the students in this research as a welcoming, diverse place. This is summed up by Melissa:

> "I reckon Midford is lovely. I've been all around the UK, I've seen what other cities are like and really don't like the idea of living anywhere but Midford. I think it's a really nice place to stay; nice multicultural place as well."

4.2 Midfordshire University

In contrast, the university is perceived as less diverse and more problematic; feelings amongst the students about the university are far more mixed. Around 22% of Midford's population are from BME backgrounds and about 18% of students at the university are BME, which is just below the mean UK sector-wide proportion of BME students at 21% (ECU 2016).

Midfordshire University is an English post-92 University with a strong focus on professional courses such as healthcare subjects, business and engineering but with some areas of outstanding research as well. Midfordshire has a very high proportion of students who went to fee-paying schools (17th highest of UK universities with 26.3%), especially when compared to other similar universities (15.8 percentage points below its benchmark for state school participation, HESA 2018). The majority of Midfordshire students are living away from home but a significant minority (around one quarter) are commuter students.

Midfordshire has three campuses in Midford: East, West and Central. Central is not only geographically central but also the main campus with East and West campuses being satellites and smaller than Central. West is a leafy, suburban campus in need of updating but offers a pleasant enough physical environment on top of a hill on the outskirts of Midford. East is a scruffy, run down campus in a village location outside Midford. With its brutalist inspired architecture, it would not be unkind to describe East campus as a grey lump in the Midfordshire countryside. Central campus is a rapidly modernising campus with significant recent investment used to enhance the physical environment.

4.2.1. A note about pseudonyms

Participants were given the chance to choose their own pseudonyms. Some were not particular about the name and were happy to use my suggestions: Saira, Anil and Janice. Three of the participants wanted a specific, significant name. Michelle chose the name after Michelle Obama, Kingsley chose for personal reasons and Salah chose the name after Salahuddin Ayyubi, the 12th century Muslim leader. Melissa wanted a 'White' name.

4.3 Michelle

Michelle is a Healthcare student in her final year. Michelle is Black African in her late twenties. She lives in her own home with her daughter and works in the local area.

4.3.1. Individual and institutional factors

She feels a certain attachment to the university and is happy to mention she is a student at Midfordshire to others but feels she is not a typical Midfordshire student. Her sense of belonging to the university is very low. Michelle reported the lowest possible score on the belonging scale for:

- I feel at home at this university
- I have found my department to be welcoming
- I am shown respect by members of staff in my department
- Sometimes I feel I don't belong in this university

This and Michelle's interview indicates she is not at all happy with the institutional environment. Michelle came with a story to tell about poor treatment and problems on her course and a genuine interest in making things better for others, "When I saw the project I was like, thank God somebody has recognised that this needs to be addressed." She gave a very reflective and insightful account of her time at university. Each story contributed to an overall arc about challenge and discrimination and how Michelle was determined to work through this and succeed.

Michelle has struggled with the academic work required in the degree which was an initial surprise to her as she already had a first degree in another subject. This has added to the sense for Michelle that something was not right at the university. Michelle ascribes the issues to assignment writing. Having started to struggle, institutional practices seem to further disadvantage her. After failing an essay, she was asked to produce an entirely new essay on a different topic. This meant she had effectively spent twice the time on this assessment than her peers because the academic felt it 'unfair' to give Michelle multiple chances at an assignment her peers did only once. Academics can see this as seeming to preserve 'academic standards' rather than the transmission of an unexamined and problematic culture (Adams 1992) that could disadvantage certain students.

This has resulted in her being perceived as a weak student. It was suggested to Michelle that she may have dyslexia but initially she did not act on this for cultural reasons; "I ignored it, because to me, in my culture, being dyslexic is a disability, and I thought bad of it. Then I said, 'No, I'm not going to do that.'" This can be common for BME students, who are less likely to have a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) diagnosis or a declared disability. Across the sector in the UK, 15% of White students have declared a disability compared to 10.7% for BME students and for SpLD the rates are 6.3% and 4.5% respectively (Advance HE 2018). Without the

university being aware of any disability students may not get the academic support they need. At Midfordshire University at the time Michelle was a student, the rate of declared disability for BME students was around half the rate it is for White students. Eventually Michelle did get tested and support was provided to help but this came late on in the course.

Another area that has been problematic for Michelle are her placements which are a required part of her course. She felt she did not get the right support from the university with her placements and is struggling to complete the required number of placements.

4.3.2. Interactions

Michelle is on a course with a small group of Black students who support each other but are made to feel separate from the rest of the students.

> "I went to one trying to say, 'Look here, I'm not happy with one, two, three things,' but she was very negative. She didn't want to support me, and then I also realised that you know, there was a division. Us three ethnic minority students were supporting each other, the three of us, and then the rest of the group, they were together. They would go out together, and then they would single you out, and they supported each other very well."

Minority students sitting together in educational settings is a common coping strategy to deal with a hostile racial environment (Tatum 2017); which is the reason that Michelle gives for this grouping together. Michelle would like staff support in breaking down those racial barriers but there are suggestions that staff have not taken any actions to integrate the different groups on the course or to create a more positive environment for the Black students; "when I mentioned it (the ethnic split of the group) they (tutors) said they don't see it." The quote suggests a 'colour-blind' approach to race has been taken by the department although there appears to be a racial issue that needs to be addressed.

On the practical and professional aspects of the course, Michelle had been working in healthcare for a number of years. She describes herself as highly competent in her professional practice work. For those supporting Michelle in practice, this is reflected in the feedback Michelle is given. However, for university staff, the academic issues seem to influence negatively how Michelle is perceived. Staff have low expectations of her ability which has a negative impact on her own confidence.

> "I knew I had a lot of experience, but in the end, I just started, losing that confidence, and now I'm not confident at all to stand in front of people and say, "I can do this," because I've got an assumption, it's not a fact, it's just an assumption…people (tutors) they don't have confidence in me that I can deliver and I say that because my tutor who came to my placement, he was surprised when he heard some of the

things that I was doing. He was like, 'Oh, I didn't know that she could do such things. Oh, I didn't know that.'"

4.3.3. Belonging

Michelle has some sense of fit within her small group of peers from a similar ethnic background but this group do not seem to fit in with the wider course cohort. In terms of contact with staff there is a sense of rebuilding belonging after some difficult encounters and experiences. For example, this is illustrated in her story by a sense of disappointment and disillusionment but also determination.

> "It's different from what I expected. I came with all the enthusiasm, all the energy, and then now it's all gone away… it's just a struggle, but I'm not going to give up. I won't, because when I came here, I really wanted to do this course, and I know that I can do it."

Michelle is aware of negative perceptions of her by academic staff, partly due to the academic issues mentioned in section 4.3.1 above and because she has put in a number of complaints during her time at university; 'I had become that problem person because I'd put in complaints.'

As a result, Michelle is trying to build positive relationships with academic staff to help and support her through the finish of the course. She specifically mentions two members of academic staff she has been able to connect with and build a relationship with. What is important for Michelle in these contacts is being treated with respect and dignity. Michelle's complex circumstances require staff to really listen to her story which of course requires time.

> "…he really treated me with dignity, which I did appreciate, and he had an hour to listen to me, and I told him everything, and he was like, 'Wow, I didn't know you're going through all this.'"

4.3.4. Wider Context

This rebuilding is also mirrored in her personal life as she tries to rebuild new personal connections after her divorce. At the time she spoke to me, it felt like she was emerging from the other side of those difficulties but they had left emotional scars. Michelle has recently become a single mum. In addition to the stress of divorce, this has had religious, cultural and financial implications which has limited her network of support and has isolated her from extended family and the wider community. The cultural stigma of divorce has led to her breaking personal connections with her existing British African community. The church and her daughter are now the prime sources of a sense of belonging for Michelle in her personal and social life.

"The only (family) support I have is my daughter, she's, she's just brilliant…"

"Before I was going to an African church. Then I realised that because of the divorce, they were not going to approve it, so I started going to an English church. It's a mix of people, but their ethics are more English and they're very, really very nice, so I started going there. That's where I was able to tell them my story, I'm divorcing because of one, two, three things and what I liked about the pastor from the church, he said, 'Well, I might be a pastor, but I haven't got any experience with this. I'm going to refer you for counselling and the church will pay.'"

4.4 Melissa

Melissa is a final year student in her mid-twenties who did the first two years of her course at a local College and is studying the final year at university. She is trying to fit full time work around her studies and is struggling.

"I found it quite difficult. Really hard to work and balance my workload for my studies and my current job … I think I am just overtired and I need a bit of a break maybe."

Her current work is related to her studies and was the reason she decided to go back into studying after leaving school at 16. She lives at home in Midford with her parents and has five siblings, all but one of whom also lives at home. Melissa was born in Midford, although her older brother and parents were born in Bangladesh. All of her older siblings are educated to degree level or above. The academic comparison with her older siblings all having degrees feeds into Melissa's general sense of a lack of confidence in her academic ability. She is finding the study hard both academically and in terms of fitting it in with work and family life.

4.4.1. Individual and institutional factors

Melissa feels a certain level of attachment to the university, particularly around acknowledging being a student at Midfordshire. One of the key factors for this acknowledgement is the contrast between university and what she describes as a terrible experience at College. Melissa arrived at university with low expectations but has found it to be a more positive experience than college. She expresses no strong feelings of isolation but also no strong feelings of belonging either. Her responses to the belonging scale are either neutral or slightly positive (3 or 4 on Lickert scale, see appendix 9.8.2 for scale).

The physical environment at university plays a role in Melissa's belonging with one campus giving a greater sense of belonging than another. Her course is based at West campus but she describes this as like a set from a "horror movie… old and mouldy." She only comes to West campus for timetabled classes. When she meets up with peers for study or when she wants to go to the library, she would go to Central campus.

"I go to (Central campus) quite a lot for the library just because it has a nice environment and I quite enjoy sitting down doing my work. I feel a lot more focus sitting there. When I come here (West campus) I just feel a bit depressed. I don't know I feel as if this campus isn't as welcoming…every time I see any of my peers it's in (Central) … we don't really come here (West)."

Unlike Pace and Stern (1958) who focused on the whole university environment and student needs, this suggests that student behaviour, in order to meet the environmental needs, is influenced at a more local level, in this case the campus.

4.4.2. Interactions

Melissa's academic experience is 'mixed'. She tells a range of stories about her classes and contact with academic staff. Melissa describes one story of an academic who inspired her and helped her. Melissa clearly identifies the features of the academic's behaviour which helped her. These were guiding her with her assignment through questioning rather than just telling, making information available, being available to students when they had questions, being knowledgeable and passionate about his subject (e.g. Rieutort-Louis 2009). However, more frequently Melissa gives examples of negative encounters with academic staff. She attributes this as some staff not being knowledgeable enough and staff not supporting her.

Melissa experienced a particularly difficult teacher during her second year of the course at college. She explicitly described the teacher's behaviour as racist because Melissa felt excluded and not supported due to her ethnicity. "I hated going (to class) and she made that a horrible experience for a good four months before she left." One of the key elements to a sense of belonging is the campus racial climate (Harper and Quaye 2009). The tone of which is often set by academic staff in the support they give minority students and the nature of their interracial interactions (Carter et al. 2017). Negative staff interactions therefore contribute to a lack of belonging. However, Melissa's desire to succeed and her resilience got her through the experience.

The social aspect of being at university is limited for Melissa. Study, work and family responsibilities take up the majority of her time.

"I work from half seven to half six, so the hours are long as it is and when I get home I am tired …When I come home I have a lot of commitments ... My mum is quite strong on that, is quite old-fashioned...That takes up a lot of my time … There's no time for me so I find it quite upsetting."

Her time outside of work and study is based at home or with her boyfriend. Socialising with friends is limited, largely at university and for study purposes.

4.4.3. Belonging

University represents a small portion of Melissa's life. She has a busy work and home life and does not feel any strong need to belong at university because of the importance of the other environments. In university, she has a small group of friends, some from college and some she has made at university. This is the focus of Melissa's belonging at university. There is no sense that Melissa has any issues with fitting in with her peers; "We all just get along and know that we're here to study and to pass and to get on with it."

Whilst Melissa derives a sense of belonging and emotional support from her friends, she also describes how they can sometimes negatively impact her studies.

> "The one that is not working this year just to focus on her studies. … she is the most positive person I know and it's like, no, it's fine we can just get on with it, move on and see every day as it is. Her being positive about everything is really helpful when I am down in the dumps. The other girl I've met her this year, she is usually in the same boat as me. We both panic because we don't know if we can do it. We just don't have the confidence in ourselves. We have a good relationship but we are pretty much no good for each other because we are both telling each other we can't do it."

The main focus on Melissa's contact at university with both peers and staff is for support with her assessments. Outside of asking questions related to assessed tasks, Melissa does not describe pursuing connections with academic staff or seeking wider support from within the university, i.e. using support services.

4.4.4. Wider Context

Time was central to Melissa's stories. At various times she expressed a lack of belonging and a lack of confidence at school, at home and at university. This appears to be more common for female BME students (Cotton, George and Joyner 2010).

The following is a piece of creative non-fiction, in the form of a diary, based on the interview transcript with some fictional elements to fill in details that were missing in the interview. The diary format was chosen because of the repeated occurrences throughout Melissa's story of her lack of confidence in her academic ability and how different staff contact points can impact this. In her stories she places the start of this in her GCSE years and carries it with her still into her final year of university. In the text, Farhana is used as a pseudonym for one of Melissa's elder sisters and Jill is a pseudonym for one of her friends.

Wednesday 7th March 2007

I hate Maths!!! I am so fed up with it! Mr Woods had a go at me today because I couldn't do something in class. I don't understand it and he doesn't explain it properly.

The school keep reminding us that it is now less than three months before the exams. I just don't need this pressure especially after the year I have had.

There is no way I can pass Maths and my parents are putting so much pressure on me. My sisters did fine at school, it was so much easier for them. It's just not fair! Everything was OK up 'til this year but with all the other stuff going on, I just can't be bothered about studying. I mentioned about getting a tutor to my parents again earlier but they said they can't afford it.

"Just try harder", my dad said. They just don't get how difficult it is for me. They keep saying they want me to pass, to do well but then they don't help.

Thursday 23rd August 2007

Well the big day has arrived and no surprises about what happened. I got a D in Maths and didn't do too well in my other GCSE subjects either. I am going to struggle to get into college to do A-levels. Anyway, who cares! I have had enough of studying!! I'll get a job in an office or something and earn a few quid. I need a break from study. Right, got to face my parents at some point today!

Tuesday 6th November 2012

Fantastic news! Thanks to my great results in the level 3 childcare and for my work at the nursery, my boss told me that the council would pay for 80% of the course if I do the foundation degree next year!!!!!!!

Friday 14th November 2014

This is sooooo much harder than last year. First year felt like a breeze in comparison.

Monday 2nd February 2015

Took a real blow today. Everyone got their grades but me. The tutor asked to see me at the end of class. She said I got a C- for the main assignment and that she thought another assignment was a fail but that it had been moderated to a B.

There goes my 2.1!

I just can't believe it. I got so much help with the main assignment, my boyfriend and a teacher friend. I went to every one of her classes last semester even though I hated it. I went because I didn't want to miss out on any information. I ask her questions and she just brushes me off, says I should work things out for myself. But I know she helps other students more. What have I done to her? Why can't she show me any kind of support?

It is just starting to feel like my GCSE year. I try as hard as I can but then I think I haven't worked hard enough at it, given it enough time. That I'm not going to pass. My confidence is gone now. I just want to pass.

Monday 9th March 2015

Still not going well. Farhana keeps pushing me. "If I can do it you can", she says. I just feel as though I panic. I've never been one to panic but since these last few bad marks I feel as though every assignment I do; I'm not going to do well.

The story illustrates the ups and downs of Melissa's academic confidence. At different times, her confidence has been dented by her contact with staff at school, college and university. It also illustrates the range of people who support her but also can act as barriers.

The overall sense with Melissa is that she does not feel a strong sense of agency with her educational experiences. Her sense of belonging and her actions to create a sense of belonging are often dictated by what is going on around her. Work, family, peers, academic staff, all act as barriers and enablers that seem outside of Melissa's control. Although she wants to finish her degree, she is unclear of her goals and long-term plan.

"I did consider doing a PGCE afterwards but that was the start of the year but coming to the end I don't think I will just because I think it is too much for me to do at the moment but might consider it later on. I did want to think about primary school teaching. I am just not so sure now."

"my 2nd year when I had that tutor that made me feel horrible and I think she's what affected my confidence. because that's when my grades stopped being B's and B+'s and went to C's and below a C."

These quotes illustrate that lack of agency and the impact that other people and circumstances have on her achievement and plans. Melissa is positive about Midford as a place to be. She has a large and supportive family and she is reasonably happy with her current university experience.

4.5 Janice

Janice is of Black African heritage and a married mother in her late thirties. She is studying on the same course as Melissa, fitting in work with study and family life. Janice was born and did her schooling in East Africa before moving to the UK in her twenties. She lives in her own home in Midford with her husband and two children.

4.5.1. Individual and institutional factors

Janice reported a low attachment to Midfordshire University with all her responses either 'not at all' or only 'slightly'. Her sense of belonging was also low and she said strongly agree to the statement, 'sometimes I feel like I don't belong at this university'. A big part of this is comparing Midfordshire with the London university where Janice started the course before transferring in her final year. There is a large contrast between the London University and Midfordshire University in terms of diversity and integration, particularly for the course Janice is on.

> "At [London university] we used to meet up and have a group who knew each other. We even had Facebook friends and everybody knew everybody. That is a bit different here [Midfordshire]…I will say maybe because there was more Black people than there are here. …in London we were integrated, the whole mixed group were all together. You didn't feel that you were you know 'I am on my own'."

4.5.2. Interactions

The sense of not belonging seems greater in relation to peers than staff. In relation to peers, Janice's experience at Midfordshire is one of isolation; *"Here I only have one friend."* This isolation is due to a range of interrelated factors. Firstly, onlyness (Harper 2009), *"…in my class, I am the only Black person there."* Secondly, this is heightened by a sense of being 'othered' at university which is not something she feels at work or in the city itself, only at the university. Janice describes a number of occasions where she was purposely excluded by her peers, *"…they decided they don't want to listen… she didn't seem interested. They just almost looked away."* Having made attempts to fit in and been rejected, unsurprisingly she has decided to withdraw.

The third reason is a general lack of cohort cohesiveness. Janice describes her experiences at the London university as having been managed so that the cohort are encouraged to mix and gel. This led to social connections in the class which extended beyond the classroom walls. At Midfordshire, she says this is absent and is forced to try to 'integrate' on her own, which given her experiences is proving a challenge. This matches the tendency in UK higher education to equate student transitions, including building a sense of belonging, with induction- type activity focused on first year students (O'Donnell, Kean and Stevens 2016). There is a suggestion that the transition of students coming onto the course at points other than in the first year has not been fully considered. Janice, also thinks the structure of the course, having a single, intense in-class day on campus, also mitigates against the cohort cohesiveness.

"At London [university] I had to go twice a week and here it is only once a week and when you come here there is so many things. You have one lecture after another and maybe two hours and in those two hours it is probably library or doing something like trying to meet one of your tutors or lecturers. I think the day is so condensed that you don't have time."

The fourth reason is mixed contact with academic staff. She does not describe any strong connections with academic staff. She experiences a range of reactions from staff from positive and helpful to being ignored.

"a couple of times I have asked to see her (advisor) and she has said to send an email and whenever I have done that she has not responded to the email… Today when I mentioned to my advisor that I am struggling a bit, well not struggling but trying to find out what I needed to do with my work, with my project. She was helpful. She did guide me and tell me who to go and speak to. So, she was supportive."

4.5.3. Belonging

This context means that Janice has neither strong contact with peers or staff at university or any fit with her course or department to create a sense of belonging. In relation to university, Janice could be described as 'belonging-lost'. Janice's sense of belonging is one of stark contrasts. She has a strong sense of belonging in her family, at work and in the city; "[Midford] is one of the most friendly places I have been."

Prior to coming to Midfordshire University she had a strong sense of belonging at her London University but that is not the case at Midfordshire. There is a sense of resignation that she will not really experience a sense of belonging at Midfordshire. She has tried to create a sense of belonging with her peers, but this is not reciprocated.

The following excerpt of creative non-fiction really illustrates Janice's overall sense of belonging at the university. The very last quote at the end of the story really struck me in the interview and formed the basis of how I have constructed the story. Unusually, for this thesis overall, I wanted to write this story from my own perspective. When I reflected on the interview, I had a vivid image in my head of walking into the crowded refectory worried about being able to spot Janice and realising it was actually very easy. Her feeling of a lack of belonging and isolation was manifest in that moment of seeing her in the refectory in contrast to the bustling space.

4.5.3.1. My Stomach Churns

I don't know whether it was Janice's or Melissa's idea to volunteer for the research. They both came forward together. As it turned out, Janice considered Melissa to be her only friend on the course.

I had agreed to meet Janice at lunch in the refectory. It was a chilly February day. As I walked in, I could feel the contrast in heat to the outside and the windows had steamed up as a result. My ears were assaulted by the expected din of a busy canteen.

Janice quickly spotted me. She was alone. As we walked towards each other, I was suddenly aware of us as two individuals amongst a sea of people busily chatting and eating. That sense of isolation was to seep through our conversation.

Once we got set up in a quiet space elsewhere in the building, I went through my preamble explaining my research, ethics and consent. Janice was from Africa originally before moving to London as an adult and finally to Midford. She worked in a local school and was studying for a degree to enhance her career prospects.

I thought I would start with a general overview of her experiences, "how would you describe your experiences here at the university?" I asked.

I think the preamble had primed Janice to jump straight into the core of her experiences. "I started at a London university. I was only there for a year but I felt more involved, more at home than I feel here."

She continued, "We did so many things together, so many activities where we had to group ourselves. We had to make acquaintances. We had to be together and talk. I made friends so much quicker than I have done here, maybe because there were more Black people there than here. I mean for instance in my class here, I am the only Black person. I think that is the difference."

Janice's voice dropped on the final sentence. Talking about the contrast between the London University and Midfordshire University came through in her tone as well as her words. Janice talked some more about that contrast and speculated as to why she felt it was different at Midfordshire. Was it that they only had classes on one day a week? Was it because she was the only Black person on the course? Was it because they were never required to mix as a group?

"Even when you speak to people it feels like you are trying to infringe into their space. I just felt that maybe I shouldn't bother."

Janice certainly felt the isolation. "I am on my own. Every day I come in I feel new. I struggle even though I am friends with Melissa. She is about the only person I could say I talk to and I know."

Then she uttered the words that really stuck in my head. "I always tell my husband this, every time I come into university it is like my stomach churns, it is so tight it hurts." ----------------------

4.5.4. Wider Context

The key aspect of Janice's wider context is her family life. Support from her family has been crucial to help her study and is where her belonging is situated.

"My family they are very supportive. My husband is very supportive… My daughter, bless her, she is doing her 6th form now, and she reads through my

work and tells me 'this doesn't sound right, correct it this way'. So that is really, really helpful."

4.6 Saira

Saira was the youngest student interviewed from a British Pakistani background. She is in her early twenties in the second semester of her first year after previously attending a local college. Saira is studying for a business degree and lives at home with her parents. The primary benefit of living at home for Saira is financial; Saira works part-time for 'pocket money' but does not have to work in order to fund getting through university. She has two older sisters who have already graduated and live away from home.

4.6.1. Individual and institutional factors

Saira has both a low level of attachment and sense of belonging. This is particularly reflected in her not feeling that she is a typical Midfordshire student and not feeling part of the wider university community. Like Janice, the sense of not belonging applies more to peers than with staff; the two belonging questions where Saira gave an agree or strongly agree response were in finding the department welcoming and being shown respect by staff.

The next excerpt of creative non-fiction is written in a summary style of writing. I want to convey quickly the overall thrust of Saira's interview; the thing that was uppermost in her mind. It illustrates the frustration, mainly aimed at peers, she feels about belonging at university. Saira came to the interview very much with an issue on her mind. That issue was about fitting in. As a first year, Saira has not really found her place yet. She has not really developed her strategies for belonging at university. As a Midford native whose family originated from South Asia, Saira has found the difference between her diverse, college experience and university surprising. She feels that many fellow students really do not understand different cultures, religions and wider diversity.

4.6.1.1. A plea to freshers

Fresher's week: The drinking, the partying in halls, the late nights. It is a rite of passage, part of the university experience. Oh, those heady days of early October. But wait, you don't drink, you don't party, you don't stay out late. So, what do you do?

It feels like no one understands, not everyone drinks alcohol. In this multi-cultural, multi-faith country how do people not understand this? Are they closed minded or just lacking experiences of diverse groups?

As for living at home, there is no way your parents would let you stay out late!

You feel left out.

You feel like you are missing out.

It is a compromise: no rent and family support versus limits on your social life and family responsibilities.

What is the university experience? Would it not just be great if everyone understood that it could be diverse and different?

Saira feels an early sense of rejection from her peers for her own identity as British and Muslim. Saira feels a contrast between Midford, the city, and her previous educational experiences versus the university. She feels her course is less diverse than her previous college and the city. This is linked to feeling that many of her peer group at university have a much higher level of cultural and religious ignorance which mitigates against forming friendships with them. This is an emerging theme for Muslims in UK Higher Education. A lack of religious literacy and understanding from staff and students, especially about Islam, has been documented (Stevenson 2018).

4.6.2. Interactions

In the face of initial rejection and a lack of initial sense of belonging, Saira has held on to her previous connections and has struggled to transition to creating a sense of belonging at university. This is present in all spheres of university life.

> "I live locally, some of my friends from college also came to the University with me. So, I'm mostly, quite close to them and I've made friends with one or two people here… But otherwise, I haven't really been able to make a lot of friends … I didn't really bother making friends myself, because I was like, OK, this is what the people are like, I'm OK, I'm at home, I still have friends outside of University, I don't really need to."

Saira knows that making connections at university is important but has a range of explanations about why she is not: work commitments, family commitments, and the cultural reasons outlined above. Group work has been one aspect of her experience that has helped create a sense of belonging with peers. Her groups have worked well and have helped her make some friendships with a few people.

In relation to academic staff contact Saira has taken a passive approach and feels that staff are not reaching out to her. This then impacts her motivation to reach out herself.

> "I met my academic advisor at the beginning of the year but after that I haven't been in contact with her, which is again, something that I should be doing… so I need to do that, but yes, and *she hasn't been in contact with me either*."

Saira also feels that being in the first year means that she does not need support because the pressure to perform well occurs later in her studies.

> "because it's my first year, I've been quite sort of relaxed. I haven't really bothered with going the extra mile…So far, I don't really think I've needed any support yet."

The curriculum and teaching have been positive aspects of Saira's academic experience. Module choice has meant that she has been able to choose modules that appeal to her wanting a wider understanding of the world within her discipline.

4.6.3. Belonging

I would characterise Saira's sense of belonging as 'transitional'. She is still figuring out how to transition from her local college to university. She is also transitioning from an initial lack of belonging to trying to find a more sustained sense of belonging and how she might fit into the university. How she might do this is unclear to her.

> "I did sign up to a few (societies) at the beginning of the year, I haven't actually committed to going to them, which is a shame on my side … I just didn't have the time… it just didn't work for me… I just said, I'm not going to bother committing."

4.6.4. Wider Context

Saira's sense of belonging is still rooted in Midford the city and her life outside university. As a local student, Midford and Saira's previous college friends represent safe, comfortable and diverse spaces for Saira. As a Muslim, she is very much in a minority at Midfordshire. Within the group of students who are Muslim, Saira describes a divide between those who have come away from home to study, especially international students and those who are living at home. As someone living at home and with wider family members in the area, Saira feels more restricted in terms of places and times she can socialise. One example of this is that Saira did not join the Islamic Society which she felt worked better for International students than for local Muslim students.

Given that the interview was conducted in semester 2, more than four months after Fresher's week, the impact those early experiences had on Saira were still strongly felt. Even after many months, Saira is still trying to carve out a sense of belonging. The length of time being taken is strongly influenced by those initial experiences.

As already mentioned in my methodology, I did not want to interview students in the first semester of the first year because I was not looking for early experiences of belonging but

of how students had figured out ways of creating belonging in the White spaces of the university. What surprised me in Saira's story was how long that process was taking.

4.7 Kingsley

Kingsley is in his late twenties. He is an outgoing person and enjoys being at Midfordshire University. His father is White and his mother is Black Caribbean. Kingsley is the only student in the research living away from the parental or own family home and he has a strong sense of independence tied to his masculine identity. Kingsley left College and worked as a machinist before deciding that he wanted to go to university in his early twenties. Kingsley is in his final year of study on a prestigious engineering course. He takes a lot of pride from having proven himself academically able to get onto this course.

> "And they basically, helped work out a performance-based solution for me. So basically, if you do really well and prove that you are a student of this calibre, then we can let you on the course, and that's basically what happened. Throughout the whole process, you know, it was a very good experience for me."

4.7.1. Individual and institutional factors

Kingsley is keen to acknowledge being a student at Midfordshire but does not have close friends at the university. He has a strong sense of belonging and affinity to his course and department. His sense of belonging to the department is grounded in the academic aspects.

Once he arrived on campus, Kingsley worked on fitting in with peers which is made easier by the strong course identity. The perceived prestige of the course (relative to other course in the department and the wider university) has created a cohesive course identity for the students on the course. That creates a strong affiliation and leads to good academic integration and fit for students on the course.

> "… maybe this is a bit controversial to say, but I know that there's a few people, including myself, feel that, the course we're on is better than the University per se… you really want to be part of the team, I felt that anyway. I felt that what we do here is quite specialist, it's very good, it's generally well respected. And you just, most of the lecturers feel the same, it felt that way in the beginning anyhow. It spurs you to really get involved I think."

4.7.2. Interactions

However, Kingsley does not socialise with his university peers.

> "I don't really socialise with University people outside of University. I socialise with people from my dancing community. So, I do like Afro-Latin dances and stuff like that, and I've been doing that for quite a long time now… And it's just a nice atmosphere to be in."

He views his peers as acquaintances and not friends. His lack of close peer contact in the academic sphere contributed to a feeling of isolation when he had a personal crisis. He had no close friends at university to confide in and the issue pushed him away from his peers

> "There was a couple of times I felt like a real outsider. There was other stuff happening in my life, which really affected that. And I didn't, I didn't tell my group mates and my course peers about this stuff. And they misinterpreted my behaviours. And, you know, not being part of the group as much. I think they misinterpreted those behaviours for something else. Maybe laziness, maybe, I don't know, not wanting to get involved, I don't know. But I didn't feel comfortable enough to tell those guys what was really going on and the reasons behind what was happening."

Kingsley has a strong focus on interactions with staff which started from before he even enrolled at university. He had a positive encounter with an academic member of staff at an open day and this was the start of him building good relationships with academic staff.

Although he almost quit university, he was able to overcome this through making contact with academic staff. Having built up good contact with staff the barrier to contacting them at a point of crisis was lower than it otherwise might have been.

> "So, at the time I felt like literally, on my own, like really on my own. And I actually didn't even go to my lecturers until the last minute about this. And it was very lucky because if I didn't go to them at the very last minute and get something sorted, I would have been in, I probably wouldn't be where I am now, in terms of actually, you know, about to graduate on time. When I did that, when I did go to lecturers, like they were immediately concerned and immediately, you know, wanting to help."

4.7.3. Belonging

The attachment questionnaire, used with all participants, tends to split into fit (A1 to A5) and contact questions (A6 to A8) (see appendix 9.8.1). Although Kingsley's score on the belonging survey was the highest of all students interviewed (and only 1 point off the maximum score), his responses to the attachment survey were highly variable and he had a real difference between those questions about wider fit at university (an average score of 4 out of 5) and those about contact with peers (1.7 out of 5). Kingsley knows how to fit in at a PWI but the university is not the place for friends and close contact.

This extends to the wider university of community. Kingsley describes joining an 'ethnic minority society' (he did not want to name the group) and felt that it did not feel right for him; there was a misalignment of values. Kingsley felt the society was segregated and kept themselves separate from other students whereas he wanted it to be about celebrating culture and encouraging interaction with different cultures and perspectives.

"It should be, we are x, get everyone else in and you can experience our culture, as opposed to, oh let's have a little home for all of you lot, for all of us ethnics to sort of get away from everyone else."

Racial grouping is not uncommon in university (Pokorny, Holley and Kane 2017). Some BME students may want to have the chance to be away from White privilege and be able to relax more in a space where people share the same ethnic background. This highlights the difficulties in looking at BME students as a single homogeneous group. In this case Kingsley, in part due to his biracial identity, wants the opposite of what a group of other Black students at the university wants.

Kingsley's perspective relates to his own identity, as biracial, as well as his previous home in Gloucestershire. The county has a low proportion of people of colour with pockets of greater diversity, particularly in Gloucester which is similar demographically to Midford and Midfordshire (GCC 2019). Kingsley is used to being in a minority in relation to his ethnicity. One of the contributing factors for Kingsley in his sense of belonging is his own racial identity and his prior experiences of White spaces. Kingsley is aware of how his biracial identity plays out in White spaces and Black spaces. As Kingsley describes it, he knows how to talk and walk in White spaces to create the impression he wants to create and to fit in which is reflected in his academic experience. Kingsley talked at length about code-switching in terms of the language he would use in different ethnic communities so that he could fit in (Waring 2013) but also of not quite fitting in and always having to be consciously aware of who he was with and how to present himself.

4.7.4. Wider Context

Kingsley's social sense of belonging is derived from the local Midford community. He values the vibrancy and diversity on offer in parts of Midford. The cohesive mix of different ethnic groups in the city is a place in which he feels comfortable.

The main negative university experience for Kingsley came on his placement year at a local employer as part of his course. He was shocked by his treatment which clearly had a racist element to it; two White students were placed in the same company and had a much more positive experience. This is an area which has been highlighted by Stevenson et al. (2019:7) who recommend "HE providers should monitor the experience of minority ethnic students and intervene where they are experiencing inequitable treatment."

4.8 Anil

Anil is in his second year of a combined IT and business course. He is a British Indian student who lives at home with his parents in a neighbouring town and usually commutes to Midford four days a week to study. Like the other students who live with their parents, the financial aspect is the most important part of that decision. Being a commuter student in another town as well as having a job, means that Anil comes to Midford only for study reasons.

4.8.1. Individual and institutional factors

Anil studied a foundation year so has been at Midfordshire University for nearly three years. Anil has a strong sense of attachment to the university and feels like a typical student. The two departments where Anil studies are two of the most diverse departments at the university with both having a larger than average proportion of BME students and where there is also a large cohort of international students. Anil gave positive scores (4 and 5) on all survey responses except for the attachment question on close friends and wishing he had gone to a different university where the responses were neutral.

Anil studies on a course which crosses two departments and this gives him an insight into how belonging can be vary in different environments. Anil feels a greater sense of belonging in the business department which he attributes to a number of factors. The first is the physical environment. Anil is satisfied with the quality and access to facilities in computing but the physical space is individualistic and does not encourage relationship building and socialisation in contrast to the Business department spaces which are more social. He feels that the Business department has a nicer atmosphere. Secondly, the Business department is where most of the group work takes place and this helps Anil to build peer relationships. The third factor is staff behaviour around feedback. Anil notes that in Computing staff tend to take longer to reply to email and give feedback on student work. The final factor is Anil's own confidence and ability in the respective subjects. He is getting better marks in the business modules and is enjoying them more.

Anil came to the interview with concerns about the fairness of grading. Midfordshire University had just introduced an anonymous marking policy which Anil supports. From his own experiences, he wishes it was in place earlier because he has a story where he felt he was unfairly marked in one module potentially because of his race. It was difficult to say for certain the reason for his poorer mark but he felt that White peers of the same academic ability had done better on this module. Anonymous marking has been a common university sector response to awarding differentials since a 2008 campaign by the National Union of Students.

However, the evidence for the benefits of anonymous marking is limited (Pitt and Winstone 2018) but as can be seen by Anil's response it is an emotive and personal topic. Anil perceives that anonymous marking is fairer and will eliminate any future marking issues for him personally. Other than this issue, Anil is very positive about the university.

4.8.2. Interactions

Unlike Saira, Anil has had to transition quickly from his prior friendship group to a new one. His previous friends have gone to different universities. Anil identifies a number of key factors in helping his sense of belonging with peers. Firstly, doing a Foundation year has been helpful. Secondly, collaborative group work has helped him make friends and get to know people. Thirdly, the physical spaces in the Business department are conducive to social interactions.

The importance of the impact of physical spaces on belonging is an emerging area of research. Spaces can hinder or foster a sense of belonging (Samura 2018) and certain institutional spaces can become refuges for certain groups of students away from other spaces in the university (Carruthers Thomas 2018)

All of his university friends are on the same course and he appreciates the mix of gender, ethnicity and nationality in his friendship group. What they have in common is age, course and many of them also did the foundation course. Like Kingsley, Anil's sense of belonging at university operates in the academic sphere. As a commuter student who also works part-time, Anil does not socialise in Midford and is not involved in student societies. This is a common occurrence for commuter students who prefer to engage with the academic sphere rather than the social sphere and that being less engaged in the social sphere reduced the risk of being distracted from their studies (Thomas and Jones 2017).

Anil prefers to be an 'anonymous student' with regards to his relationships with academic staff; he is quite introverted. For example, he has not seen his academic advisor in nearly two years and he does not want to initiate that contact. Anil feels that it is the academics job to initiate contact. This desire for anonymity seems partly to derive from a lack of confidence in his computing skills and experience and not wanting to stand out from his peers.

> "When the teacher says, oh do you understand that? It's because the majority of Computer students, when they all say, yes, I don't feel comfortable saying, no. So, it's very hard. So, it's always difficult for me to ask questions, you know. I don't want to stand out in that. So after, when the teacher's going around, I ask the teacher about the doubts that I have. And they will, sometimes they do explain it really, but I

don't want to say, I didn't understand, because they did try their best, honestly, to try and explain. But then I have to go off home and, you know, research up on it and try and learn it myself, yes."

This may be another reason why anonymous marking is important to Anil. One of the potential downsides of anonymous marking is the negative impact on staff-student relationships and feedback dialogue (Pitt and Winstone 2018). This is less problematic for Anil because he is less invested in direct relationships with academics.

Anil has been an avid user of wellbeing workshops, such as on dealing with stress. This seems to suit his shyness; he gets support without having to specifically ask for help from academic staff.

4.8.3. Belonging

Anil's sense of belonging at university derives from having a diverse friendship group which has been helped to form through group work. Anil seems to fit in at university within his course and the peers on that course. The peer contact element seems to be less important in creating belonging; Anil did not describe any close friendships at university. He would socialise with university friends during the day on campus between lectures but not outside of that. Anil's approach to peer contact was particularly noticeable in relation to help seeking. Anil would ask for help from academic staff, from support staff but not from peers, especially in the computing parts of his course. His lack of confidence in his computing ability meant he was reluctant to reveal that to peers by asking for help.

4.8.4. Wider Context

The key wider contexts for Anil are part-time work, commuting from outside Midford and family. Anil's social life outside of university is influenced by work and family. These aspects will be discussed more widely in the next chapter.

4.9 Salah

Salah is in his mid-twenties in the final year of a business degree. He did a foundation year at Midfordshire then started one degree before changing and so has been at university for nearly five years. Salah is a Midford native of British Pakistani heritage. He lives in the parental home outside Midford and commutes to Midford to study.

4.9.1. Individual and institutional factors

Salah is positive about his attachment and belonging to the university. This is particularly noticeable in his sense of achievement in getting to university and the positive impact it has

had for him. Like most of the other participants the lowest score for Salah was A8: whether his friends were from university.

Salah has a well-defined identity as a working-class man. The intersection of class, race and gender feature strongly in Salah's stories. He talks of a personal transition from a more macho persona to a more moderate, intellectual persona. Salah struggled at school in part because he did not fully learn to read English until secondary school and having been diagnosed with dyslexia quite late in his schooling. He much wants to prove his academic abilities but he acknowledges that written work is still challenging for him.

For Salah, there is a clear contrast in the university environment between his identity as an older working-class student from a Pakistani background and the prevailing young, White, middle class culture of most students. He links this to different types of privilege that they can take for granted and which he has to overcome.

The following piece of creative non-fiction is taken almost verbatim from different stories where Salah discusses privilege and challenge at university. Some narrative smoothing has been employed to ease the flow for the reader. I have chosen to write as a first person, subjective monologue intended to convey emotion (Cheney 2001). I have used alternating me and you to start each sentence to reflect the main thrust of Salah's arguments about privilege and the divide he sees between his own background and that of his peers. 'Me' refers to himself and 'you' refers to his unnamed peers and the privileges they had that he did not.

4.9.1.1. Your Privilege

Me, I started in Business and Computer Management but the programming was very difficult so I changed to just Business and Management.

You, you didn't have to change. You had a strong five years of experience in programming, so could take up the languages a lot faster.

Me, I started reading really late. I don't think I was competently able to read until about thirteen. That has impacted my ability, even today, to get stuck into the actual reading around the subject and reading the assignment briefs.

You, you've had practice from the age of like eleven. You've got that practice and repetition, so reading and writing comes second nature.

Me, I was accused of plagiarism because of my referencing. I didn't have experience with referencing, luckily they let me off. All I had to do was take the work back and then reference it according to what the requirements were. But it was still stressful, annoying and scary. I wouldn't have had to go into the investigation room if I'd known how to cite properly.

You, you'll never have that experience, that worry.

Me, I almost got kicked out of university. An administrative error said that I had failed some modules and could not come back. I was about to throw in the towel but my dad helped me and got it sorted out.

You, administrative errors don't tend to happen to people like you. And if they do you have the soft skills developed early in life to sort it out quickly. Those soft skills go a long, long, way. Unfortunately, for myself I had to fight, to try to overcome those things.

One of the most valuable aspects of Salah's university experience has been his own personal development. He frames this around his ability to communicate and make arguments with words rather than with aggression.

"the group that I found was a little bit racist, if I'd met them five years ago, it would have been quite aggressive. But now that I've got my words, I've got the ability to understand and create context, I don't have to. I just have to reflect and try to find my arguments to give back."

Salah talks about increased self-esteem from being involved in co-curricular activity such as an ethics debate. There is a real sense of achievement about being so close to getting a degree given the long journey he has been on and what he has overcome. Salah would like to get a 2:1 but thinks this unlikely but he is still confident in the skills and knowledge he has acquired at university.

4.9.2. Interactions

The aspect of Salah's experience that most creates a sense of attachment and belonging is in relation to academic staff. His belonging questions related to the department and to his experience being enriching (B2, B4 and B5, see appendix 9.8.2) all were rated strongly agree. A7, being influenced by members of the university scored a 5, and clearly applies to staff as well because Salah mentions many academic staff who have inspired him. Salah has a lot of insight into how academics can behave to engender positive relations with students and help get the best from them. He discusses a range of qualities and behaviours that include:

1. Being Relatable
2. Being Empathetic
3. Being Passionate
4. Being Enthusiastic
5. Being Knowledgeable
6. Being Inspiring
7. Being Uplifting
8. Listening to you without making you feel you are wasting their time.
9. Speaking in a way you can understand.
10. Asking for your thoughts and opinions (even though you are the expert.)

4.9.3. Belonging

Contact with academic staff is the key to Salah's sense of belonging at university and primarily the "best academic advisor in the world" is a key person in that sense of belonging.

The same is not true for his peers. In the main contact with peers is focused on what is required to get university work done and a few university friends. Overall, Salah does not feel that he fits in at university and he is fine with that; this was not entirely unexpected. Having worked before coming to university, Salah is aware of societal issues of racism. However, he was still surprised by some of the open expression of views that are racist and classist by his peers. Like Saira, he has experienced issues with attitudes of his White peers during group work and he feels more comfortable working in groups that are more mixed in terms of ethnicity and nationality.

> "I was in a group last week and it was just me and my colleague from Somalia in a group that was predominantly all English. Usually, I'm in a group where it's, you know, you've got people from Germany, Austria, you know, people from different, all parts of Europe. So, and I just found it was a bit, it was kind of like an eye opener, like how subtle racism there was."

Salah does not let this dent his sense of belonging. He places the issue with his peers and their privileged upbringing rather than it being anything about himself and his own identity. He sees these experiences as an opportunity to learn and mature.

> "as stressful, as distasteful as it was, I have to experience the people like in my group and I have to overcome those prejudices in order to make some form of change."

That is not to say he is unconcerned or unhappy about how these students can be nearly at the end of their degree and still have such narrow perspectives.

> "Hopefully, university will broaden their horizon. It's a bit scary that they're in the last year, so they'll be going into the working environment soon."

As a result, Salah sees himself as different to most of his peers because of his race, class and age (Salah is slightly older than most students on his course.) His university friends tend to be older and more diverse than the cohort in general.

4.9.4. Wider Context

The big wider factors of Salah's experience are money and family. Salah studies at Midfordshire because it is the closest university and he could not have afforded to move away from home to study. As the eldest son living at home, he has family commitments which involve taking his younger siblings to school and he had been helping out with his family's

business. Salah left school at sixteen to work and then decided later to come back into education. However, he is not the first in his family to go to university; Salah's father has a degree.

4.10   Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed each of the participants' experiences of belonging in relation to my analytical framework. As you have seen, each of those factors plays a different part for each student. For some, like Michelle, the wider context overlaps strongly with her university experience but for Kingsley his university experience might be considered more 'traditional' as he is a residential not a commuter student. For Kingsley and Salah, interactions with staff are a crucial aspect of belonging but for Anil staff interactions are fewer and more transactional. Some students have experienced highly problematic peer interactions but others have not. The next chapter will bring together the student experiences as a whole to explore similarities and differences.

5. Discussion: Composite counterstories

5.1 Introduction

This discussion chapter moves from the focus on the individual in the previous chapter to a focus on the comparisons and contrasts between the experiences of the research participants. In this chapter I will use composite counterstories (Solórzano and Yosso 2002) to bring together shared and contrasting perspectives for each student. The chapter will discuss the institutional factors, the individual factors and the peer and staff interactions and how each of these interactions and factors creates or not a sense of belonging. The sub-sections have been drawn from a combination of where the literature has intersected with the findings from this research.

5.2 Institutional factors

I start with a quote which sums up my own thoughts whilst writing this chapter and analysing the data. *"Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition."* (Baldwin 1957). This quote makes an interesting observation about home and belonging. For me it highlights the notion that belonging (our home) is not so much about place but about people and the social and cultural dimensions. For Baldwin it was about being a gay, Black man in 1950's America, a society which didn't accept his identity. Much as in the same way that BME students might struggle to find a sense of belonging in the White spaces of Midfordshire University. Beyond the original meaning of the quote, I get a sense of people always needing to find a sense of belonging. It is not something we can avoid but need to find it in any way we can. If absent at university, we will seek it elsewhere.

The first section of this chapter will explore how the university impacts on a student's sense of belonging from demographic factors to the curriculum via campus spaces and the campus climate.

5.2.1. Not belonging and minoritisation

We all strive for a sense of belonging. For university students, their studies are a big part of their lives but what happens when they cannot find belonging at university. I would describe Saira and Janice in that position. What was common for both was that they found Midfordshire university to be less diverse than their previous educational experiences and less diverse than their day to day lives before university. Janice compares Midfordshire university to both her previous university and to the local city

"… in London [university] we were integrated the whole mixed group were all together. You didn't feel that you were you know 'I am on my own…I have visited a few other places and Midford is one of the most friendly places I have been. I have never, ever felt that I am a foreigner. it has never felt like that but Midfordshire…" Janice

As a local student, Saira was genuinely surprised by the lack of diversity at Midfordshire especially in contrast to the city and her experience in a local college.

"People who went to that college were already well aware of different cultures and different backgrounds and different beliefs and different religions and all of that. So it was very easy for everyone to get along and find some sort of common ground and say, oh, you know, we do something like this at home or we eat foods like this at home, why don't you try some of this? Why don't we go to this place that serves Asian food? It was, you know, it was very easy to get along with those who were White or Black or Brown or, you know, it was completely different (to MIdfordshire)." Saira

Janice and Saira experience both a reduction in ethnic diversity and in how they are made to feel about their own ethnicity in coming to Midfordshire University. Both students feel more minoritised at university in contrast to previous environments they have experienced. In other words, others make them feel more marginalised and feel like they have lower status and less power. Minoritisation here is being used in the same way as defined in Stevenson et. al. (2019: 45) – "minority status is arrived at through particular processes of discrimination, racism or exclusion…".

Saira is frustrated and surprised that even though she had not moved city, she was being treated in a different way than before. For Janice, the contrast between the London university and Midfordshire means she is struggling to know how to respond at Midfordshire to that minoritisation because it was not present at the London university. For both students being minoritised has had a negative impact on their sense of belonging and their subsequent strategies for creating a sense of belonging.

What comes across with Janice and Saira is the unexpectedness of being minoritised which has left them without strategies to adequately deal with it because they have not experienced it to this degree before. In contrast, Kingsley and Salah to some degree anticipated being minoritised at university and so were not as surprised when they experienced it. Kingsley has come from an even less diverse area than Midford and knew that his course was not going to be ethnically diverse. He was already experienced about dealing with minoritisation. For Salah, his protection and ability to deal with minoritisation was dispositional. He recognises societal issues of racism and ignorance and has taken an approach to deal with that:

"...I've tried to like, lean back and tried to frame my arguments concisely and say that this is wrong, and do it in a reasonable way." Salah

Salah is not saying he accepts racism but recognises it as an everyday occurrence that he is now dealing with in a different way than he did in the past. For him to move forward and to bring about change, he knows that reacting emotionally to provocation is not helpful and he wants to challenge it in more intellectual and educational ways. This is part of Salah's personal development journey at university.

5.2.2. Student societies and spaces

One aspect of the literature that is frequently mentioned in response to minoritisation is the role of 'safe spaces' for students based on race or other aspects of identity away from the normative spaces of the majority (e.g. Quaye, Griffin and Museus 2015). One way this happens in universities is through student societies (e.g. Jackson, Harris and Crawford 2015). However, the way participants talked about student societies at Midfordshire re-emphasises heterogeneity and highlights the complexity of identity on campus. Although some students joined societies, they were not active members. As already mentioned, Kingsley felt the approach of the *'ethnic society'* he joined was different to the approach he was looking for. Saira felt the religious based society she joined was run by and for international students and the locations they chose to socialise in (areas where she would not want to be seen by family) and the timings of events (later in the evening) were not suitable for her as a local, female Muslim student living at home. Having a shared aspect of identity such as race or religion does not mean students automatically feel a sense of belonging in spaces based on that aspect of identity.

The other key issue mitigating against all students, regardless of ethnicity, being involved in societies is the time needed to commute and to work, reducing the time available for other activities. Saira cited work as a barrier to involvement and Anil cited both work and the time it takes him to commute from outside of Midford. Salah has family commitments which sometimes make it hard for him to participate in the wider university life. Thomas and Jones (2017:7) noted that commuter students "tended to undervalue and under-participate in enhancement and social activities." They (ibid) highlight that many of these social activities happen in the evening and that commuter students are more likely to take part in daytime rather than evening activities; this has been a key issue for Saira, Anil and Salah.

For some, student-led societies may be a way to enhance their sense of belonging at university but for the participants in this research that was not the case; family commitments, work and commuting were all acting as barriers.

5.2.3. Campus Climate

If the students were not involved in student societies then where else might they gain a sense of belonging in the university? For the students in this research their primary connection to the university was the department and course, with the campus where their department was based a secondary feature. The students had little connection to the university, other than study support services such as the library and central academic support workshops. This was similar to that found by Thomas et al. (2017), where students reported greater belonging in their department than with the university and Hurtado and Carter (1997) felt that belonging was more likely found in smaller networks rather than the university as a whole.

Michelle and Janice were the only two students who did not agree (or strongly agree) with the statement 'I have found my department to be welcoming'. They did not feel a sense of belonging to the department or course and had an overall lack of belonging at university. All the other students felt some sense of belonging at the departmental level.

There were five factors identified that supported a sense of belonging for BME students related to campus climate: the nature of the space, time spent on campus, racial diversity, peer understanding and course activity designed to support the mixing of students and cohort identity.

Universities around the world have been paying increasing attention to the impact that campus spaces can have on the student experience (Temple and Barnett, 2007) with a drive on creating high quality informal learning spaces where students can work together (Temple et al. 2014). This is something Anil and Melissa explicitly addressed.

> "I think one would be the environment. Because in the [Dept 1] block, they have this, quite nice area, where you can sit together and get on with group work. I think when you come towards [Dept 2], it's just all computers, there's no atmosphere. They don't have the, I don't know, the right environment." Anil

Melissa felt a greater sense of belonging in the nicer surroundings of Central campus, where she would meet for informal study with friends, as opposed to West campus. Janice had a visceral reaction to having to come to West campus and the campus came to symbolise her negative experiences at university. Recent interest has focused on the idea of a 'sticky campus', a *"place where students would want to spend time even when they have no formal teaching sessions to attend"* (JISC 2018:1). Whilst this might benefit student belonging it may also serve to reinforce a lack of belonging and isolation for students who are commuting, working or having caring responsibilities and do not have time to stay on campus outside of class time.

Another aspect of belonging linked to department and course is subject choice and diversity. In the UK, subject choice often aligns to ethnicity. BME students are more likely to study subjects such as business (33.1% of all UK students are BME) and computer science (28%), both departments based at East campus, than education (12.7%) and Philosophy (14.2%) (Advance HE 2018), subjects based at West campus. Healthcare subjects, based at Central, were in between (19.5%) those other subjects. These subject differences were reflected at Midfordshire. At Midfordshire, East and Central campuses were felt to be relatively ethnically diverse by students, but West campus was not due to the subjects based at that campus.

The lack of ethnic diversity was a central experience for Janice (Education at West) and Michelle (Healthcare at Central) which contributed to a lack of belonging at university. These were the two students with the lowest self-reporting of belonging. Kingsley also experienced a lack of ethnic diversity on his course (Engineering, only 9.1% of UK students are BME) but there seemed to be two positive factors which helped him: he was on the more diverse East campus and he sought out greater diversity in the local Midford community. Saira, Salah and Anil were on the more ethnically diverse courses at Midfordshire and they all agreed that it felt diverse on their course and on the campuses they visited. However, in the case of Saira and Salah, the race-based issue for them was a lack of understanding from peers about diversity and race. Salah to some extent had expected this issue before arriving at university but he was still surprised when it was so obvious from some peers.

> "I was in a group last week and it was just me and my colleague, he's from Somalia. And, you know, this is the first time I was in a group that was predominantly all English. …it was kind of like an eye opener, like how subtle racism there was …They've gone on to talk about Somali Pirates because we've got a Somali there. I even stepped back and I said, I don't think you guys understand but, you know, how you're phrasing questions, it's quite racist." Salah

Kingsley was the only student to describe a strong sense of cohort identity that had been created on his course.

> "…everyone's a real close tight knit group, we all know each other's characters, I think when you get to this level, the Programme, it's quite a lot of work and the cohort goes from big to very small…I think that's because we're all together and people have spent time with you, had the tough times where you've got bloody nine modules of hard work to study. And you're in every single day at 9 O'clock. You know, I think you harbour a level of respect and you see past that; you see past the face value." Kingsley talking about his course and peers.

Integration requires reciprocal commitment from the university and the student (Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie 2009). Overall, students felt that they had to integrate themselves and, as found elsewhere (e.g. Stevenson 2012), that the institution could do more to help. This

was a key reason for not interviewing first year students at the start of their degree because this is where most 'fitting-in' type activities take place as part of induction. Beyond the initial induction phase, there was a lack of long-term institutional effort to support integration.

In summary, there were five factors related to campus climate: physical space, time on campus, ethnic diversity on the course, peer understanding of diversity, departmental / course-based 'fitting in' activity. This ties in closely to three of Quaye, Griffin and Museus' (2015) four factors in a university environment that influence the BME student experience in a PWI: lack of ethnic diversity, racial stereotypes, academic staff ethnicity, and the curriculum. The first two of these factors were present in this research with lack of student understanding often manifest as stereotyping or ignorance. The third factor may partly explain the lack of course based 'fitting-in' activity. Midfordshire has few British BME academics (12% of academics, HESA 2018) that BME students may see as role models (Singh 2009) and may help their sense of belonging. These staff may be more likely to recognise issues of belonging for BME students and make efforts to address them in the classroom as opposed to the 'colour-blind' approach that Michelle described (in section 4.3.2).

5.2.4. Curriculum

Although a lack of diversity in the curriculum has been widely identified as problematic (Stevenson et. al. 2019) this fourth of Quaye, Griffin and Museus' (2015) factors, was not an issue that participants raised themselves and was something only discussed when specifically prompted. Unlike many other UK universities (e.g. Richards 2014, Sabri 2017), Midfordshire has not had a student-led or institution-led campaign about diversifying the curriculum. When prompted there was some concern that the university was Eurocentric or diversity-orientated rather than equity-oriented (Jayakumar and Museus 2012).

Saira expressed a preference for modules with a more global perspective. She singled out a module that connected with her Asian heritage but this was not the norm across her modules:

> "I think those things do help with allowing me to get a better understanding of things that have happened in the past that relate to my original roots. So, we were learning about… the East India company." Saira

Salah identifies the curriculum as Eurocentric but he does not see a need for any great change.

> "you're given very Eurocentric kind of examples… the examples start to become a little homogenous. But that said, I think it's very useful, it is without a shadow of a doubt, and there's no reason why you can't apply it anywhere else… it's understandable because … we're (students) not going to leave (the West), nine

times out of ten, the organisation, they're multi-national organisations now and they started in the west." Salah

Even though Salah would like more diverse examples used in the curriculum, he is not taking a critical perspective on the curriculum offered. He accepts and has absorbed the western perspective. It seems that without any consciousness raising about curriculum issues students seem to accept the curriculum they have been given. The one instance where a student-led campaign did come up was the issue of anonymous marking which was of key importance for Anil.

Whilst student action en masse may be able to influence the university in areas such as the curriculum, at the individual level the institutional factors above are outside of the control of the students. The next section of this chapter shifts the focus onto those factors that are (for the most part) in the control of the student or at least the student has some level of choice about. As you will see, in many cases, that choice is often very limited.

5.3 Individual factors

Given the range of negative experiences for the students in this research related to othering, minoritisation, and campus climate, it is worth exploring why these students came to study at Midfordshire, what choices they make whilst at university and how other personal factors impact belonging. Did they anticipate potential issues and still chose to come to Midfordshire or were they surprised about what they found once they were studying? How have the students sought to mitigate issues through seeking help? What other personal factors have impacted their sense of belonging in the Midfordshire environment?

5.3.1. Choice of university

Pace and Stern (1958) were interested in the congruence between the environmental press of a university (i.e. the practices, policies and culture of the university) and the individual needs and dispositions of a student. We know from UK sector data that BME students are more likely to attend certain universities: post-92, a university in a diverse city, a university close to home (e.g. Clegg 2011, Donnelly and Gamsu 2018). These choices are often driven by a worry about discrimination (Connor and Dewson 2001) and a subsequent preference for an environment with greater diversity so students feel a greater sense of belonging (e.g. Read, Arthur and Leathwood 2003). The students perceive their individual needs to be more closely aligned to the press of the university they chose in these cases. Key to the student experience is that the student expectations about the university are met (Neves and Hillman 2019).

For the students in this research, they have not chosen one of the more diverse UK universities or chosen to study in one of the UK's more diverse cities. Instead all but one have chosen a university close to home. For most, being close to home is the key factor in choice of university. Kingsley, the other student had not moved far to university (less than 60 miles) and would be classified by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) as a 'short distance mover,' with the other students being described as 'short distance commuters.'

I have categorised the students' reasons for this choice into four categories: financial (Saira, Salah, Melissa and Anil), work (Melissa, Janice and Michelle), family (all of the six commuter students) and familiarity (Saira). The financial reasons meant that four of the students were living with their parents so they did not pay rent and they were working to bring in some additional money. For these students their choice of university was limited to those they could reach as a daily commute, which for some meant no choice at all:

> "…because it's close, I couldn't afford to go anywhere else…I applied for like five
> different courses, and they accepted one." Salah describing only applying to
> Midfordshire.

I have separated work from financial because the work reason relates to the motivation to study locally. Melissa, Janice and Michelle were all working in the local area prior to their study as opposed to working part-time to help fund their study. The aim of going to university was for career enhancement with their current employer or in their current employment field.

> "I was working in [Midfordshire county] and my manager was somebody who was
> very nice and encouraging…I was, you know, at risk of losing my job any time
> because I was not registered, so when the chance came, she said, 'Apply (to
> university). I will support your application'." Michelle describing her reason for
> attending Midfordshire.

The family reasons were of two types: obligations and support. For Janice and Michelle, they both had school age children which shaped their choice not to study elsewhere. For Salah, as the eldest son, he felt obligated to not move away for university. His father had been ill, he had been helping drop his younger siblings to school and he had been helping with his uncle's business. Whilst these obligations may have a negative impact on students being able to engage and belong at university, they also provide support for university study and belonging outside of university. Salah described receiving a lot of support from his family for his studies, particularly his father in terms of social and navigational capital (Yosso 2005), that has helped him persist at university.

> "I was about to throw in the towel and say, I don't think University's for me. But
> he's the one that rang up the Student Union and said, could you give some help or
> advice to my son?" Salah describing how his father has supported him.

The final reason, familiarity, was part of Saira's decision making process. She, in part, chose to come to Midfordshire because a small group of her friends were also coming to do the same course.

Out of class stressors such as financial pressure, family obligations and employment are often considered factors linked to low persistence in higher education (Burras et al. 2013). That these students are persisting despite these risk factors highlights their resilience. Although these factors can cause retention issues they can sometimes conversely help create belonging and protect against dropping out of university. For example, living at home for financial reasons reduces the cognitive load of living on your own for the first time. Being in employment widens a person's social networks potentially providing additional support and belonging outside university. Familiarity with both peers and the area means the student has a ready-made group of friends to feel a sense of belonging.

The question of interest then becomes did the choice to study locally for these six students also result in congruence between their needs and the university press? Cureton (2016) uses the concept of the psychological contract (Rousseau 1996) to highlight those perceptions and expectations about university and the alignment of individual needs and the environmental press of the university. Cureton (2016) argues that belonging and other affective aspects of university engagement can be negatively affected when the student's psychological contract is broken. She identifies that the students' psychological contract links to two elements. The first is learning relationships with academic staff which students see as about two-way interactions but some staff can see the interaction as one-way. The second is the provision and access to the resources needed to do well at university.

Table 2 summarises these two elements of the student's psychological contract and whether they contribute to a sense of belonging at university for each of the local students.

Table 2: Psychological Contract needs for each research participant based on Cureton's (2016) two key ideas of resources and learning relationships.

Student	Resources to meet their needs	Learning relationships to meet their needs
Anil	Creates belonging. Happy with the resources and his access to them. "I mean the facilities are brilliant, you know, there's always a computer for me to access." "So, I've attended quite a lot of (study skills) workshops in semester one, and from that I learnt there was the Wellbeing (service). I'm able to go to them if I have any, you know, any concerns at all."	Does not create belonging. Describes staff as having an approach to interaction as one-way, focused on imparting knowledge. "I think it could be slightly improved … I really did struggle with a couple of my modules. And it wasn't just me, it was a couple of my friends as well. Because the teachers weren't able to help, they assigned a PhD student, who was able to help us for about an hour or so each week, … I think in class, if there was, it's a lot to take in during lectures. There's too much information being given…"
Janice	Does not create belonging. Struggles to navigate central support and finds it unsupportive. "it is like a big, very difficult maze to find out who can help me. In the end you just say why bother."	Does not create belonging. Has a mixed experience of learning relationships summed up in this quote: "today I had a one to one meeting with my advisor and she was really nice to me which was a change."
Melissa	Central campus and its environment and resources creates belonging but West campus (where her classes are based) does not.	Partially creates belonging. One academic member of staff contributes to a sense of belonging but that is not replicated by her relationships with other academic staff.

Michelle	Does not create belonging. Michelle did not feel supported by the university on her placements. *"I wasn't being supported by the university."* She did get support from the Student's Union and central services. However, she accessed these services when things had reached crisis point. These services were used to fix things that had gone wrong rather than help create a sense of belonging.	Does not create belonging. A mix of experiences with academic staff, mostly negative. One positive interaction is mentioned which did have a big impact but occurred later in her course after the negative issues.
Saira	Does not create belonging. At Saira's stage of university, she felt that this was not something she needed but might do so in the future.	Does not create belonging. So far this has been a mixed experience for Saira. "I met my academic advisor at the beginning of the year but after that I haven't been in contact with her… But her office hours were clashing with my lectures and seminars, so I just didn't bother trying to find space outside of that because I was working… but she hasn't been in contact with me either."
Salah	Does not create belonging. Recognises that resources and support is available but issues with accessing. This experience could create a sense of being different from other 'normal' students and be isolating. "I do feel there is a lot of help around but whether it's set at suitable times, that's one thing… if you have to go pick up your little brothers and sisters from school or drop them off, it becomes a bit difficult to come back to campus and take advantage of like the [study skills service]. They tend to have quite useful events during periods of where I'm at [East] campus and they're having it at [Central] campus. So, it's hard to just quickly run over there to participate in the drop-in sessions."	Creates belonging. Has a strong relationship with academic advisor. Positive experiences with academic staff.

For these six students their choice of university was limited by the powerful, pragmatic choices they were making. This limited choice meant that rather than choosing a university that felt right for them they risked attending a university whose press did not align with their own needs. The choice to study locally has partially met the needs of some students but for others their needs have not been met. What is notable is how neither the learning relationships nor the university resources have helped create belonging for most of the local students.

Given the innate human need for belonging, that choice of studying locally means that the students in this research are looking to have a sense of belonging outside university instead through family, existing friends and work. This prompts the question as to whether this is sufficient? Is it possible to succeed at university without feeling a sense of belonging at university but having that need met elsewhere in the student's life? In this research, the students persisted and completed their studies but would they have done better with a greater sense of belonging at university? The research seems unclear on this question. In terms of outcomes, Burras et al. (2013) review of the literature suggests that, for example, some employment during study has a positive effect on outcomes but too much has a negative impact. This is backed up in the UK by Neves and Hillman (2019) who found that students who worked 1-9 hours a week reported more learning at university than those who did not work but that those who worked more than 10 hours a week learnt least of all. Family commitments can produce either a negative or positive effect (Burras et al. 2013).

In terms of belonging, Thomas et al. (2017) found no effect on belonging for students who have a part-time job or for those caring for dependants. Meeuwisse, Severiens and Born (2010) found that informal, social peer interactions, the kind the commuter students were most missing out on, did not impact belonging.

5.3.2. Help-Seeking

At the heart of the students' psychological contract is the belief that the university should help and support the student in their studies and other aspects of their life that may impact study whilst at university. The next section explores student help-seeking behaviour and the response of the university when students seek help. This is relevant because BME students are less likely to seek help at university (Gloria, Hird and Navarro 2001) and find academic staff less helpful and supportive than their White peers (Neves and Hillman 2019). The way students respond to their university through help-seeking behaviour may be a useful indicator of their perceptions of the university environment and could have a significant impact on student outcomes and belonging.

The following is a fictionalised composite story of the students' experiences of help-seeking in the form of narrative set in a fictional focus group meeting. In this narrative, Dave is a fictional researcher asking the students questions about the support they get at university. The focus group includes six of my research participants. Saira is not included in this story because she felt that she had not needed any help yet and therefore had not sought any. The purpose of this fictionalised narrative is to summarise the variety and similarities of help-seeking of the participants in the research.

5.3.2.1. The Focus Group

"Thanks for coming to this discussion," said Dave, "I would like to ask about the support you get at university starting with the support services. What support services have you used and how have you found them?"

Michelle jumped in first, "if you go to people who are really trained to support you, you get the support. I was about to be evicted from my house and the university services really helped me." She was keen to emphasise the support she got from professional services. "Counselling as well. They were brilliant, very nice, and they worked with me, they supported me. I am getting support for dyslexia and with my academic writing. But when I have asked for help from academics, I don't get it. Nothing comes out of it. So, I think to myself, why bother, just leave it."

Michelle's demeanour changed a bit with this last sentence. There was a sense of frustration in her voice. Dave quickly added, "Thanks Michelle. Anyone else?"

"We have always been told that when you need support you go to your academic advisor," added Janice. "What I have found is there are so many people, so many advisers you can go to. You go to this person, they tell you no that is not me, you should go to this other person. It doesn't seem clear where you go for support if you need it. In the end you just say why bother!"

Her tone was downbeat with an almost defeated edge to it. As a part time student at Campus West, Janice felt isolated from the central hub of the university.

Dave turned to look at the three men sat together and smiled. "What about the men here? You've all been keeping quiet."

Salah was the first to speak up.

"There is support there but I kind of find it difficult sometimes to ask for help." There were agreeing nods from both Anil and Kingsley. "So, that's probably because of my background maybe. Whether it's ethnic or masculine? You want to be able to do things yourself. You're taught that you have to learn on the job and do it."

"Yeah," Kingsley, still nodding, added, "I generally don't default to other people to find help, not initially. Usually, I try and work stuff out on my own. But if I do get really stuck or if it's like an administrative problem, then I do have no problem with asking for help. I take pride in not depending on others though."

Anil was the youngest member of the group and Dave could clearly see he had something to say but seemed reticent "and you Anil?"

"I knew I was going to get quite a lot of stress during the second year. So, I've attended quite a lot of workshops. From that I learnt about the wellbeing service, I'm able to go to them if I have any, you know, concerns at all."

Anil paused and then started to talk about the challenges on his course where he feels he lacks the background in computer programming to keep up with peers.

"If I am struggling in a module, I don't feel comfortable asking for help. It's always difficult for me to ask questions. I don't want to look stupid. But then I have to go off home and research up on the topic to try and learn it myself."

"Interesting, we've started talking about academic support here. What have your experiences been of academic support?" Dave moved his gaze from right to left to make eye contact with the six students.

Janice and Melissa agreed that feedback on assignments was helpful and some academics were helpful and giving of their time to help students understand. However, this was not always the case and some academic staff were not always willing to help. Janice said, "At one point I did a whole assignment as an essay instead of a report. Even though I asked the module leader what was expected, she didn't reply. I don't know why."

"I think you have to seek out the support. I have had no contact with my academic advisor for over a year. It would be good if he could get in touch to see how well you are doing," added Anil.

Kingsley disagreed with the general tone of the conversation at this point, "Yes but once you do go to academics you can develop a good relationship. I would go to one of those lecturers without any hesitation whatsoever. When I had a crisis, I eventually, at the last minute, went to one of my lecturers and they sorted things out for me. He was immediately concerned and wanted to help. I probably haven't given that lecturer enough credit or explicitly said thank you enough."

"That's great, thank you everyone." Dave then moved the conversation onto wider support mechanisms outside university.

The students outlined two types of support; one was more of an emotional support and giving students time and space to study and the other was academic support. For Janice her husband gave emotional support and a friend and her daughter would help academically, "My daughter, bless her, she is doing her 6th form now, and she reads through my work and tells me 'this doesn't sound right, correct it this way.'"

Michelle said she got emotional support from her daughter, from church and outside support mechanisms. Melissa gets academic support from her boyfriend.

For those students living at home, family can sometimes get in the way. Melissa added that, "With Asian boys they don't usually do anything like cleaning and cooking. My mum is quite strong on that, is quite old-fashioned. When I come home there is always bits and bobs to do with helping her finish cooking or cleaning the house. That takes up a lot of my time and when I sit to do my work, I have no motivation to do so I've lost the will to do any of it."

Salah agreed, "Family commitments can make it difficult to come back to campus and take advantage of support services."

Dave wrapped up, "thanks everyone for your time, we will leave it there."

Table 3 summarises the help that the students have sought and what their feelings were about the responses they got when they asked for help or support.

Table 3: Help – seeking behaviour for each research participant in relation to academic support, professional support and external support.

Participant	Asked Academic staff for help & response.	Asked for Professional Support staff help & response.	External to university & type of support / help.
Michelle	Yes, +ve and –ve experiences.	Yes, +ve support for personal issues.	Daughter: some academic support & emotional support. Church: emotional support.
Melissa	Yes, +ve and –ve.	No.	Friends, Boyfriend: emotional & academic. Family: financial, would have also liked academic support from family.
Janice	Yes, +ve and –ve.	No.	Family: mainly emotional. Friend: academic.
Kingsley	Yes, +ve.	No.	No.
Anil	Limited and reluctant to ask for help.	Yes, workshops, +ve support for academic work.	Family: financial support.
Salah	Academic advisor but reluctant.	No.	Family: financial, emotional and some academic.

What emerged from the student interviews were three distinct groups of people where students went to seek help:

- Academics
- Professional support staff
- Sources external to the university such as family and friends.

The students talked about three types of support: academic, emotional / personal and financial. Unsurprisingly, there were clear gender differences in help seeking behaviour with men much more reluctant to seek help (Gloria, Hird and Navarro 2001). The women expressed no concerns about asking for help and even when they had negative responses and experiences, they still sought help from other staff afterwards. The men were more likely to want to help themselves rather than ask for help initially. Given the lower likelihood of BME students and male students seeking help (Gloria, Hird and Navarro 2001) this suggests an obvious area for universities to address.

The students mentioned many negative responses to asking for help, particularly from academic staff. These ranged from unhelpful discussions and a sense of bothering the lecturer to responses which might be characterised as discriminatory. The vast majority were on the mild end of unhelpfulness but even one instance of discrimination is worrying. Seeking help seems to come with risks. For the men, there is some degree of anticipation of this which reduces the likelihood of asking in the first place. For the women, negative experiences to asking for help mean that they tend to seek help elsewhere rather than reducing the help they seek.

The other notable issue was related to proactivity and help-seeking. The students felt that the emphasis was on them to ask for academic support. If they did not ask, then it did not happen. Saira and Anil explicitly wanted academic staff to be more proactive in getting to know students and supporting them. Kingsley and Michelle both had serious issues that could have resulted in them dropping out of university. In both cases, they both sought help at the last minute to resolve the issues. Could staff have noticed and intervened sooner? Students want to be known by an academic member of staff (Nottingham Trent University et al. 2011). This research suggests issues with the learning relationships between these students and academic staff and in some cases the students do not feel 'known'.

5.3.3. Personal factors

The final sub-section looking at individual factors considers any other personal traits or aspects which have influenced belonging. The main factor that emerged from the data was confidence and language. Cotton, George and Joyner (2010) found that female BME students are the group most likely to lack confidence in the outcomes of their degrees. This was generally true for my research participants. The female students were more likely to express a lack of confidence in their academic ability than the male students, although Anil was an exception. Prior educational experience was a factor in this lack of confidence and this was most clearly evidenced by Melissa. However, what seemed to have a bigger impact on

confidence in the university environment were issues of writing for academic purposes and a lack of university recognition of other types of expression and linguistic capital (Yosso 2005).

Janice, Michelle and Salah all linked confidence to issues related to writing for academic purposes. Janice and Michelle were both educated at school in English but English is not their first language. Both described small errors in their writing which they do not think a first language English speaker would make. However, they are both aware of this and get help and have their writing checked. Salah also comes from a home where English was not the language spoken. Additionally, Salah talks about being at a disadvantage with academic writing compared to many White peers because he feels he was not taught academic writing in school. This phenomenon was discussed by Hockings (2010) who noted that 'non-traditional' students felt less well prepared for HE assessment practices. What they seem to be suggesting is that they are penalised for the form and style of writing rather than being credited with demonstrating what they know, contrary to the purposes of the UK system of outcomes-based education (Biggs and Tang 2011). This was a key experience for Michelle:

> "...they saw me as, you know, a low-level student... I felt like I was being really looked down on, and there were other issues as well, that I wasn't happy with, that I was being referred to go to the International Centre because of my English. So, I went there and then I told them that, you know, I'd been referred here, and they said, 'Well, talking to you, we don't think English is your problem'." Michelle talking about her experiences of writing and how she was perceived by academics on her course.

Michelle's experience echoes the work of Lillis (2001) who argues that UK and US academic writing practices:

> "privileges the discursive routines of particular social groups while dismissing those of people who, culturally and communally, have access to and engage in a range of other practices...whilst people may be unfamiliar with the privileged literacy practice within academia, there is no justification for constructing them as 'illiterate' or...construing them as intellectually inferior in some way." (p.39)

This may also be a cause of Anil's sense of unfairness in assessment processes. The students who expressed these concerns struggled to articulate them and understand the root cause of the issue because it seems deeply embedded in academic practices in Higher Education. Yosso (2005) talks about the linguistic capital and ability to communicate in different ways that such students can bring to university but in these cases that is not being recognised. For the students a lack of confidence would be justified in response to a non-inclusive system that seems to penalise the particular way they express themselves and their prior educational backgrounds and yet remains opaque to student action to remedy their situation.

In addition to language perception, there were some indications that personality may be a factor in belonging. Kingsley, by his own admission, is an extrovert and this does seem to reflect his positive sense of belonging and the idea that extroversion is helpful in fitting in at university (Burras el.al. 2013). Salah, the student with the second highest belonging score, talks a lot about his openness to new ideas and his willingness to have a more agreeable perspective on his relationships with peers which matches the literature (Dollinger, Matyja and Huber 2008, Burras et al. 2013). However, given that I did not administer a personality test to the participants it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions about personality and belonging from this research.

Other personal factors in the literature include negotiating time and space for study with family, friends and work to create a greater sense of belonging (Kember and Leung 2004). Melissa's experiences illustrate this as she struggles to negotiate that time with her parents which may help to explain her lower sense of belonging. On the other hand, Janice and Michelle have been able to negotiate with family to provide time for study. For example, Janice's husband takes the children out on a Saturday so Janice can study. However, this does not seem to have impacted on either students' belonging most likely because their experiences at the university have been negative.

The final personal factor is whether the student's primary identity is that of a student. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) argue that students who live at home are less likely to see their student identity as their main identity. Those students who live at home are also less satisfied with their university experience (Neves and Hillman2017) and research suggest that the needs of commuter students are often overlooked (Smith 2018). From my research it seems that the underpinning reasons for choosing to live at home whilst studying, family and financial pressures, can impact this aspect of identity. These pressures may have elements to them which may be specific to BME students. For example, Salah as eldest son felt familial responsibility for his siblings and being the 'man of the house' when his father was ill. Melissa, as a female Muslim, felt the pressure of certain familial expectations: shopping, cooking etc. Of the students in this research living at home, Anil seemed to have the stronger student identity because he was well supported at home with his studies, did not have additional family expectations (such as looking after siblings) and work provided additional money to support his studies rather than being a necessity.

This chapter, so far, has focused on the interaction between the student and the institution and the impact of institutional and individual factors on a sense of belonging. As Pace and Stern (1958) highlight it is desirable to have some congruence between the needs of

the student and the environmental press of the institution regardless of whether this is achievable in practice in a large university. What this research highlights are mismatches between students and the institution and that this has a negative impact on belonging. Limited university choice for most of the students has resulted in greater mismatches than might have happened had they been able to study further from home. In most cases, students are having to make do with a less than ideal situation with regards to the university meeting their needs and this results in a low sense of belonging.

The next half of this chapter discusses the interactions between staff and students which are also an important part of the university environmental press. How students perceive their relationships at university will impact on how they feel towards the university environment. I will start by analysing peer interactions firstly in the classroom environment and then more widely in a social context. Then I will discuss staff interactions starting with the importance of personal tutoring and then looking at staff empathy and staff expectations.

5.4 Peer interactions

We have a fundamental human need to be social and interact with others; *"we shrivel when we are not able to interact"* (Dalai Lama, Tutu and Abrams 2016:59). Peer support during study has been linked to a sense of belonging (e.g. Hurtado and Carter 1997, Kember and Leung 2004, Black and MacKenzie 2008). BME students seem to benefit most from academic integration and peer interactions in formal academic settings (Meeuwisse, Severiens and Born 2010) and with those from the same ethnic group (Harper 2013). However, in a predominantly White institution, it is inevitable that BME students will need to make friends with and get support from White students. A lack of relatedness with White peers can impact motivation, success and wellbeing (Bunce et. al. 2019). It is likely that the classroom will be one of the best places to facilitate this and help students create connections that go beyond the classroom.

Across the students in this research there was a range of variation in peer interactions and the role they played in belonging. One of the notable links found was that students who described limited friendships or issues with making friends at university also reported the lowest scores on the belonging questionnaire (the attachment questionnaire was not as obviously linked) and were the students who expressed most dissatisfaction in the interviews. Michelle, Janice and Saira had the most issues related to friendships and they had the three lowest belonging scores. Conversely students who described positive relationships and few issues with peers at university also seemed to have a greater sense of belonging. What was apparent in both positive and negative experiences of peer interactions at university was the location of those interactions: the classroom.

5.4.1. Group work

Kuh et al. (2006) recommend that university educators make the classroom central to the university community especially as commuter students often spend limited time on campus. They suggest (*ibid*) that educators design educationally purposeful ways of encouraging commuter students to spend more time with classmates. This was echoed as one of the striking features in my research. Students make friends, especially those who are commuter students, through group work as part of their course. What happens in the classroom potentially helps the most in creating a sense of belonging at university.

> "So, there's one friend who, she happened to be basically, in every single class of mine, for my first semester. And we ended up working in, yes, two group projects for two different modules. And because of that, I mean because we were spending time with one another, working on these different projects, obviously, we got to know each other a lot better.' (Saira)

> 'I think there's about eight of us on the [course]… so it's actually quite a, you know, small collection, a group. I do feel part of that team, so there is, I think, yes, a good team belonging.' (Kingsley)

> 'I'll mostly hang around with my friends from University. And, you know, a lot of, there's a lot of group work, etc. So, we come in the majority of the time in the week and, you know, work along. Yes, it's, we're all together pretty much quite a lot of the time." Anil

Anil experienced two departments and was able to articulate why he felt a much greater sense of belonging in one than the other. For him, the nature of group work tasks was important. He preferred tasks that required students to talk to each other and collaborate rather than tasks that could be done individually before being brought together; the more interaction in group work the better.

At Midfordshire it seems that some courses (those studied by Kingsley, Anil, Salah and Saira) have chosen group work as a core pedagogic practice which has clearly had an impact on the students' experiences. In contrast, Janice and Melissa do not describe groupwork as a core part of their experience at university. They became friends because they were in a seminar group together but their stories do not feature groupwork. This seems to have had an impact on their peer interactions and sense of belonging.

5.4.2. Cross-racial interactions

Group work is a useful way to help students interact with each other and form friendships. However, the cross-racial nature of most of these peer interactions can be problematic. Janice, Michelle, Salah and Saira all describe incidents where White peers have made them feel rejected and unwelcome. In these cases, students expect that academic staff will facilitate good cross-racial interactions to avoid a lack of inter-ethnic integration

(Stevenson 2012). This is most explicitly articulated by Michelle who asked for staff intervention in her class to try to get different racial groups to work together more. Janice felt that because working together is not part of her course, White students can reject her without any consequences with the implication that academic staff need to help.

Chang, Astin and Kim (2004) found that in-class cross-racial interactions had a strong positive impact on student intellectual and social development. Exposing students to diversity is important but that this does not always happen for White students in PWIs (Kuh et al. 2005). Bonilla-Silva, Goar and Embrick (2006) noted that White university students support ethnic integration but their actions suggest otherwise. In a majority White environment, few White students interact with students from different ethnicities. Harper (2013) noted that White students can be reluctant to work with students from different ethnicities and this is something Janice and Michelle encountered. As described in the previous chapter, Janice's attempts to work with White students were rejected and as a result Janice has just one university friend, another BME student. Onlyness (Harper 2009) plays a role because Janice is the only Black student in her class and she cannot make friends with someone of the same ethnicity.

Although Michelle's experiences of working with White peers is similar to Janice, in her class there was a small group of Black students who experienced the same phenomena and ended up working together as a group. These Black students formed their own support group.

"…we did our own support group, us ethnic minorities." (Michelle)

Again, this reflects a common theme experienced by BME students in predominantly White settings (Harper 2013); the need to form support networks between students of shared ethnicity to help deal with the White spaces. In this research, this seems to be a protection factor for those students experiencing issues with cross-racial peer interactions. For example, Michelle describes acting a bit like a mentor to support a peer and keep her going on the course

"One of the students, she has now taken a gap year. She was in tears. She was, you know, right at the edge, and I had to speak to her and encourage her."

Those students who talked about more positive peer interactions enjoyed a diverse peer group that consisted of BME and White home students as well as international students. These students, like Anil, were happy with peer relationships. Diversity, including all aspects of diversity such as age, gender etc., of peers was important to the students and something they valued as creating a sense of belonging.

"They're (friends) all from various backgrounds, you know, a mix of female and males… they're all from across the world.' Anil

"Me: how would you characterise your friends at University?

Salah: Broad, all from different backgrounds."

"…everyone's a real close tight knit group, we all know each other's characters, at least inside the University and that kind of thing. And, you know, a lot of respect." Kingsley

In the cases of Anil and Salah group formation was often controlled by academic staff to create diverse groups and mixing across the cohort. This suggests that one action academic staff and institutions could take is to be more explicit about diversity in the classroom and adopting pedagogies that enhance cross-racial interactions. Academic staff generally support diversity but do not account for it in their teaching (Valentine et al. 2012). For example, one study reported that only a quarter of academics changed their classroom discussions due to diversity (Maruyama et al., 2000). This idea of managing cross-racial interactions both inside and outside the classroom does seem to be under-researched and under-discussed in UK higher education.

5.4.3. Social Engagement

BME students tend to benefit more from academic engagement (Hausmann, Schofield and Woods 2007) with social engagement less important for BME students than for White students (Meeuwisse, Severiens and Born 2010). Whilst this may be true more broadly, that should not mean ignoring variation within the BME student group.

Most notably in my research, Saira and Janice were expecting greater social engagement than they experienced. Janice's prior university experiences at the London university and Saira's experiences at college suggested to them that social engagement was part of the university experience. Being commuter students has played a part in their sense of social isolation which is a common experience for commuter students who often have lower levels of social engagement (Thomas and Jones 2017). Saira felt that living at home has made it harder to break into existing friendships formed in halls of residence. Janice's course which only requires one day a week on campus seems to have limited opportunities for the social aspects of university. Their social engagement is part of their lack of a sense of belonging at university.

Saira has defaulted to a friendship group that largely consists of other British Asian students who studied at the same college and have also gone on to study at Midfordshire which is not uncommon (Smith 2018). However, this is not true for all students. Anil, also a commuter student, mostly socialises with university friends rather than those from before and he appears happy with his level of social engagement.

As I outlined in the literature review, not only is there variation in how students experience social engagement and integration at university but we must question the role of the university in students' social engagement. Salah, with strong family connections and support, seems indifferent to the role of social engagement at university. Kingsley explicitly feels that university is never going to meet his social needs and has taken a deliberate strategy to seek his social relationships outside university in the local community. Although he has good relationships with his university peers and feels a sense of belonging on the course, his peers were not his friends. Race and onlyness are a key aspect of Kingsley thinking in this area. Kingsley is accustomed to onlyness and his strategy is to reduce it in his social life outside university.

> "I'm an only child and … so I was the only ethnic in my primary school. In my secondary school it was better, there was a handful of us, I could count them on two hands… So, I've always had, I've always sort of been on my own, in that sense. You don't come home to brothers and sisters … You know, you don't have brothers or sisters in the playground and that sort of thing, or you don't have other ethnics in the background. So, you have to, I think, naturally, you learn to stand on your own two feet in that context, like very well and very quickly."

What this emphasises, is that academic integration and engagement with peers seems crucial and needs to be planned and managed by academic staff. Minority students may find it difficult to fit in or build contact because of exclusionary responses from their peers. However, staff can provide a teaching environment that helps to overcome this.

The social integration and engagement aspect may be more difficult to address by universities as there does seem to be a large component based on the individual students' preferences and factors beyond the control of the university such as the city and wider community. It may not be desirable for universities to intervene in this area as the literature suggests it is academic engagement which most benefits BME students (Hausmann, Schofield and Woods 2007). Why would a minority student want to spend even more time feeling like a minority when there may be better social spaces outside the university?

With academic engagement being so important the next section discusses the crucial role of staff interactions in creating academic engagement and belonging.

5.5 Staff Interactions

Belonging has been linked to staff support and good relationships between staff and students (e.g. Hausmann et al. 2007, Hoffman et al. 2002). Kandiko and Mewer (2013) argue that the relationships between staff and students may be more important than the university system and educational content in the overall student experience. Small acknowledgments of

BME students' contributions in class can boost confidence (Bunce et. al. 2019). This section focuses on staff / student interactions, from the role of the personal tutor to how academic staff perceive students.

5.5.1. Personal Tutoring

In the UK, the personal tutor or academic advisor can play a key role in student decisions to persist (Cotton, Neale and Nash 2013), their academic success (Stevenson 2012) and potentially their sense of belonging (Cashmore, Scott and Cane 2012). The relationship between the student and personal tutor is a crucial precursor to students then subsequently seeking help and support at a point of need (Yale 2019). However, there are issues with the personal tutorial system in the UK with providing consistent support to students at university (Stevenson 2012) and a negative experience of personal tutoring has been found to be more harmful than no personal tutor support (Yale 2019).

As already discussed in chapter 4, Anil and Saira were disappointed that their personal tutor (academic advisor) was not more proactive in building a relationship with them. Subsequently, neither student felt the need to seek support from their personal tutor. Conversely, Kingsley and Salah, who were the students who described the best relationships with their personal tutor, were happy to seek advice or support from their personal tutor even though both of them were reluctant to seek support; preferring to deal with their own problems.

> "I would go to one of those lecturers, you know, without any hesitation whatsoever. Probably more so than anybody else in my cohort, probably purely because, over that period of time, I've developed a relationship with the lecturers that, you know, I interface with." Kingsley

Kingsley highlights just how important it is to build a relationship between staff and students to create a sense that a student is 'known' by an academic member of staff (Nottingham Trent University et al. 2011). This research suggests that across Midfordshire, personal tutoring practice is inconsistent and that this is linked to whether or not students are likely to seek help and support.

5.5.2. Staff Empathy

Extending beyond the idea of being 'known,' one of the striking features in the student interviews was their reaction when talking about academic staff who took time to listen to them and show empathy. Michelle, Melissa, Kingsley and Anil all had stories of interactions with staff of this type. What was noticeable was how enthused students were discussing these stories and how their mood was much more positive.

The following two short narratives are composite stories based on Melissa's stories. Each narrative takes the form of a discussion between two fictional characters; Janine, a BME student, who represents the composite of the research participants and Anne-Marie, a White student). The first, titled 'The empathic tutor', outlines a positive interaction and uses elements from Salah, Kingsley and Michelle's interviews and takes place after a meeting with Janine's personal tutor. The second, titled 'a bad relationship', is a negative interaction with staff that uses elements of Michelle and Janice's interviews. In this narrative Janice has not been at university due to illness and is catching up with Anne-Marie about the day.

5.5.2.1. The empathetic tutor

Anne-Marie was waiting in the hallway when Janine came out of the office, "How did it go?"

"Good," replied Janine, "I am glad I have him as my tutor now. He treats you with more respect and dignity than some of the other tutors. Do you want to get a coffee?"

Anne-Marie nodded and as they walked towards the café Janine elaborated, "I explained I was struggling and he actually listened rather than try to fix things and get me out of there quickly. I wasn't sure I really wanted to bother him about it, but he made it easy to talk and seemed genuinely like he wanted to listen."

"Did he help with the assignment?" asked Anne-Marie.

"Yes, I wasn't too sure which way to go because the topic is so broad and I asked him how can I focus in? He mentioned one experience we had on the course which I related to and it made me focus on what I wanted to do. He linked it to one of the articles he gave us and helped me put it all together. I found the advice really helpful. He made me think. He gave me a question that made me think about what I had to do rather than just saying this is what I need to do."

"Yeah, he is excellent and so knowledgeable as well," Janine added as they waited to order at the café counter.

5.5.2.2. A bad relationship

"How are you feeling babe?" asked Anne-Marie.

"Yeah a bit better thanks," replied Janine.

"You'll never guess who came over to chat with us at lunch?" Anne-Marie asked with a knowing smile. Janine shook her head and Anne-Marie continued, "Taylor!"

Janine raised her eyebrows in surprise. Gemma Taylor was a tutor on the course and she had never come over to Janine's friends before at lunch although she would often talk to other groups of students. "She is definitely racist. The one day the minority student is ill and she decides to talk to the group." Janine continued, "I don't know what I have done to her that she is so unsupportive."

Janine felt that Gemma Taylor had unfairly marked some of her work. "Do you remember that assignment where I thought I had done really well and she gave me a C?"

Anne-Marie gave a quizzical nod and Janine continued, "I asked straight afterwards about it and she kind of brushed me off and said she didn't have time and to email her instead. Well I did and she didn't reply. So, I went to see her again and asked and she still didn't give any useful feedback. I know they are short staffed and don't have time always to listen but this is more than that!"

"She has given me some useful feedback in the past," replied Anne-Marie.

"Exactly my point! She never gives me any guidance. She says I have to figure it out for myself."

Anne-Marie gave a sympathetic look and started to wonder about Janine's absence today. "Are you coming in tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. She's horrible and I hate going to her class and even more so now! But I don't want to miss any crucial information or get behind. I am glad I have support from you to help."

That the students feel the need to highlight terms such as understanding, respect, dignity, and prepared to listen shows that these types of positive interactions are not universal and that students feel disrespected, unsupported and in the worst case discriminated against by staff. These experiences are echoed in the literature. Kandiko and Mower (2013) found that many negative experiences of university resulted from poor interactions with staff and that a sense of belonging is linked to staff understanding, support and positive staff / student interactions (Hausmann et al. 2007, Hoffman et al. 2002).

5.5.3. High expectations

The attitude and perceptions of staff towards BME students can also manifest in more subtle ways such as the expectations staff have of student capability. Having high expectations has been identified as being important to student outcomes in higher education (Chickering and Gamson 1987, Kuh et al. 2005). However, BME students are often subject to staff having a deficit cognitive frame of thinking (Bensimon 2005) about their capabilities resulting in lower expectations (Stevenson 2012). Feeling that staff have low expectations of you as a student may not only impact performance but a sense of belonging which was seen in the student interviews.

Kingsley was on a course with a culture of high expectations. He was consciously aware that everyone, staff and students, had high expectations and that his course "is better than the University" as a whole. This shared goal of wanting to perform and do well seemed to create a sense of belonging for Kingsley on the course.

Conversely, Michelle, the student who reported the lowest belonging, experienced the opposite. At one point, when she went to seek help with personal problems, she was advised to take a break from the course rather than being offered support to help her through. This added to her feeling that staff had low expectations of her derived from her experiences about academic writing discussed in the previous chapter. Janice also describes feeling that a "certain cleverness" is required and that BME students may have different ways of knowing and thinking which are not seen as valid in academia. This is coupled, for Janice, with a lack of support for BME students. This matches Yosso's (2005) concern about certain types of capital being valued over others.

5.6 Summary

This chapter discussed how the four key elements of my analytical framework, institutional and individual factors, peer interactions and student / staff interactions, contributed in different ways to the students' sense of belonging. Within each element, I identified aspects that emerged from the data. At some point all the students had felt minoritised in different ways within the university. Anil felt it with his assessments although assessment and the curriculum were not factors which featured strongly in this research. Saira, Janice, Salah, Kingsley and Michelle felt minoritised with or by their peers, although expressed in different forms. Cross-racial interactions were notably problematic due, it seems, to ignorant and insensitive peers. However, well-managed groupwork helped create a sense of belonging as well as seeking diversity outside the university.

Janice and Michelle, alongside Melissa, felt minoritised to some degree from interactions with staff. Personal tutoring was noted as crucial to some students belonging (Salah and Kingsley) but the personal tutoring system did not work for others, especially Anil and Saira. One of the most powerful drivers for belonging was the limited university choice most of the students had due to restrictions in their personal life. All of these aspects will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter which will also explore the strategies and actions students adopted to cope with or improve their sense of belonging.

6. Belonging

6.1 Introduction

There has been a much research on the outcomes (awarding gaps) for BME student groups in UK higher education but beyond issues of structural racism, there is still no agreed understanding of why such gaps persist. Although sense of belonging has emerged as a key consideration, our understanding and definitions of belonging, in a university context, can be confused and unclear. There has also been a large amount of research on the experiences of BME students in universities with high proportions of BME students but less so in other institutions. In this study I set out to explore and understand the experiences of different BME students at a predominantly White university situated outside of the UK's main conurbations to address this gap in our knowledge. I was seeking to explore how BME students respond to their university environment and adopt different strategies for generating a sense of belonging as well as gain a better understanding of what is meant by belonging. Beyond this focus, I hope to have demonstrated that universities need to attend more widely to the varied experiences of students, particularly commuter students, and adopt policies and approaches that acknowledge the human interaction and the emotional component inherent in the university experience.

The approach to this research has been to focus on the detail of individual stories and experiences through listening to the narratives of BME students. The aim has been to highlight differences as well as similarities and to show how students respond in different ways to similar environments. Having looked at factors that have influenced the students' sense of belonging at university this chapter will look back to the research aims and questions and summarise the findings and discussion in relation to those questions.

Firstly, I will acknowledge the significance and limitations of the research. I will then address each of the three research questions and summarise the findings:

- How do different BME students experience belonging at a predominantly White university in the UK?
- What do BME students' university experiences reveal about their strategies for belonging in HE?
- How might a sense of belonging be fostered in a predominantly White university?

This research has tried to address the following gaps in our current understanding of the experiences of belonging for BME students:

1. There seems to be little understanding in the HE sector of precisely what is meant by belonging.

2. Belonging research in HE tends to focus on initial belonging and not how it changes over time.

3. There is little research on how students react to their sense of belonging or respond to a lack of belonging.

The first is addressed in my literature review and from reflecting and analysing the data in this research. I have tried to unpack belonging in HE to give the reader a much clearer understanding of what it is and how it may be applied. I think breaking down belonging into two distinct concepts of fit and contact gives a more powerful and nuanced means of understand student belonging and student experiences.

The second is addressed by the stories of students near the end of their studies. My research suggests that the cumulative effects of small instances of not feeling a sense of belonging (this research suggests it likely to be rare for there to be large and significant instances of alienation) start to add up over time and that students are forced to adopt strategies to get through their university experience.

The third is addressed in the previous two chapters and again here. I have highlighted that students experienced belonging and reacted to their experiences in different ways. A combination of personal needs, individual responses to institutional factors, the experiences of peer and staff interactions and the wider context of a student's life all contribute to the complexity of creating (or not) a sense of belonging.

6.2 Limitations

Clearly, there are limitations in this research. Firstly, the research looked at the students' stories at a single point in time. I could have interviewed the same students at different points in their studies which may have shown how belonging changed over time and capture in more detail some of their early experiences. However, my main concern was for students to be able to reflect on their whole or a significant part of their university experience. This meant trying to interview them after they had as much experience as possible at the university. As outlined in the introduction and literature review, the first year experience seems to have been studied far more than subsequent years.

The research was at a single institution and with a small sample size. This may mean the findings are specific to this context only and to these students only. I have never intended to make any general claims about this research. As I outlined in my methodology, the stories should be judged for their ability to resonate with the reader as recognisable experiences. Interviewing more students at other similar institutions would have added to the data but

equally I was more concerned to illuminate the uniqueness of each student experience rather than reach qualitative data saturation. The fact that, despite my best efforts, it was a small sample only serves to highlight the issues I have already discussed. Students appeared wary of talking about this issue to staff at Midfordshire.

By using the category BME to define my research population, I risk perpetrating the singular experience that I have criticised throughout the thesis (see section 1.6 for a more detailed discussion on terminology). I have wanted to focus on the individual stories and have narrowed my population down to those from BME backgrounds. However, in no way do I suggest that, for example, a British Asian female student's experience shares anything in common with a Black male student. The focus has been on belonging and the student experience first and foremost with a specific focus on those that have an ethnic identity within the broad BME category. The choice of BME was to look in more detail at the issues faced by this wide-ranging group of students. The choice of interviewing students from a range of BME ethnicities was partly convenience driven by the issues of recruitment in a predominantly White university and partly trying to address the question of difference and the variety of student experience. There is an inherent tension for this conclusion in wanting to highlight difference in the student experience and the student responses to their university environment whilst also wanting to be able to draw similarities that allow useful recommendations to emerge.

Finally, as outlined in the methodology, the research is highly interpretivist educational research which has many critics and goes against recent attempts by the UK Government to only consider more quantitative educational research. Narrative research is also highly contested but we seem to be living in a narrative age, where stories seem to create more impact and action than numerical data. The years of statistical analysis showing differential outcomes for different BME student groups, certainly in the case of Midfordshire, does not seem to have had any impact on the situation. My hope, then, is that stories might be able to have that impact. In my professional life I still come across far too many staff who simply do not understand the issues involved in the experiences of BME students. This research was always intended to help them understand.

6.3 Significance: BME students' experiences of belonging at university

This next section summarises the key findings from this research. Firstly, focusing on the institutional, individual and wider contexts and then focussing on staff / student and peer interactions.

6.3.1. Institutional diversity and student adaptation

- BME students adapt to non-diverse university environments to generate a sense of belonging but some students are better at adapting than others.
- Prior expectations can influence how well students adapt and influence their sense of belonging.

As discussed in chapter 5, students felt that Midfordshire university was less diverse than the city of Midford. In all but Anil's case, the students felt that they needed to adapt to respond to the, at times, hostile university environment and that their needs were not going to be met without strategies to deal with that environment. These students felt that university was a less welcoming environment than other environments they were familiar with such as the city, their workplace or a previous university. The degree to which students were able to quickly adopt strategies to compensate had an impact on belonging.

Kingsley was aware in advance of the lack of diversity and was prepared for it. He developed strong relationships with academics at an early stage to feel a sense of belonging at university and engaged in activities in the diverse local community to feel a greater overall sense of belonging. Salah also adapted quickly and decided that he was not going to let any negatives in the environment impact his belonging. Kingsley's and Salah's strategies and lack of surprise about the environment meant they were able to develop a sense of belonging. Michelle, Janice and Saira were surprised that the environment was different to what they had expected and experienced before. Saira had not anticipated issues because of her diverse and positive experience at a local college. Janice's and Michelle's work and previous university environments felt comfortable and they had a sense of belonging in those spaces. The climate at Midfordshire was unexpected for them. They felt the institution did not meet their needs and it did not feel right for them;

> "I'm a bit concerned. It looks like us, the ethnic minorities, are trailing behind, and I'm already losing my confidence… it's me who has a problem and has to change. That's how I'm taking it now. That's how, I think if you want to finish a degree here, that's how you have to take it. You have to take that approach. I call it a Buddhist approach. When there's a problem, it's not other people who are causing it, it's you, and then you try and solve it at your own level, and accept," Michelle

> "I found fitting in and getting along with people very difficult because there was no sort of common ground to fall on…I found that everyone else was getting along with one another, simply because they were talking about, oh yes, I went to this club yesterday…And I'm like, I'm sorry, I didn't go out, I'm sorry, I don't drink. And I think the shock, people's lack of understanding, that shocked me." Siara

> "Like I say it (university) feels foreign to be precise." Janice

There is a real depth of emotion being expressed here. These students feel that they have to deal with the problem themselves when their university environment is out of alignment with their own needs. There is no sense that the environment is going to adapt to meet their needs but that they have to adapt. Neither Saira nor Janice were able to articulate strategies for dealing with this. Belatedly, Michelle decided that the only strategy to deal with the situation was to internalise it and not complain; her 'Buddhist' approach. These three students reported the lowest sense of belonging of the participants.

6.3.2. Choice of University and commuter students

- BME students tend to choose their university based on pragmatic considerations such as finance, family and being local to their home (commuter students).
- As a result, BME students who live outside of the UK's large, diverse cities often face a limited choice of university which may not meet their needs.
- Those pragmatic considerations can reduce the time spent on campus and their sense of belonging.

Although some students were more aware of the likely campus climate and lack of diversity than others, the issue of diversity was not a key factor for the research participants in choosing to come to Midfordshire. All the students have chosen to study somewhere close to home. Financial, family and work reasons meant that Midfordshire was a pragmatic choice rather than the best choice for their needs.

BME students often feel safer from wider societal prejudice by studying in their home community (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018). However, this works in more diverse areas than Midford because there are more diverse universities available in those locales. The problem for the students in this research is that whilst staying at home may feel safer outside of university, they are entering a less diverse and potentially less safe community at university.

That lack of diversity, being a commuter student, having to work and having family obligations can mean students spend less time that they might otherwise on campus which contributes to a lowered sense of belonging. This can be seen in the contrast between Anil, who has a strong sense of belonging and is less impacted by the other pressures, and Melissa, who has a lower sense of belonging.

> "I'm pretty much here (on campus) like the majority of the week, so I think that's what gives me that sense of belonging." Anil

> "I did consider cutting my [work] hours down but it just doesn't work for me financially…. If I wasn't working, I feel as though I would really be focused on my studies… I think I would enjoy University a lot more" Melissa

One way to address this is through co-curricular activity. Co-curricular activity potentially enhances belonging by creating informal peer interactions (Park 2014) and 1 -5 hours of weekly engagement with co-curricular activity can lead to increased academic outcomes (Zacherman, and Foubert, 2014). In this research, only Salah and Kingsley were engaged in co-curricular activity. The other students explicitly noted a lack of time as a barrier to involvement, but in reality, it was seen as a low priority for these students and they prioritised their time elsewhere.

Overall, there seems to be an overlap between being a BME student and a commuter student which intersects to be a significant factor in the experiences of the students in this research.

6.3.3. University Transitions

- BME students often do not have 'straight-forward' journeys through university.

None of the 2nd or final year students in this research had a simple three-year journey through university; they did not stay with the same cohort of students through the whole course. Michelle and Salah had to drop back a year, Janice transferred from another university and Melissa transferred from college. Anil did a foundation year and then joined an enlarged cohort in the first year but mostly retained friends from the foundation year. Salah also studied a foundation year and then changed courses. Kingsley started on one degree and then transferred to a different degree. His degree has a small number of students who share classes with a larger cohort of students studying different engineering degrees. In all these cases, the students' peer group changed at various points in their university experience, not just at the typical transition point from school or college to university.

Without conceptualising transition as becoming (Gale and Parker 2014) and an ongoing process, BME students in largely White universities risk being more isolated and lacking a sense of belonging from normative ideas of transition. University transitions are seen as linear journeys and this perception then informs institutional initiatives to manage such transitions missing out on much of the transition process (Gravett 2019). As an example, Janice transferred universities at an atypical point and nothing was done to help that transition. As a result, she was unable to break into existing friendship groups which contributed to her lack of belonging at university. Conversely, Anil's belonging was derived from his peers on the foundation course. However, that group did not integrate fully with those coming into the first year of the degree without the foundation course.

6.3.4. University Culture

- University policy and practice may disadvantage BME students or at the very least do not take account of student circumstances.

Supportive campus cultures are linked to student success (Kuh et al. 2005) and belonging (Harper and Quaye 2009). There was evidence in this research that institutional policy and practices do not recognise student circumstances. Salah experienced administrative errors that, were it not for the support of his father, could have resulted in him leaving university. When his father subsequently became ill and Salah had to step into the role as head of household, he was forced to take a year out from study rather than be supported to continue. If BME students are more likely to live at home and have family commitments, then this lack of recognition of the particulars of their circumstances may lead to worse outcomes for them.

In predominantly White institutions, like Midfordshire, it is likely that the campus culture is based on White majority assumptions and values (Quaye and Chang 2012). Michelle's whole story is a constant struggle to stay in university with variable support and a feeling that her ethnicity played a large part in the difficulties she encountered. She felt powerless to get the university to address any of her concerns because she felt they just did not see how the institutional culture worked against her. Her stories of repeatedly not getting any resolution to her experiences through university procedures highlights how difficult it can be for students to deal with the power imbalance with the institution. Her story of failing an essay and having to rewrite a completely new one, as outlined in section 4.3.1, suggests that once a student struggles institutional practices seem to compound the problem rather than support the student. If BME students are more likely to initially struggle with academic attainment then this will only increase the gap between BME and White students.

6.3.5. The Role of Staff

- Interactions with staff are important for student belonging.
- Small negative interactions can impact a student's long-term sense of belonging at university.
- Personal tutoring is a key area for creating student belonging but staff must be proactive in initiating that relationship with students.
- Students are conscious of how they are perceived by academic staff which can impact their belonging.

- Collaborative pedagogies and group work can help BME students feel a sense of belonging

In the interviews, one of the moments that had the biggest impact on my thinking was when Michelle talked about a member of staff who did listen to her and was empathetic. As outlined in the previous chapter, most of the students spoke positively when they encountered staff who spoke to them with respect even if it was only for a brief time. Interactions with academic staff are arguably more important for belonging than peer interactions (Kandiko and Mewer 2013).

A sense of belonging was created when academics:

- gave students respect,
- listened to students,
- gave help when asked,
- knew who they were (Nottingham Trent University et al. 2011).

In contrast, the times when staff were dismissive or did not listen had a big negative impact on the students. Even when those occasions were just small fleeting moments, they stuck in the students' minds.

> "At one point I was very stressed … and the only place to turn to was the university, so I came here to tell my lecturer what had happened, and she was falling asleep…I couldn't believe it…I don't think she even heard what I was saying." Michelle

> "a couple of times I have asked to see her and she has said to send an email and whenever I have done that she has not responded to the email." Janice

This tended to create a lack of belonging that was difficult to compensate for by more positive staff interactions. Once those negative interactions had occurred it was difficult for students to build a sense of belonging on their course.

One key area of staff / student interaction was personal tutoring. Students felt that the personal tutor needs to be proactive. Salah was full of praise for his personal tutor because the tutor had made a connection with Salah that Salah could then build on. Whereas Anil and Saira did not seek help from nor build a relationship with their personal tutors because they felt their tutor was not bothered about building a relationship. Building a strong relationship with an academic member of staff may contribute to a sense of belonging which was the case for Salah. This relationship then links to whether and what type of help students might seek. Those students whose interactions with staff helped create a sense of belonging were likely to seek help even when their own personality traits made help-seeking difficult (Kingsley and Salah). Students needed to feel rapport with a member of staff to talk about the 'bigger' issues

they were facing (Bunce et. al. 2019) as evidenced by Michelle and Kingsley. However, those students whose rapport with staff was more limited would seek help with assignments or ask questions about the course but they did not describe significant personal conversations with staff (Melissa, Anil, Janice).

Students are aware of how they are perceived by academic staff and this was linked to belonging. A culture of high expectations (Chickering and Gamson 1987) was linked to a sense of belonging and vice versa. Language emerged as a proxy for perceived academic performance (Currant 2015) and cultural capital. Students from multilingual backgrounds (Janice and Michelle) were perceived by academic staff to be less capable rather than their language skills being seen as an asset (Yosso 2005).

Academic staff also decide the pedagogy and curriculum that students are exposed to. One, for me, surprising, finding in this research is the importance of group work for BME students' belonging. Surprising because the literature on group work suggests it is often problematic (Gibbs 2010b). The key is that group work needs to be carefully managed by academics in the classroom. The research literature has been clear for a long time about the importance of collaborative learning (e.g. Chickering and Gamson 1987) and that peer conversations about academic work enhances belonging (Hurtado and Carter 1997). For all the problems that are sometimes associated with student group work, a well-managed learning environment may have significant benefits for BME student belonging. In addition, group work appears to be a key place for commuter students to get to know peers and make friends, for example this was true for Kingsley, Anil, and Salah. Even Saira, who was struggling with her sense of belonging at university due to peer interactions, felt that group work helped.

Where the curriculum provides the choice or flexibility for students to study areas which are of interest to them, they are more likely to feel belonging and do well. Saira's story is a good example of this. Where she was given the choice, she chose more internationally focused modules in business to better reflect her cultural background and perspectives.

Students also expect staff to help integrate them with their peers and deal with issues of race (Stevenson 2012). This was most clearly seen in Michelle's stories and Janice and Saira were also frustrated by problematic peer interactions which they perceived had a racial element to them.

6.3.6. Peer Interactions

- Onlyness (Harper 2009) and negative peer interactions with a racial element, although undesirable and distressing, do not always lead to a lack of belonging.

- BME students seem to receive little institutional support in navigating peer interactions.

Problematic peer interactions could to some degree be compensated for by positive peer interactions (e.g. Saira and Salah). Racism exists in wider society and most BME students have developed the navigational capital (Yosso 2005) to deal with predominantly White institutions and spaces. For example, Salah conceptualised these interactions as a problem with the other person and not about himself and placed it in the wider context of society issues. A lack of positive peer interactions was an important factor in creating a lack of belonging but negative peer interactions by themselves may not lead to an overall lack of belonging.

Equally, onlyness (Harper 2009), as experienced by Janice and Kingsley and in part by Michelle, does not inevitably result in a lack of belonging. However, it does require BME students to be confident in their strategies for dealing with it as Kingsley was and there seems to be a need for a pedagogy which helps to address it (as outlined above), which Janice felt was missing.

However, it did not appear that students had institutional help in navigating difficult peer interactions and they seemed to be left to deal with it themselves. For example, for Michelle:

> Michelle: "Us three ethnic minority students were supporting each other and then the rest of the group, they were together. They would go out together, and then they would single you out, and they supported each other very well. If somebody does a presentation, I would say everybody was getting praises, and then I felt like I didn't get the same praises. I've never got positive feedback."
>
> Interviewer: "So, in the class would say that's divided by ethnicity?"
>
> Michelle: "Oh yes. Yes, it is. It's divided."
>
> Interviewer: "And, lecturers don't do anything to break that?"
>
> Michelle: "They said that they don't see it, when I mentioned it."

6.4 Significance: Strategies of Belonging

Given the variety of the students' experiences impacted by the range of factors discussed above, how did the students respond? Black students, in particular, face an anti-intellectual stereotype about their academic ability (Cockley 2003) throughout their prior schooling and at university. This often results in an explicit academically-focused strategy designed to prove this stereotype wrong through hard work and achievement (Vincent et al., 2011, Byfield, 2008). Michelle, Melissa, Janice, Kinglsey, Anil and Salah all expressed forms of

this strategy although exactly how this manifested in their belonging and actions varied greatly.

Michelle and Janice adopted a strategy which might be described as 'persistence.' Both have a lack of belonging at university and as they approached the end of their degree, they just wanted to get through it and finish. As a result of their experiences at university, they have come to believe that achieving a sense of belonging at university is not possible and seek belonging in other places such as family and church. Their approach has led them to focus only on the academic aspects of university. They interact with staff in order to be able to do well in assessments. Additionally, Michelle feels the need to build strong connections to academic staff in order to compensate for her sense that she has been labelled as the "problem person because I'd put in complaints."

> "At the moment, I've tried to mend the relationship [with lecturers], I've tried to mend it by accepting everything, even if I'm not agreeing."

Michelle did not start out adopting this strategy. Initially, she had more of an 'advocacy' approach using her 'resistant capital' (Yosso 2005); she wanted to challenge injustice for herself and others like her. She wanted things to improve. However, she felt blocked by the system and unable to improve things to the point she gave up this strategy.

> "If we just want to finish this course, do not make any complaints, do not do anything. Just get on with it. Get on with the flow, leave it."

Melissa has adopted a similar strategy, in terms of getting on with the academic side of the course. Her life outside university plays a much larger part in Melissa's thinking. Her work and family take up much more time than university. It is her work that Melissa attributes to having the biggest impact on her performance at university.

> "If I wasn't working, I feel as though I would really be focused on my studies and I can aim for a high grade but right now I'm just aiming to pass but I never wanted that."

For Melissa university is a means to an end; a qualification that she had planned to do to enhance her career prospects, although at the time of interview her plans were paused. Melissa's primary focus is on passing the course and reviewing her future plans afterwards. Her specific strategy is to seek support from peers and academic staff with her assessed work. She does not seem to have a strong identity as a student. She seems to epitomise Archer and Leathwood's (2003: 177) description of a student that is going "through university rather than university going through them".

Kingsley, by contrast, was one of two students who viewed his university experience as transformational. Alongside a focus on his academic work, Kingsley adopted a strategy of

social belonging based in the city and local community. In his case, as a student who had moved away from home, he knew he would have to be proactive in building that sense of belonging. One way he achieved this was involvement with a local dance group. This aspect of Kingsley's strategy resulted because there was little racial diversity on his course. In consequence, he sought that diversity elsewhere and this helped give him a sense of belonging. Kingsley, whose father is White, is aware in his life of how his biracial identity is perceived in different communities and is conscious of 'acting White' or 'acting Black.' He uses this knowledge to deal with the White environment of his course alongside his extrovert personality. This was not the 'fitting in' described by Strayhorn (2018) but one expression of Kingsley's overall identity which he was happy with because he had outlets outside of university to explore other expressions of his identity. Of the students in the research, Kingsley was most confident about his academic performance. The academic-focus of his strategy was to build good contact with academic staff. This had started at an open day he attended and he built on it from there.

Anil's strategy for belonging is about fit in terms of common-identity groups (his course peers) and contact with peers. Of those interviewed, Anil had the most friends who were other students at Midfordshire, all from his course. It is through identifying with the course that Anil has developed most of his friendships and his sense of belonging at university. Anil has a strong attachment to the university, (4.4 out of 5 on the attachment fit questions A1-5) developed as a result of the provision of resources and services to support his study. Anil's strategy is to commit to his studies; he attends classes, he makes use of resources available, he works with peers and asks for help when needed. Unlike Kingsley he has not built strong contact with academic staff.

Like all the students interviewed, Salah has engaged academically at university. More so than most he has engaged in co-curricular activity and has tried to take advantage of the development opportunities available at university. Like Kingsley, he describes his university experience as a journey of development and transformation. Salah sees completing university and getting a degree as a significant achievement, regardless of the actual outcome. He recognises how much he has developed as a person. There are similarities between Salah's strategy and Kingsley's. Like Kingsley, Salah has built strong contact with academic staff and although he gets on well with most of his peers, his friends are mostly outside of university. Salah is older than most of his university peers and his university friends tend to be those who are older and from more diverse backgrounds. Family is Salah's main source of belonging outside of university.

Saira had not yet adopted a particular strategy for belonging at university. She had expected to find it easier than she has done to fit in and feel a sense of belonging. As a result, she is not sure how to go forward and not surprisingly has defaulted to the familiarity of friends from college and the city to give her that sense of belonging for the time being; "staying close to home…provides a sense of safety and reassurance" (Reay, Crozier and Crawford 2010:111) Even though, she has been at university for half a year, she is still in a transitional phase. Being a local, commuting student has had both positive and negative impacts. On the positive side Saira had existing friends and family locally to create a sense of belonging. However, because of this she was still struggling to adopt a strategy in relation to university.

Table 4 summarises the nature of the contact and fit that the students have at university and how it influences their strategies. This reflects both their own strategies of belonging and how they feel peers, staff and the university environment has responded to them.

Table 4: Belonging strategies for each research participant based on my analytical framework of fit and contact.

Participant	Peer Contact	Staff Contact	University fit	Strategy	Created Belonging
Michele	Mixed, with other BME students but not White students.	Developing but problematic.	No.	Academic-focus. Persistence – do what needs to be done to complete. Started off as 'advocacy' approach.	No. The university is not a place where she will feel belonging.
Melissa	To some degree with a small group of friends.	Limited.	To some degree.	'Means to an end.'	To some degree.
Janice	Very limited.	Limited.	No.	Academic-focus. Persistence – do what needs to be done to complete.	No. The university is not a place where she will feel belonging.
Saira	Limited.	Very limited.	No.	Undecided.	Still developing.

Participant	Peer Contact	Staff Contact	University fit	Strategy	Created Belonging
Kingsley	Academically but not socially.	Strong.	Yes because of his own strategies.	Academic-focused. Strong working relationships with peers and academic staff.	Yes. Strong sense of belonging to his course.
Anil	Yes.	Limited.	Yes, partly own strategies and partly his course.	Peer-group focused.	Yes. A small group of friends on course contributes to belonging.
Salah	Limited.	Yes.	To some degree.	Developmental approach. Learning has been more than just his course.	Yes.

6.5 Significance: Summary

I feel at this point in writing this thesis it is appropriate to move away from trying to give an objective and dispassionate analysis of my research and go back to what I feel inside and the reasons for doing this research in the first place. As a result, this is a note to you, the reader, of a shift in tone.

Going back to the research questions, in summary BME students experience predominantly White institutions in a myriad of ways; there is no single BME student experience. Students prior experiences, the diversity of their course (both in terms of students and curriculum), the willingness of staff to support students and manage cross-racial interactions and the attitudes of peers all interact to create different experiences.

Even the most positive, well-prepared students in this research could not avoid the impact that their ethnicity had on their student experience. BME students are forced to adopt strategies that allow them to cope with the, at times, hostile racial climate on campus. Some students withdraw and seek a sense of belonging elsewhere in their lives. Some students adjust their mindset and outlook so as not to be beaten down by the negative responses they experience from others at university. Most seek some sort of support from people who empathise and can help them. Although, in many cases this support is not found at the university but outside: church, family, friends and work colleagues. This last point highlights an obvious gap in how universities act to support BME students. The next chapter looks at identifying gaps and recommendations for universities and their staff to improve the experiences and sense of belonging for BME students.

7. Recommendations and Conclusions

7.1 Fostering Belonging Introduction

Having summarised the experiences and the strategies of the students in research this chapter discusses recommendations for universities and academic staff about how they might foster belonging for BME students. An underpinning assumption, derived from the literature and the data analysis, of the following recommendations is that a sense of belonging is a deeply individual experience that cannot be addressed as a singular, monolithic strategy or set of actions (e.g. Hayes and Jandrić 2018). I am mindful that 'there is too much emphasis on what works for some without consideration of why it works and who might be excluded' Bryson (2020:260). However, there are some common themes and recommendations that have emerged from this research. The chapter also add recommendations for further research and concludes with a final summary of my thoughts on the research.

7.2 Recommendations for Universities and Policymakers

The first set of recommendations deals with the issues the students experienced as a result of being commuter students, needing to work, their attitude to the university campuses and their desire to be on campus. None of these recommendations involves targeting interventions at students based on their ethnicity. A majority of universities still treat BME students as a single group, especially in PWIs where the proportion of BME students is low, which "means that interventions or resources can be misdirected whilst those who need targeted interventions can remain unsupported" (Stevenson et. al. 2019:5).

As BME students are more likely to be commuter students (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018) addressing this may improve the experiences for some BME students. Additionally, dealing with the campus climate should benefit all BME students as well. Institutions may feel that they espouse the value of diversity but this can seem tokenistic to minority students and staff (Museus, Ravello and Vega 2012). Policies and practices intended to be 'neutral' can have a negative impact on minority students because of a lack of awareness of the assumptions inherent in the institution and assumptions made about minority students. 'Neutral' policies and practice are only neutral when perceived through the lens of whiteness and can be anything but to BME students.

- Investigate the needs of commuter students and better cater for commuter students. Commuter students feel that universities do not accommodate their needs (Thomas 2020).

- Develop interventions / activities that encourage or benefit students in spending more time on campus without penalising financially or being in conflict with family commitments; the 'sticky' campus idea (JISC 2018).
  - Provide more on-campus student employment (Chang 2004).
  - Co-curricular activity should take place during the day or early evening to make it more accessible for students with other commitments. (Maguire and Morris 2018).
  - Gain greater understanding of the barriers to BME student involvement in co-curricular activity.
- Universities need to consider socialisation processes and transition beyond initial induction (Tett, Cree and Christie 2017). Students may be in a state of permanent or repeated transition whilst at university and they need to be supported in moving between cohorts and peer groups.
- Institutions and their leaders need to think critically about the campus culture and how minority students perceive it (Museus, Ravello and Vega 2012) and take action to remedy issues. This requires a commitment from university leaders to address the issues faced by BME students (UUK / NUS 2019).
- Review policies and practices to consider their impacts on BME students.

I want to add a note of caution about recommending that BME students spend more time on campus. This could negatively impact BME student belonging unless the campus racial climate is addressed and cross-racial interactions are positive experiences. Encouraging BME students to spend more time with White peers or in White spaces may decrease belonging where White students or staff are insensitive to racial issues.

Given that ethnicity clearly has an impact on the student experiences of belonging, then universities need to recognise this and be more proactive to mitigate. There needs to be recognition of the additional cognitive and social demands that BME students may have placed on them by having to develop strategies to cope in predominantly White environments and possibly dealing with race-based hostility (Greene, Marti and McClenney 2008). Prevalent notions of fairness and equality, as I illustrated in Michelle's stories, need to be replaced by real equity. If being a BME student means having greater cognitive or social demands than being a White student, then BME students should have access to more help and support to compensate. For example, through a dedicated person to talk to who understands the specific issues of race and belonging in a PWI.

7.3 Recommendations for Academic Staff

The second set of recommendations are related to aspects which are more in the control of an individual academic or programme team. They relate to interactions with students and what happens in the classroom. This research suggests that individual staff can have a large impact on BME student belonging.

- As academic staff we need to be mindful of how important all our interactions with students are and to try at all times to be respectful and empathetic in those interactions.
- Provide structured and proactive personal tutorial support.
- Flexibility in curriculum and assessment so that it is more relevant to BME students' own experiences and interests. (Quaye and Chang 2012, Currant 2015).
- Be aware of our own cultural biases and manage students' cultural biases in the classroom, for example through co-creation of ground rules for peer interaction. This may require addressing race and racism directly in class or the curriculum (Quaye and Chang 2012).
- Use well-managed collaborative pedagogies (Chickering and Gamson 1987) such as group work to support positive peer interactions.

Finally, the most impactful aspect of this research on me was the emotional one. The resignation in Janice's voice when she described coming up the hill to West Campus. The complete change of tone when Michelle talked about a staff member who listened and empathised with her. The joy of Kingsley describing his hobbies outside of university. These emphasise just how emotional university can be. If we want to create a sense of belonging for BME students at university, we need to attend to the emotional aspect. From this research, it actually seems quite simple: listen, empathise, support. This does not need to be lots of support but just knowing someone was willing to listen and support them made a difference to the students' sense of belonging. Recent research has highlighted the importance of institutions building 'affective engagement' to benefit student wellbeing, transformative learning and a sense of inclusion (Bowden, Tickle and Naumann 2019). They are not just BME students they are human beings and I wonder whether a bit of humanity has been lost from our higher education system.

7.4 Recommendations for Researchers

Whilst I have tried to address what I see are limitations in the literature on BME student belonging, there still needs to be further research in the areas I have identified above. The first set of recommendations relate to gaps that I discussed in my literature review.

- A qualitative and quantitative understanding of belonging over time at university.
- Establish a stronger connection between how BME student belonging is related to success and student outcomes.

The second set of recommendations relates to the findings of my research and future implications of this.

- Understanding of how university belonging interacts with BME students' wider belonging
- Better understanding of the intersection between being a BME student and a commuter student, especially outside the UK's larger conurbations.
- The role of group work in creating friendships for all students and whether group work has a greater benefit to BME students or White students in this respect.
- A greater understanding of the affective domain on BME student experiences and outcomes.

7.5 Final Reflections

I started this research in part to address a feeling of dissatisfaction about the ways that universities are approaching student engagement and belonging which I outlined in the three questions at the end of section 2.2. It seemed to me that the metrics culture that has emerged in UK HE was mainly interested in a quantitative understanding of how we could increase student engagement and belonging across a cohort without real consideration of the individual. As I conducted the interviews and analysed the data, I felt the importance of the personal and the qualitative experience that could not be easily measured with a survey. I would hope then that the reader might consider the following questions instead when it comes to BME student engagement and belonging:

- How do universities engage students in a way that suits their circumstances and personal needs?
- How can universities meet the varied student needs for belonging?

If we are to meet every students' needs and circumstances that sounds complex, time consuming and probably impractical. However, I became convinced, by the students I interviewed, that it can be simply reduced down to treating them as fellow human beings.

What is the main message I would like the reader to take away? What did the students in this research want?

- The students wanted their White peers to be better educated and aware of cultural differences and their own privileges and to treat them as any other peer.
- They wanted staff to treat them with dignity and respect as human beings and to listen to them.
- They wanted personal tutors to initiate contact and build a relationship with them.
- They wanted the university to acknowledge that the environmental press was not a good one for BME students and improve it. As Kendi (20xx:18) notes "there is no such thing as a non-racist or race-neutral policy. Every policy…is producing or sustaining either racial inequality or equity."

This last point brings me to the moment of writing this last section of the thesis in June 2020 in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests initiated after the death of George Floyd. I have to ask myself what am I contributing? I hope this thesis is a big part of my contribution.

This research has been a journey. It has been a journey of self-education through my scholarship. By listening to and analysing the students' experiences, by engaging critically with a wide range of relevant literature and by reading more widely about race and antiracism, I am now a far more educated and aware person. This extensive knowledge of student engagement and belonging has been extremely valuable to be able to apply in my everyday work supporting academic colleagues to think about their teaching practices.

Moving forward from my own education, I hope then that this research serves to help educate other White people. I feel that the journey of producing this thesis has helped to educate others and bring about small ripples and changes. Through presenting my research at conferences and testing my ideas out with peers, lots of interesting and inspiring conversations have taken place. One example was presenting the research at a time when I was trying to frame it around Pace and Stern's (1958) concept of Environmental Press and develop a new understanding and way of thinking about BME student belonging. This had such an impact on one member of the audience that I was invited to meetings at the Equality Challenge Unit to discuss a possible departmental level Race Equality Charter Mark. In addition to the theoretical

contribution, I have also been invited to present my narrative research methods to Masters degree students exploring their own methodologies. The research has enabled me to move from a novice researcher to someone who has some expertise in narrative research.

What has kept me going through the journey has been the resonance that the research seems to have had with BME colleagues in the audiences where I have presented and the way myself and those colleagues have been able to use it and their own experiences and research to start conversations with White colleagues who seemed to not have fully grasped the experiences of BME students. As an educational developer, I am motivated to develop new understandings to help enhance the knowledge of academic colleagues so they can enhance their own practice and take action to improve the experiences for BME students. This research has been pivotal in developing my subject expertise to support others.

Finally, I would like to thank the students who took part in this research and shared their stories. As an educational developer, foremost in my mind were ideas about the curriculum, assessment and pedagogy but thanks to the students I learnt so much more about the wider context of the student experience. Each student had a different motivation for being interviewed and I think on balance the combination of the students gave a wide insight into the experiences of belonging for BME students.

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9. Appendices

9.1 Research diary excerpt – Recruitment (dated 5th Feb 2016)

It would be naive to think that as a White member of staff it was going to be easy recruiting students from BME backgrounds for my research but I didn't think it was going to be as hard as it is. In the previous work, when two PhD students from BME backgrounds did the recruiting it was problematic but we managed to get 10 recruits in a single semester. So it does raise the question about both 'power distance' of being a staff member and race effects.

As a result, I have tried to address the first issue by downplaying my 'staff' identity. Firstly, I had used my student email address (this actually seemed to make no difference). Secondly, when recruiting I identified as a researcher and student rather than staff member. Finally, I had started 'dressing down' when addressing students and carrying out interviews.

Addressing the second issue is harder. This was always a concern before even attempting to recruit and is addressed in my ethics form and recruitment strategy. The primary strategy has always been to get staff who teach or work with students and who have build up a relationship with them to 'recommend' the study. Added to this I have now focused on attending the end of lectures to briefly talk about my research and to recruit students.

There is an interesting comparison with the previous recruitment method where the PhD students were approaching students on campus to ask for interviews. What I think I am detecting so far is that in this previous method, there was a tendency to get those who might be characterised as on the two ends of the distribution of students in terms of their views. In other words, students who had a specific issue with the university and wanted to air it and students who wanted to defend the university. At the moment, with the new recruitment strategy it feels that the students recruited are in more middle positions. They do not have any specific burning issue to bring up but at the same time they are hardly showering the university with praise. I may be proved wrong with this observation as it is still early days but in many ways the latter strategy seems to be giving the highly useful 'middle' position. The danger though is that the most egregious stories of prejudice will not emerge. I think it will be important to frame the discussion around the idea that the interviews were with the 'average' student who turned up to lectures and was engaged with the university and most likely known to staff. This has implications in terms of belonging and mattering as being known to staff is a key component of mattering.

The other interesting observation with recruitment is timing. The response and willingness to take part at the start of semester is way higher than it was at the end of the last

semester. This was summed up in an email sent by a participant who could not be interviewed at the end of semester because of workload caused by assignments. So there is probably a five week window at the start of semester to get interviews completed.

9.2 Research diary excerpt – Emerging themes (dated 6th March 2017)

I need to be careful with themes as I am not doing a thematic analysis but I think in any discussion of my data and the literature, I think themes are a useful device to construct the writing of a chapter.

So, what is emerging:

- Campus climate
- Placements
- The city
- Wider society
- Support mechanisms
- The impact of lecturers
- The lack of university friends
- Confidence

Campus Climate

This is a complex variable. The general feeling from students studying at the satellite campuses is that the main campus is better; they would rather be studying at the main campus. However, this feeling manifests in different ways and is partly linked to 'onlyness'.

Student C describes herself as a visitor to campus Y (the 'Whitest' campus) no matter how many times she comes to campus she always feels like a visitor. Student B who also studies at campus Y does not express any great negative feeling towards the campus but prefers to work at the main campus. Conversely, student D describes a 'we are all in it together' attitude to campus X (a more culturally diverse campus). He describes that no student likes being at campus X and so that generates a shared bond between students. However, I do think the ethnic mix at campus X plays a part in it being a better experience for BME students. There are lots of subtle hints in the interviews about this. What it does demonstrate that the environmental press and culture at each campus is different and this creates a different experience for BME students. My hypothesis would be that White students at campus Y would be much more positive about the experience and would be more positive about their campus than White students at campus X.

Placements

On many professional courses, placements are a vital part of the degree. However, the culture of the organisations where students go on placements are difficult for the university to control and represent a highly problematic aspect of the experiences of BME students.

Student A described multiple issues with multiple placements. She experienced colleagues in the workplace making complaints or having concerns about her performance. Equally student D described a formal complaint made about him by a colleague in the placement setting. Both students A & D attributed part of their experiences down to racial prejudice. For example, student D described the experiences of his White peer placement students in different terms and cited evidence that they had gone back to that workplace after their placement. Students B & C are formally employed in their work settings and describe a different experience whereas longer term members of staff they are more accepted.

The City

So far, the city comes out positively. All the students are generally happy to be in this city. Student C highlights that it is less diverse and different to London but still praises the city as being friendly. Student D highlighted the diversity of the city particularly in the international flavour of the city as well as ethnic diversity. I think in the case of at least three of the students, the city comes out positively because it feels more diverse than the university and is a friendlier place.

Wider society

Of course, that is not to say there are not problems. Students A & D highlighted in particular the everyday reality of living in a White society. For students B, C & D there was a strong reluctance to blame White society and to attribute many of their experiences to race. In fact, when asked about the issues of BME attainment and the wider concerns for BME students they tended to place the blame within their own communities. For example, student B described 'Asians as lazy'. Student D highlighted his concern about the prevalence of poor role models for Black men citing the music industry as a key area where an anti-intellectual culture is created.

This raises a crucial issue for the research. Is this a case of these students having absorbed the prevailing stereotypes and to some extent bought into them when discussing others of similar ethnic background. In Bourdieu's terms they demonstrate the power of symbolic violence. (There is probably a bell hooks or CRT term for this.) The students whilst not

recognising themselves in those stereotypes seemed to genuinely believe that there was some truth in the stereotypes.

Support Mechanisms

What is striking so far is the variety of key support mechanisms, most of them outside the university. Self and family were the key support mechanisms. Students emphasised trying to support themselves. Student D demonstrated the self-support most strongly and had a real desire to make it on his own merit without too much support from others. He described himself as very self-sufficient. However, he acknowledged that this had almost meant failing at university. When he hit a particular set of personal issues, he started struggling at university. Whilst his peers seemed to note his change of behaviour, this isolated him rather than being a support mechanism. He was only able to move forward when he eventually sought the support of lecturers.

Family support was often varied and represents strongly the personal circumstances of the student. Student B gained most of her emotional and academic support from her partner and felt that her family were as much a barrier to her success as a support mechanism. Student C gained her support from her husband and family. Student A struggled to get academic support but got emotional support from her daughter and her church. Student A was isolated from her family due to cultural norms.

The Impact of Lecturers

Lecturers do have a strong impact on students both positively and negatively. Student D described mostly positive impact from lecturers and this tallied with his strong support for his course. In terms of my previous discussions about fit and contact, student D derived belonging from positive contact with lecturers and a course that had created a strong cohort identity to create fit. Student B, on the other hand, described a negative experience with a lecturer which has had long term impact on her motivation and aspirations. Student C reported no strong contact with lecturers and a strong lack of fit. However, she did mention some positive feedback that had a strong impact on her sense of ability and aspirations. Professional service staff where not mentioned by students.

Lack of University Friends

What is noticeable for all students is that their friends are not derived from being at university. Students B and C largely described each other as the only friends they had on the course. Student D, although describing a strong sense of fit and cohort identity, did not

socialise with university peers. His friends were derived from interests outside university as part of his involvement with community activity such as dancing.

All the students had little involvement with the social side of university. Student C felt largely isolated from this most likely due to being older and with a family. Student D had attempted to join societies but eventually felt they were not for him.

Confidence

It seems in the interviews that there is a strong link between confidence and interactions with lecturers. Student D mentioned multiple positive interactions and how this had helped to create a sense of achievement and a visible confidence. Student C had felt initially to lack confidence in her ability but positive feedback from a lecturer had bolstered her confidence and raised her aspirations such that she was hoping to move from seeing herself as a 2.2 student to achieving a 2.1.

Equally, confidence can decrease with negative contact and interactions which was the case with students A and B. For multiple reasons, including a negative experience with a lecturer, student B was hoping just to pass.

9.3 Initial impressions - Michelle

This were my first thoughts on the interview with Michelle. This was a very emotional interview in which Michelle got upset about her experiences. Reading the transcript and listening to the audio again, to analyse the data, left me emotional in response and some of that comes across in my impressions below. I needed to put that emotion down on paper in order to move beyond it and really get into the detail of Michelle's interview and analyse it more objectively; bearing in mind the idea of the hermeneutics of faith and of suspicion. At this first phase of analysis, I tended to be outraged on Michelle's behalf.

9.3.1. Michelle

Michelle has come to the interview with a story to tell. She is convinced that her personal experiences at university have been affected by racism. She describes numerous incidents / events where she has implied an issue about race; although she leaves that largely unspoken (i.e. does not actually mention racism) it is pretty clear reading between the lines.

There is a lot going on in the account and it is hard to get a sense of a timeline – lots of events are described but in no particular order. She is storying a theme rather than chronologically. Chronological order is not important in the stories. Each story purpose is to advance her case that there is a serious issue around race.

She seems very action oriented. She is an older student who already has a first degree and has worked in the area of her degree. She comes across as proactive but you can see this might be perceived as being a troublemaker by staff. There is a lot of resistant capital (Yosso) –

she is not going to accept poor treatment. Lots of complaints made and a strong sense of being treated unfairly.

At some point in the interview, the thematic structure breaks down into a more stream of consciousness account, particularly as the emotion takes hold.

It seems that the relationship between the student and staff has broken down in a big way and things have spiralled out of control for this student, including in her personal life. This student, because of this, is not 'typical' of the other participants and in a sense the stories are particular rather than general. In other words, to what extent is this an outlier, a situation that has gone badly wrong for a student (but that might not be connected with race)? Knowing a bit about the background of her course at the time, there were also issues with staffing etc. This combination has clearly proven toxic in this situation.

The strong theme here is a student who is clearly capable in practice (in the profession) but is struggling academically because of numerous factors (dyslexia, language?, sense of injustice) and feels that the academic side is not supported and that the course team even know how to support students who need this type of academic support.

Complaints and support are the key themes of her stories.

There are a lot of personal circumstances impacting on this student. Separating from her husband, supporting her mother, being a single mum, financial worries. You are left with the impression of someone really struggling but managing to do it through sheer willpower. There is a short section when she reveals more about her situation to academic staff that then gets more sympathy but it seems things are too late in terms of what can be done within regulations and the student's response and relationships to staff.

A background theme is one of eventual compliance. You can only resist and fight you own corner for so long against those that hold the power. She talks about multiple complaints that never come to anything and eventually feels she just has to keep quiet and comply (even if she does not agree) in order to get by and have decent relationships with academic staff. This is linked to the fact she feels there is a deficit model in place – problems are caused by students.

9.4 First step in constructing narratives - example from Melissa

9.4.1. Story 2b: Achievement & expectation

These sections in brackets are my annotations / reflections. [Story explaining reason for lack of confidence.]

I did my GCSEs and didn't do very well and I failed my GCSEs and then I was in a bad place and I didn't want to study anymore so I don't do my A-levels um and I started to work I went from working in an office to um then I volunteered in a play centre and I got into a nursery and that's why I decided that if I wanted to go anywhere further that I would need to study so I was a bit older then. I'm 25 now so I think that was when I was 20 am I decided to do

level 2 which I found quite easy and a level 3 in childcare and again that was no problem and then um I was offered a foundation degree with the council paying 80% of it so that would be good enough motivation to do so. *[To what extent is her motivation largely external? Family, course being paid for etc.]*

My 4th year was ok by the time I got to my level 5 it was too much and my sisters were they were pushing me and saying that I can do it just do it. Its fine we've done it but it wasn't so much support as more like we've done it why can't you do it so. *[Lack of confidence. How does confidence link to belonging?]*

if I wasn't working, I feel as though I would really be focused on my studies and I can aim for a high grade but right now I'm just aiming to pass but I never want that. I wanted to aim for; I know I'm not the smartest girl. I wasn't even aiming for an A but a high B because that's how I've always been. Before my GCSEs is that just was a bad year for me in school I was a B average and same with the early years of my higher education but now I'm just hoping to pass but if I was to put a positive picture to be to come out with a 2:1. A high 2:1 and be happy with that, more than happy that's what I feel I would deserve if I was at my best.

we just don't have the confidence in ourselves

Q – I'm gonna go back to the confidence thing. What would you put that down to?

I don't know, like I said my first year went well and I was quite happy with it but my 2nd year when that when I had that tutor that made me feel horrible and I think she's what affected my confidence. because that's when my grades stopped being B's and B+'s and went to C's and below a C. For the assignment that I got below a C, that really, that really hit me. It was horrible I don't know. I was in shock because everyone else had received their grades. I haven't received mine. She goes see me at the end. I say her at the end and she felt as though it wasn't a good enough piece of work. Had a meeting with me with another woman in the room. Saying that I'll get a chance to add to it, redo it. Since then I just feel as though, I panic. I've never been one to panic and then since then I feel as though every assignment I do, I'm not going to do well. *[Further addition to story on confidence. To some extent the micro contact level of belonging plays a part in her confidence, i.e. contact with staff knocked her confidence after regaining it.]*

I try as hard as I can but then I think I haven't worked hard enough at it, given it enough time. That I'm not going to pass. I think that's where my confidence went down.

[This section is where confidence and family really get tied together.] When I was younger, I used to struggle with maths quite a bit and they were like you have to do well and I

remember in my GCSEs and it was already a bad year for me. And they were like you have to pass. I'm like I'm struggling I don't understand this I don't understand that. Because my parents are from Bangladesh they didn't study here and the education is completely different there, especially like 40 years ago. They don't understand how difficult it could be. You know, they could have got me a tutor they could have done something, suggested something because their way of the support but they don't do that. It was always in my head I need to do well but when you don't actually know something it's just…

Q- So they weren't able to support you themselves directly.

No, they couldn't but they could have done something about it.

9.5 Ethics - consent form

OXFORD
BROOKES
UNIVERSITY

CONSENT FORM

Full title of Project: Stories of belonging for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students in Higher Education (HE). (Doctoral research project)

Name, position and contact address of researcher: Neil Currant

School of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, 12004045@brookes.ac.uk

Please initial box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.

I agree to take part in the above study.

I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Please tick box

Yes   No

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____

Name of Researcher   Date   Signature

9.6 Ethics - participant information sheet

(Modified to remove information identifying the university)

<u>Stories of belonging for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students in Higher Education (HE)</u>

Participant Information Sheet

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The experiences of BME students has become an area of interest in UK universities for a number of reasons:

- The differences in attainment between BME students and White students.
- A concern about university curricula and perceived attitudes towards BME students in universities as seen through campaigns such as 'why is my curriculum White?' and 'I too am Oxford'.
- Concerns about BME graduates employment prospects.

The focus of the study is the experiences of BME students in two UK universities, with a particular focus on their sense of belonging. The study is seeking your stories about being at university and how this relates to your sense of belonging at university. The research will take place at [Midfordshire] University and will run from October 2015 to March 2016.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate in either two one-to-one interviews, or a focus group because you are a current student at [Midfordshire] university. You will be in the second or third / final year of undergraduate study or a postgraduate student who was previously an undergraduate at the same university and have self-identified as from a BME background.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw any unprocessed data at any time and without giving a reason. Choosing to either take part or not take part in this study will have no impact on your marks, assessments or future studies. I am aiming to recruit 8-10 different students for individual interviews. If there is greater interest than this, then it will be on a first come first served basis.

What will happen to me if I take part?

The main methods of data collection are based on narrative inquiry. You are invited to attend one-to-one interviews. The interviews will be carried out on university premises and will be audio-recorded by myself.

If you participate in the interviews they will take no longer than one hour. After each interview, you will be asked to complete two short self-report measures of Attachment and Belonging at university which will take about 5 minutes to complete. A transcript of the interview will be sent to you for accuracy checking.

If you do take part you will be asked not to name any specific individuals in order to protect their confidentiality.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

As the focus of the study is on the experience of being a BME student, you will be asked to recount any negative and positive experiences you have had. These negative experiences may be upsetting to recount. However, you will not have to reveal anything you are not comfortable with and do not want to reveal.

Should you wish further support as a result of recounting your experiences, the university has a range of professional services available including counselling and the chaplaincy as well as welfare advice available from the Students' Union. Contact Student services for further details.

Another risk will be your time commitment in attending the interview or focus group.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to participants. However, it is hoped that the study will lead to a more informed picture of the experiences of BME students in order to improve the student experience.
The findings will be disseminated at conferences and in academic publications and may also be discussed at university committees.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). Confidentiality will be maintained by anonymising your contributions. Anonymity will also be ensured as far as possible in the collection, storage and publication of research material. Data generated by this study will be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity. Data generated in the course of this research will be kept securely in electronic form for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you wish to take part in this study, please contact me at the email address below to **arrange an interview date and time.** Interviews will be held at a campus of your choosing.

Before the interview or focus group commences, I will check that you fully understand

what is involved in the study and ask you to sign a consent form.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this research will be presented at conferences and published in journal articles. You can obtain a summary of the findings by contacting me at the email address below.

Who is organising and funding the research?

I am conducting this research as a self- funded doctoral student in the School of Education at Oxford Brookes University.

Who has reviewed the study?

The research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committees at Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for Further Information

Principal Investigator: Neil Currant 12004045@brookes.ac.uk

Director of Studies: Prof. Liz Browne, School of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, Harcourt Hill, Oxford OX2 9AT lbrowne@brookes.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, you should contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Date: 1st September 2015

9.7 Interview Schedule

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to this interview and for filling in the survey. My name is Neil and I am carrying out research looking at the experiences of belonging of students from Black and minority ethnic groups, particularly around belonging and feeling a sense of community. I'm going to be asking questions about your experiences at the university. I want to take a story-based approach, so if you can think in terms of experiences that you have had at university.

Introductory Questions:

Tell me a bit about yourself?

Main Question:

Tell me about your experiences of university and how you feel you belong and fit in at

university?

You might want to start with your experiences of when you first arrived at university.

You might want to think about your lecturers, your subject, your assessments, how you came to the university, your friends, your social experiences and how your race /ethnicity might or might not play a part in your experiences. Whatever comes to mind; I am interested in your stories and experiences. I might ask some clarifying or follow up questions but mostly I am going to listen. There is a sheet here (p.2 of focus group activity) to remind you about some of the areas you might want to tell me about.

Interview Structure (based on Schütze, F. (1977)

- Initiation – getting the story started, aids to help recall.
- Main Narration – no interruptions only non-verbal
- Questioning Phase – Clarifying, 'what happened then' questions, using only language used by participant and not interpreting their words.
- Concluding Talk

(see Jovchelovitch, S. & Bauer, M. W. (2000). Narrative interviewing [online]. London:

Thank you very much for your participation in this project. All stories and contributions are valuable. When we have transcribed the interview, we can send you a copy for checking.

9.8 Post-interview surveys

9.8.1. France (2010) University Attachment Scale

The response options are different for every item, so please read each item and their accompanying options carefully before responding to each item. There are no right or wrong answers; everyone behaves and feels differently. Just answer as honestly as possible.

PLEASE CIRCLE ONLY ONE ANSWER FOR EACH STATEMENT.

A1. How often do you acknowledge the fact that you are a member of MIDFORDSHIRE?

Never	Rarely	About Half the Time	Most of the Time	Always

A2. How accurate would it be to describe you as a typical MIDFORDSHIRE student?

Not at all accurate	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely accurate

A3. How important is belonging to MIDFORDSHIRE to you?

Not at all important	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely important

A4. When you first meet people, how likely are you to mention MIDFORDSHIRE?

Not at all likely	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely likely

A5. How attached do you feel to MIDFORDSHIRE?

Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely

A6. How close do you feel to other members of the MIDFORDSHIRE community?

Not at all close	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely close

A7. To what extent have members of MIDFORDSHIRE influenced your thoughts and behaviors?

Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely

A8. How many of your close friends come from MIDFORDSHIRE?

None	Few	About Half	Most	All

9.8.2. Yorke (2014) Belongingness scale of BES measure

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree, rate your feelings on the following six questions.

B1. I feel at home in this university.

B2. Being at this university is an enriching experience.

B3. I wish I'd gone to a different university.

B4. I have found my department to be welcoming.

B5. I am shown respect by members of staff in my department.

B6. Sometimes I feel I don't belong in this university.