



Black Lives Matter protesters demonstrate in London in July 2020.

RACISM IN ACADEMIA, AND WHY THE 'LITTLE THINGS' MATTER

Subtle biases and structural inequalities need to be challenged, just like overt acts of racial discrimination. **By Kevin N. Laland**

I am a professor of biology at a good UK university and a member of a national academy, and can regard myself as successful by most standards. I am comfortable with, and proud of, my Indian heritage and culture, as well as my British heritage. Yet, as is often the case for Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) staff and students, many less fortunate than me, I bring the burden of my personal history to university.

I was raised in the English Midlands, the son of an Indian father and an English mother. My father was one of a large influx of people from

the Indian subcontinent who settled in the region from the 1950s to the 1970s. The period is an ugly chapter in British history, marred by violent gangs who took up 'Paki-bashing' with relish. The insult, derived from 'Pakistani', was thrown at anyone with real or perceived roots in the Indian subcontinent.

Only when I entered secondary school aged 11 did I have it applied to me. I spoke up confidently in class, until a group of boys had enough of the 'smart alec Paki' and roughed me up a few times. The physical abuse I experienced was trivial; the psychological

impact was profound. A monkey chant, a sneer, a condescending attitude – these things accumulate to do corrosive damage over time. Even a single comment can be devastating. And, for every explicit act of racism, there are countless other, more subtle acts in which the racism is suspected, but not easy to substantiate.

I overcompensated for my vulnerabilities in bizarre ways: pretending I didn't care, and even making racist jokes to fit in. I look back on this with embarrassment now, but such 'internalized prejudice' is common. The

SUGGESTIONS TO REDUCE RACISM IN ACADEMIA

INCREASE AWARENESS

- Give undergraduates tutorials on racism, bias and the benefits of a diverse team.
- Create opportunities for staff and students to have conversations on racism, and be willing to listen.
- Review curricula to ensure that Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) academics are fairly represented and that no groups feel marginalized.

PROVIDE SUPPORT

- Develop clear procedures for people to report workplace bullying and prejudice, with support for complainants.
- Set up BAME staff and student networks, and provide a BAME counsellor in student-support centres.
- Lobby universities to address BAME pay and promotions gaps.

DELIVER OPPORTUNITIES

- Develop robust, transparent recruitment procedures that ensure all job ads also target minorities.
- Adopt guidelines for the organization of diverse conferences and workshops.
- Ensure BAME representation on interview panels, paying for external members if required.

MAKE ROLE MODELS VISIBLE

- Organize a prestigious annual public lecture by a BAME researcher.
- Nominate worthy researchers from minority ethnic groups for prizes and honorary degrees.
- Lobby universities to appoint BAME staff to senior positions.

More suggestions and links to resources are at go.nature.com/3hftk1d. **K.N.L.**

psychological defence mechanisms that lead us to mis-categorize our experiences as trivial – to say to ourselves, ‘they’re just little things’ – are part of the problem. There are no ‘little things’ when it comes to racism.

The explicit racism of my past is now superseded by subtler discrimination. For 30 years, I have struggled with the fact that some founders of my field are still idolized as if their racist and eugenicist views were unimportant. (Only in 2020 has this problem finally been acknowledged by the Society for the Study of Evolution, based in St Louis, Missouri, which is renaming one of its prizes to avoid such associations.) I welcome this step, but I fear there remains little general

understanding of how academic cultures inadvertently exclude some groups. And for decades, I’ve also been attending scientific conferences in Europe and North America and have seen barely any BAME representation.

I probably would have been less successful as an academic if my father hadn’t anglicized our family name. His original surname was Lala, which he changed in the hope that his children would experience less prejudice. Even today, people with names associated with minority ethnic groups are substantially less likely to get a job interview, according to a report by sociologists Valentina Di Stasio and Anthony Heath (see go.nature.com/2egysnh), and BAME researchers receive fewer and smaller grants than their white counterparts. Names still matter in 2020, yet name-blind procedures are applied only haphazardly across academia.

That said, for me, academia has been a haven. Others are not so fortunate, and I regularly hear reports of harassment of BAME students across the sector. We delude ourselves if we think that there is no racial discrimination in academia because racist expletives are rarely uttered. Statistics show that the BAME population is under-represented at many UK and US universities (particularly at top-ranked institutions, and at more senior levels), that ethnic-minority staff are less likely to get promoted than their white counterparts, and that there exists a pay gap between white and BAME university employees (see Kalwant Bhopal’s 2015 book *The Experiences of Black and*

Minority Ethnic Academics). Sadly, many UK and US BAME academics continue to feel like outsiders, and that they have to reach higher standards to have the same level of success (as Bhopal also describes).

For the ethnic diversity of our universities to improve, actions are required that increase awareness and provide support (see ‘Suggestions to reduce racism in academia’). These are small steps, but they can have lasting effects, too. Our policies need to reach out to the excluded, to give them opportunities, and help them to perform at their best.

It is better to regard actions, rather than people, as racist. Each stereotype, social slight or micro-aggression propagates inequality, as does every case of someone being overlooked for promotion or admission to an institution, and every unfairly rejected grant application.

Many of us, including me, have spent too long viewing our experiences as too trifling to complain about, but we were wrong. The Black Lives Matter movement has helped me to appreciate this. Redressing racist brutality is surely the priority, but it is not enough. All of us must speak up and take responsibility for our corner of the world. Racism will be defeated only when people understand that these ‘little things’ matter.

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TIPS FOR BOOSTING CAMPUS DIVERSITY

Reimagine spaces to promote belonging.
By Danielle McCullough and Ruth Gotian.

Women, people from minority ethnic groups, first-generation university students and disabled people – to name but a few – are woefully under-represented in the basic sciences worldwide. Reports by the Association of American Medical Colleges and the US National Science Foundation show that this under-representation is pervasive at every level of academia, including among graduate students, postdocs and faculty members.

As scientists, we need to ensure that the basic sciences are more welcoming and inclusive. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a tipping point at which no one can ignore the growing public outcry for justice and equality,

particularly in light of the Black Lives Matter movement, which quickly became global. We already know that diverse perspectives increase productivity and creativity. So we must reimagine our spaces, behaviour and processes to promote a sense of belonging.

D.M. actively works to diversify her clinical field as chair of the committee on diversity and inclusion in anaesthesiology at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City. For more than two decades, R.G. helped Weill Cornell’s Tri-Institutional MD-PhD Program to become a nationally recognized leader in recruiting and retaining students from under-represented groups. She also ran a popular summer programme in biomedical science for undergraduate students