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# Racialised terminologies and the BAME problematic: A perspective from football's British South Asian senior leaders and executives

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## Abstract

This article problematises the usage of the term 'BAME' (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) and considers its limitations as a diversity intervention. It draws on sociolinguistics, critical race theories and poststructuralism and is based on interviews with 21 British South Asian people working at senior and executive levels of the professional football industry in England and Scotland. Our analysis delineates formal and informal modes of racialisation, extending theories of racialisation beyond the creation of legal categories, to consider the discursive construction of 'race' and its institutionalising effects. At the same time, we show that it is important for sporting institutions to recognise and celebrate British South Asian representation, wherever and however it exists. The article calls for a greater focus on the sociolinguistic dimensions of racialised terminologies and their (in)ability to capture racialised difference; secondly, through invoking anti-essentialism and differential racialisation as heuristic tools it explores how racialised language reflects and sustains racialised hierarchies; and thirdly, it advocates for a deconstruction of the term 'British South Asian' to encourage a more nuanced approach to policy development aimed at realising better diversity outcomes.

## Keywords

BAME, British South Asian, critical race theory, diaspora, executive board, football, racialisation, sport

## Introduction

In this article we examine the language constructs of 'race' and ethnicity – specifically 'BAME' (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) – currently in operation across many professional industries and workplaces, and which seek to capture – amongst other things

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– the ‘British South Asian’ experience in the United Kingdom (UK). In so doing, we argue that there is a need for a greater appreciation of heterogeneity when racialised language is operationalised in ‘diversity interventions’ (i.e. any policy, strategy, plan, quota framework, protocol among others, designed to enhance inclusivity) that aim to foster a more racially diverse institution. We challenge the sociolinguistic pillars upon which many ‘diversity interventions’ are built, and critically interrogate key epistemological questions about their utility, or otherwise, as vectors for racialised difference. As Ahmed (2012) powerfully argues, ‘words create lines and pathways in their trail. Once a pathway is created, we tend to follow its trail. When officials give diversity value . . . it gives the term somewhere to go’ (pp. 59–60). Words, therefore, matter and, as we aim to show throughout this article, we currently need better words. Words that plough furrows for better pathways, better outcomes, and better diversity interventions.

The football industry is a working culture that provides excellent context to explore this empirically, for two main reasons. First, over the last 30 years or so, the football industry has matured and established itself as a professional sector in its own right. According to Deloitte (2022), during the 2020/2021 season, the European football market was worth €27.6 billion, while, in the same season, the English Premier League (EPL) alone, the biggest of all of Europe’s leagues, contributed an estimated £7.6 billion to the UK economy (Ernst & Young, 2022). Second, football is the UK’s most popular sport, both in terms of playing and spectating. Its symbolism, as a conduit for national identity, barometer for liberal assumptions about the successes of multiculturalism and its status as a vehicle through which to imagine the character of the nation, means its social significance is unparalleled.

Football is also incredibly popular amongst British South Asian people (Bains & Patel, 1998); yet, despite this, its popularity has not translated organically into proportional representation in most vestiges of the game (Burdsey, 2011; Kilvington, 2017; Lawrence, 2017; Lawrence & Davis, 2019). Approximately 9% of the UK population identify as ‘Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh’ (Office for National Statistics, 2022). However, only 0.45% of professional male footballers in England are British South Asian (Professional Footballers’ Association, 2021). The underrepresentation of British South Asian people in men’s professional football has been a topic of debate for several decades, and there is now a critical mass of research focusing on the racialised barriers into coaching and playing arenas of football (Bains & Patel, 1996; Burdsey, 2006; Kilvington, 2019; Mcguire et al., 2001). However, seldom has this debate engaged empirically with the experiences of British South Asian people at senior and executive levels of the football industry (Kilvington et al., 2024).

This is not overly surprising given the paucity of sociological enquiry into the interstices of ‘race’ and its influence within executive sports cultures, particularly in football, despite a few notable exceptions (Bradbury, 2013; Long & Hylton, 2002). It is even less surprising when we consider the dearth of research into football’s executive cultures, which are notoriously ‘closed’, heavily guarded networks (Parnell et al., 2018, 2023). The remainder of this article therefore not only advances scholarship in this area by focusing on the views and perspectives of football’s British South Asian senior leaders and executives but speaks to a wider sociological canon, which explores the instrumentality of racialised terminologies from the perspective of people who are producers,

receivers and supposed beneficiaries of diversity phraseologies. More immediately, though, we turn to the theoretical foundations we employ throughout the article, before moving to our methodology, a discussion of our findings, and finally our conclusions and recommendations.

## **Discourses of difference: Heterogeneity, power and deconstruction**

While there has been a proliferation of sociologists using critical race theory (CRT) to explore the complexities of ‘race’ and racism, many of whom have advocated for a synthesis with poststructuralism, the sociolinguistics of ‘race’ have been considered less readily in the literature (Grieser, 2021). In this article, we go about addressing this by utilising critical race theories, anti-essentialism and differential racialisation<sup>1</sup>, along with poststructuralist conceptions of power, discourse and deconstruction. More specifically, we critically evaluate racialised terminologies in the sports industry and their insidious and/or enabling effects by evaluating them in the context of Brah’s (1996) framework for understanding “‘difference’: as experience; as social relation; as subjectivity; and as identity’ (p. 14). By adopting such an approach, and understanding that difference is polysemic, we are attuned to the social significance and complexities of ‘race’, ethnicity and activist-scholarship, and begin ‘troubling’ that which is often hidden by racialised terminology and reductive categorisation (Gillborn, 2005; Harpalani, 2013).

We elide Brah’s notion of ‘difference’ with Foucault’s (1978) notions of power and discourse, and Derrida’s (1978) thesis on deconstruction to guide our analysis of British South Asian heterogeneity. For Foucault (we return to Derrida below), power is not a thing that one owns; rather it is a relation, external to any one central possessor, with a productive and iterative effect (Foucault, 1978). This non-hierarchical conception of power emphasises the dual possibility for discursive practices, such as labelling and racialised categorisation, to have both a conforming *and* fracturing effect on the racialised subject, meaning they are often ‘caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers’ (Foucault, 1975/1991, p. 201). This conception is useful for our purposes given it recognises the ability of power and discourse to produce multiple subjectivities (Gillborn, 2005, p. 490), whose existence, in turn, present as a challenge to narrow and dualistic, racialised terminology often used in mainstream diversity interventions, such as BAME. Turning to Derrida (1978), we see heterogeneity in his theses on deconstruction where he problematises text and language systems to capture reality: ‘[w]henever deconstruction finds a nutshell a secure axiom or a pithy maxim – the very idea is to crack it open and disturb the tranquillity’ (cited in Caputo, 1997, p. 32). This philosophical endeavour lends itself well to our purposes given it focuses on the tendency within language systems to produce deferrals, dichotomies and hierarchies.

Like poststructuralism, CRT is characterised by a focus on the ways in which meaning is produced and reproduced in (racialised) language and other cultural practices; it is sceptical of grand narratives and universal truths and critical of liberalism as a progressive political economy (Crump, 2014; Grieser, 2021). Both recognise racism(s) – or, as Foucault (1982, p. 779) would have called it, ‘diseases of power’ – as omnipresent and

evident in a multitude of forms, be it subtle, individual and/or institutionalised. To this end, CRT is also an anti-essentialist framework (Crenshaw et al., 1995), one that recognises power dynamics, intersectional and racialised inequalities are reinforced through everyday discourse, including linguistically via microaggressions. While Crenshaw (1995) does make a distinction between CRT's use of anti-essentialism and that of more esoteric poststructuralists – whose theses on deconstruction promote the annihilation of 'race' and ethnicities as social categories – she reconciles this tension, and we agree, by acknowledging *both* the complexity of the self *and* the social fact that certain differences (such as 'race' and gender) carry more political significance than others. We argue for the necessity of such an approach and operationalise it throughout the remainder of the article, starting with problematising the acronym BAME.

### **The problem with BAME: The importance of terminology in workplace diversity discourses**

The creation and transformation of racial categories are central to understanding the racialisation of individuals and groups. Of course, historically, such projects served to (unfairly) (re)allocate resources to dominant racialised groups, thus creating or reproducing 'structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race' (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 71). The work of such ascriptions of 'race' categories remains common within government, law and policy discourses (Harpalani, 2013, 2023). For example, over the last 20 years or so, the gradual adoption of equality and diversity agendas across sport and football (Long et al., 2017; Lusted, 2014) has coincided with a rise in the use of the acronym BAME. This acronym is ubiquitous amongst myriad organisations concerned with addressing racialised inequalities. Before there was BAME, however, which first appeared in parliamentary vernacular in 2004 (Aspinall, 2021), there was BME (Black and Minority Ethnic). BME, according to Aspinall (2021), debuts earlier, chiefly amongst local authorities serving racially diverse communities, in the early 1980s. Between them, both BAME and BME, have functioned as umbrella terms used to refer to *all people* who are not racialised as White. They have been used in policy and strategy documents across industries (and by these authors elsewhere), often with good intentions; however, for Khunti et al. (2020, p. 1), it is a term that 'indiscriminately combine[s] people from different geographical, behavioural, social, and cultural backgrounds'. Within this context, of late, there have been a number of calls to do away with it.

Catch-all terms in the realm of racialised terminology, of course, do have history. In the 1960s and 1970s, the term 'Black' – and relatedly, political Blackness – was commonly used to refer to any migrant group suffering from racialised oppression and was used as a word that signified a sense of shared experience (Sudbury, 2001). The term was never intended to be a descriptive marker of identity; it was deemed to have significant anti-racist organising potential and, in turn, unified those people who negatively experienced racist systems in housing, leisure and in the workplace, as well as racist thugs and trade unions (Brah, 1996). The difference of course between political Blackness and BME/BAME is that the former was very much adopted by Black-led, anti-racist movements, like Southall Black Sisters (Modood, 1994). It did not emerge as clerical shorthand, which functioned for efficiency's sake, for civil servants, parliamentary committees

and policy makers, as did the latter. While there were always criticisms pertaining to the use of umbrella terms within anti-racist movements about their inability to recognise unique experiences, the term 'Black' garnered a sense of solidarity, as well as an ability to self-determine and self-identify (Brah, 2022; Modood, 1994). It is for this reason political Blackness and 'Black', as resistive discourses, have persisted (Wilson et al., 2016).

There is an argument now, however, which not only problematises technocratic terms such as BME/BAME, but the efficacy of anti-racist terms such as 'Black' and their contemporary appropriateness (Alexander, 2018). As Narayan (2019, p. 946) neatly puts it, '[t]hese positions view the era of political Blackness, at best, as outdated and at worst, emblematic of ethnic erasure'. While it is not our intention, nor is it the aim of this article, to make a definitive judgement on the continued relevance of political Blackness or otherwise, it has been important to consider the politico-historical context for our forthcoming discussions on racialised terminologies. It has helped locate our article at a sociological moment wherein late modern modalities, and their tendency to produce multiple subjectivities, can jar against rigid racialised terminologies and categories often seen in policy (Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2005, 2021). Reflecting on the ways we use language, how useful it is to capture racialised forms of difference, and whether it is well positioned to give shape and direction to policy, must be an ongoing sociological enterprise.

## Methods

This article emerges from a larger dataset, generated in response to a broader aim, which was to document the lived experiences of British South Asian people working at senior leadership and executive levels of English and Scottish football. As part of the project, the research team conducted 21 semi-structured, dialogical interviews with people who identified as 'British South Asian', during spring and summer of 2021. This amassed circa 36 hours of recorded testimony from five women and 16 men and who actively claimed a birth and/or historical familial link to India, Pakistan and/or Bangladesh. Further inclusion criteria used to identify suitable participants were provided by the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification system (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This meant that only those people who were, or who had been employed, in 'lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations' and/or in 'higher managerial and professional occupations' within football were suitable for interview. In our context, the former refers to, for example, specialist managers with line management responsibility and/or input at executive board level in, for example, marketing, human resources, commercial, community, player/coach development and recruitment, legal and medical departments; while the latter refers to, for example, executive and non-executive members of boards of directors at county level, national governing bodies and professional clubs.

The interviews were circa 60–90 minutes long, recorded via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, transcribed verbatim and then coded. Solórzano and Yosso (2002, p. 26) explain that the gathering of 'lived experiences' complements CRT given the value it places on experiential forms of knowledge. The testimony of our interviewees then is a form of

counter-hegemonic data (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). The data are anonymised, using pseudonyms in the place of interviewees' real names.

In order to analyse the data, a deductive approach was taken to thematic analysis. Initial open codes were generated through systematically coding the dataset and subsequently organising codes into themes. This involved an iterative process moving 'between emic, or emergent, meanings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations and theories' (Tracy, 2019, p.184). Themes were then reviewed by all authors to ensure they were a proper reflection of the larger dataset. Once all data were coded the themes were revisited for coherency, refined and operational definitions developed to describe each theme. Four main themes were identified from the entire dataset: (1) unique experiences of British South Asian peoples/groups overlooked (differential racialisation); (2) feeling of inside-outside of football networks (microaggressions); (3) burden of representation (waiting for the call); and (4) significant barriers to recruitment and progression (systemic racism). This article, in the sections that follow, considers the sub-themes emanating from the first headline theme, which attempts to capture the collective voice of our participants.

CRT affords the voices of racially marginalised people priority in research methodologies (Alemán & Alemán, 2016), which supports our choice of sample. An important methodological and epistemological consideration therefore was that the research team consisted of White male researchers; thus, as Richardson (1990) notes, '[n]o matter how we stage the text, we – the authors – are doing the staging' (p. 12). All three authors identify as White, heterosexual, non-disabled, cis men from working class familial backgrounds. Stefan identifies as Anglo-Italian and has worked in football in a variety of capacities from playing and coaching to development and administration. Tom considers himself an academic activist, who works closely with sports organisations on their EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) journeys. Dan strives to use his research to help tackle racialised inequalities through working with fellow academics, stakeholders and practitioners. We do not intend to suggest the positionalities we outline above are fixed; they are indeed contingent on a multitude of factors and are uniquely relational.

We arrived at our theoretical frame then, not simply through our biographies, but also via a shared intellectual journey, inspired in various ways by Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) – an offshoot of CRT (Ansley, 1997). At risk of oversimplification, CWS contends that Whiteness takes many conceptual and discursive forms – as a modern invention, relation of labour, social norm, performativity and currency – and those scholarly voices located or associated with it are often mired with the epistemes of unearned privilege (Howe et al., 2023). CWS is a movement, therefore, that mandates a methodological reflexivity for the work of scholars racialised as White. It dictates that we must consider how racialised power is embedded in the research process and urges the use of epistemological frameworks, like CRT, that are grounded in the racialised histories, lived experiences and subjectivities of people who are not racialised as White (Warmington, 2020, p. 21). To this end, disclosures of our own positionalities and histories are not merely rhetorical; they are intended to encourage active critique of our analysis, especially from those who are not racialised as White. Our approach then is radical in that it aims to subvert the social power of Whiteness to leverage counter-narratives of our sample, as well as put our privileges to more egalitarian use.

In practice this means that, first, we worked with contacts across the football industry, inside governing and charitable organisations specialising in ‘race’ and ethnicity in sport, to identify and access our sample. We employed a snowball sampling technique for three reasons: (1) to empower our participants to shape the research via the inclusion of those voices our interviewees believed should be heard; (2) to ensure the sample did not simply reflect the research team’s existing professional networks; and (3) given the lack of available data documenting ethnic diversity across football, snowball sampling was key in enabling us to be sure that we had gathered a purposive and meaningful sample of voices. At the point when no new recommendations for interview were forthcoming, and when no new themes were emerging, we reached theoretical saturation.

Second, after interviews had taken place and the coding phase was completed, we engaged in a further co-production stage of our research. We organised a digital event to which we invited members of a learned public, as well as interviewees to discuss the preliminary findings. This facilitated the agency of our participants while keeping their identities confidential. This approach aligns with the idea that by ‘stand[ing] back and suspend[ing] researcher assumptions’, we can co-create research findings and avoid over-determining the experiences of our interviewees (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2021, pp. 465–466). The event took place digitally via Zoom and consisted of 32 people. To ensure that the audience was composed of individuals who were invested in advancing anti-racism, we required delegates to register in advance and only permitted entry to those who could evidence a personal, academic or professional interest in anti-racism in sport. The audience was encouraged to engage critically with our findings and to provide feedback on which themes should be emphasised.

The testimony of our interviewees is presented, then, not only as a form of counter-hegemonic data (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) but is a tribute to them and the issues they wished to be foregrounded. During the remainder of the article, we explore these themes. We do concede that the theoretical and conceptual frames we deploy were identified before the co-production stage shaped the themes we presented to our participants. However, if Krossa (2012, p. 17) is credible in stating that ‘a central question of sociological research for many decades has been how . . . to bring the aspect of heterogeneity under some control’, the methodological reflexivity we hoped to have displayed means that what follows is an attempt to present the experiences of the people we spoke to in an ethical way, which captures difference as they articulated it.

## **To BAME or not to BAME?**

The first notable theme that emerged was the perceived futility of the term ‘BAME’ and its tendency to shape sector-wide policies that are sometimes well intentioned but ultimately promote an unhelpful ‘White people and the rest’-type dualism – where Whiteness only speaks of power and BAME only speaks of powerlessness (Mac an Ghaill, 1999). Participants’ views on the BAME acronym support previous work (Aspinall, 2021; Parry et al., 2023) and provide a critique of it as a mechanism through which to meaningfully capture notions of difference. For Maha (EDI professional and non-executive board member, professional football club), the tendency for BAME to be used to homogenise was at the heart of the problem:



I don't think BAME is a helpful acronym or terminology at all because we don't all sit under the same umbrella, it's not one size fits all at all.

Yahir (EDI advisor, previous non-executive board member) believed similarly, arguing that over time the use of the term BAME has become naturalised throughout sporting organisations and that resistance to it has been silenced:

These are all things that I've learned on the journey that I would say have probably been fed to us by White people. I didn't know what BAME was until a few years ago and then you just buy in to it when we should really be challenging it.

Faaris, an EDI professional at a national governing body, summarised the view of many in this research by simply saying: 'I don't like the term'. BAME was clearly an expression that held negative meaning for several participants, especially Maha, who mirrors Aspinall's (2020, p. 87) description of BAME as an 'artefact of the bureaucratic processes of government and of administrative efficiency'. Yahir, however, goes further, identifying it as an act of White supremacy insofar as he locates it within the linguistic realm of the Other, alluding to the institutionalised and discursive power it exercises in shaping the racialised self (Crump, 2014). CRT, as analytical frame, therefore, helps us name BAME as a process of 'differential racialisation' (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) a concept closely related to Crenshaw's theses of anti-essentialism – given not only is it a product of the language of dominant racialised groups, but it also serves their interests by neatly and indiscriminately reifying the racialised binaries of White/Other and Black/Asian. The reductivism of such a move leaves little space for the nuance of identity formation, nor for an appreciation of the diversity of experiences that are held within racialised subjectivities.

However, more than this, participants were also critical of the utility of the term BAME as a throughput or metric indicator that would act as an arbiter of social relations and facilitate meaningful change within the football industry. As Gharchet (senior departmental leader at professional football club), described:

I've had to write documents for different things like operating procedures and I can kind of see why these terms occur because . . . when you are writing documents it's almost easier if you just make it a very, very broad brush, but BAME is quite irrelevant actually, it doesn't tell you anything.

Gharchet is acknowledging the convenience of terms like BAME, but identifies similarly how they serve to veil British South Asian heterogeneity. This view was similarly articulated by Faaris, who referred to BAME as 'lazy labelling', and called for it to be removed from normal institutional parlance:

Where I do draw the line is around those lazy terminologies like the BAME piece. I stay away from it, if there's one campaign that I do want to start it's to lose the term, I feel it compartmentalises me, it stereotypes me and ultimately, it's lazy labelling on the part of those who just want an easy way of trying to describe a group. (Faaris)

What these testimonies helpfully elucidate is that not only do practices of differential racialisation – such as BAME – have little utility for Gharchet, Faaris and others as markers of identity, they ensure reductive axioms remain embedded within diversity interventions that paradoxically aim to achieve social justice outcomes. We might even go as far as to suggest such terms function as a conduit, at best, simply to gather data with little other purpose (Parry et al., 2023) or, at worst, like Yahir does, as a technology of domination, a ‘tick box’ metric and containment strategy, which prevents difference from proliferating too rapidly (Ahmed, 2012).

This must then call the Football Leadership Diversity Code’s (Football Association, 2023) terminology and categories of measurement into question given it follows the same logic of BAME. It collapses all new hires of ‘Black’, ‘Asian’ and ‘Mixed Heritage’ people at senior and executive levels into one disempowered group. In this way, ‘British Asians are overlooked and distorted because of a doctrinaire assumption about the nature of racial discrimination’ (Modood, 1994, p. 865). As is often the case with racialised matters, the clamour for a neat, singular term to represent the complex, fragmentary and contradictory experiences located at the nexus of sport, policy, linguistics, ‘race’ and racism(s) is likely to invite a neat, singular (and thus ineffective) response (Hylton, 2009). For several participants in this research, the term BAME is nothing more than clerical shorthand, tied closely to bureaucratic, passive and regressive processes, like ‘ticking boxes’, and thus does not value meaningfully the diversity of cognition that it superficially represents. Its institutional power to address deeper structural inequalities embedded within the football industry is thus highly questionable.

As advocates of CRT contend, listening and empowering historically marginalised groups to exercise agency when it comes to selecting and defining the terms that best represent them is of primary importance. It is to this end, as prominent critical race theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) would have it, BAME is a microaggression and a flawed ontology; a racialised form of violence done to the people whom it professes to enable, wilfully, daily and, in plain sight. It is a symptom of a much broader sociolinguistic deficit vis-a-vis racialised difference in sporting workplaces and inclusion policies. Its existence, and similar terms, should be for activists, scholars and decision makers like the miner’s canary is for Guinier and Torres (2002, p. 11):

Miners often carried a canary into the mine alongside them. The canary’s more fragile respiratory system would cause it to collapse from the noxious gases long before humans were affected, thus alerting the miners to dangers . . . Those who are racially marginalised are like the miner’s canary: their distress is the first sign of a danger that threatens us all. It is easy enough to think that when we sacrifice this canary, the only harm is to communities of color. Yet others ignore problems that converge around racial minorities at their own peril, for these problems are symptoms warning us that we are all at risk.

The metaphor of the miner’s canary alerts us all to the toxic properties of institutionalised terminology and imposed categorisation. Not only then does it expose for us that our language is ill-equipped to represent difference, but it also illustrates that current recruitment and diversity interventions are predicated upon forced terminologies that are weak and in need of urgent reform.

## Troubling the 'A' in BAME

In opposition to essentialist traditions and the certainty posited by grand narratives, post-structuralism rejects the search for a singular or explicable 'true meaning', preferring to foreground the politics of representation. Hence, what followed on naturally in most conversations with participants about the BAME acronym were further nuanced discussions about the representativeness of the term 'Asian'. Participants moved between the terms, 'Asian', 'British Asian', 'South Asian' and 'British South Asian' when immediately asked to articulate the racialised aspects of their lived experience of working in football. Maha captures a common sentiment across the sample:

I personally don't mind being called a British Asian because I am born and bred here, I am British, England's my home . . . and I am Asian, I love my Asian culture, I love my Asian roots and I'm never going to forget that.

While there were indeed proponents advocating for an inclusive British South Asian identity, as Brah (1992) notes, meaning is always a site of contestation and is never absolutely fixed, which points to a need to be sensitive to the specificities of our sample formed of a specific generation of British South Asian people, located within a specific industry, specific football workplaces, within specific local regions, as senior professionals. We see this in the context of our research, insofar as participants avoided reductive frames, which tend to reify the experiences of historically underrepresented ethnic groups by imposing an imagined universality. For instance, discussions of religion, as well as national and regional identities, provided nuance and qualification, highlighting how 'individuals are capable of identities of several sorts' (Modood, 1994, p. 869). Abdur (EDI specialist and board member at a sporting charity) spoke passionately about his Bangladeshi heritage. While he was proud to represent the wider British South Asian communities, he was keen to emphasise the diversity within and between these communities:

I'm proud to be from Bangladesh, and I've always kind of made an issue about that because when people talk about British Asians and they say '. . . you are the first British Asian to do X, Y, Z' I think people tend to forget that I'm also a Bangladeshi . . . I feel very proud of that, and I think sometimes that's almost forgotten . . . when you are British Asian you are tagged into this huge kind of like pond . . . listen, I'm happy to fly the flag for the whole of the Asian community because I feel like I'm very proud to be Bangladeshi.

Similar to Abdur, Gharchet was keen to challenge any perceived homogeneity of British South Asian communities:

I also think British Asian is certainly too broad, even what I've described as British Indian if I'm being frank is probably too broad, I'm only saying that because when you fill out forms that is one of the options . . . but yeah, if I answer that question again I'm British Punjabi Sikh . . .

Faaris goes yet further, claiming British South Asian people's footballing subjectivities cannot be comprehended without subjecting them to a deconstructive lens:

. . . if you start with South Asian and then you ask further questions and then you unpick the journeys of . . . these people that you are working with . . . you need to contextualise the backgrounds that they come from and understand their experiences within football from that point.

As Nayak (2007) would remind us, the deconstruction of the British South Asian diaspora, above, must not be understood as destruction. It is not the antithesis of the ‘absolute logos’ that Derrida (1998, p. 309) eloquently critiques. Language, and more specifically, discourse, invites reconstruction and/or refinement. This is because, as Davies (1993, p. 148) would have it, ‘[t]he innocence of language . . . is undone in poststructuralist theory revealing a rich mosaic of meaning and structure through which we speak ourselves and are spoken into existence’. Abdur’s, Gharchet’s and Faaris’s testimonies embody this discursive undoing as they reject the collapse of a multiplicity of subjectivities into a series of neat, catch-all terms. They bring a politics to language, and foreground a plurality of power and discourse that shapes a sense of self beyond “‘ethnic absolutism’” – the idea that ethnic identities are simply “‘given’” (Modood, 1994, p. 873).

The instrumentality of institutionalised language that implies an ethnic absolutism often operationalised in football and sport policy discourse goes some way to explaining why several of our participants reported feeling a burden of representation (see Hall, 2006). Pranavi (senior leader at a charity and non-executive board member at a professional club), for instance, spoke passionately about her objection to having her experiences (con)fuscated with other British South Asian people’s when she is invited to speak at industry conferences and events:

. . . asking me to speak on behalf of an entire gender, race, population, sub-section I can’t do that; I can only speak for my own experience and my experience as a Brown Asian woman in sport is still not the same as the next Brown Asian woman in sport who is Muslim or who is gay or who has a disability, all of those things . . . that assumption that you can ask me and I will have all the answers, that for me is a microaggression.

This testimony posits why it is important that we continue ‘to puncture the balloon of those who believe that language is simply a technical device for establishing singular, stable meanings instead of the deeply constitutional act that it is’ (Agger, 1991, p. 114). And so, while we concede that the expectation for members of historically underrepresented groups to speak for the entirety of a community is not new, Pranavi’s articulation of this is worthy of note in that she does this through a racialisation of gender, positioning herself consciously and intentionally not as a woman who is Brown and Asian, but as a ‘Brown Asian woman’. Not only this, but she also demonstrates a reflexivity towards multiple subject positions that marks her testimony out from those of our male respondents, whose language at least overlooked the intersections of ‘race’ and gender. Maha and Preeti were the only two other respondents to name the interconnectedness of ‘race’ and gender, thus such (in)visibility serves to remind us that football remains an industry in which women from historically underrepresented groups ‘experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men’ (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 149).

While the dynamics of gendered subjectivities was lacking in male participants' recollections of their time working in football, the theme of participants shifting linguistically to refine and finesse racialised positionalities – through religion – crossed the gender divide. There was evidence of an acute social awareness of the pervasiveness of Islamophobia within the industry, and across society (Allen, 2016). As Pranavi described:

. . . people have said things to do with me in relation to being Muslim, and I have found myself saying 'I'm not Muslim', I'm not Muslim but that's not the point, I found myself trying to separate myself from being Muslim . . . I think it's more palatable to be Indian because you're perceived as not Muslim. I've been ashamed of myself for so quickly feeling the need to say I'm not Muslim because that should have no bearing on anything and any conversation.

Jaganinder (non-executive board member at professional club) shared a similar story:

Funnily enough over the last couple of weeks I had a couple of texts from [White] members of staff from [a governing body] to say 'Happy Eid'. It's interesting because I was thinking 'they must think I am Muslim'. For me I was like 'well', I just gave them a bit of an education really because if I don't and just let it go and say 'thanks' they will think that, yeah, I am Muslim.

Being misidentified as Muslim is, here, further evidence of the insidious effects of the hyper-racialisation of British Muslims as 'South Asian' in the UK context. However, equally revealing is the difficulty Jaganinder's and Pranavi's White colleagues have in operating outside of a British South Asian–Muslim couplet. Mills (2007) terms such, seemingly benign, errors as 'White ignorance'. A microaggression that is enabled and perpetuated, in part, by the existence of an institutionalised, racialised vernacular that is neither sufficiently equipped to capture the efficacy of social relations, nor textured enough to challenge dominant forms of racialisation. As is evidenced by Jaganinder's testimony, it would be inaccurate to suggest that ignorance is always tantamount to intolerance and bigotry – indeed, that is not how contemporary racialised hierarchies are formed. Nonetheless, the outcome for Jaganinder is that he is put in an uncomfortable position by colleagues' 'non-knowing' (Mills, 2007, p. 20), which plays a 'crucial and casual role' (p. 20) in the homogenisation of the British South Asian experience of football workplaces.

Here, we lay witness to the kinds of 'formal and 'informal' modes of racialisation articulated in Harpalani's (2013) analysis of South Asian Americans, through the CRT analytic of *DesiCrit*.<sup>2</sup> That is, not only does 'formal' racialisation occur through the application of bureaucratically cognisable racial categories, such as BAME, 'informal' racialisation occurs when the body is taken as a marker of racialised categorisation – *a language of signification in itself* – that is imbued with social meanings indicative of 'race', diaspora and religion. It is this symbiosis between the corporeal and sociolinguistic realms of differential racialisation that we explore further in the following section.

## Diasporic subjectivities

When differences across diasporic communities are understood better it opens an intellectual space for more complex discussions, as well as an education to take place around

inclusion and diversity policies and terminologies, including their strengths and limitations. As Noble (2015, p. 55) skilfully puts it, ‘complexities are often obscured’ when racialised terminology is used aggregately, which ‘naturalizes a political consensus that may not always exist or in all times be appropriate’. Harpalani (2013) refers to this as ‘racial ambiguity’, which becomes especially apparent when a diasporic lens is held to British South Asian communities. For Harpalani, focusing on the differential racialisation *within* a single group is valuable but ‘can only be understood by considering the positioning of individuals and groups with respect to other groups, and situational changes in such positioning’ (p. 84). Maha was keen to do precisely this, recognising the term ‘British South Asian’ disguises a hierarchy of socioeconomic performance, and a variety of diasporic subjectivities:

Asian communities, as do Black communities, have different communities within them so you’ve got the Bengali community, you’ve got the Pakistani community, you’ve got the Indian community that would largely fall under the Asian of the BAME. Bengali, Pakistani and Indian experiences are all very, very different. Now, from my perspective, if you went from the experience that I have and the knowledge that I have I would say, out of the three, Indians fare better, followed by Pakistanis, followed by Bengalis . . . I think the premise that some of these communities integrated into the country was very different.

Maha’s testimony is echoed in data from the UK’s Office for National Statistics (2020), which identifies high(er) levels of employment among ‘White’ (77%) and ‘Indian’ (76%) people, compared with ‘Pakistani’ (57%) and ‘Black’ (67%) people. It further reveals that ‘White’ and ‘Indian’ people are also more likely to earn higher salaries than all other ethnic groups. This trend continues in 2022 with ‘Pakistani’ (76%), ‘Bangladeshi’ (75%) and ‘Black’ (62%) ethnic groups contributing the highest percentages of households to the UK’s two lowest income groups, while the ‘Indian’ ethnic group contribute the highest percentage of households to the highest income quintile (24%). While the differing colonial histories of these groups are well documented elsewhere (Heath & Di Stasio, 2019; Karlsen et al., 2020; Saini, 2022), for our purposes, such different socioeconomic conditions and patterns of diasporic migration present as challenges to the many diversity interventions (in sport and football) that refuse to use language that accounts for potentially ‘conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties and allegiances’ (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 11).

To further demonstrate this point, participants recognised that British Indians had been disproportionately successful in off-field roles in the football industry – compared to other British South Asian groups – presenting empirical support for the transference of the model minority myth from education (Gillborn, 2008; Harpalani, 2023) and law (Harpalani, 2013) to the senior levels of the football industry. Our invitation to deconstruct racialised terminologies then revealed the instrumentality of a particular diasporic performativity for Gharchet and others in determining the extent to which individual agency can be operationalised when seeking to overcome the linguistic, and wider cultural and ethnic, politics embedded within sporting workplaces and institutions. Indeed, of all 21 interviewees, 14 people identified themselves as having Indian familial heritage. Some of our participants, like Gharchet, went further, qualitatively asserting that

British South Asian people who he identified as ‘Punjabi’ were more visible in senior leadership and executive positions in football than other British South Asian groups:

. . . the Punjabi thing’s really interesting because . . . I have noticed that there are a lot more people from a Punjabi background, maybe even predominating that I’ve met, even the people that I’m talking about [at my Club] the majority are from a Punjabi background.

Of the interviewees, six identified themselves as ‘Punjabi Sikh’ – the largest ethnoreligious group in our sample – reinforcing Nayak’s (2005) poststructuralist-inspired conception of racialisation and – by association, racialised terminology – as a polysemic process. In other terms, as power ‘is dispersed, decentralised and diffused throughout society’ (Newman, 2005, p. 51), the British South Asian body is not always read as an ‘inherently negative sign, absent of power for those subjects it is said to oppress’ (p. 145). There are diasporic performances of it, as Gharchet observes, that seem better represented in football governance than others. Such a recognition is a vital component of a much broader politico-linguistic enterprise: to develop a more sophisticated lay and policy vernacular that is cognisant of how historical and intersectional processes manifest in current racialised terminologies and how they institutionalise the notion of difference. Only then might we ‘move beyond the seemingly entrenched colour line of late modernity’ (Nayak, 2007, p. 752) and out of the quagmire set forth by pre-post-racial discourse.

Such an appeal locates significant responsibility with the football industry’s administrative and governance professionals to shift from a facile politics of representation, which reports aggregately the number of Black and Brown people in senior roles. That is because our data suggest a malleability of British South Asian subjectivities and their polysemic value in football discourse. Failing to engage with these findings more readily means diversity interventions, built upon weak linguistic pillars, risk becoming mere stultifying agents of differential racialisation that impede the progress of those working towards anti-racist ends. Recognising this is of considerable importance, otherwise aggregation serves only to feed the declining significance of ‘race’ myth (Bonilla-Silva & Baiocchi, 2008) and support the cause of those who use racialised terms not as mobilising apparatus but as containment strategies. In other terms, as conditionally accepted, Black and Brown people are granted entry into those echelons of society, previously reserved exclusively for White people (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2008) – as those individuals help raise metric scores that collapse the complexities of ‘race’ into a binary of BAME and White – and the myth of the colourblind, post-racial society grows stronger and becomes more entrenched.

## **Conclusion**

Working within the confluence of sociolinguistics, critical race theories and poststructuralism has enabled a critical reflection and problematising of institutionalised languages and everyday categories, echoing critical social science’s scepticism towards fixed racialised identities. Our analysis has helped delineate formal and informal modes of racialisation, extending theories of racialisation beyond the creation of legal categories, to the realm of discourse and language. At the same time, we have also sought to argue

that while it is important for sporting institutions to recognise and celebrate British South Asian representation, wherever and however it exists, we must avoid the temptation to view *some* British Indian representation in football senior leadership as a validation of current sporting diversity agendas. If we accept that social reality is formed from a rich tapestry of difference, reified into a knowable form by language and the habitual and discursive patterns that it engenders, finding better words to catalyse more efficient diversity interventions in sport is a compulsory task.

Drawing on the testimony of 21 British South Asian people working in senior leadership and executive positions across the football industry in England and Scotland, our article has contributed to the contemporary sociological canon in three major ways: firstly, by arguing for a greater focus on the sociolinguistic dimensions of racialised terminologies and their limitations in capturing racialised difference; secondly, by invoking anti-essentialism and differential racialisation as heuristic tools to explore how racialised language reflects and sustains racialised hierarchies; and thirdly, by reflecting on the ontological impossibility for terms such as ‘BAME’ and, to a lesser degree, ‘British South Asian’, to leverage diversity interventions in football beyond a superficial understanding of ‘race’. To this end, we argue there is an urgent need for future research into race equality in football to consider more comprehensively social differences related to gender, sexuality, class, religion, age, generation, geographical location and familial migration histories, to reveal what is often hidden within institutionalised language.

Before we conclude, we must be clear: in arguing for more textured language to be deployed across football, and sport more broadly, while BAME was deemed largely redundant by our participants, we are not calling for the discontinuation or obliteration of the term ‘British South Asian’ – not least because this is not our place. Racialised terminologies link anti-racist movements, and other rights or work-based collectives seemingly remain useful, providing they embrace difference. Moreover, what our article has also shown is the importance for racialised language to garner support from the people it is said to represent. Without this agreement, seemingly benign language functions as a (micro)aggressive act. We end this article then by suggesting greater linguistic reflexivity is needed in sporting diversity interventions. Language that is sensitive to the dangers of over-fragmenting analyses of shared patterns of exclusion as well as capable of valuing the specificities of individuals’ and groups’ experiences, identities and subjectivities. Where possible racialised terminologies must be more specific – and if this is not possible – policy and institutional actors mobilising aggregative terms must be sensitised to their limitations, as well as the dangers they entail.

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## Notes

1. ‘Differential racialisation’ refer to the socio-historical processes through which all individuals are separated into discrete racial groups (e.g., Black, White, Asian etc.), with each group being ascribed different biological and cultural characteristics. These ascriptions are not static ; rather, they undergo significant transformation over time and are highly contingent upon context, politics and geographic region.
2. According to Harpalani (2013, p. 92), the term ‘Desi’ refers to people of South Asian descent around the world. Desi derives from the Sanskrit word ‘desha’, which means country. The term ‘DesiCrit’ is described as a portmanteau of ‘Desi’ and ‘Crit’ – short for Critical Race Theory.

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