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The dynamics of racism and anti-racism in a Scottish charity

Citation for published version:
Taylor, EP, Mohammed, F, Kervin, S, Evans, B, Bouazzaoui, M & Zeng, X 2024, 'The dynamics of racism and anti-racism in a Scottish charity', *Voluntary Sector Review*, pp. 1-21.
https://doi.org/10.1332/20408056Y2024D000000014

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1332/20408056Y2024D000000014

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Voluntary Sector Review

Publisher Rights Statement:
This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in Voluntary Sector Review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version Taylor, E. P., Mohammed, F., Kervin, S., Evans, B., Bouazzaoui, M., Zeng, X., Chen, Y., Lu, Y., Wei, X., & Zhang, D. (2024). The dynamics of racism and antiracism in a Scottish charity. Voluntary Sector Review (published online ahead of print 2024) is available online at: https://doi.org/10.1332/20408056Y2024D000000014

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Download date: 06. Aug. 2024

Abstract

This research explored how staff and families using a Scottish trauma-informed charity. striving to enact anti-racism, understand and approach race and anti-racism in services for families of colour. Thematic analysis was applied to data from ten interviews with six staff participants and four families. Six interlinking themes emerged. Staff identified the charity as a 'white organisation' and sought 'a common frame of reference' with families, whilst families expressed overwhelming 'gratitude' to staff. 'Identities were owned and disowned,' with participants using 'colour-blind' racial ideologies. Staff 'located responsibility' for bridging cultural gaps in families of colour. White staff, whilst well-intentioned, did not express a fundamental understanding of racism, impeding their ability to enact anti-racism. This reflected wider Scottish policy and lay beliefs of being a post-racist society and challenged organisational attempts to fully embody trauma-informed practice. Challenges and recommendations for researching racism in the third sector are discussed.

146 words

Introduction

Heated discourse about structural and institutional racism has flared recently with renewed vigour after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 in Minnesota. The effects were felt worldwide, with protests in more than 4,400 cities including throughout the United Kingdom (WBUR, 2020). Britain began to re-evaluate its relationship with minoritised communities, and the UK government commissioned an investigation into race inequalities (Commission on Race

and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). The resulting report was widely condemned, including by the United Nations, which denounced it as "reprehensible" and "tone-deaf" (Office of the High Commissioner, 2021), showing the ongoing challenges inherent in acknowledging racial inequalities in the United Kingdom. Enacting an anti-racist position presents more challenges in Scotland, where a dearth of research on race and racism and a lack of consensus on defining racial equality among national authority figures have historically interfered with anti-racist action, despite public pressure (Boyle, 2020).

Scotland has committed to trauma-informed practice across the public sector, including health, social care, and policing (NHS Education for Scotland, n.d.). Trauma-informed practice (TIP) is a framework for organisations to ensure that sensitivity to trauma experience and its effects are considered in all aspects of the design and delivery of services. Anti-racism in TIP is an imperative, where the meaning assigned to trauma, systems of help-seeking, and sources of strength, coping, and resilience are all influenced by ethnic identity and cultural values (Vinson et al., 2019). At present, there is insufficient research exploring racism in Scotland specifically (e.g. Davidson et al., 2018; Harris, 2018; Meer, 2015), with no studies yet investigating racism and anti-racism in the delivery of trauma-informed support.

Therefore, through partnering with a Scottish trauma-informed charity, this research explored how race and racism is conceptualised in work between a White organisation and families of colour and sought to provide insight on how to progress anti-racist intentions to action. This paper describes the process and outcomes of this research, with reflections on the impact of the research process on the organisation's progress towards anti-racist practice.

In Scotland, where over 90% of the population identifies as White ethnicity (Scotland's Census, 2021) there are few service providers from culturally and ethnically diverse

backgrounds. Although organisations may be aware of the need to be more sensitive to the needs of diverse groups, and actively working toward adopting inclusive practices, under-representation of people of colour in this process means that unconscious biases go unchecked, and a white perspective dominates (Elias & Paradies, 2021).

When developing this research, the team was aware of the potential to reinforce racist tropes, to turn people away from fruitful discussion on anti-racism, even to alienate the organisation. In designing the research, we needed to be familiar with the phenomenon we were studying (racism and anti-racism) in its cultural (Scotland) and institutional (a third sector children's charity) context.

Racism and anti-racism: key definitions

Race was framed as a socially constructed categorisation of differences described and valued differently across history based on socio-political climate (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007), and which separates individuals based on characteristics including religion, culture, ethnicity, and skin colour, and is referred to as race, culture, background, or ethnicity (Roberts et al., 2020). **Racism** is part of a societal structure (Salter et al., 2017) where economic, political, and social systems create and maintain an unequal distribution of privilege and power between White and non-White groups (DiAngelo, 2016). By these definitions, racism has led to the social construction of race. Without the social differentiation brought about by racism, the physical characteristics are void of significance (van den Berghe, 1967).

Racist and **non-racist** as bad and good are understood as a false binary of overlooking 'unintentional' institutional racism extant within educational opportunities, socioeconomic prospects, and access to housing and healthcare (Greenland et al., 2018). As the Western world

was constructed through racist policy, contemporary racism does not require active discrimination (Tappan, 2006); only passivity. Through this lens, there is no such thing as non-racist; there are only racists and **anti-racists** (Kendi, 2019). An anti-racist is someone "supporting an anti-racist policy through their actions or expressing an anti-racist idea" (Kendi, 2019, p. 13). **Microaggressions** are understood as frequently occurring incidents that might not be easily identified as racist and may not be recognised by White actors at all, but which serve to reinforce the racist hegemony through othering, belittling, or otherwise negative verbal, behavioural or environmental acts (Sue et al., 2007).

Concerns about **'Whiteness'** and what this meant were a driving factor in commissioning this research. Whiteness was articulated in the literal sense of almost all members of the organisation being of white ethnicity and that this might contribute 'whiteness' at all levels of service provision. Whiteness infers privilege and protection through perceived white normativity, stemming from white supremacy. Scotland, as a colonising nation, is as vulnerable to whiteness as the rest of the UK (Young, 2018). In practice, it influences everything, from the development of policies and protocols to the individual interactions between service provider and service user (Bell, 2021), and may contribute to organizational obliviousness (Humphrey et al., 2023).

A note on language

Collective descriptors for people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds are problematic. Terms can reinforce White normativity by collating all non-White people into one group (e.g., 'BAME'), may become terms of overt abuse, or operate as microaggressions via mislabelling. At the time of the project design, accepted terms were changing rapidly, with 'BAME' starting to fall out of favour. The organisation adopted the terms

'person/people/families of colour,' and the research team therefore also used this term to describe participant eligibility and the sample. Where possible more specific descriptors are used, but many participants felt vulnerable in terms of legal status, and we have prioritised anonymity over precision.

Institutional and cultural position

In the UK, refugees, who have been arriving in growing numbers (UK Government, 2023), face multiple barriers to accessing essential services, and are making increasing use of voluntary organisations. The voluntary sector has historically provided an essential bridge between marginalised people and public sector institutions (Strang et al., 2018), and is perceived to have the freedom to act in the interests of its service users without being hampered by hostile laws that the statutory sector must adhere to (Robinson & Masocha, 2017). However, the support they provide is delivered within a hostile legislative and policy context that positions asylum seekers and migrants as problematic and less deserving than 'British' people (Käkelä et al., 2023), and which has not yet addressed the implicit racism embedded across institutions. Whilst black and minority ethnic organisations exist to support black and minority people (Butt, 2001), a relative lack of funding for minority ethnic-led organisations (Netto et al., 2012) means that in practice, most people of colour seeking help will receive services from white organisations. For UK-based charities, the problem of white saviourism has come to their doorstep.

Anti-racism entails a comprehensive and thoughtful understanding of what constitutes racism. It requires confronting underlying beliefs and expressing deliberate opposition to institutional and cultural racism, which Fekete (2020) argues is under threat in the UK due to a focus on individual over institutional racism. Furthermore, by conceding that regardless of

intention, all White individuals have a role in racism, White anti-racists are tasked with using their position to instigate change in their sphere of influence (Dabiri, 2021). Thus, when an organisation strives to be anti-racist, it must recognise how racism exists in its institutional structure and consciously refuse its repetition. This requires engagement with cultural humility and cultural competence (Razack & Jeffery, 2002) but these alone will not address racism (Boyle, 2020). All organisational members must pledge to uproot their underlying beliefs and embark on lifelong training, collaboration, and listening while welcoming growth, development, and discomfort (Law, 2011). In the refugee sector, anti-racism has been enacted as 'practice-based resistance' (Käkelä et al., 2023) involving advocacy and challenging of statutory organisations. However, less is known about voluntary sector organisations that are not specialised to refugee work, but who nonetheless are working with refugee and asylum-seeking families. Historically, social work has an ethos of anti-racism dating back to the 1980s (Lavalette & Penketh, 2013). As such, charities with a social work orientation might also be expected to employ anti-racism in their ethos and practice.

The cultural context: Scotland

In the early 2000s, after two decades of progress, Scotland slowed efforts toward racial equality, initiating a 'post-racial' and 'race-blind' narrative (Mohammed, 2020; Sayyid, 2010), whereby racial discussions were side-lined due to a nationwide hesitation to name systemic injustice (Young, 2018). Scotland has faced criticism for this lack of urgency and depth, where racial inequality is not ignored but regarded as less pressing than other matters. Race equality is rarely referenced as distinct from a general 'fairness' (Calman Commission Report, 2009; Christie, 2011).

Until recently, Scotland engaged in limited dialogue on its role in endorsing racist policy, taking on a form of 'exceptionalism,' and disregarding its influence in British colonialism and imperialism, projecting blame back to England (Harris, 2018), even presenting itself as a British colony (Kidd & McClymont, 2014). Through this, inequality is contained as a cognitive problem to be resolved rather than a function of Scotland's identity (Carstenson & Schmidt, 2015), producing an issue which can only be addressed through enhancing race-related understanding and identity in Scotland (Meer et al., 2020). However, organisations and policymakers typically employ a colour-blind approach, contending race does not and should not matter (e.g., Mohammed, 2020), which has filtered down to the public (Gawlewicz, 2020). Racism is re-rationalised through the deficit model, whereby any remaining injustice following the implementation of race-related policy is attributed to the actions of minoritised individuals rather than ineffective policy (Gorski, 2010; Equality, Inclusion and Human Rights Directorate, 2021). This unwillingness to address contemporary and ongoing racism serves to perpetuate inequality, preserve the myth of meritocracy, and reveal a country that has yet to engage in a deeper reckoning with its past (Helms & Cook, 1999; Ronay-Jinich, 2010; West et al., 2021).

A societal mis-framing of racism as only occurring in far-right movements, celebrity scandals, and other countries (Young, 2018), paired with a scarcity of critical work examining racism in Scotland, has contributed to the perception that there is 'no problem here' (Davidson et al., 2018; Jackson, 2020). Nonetheless, a Scottish Social Attitudes survey revealed that nearly half of White respondents perceived the nation's identity as threatened by a rising number of migrants (McCrone, 2017). Racially and ethnically minoritised individuals face indisputable disadvantages in Scotland, including heightened vulnerability to unemployment or underemployment, health inequalities, and inescapable cycles of poverty (Equality and Human

Rights Commission, 2016). Racial violence occurs at higher rates in Scotland than in England and Wales, with the number of reported racially motivated hate crimes reaching 3,285 in 2020 (Crown Office & Procurator Fiscal Service, 2021). Notably, 60% of minoritised individuals who reported experiencing racism within Scotland did not inform any authority figure of the interaction (Meer, 2016, 2017), suggesting official figures underestimate the true scale. This may reflect the consequences of colour-blind racial ideology whereby incidents are re-framed as not racially-motivated although the normality of racist incidents is also cited as a reason for under-reporting (Bhugra & Ayonrinde (2001). The limited evidence base suggests racism is more prevalent in Scotland than the collective UK data has suggested (Meer, 2018). Altogether, a national resistance to confront racial inequality has permitted the experiences of racially and ethnically minoritised groups to be concealed, allowing Scotland to maintain its fictional 'post-racial' identity as a country which no longer requires attention to racism (de Lima, 2005; Kailemia, 2016).

Institutional context

Across the UK, third sector organisations have been challenged on their insufficient approaches to tackling racial injustice (Lingayah et al., 2021). A two-year follow-up of over 60 Scottish organisations that had publicly supported the BLM protests revealed that public pledges seldom translated into observable change, noting charities to be the least responsive (Young, 2022). Despite contextualising BLM and the global context in original remarks, over 30% of follow-up statements excluded similar sentiments (McNeill, 2022), suggesting a renewed hesitation to denounce racism, impeding the ability to address and reject it.

The current research focused on one Scottish charity, which aims to pursue anti-racism within its organisational structure. The charity provides a range of services to support families in distress, including practical, financial, social, and psychological supports, with the overall aim of protecting children. It is a flagship organisation for trauma-informed practice in Scotland. Through focusing on clarity regarding boundaries and expectations, their approach recognises that physical, cultural, and social experiences may impact how people individually respond to and interact with care (Ranjbar et al., 2020). This style of support integrates trauma-informed knowledge into all steps of service provision, working to avoid re-traumatisation (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2014). Moreover, the organisation provides holistic child protection by striving to maintain the family unit through various parental and family support services.

Rationale and Research Aims

With the meanings of race and racism unique to Scottish societal structure, third sector and racism research may not be extrapolated from American or even British society to inform anti-racist efforts in Scotland. Therefore, to begin addressing these gaps, this study sought to initiate a bottom-up dialogue exploring how staff and families of colour approach race and racism in Scottish third sector support and investigate how this is influenced by the broader societal structure. The aim of this project was to explore staff and families' experiences, beliefs, and attitudes toward race and racism when engaging in trauma-informed support.

Methods

Research Design

This study selected a qualitative approach for its advantages in exploring identity, development, and multicultural matters (Ponterotto, 2005). A Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach was implemented, such that participants were actively included throughout the research process, in effort to reduce the common power imbalance between researchers and participants (Baum, 2006) and mitigate a recurring problem in psychological research where researchers engage with social issues without holding a developed understanding of the context or implications of their involvement (Kindon et al., 2010). A social constructionist reflexive thematic analysis was chosen for its theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Ethical approval was gained from the XX Research Ethics Committee.

Developing a research team

The lead researcher and the charity's representative are both White and were conscious of developing a research proposal from a White perspective. When recruiting the research team, people of colour and those who identified as racially or ethnically minoritised were encouraged to apply. The research team comprised postgraduate students from China, France (Arabic ethnicity), Jamaica and the USA. One team member was White and all bar one came from a majority ethnic group in their home countries. The specific focus of enquiry, the approach and all materials were developed once the research team was in place. The team explicitly discussed and contracted how to navigate questions of race and racism, language, power dynamics and differentials within the team.

Sampling and Participants

Staff members were asked to share details of the study with eligible families, and the organisation sent the information to families directly in newsletters. Interested families were then referred to the research team. Recruitment and data collection occurred over three phases.

Phase I entailed a series of consultations with services users who were also people of colour and staff. The focus of the interviews was discussed along with trialling of potential questions. Phases II and III were conducted six months apart to accommodate changes in the research team, reduction of Covid-related restrictions and allow for renewed marketing of the project. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted and audio-recorded over Zoom Enterprise, with translators included as needed.

Staff were invited to participate based on their (paid or voluntary) employment by the charity, and families were invited based on receiving support from the charity. The charity's desire for this research arose from the Black Lives Matter movement and therefore was focused on people of colour rather than those who are White but otherwise ethnically or racially minoritised.

Considering theoretical sufficiency and our aim to derive value from the depth over breadth of participant narratives, a sample of ten was sought (Morse et al., 2002). Thirteen participants were included across ten interviews, comprising six staff members, 3 individual family members and one family of four members. Children were included in the sample numbers only if they contributed to the discussion. Five staff participants worked closely with families, and one held an administrative position. All participant staff were White and from the United Kingdom. All families were people of colour, with two families from West Africa and two from South Asia. Two families' interviews were facilitated by interpreters.

Procedure

The interview schedule was developed following three preliminary consultations with family and staff prior to Phase I, which were not included in the data analysis. These initial consultations surfaced some of our assumptions and gave us a different frame of reference. None of the families we spoke with recognised microaggressions, and instead conceptualised racism as gross violations of human rights. This reflected in part recent experiences of being stateless or persecuted in their origin countries. One consultant in this first phase was second-generation British Pakistani and was more forthcoming about examples of institutional racism from public sector bodies in the UK. This suggested that some of our families did not have sufficient English or were not yet mixing with others enough to either be exposed to or recognise nuanced examples of racism (due in part to pandemic restrictions). Some terms used, such as 'microaggression,' could not be effectively translated into Arabic. All consultants in Phase I expressed deep and unconditional gratitude to the charity for the help they had provided, with concrete examples of what help they had been given. In this context, it was difficult to elicit ideas about how the charity could improve its services for people of colour. One consultant pointed out that to criticise charity was to criticise Allah, so questions inviting constructive feedback for the charity might put some participants in a difficult position. It was evident that they were contributing to the research out of gratitude to the charity rather than due to an intrinsic interest in the topic.

A semi-structured interview method was selected for its non-restrictive nature and resistance to imposing categories designed by the researchers (Polkinghorne, 2005). Two interview schedules were assembled for staff and families, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the participants' perspectives on race and racism in Scottish family support. Entering the main phase of interviews, we had questions about the nature of gratitude and how this might influence

power dynamics between White charity providers and recipients of colour. We reconsidered our use of terms like racism (too powerful) and microaggressions (not understood) and encouraged participants to share concrete examples of their experiences and perceptions.

Gaining consent

As family participants typically did not read English, information and consent forms were provided in advance digitally to allow for automated translation and presented verbally before the interview with a translator present as needed. Following verbal consent, the research team documented it on behalf of the participants.

Managing power differentials

'Multiple' interviewing was used (Velardo & Elliot, 2021) such that researchers alternated between the role of interviewer and observer, allowing for diverse conversation through multiple constructions of information (Velardo & Elliot, 2021). The presence of a second researcher was intended to mitigate an 'us-them' environment by helping to redistribute power away from a single interviewer, allowing a natural flow of conversation and questioning (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2014). Mindful of the trauma that recent immigrants may have been exposed to, co-interviewers paid close attention to participant comfort (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007) and potential re-traumatisation (Duckworth & Follette, 2012; SAMHSA, 2014). The interview focused on experiences since arriving in the UK and did not ask about earlier trauma, although some participants spontaneously shared details. Interviewers explicitly checked on the wellbeing of participants at regular points, offering opportunities for breaks or to terminate the interview. A disclosure protocol was created in the event of child protection concerns. A distress

protocol was also created to allow for follow-up by a keyworker from the charity. Neither protocol had to be used.

The interview schedule was used as a means for exploration, from which researchers could pursue follow-up questions for enhanced clarity and meaning (Bearman, 2019). There was no compensation for participation. Participants were contacted following analysis and invited to provide comment in a verbal (translated) feedback interview, but none responded.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), supported by NVivo (version 12). This analysis drew upon Social Constructionism, such that the data and their interpretations were understood as a social construction of the participants' and researchers' shared reality, where multiple perspectives and conclusions could exist (Charmaz, 2006). Considering race is a socio-political construct, the participants' experiences were understood correspondingly (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). The data were not analysed with deliberate preconceptions; however, it is recognised that the nature of a social constructionist thematic analysis means researchers' beliefs would influence the outcome (Harper & Thompson, 2011). Regular discussions within the research team tested emerging themes for bias, selectivity, and closeness to the data. Discussions included the experience of being a member of a minority group and its distinction from being a person of colour; the relative status that international students and asylum seekers have in British society; and the nuances and ambiguities of language in transcripts.

Each interview was transcribed by one researcher and verified by a second researcher (McLellan et al., 2003). Some members of the research team and participants spoke English as a second language. This and the use of translators introduced the potential for ambiguity in

transcriptions. Such ambiguities were discussed and where a plausible clarification was possible it was added in brackets to the transcript. Ambiguities that could not be confidently resolved were allowed to remain.

Throughout the study, researchers kept reflexive journals to capture initial thoughts, ideas, and patterns within the research, as well as to reflect on how the researchers' positionality may impact the construction and interpretation of data (Gormley et al., 2019; Hill & Dao, 2020). Following completion of the analysis, findings were presented back to the organisation in a lunchtime seminar and staff invited to comment. A video of the findings was made for families and shared with participants and other service users.

Results

Thematic analysis of the interviews identified six themes. 'Finding a common frame of reference' described attempts by staff to find common ground with families that side-stepped cultural differences and was reflected in 'Owned and disowned identities'. 'Colour-blindness' was evident despite an explicit awareness of belonging to 'A White organisation' and what this might entail. Families expressed strong 'gratitude' to staff, who responded with modesty and pleasure but with less attention to the power dynamics created or reinforced by the donor-recipient relationship. This was apparent in problematic 'locating of responsibility' for recognising and responding to cultural differences. See figure 1 for thematic map.

[Figure 1 here]

A white organisation

Staff participants associated whiteness with power and privilege, but also with guilt and responsibility. Staff highlighted the makeup of their staff, expressing concern about the implications of white homogeneity and the need for positive action:

"We are a predominantly, you know, white organisation and our information is in English, you know so we're not actually really promoting ourselves to other communities." (S21002)

For some staff, recognition of being a predominantly white organisation triggered concerns about cultural competency:

"I think about how does our organization, given that all of our staff are part of a society where there's racism, how is that reflected within our organisation? How does that unconscious stuff, how does that unconscious stuff surface? So, firstly, I suppose, in individuals and individual interactions but also that the way that we construct our services, the way we design our services, how is that accessible or not accessible? How could we do better?" (S21003)

Colour-Blindness

When speaking about race and racism, nearly all interviewed staff and families employed colour-blind messages, prioritising personality differences and denying racial differences or similarities. All family-facing staff participants stressed how they did not perceive a family's race to warrant differential treatment and considered individual differences more:

I hope I treat everyone the same but differently because they're all different personalities. I don't think I treat them differently because of the different culture…race or religion, but the different personalities (S21001)

The use of colour-blindness by staff was noticed by families, in which diversity was denied whilst equality was promoted:

They always tell us, 'You are not different from anybody else in this country. You have equal rights to everybody else…and do not feel you are different or less than anybody else…it has enhanced our feeling that…we do belong here, and we really feel this way (F21001)

Gratitude

Gratitude was dominant in all interviews. Families spent considerable time expressing their gratitude to the charity and outlining the support they had received, to the exclusion of addressing other questions.

"Honestly, [charity] are the best in the UK. Because they have been the only support, I have been contacted with and have got amazing experience with them. Ever since then, they've never made me to lack anything, they have never allowed me to lack anything that I think that I need." (F21002)

Additionally, families' gratitude conveyed a religious element, in which gratitude was an obligation:

"…part of our belief what we believe is those who are not grateful to, to the people and to the things God created, it will be very hard for them to be

grateful towards the creator himself, so we are very grateful to everything we have here it's our way to show gratefulness towards our God, the Creator, this is part of what we believe." (F21001)

Staff were also asked about their views of families' gratitude and if there were potential avenues to open discussion beyond that. While staff recognised the levels of gratitude families had, they did not feel it was warranted:

"And so, it makes me feel very kind of humble, because they are so grateful and that's my job, you know, but they are so kind of 'we couldn't do anything without you. Thank you so much.' I'm like, 'don't thank me, it's my job.'" (S21001)

Finding a common frame of reference

The research team was primed for hearing about day-to-day experiences of racism or micro-aggressions as observed in wider Scottish society. However, participating families had a different frame of reference, describing their origin countries as lacking fundamental rights:

"I belong to a category of the population in [country of origin] that were not given the rights to citizenship, so we have no citizenship, we don't have any documents, no birth certificate, no right to join the schools, no right to access to health system. We basically live rightless in every way there and life is very difficult there." (F21001)

Whilst staff were also attuned to continued challenges for families post-arrival:

"All the families we work with bring vulnerabilities, but obviously if it's a family from a, from a black and minority ethnic group, maybe they have potentially levels of discrimination, racism, different things that are happening. Obviously, for [name], she's going through incredibly difficult asylum-seeking process that is just very difficult for families - for any family - to negotiate so. (S21002)

Such experiences may have desensitised families to more subtle forms of racism, and their gratitude for the help received translated into a concerted effort to embrace staff perspectives on colour-blindness, language barriers and the power differentials of giving and receiving aid. For staff, the desire to help was evident as was the lack of attention to more nuanced ways of reinforcing institutional racism:

"Tolerant of other people's views about religion… backgrounds, and things like that" (S21002)

"People don't come into the job to be nasty, you know, you'd expect people to be, to try and be respectful" (S21003)

In many narratives, anti-racism was understood as 'niceness' rather than an active engagement with and challenging of racism. In contrast, phrasing suggested a lack of cultural humility, implying cultural diversity as a problem to be managed, rather than understood and embraced.

Owned and Disowned Identities

Identities included religious beliefs, (“*I'm a very strong Christian...”* (F21002)), cultural groups, or family roles (*“They always make activities for me to meet other mothers of children.” (F21002)*). Staff could also identify with some of these roles and identities, across racial and ethnic divides:

> *“For me, I think, if I've had anything similar things, you know because I’m a mother, I'm a grandmother, you know, I’m ancient, I’ve been through a lot myself.” (S21001)*

This might reflect an awareness of intersectionality between race and other identity markers (Nickels & Leach, 2021), especially in the family context (Collins, 2000). The data suggested an interest in finding commonalities rather than grasping the nuances of converging multiple socio-politically-laden identities. In some staff narratives, there was an active rejection of race as an identity marker, as expressed in the Colour-blindness theme.

Immigrant families described feelings of exclusion in reference to their countries of origin. They distanced their identity from their countries of origin, stating, “I am from...” rather than identifying with their nationality.

Locating Responsibility

Most participating staff were conscious not to transfer Western perspectives onto families from non-Western cultures; however, they voiced a lack of felt competence in delivering services appropriately, worrying that their intentions could be ill-received:

> *"I was just so scared of…upsetting people and saying, "your way is wrong," because that's not what I was trying to say. I find that quite difficult and quite challenging" (S21001)*

Some staff discussed uncertainty around how to respect cultural etiquette, sharing that when a family requested that they remove their shoes inside the home, they would *"take them off every time [I] visited, and occasionally I would forget"* (S21001). They questioned, *"is it something that I could forget or is it… deeply disrespectful?" (S21001).*

Some staff saw cultural barriers as a rights issue:

> *"Like why isn't there a translator? Is giving them [a translator] something that they should do? So, if you raised expectations, and instead of saying like, well they're grateful because I've given them some money, you raise expectations and say what are these people's rights and have they been met?"* (S21003)

However, others outlined various instances where family members were implemented as unpaid translators, including children. The responsibility was placed on non-English speakers to translate both from English and into English:

> *"So, one mum who I built a relationship up with…is now my go-between between these mums… So, I use her as my translator." (S22001)*

Whilst most family-facing staff participants recognised limits in their cultural competency, in practice, staff commonly handed responsibility to people of colour to educate and correct any misunderstandings:

"You're worrying that you've not done the right things but at the same time, you kind of hope that if you have gone wrong somewhere that the family can help you to not make a mistake again." (S21001)

Additional observations

In our interactions with the organisation we observed examples of racially-motivated microaggressions perpetrated by White staff members against people of colour – colleagues or members of the research team were ignored or academic credibility was called into question - and a lack of awareness relating to this. These were reported back to the organisation.

Following the interviews and analysis, we held a knowledge exchange event to share the findings. More than 100 staff attended and there was active engagement with the issues raised by the research. Staff expressed feeling too ignorant to usefully contribute, feeling overwhelmed by Scotland's colonial legacy, and a deep concern for the families they worked with. Some reflections on racism seemed more developed than had emerged in the interviews, reflecting how rapidly racism discourse is evolving in Scotland.

Discussion

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first research study investigating how staff and families negotiate race and racism in a third sector Scottish context. The themes that emerged supported the idea of White staff members' frame of reference being strongly drive by Scottish policy and culture. Colour-blindness was evident along with a disavowal of racism, matched by families who described cultural incompetence in staff but minimised the effects. Staff expressed a lack of certainty about race and ethnicity, orienting towards characteristics such as family roles

as a way of finding common ground. Responsibility was given to families for educating staff in cultural competence. These themes are explored further below, and this section also focuses on learning for future research.

Cultural competence and colour blindness

Despite strong organisational support for the research, few staff volunteered to participate in the research. This partly reflected additional pressures caused by the pandemic and employee fatigue seen in health and social care sectors (e.g., Meyer et al., 2021), with consequent lack of attention to the research. However, uncertainty about anti-racism, including how to talk about it, may have created avoidance, and demonstrates the consequences of a colour-blind policy context (Kailemia, 2016). Those who did participate expressed significant concern for their client group and a deeply held desire to be anti-racist in their approach, but also described problematic practices inconsistent with this position. In the subsequent knowledge exchange event people spoke openly about their shame at Britain's colonial past, a commitment to anti-racism, and deep uncertainty about how to enact this. This was reflected at the individual and organisational level, the latter most evident in the commissioning of the research. Participants talked about the goal of enabling families to live independently and recognised the structural inequalities that inhibited them. This differs from White charities in the USA, which are depicted as paternalistic rather than focused on justice and emancipation (Danley & Blesset, 2022).

The problem of gratitude

Whilst the extreme gratitude shown by families was acknowledged by staff, the role of charity in Islamic faith and the potential impact this might have on the dynamic between staff

and Muslim families was not referred to in any interviews. Gratitude was experienced by staff as validation of their efforts, sometimes embarrassing, and in some cases problematic. In this latter case, staff were attuned to how gratitude might reinforce power differentials and lack of entitlement. However, nobody knew how to address these issues. This warrants further attention in research and practice to help charity workers from non-Muslim faith to understand and respect this characteristic and to mitigate the potential amplification of power differentials that ignorance may cause. However, all participants, irrespective of faith, expressed extreme gratitude and the dynamics of this should not be framed as wholly related to religion.

Divesting responsibility

Several examples of staff giving families responsibility for managing language differences, facilitating communication, and informing staff of their cultural incompetence reflected a lack of awareness of staff responsibility for cultural competence. The unidirectional nature implies an expectation of acculturation on the part of the family member, symbolic of a lack of cultural humility and an expectation of White normativity (Young, 2018). It also suggests a lack of attention to how gratitude and power differentials might influence the families' behaviour in response to these expectations.

Overall, these findings speak to the confusion experienced by staff members and accord with other findings around cultural competence in a context of colour-blind policy, in which lack of encouragement to cultural humility or competence sustains racism (Younis & Jadhav, 2020). 'Whiteness' was held as problematic for the organisation but with little sense of how. Humphrey et al.'s (2023) depiction of organizational obliviousness seems apt. They describe apparently neutral policies disadvantaging certain demographics due to lack of awareness. In this research,

some staff recognised that lack of diversity might be creating unknown problems, but due to those problems, it was difficult to increase diversity, becoming a self-reinforcing issue (Young et al., 2018). The obliviousness was more apparent in actions divesting responsibility in which power differentials were actively, if unwillingly, reinforced.

The lack of constructive socio-political discourse has handicapped Scotland in confronting its own history as a colonising nation, further complicated by a political narrative of exceptionalism (Harris, 2018) and Scottish colonisation by the English (Kidd & McClymont, 2014). When sharing our findings with the organisation, contextualising the findings within Scotland's racism story, as this paper has done, was important. We presented our findings as provocations and observations and invited reflection on this. It is testament to the charity and its culture of support, challenge, and reflexivity that it embraced our findings so openly.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

Building cultural competence and humility is a process in which repeated efforts must be made to increase awareness and engagement before change can happen; and timing is important when positioning a research project in this process. Attention needs to be given to how best to scaffold organisational learning across the third sector in a way that moves beyond tokenistic training, such as cultural competency (Razack & Jeffery, 2002). Through this collaborative learning process, emphasis should be placed on the benefits of discussing race with families of colour and the risks of not doing so. Research may be a catalyst for change in an organisation and this should be accepted and factored into design considerations.

During this project, accepted terminology was changing rapidly and written materials, at different points, referred to BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic), ethnic minorities,

minoritised people, and people/families of colour. Anxiety about using the right terminology was evident amongst staff. Strict rules about language can inhibit open discussion. In organisational conversations, guidance on accepted terms can help people speak with confidence. Discomfort appears to be a by-product of the broader societal mis-framing of racism (Young, 2018) and both top-down and bottom-up collaboration is needed to curate precise definitions of race, racism, and anti-racism, endorsed by government agencies and racially- and ethnically-minoritised individuals (not only people of colour) in Scotland (Coalition for Race Equality and Rights, 2016).

Microaggressions against members of the research team were seen. Improving representation in teams is critical to identifying and preventing racism. However, within a White dominated culture, people of colour are more vulnerable to being mistreated and for mistreatment to go unrecognised. The research team has a shared responsibility to ensure that people of colour are protected from microaggressions as far as possible, all feel empowered to speak out, measures are in place to address issues when they arise, and that people of colour are not left to advocate for themselves.

Study Limitations

Qualitative research does not aim for generalisability but the specific context of this research - a single charity, self-selecting participants and during the Covid pandemic – all affect the findings. There was an imbalance between staff and family participants. Staff perspectives were overrepresented, contributing further to the issue of White voices being amplified over those of people of colour.

Narrowing the minoritised population of interest to a specific ethnic group or migrant generation would give clearer insight into experiences of race and racism and mitigate the tendency of psychological research to combine all non-White groups under a ‘multi-ethnic umbrella’ (Meer, 2018).

Some narratives reflected an awareness of characteristics apart from cultural, but only one participant extended this to thinking about how these might interact to compound inequalities and injustice. Nickels and Leach (2021) emphasise the need for an intersectional lens on racism and anti-racism research, and the close focus in this research may have missed an important opportunity to enquire further with participants.

Conclusion

This research provides a starting point for investigating Whiteness and racial understanding in the Scottish third sector with initial recommendations for organisations to advance their anti-racism commitments into sustainable action. Considering the scarcity of racism research from Scotland (Meer, 2018), examining the views of White staff and racially diverse families was a valuable contribution. Within a trauma-informed organisation, awareness of the need to be culturally competent was evident, but practice was influenced by wider societal perspectives, and staff leaned more towards non-racism than anti-racism. Findings reveal an acute need to educate, train, and support staff to fully enact anti-racism. Establishing a shared vocabulary and enhancing confidence and felt competence could reduce reliance on colour-blind and deflective strategies. However, a critical demand for self-reflection and self-awareness among White staff within the third sector remains in order to fully embrace anti-racism within trauma-informed practice.

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This research did not receive any funding.

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest