

A2: Intersection of race and mental health

APP PAR Project Cycle 3 2021-2022

1. Background information		
Topic	Intersection between race and mental health	
Strand	A: Black British perspectives	X
	B: Disability/Mental Health perspectives	
Specific research question	What is the impact of the expectations surrounding “Black Excellence” upon the educational experiences and mental wellbeing of Black students at Cambridge?	
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2. Executive summary

In seeking to explore potential factors upholding final undergraduate degree attainment (Awarding) gaps for Black students and its intersection with mental health conditions, we conducted a crossover investigation focusing on race and relevant themes (including the concept of 'Black Excellence') and, more subtly, holistic and academic wellbeing via our inquiry method. In light of context, we explore both representation (navigating [anti]blackness) and Representation (formal roles i.e. JCR work, Speaking out against racism, Access/WP Recruitment, Diversity roles on Committees etc) to look at excellence as a both r/Representation endeavour.

We conducted an arts-based workshop with Black undergraduate students using informal drawing and collaborative-playlist based tasks to gather reflections/conversational data. Our findings revealed that 'Black Excellence' was perceived to be more than simply ideological, novelty, or optional, but instead manifests as:

- a hidden requirement underpinning entry/acceptance, a cultural practice / functional necessity that is handed down generationally
- a source of time costs, fatigue, and shame which is often reinforced
- potentially a system hindering capacity for accurate self-assessment via reducing access to beneficial informal resources or "insider knowledge" and support systems which subsequently helped participants to recognise their competence and feel equipped to navigate the system. All things which generated more pressure to increase Representation/Excellence labours in their absence, with even 'safe spaces' away from 'representation' demands being reported as functioning as recruitment grounds for further Representation work.

As a result, we request that more investigation is conducted into alternative r/Representative attainments and workloads, including potentially disproportionate indebtedment/indenturing narratives, to assess their impact regarding academic availability and access to informal knowledge, as well as wellbeing and capacity for accurate self-assessment. With this, more holistic Representation opportunities and continued antiracist inclusion and support provision at race level, particularly freshers integration. Moreover, given that the link between wellbeing and r/Representation is still widely under researched at society level, we believe this could be enriching to our academic understandings if performed ethically in the near future.

3. Rationale

There exists a persistent undergraduate 'awarding gap' at Cambridge, whereby Black undergraduates and students with mental health conditions are less likely to receive a First as compared to their White peers and students without a mental health condition, respectively (BIT, 2020). As a team, rather than explore contingent influences separately, searching for specifically 'Black Student' or 'Mental Health' themes, we decided to do a crossover inquiry - Black Student Mental Wellbeing - to see if there was anything which might give insight into their potential crossovers.

Having explored broad bodies of research across mental health (Bignall et al., 2020, Suman, 2017), Blackness (Stoll et al., 2022, Osbourne et al., 2021; Mushonga et al., 2021), improving attainment (Lei et al., 2021; Pajares, 1996; Yuen et al., 2020), and racialised experiences within education (Griffith et al., 2019; Jankowski, 2022), we recognised a gap in existing scholarship exploring the interaction between concepts - particularly how race interacts with mental health (MH). The lack of data pertaining to the relationship between perceptions/voices of Black student experience and intersectional student mental health, even before factoring in the particularly unique Cambridge spatial/'Cambridge Time' context, felt particularly problematic so we felt an explicit need to rectify this insight gap.

Moreover, there was a further lack of scholarship on Black undergraduates outlining practical mechanics of day-to-day professional and social interactions; broken down processes of what 'Black excellence' means to them; their mental health; and their experience of being Black at Cambridge. The existing scholarship (Adeleye, 2019; Black Student Talk, 2020; Fapuro, 2020) helped us to identify how we might map these concepts onto Black student mental wellbeing experiences in Cambridge. From there, we hoped that it might provide practical insight into how to visualise improving the current situation and streamlining support approaches.

As both Black Studentship and Mental Health Challenges are incredibly broad, we loosely chose what we as a group (of Black and Mixed Black Cambridge students, including some MH representation) felt were prominent Black/Disabled themes in Cambridge specifically, including based on previous APP cycle findings; Black Excellence; Racial Monoliths - questions which explore interactions with Spaces and across 'Cambridge Time'. In light of racialised MH diagnosis and support gaps in the UK (Bignall et al, 2020; Mental Health Foundation, 2021; Race Equality Foundation Report, 2020; Suman 2017), and as inspired by 'Black Students' Talk's' (2020) work, there were clear indications that presentations of MH symptomatology, including prominent conditions such as anxiety and depression might look different for Black students. As such, we chose instead to make space for students to discuss mental wellbeing holistically rather than as it relates to specific mental health conditions. A brief insight into arts-based methods (Barone and Eisener, 2011; Currans et al, 2015; Finley, 2014) indicated that it would be a suitable approach to explore these themes. We sought to be as ethical and mindful of participants as possible to ensure we weren't adding further labour without means of promising vast immediate outcomes.

Whilst we aren't seeking causality within our scope, our research highlights how the extra pressure, expectations, and workloads of 'Excellence' within the Cambridge setting have impacted the mental health of students of colour, and how this might influence the attainment gap. From there, we hope that it might urge future consideration of questions such as is there a crossover and/or chronological link between Black student r/Representational experience and mental/emotional wellbeing? Is that particularly amplified in Cambridge? Does our limited understanding of this interaction, as it manifests in real life, hinder our ability to understand its potential impact upon attainment?

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4. Contextual information (literature review)

BME attainment Gap and Self Determination Theory

Bunce et al (2021) - did a study looking at race and attainment through the lense of 'Self Determination Theory'. They found racialised barriers to relatedness (differential treatment including less empathy from lecturers, social group othering, underrepresentation); competence (including mentioning a need to be 'twice as good' and being overlooked); and autonomy (they couldn't be themselves, fighting was 'stressful, tiring, demoralising' - p.541). These are all elements traditionally linked to the motivation and skills required for positive attainment and wellbeing. As such, they're areas which could shed light on the Cambridge attainment/'awarding' gap and were evident in our findings.

Anti-Blackness and Belonging

Through an exploration of blackness and belonging it has been observed that there is a more complex thought process in students of colour regarding how they assess their integration within an academic setting that indicated in previous research. Self-Categorisation theory (Osbourne et al, 2021) helps demonstrates that for students it wasn't just about the self in the present, i.e., being the only Black person in the room, but they also took into account perceptions of others based on multiple moments in time to make explanations for everything from naivety to racism; thus constant double thinking/mediation occurred.

Othering: It has been demonstrated that Black students are othered in many ways that aren't often represented, i.e., people code switching around them including their language and mannerisms, and people expecting them to sell drugs in a club (Osbourne et al., 2022). There is also a clear establishment of where Black students do and don't go within a certain region causing an almost physical babracade which is marked by race.

How racial incongruence is handled by students.

According to Jessop (2009) BME students at UK Universities widely reported belonging, and reported not experiencing racism within their institutions, yet spoke about events widely regarded as racist whilst downplaying their significance. The significance of Self-Questioning/Rumination and self doubt about racist events was noted, this suggests that there is a mediation process that occurs for students of colour when attempting to navigate such events. Black students develop coping strategies to deal with institutional racism i.e. isolation, working harder to disprove negative stereotypes (Griffith et al, 2019) but this comes at a negative cost to their wellbeing. There is explicit discussion of not only managing their own emotions but also taking into account their white counterparts' emotions; as well as employing the role of educating their peers. Additionally, Black students engage with a curriculum and learning environment in which they are not represented and that which does not account for their

lived experiences or worldview (Arday et al., 2022). Having to consider all of this can be shown to increase pressure and cause a level of distress.

Links between race and mental health

A number of sources have demonstrated links between mental health and race, particularly differences in points of entry for support, i.e., at a more severe level than non-black counterparts i.e. The Mental Health Foundation (2021) shows that Black people are four times more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act than White people. A recent review by Stoll et al (2022) found that the mental health of Black university students, along with academic pressure, was impacted by racialised experiences, isolation, racism, culture shock amongst others. There were specific gendered issues as well, e.g., female-identifying students felt conscious about their body shape and size, while male-identifying students reported experiences of expectations of hypermasculinity. The findings indicate that there are stressors within higher education settings that are unique to Black students.

Overachieving and Race

There is a strain on black students coming from another angle in terms of high expectations when they have reached institutions of higher learning. As quoted in an article by Obasi (2020), “Black people also pay a minority tax—i.e., the burden of additional responsibilities placed on them by organisations in the name of diversity.” The ‘strain of black excellence’ is a dualistic term, one that can add pressure to exceed in all that black students do, thus pressure is applied internally and externally. Ultimately black students striving to boost the collective can lead to neglect of personal wellbeing, and a failure to meet individual standards of academic achievement.

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5. What do you hope to achieve with this qualitative research project?

Given a broad yet unspoken duty to “carry the torch” for the next generation, or speak for/represent all of blackness yet seldom feel heard as an individual, understanding the nuances of these pressures/experiences (which existing scholarship lacks) felt key to our understanding of the attainment gap experienced by Black undergraduates at Cambridge. We also seek to explore a distinction between “being” Black (representation) and representing “Blackness,” i.e., “doing Black” in a formal capacity (Representation) and what that involves so that we might see its interactions with the known and tangible, i.e., interpersonal communication, spatial dynamics, workloads etc. We will also refer to it as r/Representation where distinctions blur.

The intended outcomes of this project are therefore to:

- Highlight a practical/material crossover between the ramifications of race and its potential impact upon the mental health of underrepresented (in this instance Black) students within rigorous academic settings.
- Shine a light upon the lived realities / labours of ‘Excellence’ and the factors which uphold it. Excellence both with its recruitment/marketing function, and as a potential source of self-marginalisation/devaluing self esteem.
- From here, future scholarship might ask how this broadens our understanding of the attainment gap in light of what we know to be necessary attributes for motivation/wellbeing/success, i.e., relatedness, feeling competent, positive self esteem, agency etc
- Equally, how these issues become cyclical/generational here, in order to generate holistic support in the present which might seek to break harmful patterns in the future, and thus improve and recognise various attainments, sustainably, moving forwards.
- Approach research and representation more holistically, i.e., by exploring the direct and indirect relationships between race, mental health and the educational experience in a higher education context.

6. Methods: generation of evidence

Arts-Based Workshop / ‘Focus Group’

Takes the form of two interconnected and informal creative halves.

The first half used questions as “doodle” prompts, which were followed by discussion. This was to develop rapport, and boost reflections as gestalt and stressing contrast where possible (easier to do in a visual format). The first half introduced and explored some of the more abstract themes such as ‘Black Excellence’ or ‘Being Black’ more generally.

The second half related to a collaborative playlist; the prompts for tracks were about what symbolises the overall being Black / Black at Cambridge, or distinct moments, in more personal terms. The second half then, centred around discussing the decisions/symbolism behind these tracks.

As the activities were interconnected, we allowed participants to add tracks to the playlist throughout the first half too, if and when something resonates with them. We had the playlist playing at ambient level in the background throughout to add both a sense of informality and holistic familiarity to the space. It was important to us to capture as broad a picture as possible, whilst also ensuring that we did our best to generate a mindful environment which resisted the pressure for participants to feel they were “representatives” beyond themselves.

Participants

- Black (or Mixed Black) Students recruited on a volunteer basis

- They were invited to participate in a workshop style focus group through student society social media (i.e., JCR BME campaign groups) and via snowball/word of mouth. Interested participants were provided a participant information sheet and consent form.
- While we aimed for 9 participants, a total of 5 participants were invited to the focus group.

Ethical consideration

- **Informed consent:** All participants who were invited for the workshop/focus group were provided a participant information sheet and were able to participate only when they had returned signed consent forms. The participant information sheet outlined the aim of the study, the research question, the methodology, and the intended use of the acquired data. Participants were informed that the session will be audio recorded, and whether they give consent for the reporting of anonymised artistic material. Participants were asked to thoroughly read the consent form before signing.
- **Distress:** We recognised that the topics discussed were potentially sensitive, and could therefore elicit some discomfort. We highlighted the participants' right to withdraw, as well as took measures to make the environment as open and welcoming as we could, including offering access breaks, and ensuring participant-lead disclosures. Active and mindful listening was of high priority, so that we could ask follow-up/counter questions. We highlighted the purpose and structure of the study clearly beforehand, encouraging space for questions, to ensure participants were fully informed and aware of the varieties of topics/methods we plan to cover.
- **Confidentiality:** We managed confidentiality by ensuring all participant information is kept anonymous at each stage of the study. Considering the methodology, raw data was transcribed and anonymised as soon as possible. Notes from the focus group did not include the names of the participants. Audio recording was done to capture the rich discussion and was discarded after analysis. Participants were aware that their audio was being recorded as well as its purpose. The safeguards implemented to protect the privacy and confidentiality of our research participants was explained within the consent forms. Participants were also reminded about the opportunity to withdraw their contribution until a specific date.
- **Reliability:** Validity and reliability are key ethical concerns that arise within research projects, this is heightened due to our reliance on qualitative data. To minimise the effects of subjectivity and researcher bias, data collected from the focus group was recorded and transcribed and researchers intended to reduce their bias and inferences made based on the participants' responses, and made use of direct quotations from participants.

7. Small project research findings

NB. before beginning, we wish to explicitly re-iterate that participants did not express ingratitude or unwillingness to engage in Representation activity (rather, quite passionately, the opposite). This instead seeks to cast honest/holistic light upon some of the practical/mechanical processes to the best of our limited capacity, so that we might envisage how to assist their functionality - including at potentially generational/cyclical level in this instance.

Main Themes

1 Excellence as the Expectation (r/Representation and Recruitment as a responsibility)

- In our sample, Representation (in a formal capacity) was unanimously defined as being a *“natural add on”* to Black Cambridge student experience and something *“expected of you”* as both implicit conditions of entry and repayment to *“prove worth”*
 - It was explicitly described as *“not noble”* compared to when undertaken by counterparts, but instead *“like a default setting”*; one where they *“have to do it”*, even if they’d do so willingly - it should be the priority (see fig. 1). It was also described as cyclical/generational/passed down almost identically to future Black students.
 - Rather than sheer self-inflicted or external pressure, it was explicitly reported that, when students sought official wellbeing support, i.e., from pastoral tutors, they were being encouraged to deny existence of any personal academic/wellbeing challenge. Instead, they’re urged to simply *“reconsider [challenge] because [they] should be grateful to be here”*, as a *“chance was taken”* on them and they should make movements to ensure senior figures would *“not regret it”*; this direct quote regarded a tutor interaction where a student sought help in first year following a major wellbeing decline and comments were subsequently made on their potential academic merit. The participant then remarked how this moment became a turning point *“where [they] started to think [they] need a hobby”* (see fig. 2) rather than experience upset, in this case doing more Representation work, and it led to increased wellbeing and academic conflicts for them later on including more self-reported depressive episodes and lowered self esteem for having experienced challenge in the first place.
- In light of representation (just being Black) level ‘Black Excellence’, Participants reported how *“you can’t just exist, [as a black student] you have to go above and beyond and be exceptional”* compared to counterparts, and this was impacting wellbeing and academic performance (fig. 1)
 - One student described how *“chunks of [themselves] are being taken away to show that [they’re] good enough to be here”*.
- ‘Black Excellence’ in particular was discussed a great deal in the context of Freshers Week, Access, and Diversity based student groups which are marketed as *“supposed to be a safe space”* but felt to participants as something made *“inaccessible”* by reiteration of recruitment and Representative hyperproductivity agendas; also creating *“cliquey”* internal hierarchies to re-establish arbitrary divides, i.e., by course, previous school attended, current college, career aims.
 - Participants described how they were asked to take a *“gang photo”* of their cohort at a Black students welcome event, so that it might be used for outward promotion and marketing.
 - Whilst acknowledged as something celebratory, participants did remark how it also introduced/reinforced ideas about *“being Black excellence”* vs *“doing Black excellence”* i.e. recruitment duty and *“carrying the torch”* as very much a responsibility, or *“the real reason”* for entry, as made clear so early on in their time here.
 - Participants also spoke about how the *“gang”* idea felt alienating as they *“didn’t even know anybody yet”* but were being marketed outwardly as cohesive and comfortable already; also, undertones of Black being inherently urban.
 - Participants spoke about Cambridge being distinctly *“not Black”*, even though they had experienced being an extreme racial minority in previous locations/schools, and so Freshers became an opportunity to autonomously conceptualise their understanding/signification of Blackness, i.e., *“what it actually is, how to do it, how to be it”*. However, they described how Freshers also (re)introduced themes of

learning to become “*the right kind of Black*”, and knowing your “*levels*” (i.e., proximity to racial archetypes, code switching ability, contextual awareness) with one participant remarking how “*just because they’re Black doesn’t mean we’re the same kind of Black.*” Racialised incidents / microaggressions were commonly reported, particularly in first year accommodation, course introductions, and concerningly, at senior figure interaction level in one instance.

- “*Brands*” of black, as a representation level ‘excellence’ antithesis, was a common theme. One participant described how “*you’re aware brands exist so you have to adjust yourself*” and “*don’t wanna be the one to say something*” as you “*don’t want to be labelled*” or have “*this [as] your brand from day dot*”. However, from a wellbeing perspective, they also stressed the practical implication of this, because in not speaking out, “*people suggest you haven’t done enough to defend yourself*” and this becomes internalised at “*did i do enough? Should I have done more?*” level, which feeds back into Representation level excellence recruitment drives, i.e., don’t process personal impact, instead commit to antiracism advocacy roles and media raising exposure to combat future occurrences.
- Overall, ‘Black Excellence’ appears to exist at both r/Representation levels, and is engaged with a system of gratitude/autonomy towards inclusion/and self-esteem related wellbeing that we don’t have the data or sample size to fully understand. What became clear throughout discussion though, is that it is clearly something fuelled by external forces as well as within, including - potentially - at internal institutional level, and something generating its own workloads and crucial goals to achieve to validate position and worth - a generational process - and these are creating conflicts with attainment improving activity i.e. rest, study, confidence, networking opportunity etc. Given its generational nature, and the persistent gap, it could be an area of significance with clear practical sites of engagement vs ability differences.

Supporting Materials

This theme was referenced on the shared playlist via ‘Black’ by Dave (2019)¹, particularly the lyrics “*black is beautiful, black is excellent. Black is pain, black is joy, black is evident. It’s workin’ twice as hard as the people you know you’re better than’ Cause you need to do double what they do so you can level them*”.

Figure 1. Participant draws their perception of otherness

¹ Omoregie, D., & Smith, F. (2019). *Black*. Neighbourhood, Kobalt Music Publishing. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/track/OJ43IKwcofdITQPjcbHxCM?si=7d8fcf6388eb4235>

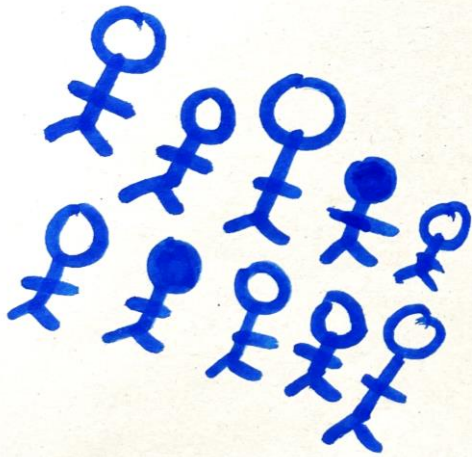
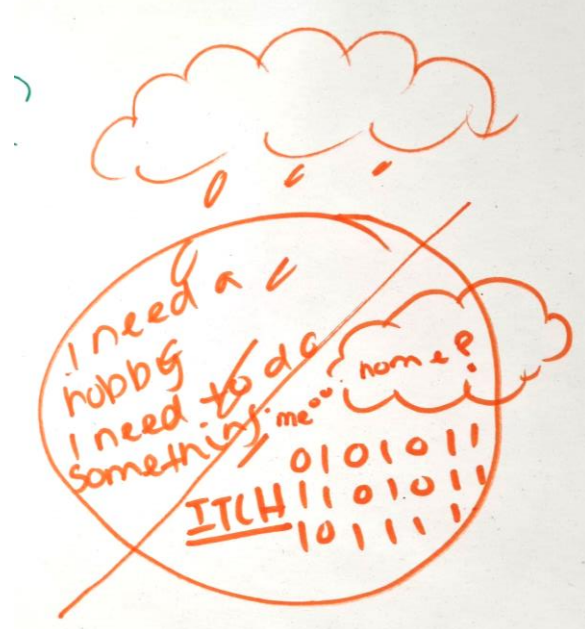


Figure 2. A participant described how the rain cloud represented their wellbeing / feeling overwhelmed. Also, feeling “itchy”, which they symbolically linked to manifestations of anxiety/depression at the time.



2. Excellence as Exhausting (r/Representation as relentless)

- The dual hypervisibility of r/Representation interactions/task loads, as something quite ‘wrap around’ or ‘relentless’ within this distinctive context, were unanimously reported amongst our sample as contributors to fatigue, stress, academic/social/wellbeing task and availability conflicts, and something which impacted their overall perception of ability/self-esteem. It became clear that it wasn’t a matter of inherent competence or confidence to deal with these things, as occurrences described as ordinarily “*water off a duck’s back*” by one participant, but instead cited the very limited time or functional spaces of reprieve compared to the outside world, as uniquely ‘Cambridge’ student factors, and key elements hindering their practical capacity for resilience/productivity in the context. Self-isolation was commonly described as a functional solution; Beds, Storm clouds, and indistinct scribbles (fig.3) were our most common responses throughout the doodles.
 - Adjustment to this additional process during freshers, particularly within the context of racial marginalisation from peers, was a common theme in light of introductions being something that’s already potentially challenging. One participant, in discussing

their isolation/marginalisation, reported feeling that “everyone was really smart and [they weren’t]; they “felt overworked...[with] the books stacking up” (see fig.4) and “meeting new people tires [them] out” and [they] “couldn’t do both at the same time” which led to further (in this case long term) isolation/alienation.

- The element of r/Representation, or hypervisibility, whether autonomously chosen or not, was referenced multiple times as being different here vs outside. Particularly, its practical impact upon wellbeing and right to self preservation in the given timeframe, often leading to self reports of increased rumination, anxieties, and devalued self esteem regarding a right to experience difficulty/display ‘non excellence’. This also existed in relation to access work and perceptions of people back home when you “fought so hard just to be here”, including shame for struggling.
 - One participant described how “just existing here is so political; just existing here is so tiring. Why do I have to invest my time?”
 - Another, in response to the track ‘Free Mind’ by Tems (2020², see fig. 5), how “when you’re black, it’s like Oh wow! You got in! So you can’t slack, you’ve got to keep up, you’ve got to make the most of the opportunity”, “even if you’re not okay, even if you don’t feel like being amazing today...the show must go on, you must always be at your best”. Therefore, when they tried to support their wellbeing, they “feel [themselves] not producing (so technically [they’re] resting) but [they] don’t feel well rested or satisfied, the rest just feels like deviating or running away”. The participant didn’t explicitly state whether the surprise at being offered entry was affirming or sceptical/condescending, but did discuss it being a frequent occurrence, and something which added to perceptions/invalidation re: a right to recovery/self preservation, and something shaping their workflow.
- With separate impacts/requirements coming from representing Blackness (racial marginalisation/microaggression), Representation (committee/advocacy/access workloads) and then being a black Cambridge Student (navigating work/time/demands etc) on top, and with this presenting across academic, wellbeing, residential, external, and social (both at course/cohort and diversity society) environments, we feel like we don’t have the sample size to fully grasp the scale of challenge or make claims. Equally, we aren’t certain how much this also translates over into other marginalised groups with potentially similar (though often less visible) interactions given the uniquely elite nature of the institution. However, again, it is potentially something of spatial significance r.e. functions and interactions, but also practical support arrangements and differentiated labour recognition.

Materials

Figure 3. Beds, Clouds, and Squiggles



² Openiyi, T. (2020). *Free Mind*. Leading Vibe LTD. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/track/2mzM4Y0Rnx2BDZqRnhQ5Q6?si=558d19c59d2c4dd9>

Figure 4. Responding to being “Black at Cambridge”.



Figure 5. ‘Free Mind’ (Openiyi, 2020) lyrics in question:

*“I wake up to fight for my earnings
Fear in my mind is a warning, Pray to the one you rely in
I've been wandering all day, I try to be fine but I can't be
The noise in my mind wouldn't leave me
I try to get by but I'm burning*

*And behind my mind it runs
All these thoughts of troubling
Fighting to give up my pain, Fighting to be on my lane
My mind running to the other side When it's time to live my life
Then it tries to take me out Tell you what I need right here*

*I really need, I really need time now
I really need, I need a free mind now”*

3. Excellence as “inherently elsewhere (r/Representation as linked to potential misrecognition of Proficiency)

One participant (responding to ‘Evil Eye’ by Bellah, 2021³, fig6) described their initial experience as:

“Just a dark cloud over my whole experience, especially academically [they] couldn't tell how good [they were] and [] thought [they were] struggling and everyone [in their redacted course cohort in college] were fine. It was only when [they] found out [the others] were working together and using resources from the year above; that's when [participant] realised [peers were] not actually superhuman they just have all these links that [participant] just didn't have.”

Another (see fig.7), as:

“Hanging onto a cliff by your fingertips and there's waves of work washing over you and you're trying to hold on as long as you can and it's inevitable that you'll fall off. [they] thought that was normal. But turns out [students] are supposed to pick and choose where [they] put [their] effort in”; in having been marginalised they noted how they hadn't accessed that information.

Another (see fig.8⁴):

³ Irosogie, A., & Akpobire, I. (2021). Evil Eye. Warner Chappell Music. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/track/4HB9GHrm8VvizUlV6VnWg?si=86aab9c720414b0c>

⁴ .Paak, A. (2019). Reachin 2 Much. Aftermath, TuneCore Music Publishing. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/track/577g1tDBKntqev2lLDydxs?si=fd8041cc14ff4bcc>

"I feel like I was left behind because I'm the only black (person in their course/college cohort). I felt like I was inadequate, I couldn't compete with them and I couldn't catch up with them. It was only when I finally got into groups that [peers] were like 'I don't know what I'm doing either'. I discovered that no one else really knows what they're doing, everyone is in the same boat, because Cambridge itself is really stressful and everyone feels the same way I do. I wasn't this strange [person] in a foreign land anymore; everyone kinda feels the same way I do. I felt comforted to know that I'm not the only one going through these thoughts and feelings, other people feel the same way. I guess that's like really comforting to know that"

Another, r.e. finding community (see fig.9 and 'Life is Better'⁵)

"It represents the point where I didn't have to interact with (course/college peers) who stressed me out and made me feel inferior any more. Now, I can concentrate on the work in my own way. I don't feel as much pressure. I can talk to people who get what I'm going through. I just feel happier. Even though its hard, after the feeling of being alone and not knowing 'how to do it' and not having the same links, oncel found the peopleI felt comfortable with I felt (better)"

Therefore, our final theme was perhaps most unpredicted, though it does link most directly to work on Self-Determination (including comparative BME research) looking at attainment (Bunce et al, 2021). The impact we observed extended beyond simply loneliness reducing happiness which reduced work, but instead seemed to relate to a practical outcome of marginalisation / additional workloads, a very material one i.e. as it relates to community, perceptions of competence, and then from there relatedness needed to confidently assess ability and set goals accordingly.

- In being so comparatively busy trying to build external connections (i.e., breaking access perceptions, doing advocacy/inclusion work) or from being marginalised (by others or autonomously), they were losing access to important frames of reference r.e. productivity norms and the often supporting informal institutional/social capital (i.e., resources from other years, accurate workload expectations, informal shared study and wellbeing support arrangements) that their peers were using to re-gravitate themselves, rest, and set workloads in a way that's necessary to navigate Cambridge accordingly. Equally, at social/human level, they comparatively described missing out on interactions which explicitly valued their "off brand" or non 'excellent' presentations - sometimes more so - which they self described later as turning points for improving academic and wellbeing capacity (including accessing support and focussing on individual goals).
- Again, we can't say beyond conjecture, but from our sample Black Excellence / Being/Doing Black at Cambridge appeared to be a system (perhaps even a r/Representation based labour economy) that's potentially self fulfilling, and if not, certainly viewed as something passed down and "normalised" within communities to the point of being unquestioned. No matter what they achieved as Representatives or were "representing" as black students here, excellence was always elsewhere because - as said above, how do you know/can you do "enough" to "carry the torch" or generate change / validate their entry especially whilst struggling is ingratitude (fig 10). In light of differential final degree marks, without explanation/recognition of why that is, this is of research concern to us as a team as we lack a framework to understand subsequent impact i.e. post-undergraduate studies wellbeing or productivity/opportunity, or give recognition where it might be due.
 - Particularly in lieu of any exposure drawing attention to certain common realities, multiple times accounts described interpreting their struggle as, which then reinforced negative productivity/worth perceptions (i.e., the interaction with the welfare tutor above) and, in this case, subsequently fuelled a further demand to

⁵ Jones, N. (2008). Life is Better. Mr Incognito Productions. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/track/6N4OkCwoXQYx6bNbj1eQqs?si=b10d0a9f114e451f>

produce Representation level excellence (and the associated workloads with significant yet unknown output achievements) to atone for it. This work is something we collectively benefit from but are yet to understand in real terms; regardless, anything gained from this work was agreed to be “bare minimum”. It seemed to go beyond imposter syndrome, and more towards repayment but again, this would require further investigation beyond our capacity and we can only offer loose speculation and calls for further research at this time.

- However, many recalled expressing genuine surprise at discovering counterpart peers were able to view “just doing their degree” as “enough” or acceptable, and that their Representation workload wasn’t the norm (direct reference was made to how this is a cyclical process both within and having engaged with it from outside the institution). Again, we can’t draw a clear assertion, but within our sample there was widespread self-report that once they had better access to holistic guides to norms/navigation/mediatory social and study networks, many reported coping much better. This, we believe, is an important practical finding however empirically insignificant.

When we asked ‘in light of all we’ve discussed today, what do you feel is ‘excellent’ about you’, big or small, the room was completely *silent*; not for the purposes of being humble, but because it was clear that no one could identify a single thing. This was commented on. Yet, with shared recognition, the group then found humour in realising they could easily identify things in the people beside them even where they’d only just met them.

“I look at pictures on the wall and I think....they're so excellent. And I never for a second think that someone's looking and thinking that about me. Even though people might be like you've done this, I'll be like `No, because I also do that...”

“Does anyone feel like it? ‘What’s excellent about me’... Ask a room of white men. Ask a room of all the people in your stories today! I’m sure you might get a very different response”
(see fig10b’)

So to close, from there we let them think again or offer suggestions for each other, here are some of the responses:

“I’m just thinking like... I’ve come a long way, so I drew a circle”

“Learning it’s actually okay to do nothing.”

“I’m proud I can make plans and stick to them.”

“I can think deeply and creatively.”

“Taking a rest when I need to.” (see fig.11)

“Cambridge has not broken my attachment to my dreams.”

Materials

Figure.6 ‘Evil Eye’ (Irosogie & Akpobire, 2021) Lyrics:

“People dem dem wanna test me, oh But I don't feel no pressure.

One of a kind, I'm “special”, Lives in me, residential

Sometimes I forget though; I still need you to pray for me, yeah

Say a prayer for me; I'm surrounded by some people that need prayer, mummy

Tell him keep me from that evil eye, From that evil eye”

Figure 7.



Figure 8. 'Reachin 2 Much' (.Paak, 2019) Lyrics:
 "I feel your pain But to try and save you now is what I won't do,
 Huh, I see you reachin', baby, what are you reachin' for?
 That don't look easy, baby, that must be so hard
 I see you reachin', reachin' out, stretchin' out to God
 That don't look easy, baby, that must be so hard."

Figure 9. Life is Better (Jones, 2008) lyrics:
 "Life is better, now that, now that I found you
 Life is better, now that, now that I found you
 Life is better, now that, now that I found you"

Figure 10. Survivor's Guilt by Dave (Omoregie & Smith, 2021⁶):

"
 a) Behind the rumours on the life I lead [...] The truth is I got really bad anxiety. [...] I don't even know where I'm goin'. I got love, but I don't know how to show it, ...
 But when you feel like givin' up, know you're close."

b) "What I realised about who I am is that, you're kinda taught
 You're taught to die for what you stand for...
 But I realise I'm here to live for what I stand for
 'Cause I wanna see it,... I wanna enjoy it...
 I wanna see what I feel like I am, you know what I'm sayin'?
 Out there, while I'm here, and that's that."

Figure 11. 'Spa Day'

⁶ Omoregie, D., & Smith, J. (2021). Survivor's Guilt. Neighbourhood Recordings. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/track/1Xapo8sq7KcQXd0HrXX5B?si=915ac09f537f4c21>



Notes on Approach (future expansion)

Afterwards, someone described feeling “lighter”.

This, we feel as a research team, was a key benefit of our methodology which allowed us to centre rapport and allow openness to be generated holistically/organically, making space for vulnerable (but ethically monitored) discussion and opportunities for mutual support during v.s just as an outcome of potential findings. In light of the context, with some participants actually in their final year where the gap we’re researching is made, and in light of “brands” and “levels” and r/Representation as something also present in research, we found this display of revised confidence/critical reflection and self recognition of competence affirming and immeasurably beneficial separate to any potential structural impact of this project.

Equally, as a small scale / small sample method it was:

- Easier for safeguarding to steer direction and generate a collective/supportive environment which solves (reflection space / opportunity for connection / elevates concerns directly) as it seeks to understand
- Generative of rich data with clear contextual explanations and a sense of how scenarios develop and changes over time - providing logistical insights which the university might be able to take on board in future projects
- Raised important questions about free labour/exploitation and indebtedness, including how to resist it in our future research and support provision, in order to give back in the short term and give agency to participants which they can use now, particularly in contexts where instant structural outcomes might be strategically challenging. I.e. breaking generational cycles of harm/gain.

8. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes.

There is so much we don’t know, but potentially clear indications of where we might search in future to find out.

Overall, there’s a lot we don’t yet explicitly understand about the intricate relationship between mental wellbeing, perceived academic competence, and experience of ‘Black Excellence’ (or the unwritten leadership expectations deemed conditional to inclusion) for Black students. This is particularly relevant

to elite institutions such as Cambridge, where there's already a preexisting expectation to 'engage' at academic and extracurricular level given disproportionately generous opportunities available and an unmistakably privileged position. However, this is perhaps something experienced more as a requirement for certain, particularly the most visible, marginalised groups, owing to Excellence's role in workload economies led by gratitude and imposterism.

It was evident that it is not enough to say "just don't do it then", without recognising Representation's invaluable practical productive function and benefit to practices across Cambridge including boosting diversity numbers and achieving community development for free and effectively, and self-sustaining from a replenishment perspective. As tasks, even though approached wholeheartedly and willingly, being a formal representative/part of the WP endeavours across Cambridge (i.e., decolonisation, countering racism, JCR, Committees, Access) seems to have formed a parallel and equal/heavier weighted workload for our participants, on top of practical wellbeing impact of representation based marginalisation, yet one still deemed 100% a duty/norm and necessary i.e. to repay gratitude or reduce current pain for future generations, complete with its own unquestioned mental wellbeing impact and timely repercussions. Equally, without understanding scale, it also means we don't see what other groups (comparatively) aren't achieving/attaining/contributing to the same degree.

Where does it fit in with attainment? What can we do about it?

Further scholarship and internal discussion outlining practical interplay between 'Excellence' (i.e., its recruitment function, its role within gratitude-based economies, potential long-term psychological impacts); Social Integration (i.e. support networks, opportunities for contextualised self-assessment, shared workloads); and their subsequent correlation with wellbeing and attainment(s) maintenance, could mean that, as both academics and recruits of future academics, we might disrupt excellence as inherently elsewhere by seeking ways to show how it's already here, even if currently unsupported in its potential.

Why does it matter?

Again, whilst we can't seek to establish causality, we believe it might be beneficial to gain a broader understanding of what turns out to be quite an unfortunate and ironic dynamic whereby students were seeking to give others access and build 'institutional' and 'Cultural capital' to gain entry, but in doing so limiting their own, and so strongly epitomising excellence and inclusion for outside bodies that they can't recognise exclusion in their own. We tried to fuse existing APP work on time costs, freshers, challenging homogenisation and external scholarship, but we can only go so far. Hopefully, this might open discussions about potential immediate and longer term implications of what further understanding might provide, not just for moral reasons but also at a practical workload level.

Hopefully, Black students might finally begin to feel able to thrive in the knowledge that they're here, and have an equal right to simply exist in their environment, without having to build it, potentially, to their own detriment.

9. RECOMMENDED ACTION/FUTURE DIRECTION

1. Review of Representative/Recruitment labours undertaken for the University by marginalised/WP students, and their role in exploiting narratives of indebtedness

The burden of Access is placed too heavily on students of colour themselves, and is often centred around pre-decided images/agendas, hence the university should do more to ease this burden and create more avenues for access that does not require extra effort from students.

- To reimagine, with involvement with students, the role of minority students, such as Black students to play representative roles in various activities within the university.
- To consider whether this responsibility is properly compensated and recognised.

2. Proactive Integration

- The University should consider avenues for bridging the gap for students of colour, not just ones relying on 'designated safe spaces' (e.g., the African Caribbean Society) when entering such an environment. There is a need to reflect on the role of the institution (college/department/faculty) on how to cultivate a sense of belonging within the context without abdicating its responsibility and depending only on spaces such as the ACS and the Black Advisory Hub.

3. Further Research Needed

- This project has provided preliminary but powerful insights into the experiences of Black students at Cambridge. Further research exploring the intersections between race, racialised experiences, and mental health is required.