

## Leveraging from Racism: A Dual Structural Advantages Perspective

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### Abstract

Drawing on the autobiography of an immigrant Black African female scholar, we introduce and conceptualize the notion of dual structural advantages that racism potentially affords elite White male academics. These hegemonic scholars enjoy two types of possible advantage. First, as gatekeepers to a racist academic system, powerful White male scholars protect their interests by epistemically excluding the ‘Other’ from knowledge production. Second, these hegemonic agents ironically utilize racism as a hermeneutical resource for ‘impactful’ research output, grounded in progressive, anti-racist theorizations in collaboration with Black male scholars. Such work is disseminated and perpetuated through elite academic outlets, thus substantially leveraging the agents’ careers and university rankings. Foregrounding double advantages in debates on racial equality accentuates the necessity of changing the agential practices of elite White male scholars in order to transform racist institutions.

### Keywords

careers, class, ethics, higher education, identity, (in)equality and discrimination, mental health and wellbeing, precarity, race / ethnicity

### Introduction

Historically, British academia is a White male patriarchal system reserved for middle class White men (Wright et al., 2007) and built on White supremacy (Johnson, 2018), as conceptually ‘the idea that the White “race” is superior simply by virtue of its being

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White' (Grimes, 2001: 135). Hence, British academia socially constructs Black individuals as intellectually inferior (Mignolo, 2009), and particularly marginalizes Black female scholars (Jacobs, 2020; Rollock, 2019; Stockfelt, 2018) through harsh epistemic exclusion, right from the beginning of their careers. Epistemic exclusion denotes 'unwarranted infringement on the epistemic agency of knowers' (Dotson, 2014: 115), based on prejudicial assessments of the individuals as lacking legitimacy and credibility (Settles et al., 2019, 2020). This is demonstrated in our analysis by Bola (pseudonym), an African immigrant admitted into an elite British business school as the only Black person among 35 doctoral candidates.

Black female scholars are the 'minority of the minorities' (Stockfelt, 2018) whose knowledge is dismissed and suppressed, despite their ability and desire to genuinely contribute to the progress of their institutions and society (Shockley and Holloway, 2019). Gender and race expose Black female scholars to the worst subjugation (Bell and Nkomo, 1999) manifesting as overwork, poor compensation, exploitation as tokens and hyper-scrutiny (Wright et al., 2007). Black female scholars are often isolated and therefore lack access to (hidden) information pertaining to institutional policies, informal rules and procedures affecting the individuals' careers (Settles et al., 2019), as revealed by Bola's narrative.

To highlight the joint operation of gender and racism in generating epistemic exclusion (Settles et al., 2019, 2020), we ground our conceptualization in intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) as 'the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences' (Crenshaw, 1991: 1244). We do so by reflecting on Bola's experiences at the beginning of her doctoral research at Great British Business School (GBBS, pseudonym). Bola was nearly forced out of academia by Abel (pseudonym), an ostensibly racist powerful White male heading the Management group (anonymized) at GBBS, who degraded Bola's Africa-centric research (cf. King et al., 2019) as nonsensical and lacking fit with the elite GBBS. This occurred about seven months into Bola's PhD, when her supervisors left GBBS leaving Abel with the responsibility of finding replacements.

PhD students are mostly precarious workers exploited by universities and supervisors (Anonymous Academic, 2018; University and College Union, 2016) for grant applications, curriculum design, manuscript development (Golde, 2008), and teaching multiple undergraduate courses on insecure employment contracts (University and College Union, 2016). International PhD students face multiple adaptation challenges (Tsouroufli, 2015), including serving as sources of income for universities by paying almost four times the tuition fee rate for local and European Union students (pre-Brexit). Essentially, a PhD resembles an apprenticeship (Golde, 2015; Nakamura and Shernoff, 2009; Walker et al., 2008), as candidates should partake in communities of learning (Austin, 2002) to acquire relevant knowledge, skills and values from engaging with, and observing, senior researchers (Golde, 2008). Supervisors and academic departments collaboratively act as socializing agents (Austin, 2002) who integrate PhD students into the professoriate (Barnes et al., 2012). Primarily, the 'apprenticeship' targets student absorption of the logics and strategies used by 'masters' and drives the formation of professional identities (Greer et al., 2016).

Against this backdrop, Bola's experiences of epistemic exclusion are crucial to unveiling the nuanced benefits of racism for White male elite scholars. While both women and Black individuals encounter discrimination in academia, Bola's experiences are unique from those endured by either of the two broad social groups (Mirza, 2009) as a result of her social location. Bola is socially situated at the intersection of gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, nationality (Yuval-Davis, 2006) and racist stereotypes (linked to Africa) routinely drawn upon by powerful actors (Zhang et al., 2019) to control the 'Other', and rationalize and sustain the status quo (Fiske, 1993). Power, privilege and social justice are interconnected (Clark et al., 2018), and Bola lacks these aspects. This triggers her distinct experiences of epistemic exclusion underpinned by her lack of epistemic power in comparison to White women and Black men. Dotson (2014) defines epistemic power as the privileges created for hegemonic scholars by social locations, resources and epistemological arrangements for knowledge production.

We thus unmask paradoxically conjoined advantages generated by racist academic structures for elite White male scholars. In doing so, we introduce the concept of dual structural advantages as denoting that, first, when hegemonic actors like Abel epistemically exclude the 'Other' (Said, 1978) such as Bola from knowledge production, they safeguard a White supremacist academic system and thus protect racist interests. Second, such hegemonic actors simultaneously leverage their professional growth and university rankings by ironically utilizing racism as a collective hermeneutical resource for intellectualizing and communicating the racialized experiences of ethnic minorities. Hermeneutical resources are pools of concepts that social actors draw from to acquire and communicate knowledge on experiences of marginalization (Fricker, 2010). This use of racism is highlighted in Abel's paradoxical engagement with progressive, anti-racist research disseminated through 'elite' journals, parallel to racializing Bola. Given that such research is classified as impactful on policies (Economic and Social Research Council, 2020), its uptake by actors such as Abel consolidates their power and acquires external legitimacy for them and their institutions. This directly implicates the institutions' rankings as sites where world-class research is conducted by 'presumably' inclusive scholars.

From the perspective of dual structural advantages, congruent with Giddens (2013), we argue that leveraging from racism stems from an academic system which not only empowers White male scholars to epistemically exclude the female 'Other', but also protects and nurtures such hegemonic actors. In turn, those White male scholars sustain the racist foundation of academia (Warmington, 2014; Wilder, 2013). The dual structural advantages system has been developed over time within academia, due to the opaque yet strong governance structures that hide and aid racist behavioural practices exhibited by principal socializing agents such as Abel. Opaqueness arises where there is lack of transparency on what is actually being done by the School to achieve inclusion (Ahmed, 2012), given that powerful actors intentionally invent ambiguous departmental policies.

For example, the statement that 'GBBS respects and values diversity' (GBBS website), but 'only funds elite and globally competitive research' (Abel) conceals institutional racism (Ahmed, 2012) and tolerates racist behaviour (Bhopal, 2016), as hegemonic actors interpret 'global' from a colonial and Eurocentric perspective that epistemically excludes the 'Other' (Alcadipani et al., 2012; Ruggunan, 2016). Such policy breeds subjective and

impromptu evaluation standards that *delimit* Black female scholars' academic freedom. Moreover, structural opaqueness renders racist behaviour and management approaches of powerful White male academics non-sanctionable and perpetuates an air of invincibility around the same actors.

The pressure faced by powerful White male academics to socialize Black women into a White supremacist research community translates into these hegemonic actors' trivialization of Black bodies' research and their abdication of duty (cf. Chowdhury, 2021a, 2021b). Bola reveals how Abel and GBBS neglected replacing her supervisors and cited opaque criteria on excellence regarding selecting her external PhD examiners. Abel and GBBS rejected numerous potential (non-elite) assessors, which resulted in an extreme delay to Bola's viva voce. Moreover, GBBS was required to notify Bola and her supervisors of the viva voce at least two weeks in advance. Yet all of them only discovered that Bola's examination was scheduled in less than six days, after she had emailed GBBS checking on the progress of her case.

Bola's experience exposes how jointly, trivialization, opaqueness and abdication of responsibility by elite White male academics reflect 'cost-cutting measures', targeting the anti-assimilation of a Black woman (worker) into a scientific research community. The epistemic exclusion of Black female academics is potentially compounded by internalized racism as experienced by Bola in perceiving herself as a low status African woman (cf. Muzanhenamo and Chowdhury, 2021), and a desperate worker without voice. From Bola's perspective, Abel resembles a 'master', untouchable beyond the confrontational zone of a Black African female scholar who fears retaliation and catastrophic consequences should she challenge him. Furthermore, to the extent that White men are traditionally deemed the credible knowers (Fricker, 2010), they also have monopoly over the (White-constructed) 'truth' concerning ethnic minorities' experiences (Collins, 1999). Nonetheless, vulnerable academics such as Bola can contest the scholarly dominance of socializing agents like Abel by speaking 'truth to power' (Collins, 1999, 2013) 'at the right moment' (de la Luz Reyes and Halcón, 1988). Thus, as a 'highly educated, deeply committed, hardworking and reflective' Black scholar (Wright et al., 2007: 159), Bola now deploys academic activism to effect change.

## About Bola

I am a Black African female educator in the early stages of my career. I was born and raised in Sub-Saharan Africa, where I acquired most of my education. I do not come from a wealthy family and my education was sponsored by private international donors. After attaining a PhD from GBBS, I became an academic activist, drawing inspiration from personal experiences and leading Black female scholars whose brave work makes it possible for women like me to exist in academia. Retrospectively, I am convinced that my social background and academic interest in Africa overshadowed my admission into GBBS, despite my outstanding prior academic achievement. I presume that one of my PhD supervisors, who was also a Black female of African origin, must have fought for my admission, based on the emails between herself and the GBBS admissions office, in which I was copied. Her emails constantly reiterated my achievements and the scientific rigour of my proposed pioneering research.

GBBS eventually offered me a place without funding. The School claimed to have received highly competitive applicants and invited me to apply in the ‘less competitive second round’. This made me less optimistic about financial security. Meanwhile, I desperately approached my past sponsors for help with tuition fees, and my supervisors, including other two academics, for teaching jobs. I ended up teaching 12 undergraduate seminars in order to cover accommodation and subsistence costs. However, GBBS never awarded me a scholarship. I am convinced that I was denied a scholarship on racist grounds, given that my more than one MSc theses with distinctions exceeded GBBS entry requirements, and all ‘exceptional’ PhD candidates joining GBBS were automatically eligible for the five types of scholarship offered by the school.

## **Threat of epistemic exclusion**

Things changed about three months into my PhD when my supervisors suddenly departed from GBBS. I was left with no supervisors for more than three months, but that did not stop me from continuing to go to the shared office every day where I reviewed literature, drafted my ideas, and prepared my teaching materials. However, soon after the departure of my supervisors, I had emailed Abel seeking support with finding replacements. While GBBS’ parent university mandated the replacement of supervisors, it did not specify the procedure or time frame for meeting such requirement (and still does not according to the information available in the public domain). Rather, each school was supposed to ‘be aware of’ the need to immediately replace departed supervisors. This loose formulation gave actors such as Abel some leeway and, indeed, he did not respond to any of my humbly written emails.

I regarded Abel with great deference based on how Black individuals interact with White individuals back in my country, a former British colony. Hence, when Abel ignored my first three emails for more than three months, I refrained from insisting upon a response. Constantly, I told myself that I was an African woman and Black, and the UK was not my country; therefore I did not have the same privileges as my peers. My advice was to wait for Abel’s response for as long as it takes, while I continued my studies and temporary teaching jobs. I also quietly researched potential supervisors’ profiles, hoping to suggest someone to Abel and GBBS. Abel finally responded on a late Monday afternoon, summoning me to a 2 p.m. meeting the following Thursday. His email roughly stated: ‘Bola, Meeting, Thursday 2 p.m., room GBBS209 [pseudonym]. Please confirm.’ I felt as though I was to attend a court hearing, as I was not given an option. Nonetheless, I politely confirmed my attendance and thanked Abel for his accommodation.

On the day of the meeting, I remember arriving about 10 minutes early in front of GBBS209, which was a small box-like room, adjacent to Abel’s office. The door of the room was open, and I could see a white plastic table with three chairs in the middle. There were no windows, but the room was brightly lit, with white walls and a grey carpet. It could have been a former storage room. I waited outside GBBS209 until 2 p.m., and still, there was no one. I started feeling tense in my stomach, an experience that I go through even now when recalling these details. Shortly after 2 p.m., I hesitantly entered the room, and sat to the right side of the table facing the entrance. I pulled out my laptop to ascertain the details of Abel’s email again. After confirming the message, I waited

perhaps five more minutes then I heard Abel's door opening and closing, a knock on another door, opening, some whispers, laughter, and then the door closing. The sound of their laughter made me nervous. My stomach tightened. Then Abel and a newly recruited lecturer of Asian origin appeared and entered the room (I will refer to this lecturer as Yug).

'Bola?', Abel asked looking at me without saying hello. Smiling and looking at him, I nodded and murmured, 'Hello Dr Abel' (I mentioned his surname, instead). I greeted Yug as well, who did not seem to notice. Ignoring my greetings, Abel told Yug to close the door behind him, pulled up the chair in the middle, and sat down. I was embarrassed by Abel's non-response to my greeting. 'So, what's your story?', Abel asked in a rather quiet but cold voice. I looked at him smiling nervously and explained that I had lacked supervision for over three months and was wondering whether the School had identified someone. Abel seemed offended by my response and I tried to hide how intimidated I was by his question. I felt as though I had done something wrong and was facing an interrogation. It was unsettling to explain my situation to him, as I had already done so in my numerous previous emails. Furthermore, I did not understand why Yug, as an early career researcher with a single publication, was part of the meeting. However, I tried to maintain composure.

Abel quietly responded that GBBS had not found new supervisors. Slightly raising his voice Abel added that, frankly, not much investment had gone into the search as my research sounded less promising. Proceeding, Abel sarcastically asked me if I really wanted to study how companies could lift Africans from poverty and quickly looked at Yug. Abel's question was a reductionist misinterpretation of my research idea, based on an apparent attempt to ridicule my work. Feeling defenceless, I could only say, 'Not companies per se' – pronouncing the latter as 'per see'. Abel quickly looked at Yug again, laughed, and said, 'per say' (or the right pronunciation). I said, 'Yes, per say. Thank you.' I felt humiliated when I realized that Abel was making fun of my pronunciation and accent. Abel then reiterated that my research was not as fruitful as other PhD projects normally accepted and completed within GBBS. Therefore, considering the School's policy of prioritizing world-class research, the chances of GBBS finding replacement supervisors for me were almost nil. I felt unworthy of being a PhD student at GBBS.

Abel further stated that, should I be lucky enough, the department would find someone who would help me with 'managing the process', but not with the content of my PhD. Appearing to have noticed my confusion, he quickly added that the person would not be required to read or comment on the work. This left me wondering what the role of the supervisor would be. I felt demoralized and desperate, given that the Head of Management, who was meant to facilitate my access to an academic profession was revealing to me his and GBBS' lack of commitment towards such outcome. Abel clearly seemed to notice my despair and enjoy his impact on me. Continuing, Abel stated that, 'it might be better for me to find another college interested in those types of research ideas' like mine. He then quietly added that I should consider officially dropping from the GBBS' doctoral programme, as there was no point hanging around.

Abel concluded that if it had been any of the other current PhD projects, particularly funded by the School, it would have made sense to immediately find supervisors for the research. It was humiliating to hear such words. Abel then reiterated that he was sorry he



could not help, and his final words were: ‘. . . but I would be happy to hear any solutions that you might have for *your* problem’ (emphasis added by him). Then he got up and left with Yug, who had remained mostly silent in the meeting, apart from smiling when Abel laughed at my pronunciation of *per se*. The meeting was less than 20 minutes, and Abel dominated the talking.

Left alone in the room, I got up to leave, not sure of my next step and terrified of dropping out of GBBS. I remember realizing that as the only Black person in the programme, I had no social network to support me. I tried to calm myself by quietly singing one of my favourite native songs. Fearing potential humiliation from my four office mates, I avoided returning to the building. Instead, I walked home. My sense of humiliation intensified as I remembered being judged by my peers after introducing my project in class when the programme started. At the time, a White female lecturer commented that projects like mine were doomed to fail. She further mentioned how a girl from some country (which she could no longer remember) had embarked on one such project only to disappear from the School after the first semester. It was degrading to hear such a message in front of my peers then and implied again by Abel in the presence of Yug. I also imagined that the Management group privately ridiculed me. I felt that GBBS was pressurizing me to drop out.

However, I strongly believed in my research and academic potential. I had made it so far in life and I was not going to surrender then. Once at home, I emailed one of my former supervisors, the Black African female lecturer, who had moved to a leadership position within a global corporation. I sought her help to identify someone in her network who might supervise my research. I also informed her about the meeting with Abel, and, in response, she stated that had she known she would have cautioned me before I met him. She added that she could compile a whole thesis on how Abel had constantly bullied and humiliated her in front of everyone. A few days later, she wrote back advising me to contact Gary (pseudonym) and George (pseudonym), two close colleagues that she had collaborated with on some projects. She had liaised with them about supervising my research. I immediately contacted the potential supervisors, who then did a wonderful job of supporting the completion of my PhD.

Notwithstanding, my PhD journey was far from smooth. Apart from facing an inevitable teaching overload due to financial constraints and being compelled to sign a document purporting that I had voluntarily taken a hiatus, I also had to contend with a very short notice period for my viva voce examination. One acute challenge was finding ‘elite’ external examiners who met GBBS’ (unspecified) criteria for excellence. External examiners were supposed to be based at other elite British business schools and could not be brought in from abroad as there were no resources for that eventuality. Then today, I still wonder what would have happened if I had not emailed the GBBS doctoral programme office on a late Thursday afternoon, following up on my viva arrangements about four months post submission. An email came back around 10 a.m., Friday morning, from GBBS administrators informing me that the viva voce was scheduled for the following Wednesday afternoon. Immediately, I emailed both Gary and George, who were equally shocked by the news. Gary then called me and held a mock viva voce on the phone. The next Monday, George called me into his office, and we had another mock viva voce. Two days later, I successfully defended my doctoral thesis. My supervisors

genuinely supported me as best as they could without explicitly challenging GBBS practices.

## Speaking the truth to power

Fast forward. The same research that was threatened with epistemic exclusion by Abel and GBBS inspired me to become an academic activist. About three years after graduation, I attended a conference where I featured on a panel linked to minority academics. After the panel discussion, a Black African female scholar, Patricia (pseudonym) approached me, noting that my PhD was from GBBS. Patricia informed me that she had to change schools because of a two-year bullying, denigration and harassment experience that she was subjected to by the head of group – namely Abel. I shared my experiences of Abel's behaviour with Patricia, which was therapeutic for both of us. However, we did not plan any concrete action against our subjugation by Abel.

About a month after George Floyd was murdered in the USA, I decided to dig deeper into current debates on racism and minority employees in general. It was around midnight when I came across an article on racism recently published by Abel and ethnic minority male scholars who included a Black (male) individual. I was shocked. As soon as I finished reading the abstract, I forwarded the article's details to Patricia. She emailed back the next morning mentioning her disbelief in realizing that Abel was one of the co-authors. During the same night, I read Abel's paper, and curiously searched multiple journal databases for similar research by him. I discovered that Abel had also collaborated with non-White male scholars on other studies looking into the racist plight of ethnic minorities. His co-authored work was cited by numerous other 'top' researchers across several British business schools and beyond. My heart sank.

It was immediately clear to me that Abel's motives were far from empathizing with the victims of racism or its associated outcomes such as epistemic exclusion. Such research is inconsistent with how powerful White male actors like Abel treat Black people as inferior whenever no one is watching or interested in holding them accountable for their actions. Thus, from my perspective, Abel's research on diversity and inclusion was, and still is, not motivated by a striving for more equitable treatment of non-White bodies. Rather, his involvement in anti-racism studies resembles a strategic manoeuvre responding to a lucrative opportunity. Such opportunity, however, demands reliance on non-White male scholars to support the analyses with authenticity and a more compelling voice. As the opportunists they are, powerful individuals like Abel assign different value to minority scholars within their ethnic groups on the basis of gender and possibly nationality. Someone like Abel may have relatively more respect for Black male scholars – but merely as a means to his own end. Yet this does not attest to an embracing or acceptance of the respective non-White male bodies.

The way hegemonic academics like Abel use racism as a source of advantage makes me wonder if they really want it to be eliminated. Discovering Abel's double-faced behaviour that night evoked the imagery of George Floyd's murder in my mind, which made me feel like, back then, Abel had *his* knee on *my* neck, while I lay there on the floor in the tiny box-like office room. Abel was filming me as I pleaded with him to let me



breathe. I felt like he did this to me, and apparently to Patricia and my former PhD supervisor, both Black female scholars, yet all the while he was using his experience to develop and publish research on a lived reality that was not his. It infuriated me to read Abel's and his co-authors' thick descriptions of how non-White bodies are denigrated, socially and professionally excluded from networks, denied access to opportunities for professional growth, and constantly reminded that they do not belong. To me Abel resembles an ethnographer who immerses himself into the context by perpetrating the very racist deeds he protests against, watches their effects, and then reports on the findings using Black voices, without revealing that his knowledge comes from being a principal actor in the perpetuation of their denigration. Abel does not provide a disclaimer like: 'I know all this because I have done it, and/or I do it in my organization.'

I find it unacceptable that Abel proposes implications for improving diversity and inclusion within organizations, while epistemically excluding the Other. My anger and disgust intensify from realizing that powerful White male scholars like Abel can have it both ways, as the journal publication system and/or reviewers do not interrogate authors on their personal values, or habitual behaviours in relation to racism. Thus, it is easy for powerful racist scholars to be hypocritical without consequence. However, the same journal system also provides me with the platform to expose and challenge hypocrisy. As disempowering and emotionally wounding as it may be, to discover that an elite White male academic who violates Black women's dignity and professional existence speaks *on behalf* of non-White bodies in the workplace, I refuse to remain passive about it.

My experience makes me constantly question the potential multiplicity of 'Abels' who discriminate against LGBTs, feminists and women across organizations, yet adopt a 'caring voice' to publish on diversity and inclusion in top-tier journals or influence policies. I wonder how many 'Abels' use the experiences of racialized and marginalized bodies through 'fake empathy' to mock the social justice system by 'having it both ways'. I may be a Black woman born and raised in the most impoverished family, country and continent, yet that does not render me intellectually inferior or inhibit me from speaking truth to power. Thus, I now seek the same academic space occupied by actors like Abel to challenge racism, White supremacy and epistemic exclusion. Academic structures may allow some hegemonic actors to have it both ways; however, those system advantages should not be protected from scrutiny.

I am aware of numerous national and organizational initiatives for promoting racial and social justice and their catastrophic failure to transform structural inequalities. Most of such initiatives are created by paid external consultants for individuals such as Abel, who, however, do not practise the ideals of equality and diversity themselves. Instead, there is a need to engage leaders like Abel to critically reflect on their roles and accountability, as changing their racist agential practices will potentially transform institutions into more equitable organizations.

### Author's note

*WES* On the Front Line pieces centre the experiences and voice of the worker, most often acknowledging the authorship of the frontline worker while maintaining anonymity. For this piece, the frontline worker is not listed as an author at their request due to the highly sensitive nature of the subject matter and a rigorous approach to maintaining anonymity.

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