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Episode 44: Maisha Islam
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Podcast transcript:

Kyra: Hi everyone, welcome back to the podcast. For this episode, we are in conversation with Ed.D. Researcher, Maisha Islam, who is also the Doctoral College Research Cultural Lead of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Southampton. In this episode, we discuss Maisha's journey through higher education and her research on the attainment gap and student experiences. We consider how we might begin to rethink academic research as a culture and practice, and, towards the end of the episode, we explore the synergies between the practices of partnership with socially just and liberatory theories.

So, I like to start things off with the guest just telling us a little bit more about themselves, in their own words. So, where did you grow up and where are you currently?

Maisha: Firstly, thank you so much for having me, Kyra. I feel so privileged and honoured to be asked on this really amazing podcast. It's a bit boring: I was born and bred in Southampton, and I've not moved out. And I know that's really boring and I should probably get to exploring other places in the UK and the world, but I honestly love Southampton and I'm very proud [laughing] to have been a born and bred Southamptonite.

Kyra: No, it's not boring at all! I love that. So, I guess, how would you describe your upbringing in terms of how race was seen and felt in your household?

Maisha: Yeah, I think that's a really interesting question because I…I never remember consciously being aware of my race or my ethnicity too much, as a child, and I really put that down to kind of ignorant bliss, em, through my school, you know, never having those conversations with [best] students, but I do remember, em, when I first realised of my…my browness or my…I like…some people call it "my melanated skin". It was in Year 5, so I must have been about eight or nine years old, and I had my teacher, em, just going around, you know, when they used to check around students' shoulders about what they're kind of doing and their work and stuff like that, and she came behind me and was just looking at my work and said, "Oh, in English, we do it…we say it like this…" and I only remember thinking…all I've ever known is English, you know. We do speak Bengali at home, but I never consciously kind of read or wrote in Bengali. But I just remember thinking…but I always write in English! And I think, looking back at it, it was just that thing of like she just assumed that I wasn't doing things, em, in a way, em, because English wasn't my first language when, actually, just kids make grammatical errors all the time – you know, you're eight or nine years old. And I think…I think that's how it was kind of…you know, when I first started being conscious of it. I do remember like there was a mini fad – it's such a Noughties thing – of kids having like

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rubber wristbands, and they had slogans on them. I don't know if you've seen them. I think they're making a bit of a resurgence. But there was a classic like "Say No to Racism" kind of armband, and I think… It was just a fad. You know, people didn't really know what the meaning behind those things were. So, I think race wasn't really ever a thing.

And in my household, you know, I never had those deep conversations with my parents, and it was only until I kind of began studying it and advocating for race equality, as a professional and as a student. So, I suppose it didn't really feel abnormal not to be conscious about the effects of my race and ethnicity, as a second-generation Bangladeshi immigrant, from that kind of perspective. But, yeah, I feel like it's really different now.

Kyra: Mm, absolutely. And picking up from what you said, it's interesting how, when you're an adult, you can kind of like analyse those kind of assumptions that people had and those like mini or micro aggressions that you experienced, and then you can only really understand it like, yeah, once you've become kind of like conscious or in your adulthood, and I think it's quite – it's a bittersweet experience because I think you get to enjoy the fact like, you know, I was a child and I was kind of innocent back then and it didn't affect, but then, to now be kind of conscious of it, it's kind of like one of those feelings where you're like, oh, that wasn't exactly right.

Maisha: 100%. And I do quite like that I'd lived in the ignorance bliss because I don't think children growing up in this day and age, particularly Black children, get to have that ignorant bliss. I remember listening to a young boy from Derry talking on like an Irish radio station about the effects of racism and growing up Black in Derry and people not thinking that he was Irish, when he had the most Irish accent you could think of [laughing]. But he was nine, and he really consciously articulated what racism felt like, and it made me feel really sad that, at nine-years-old, he knew exactly why life was so hard for him, because of his skin colour. And so, I feel grateful that I didn't have to kind of, I suppose, face those…the reality of our situation, as, you know, Black and Brown folk in society. But, yeah, I suppose – even the language of micro aggressions, like you've just mentioned, I wouldn't have known that, but I don't think it's a privilege that our young kind of Black and Brown brothers and sisters get to have today.

Kyra: Mm, yeah, no, absolutely, and, yeah, it definitely is kind of a privilege in that sense that you say. I'm interested to kind of know what shows and what books did you watch and read growing up, and I guess what kind of representations were you exposed to?

Maisha: Yeah. Again, like it's really sad to say that I was really just mainly exposed to very mainstream media growing up, and so I didn't experience representation outside a very, you know, white European, North American, kind of positionality. I don't also remember being kind of read to or being an avid reader as a child. They weren't really a staple part of my childhood or in our homelife growing up, but I put that mainly down to coming from a very working-class background - I would still see myself as coming from a very working class

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background - and not necessarily symbolic of, you know, my parents' lack of love or aspirations for me and my brother. It was just down to not having the cultural capital to understand how that would benefit myself and my brother, you know. I have a lot of respect for my parents' generation a lot of the time, and, still, today, they focus on survival rather than the kind of things that you and I can…can be privy to, such as an education and having these conversations right now, you know. That wasn't a thing for my parents and that kind of generation. So, I think, at that time, you know, they were more concerned about providing us with religious knowledge, you know, private tutoring and things like that, which I'm really, really grateful for because religion means so much to me, but very, very limited representation of, you know, race or culture, ethnicity, religion, when I was growing up. And I again kind of realised that in hindsight rather than thinking about that so deeply when I was growing up.

Kyra: And when did you start to kind of look at your environment through a critical lens, so thinking about maybe specific systems or spaces and behaviours? Was it when you kind of entered higher education or was it sooner?

Maisha: I would like to think it was sooner, actually. So, I really remember the first book that I absolutely fell in love with. It was Malorie Blackman's 'Noughts & Crosses'. I don't know if you've read it.

Kyra: No. I think I've heard of it though.

Maisha: They semi-recently kind of adapted it into a BBC series. But the book, for anyone listening, if you've not read it, is just…it's incredible. It's a classic teen love story but I think what really gives it its edge is Blackman's really brilliant way of intertwining, you know, that classic teen love story with societal issues related to race, because the setting of the book takes place in a dystopian world where actually white folk are the oppressed, and Black folk are the oppressors, so, again, like kind of flipping the current narrative that we find ourselves in. And I think that book just really piqued what I now believe is an innate interest in social justice for myself. So, when it came to picking my A Levels, as a 15-year-old who was a very average performing student, I absolutely fell in love with Sociology as a discipline. Studying it felt like I'd found a language to understand my social world. Things just started to make sense and it was particularly shattering of like a glass that I'd just lived my entire life from. And, at A Level, we were largely explained, you know, inequality, and why inequality kind of persists through theories such as Marxism and feminism, but when I chose to study Sociology as my undergraduate degree, which I always say is like the best decision I ever made, I began to look more into racial and religious inequalities because they were more prominent in my lived experience, but I think that's when that critical lens really kind of opened up and I'm really grateful for having done that as a degree, and I would strongly advocate any student or person listening to study it, even not as a…if it's not as an entire degree, maybe a module on race or gender. They were so impactful to my life, honestly.

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Kyra: I love the way you speak about Sociology because I think I have a bit of a similar experience as well. I studied it from GCSE and then I went into A Level to study it as well, and I just remember like being in a GCSE classroom and just thinking like, oh my gosh, I feel like I understand myself so much better as well… Like I think, obviously, all of our experiences are unique, but there are kind of like patterns that you don't necessarily realise, and I think, yeah, like to be able to sit in a classroom and feel like almost a weight is lifted because you understand certain systems and certain kind of behaviours in a new light, is just, yeah, I can't even…I can't even like advocate for studying Sociology enough [laughing]!

Maisha: I love finding fellow like Sociology sisters because I feel like I could talk about it forever. And you're right, it's kind of like, you know, you've…you've lived long enough at that point, at GCSE, A Level, to realise that, you know, folks that look like us and that come from our background don't have, like statistically speaking, great life outcomes in comparison to… to white folk, and then you get to understand why that is. So, you're no longer just a stat of "Bangladeshis are the most deprived community in the UK and are a community of concern". Well, actually, it's kind of flipping that deficit kind of statement into looking as to why that is. It's because we've gone through historical, political, socioeconomic inequality which is keeping us at that level. And so, I was no longer happy with accepting that as a fact, and I was no longer happy accepting myself being a part of that statistic. So, yeah, I think it's really…like you just said, it gives you that…that language and lens to look at those things that are taken for granted, that have…that speak to our experiences, you know.

Kyra: Absolutely. Would you be able to give us a breakdown of your academic background then, after your A Levels of course?

Maisha: Yeah, absolutely. So, I kind of see my academic journey starting with my Sociology degree at the University of Winchester. I received a First-Class Honours degree and a faculty prize for outstanding dissertation and overall grade, and I only mention it because I feel like, after it's over, you don't get to brag about it anymore [laughing]!

Kyra: Yeah!

So, I always pop it in where it's suitable [laughing]!

Kyra: As you should, as you should!

Maisha: So, following graduating in 2017, I secured a really short-term graduate intern contract at the University of Winchester's newly formed Centre for Student Engagement, and what should have been a three-month contract slowly turned into a permanent role, thanks to having such a wonderful line manager. So, I feel like I went from intern to administrator to researcher within my five years at Winchester, where I've secured a new role. I'm starting next week at the University of Southampton, but my last role at Winchester was helping to develop a new University strategic plan, working closely under and with our

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Pro Vice Chancellor of Engagement. But, within that, the kind of five years at Winchester, you know, I've lectured on undergraduate and postgraduate courses, I've published 12 academic outputs, I've been invited to speak at around 40 different conferences, events, engagements, with universities and sector bodies, including being a keynote speaker on five different occasions. I'm really fortunate to have worked so closely with the Office for Students, the regulator of English higher education, and, more recently, with Research England, and have engaged closely with folks at Universities UK and [Advanced HE] too. So, a lot of my work has been in the space of racial and religious equity for students, so it's really great to see how much appetite there is across the sector currently to engage in these discussions, and I really put that down to the resurgence of Black Lives Matter in 2020. But, you know, everyone's so much more kind of on-board to further improve the experiences of, you know, historically minoritized student groups in higher education, and I feel like now is a really great time to be in the sector for people like you and I who are so passionate in that kind of space as well.

Kyra: Thank you. And I guess obviously, within that time you were at Winchester, you obviously started to do your EdD. What motivated you to even kind of like pursue that?

Maisha: I really just…I really fell into it, to be honest, Kyra. I never thought someone like me would go into doing a doctorate. So, again, you know, a second gen Bangladeshi Muslim woman, I didn't know anyone else like me that had gone on to do a doctorate or even kind of wanted to pursue one. It wasn't really encouraged of me, from either end, like either from my cultural background or the academic institution that I was in. You know, no one was really pushing me to do one. But I just knew that I was so passionate about research, and I really enjoyed the process of capturing the experiences of, you know, students of colour in higher education. So, when the opportunity arose – I was currently on an M.Res. kind of pathway and then decided to make the switch because it felt like a "now or never" type moment. So, like I took it and I'm currently at the kind of thesis stage of my doctorate. It's… it's really…I'm really enjoying the process of it. My thesis is looking into the experiences of British Bangladeshi women who've pursued postgraduate research degrees in order to increase the representation of women like me in this space, particularly when, you know, calls to diversify the Academy have been such a historic ask. So, I'm really hoping that this research can further luminate to this experience and really just make things more equitable for women just like me in higher education.

In what ways do you think your positionality has aided your research then within your doctorate?

Maisha: I think my positionality has aided my research, my doctorate, everything that I do, in every possible way, from the research questions I ask to the way in which I conduct interviews, focus groups, to the way that I interpret my data and kind of write it up, you know. I've written previously about how important it is for every researcher to be aware of their own positionality because it will inevitably influence every decision you take when you

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conduct research. For example, the first concept that I theorised a couple of years ago, which I termed "satisfied settling", that was inherently rooted in my experience as a Muslim student. So, essentially, the theory describes a kind of adopted mindset by Muslim students who come to university and who end up settling for a "less than" experience compared to their white non-Muslim peers, and, instead of bringing awareness to those particular issues, I found that Muslim students were more likely to kind of accept their situation, and they were…and they stated being satisfied with the status quo. So, that research was, you know, based around primary questions around student voice and exploring sense of belonging – two things that I felt like I was robbed from and robbed off as an undergraduate student. So, I just wanted to know if there were others that were just like me in that experience. And, you know, we talk so much about student experience in higher education, but I never really felt that that…that the discourse was currently capturing, you know, Muslim students. So, again, it's really similar to my doctoral research, as I've described as well. So, every which way that positionality [is there], it's genuinely, you know, influenced my research – and I actually really love that. Sometimes, you're supposed to be positioned as this very objective researcher, but, no, I think…I think we should embrace it because it's going to be there. You can't stop it. So, the best way to kind of use it for…you know, in a positive way, is to acknowledge and understand its influence on your work.

Kyra: Do you think your opinion or your perception of the university has changed now that, you know, you've been so involved in research within the institution, and, obviously, being a staff member as well with a teaching kind of role…? Yeah, do you think your opinion has changed so much from the time when you were a student?

Maisha: Oh, 100%, 100%. I think, as a student, it's really easy not to have an understanding of the kind of inner mechanisms of a university. I guess there's no real necessity for you to have that. But having learning…having learnt the kind of ins and outs of the university, and been a part of it, there's a lot that is taken for granted, you know, from regulators to other sector bodies, to external pressures, you know. Universities are just situated within an ever evolving, you know, landscapes. So, there is so much that goes on behind the scenes that you're just not aware of. But I also, I think, at the same time again, talking about that kind of critical lens, realised that universities, you know, really love to espouse values for equality, diversity and inclusion, and I've seen how sometimes that work is just gate-kept by individuals who don't really have the lived experience to empathise what equity might mean for those historically minoritized groups. I know there is so much red tape in enacting meaningful change and enhancing the student experience. So, there is…there is a difficulty and complexity to all of that. But, at the same time, you know, again, I've met some really incredibly dedicated and wonderful colleagues just spearheading this kind of work – you know, people like yourselves - and it's been amazing to see how much race and intersectional equity are now moving into this very "business as usual" or top priority place for universities across the sector. So, again, like I feel like there's such a momentum that's been build in higher education, that now feels like a really great time for, you know, students

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like ourselves to be going into higher education and can expect a lot more from their universities in that space.

Kyra: Absolutely. And I think, also, students of today, they're so much more aware of, I think, the things happening in kind of wider society, and they know exactly how that impacts the institution - like the university isn't this kind of thing that just exists outside of everything going on on the outside. And I think, yeah, a lot of the time, students come in also wanting to kind of like demand change and wanting to kind of like take up space. I think it's just so important that, yeah, the institution is prepared for that and creates kind of like safe spaces for students to do that.

Maisha: 100%. And I think that's what…this is something that I wanted to talk about, and maybe we'll touch on later, is those safe spaces for the students who are really invested in this kind of work.

Kyra: Absolutely. So, I guess, is there anything that you wish you knew as a student that you know now?

Maisha: Em…tons! Hindsight is a great thing, right? Tons! I suppose I would have liked to have known exactly what you've just said: how much power you can have as a student, that if I was – and I was, you know, unhappy with my situation, and I knew it was affecting other students just like me, that I could have been a part of the change if I'd gotten stuck in a little bit more or had been given the cultural capital to know how to get into those spaces and enact change. I definitely would have encouraged my past self to go for a sabbatical or an SU type role so I could enact change and shape the experiences for students that look like me, particularly in a predominantly white kind of setting that I was in, but do it…do it way earlier than I have done as a staff member. But I wasn't made to be aware of a lot of those things, so…and I didn't really feel like they were…like my needs were institutional kind of priorities. So, as I said, like I'm really glad that the current landscape is so much more open in a lot of ways for students like us.

Kyra: So, what do you think you are still learning? I guess that could relate to anything, like your position in the university, or just in general – what has Maisha still yet to learn [laughing]?

Maisha: I thought this was such an interesting and thoughtful question, honestly, and I want to say everything. I want to say, you know, learning to be a better researcher and a better advocate and sector leader for race and intersectional equity, and I think those things really require you to be, you know, really attuned to recent literature and practice, continue to learn with and from those that are under-represented, even if they share your own positionality, right? So, even though I am, and was, a Muslim student and a Bangladeshi woman, our experiences are going to be different, and I need…I am constantly humbled by that every day. I want to, you know, embody and network with really incredible people who

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have come before me, who have done great work in this space, and surround myself with people that want to make me better, or I can make myself better through being associated with those kinds of people, both personally and professionally, you know, and I want to surround myself with, you know, people that are going to be authentic allies for me.

And learning just to be brave and face up to the challenges. You know, I spoke about going into a new role just next week, and, as much as that feels really daunting, and I love being… everyone loves being, you know, in their kind of comfort zone - we are creatures of habit, I suppose – but, you know, when you need that challenge, go for that challenge, as scary as it kind of is.

But I also think I need to learn how to balance all those things that I want to be and become because the last thing I want is to have really poor mental health. That's not going to help me perform at my optimum. But I'm really, now that I'm moving into a role that is very EDI focused - because I've never had EDI in my job description, it's been off of my own back really – I'm really scared about burnout, and I know a lot of colleagues who work in these spaces speak a lot about that, and I know that women of colour, people of colour, are particularly susceptible to it when we work in those spaces. So, I think I'm still learning, or I still need to learn how to protect myself, and, you know, folks like us, in the midst of all of that as well.

Kyra: So, as you mentioned, your role at Winchester was really about kind of research and supporting projects that were related to student engagement, employability and student experience. I wanted to dedicate some time to talking about how you came into these research areas, specifically kind of the BAME degree awarding gap, as well as Muslim student experience. Would you like to maybe talk us through, I guess, some of the specific projects that you've led or kind of co-led?

Maisha: Yeah. So, my very first research project was looking into Muslim students' sense of belonging. Again, I felt – that was back in 2018, and I know rhetoric around belonging has kind of…I suppose revamped a lot in this past year, but actually they've been discussions that have been taking place in the sector since 2012. There was a really seminal Liz Thomas report, from the then HEA, about student sense of belonging, which really correlated success to students feeling like they belonged, both academically and socially, in the university space. But, again, none off that literature really spoke to my experience as a Muslim student, which I felt was the kind of…predominant identity, em, I kind of identify with since…I suppose that the first thing that's really noticeable about me is my hijab [laughing]. So, that's when I first started to research, you know, Muslim students' sense of belonging and how we use our student voice, and I've published two papers in that kind of area: the first about that kind of…it was sort of hypothesised term at that point around "satisfied settling"; and my second research project took me to, you know, an institution in London and in the Midlands to really see if Muslim students really identified with that

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concept of "satisfied settling", and they really did, and that was a really interesting kind of follow-up project to kind of work on.

So, following the research into Muslim student experience, I was actually tasked with looking at our degree awarding gaps at Winchester, where we noticed specifically that our Asian students were showing very statistically significant gaps in success and progression, so, you know, not coming out with 2:1 or First-Class Honours degree and going into professional employment. So, I found that a really interesting project to do because, in the sector where we were talking a lot about the BAME degree awarding gap, a lot of that has focused energy and, em, kind of insight into Black student experience, which is, again, completely fine because that's where the national…where nationally the largest gaps are, but when we dissect the term "Asian", where, in the UK, we kind of group that as coming from an Indian, Bangladeshi, or Pakistani background, we can see that, actually, Indian students outperform, and have historically outperformed, white students. So, when we group all of those three groups together, it actually looks like Asian students are doing okay, but, actually, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students have very close rates of attainment and progression to Black students as well, but a lot of that nuance gets lost because we use these umbrella terms. So, again, it was really interesting to look into Asian students' experiences at universities, and really spotlight on that kind of…that kind of experience, particularly when, again, as I was saying, we were kind of focusing on, em, using the term BAME as this very homogenous kind of catch-all term to describe, you know, all racially minoritized students' experiences. And it made me realise, actually, we don't talk enough about Asian students [laughing], for some reason, and when you look into literature and papers that talk about, you know, the BME degree awarding gap or BAME student experience, you know, you look at who their participants are, and they are predominantly Black students. So, we couldn't really gauge a lot about what…what was happening for…for Asian students at university.

And then, I suppose, my doctoral research now focusing on Bangladeshi women is, again, a kind of extension of that because we talk a lot about, again, the lack of Black professors that there are in the UK, which again is an issue, but when I looked into numbers, about, you know, how many Bangladeshi female professors there are in the UK, em, there is really no stat for it. We can only kind of determine that there are more than two, which gets rounded up to five when we look at [HESA] data. But, again, like no one was really talking about that kind of issue. So, I really kind of…want my research to kind of focus in on those…those little blind-spots that we have, and contribute to our understanding of, you know, what it means to be a racially minoritized student or staff in higher education today, particularly looking at groups that have been done a disservice to when we use those catch-all terms like Asian or BAME and things like that. So, that is a very whistlestop journey of my research…

Kyra: Thank you so much. Yeah, I think just…your experience just speaks to, yeah, the kind of harm that can be done by using these kind of umbrella terms, and, you know, when we use them, there's always going to be groups that get left out and get silenced, and I think it's so inspiring that you're kind of…the research projects that you've worked on have really tried to

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kind of like bring those kind of groups, and their experiences, to light. I'm interested in kind of the student responses to the research that you were doing, specifically kind of looking at the Asian kind of attainment gap. Yeah, what was the kind of responses that you were getting from students? They must have been so happy that this research was being done…

Maisha: I think that's what I love - I think you must get that too – when we look at these experiences, particularly when I've done it with Muslim students, and, again, with Asian students, and I would say that they were predominantly South Asian students. So, I make that really clear in the report, that East Asian kind of student experience, again, is something that wasn't able to be explored because of the nature of the participants. But it's really humbling when students shake your hands afterwards or tell you how much…just having an interview with you has meant because no one has asked about what their challenges are, what their experiences are at university. It means so much, particularly when I'm the one taking their time, you know?!

So, when I was doing the Asian student experience research, I think one of the lightbulb moments for me personally was how normalised caring responsibilities are for our Asian students. So, a lot of our students were saying to me that, because, culturally, we assign so much importance and significance to our parents, it was really normalised for students to drive their parents to their hospital appointments, act as translators in their day-to-day care, and just being quite active domestically in a household, alongside, you know, being a full-time student or alongside doing a part-time job and all these other kind of responsibilities that normal life kind of brings with it. But they didn't consciously see that, Kyra, as a…as a burden, because it had been so normalised, but, at the same time, we can kind of say, well, if you are taking on-board these quite significant caring roles and responsibilities, there should be measures in place, or funding in place, to support that, that you don't have to do that alone or you are at least getting funding for having taken on board, you know – like a carers' fund, right? A lot of the students weren't accessing things like that or weren't asking for extensions or leniency when it came to assignments because…it felt so normalised, and it just felt like a responsibility, and they were never discussing it in a way that was resentful towards their parents or family life. It was just so normalised. And I think, you know, we needed to…be better at understanding that and ensuring that those students who can be supported in that way know that they can be supported in that way.

Kyra: Mm. So, I guess, does that almost link to this term that you speak of, like "satisfied settling", in a way?

Maisha: Yeah. 100%, because we've gone through an education system that hasn't accommodated for us, through very small things. I didn't expect to be given halal food when I was in school, you know, in the school dinner-hall. I wasn't expected to have a prayer space, again, when I was at college. So, when you get to university, you…it's really hard to flip your mindset into a "Oh, I can have these things, and, oh, there is support for this, this and this…" and you just wouldn't know otherwise. So, I think there's definitely a kind of

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psychological kind of element to "satisfied settling" because your mindset has been primed in a way for you not to expect certain privileges, and so, to be suddenly told that you can, em…or sometimes you're not, this is the thing, no one actually tells you that you can ask for those things, it's…it takes a kind of more conscious realisation that I should be getting those things. So, when I was talking to Muslim students about it, they… There was a kind of air of almost…sadness because they realised, "Oh, I've gone through my entire university journey not realising like I could have…it could have potentially been better…" So, I think that, again, like it's…it's really on the part of an institution to make sure that all students can benefit, in an equitable kind of way, you know.

Kyra: Mm, absolutely. So, I guess, thinking about educational research more generally, I think there's definitely kind of a hierarchical nature to it, in the sense that, you know, there are particular research topics and subjects that the university values, and, because of that, funds more than others. What do you think are some of the norms of accepted kind of social research?

Maisha: It's a really interesting question. I think social research and the Social Sciences have done well to adopt, you know, I suppose, less stringent and restrictive forms of understanding and obtaining knowledge, particularly with the kind of qualitative and interpretive turn that was apparent kind of many, many decades ago. But there is still this kind of air, I find, of kind of…positivist pretentiousness which gives more weighting to facts and objective figures and statistics and things like that, and that has led to many researchers choosing to kind of window-dress their studies with quantitative data because purely qualitative data runs the risk of, em, having its legitimacy questioned.

So, I think one of the things that I really struggled with, as an insider researcher, you know, being of the population group of interest that I'm studying as well, is that relationship between you and your participants, and the appropriate gap between you and your participants. So, there are so many guides and manuals and practices that talk about, you know, ethics, for example, in research, and I don't think sometimes they capture the nuance when you go into the field and do your data collection. So, it might be unethical to keep in contact with participants following, you know, the formally agreed timeline that you set out, but what happens when you've really connected, you know, to a participant in a way that you know it's going to be really hard to find again? And I've really felt that with my doctoral research. You know, I feel like I've been socialised to believe that you need to keep your research area like, quote/unquote, "clean", you know, and be as objective as you can, but, you know, I've made a decision to kind of…stay in touch and connect with consenting participants, because, otherwise, it would have felt, to me, quite unethical. Even though I felt a duty of, you know, ensuring the safety of my participants, I genuinely believed, you know, when you're in those meetings with them and they're saying to you, "We don't know anyone else that is like us in academia", it felt like an ethical decision of, oh, I can't just let this go, you know? I was trying to find Bangladeshi female postgraduate research students. We make up 0.3%. We're not even a full percentage of the UK PGR population. And so, I felt

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like I can't just let this go for fear of what…very Eurocentric, Western ideology of research, and social research, has taught me. So, then I was beginning to turn to, you know, decolonial methodologies and things like that, which we can definitely talk more about, but I think that was the thing I really struggled with, with like, you know, quote/unquote, "accepted social research", that what is the distance between you and your participants.

Kyra: I mean, on our project, we're always trying to think of ways that we can obviously invite people into the space but not in ways that are kind of extractive – like we don't want you to just come to this space and, you know, give us your knowledge and share with us kind of your experience and stories and then be like, "Okay, see ya!" you know? And I think it's such a…it's a human thing to want to be able to kind of continue kind of building relationships with the people that you work with for such a long time and you research, yeah, and I think, yeah, that's definitely a kind of norm in social research that I think we need to kind of dismantle and really rethink.

Maisha: I love that term that you use, "extractive", because that's exactly what it is. We are constantly giving up our knowledge, with very little in return, particularly if we're asking for connection, solidarity and things like that. But because someone's decided that, actually, no, that's not an ethical way to conduct your research, we don't do it. And I felt like I was doing it wrong. So I felt like I was being a bad researcher because I wanted to bring together all my participants – again, those that were consenting of course – but it made me feel like I was doing something wrong, and then I realized you're not. You know what you're talking about. You know what your intention is. And everyone is benefiting from that, in a way that they wouldn't have had you stuck to, you know, what was being originally asked of you and through these ethical kind of manuals. So, yeah, you're right, yeah, that's the last thing I would want my research to be, is extractive. I want it to be participatory and that we're all benefiting from it. Like why should I be the only one benefiting from these really rich conversations?

Kyra: How do you think we can disrupt those kind of norms and assumptions and kind of actively work towards different ways of kind of being when it comes to research?

Maisha: So, I think the best thing is what you and I are doing right now, you know, we're talking about it, we're going to publicise it, and so I think publishing actually, em, research that talks about decolonised research, and what a decolonised research space looks like and can feel like, adds weighting to the decisions that we take as minoritized researchers. And so, there's this very clear acknowledgement that the rules of research have been set up by, you know, very white, Western ideologies, who…who just get to deem what knowledge is and what isn't worthy of being classed as knowledge, and that's going to, you know, being really honest and transparent about that is what will enable us, em, you know, empowerment to transgress against those kind of, quote/unquote, "norms" of research.

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Kyra: And I guess what precautions do you think you take now, in your own research, and I guess, moving forward, what precautions do you think people should take?

Maisha: So, for me, where my research has just always concerned minoritized and under-represented groups within university, you know, speaking with predominantly students of colour and Muslim students, my biggest priority is always to make sure that the space that they have voluntarily entered and kindly offered their time to is a space that is brave and respectful. So, recently, I've started to take precautions to ensure that they can, you know, comfortably and confidently engage in conversations about race and intersectional inequality, but prepping their mindsets that they will be giving attention to those things. So, I've been looking at how to do that through pre-interview kind of tools. So, despite, you know, people like, you know, us talking about race and equality, almost for a living, you know, having that understanding that those aren't conversations participants have daily is a really important thing to recognise. So, I think we can prime the research environment in a way for this to be more deeply considered, rather than have my participants come into a space where they are faced with a kind of harsh truth, in the moment. I want to know that they have a prepped mindset to know that this is what I will be talking about, and these are some of the feelings that I could be experiencing, rather than it being kind of…thrown onto them in the space of a moment, in the space of a focus group or an interview setting. So, again, like, you know, really preparing a suitable environment and then thinking about how to manage, I suppose, post data collection states as well, you know, not, like you just said, "That's it, we've extracted what we need from you – see you later [laughing]" kind of thing. That is something that's really interesting and important to me to do, moving forward, with research.

Kyra: What does a decolonised kind of research culture look and feel like to you?

Maisha: So, you know, we recently co-organised the University of Winchester's third institutional Decolonising the Curriculum Week, where our focus was about decolonising within and beyond the curriculum, to which, you know, the podcast was suitably represented by you and Fatima. But I chaired a really interesting session about decolonising kind of doctoral supervision and research culture, where colleagues were really asked to consider what are the challenges and opportunities, em, you know, related to research culture and doctoral supervision, and everyone really showed an appetite for collaboration, community, inclusiveness, particularly within a stage of higher education. If we think specifically about PGR research culture, it's been described as solitary and, at times, really exploitative, so, for me, a decolonised research culture is one that really starts with that kind of acknowledgement that we have prioritised Western Eurocentric knowledge, systems, frameworks, lenses, that have excluded all other forms of knowledge that sit outside of that positionality, particularly when we look at issues related to those outside that…outside of privilege. So, we have to humble ourselves in, you know, engaging in that kind of reflexive practice, actively, you know, addressing those disparities and the epistemic injustices that are present in our kind of sector, and not take a kind of deficit approach to it, but, again, you

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know, work in partnership with those that have been under-served as well and, you know, really give opportunities for, em, progression to minoritized researchers, priming them and placing them in senior positions. We have to ensure that those that are in currently in positions of power can be held accountable, and champion the change that we kind of want to see, because, you know, poor behaviour exists all the time. We are really great with kind of talking the talk, but poor behaviour related to research culture still exists, so, you know, that needs to be made an example of. So, when that happens, I think, then, you know, the research culture feels to be inclusive, you know, collaborative and supportive, and that's when all researchers thrive, and I think that's when we can begin to fix the holes of that really leaky academic pipeline, which has kept us from diversifying the Academy, despite this being a constant call from students and colleagues alike, you know, for so, so long, you know.

Kyra: I'm so happy that you mentioned partnership because that was actually the next kind of topic that I wanted to get into with you. What does student-staff partnership mean to you specifically?

Maisha: So, for me, partnership has to be about centralising those that have been historically minoritized, both students and staff, you know, working together with those that have been in very privileged positions to achieve a very shared endeavour, but, for me, that has to be primarily situated on the basis of, you know, equity and social justice, and it recognises that there is a historic power imbalance, and it attempts to kind of redress then that kind of…both individual but also institutional and systemic kind of level, you know? So, I think partnership as a concept, as has been argued by the likes of Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot, it needs to be an inherently radical practice, so the aims of it can't detract from that kind of core of…of being…of radical transformational change, particularly as we begin to see it scale up in the sector. So, again, I think, when I think of partnership, it is that kind of very much basis of students and staff working together to achieve aims specifically related for social justice and equity.

Kyra: Thank you. I think that's probably the best explanation I've heard of partnership. I will be using that [laughing]! So, obviously, you've been doing a lot of kind of thinking and writing on this topic, and I wanted to ask: what are some of the kind of synergies between the practice of partnership with socially just and kind of liberatory theories?

Maisha: Yeah. So, I recently had an opinion piece published in the 8th Volume of the journal, 'Educational Innovation Partnership & Change', and that piece really brought together those connections that I was seeing between theoretical concepts and minoritized scholars in education when I was reading that kind of work for my doctorate to be…to what was being espoused as, you know, really good student-staff partnership practice when I was exploring that kind of literature as a staff member. So, for example, I kind of say how critical race theory, which is a theory which centres scholarly inquiry on race, is all about re-centring the knowledges of racialised others, em, and seeing…seeing how, you know, our world views

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have just been traditionally excluded. And partnership also does that because, where students traditionally would not get a say in how they were taught, in what they were taught, it's seeking to rebalance that…that dynamic, right?

Again, like another good example is the pedagogy of bell hooks. She was an advocate for race equality in schooling, a pioneer in Black feminist thought and scholarship. You know, her outlook and her books really…it's so clear how much she valued students. She wanted to ensure that all students feel like they had a voice to use, one, again, that she was kind of robbed of as a student who went into desegregated schooling. And she wanted classroom spaces, again, to be kind of filled with love and joy, and she even uses the word "ecstasy". And, again, if we look at AdvanceHE's kind of framework for student engagement through partnership, the values of, you know, things like reciprocity, inclusivity, authenticity, and responsibility, they share such huge parallels with Hooks' work. So, again, like those are two, em, two examples, but, you know, there are so many synergies between the frameworks that I've been really privileged to explore, such as participatory action research, decolonial methodologies, and those practices, em, unwittingly or consciously, have been widely adopted for student engagement practitioners and within partnership practice as well. So, there are so many synergies, and it was really kind of nice to connect those dots a little bit more in that…in that very small [looking in] piece.

Kyra: How can we begin to kind of practise decolonial and socially just forms of partnership? I'm thinking particularly for people who teach in the university, how can they begin to kind of do that work, or at least move forward in terms of maybe changing the way that they see certain relationships that they have with students?

Maisha: So, there was a really recent literature review looking at student engagement through partnership, from Advanced HE, and it again identified how having an equality, diversity and inclusion focus was very much a recurring theme that many papers that were using student-staff partnership were referring back to. And I think that's really exemplar of the fact that so many staff and students are genuinely interested in forging decolonial and socially just forms of partnership, and I think that's the first step, Kyra, you know, this…this very genuine openness to developing your understanding and shifting your praxis, sharing in the decision-making process with students and staff alike, and authentically kind of valuing the feedback and thoughts from those that are, you know, historically minoritized. So, for me, where staff members tend to be, generally, in that kind of more privileged kind of institutional setting at least, I've spoken quite passionately about the need to centralise an ethics of care that ensures that the underrepresented folk, who we ask to take part and enter into those partnership spaces, can be guaranteed, you know, a strong level of trust and safeguarding. I feel like, too often, I've seen the intent of many colleagues to embark on social justice kind of issues and projects with students, but they have fallen flat because of the difficulties that they then encounter. So, that intent needs to be followed through, and all parties need to acknowledge that there will be additional harm and violence that can take place – that is a high possibility when engaging in this kind of work. So, we really need

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to deeply consider what steps are we taking to ensure that, as and when that does occur, the priority needs to be placed on ensuring that the harm and violence is as minimised as it possibly can be. So, in the context of partnership, I've really likened that to a kind of…a two-person rowboat. You know, a staff member can invite a minoritized student into the rowboat but not give them the oar to kind of paddle, right? So, it's a very tokenistic form of partnership. But when you give students that oar, it's only then that the boat can reach its endpoint of whatever form of social justice that you want to work towards. But if the staff member involved is just using that…that kind of oar, and they are then controlling the direction of movement of the boat itself, and you only end up going around in circles with one oar kind of doing the work, you know, so no real progress is made. So, I think that's what needs to happen when we talk about decolonial and socially just forms of partnership. It's this authentic engagement, but it's also ensuring that the harm and the violence is minimised because that's the last thing you want for a student or staff who is actively engaging in this work to come under. But it's a real possibility, that we do need to acknowledge that that can happen. It's not going to be the smoothest of rides because what we're doing is something that wants to change culture, I think, at the form of it, and that takes time, and that will have kind of bumps along the way. So, really ensuring that that space is as safe and as conducive to minoritized students and stuff is…is my kind of top priority, in that sense.

Kyra: Absolutely. I mean, I completely agree with you, like this work is not something that's kind of like…this isn't like a linear part, and also not following in the footsteps of anyone really, like this is definitely…especially considering kind of the different contexts, of course, but, yeah, I think, for a lot of us, this is kind of the first time, and we're paving the way in our institutions, in a sense, and I think, yeah, like mistakes will be made along the way, and I think it's important for us to acknowledge that or at least be prepared for those things to happen so that we can better navigate kind of the situations that we get put in, and how we can at least come out on the other end.

Maisha: Yeah, 100%. Things will go wrong. They will go wrong. I've been in that kind of space where things have gone wrong. So, the harm has come from the thing that went wrong, but I feel like the violence comes from the way in which the institution decides to act, or doesn't decide to act, in that sense. So, if…if I was treated with the way in which someone who should be treated when they go through any kind of racialised experience in a kind of derogatory way, right, I would have given…I would have felt better about it, but instead of kind of holding your hands up to the situation, we backpedal and we go back into our old kind of forms of working, of, well, actually, you know, we're not going to do this, this, and this because of X, Y and Z, and you suddenly start to go back on all the kind of, em, socially just values that I was initially brought on board to…or under the premise of the socially just values that I was promised, you know. So, I think it's fine for things to go wrong. It's the reaction to which…how we then respond to it, and how we ensure that that thing doesn't happen again, right?

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Kyra: Absolutely. Maisha, unfortunately, we're coming to the end of our talk…

Maisha: No [laughing]!

Kyra: I know! I feel like we could go on for ages! But, as a question I like to finish up on, what would you like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Maisha: I feel like that's the million pound question, isn't it, and I would love to hear also what you think, Kyra, about that and what other people have thought, but I think, for me, I would like to see, obviously, our inequality gaps be irradicated, you know, from degree-awarding gaps to, you know, everything from like progression gaps for both students and staff as well. I want to see more racially minoritized and religiously minoritized students like us, you know, going into postgraduate research and be supported into academic roles; that funding to close those gaps and get folks in those spaces is just a regular occurrence, from sector bodies and universities alike; that Black and Brown folk who are leading this work can do so and continue to make their impact in an equitable way, where the burden just doesn't fall on you all the time; and I would really love to see issues, I suppose, related to religion, particularly Islam and Muslim students, be given more weighting in discussions related to equality, diversity and inclusion. I feel like it's often quite side lined. But I think, finally, the thing that I want to see is more Black and Brown folk in senior positions of the university. I mean, last week, we saw word of Professor Jason Arday making history of being appointed the youngest Black professor at Cambridge, and it was just really, really heartening to see that, especially given his background, right? He'll be an excellent podcast guest, honestly!

But I want to see those milestones also being accomplished for, you know, Bangladeshi and Muslim women like me too, and I want to know that we're being placed in really influential roles, such as management and leadership, and we're valued academically and, you know, we increase that number of professors that look like me in higher education, you know. I would love to see, you know, people like you going on to be in these really key positions of power and like growing your profile because the authenticity is there and you're not going to lose that, you know. So, I would love to see, you know, more of us in those kinds of spaces. I know representation is always the one thing that is like the go-to kind of recommendation, but it…it really does mean so much once you become consciously aware of it, and consciously aware of how little representation there is like you in the sector. So, yeah, that's what I would like to see happen.

Kyra: Maisha, I just want to thank you so much for being here and giving us your time and your knowledge. I feel like I know you so much better just from, you know, hearing about your academic background and, you know, thinking about also your research with minoritized students. It's just super-inspiring, and I'm just really grateful that we got to have this conversation.

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Maisha: Thank you so much for having me, Kyra – this is such an excellent space to be a part of, and, yeah, it was really nice to be invited. I genuinely feel deeply humbled. So, thank you again – and for doing this really incredible work, and I really wish you all the best.

Kyra: To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj.