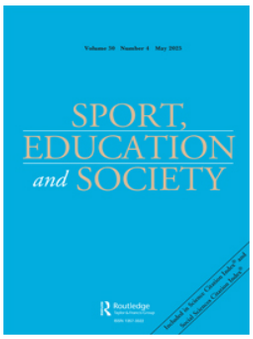

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Decoloniality and anti-racist pedagogy: sport students' experiences of enhancing their racial literacy

Spencer Swain, Matthew Green and Mark Mierzwinski

School of Education, Languages and Psychology, York St John University, York, UK

ABSTRACT

Undergraduate sports courses can often emphasise colonial biases around 'race' that foster essentialist thinking about ethnic groups and people of colour. This article explores university sports students' experiences of being taught decolonised content delivered through anti-racist pedagogy and the impact this had on their understanding of 'race' and racial inequalities within sports and broader society. Drawing on interviews with fourteen undergraduate students and four alumni from one university in Northern England, the research investigated how these participants engaged with decolonial ideas and anti-racist teaching methods. Through a postcolonial lens, we thematically analyse how such ideas and pedagogy enhanced students' racial literacy by problematising the concept of 'race' and unpacking complexities surrounding discrimination in sports. Centralising student reflections, we found (a) students had a limited understanding of 'race' and racial discrimination before attending university, (b) students' experiences of being taught theories related to postcolonialism and decoloniality enhanced their understanding of how colonial ideas have instrumentalised thinking about ethnic groups in society and sports, and (c) how constructivist anti-racist approaches to pedagogy enabled students to better understand 'race' and the promotion of anti-racist ideas in both society and sports. These findings serve as a timely reminder of the value of sociology and social-justice-themed modules within all sports courses during a period in the UK whereby mainstream sociology university courses are being challenged and withdrawn, and sports courses are increasingly becoming vocation-orientated.

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Introduction

Anti-racist education aims to challenge and dismantle systemic racism and foster equity within educational environments and broader society. One facet of this approach involves enhancing racial literacy by teaching students how to recognise, respond to and counter racism (Andrews, 2019; Arday et al., 2021). Enhancing racial literacy emphasises the importance of teaching students the impact of historical and contemporary racism by fostering critical thinking underpinned by social justice (Peters, 2015; Tate & Bagguley, 2017). Whilst many universities increasingly adopt social justice values, Leonardo (2016) and Arday (2018) argue that in many respects, the Higher Education (HE) sector often exacerbates inequality. Their arguments relate to (a) a lack of awareness of, or desire

CONTACT Spencer Swain s.swain@yorksj.ac.uk

to, engage in historical oppression, (b) limited opportunities for, or narrow focus on, critical engagement with racial inequality, and (c) a failure to implement inclusive curricula or learning spaces that amplify the voices of marginalised groups. Indeed, Rollock (2022) and Bhopal (2024) assert that some institutions reinforce White privilege partly through curricula that adhere to dualist or objectivist epistemologies, perpetuating racialised stereotypes and silencing marginalised voices. This neglect of constructivist[1] approaches that reflect the diverse experiences of a multicultural society can undermine universities' professed values of free thought, enlightened thinking, and social/epistemic justice (Joseph-Salisbury, 2017; Law, 2017; Meredith & Quiroz-Niño, 2022; Pilkington, 2013). Such dynamics can contribute to enduring misrepresentations of minority ethnic groups in the United Kingdom (UK), with Hylton (2012) and Ladson-Billings (2009) referencing subaltern effects through derogatory narratives tied to physicality, criminality, and supposed intellectual deficiency.

Such portrayals of universities underscore calls to decolonise the curriculum by reevaluating educational content and practices to challenge colonial biases. Arday et al. (2021) propose that central strategies for doing this include incorporating diverse voices, critiquing Eurocentrism, and promoting critical thinking regarding power dynamics and historical injustices. Therefore, this article highlights the importance of decolonising curricula and adopting anti-racist pedagogy within undergraduate sports courses at one university in the North of England. We investigate sports students' awareness of the concept of 'race' and racial inequalities before attending university, evaluate the impact decolonial content had on enhancing their racial literacy, and reflect upon how anti-racist pedagogy may develop students' critical thinking about the concept of 'race' in relation to sport and society. The following section provides a macro analysis of decolonising curricula and postcolonial theory to frame our study. This is followed by a micro perspective of university sports curricula, scientific essentialism, and challenges in adopting anti-racist pedagogy within and across different sports courses in the UK.

Higher education in the UK – decolonising curricula and postcolonial theory

Worldwide calls to decolonise the curriculum have prompted various theoretical conceptualisations and anti-racist practices. In the UK, a historic centre of colonial rule, Bird and Pitman (2020) note how the decolonising movement began in the early 2000s by promoting inclusive curricula centred on 'internationalisation' and 'widening participation'. Here, inclusive curricula were, and continue to be, deemed essential for achieving equality, representing a diverse student population (HESA, 2019), and addressing academic attainment gaps for minoritised ethnic students, who Bird and Pitman (2020) note are statistically less likely to attain top degrees than their white peers. However, Andrews (2019) argues that only in the past decade have curricula in UK universities been critiqued through broader intellectual movements aimed at transforming knowledge systems rather than merely addressing tokenistic diversity. Furthermore, despite internationalising and widening participation agendas, Alexander and Arday (2015) are two of many academics who identify and criticise how these egalitarian goals have not materialised in staff demographics. Offering one explanation for this trend, Mohanty (2003) highlights an issue with attitudinal engagement whereby diversity is premised on empty cultural pluralism, whereby superficial or symbolic recognition of cultural diversity lacks meaningful inclusion, structural change, material benefits and domesticates the historical agency of Third World peoples. Consequently, these processes contribute to, as Bhambra et al. (2018) note, White European canons of knowledge dominating the HE curriculum, with teaching methods excluding, limiting or silencing minority ethnic groups, resulting in students reencountering prevailing narrow knowledge systems with little alternatives or minimal representation of people of colour. Andrews (2019) claims this dominance erodes Indigenous and non-Western populations' historical, intellectual, and cultural contributions, thereby hindering students' ability to challenge European hegemony in knowledge production and prevailing perceptions of Europe as the epicentre of enlightened thought.

Although mainstream debates concerning decolonising curricula appear recent, there have been long-standing calls for decolonising education within post- and anti-colonial thought (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Elhinnawy, 2023). Here, postcolonial theorists have sought and seek to address the legacy of colonialism imposed by Western nations, a process which Young (2001) describes as involving the 'will to power' and imposing order over colonised peoples and cultures, resulting in a mentality that sought to essentialise diverse societies into one universal form centred around a Eurocentric rationality of lived experience that subjugated diverse perspectives. Edward Said (1995, p. 21) describes this colonial vision as forming a 'symphonic whole whose progress and formations, again as a whole, could be studied exclusively as a concerted and secular historical experience'. Therefore, Winter et al. (2022) declare how central to postcolonial thinking in education is the call to make subaltern identities and life histories visible within global discourses and knowledge systems that influence civic thought in the metropole and formerly colonised countries. As Masaka (2019) notes, this movement advocates for a reimagined university that challenges dominant ideological positions that privilege coloniser voices and dismantles knowledge hierarchies in formerly colonised countries. DiAngelo (2018) states that postcolonialism pushes beyond merely reimagining the curriculum and modes of assessment by interrogating the interconnected processes of colonisation and racialisation in education and broader society. Elhinnawy (2023) argues that the decolonial strand within postcolonial thought involves critiquing Western institutions and the knowledge systems they construct; however, approaches to decolonisation are not homogeneous. For instance, Pimblott (2020) notes how these processes are often influenced by their own temporal and spatial contexts, whilst Chilisa (2019) contends that decolonial education should enable previously colonised peoples to rediscover and recover Indigenous ideologies, identities, languages, histories, and cultural principles by reclaiming ways of knowing that subvert colonial oppression. Furthermore, Le Grange (2016) and Smith (2021) advocate for constructing a curriculum that creates intellectual spaces advancing the voices and knowledge of Indigenous peoples, and Mbembe (2016) sees decolonisation as a holistic term transforming students from knowledge consumers to active participants in its production.

University sports curricula and scientific essentialist knowledge

In the UK, most university sports courses are underpinned by physical sciences (i.e. biomechanics, physiology, medicine) and social sciences (i.e. psychology, sociology, development). St. Louis (2004) and Ward et al. (2023) explain how discussions concerning 'race' within sport and exercise science can often centre on objectivist and inductivist frameworks, which narrowly connect athleticism and physicality to 'racial' profiles. Further examining this reductive lens, the following extracts from a leading exercise physiology journal and textbook document examples of such essentialist thinking:

> Recent studies examining cardiac adaptation in African/Afro-Caribbean (black) male athletes demonstrated that black male athletes develop more striking repolarisation changes on the ECG and exhibit a greater magnitude of left ventricular hypertrophy (LVH) than white male athletes of similar age and size participating in identical sports. Indeed, up to 25% of black athletes exhibit either repolarisation changes or LVH that overlaps with morphologically mild HCM. (Rawlins et al., 2010, p. 1078)

> Racial differences in physique may significantly affect athletic performance … compared with whites and blacks, Asian athletes have short legs relative to upper torso components, a dimensional characteristic beneficial in short and longer distance races and in weightlifting. (McArdle et al., 2001, pp. 801–802)

Critical of how this prevailing narrative often overlooks deeper socio-cultural dynamics for participation and performance, Spracklen (2008) argues that using scientific terminology often lends unwarranted credibility to claims linking 'race' to performance. By framing the socially constructed concept of 'race' as a biological truth (Cleophas, 2021), Spracklen (2008) and Nachman et al. (2022) stress how this perspective perpetuates an essentialist mindset reminiscent of the eugenics movement and 'race science' that emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Given such now-

debunked myths, Bhavnani et al. (2005) and Flintoff and Dowling (2019) problematise how, when not challenged or presented with alternative knowledge, this prevailing logic within sports science severely undermines students' ability to critically engage with the concept of 'race' as a social construct. Evaluating the consequences of such pedagogy, Burdsey (2007) and Hylton (2010, 2015) highlight how this prevailing discourse and ideology bolster oppressive social frameworks, effectively contradicting or diluting academics' anti-racist efforts in sports.

Whilst social scientists within sports focus on how socio-cultural dynamics impact participation, Carrington (2015) is critical of how social science curricula have failed to adequately acknowledge, accept, and critique modern sports' colonial, imperialist and (white) muscular Christian origins. Demonstrating possible legacy issues, Darnell et al. (2019) are critical of frequent neo-colonial undertones within development initiatives whereby sport is framed as a civilising force in developing nations, othering indigenous physical activities and sports. Moreover, Darnell et al. (2019) argue that mega-sporting events, such as the Olympics and the Football World Cup, perpetuate essentialist colonial perspectives by reshaping emerging countries through neoliberal economic frameworks. When adopting a similar postcolonial lens, sports sociologists, such as Fletcher (2012) and Ratna (2018), draw upon the influential work of Bhabha, Said, and Spivak to highlight the role of sport in colonial domination and suppressing subaltern resistance, revealing critical insights into 'racial' identity, ethnicity and alterity. As such, scholars such as Bale and Cronin (2020) and Ratna (2020) strive to uncover neglected histories of alternative physical cultures and practices that offer meanings distinct from dominant Western competitive paradigms.

Decolonising sporting curricula and anti-racist pedagogy in sport

Despite the postcolonial work of certain social scientists, some have been critical of sports sociology curricula for failing to adequately encourage students to critically assess the legacy of imperialism on modern society and sport. For instance, Carrington (2015) highlights how key introductory texts seldom address postcolonial theory. However, recent contributions by Ratna and Samie (2017) have advanced this discourse by employing an intersectional analysis of the relationship between 'race' and gender, drawing on the postcolonial ideas of Gayatri Spivak (1988). Whilst the emergence of such scholarship is crucial for fostering a more nuanced understanding of these interconnected issues, it has not simultaneously transferred into attempts to decolonise curricula and anti-racist pedagogy. This lack of transference may be partly explained by the reflections of scholars who teach decolonial ideas to undergraduate sports students. For instance, Hylton (2015) describes how challenging it is to teach 'race' as a concept and how difficult improving students' racial literacy can be when they have limited exposure to such topics. Furthermore, Hobson and Whigham (2018) document their discomfort when adopting anti-racist pedagogies when teaching this topic due to their awareness of their Whiteness and the privilege it confers, acknowledging how teaching social class or policy is more experientially relatable and less emotionally sensitive to them. To overcome such challenges, Burdsey (2019), Cleophas (2021), and Hylton (2015) advocate for dialogue and critical reflection to be embedded within anti-racist pedagogy, with Burdsey (2019) advocating defining concepts sociologically to enable students to more confidently and critically discuss issues of racism, whilst also encouraging students to reflect on their socialisation and experiences of White privilege, preferential prejudice, and racial discrimination in sports settings. To further facilitate such reflections, Hylton (2015) stresses the need to liberate dialogue and foster cooperation to create dissonance within familiar contexts, empowering students to critically reflect and take ownership when discussing 'race', ethnicity, and their relationship with sport. In accord, Dowling and Flintoff (2018) and Wrench (2023) stress how implementing such dialogic, critical, and reflective processes can create safer learning environments whereby robust and honest conversations about 'race' and racism can start to develop. To do so, DiAngelo (2018) suggests that cultivating an atmosphere of humility involves non-confrontational or non-judgemental discussions, avoiding naming or shaming individuals, listening respectfully, respecting diverse opinions, and being open to correction.

Research methods

Given the exploratory angle of this project, a critical constructivist approach informed the interpretive research design by recognising how knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by power dynamics (Adigun et al., 2025; Barker et al., 2013; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). This framework facilitated an in-depth examination of how undergraduate students and alumni perceive and negotiate the impact of anti-racist pedagogies within their lived experiences. Given this focus, a purposive sampling strategy (Robinson, 2024) was adopted to identify participants who could reflect on their experiences of being taught a decolonised sports curricula within their undergraduate studies. For all participants, these studies entailed three compulsory sociology-based modules focused on social justice in sports. Enrolled students were asked to participate in one short (approx. 30-minute) interview conducted within two months of being taught concepts of 'race', scientific essentialism, and racism through a postcolonial lens. Alumni participants were sampled within two years post-module to maintain recall consistency. Before interviews, they received all teaching materials; however, we acknowledge that their perspectives were also shaped by prior schooling and broader pedagogical experiences across other undergraduate modules. Recruiting alumni was premised on exploring the prolonged impact of decolonising curricula within their respective developing careers, current jobs, and/or personal lives. Pre-recruitment attendance record checks were completed to ensure all participants attended all taught sessions. Whilst the three sociology-based modules were taught alongside traditional sports and exercise science modules, including biomechanics, physiology, and psychology – all of which often emphasise traditional positivist methodologies and interpretations – recognising Carrington's (2015) concerns, we acknowledge how only three out of 24 weeks taught content (15 hours) within social science modules addressed postcolonial theory.

We were also conscious that the research team included two academics who had taught the sociology-based modules, and all authors self-identified as White British. To avoid potential coercion (Comer, 2009), recruitment and data collection were completed by a research assistant (Author Two), no financial or academic incentives were offered, and the voluntary nature of the study was stressed during all stages of communication. Similarly, during the recruitment phase, participants were further reminded that their (non)participation or withdrawal would not impact their undergraduate studies in any way, whilst they were also reassured that their responses would not result in judgment, discrimination, or preferential treatment. The research team did this by implementing the following four processes: (1) all interviews were conducted after participants had completed relevant module assessments, (2) anonymity was maintained by the research assistant numerically coding each participant a pseudonym tied to their degree programme – Physical Education and Sports Coaching (PESC), Sports and Exercise Therapy (SET), and Sport and Exercise Science (SES), (3) as module directors, neither Author One or Three were informed who had or had not, participated in the study, ensuring participants and their specific responses remained confidential, and (4) once volunteered, all interviewees received a participation information sheet and consent form detailing the research aims, procedure, recruitment rationale, and participant rights, and provided written and verbal informed consent. Despite such measures, we recognise the inevitable potential or impressions of conflicts of interest arising from student-based studies within one's institution/department.

Fourteen current students and four alumni were recruited from an approximate sample size of over three hundred current and former students. Representative of the broader sports student cohort demographics, fifteen participants self-identified as White British and mostly hailed from Yorkshire and the North East of England, whilst three participants hailed from America, with two self-identifying as Hispanic and one as African American. Fifteen interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams; as Oliffe et al. (2021) explain, such interviews offered flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and broader reach but also presented challenges regarding potential technical issues, limited rapport-building, and possible barriers to non-verbal communication and contextual depth. In addition, three interviews took place at the university campus, away from staff offices and sports

social spaces, based on participant preference and ensuring confidentiality. Interviews were informed by a semi-structured guide, whereby questions focused on (a) students' prior awareness and experiences of the concepts of 'race', ethnicity, and racial inequalities, (b) current understandings of 'race', ethnicity, and racial essentialism, (c) perceptions of the impact of the being taught decolonising curricula through anti-racist pedagogy and, (d) reflections on the value of anti-racist education more broadly.

Recorded interviews were manually transcribed verbatim and anonymised by the research assistant before being imported into N-Vivo 12 for organisation and visualisation purposes and then shared with the research team. Data was thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide, beginning with the research team reading each imported interview transcript separately to familiarise themselves with the data (Phase One). We then discussed initial thoughts before collaboratively creating 48 codes (Phase Two). These codes were grouped into emerging themes, including students' limited exposure to the concept of 'race' before university, increasing racial literacy, and the positive impact of collaborative dialogues within taught sessions (Phase Three). These themes were further inductively developed and reviewed, an iterative process whereby each researcher scrutinised each theme to ensure empirical consistency and analytical rigour. This process produced eight key themes (Phases Four and Five), which are presented and critically discussed through a postcolonial lens in the following sections: (a) students' awareness and experiences of the concept of 'race' and racial inequalities before university, (b) students' increased racial literacy and racial awareness, and (c) the perceived value and impact of anti-racist pedagogies (Phase Six). The quality of this research is grounded in ensuring the trustworthiness of findings and transferability, considering the applicability of what has been found to other educational contexts. Reflexivity, transparency, and rich, thick descriptions further enhance the study's rigour and validity, strengthening its analytical depth.

Results and discussion

Students' understanding of 'race' and racial inequalities before university

Participants were asked to retrospectively articulate their understanding of 'race' and awareness of racial inequalities before attending university to ascertain a base level. Probes included the extent to which participants were exposed to postcolonial thinking within their compulsory education and the degrees to which they were exposed to ethnic diversity through their family, community, and regional networks. In reference to the latter, minority ethnic students discussed their racial awareness before attending university, with SET Student 2 stating, 'I think from my own experience like I'm from a mixed-race background. So, my family people in my immediate family look different. So, there's like different things I would notice' (interview). Devoid of such lived experiences, responses by self-identified White British students are most represented by the following quote:

> I'd say I am from a town which is very White. There is not a lot of diversity, so it was never like a massive conversation. It was kind of mentioned here and there but it was never like a big thing that we learnt about. I've never been taught to an extent what it [racial inequality] is and things like that. [PESC Student 6]

Through such comparative responses, as Azzartio and Harrison (2008) note and participants acknowledged, it was evident that students' ethnicity partly informed their understanding of 'race'. Furthermore, as Burdsey (2019) discovered, self-identified White British students' cultural upbringing shielded them from and partly stemmed their knowledge of the realities of racial oppression and inequality. Indeed, besides their specific towns, many participants acknowledged how, from their perspective, Yorkshire and North East England are predominantly White regions – perceptions largely supported by Office for National Statistics Census data[2] (GOV.UK, 2022). Therefore, for these students, their personal experiences and socialisation into and through sport were predominantly with White peers and informed by White coaches.

Irrespective of many participants' ethnically homogenous upbringing, the reflection that 'race' and racial inequalities were not taught in detail at school was noteworthy, as evidenced in these consensus-based reflections:

> Nothing in primary school [ages 4-11] and I don't think so in secondary school [11-16]. We had like PSHE [personal, social, health and economic education] and citizenship and that. Kind of sociology which kind of slightly touched on that [race education] and that's where we did racial inequality and social inequality. It wasn't very detailed. [SET Student 3]

> I think the main thing for me was through secondary school you had a citizenship course, which wasn't too informative. They just kind of gave bare-bones explanations. [SES Student 3]

While recalling some related knowledge, these participants' uncertainty and retrospective appraisals illustrate how completing formal education in predominantly White British populated schools offered little transformative knowledge and pedagogy in this respect. It is important to note that these retrospective accounts do not represent current UK education curricula and practices, as many participants entered primary school in 2005 and left secondary school in 2016. This point of reference is useful when considering how, in the UK, the decolonising movement began in the early 2000s (Bird & Pitman, 2020) and only moved away from tokenistic diversity in the past decade (Andrews, 2019). However, this observation is perhaps still pertinent given Heleta's (2016) critique of the UK education system, whereby policy and practice often lack coherent conceptualisations of 'race'.

It seemed that a combination of participants' lack of personal, social, and educational exposure to the concept of 'race' and awareness of racial inequalities possibly contributed to a further trend: participants' lack of confidence, apprehension and even fear of openly discussing these topics before attending university.

> I wouldn't be very comfortable, to be fair. I wasn't really wanting to discuss it. You don't want to upset anyone by saying the wrong thing. [PESC Student 1]

> Before coming to Uni, I wouldn't be overly comfortable just because I don't know a lot about it, and you wouldn't want to say the wrong thing. Saying the wrong thing – you don't mean it. [PESC Student 6]

Across interviews, phrases such as 'saying the wrong thing' and 'I wouldn't want to accidentally offend anyone' were expressed by several self-identified White British participants. When probed, these concerns tended to what these students referred to as the 'correct' and 'right' terms and when, where, and even how to use them appropriately. As such, participants often described 'shying away from it'. In one respect, such sentiments demonstrate students' social justice inclinations regarding etiquette, and they also illustrate how peer-group interactions are constrained by fears regarding causing unintentional offences. In this instance, these fears appeared part-informed by a lack of experiential or taught knowledge. Students' fears of implicit or explicit prejudice are understandable when considering Hobson and Whigham's (2018) discomfort when teaching these topics. Therefore, an overarching narrative emerged relating to how self-identified White British sports students seldom discussed, remained silent, and actively avoided conversations regarding 'race' and racial inequalities. Collectively, these findings highlight Young's (2001) issues with traditional White ethnocentric curricula devoid of postcolonial perspectives, specifically, not providing young people with the necessary knowledge and linguistic tools to confidently and respectfully engage in race-related dialogue that can critique the instrumentalised power systems of colonialism. Arguably, such progressive and transformative educational decolonial content is needed given self-identified White British participants' lack of experiential knowledge and desire not to offend.

Students increased racial literacy and racial awareness post-module engagement

Participants were asked to reflect on sociology-based modules' impact on their racial literacy and awareness. One of the first themes identified by students was the definition, differentiation, and

understanding of the concepts of 'race', ethnicity, and racism. Evidencing learned knowledge, SES Student 2 explained, 'race is a made-up thing linked to physical attributes, like the colour of your skin, the shape of your face, and hair texture', whilst SES Student 4 stated, 'ethnicity is a group of people who share a social context or a culture. It is linked to cultural attributes of an individual, with a shared social context'. Illustrating a perceived value from such teaching, SES Student 3 noted, 'I think my understanding has been influenced a lot by the modules because I used to use 'race' and ethnicity interchangeably, not realising they are two different things'. Whilst seemingly foundational in the abstract, academically differentiating these terms provided students with necessary clarity, as Burdsey (2019) and Hobson and Whigham (2018) advocated, foregrounding further critiques of the concept of 'race', scientific essentialism within sport and socially constructed racial inequalities.

During sociology-based modules, students were introduced to concepts such as scientific essentialism through a decolonial lens. Reflecting upon this unfamiliar content, PESC Student 4 confidently explained, 'it [race] is a pseudo-scientific term coined in the 18th and 19th centuries' before detailing how, 'it [scientific essentialism] involves false claims of a scientific method and the idea of fixed differences between races'. Offering a critique of such essentialising, PESC Student 5 added, 'there are stereotypes that people have which are not substantiated, like myths that generalise people within different racial categories'. Upon being introduced to critiques of racialisation, some students were more able to recognise the consequences of such thinking, with SET Student 2 remarking, 'I never really heard of the term stacking, but you definitely see it play out in sports and my own personal experiences, as well as when watching sports'. In doing so and reflecting upon the process of self-realisation, SES Student 4 revealed:

> I think the biggest thing for me was that it was evident when you learnt about. You realise it has been evident throughout your life, but you don't realise where it's come from. You know, like growing up, I'd heard people say like Black people can't swim as well as White people. And you know, it's something that you never sought of questioned, you know, you didn't know why people were saying that and where it's come from.

These quotes demonstrate how adopting a decolonial lens through constructivist methods and critiquing positivistic deducting reasoning enabled these students to gain greater racial literacy and realise answers to previously unknown or unquestioned racialised sports practices and trends. How such knowledge was learned and applied enabled students to begin deconstructing essentialist practices in sports, which Masaka (2019) considers to be a crucial step toward achieving epistemic justice through subverting colonial ideas that have shaped how non-European bodies have been viewed for centuries.

Demonstrating further transformative effects of such learning, some students referred to how these modules ignited their social justice knowledge and possibilities for allyship. While most participants indicated that their understanding of the term racism had not changed, many reported how anti-racism was a new concept to them, with SES Student 3 stating, 'before university, I didn't think there was an actual thing called anti-racism. I didn't realise that was a thing'. Evidencing a newfound understanding of anti-racism, Alumni 1 denoted how 'anti-racism is when you actively work against racism and strive for more equality and unity between everyone'. Whilst we had no specific evidence of any participants engaging in anti-racist activism, there was a shared sentiment that students now felt more understanding of and able to enact their learned knowledge and enhanced criticality towards 'real-life' sporting situations.

Students' reflections on anti-racist pedagogical approaches

Sociology-based modules followed a relatively standard delivery approach for more theoretically based subjects. This approach included students attending one themed lecture (i.e. 'race' & scientific essentialism in sport), followed by a related seminar the same day. Lectures typically involved didactic pedagogy, with occasional videos and interactive apps used to engage students. Seminars typically involve a series of small group tasks, including case studies, generally followed by whole class

discussions and an evaluation of learned knowledge across the day. Whilst this approach is common practice, many participants primarily attributed their newfound confidence to lecturers' informative, dialogical, and supportive pedagogy, as denoted by SES Student 4:

> I'd say I felt comfortable because we were in an educational situation. It makes it a lot easier to discuss things when it is for educational purposes. So, for example, in seminars, they'd [Author One & Two] talk about the situation at hand and then, to further our knowledge, ask for our experiences and opinions. So, I think that helps, that helps a lot.

Reiterating this sentiment, SES Student 1 noted:

> Because it is a sensitive topic, so it's quite hard to deliver, but it has been delivered quite openly and like you can ask questions without feeling uncomfortable on the subject. It's been very open to discuss.

Probing more specific examples, SES Student 3 stated:

> I'd say I felt quite comfortable discussing it [race and racism] during the seminars. I think it's made highly clear when we have the seminars that you know it's sort of a safe space for people to be comfortable. It's, you know, it's to free up discussions.

Students' reflections underscore the value they attached to delivered content and how this was done, demonstrating how informative, dialogical, and supportive approaches facilitate learning. Particularly, students valued being encouraged to share their experiences and/or observations of racial discrimination in sports and broader society. DiAngelo (2018) and Race et al. (2022) recommended that this approach fostered a safe space where elements of humility, non-confrontational and non-judgmental dialogue were coupled with a commitment to respectfully listening and acknowledging others' experiences. One way these elements were fostered was lecturers openly discussing their White privilege and personal experiences.

Further probing participants' pedagogical preferences revealed their fondness for sport-related case studies, as denoted by PESC Student 1:

> The case studies help bring everything together. All the stuff you've been taught. I think it helps you put a real-life example on it. It gives you a better understanding because without a real-life example you don't really understand it.

Perhaps illustrating the sustainable knowledge attained through case studies, Alumni 4 reflected 'it [seminar] involved practical applications and numerous case studies. There were in-depth examinations of various instances of discrimination and racism within the sports industry, which was quite eye-opening'. Case studies enabled students to externalise and depersonalise their initial prohibitions and fears while enhancing their comprehension and engagement. As such, this finding aligns with Phillips et al. (2019), who highlight the benefits of using case studies to stimulate critical discussions.

Knowledge gained appeared sustainable and impactful in strengthening participants' commitment to social justice. For example, PESC Student 6 observed, 'I think I've been a bit sheltered from it [racism], and maybe I was a bit naive to what was happening. Now I think it's like a wider world and not just the small bubble that I've been in'. Detailing awareness and engagement in race-related discussions, SES Student 3 articulated:

> I'd say in terms of value in everyday life, I'd definitely say I'm more aware. I'm more aware when I am talking about sort of racism and inequality in society with regards to race and ethnicity. Just simply from the terminology I use, the way I phrase things. It also makes you more aware, now you pick up on it a lot more.

Offering retrospective accounts on the belated application of self-realised knowledge, Alumni 4 contemplated:

> I think at the time [of study] it was very difficult to underpin how valuable it was. But I would now agree that it is valuable for the work I am in [Physical Education teacher]. Because you don't know what you don't know at the time of undergraduate. Now that I can apply everything that we've learnt, you see the value. Like you see all the work preparing me to come into the world of teaching.

Taken as a collective, these findings illustrate how these critical sociology-based modules exposed and broadened participants' knowledge, deepened their interest, and bolstered their confidence in critically discussing these 'race-related' topics. As such, demonstrating Mignolo's (2011) point, sport and postcolonialism can be addressed by forging a supportive and collaborative learning environment, whereby epistemic disobedience is fostered through critiquing and challenging the legacy of colonial perspectives.

Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight the transformative role of educational modules in developing students' racial literacy and their confidence in confronting issues of racism and racial discrimination. This is especially evident in the reflections of students who took part in the study from predominantly white towns in northern England, who initially struggled to comprehend the full scope of racial inequalities. Their limited understanding of these issues was primarily shaped by their White privilege, which often led to apprehension when discussing 'race', despite familiarity with terms like 'race', 'ethnicity', and 'racism'. This discomfort was compounded by a lack of experiential knowledge before university, with many students fearing they might say something wrong or inadvertently perpetuate harmful stereotypes. However, by integrating critical sociology modules grounded in anti-racist pedagogy and postcolonial theory, students who took part in the research stated how they began to engage more deeply with these complex topics. The application of postcolonial theory proved particularly significant in challenging these students to question entrenched racial biases in sports and broader society. Postcolonialism, focusing on understanding power dynamics, historical legacies, and colonial structures, provided a lens through which students could critically examine the racialised power structures that persist in both sports and broader societal systems. By pushing these students to reflect on how racial inequality is deeply embedded in societal frameworks, postcolonial theory offers a critical tool for disrupting these normalised injustices.

A key finding from the research is that seminar-based discussions created 'safe spaces' where students who contributed to the research felt empowered to reflect on their White privilege critically and engage with the uncomfortable realities of racial inequality. These safe spaces proved vital for fostering dialogue, allowing these students to question their assumptions and confront the power imbalances inherent in their social contexts. For many, this process of self-reflection and learning to challenge their biases represented a critical step in becoming more attuned to racial issues within sports and society. As participants explored the intersections of 'race' and sport, they came to appreciate the complexity of racism and recognised the importance of anti-racism as an ongoing, active practice rather than a passive stance. This study underscores the value of incorporating postcolonial and decolonial theory into higher education curricula, particularly in sports and exercise science education. It highlights the necessity of creating pedagogical environments that encourage critical thinking about the intersections of 'race', power, and sport while also addressing the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism. Postcolonial theory challenged students who participated in the study to move beyond surface-level understandings of 'race' and confront the deeper structures of racial injustice that shape both sport and society. While discussions of 'race' and racism can be uncomfortable and challenging, the research reveals that it is this discomfort that is essential for meaningful growth and change. These modules facilitated a more nuanced understanding of how racial discrimination manifests in sports and broader social contexts by grounding theoretical discussions in real-world examples. Young (2001) highlights the importance of engaging students in 'race-related' conversations, emphasising that such dialogues can reduce prejudice, increase empathy, and promote mutual respect. The findings of this research stress the critical role of critical sociology-based modules in higher education institutions in decolonising knowledge and implementing anti-racist pedagogy to equip students with the tools to address racial discrimination. Through the integration of such ideas, students are not only better prepared

to confront racism but are also empowered to contribute to the development of a more inclusive and anti-racist society.

Notes

1. Constructivist approaches to research seek to gain an understanding into how people create meaning in their lives.
2. Data collected every 10 years regarding population and demographics within England and Wales

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ORCID

Spencer Swain http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2191-0041
Mark Mierzwinski http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9751-5865

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