Report on the conference "Let's not talk about racism": Why it is hard to talk about and how this affects society in Northern Ireland

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

Report on the conference

"LET'S NOT TALK ABOUT RACISM":

WHY IT IS HARD TO TALK ABOUT AND HOW THIS AFFECTS SOCIETY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Compiled by LeAnne Zarroug [iD], Dina Zoe Belluigi [iD] and Timofey Agarin [iD]

20 June 2025

Available at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15690373

ABSTRACT

After the success of a symposium held in Belfast in June 2024 (Devine et al. 2024), a commitment to reconnect scholars, activists and community members, and those within civic and state bodies was upheld, by organising another opportunity to discuss 'race' and ethnicity research undertaken in Northern Ireland (NI). The period between the two events was marked by an increase in divisive and discriminatory rhetoric about migrants and ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland, with anti-migrant hate crimes and 'riots' brought to the public's attention in July and August 2024.

The conference titled '"Let's not talk about racism": Why it is hard to talk about and how this affects society in Northern Ireland', was held on the 1st – 2nd April 2025. A concept note was circulated in December 2024, with an open call for submission of presentations. 20 people spoke formally at the event, in a conference-like format, with 3 leading a roundtable, and opportunities throughout the two days for the participation of attendees. 71 attendees came from a range of backgrounds with a shared interest of discussing the persistence of racism in NI.

This report outlines the highlights of points raised by those who participated in the multiple panels and discussions of each day; intersectionality as an underpinning lens used to explore racism in NI; and key takeaways to do with: Education, Government and Policy, Racial Fatigue and Collaboration. Continuing the practice of the 2024 conference, discussions made outside of referenced presentations were held under Chatham House Rule, and as such those are not attributed to an individual.

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF ETHNIC CONFLICT

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST — EST 1845

CENTRE FOR INCLUSION, TRANSFORMATION AND EQUALITY

LIST OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The title of the conference explicitly made apparent that public discussion of 'race' and racism in Northern Ireland (NI) is avoided and perceived to pose difficulties, with the resultant silence adversely impacting society.

A concept note was circulated with the dates, time and location of the conference with a call for proposals from "academics, practitioners and community activists" (Appendix 1). 'Riots' of August 2024 shaped the framing of the conference, with the starting point of the "tacit acceptance of racist attitudes" in NI impacting the main goal of the conference, to explore what "racism does to society", through a variety of areas such as policy and education while calling for the highlighting themes such as everyday racism. One key contribution called for, was the opportunity for solution solving which was reflected within presentations and round talk discussions.

Within the NI context, dominant narratives continue to project society as homogeneously 'white', despite the changing population of NI. The percentage of racialised ethnic minorities, as seen in the most recent census, has doubled from the reported figure in 2011 for instance (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland 2023). Mentions of multicultural societies, such as London, have reportedly caused shock amongst NI men (Kavanagh 2023), highlighting how whiteness is understood as the preferred norm in NI. Whiteness has been described as a key component of the formation of both Unionist and Nationalist identities (Connolly and Khaoury 2010), positioning ethnic minorities as either 'Others' or 'newcomers', 'caught in the middle' of the two dominant 'white' communities (Kavanagh 2023; Khaoury 2012). The dominance of whiteness in NI also works to impact academia. Belluigi (2024) studied how the White Racial Frame extends into the academic research culture, limiting racial consciousness, and creating and sustaining gaps in knowledge. Gilligan (2022, 436) argues that such gaps are intentional, as NI is commonly isolated from academic research about the UK and the Republic of Ireland, thereby methodologically positioning NI as "an alien irruption".

This conference intended to disrupt the normative nature of Whiteness to actively and critically think about 'race' and racism in NI. The two day programme was structured around themes of those who contributed (Appendix 2 and 3). It brought individuals together who were interested in tackling and discussing the impacts of racism in NI society over the course of two days. Organised by Timofey Agarin and Dina Zoe Belluigi, the event was jointly hosted by the Centre for the Study of Ethnic Conflict (HAPP) and the Centre for Inclusion, Transformation and Equality (SSESW) of Queen's University Belfast. Funding for the event and this report was secured by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account, and contributions from the Schools of History, Anthropology and Politics, and the School of Social Science, Education and Social Work. This report was compiled from the notes of LeAnne Zarroug and edited by Dina Zoe Belluigi.

DAY ONE

Day one was composed of two panels. Panel 1 was titled 'What is silent racism and what it does to societies' wherein presentations focused on *attitudes* present within NI as related to racism. Cameron Lippard and Catherine McNamee started the discussions off by utilising survey data to measure differences in attitudes held by the dominantly-placed social groups, towards people seeking asylum from Syria and Ukraine. Following that, Sadiya Akram focused on the Belfast 'race riots' which had occurred in August of the year prior. They discussed how the distinctive racial, sectarian elements present in NI may have created the conditions for such a riot to occur. Notions of ignorance and silence which encapsulate NI were discussed; which Ebun Joseph took further in their presentation, to discuss the prevalence of anti-Black racism and the lack of attention paid to tackling it across the island of Ireland.

Panel 2 was titled 'Understanding unequal causes of treatment'. Monish Bhatia started the panel with a presentation on their research on air deportation of migrants in Britain. The violent and targeted nature of the deportations was described, highlighting the brutality of racism. Policy and discourse in the Republic of Ireland was connected by Lucy Michael to the severe disruption of rights for immigrants not-racialised-as-white, in comparison to those racialised as white. This recalled the comparative racist distinctions noted in Lippard and McNamee's earlier presentation. Emma Soye presented future plans for research which involved an ethnographic approach to conceptualising social identities when navigating integration in NI. LeAnne Zarroug brought the panel to a close by providing insights into the sexual lives of Black female university students on a NI campus. The impact of being 'othered' as Black women was explored, where participants reported withdrawing from their sexual and dating lives.

The first panel opened up conversations for how racism works to 'other' individuals and the significance of whiteness in doing this. The second panel expanded this by exploring the ways in which this limited access to rights, services and participation in wider NI society. The contributions from scholars discussing policy in England (Akram; Bhatia) and the Republic of Ireland (Joseph; Michael) contributed to stimulating reflection on NI policy regarding society within its borders and immigration. This allowed for further reflection on the vastness of issues spanning across the island and Britain.

A round table discussion commenced through the presentation of perspectives on the absence of discussion about racism and avoidance of addressing it. Frames of human rights law and equality within the Good Friday Agreement, by Colin Harvey; critical university studies, by Dina Zoe Belluigi; and politics in relation to ethnic conflict, by Timofey Agarin, catalysed further discussions by audience members.

DAY TWO

The second day involved two panels, 'Challenges to equal access' and 'Unsilencing racism: exploring community dynamics and racialization in NI'. Across these panels were eight presentations. Ruth McAreavey and Katharine Wright started the day by discussing barriers to healthcare for immigrant women across NI. They uncovered that the border had a physical and psychological toll on immigrant women, in regard to their seeking and obtaining healthcare services. Suzanne Whitten outlined how the development of philosophical thinking in the primary and secondary education of children, potentially shapes their future citizenry as persons with the capacity to listen and to challenge each other. Rebecca Loader uncovered the institutional racism at work in NI secondary school admission processes, wherein selective schools protect their institutions as 'white' only spaces. Focusing on higher education, Jamie-Lucas Campbell identified where the Student Union fails as a space of inclusion for all students, where belonging was revealed as conditional.

The final panel contributed psychological perspectives on interactions within educational and community spaces in NI. Gulseli Baysu and Danielle Blaylock investigated how relations between the dominantly-placed 'communities' in NI spill out towards ethnic minorities. Drawing from a study of cross-group friendship in England, Rhiannon Turner outlined how ethnic diversity within secondary school may encourage confidence amongst pupils and teachers about speaking about 'race'. Elida Cena presented a co-designed study, wherein South and East Asian international students' experiences of microaggression and insults on campus were explored.

On this day, educational and community spaces were constructed as places where racism existed but may also be tackled with purposeful interventions. The focus on education informed the final roundtable wherein education was identified as one of the key take-away in order to dismantle racism. Additional take-aways contributed by wider participants are outlined at the end of this report.

THE PREVALENCE OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN DISCUSSIONS OF RACISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Discussions ranged from theoretical to the implications and implementations for policy-making. While an array of theories were discussed, the concept of intersectionality stood out as being utilised by a range of presenters.

The Black US feminist scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (2004, 2) described in an interview that "intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you're standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both." While this excerpt alludes to the impact at one intersection of two axes of power, intersectionality as a theory has been applied to comprehending the impact of oppression of 'race', gender, class, sexuality amongst others to highlight how experiences are tied together (Yuval-Davis 2015). This is because those with multiple intersecting identities may be invisibilised when the attention of policy or research is narrowed to primary identities – such as the experiences of Black migrant women. When linked with investigating racism, intersectionality highlights how different identities can result in racism occurring.

While a topic of focus of the prior conference in 2024 was skin-based racism across NI, presentations at this event utilised skin-based racism to discuss how discrimination works across a range of intersections. This was seen most clearly across two focal groups in the discussions: people seeking asylum and university education. In both contexts, migrant status, gender and class was seen to shape how racism was experienced in Northern Ireland.

Comparisons enabled the impact of skin-based racism coupled with xenophobia to be exposed for different groups of people seeking asylum in NI. The intersectional lens helped reshape explanations of the racism targeted at so called 'non-white' asylum seekers in their experiences of daily racism (in England, Bhatia; and Ireland, Michael), coupled with data outlining contrasting settled attitudes towards 'white' asylum seekers (Lippard and McNamee). In such ways, the expansive nature of whiteness was exposed in relation to the 'face' of one's migrant status in NI.

Black female university students discuss their withdrawal from dating, working to uncover gender and 'race' as key aspects of their dating lives in NI. During the discussion, it was pointed out that some experiences Black women spoke about in nightclub spaces also occurred to non-Black women. It is intersectionality that allows for the retrieval and articulation of Black women's experiences of possessing a dual identity status (Thomas et al. 2011).

A final intersection uncovered was between 'race' and class. These shaped the experiences of South and East Asian international students in NI higher education as they experienced microaggressions, stemming from stereotypes related to their ethnicity. For example, Chinese students were assumed to be good mathematically. Both South and East Asian students experienced hostility by local students about their presumed wealth as international fee payers. The specificity of the experiences of different communities meant that different intersections were highlighted and used to uncover how racism can impact across and within communities.

While rarely referred directly as "intersectionality" by all speakers, it was of interest to note that speakers and attendees were often using intersectional approaches to investigate and comprehend racism, moving beyond rigid and separate categorisations of groups and utilising inter- and intra- categorisations to discuss the complexities of discrimination for different individuals and communities.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS of *"Let's not talk about racism"* in Northern Ireland

This conference provided opportunity for a range of initiatives, experiences, concerns and research findings to be shared. Four key take-aways have been highlighted in this section.

EDUCATION

Throughout the conference, formal education through the life course was discussed as a space and a system with potential: continuing to reproduce systematic racism, and contributing to the dismantling of whiteness and racism.

Researchers shared findings on how systematic racism was being used to prevent so-called 'newcomers' to NI from securing access to schools, with selection acting as a reinforcement of a racial barrier. Education was discussed as a space which works to reaffirm racial barriers and hierarchies, especially within universities, a trickle-on effect of not speaking about racism. This was used to discuss the response to the riots from higher education institutions wherein the response to the riots focused on international ethnic minority students, failing to include home ethnic minority students who may have been impacted, continuing the idea that local students are only from the two dominant white groups.

Despite this, most of the conversation surrounding education emphasized its transformative potential. The importance of access to impactful resources, for both learners and educators, may transform how both think about 'race'. In universities, it was suggested that students are enabled to also have space and resources for dealing with and speaking about racism.

GOVERNMENT AND POLICY

Policy took up a large space in discussions wherein it was identified as not moving fast enough to effectively tackle or protect against racism, and to provide the conditions for a healthy democracy.

It was clear from discussion that the response from the government, particularly in relation to the 'race riots' occurring last August in Belfast, was ineffective in even acknowledging racism. Those in roles with statutory duties spoke of the limitations this placed on their agency to enact rights-based practices, and hold relevant bodies and leaders accountable.

Ineffectiveness in acknowledging racism in riots, spread to lack of acknowledgement or government action in other areas of life which impacted how ethnic minorities moved throughout NI society. For example, healthcare was identified as an area wherein racism was unchallenged especially when it came to accessing healthcare between the border.

Policy in regard to data collection was referred to, mirroring the concerns discussed last year wherein data is still not being accurately collected, stored or made accessible for researchers, and for holding responsible bodies accountable.

RACIAL FATIGUE

Multiple individuals spoke about the struggle of anti-racism in NI. The denial, resistance, lack of funding, systemic support and time made it difficult to continue. People spoke of burn out and of feeling frustrated with the slow and reactionary pace of policy-making and implementation. The lack of vision and leadership about racism within NI society made it difficult to continue fighting.

Within presentations, it was clear that one way that ethnic minorities dealt with racism was by withdrawing from NI society, either for self-preservation or by necessity. An example included finding alternatives to local healthcare services, a concern which continued from last year's presentation. Disengagement and un-belonging were also revealed in universities, where various studies indicated that students would withdraw from the Student Union, campus culture and relationships. In the discussions, members of various civil society organisations and government bodies spoke of working in a vacuum and often at risk to themselves.

Recognising such fatigue, it was acknowledged that better support throughout healthcare, education, housing and more should be present for individuals and groups who are targets and victims of racism, in addition to supporting those who persevere in anti-racism efforts.

COLLABORATION

A central concern of the conference was how to mobilise against the denial, silence and inaction about racism in NI. The strongest emphasis was on the call for collaboration, especially across academia, grassroots organisations, community activists and key insiders of government bodies.

A focal point of such collaboration was policy. Academics and their institutions were called upon to utilise the strength of their academic voices and knowledge to help enact change faster. Students in higher education were highlighted as possible collaborators.

There was encouragement for other institutions to get involved and host future symposiums and gatherings, across NI, to share space for anti-racism and resistance. This was coupled with thinking for the next event, on the importance of reaching out and encouraging more activists and individuals working with and in communities to contribute to and inform future gatherings.

CONCLUSION

Continuing from the positive steps towards making connections last year, the conference *"Let's not talk about racism" in Northern Ireland* was both timely and necessary, especially in light of 'race riots' of 2024.

Participants at this year's conference spoke of sustained levels of racism prevalent in cross-sections of NI society, and repeatedly noted that the limited attention to causes of the 'race riots' of 2024 have contributed to it being poorly understood and acted upon. Racist mobilisations would recur in the future – as *absent* was engagement with the wider population through such means as robust commitments to **equality in education** for those dominantly-placed as well as those perceived to be 'newcomers', commitment to **equality in government policy and legislation**, and attention and investment from civil society and community organisations to intergroup contact.

The anti-immigrant rhetoric made recurrence during the June 2025 disorders in Ballymena and around NI. These appear to show patterns of mobilisation and unrest similar to outbreaks in the past: these current riots appear in areas with significantly curtailed opportunities for socioeconomic development and growth, and low levels of community organisations, which may compound perceptions of neglect by the central/provincial authorities and competition from 'newcomers'. Participants of the April 2024 conference had highlighted that precisely such conditions needed to be addressed to prevent racist mobilisation in the future.

The conference provided a platform for a range of people to speak about their issues with, concerns about and experiences of with racism within Northern Ireland. Additionally, it provided time and opportunity to connect with related research projects, groups and key persons invested in addressing the topic. Key take-aways involve a focus on Education, Government and Policy, Racial fatigue and Collaboration, continuing dialogue from last year's conference.

REFERENCE LIST

Belluigi, D.Z. (2024) 'Signs of Dysconscious Racism and Xenophobiaism in Knowledge Production and the Formation of Academic Researchers: A National Study', *Journal of academic ethics,* online first. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-024-09545-4

Crenshaw, K. (2004). 'Intersectionality: The double bind of race and gender interview with Kimberlé Crenshaw', *American Bar Association*, Spring. https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later [Accessed 18 June 2025]

Connolly, P and Khaoury, R. (2010) 'Whiteness, racism and exclusion in Northern Ireland: A critical race perspective.' in C Coulter & M Murray (eds), *Northern Ireland after the Troubles? A Society in Transition.* Manchester University Press, pp. 192-212. https://doi.org/10.7765/9780719095160.00019

Delgado, R. (2011) 'Rodrigo's reconsideration: intersectionality and the future of critical race theory', *Iowa law review*, 96(4), pp. 1247-1288. https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/faculty/43/ [Accessed 18 June 2025]

Devine, P., Belluigi, D., Moynihan, Y and Anand, A. (2024) "Race and Ethnicity Research in Northern Ireland: Challenges and Opportunities". Local Race/ Ethnicity Research symposium, Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13981259

Gilligan, C. (2022) 'Methodological nationalism and the Northern Ireland blind-spot in ethnic and racial studies', *Ethnic and racial studies*, 45(3), pp. 431–451. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1950793

Kavanagh, T. (2023) '"We now have Catholics and Blacks": Whiteness in a Northern Irish rugby club', *International review for the sociology of sport*, 58(3), pp. 491–510. https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902221112776

Khaoury, R. (2012) The Schooling Experiences of Minority Ethnic Students in Northern Ireland. Doctorate of Philosophy thesis, Queen's University Belfast. https://pure.qub.ac.uk/files/198680301/Khaoury_The_schooling_70208166.pdf

Equality Commision for Northern Ireland (2023). *Census 2021 Briefing: Release 2, Phase 1 Results.* [pdf] https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Corporate/Commission%20Meetings/2023/cmeeting250123/EC-23-01-11-Census21databriefingnoteAC.pdf [Accessed 13 June 2025].

Thomas, A.J., Hacker, J.D. and Hoxha, D. (2011) 'Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women', *Sex roles*, 64(7–8), pp. 530–542. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9939-y

Yuval-Davis, N. (2015). 'Situated intersectionality and social inequality' *Raisons Politiques*, 2(58), pp. 91–100. https://shs.cairn.info/revue-raisons-politiques-2015-2-page-91 [Accessed 18 June 2025]

Appendix 1: CONCEPT NOTE / CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

"Let's not talk about racism": Why it is hard to talk about and how this affects society in Northern Ireland

Date(s): April 1, 2025 - April 2, 2025
Location: Queen's University Belfast
Time: 10:00 - 17:00

Early August 2024 saw an anti-immigration protest rally at the City Hall of Belfast and the rioting in South Belfast in subsequent days. In the immediate surroundings of the Queen's University Belfast and along Botanic Avenue, 'Belfast's most multi-cultural street', the shops of 'minority ethnic' people were vandalised. Over several days, race hate attacks were directed against homes and businesses belonging to black and minority ethnic people across Northern Ireland. While on this occasion the riots took off after the nativist British nationalists had mobilised racist elements in society, the sectarian structure of Northern Ireland society - on both sides of the ethnopolitical divide – maintains intolerance of central relevance in the province.

The tacit acceptance of racist attitudes in politics, society and the university has profound relevance for the instability of intergroup relations in NI. We identify absent engagement with racist attitudes, practices and conduct as one of the key effects of the privileged focus on accommodation of nationalist/unionist identities in the province. Sensitivities about the concerns of the two major groups in NI normalises presence of racism in the everyday; commitment to social and political stability in its current form additionally perpetuates blindness to other identity groups and to the plurality of peoples' lived experience. Where discussions about racism take place, these too are often presented as a zero-sum game between the dominant groups: nationalists/unionists, locals/newcomers, "whites"/"people of colour". "Misery research" is often times the result. However - as copious studies and reports on Northern Ireland societies highlight - problems, challenges and concerns are widely shared across groups, affecting each and every individual in the society

The absence of engagement with what "racism" *does* to society as a whole, is the theme we would like to centre. We invite contributions that engage with one or several issues during this two day workshop:
- Everyday racism and consequences of it being glossed over
- Misrecognition of diversity in the NI society and challenges this poses for appreciation of individual equality
- Dangers of neglecting alternative vectors of group-ward organisation
- Effects of rhetoric/policies that naturalise/ essentialise protestant and catholic identity groups
- Cost of ignoring the continuities of interests, values, assumptions and traditions
- Opportunities to devise and implement solutions, such as Bill of Rights, and why these are needed, what benefit would these bring, what might these constrain etc
- Finally, the role of anti-racism education in a deeply divided society; risks to academic freedom/thought and scope for action within the 'post-race' university

Our workshop invites contributions from *academics, practitioners and community activists* to join in the discussion on the impact that the oversight of everyday and explicit racism has in contemporary Northern Ireland. We invite proposals for individual paper contributions and/or panels that engage empirically, conceptually and normatively with racism in Northern Ireland, and welcome comparative research including that on societies in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. The workshop will be in-person and will take place on the afternoon April 1 and throughout April 2.

Our aim is to bring the best of contemporary research on racism, "race" relations and identity-centred politics, the impact of deep and/or growing divisions between groups, and factors facilitating evolution of outgroup enmity on the island of Ireland and in Great Britain. We welcome new research by practitioners and community groups, established academics as well as by early career scholars. *We also welcome people working in and interested in practicalities of the absent discussion on racism to join in the audience.*

- Timofey Agarin and Dina Zoe Belluigi
  December 2024

Appendix 2. PROGRAMME

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF ETHNIC CONFLICT

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

CENTRE FOR INCLUSION, TRANSFORMATION AND EQUALITY

"Let's not talk about racism":

Why it is hard to talk about and how this affects society in Northern Ireland

Centre for the Study of Ethnic Conflict and *Centre for Inclusion, Transformation and Equality*
Queen's University Belfast, April 1-2 2025
Location: 27 University Square/01/003

April 1

1330- Coffee, Meet & Greet

1345 Brief opening, intro

1400-1530 Panel 1: What is Silent Racism and What it does to Societies?

Cameron Lippard, *Appalachian State University* & Catherine B. McNamee, *Queen's University Belfast* **Are Refugees Really Welcome?: Understanding Ethno-Racial Attitudes toward Asylum Seeker Communities in Northern Ireland.**

Sadiya Akram, *University of Birmingham* **Sectarianism as a form of racism: An Analysis of the Belfast Riots of August 2024**

Dr Ebun Joseph, *Institute of Antiracism and Black Studies* **Confronting the Silence: Anti-Black Racism in Northern and Southern Ireland**

1545-1715 Panel 2: Understanding Causes of Unequal Treatment

Monish Bhatia, *University of York*, **Air-Deportations and Liberal Violence in Great Britain**

Lucy Michael, *Research Training and Consultancy* **Immigration, the human rights pause, and the island of Ireland**

Emma Soye, *Queen's University Belfast* **Researching the social dynamics of migration and mobility in NI**

LeAnne Zarroug, *Queen's University Belfast* **"I feel like there's actually a love for Black women in London whereas in NI..." - An Insight Into How Black Female Students Navigate a Predominantly White Sexual Field**

1730 – 1900 Roundtable Discussion: Thinking through the impact of Others' invisibility in a group-centred social context

Beginning with reflections by **Colin Harvey** (Law), **Dina Belluigi** (Social Science), **Timofey Agarin** (Politics), roundtable will invite contributions from participants to move beyond the current impasse, and sketch potential avenues along which scholars, activists and citizens can mobilise for engagement with racism in Northern Ireland.

1930 Dinner close-by: Bites of India, 11 Botanic Avenue BT 71 JG

April 2

0845- Coffee available, Meet & Greet

0915-1045 Panel 3: Challenges to Equal Access

Ruth McAreavey & Katharine AM Wright, *Newcastle University* **Brexit, racism and access to healthcare**

Suzanne Whitten *Queen's University Belfast,* **Critical Civility**

Rebecca Loader, *Queen's University Belfast,* **Unintended consequences? Institutional racism and the Northern Ireland education system**

Jamie-Lukas Campbell, *Queen's University Belfast / TUS Initiative* **Creating Belonging: A Call to Take Up Space in Northern Ireland's Higher Education**

1115-1245 Unsilencing Racism: Exploring Community Dynamics and Racialization in Northern Ireland

Gulseli Baysu**,** *Queen's University Belfast* **Parental Socialization and Critical Consciousness: Exploring Community and Ethnic-Racial Socialization Practices in Northern Ireland**

Rhiannon Turner, *Queen's University Belfast* **Identifying promoters and barriers to cross-group friendship in adolescence and young adults: Confidence in contact, 'race talk' and diverse friendships**

Danielle Blaylock, *Queen's University Belfast* **Bridging Divides: Ripple Effects of Cross-Community Contact on Attitudes Toward the Marginalised Outgroups**

Elida Cena, *Queen's University Belfast* **Racial Microaggressions on Campus: The Hidden Reality of International Students' Experiences at a UK University**

1245 Discussion & ways forward

1330 – 1400 Lunch & Byes

If you have any questions before or after the workshop, please contact:

Timofey Agarin t.agarin@qub.ac.uk and Dina Belluigi, d.belluigi@qub.ac.uk

Appendix 3. ABSTRACTS OF PRESENTATIONS

PANEL 1 - WHAT IS RACISM AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

Are Refugees Really Welcome?: Understanding Ethno-Racial Attitudes toward Asylum Seeker Communities in Northern Ireland.

Cameron Lippard [iD], Appalachian State University & Catherine B. McNamee [iD], Queen's University Belfast

In 2018, Northern Ireland officials and journalists claimed that the local population had created a 'welcoming society' for Syrian refugees. This assertion, however, clashed with reports of rising violence against foreign-born groups, particularly Muslims, leading to Northern Ireland being labeled the 'Race Hate Capital of Europe.'

To investigate these conflicting views, we analyzed data from the 2015 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) and examined four social theories. We focused on whether economic self-interest and social exposure (the contact hypothesis) influenced attitudes toward Syrian refugees. Additionally, we considered cultural marginality and ethnic competition theories in light of Northern Ireland's unique ethnic history. Our findings indicated that multiple theories explain citizens' views. While economic self-interest and social exposure were relevant, racism and sectarianism pointed to a more complex understanding of attitudes, mainly as identity politics related to religious and nationalist ties often fueled opposition to Syrian resettlement.

To expand on these results, we analyzed current NILT data to compare attitudes toward Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. We aimed to identify differences in these attitudes and further explore how economic self-interest, social exposure, cultural marginality, and ethnic competition might vary between the two groups. Lastly, we considered whether racist nativist beliefs influenced negative attitudes.

Sectarianism as a form of racism: An Analysis of the Belfast Riots of August 2024

Sadiya Akram [iD], University of Birmingham

The discipline of political science has paid less attention to the concepts of race and racism than it has to other forms of identity and identity-based discrimination (Akram, 2023). In political science race tends to be treated as a biological, physical or demographic characteristic where race precedes politics rather than thinking that politics plays a constitutive role in shaping race. While Northern Ireland is clearly a sectarian society, debates about racism tend to be isolated from discussions about sectarianism in the province. This issue came to the fore in the riots of August 2024 in Belfast, where anti-immigrant rhetoric aligned with sectarianism and provocation from the far right. This paper considers the relationship between sectarianism and racism, arguing that sectarianism is a form of racism and that we must explore the interrelations between the two as they feature in the Northern Ireland case. I argue that much is to be gained from drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to understand sectarianism's modus operandi in the region, not least because it means taking racism – and, by extension, sectarianism – as being at the root of the Northern Ireland problem rather than a phenomenon peripheral to societal concerns.

Confronting the Silence: Anti-Black Racism in Northern and Southern Ireland

Ebun Joseph 🆔, Institute of Antiracism and Black Studies

Discussions of racism in Ireland are often constrained by the nationalist/unionist framework, leaving little space to address broader racial injustices. As a result, anti-Black racism remains largely invisible, unexamined, and unchallenged. The focus on political and social stability has normalised racism as an accepted aspect of everyday life, with Black communities frequently overlooked in both policy and discourse.

While diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives exist, they often offer only tokenistic representation rather than meaningful action. Black people cannot 'unBlack', 'assimilate' or 'blend in,' making them uniquely vulnerable to discrimination, yet Ireland's policy responses fail to reflect this reality. Despite growing evidence of rising anti-Black racism, concrete strategies to combat it remain absent in both Northern and Southern Ireland.

Drawing on insights from the Equity in the Workplace book series, this paper challenges Ireland's failure to engage with the structural and everyday impacts of anti-Black racism. It calls for a shift beyond performative commitments toward tangible, systemic change. Addressing anti-Black racism is not about isolating one group but recognising its broader societal harms. Racism is not an individual issue; it requires a collective, structural response. Without targeted action, Black communities will continue to be sidelined, and Ireland's commitment to racial justice will remain superficial rather than transformative.

PANEL 2 - UNDERSTANDING THE UNEQUAL CAUSES OF UNEQUAL TREATMENT

Air-Deportations and Liberal Violence in Great Britain

Monish Bhatia 🆔, University of York

This paper contributes to understanding violence in deportation. Drawing on data from eight months of fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2017 and interviews with asylum seekers and practitioners, the article shows how liberal violence, in its various forms, is integral to the contemporary air deportation process. The violence, as argued here, is not unusual, spectacular or resulting from procedural failures and lapses in individual officer judgement, but is integral to it. The conclusion calls for scholars to consider the very practice of deportation as violence and a crime against humanity, gather comprehensive evidence with an explicit aim of making deportations interrogatable by international criminal law, and hold the state accountable and demand reparations.

Immigration, the human rights pause, and the island of Ireland

Lucy Michael [iD], Lucy Michael Research Training and Consultancy

Recent shifts in European migration policy, including the proposed EU Migration Pact and its implications for asylum, border control, and solidarity mechanisms, demand urgent reflection on their impact on the island of Ireland. The unique context of Ireland, with its divided jurisdictions—Northern Ireland (NI) as part of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland (ROI) as an EU member state—raises questions about the interplay between domestic policies, human rights obligations, and regional politics.

This paper examines the "human rights pause"—a term describing the erosion of asylum protections in pursuit of political expediency—and its consequences for Ireland. It interrogates the divergent responses to immigration in NI and ROI over the past two years, assessing policy shifts, public attitudes, and the lived experiences of migrants and asylum seekers. It also explores the opportunities and challenges for local policymakers, including health authorities, educators, and city institutions, in addressing migration-related needs. From integration strategies to resource allocation, these actors face the dual task of fostering inclusion while managing pressures arising from shifting national and international frameworks.

Looking ahead, the paper questions whether a rights-based approach can be reclaimed amidst growing securitization and populism and considers how local initiatives might shape the future of migration governance on the island.

Researching the social dynamics of migration and mobility in NI

Emma Soye [iD], Queen's University Belfast

An increasing number of migration studies are moving away from one-dimensional understandings of 'integration' towards more nuanced perspectives on the social dynamics of diversity. These studies underline the importance of examining the experiences of newcomers and locals alike and of exploring how their interactions are shaped by complex structural and institutional factors in specific contexts (e.g. Schiller and Çağlar, 2016). Of these studies, several have focused on public transport as an intercultural space – 'a crucial site of everyday multiculture' (Wilson, 2011:634).

In Northern Ireland (NI), academic discourse has mirrored public policy in its tendency to view newcomers as interacting with a 'two-community' society. Recent studies argue that this perspective obscures the differences both within and between these so-called groups, calling for a more complex and intersectional approach to research on social relations in NI (e.g. Svašek and Komarova, 2022).

This paper responds by outlining plans for ethnographic research on the complex social dynamics of migration and mobility in NI. It situates the project in the literature and explains how the research methods – participant observation and interviews including participatory methods in Belfast, Derry and Craigavon – will be used to explore how, when, where and why locals and newcomers construct social relations on the move, and to what effect. The paper will point to the ways in which this research might inform and contribute to broader understandings of social cohesion in NI and other diversifying transitional contexts. Feedback on the research is most welcome.

"I feel like there's actually a love for Black women in London whereas in NI..." - An Insight Into How Black Female Students Navigate a Predominantly White Sexual Field

LeAnne Zarroug [iD], Queen's University Belfast

The main objective of this paper is to investigate Black women's navigation of a predominantly white sexual field, existing on the campus of a predominantly white university, Queen's University Belfast. This project actively develops upon Green's (2014, 2015) and Wade's (2022) call for macro powers to be explored throughout Sexual Field Theory and contributes to literature exploring women's sexual choices on campus (Wade 2022). To achieve this objective, snowball sampling was utilised resulting in the participation of six Black women with most participants being West African and having Christian backgrounds. A mixture of face to face and online interviews were utilised to capture participants' experiences. The results of this study revealed that Black women answered to the predominantly white sexual field by withdrawing as they recognised their standard for engaging in sex (being in a long term committed relationship) is unlikely to be fulfilled living in Northern Ireland, speaking of their potential to partner being higher in England. Their sexual habitus and erotic capital failed to be inline with the standards of the white dominated sexual field they now inhabit. This paired with the desire to temporarily de-centre men alongside a lack of discussion of sex outside heteronormative standards, led to an exploration of compulsive heterosexuality and its presentation while existing outside the sexual field. To extend research, an increase in participants and ethnicities would help ensure more experiences are represented.

Round Table Discussion : Thinking through the impact of Others' invisibility in a group-centred social context

Colin Harvey [iD] ,Queen's University Belfast - Law, Dina Zoe Belluigi [iD], Queen's University Belfast - Education and Timofey Agarin [iD], Queen's University Belfast - Politics

In the panel roundtable three academics representing legal, political and social studies invite workshop participants to reflect on the impact that the group-centred social interactions, political representation and legal framework have on minority groups. Years of research highlight the adverse impact of these on perceptions of equality and worth in all groups of NI society. We invite reflection on the impact implicit racism also affects politically significant communities (Catholics and Protestants); how it limits participation options for Others and drowning their voices silences claims for recognition of others' presence, preventing social inclusion and appreciation of others' positionality in contemporary Northern Ireland from both the perspective of practical experience and scholarly reflection.

Sensitivities about the concerns of the two major groups in NI is often used to "normalise" presence of racism in the everyday; commitment to social and political stability in its current form additionally perpetuates blindness to other identity groups and to the plurality of peoples' lived experience. Where discussions about racism take place, these too are often presented as a zero-sum game between the dominant groups: nationalists/ unionists, locals/ "newcomers", "whites"/ "people of colour". However - as copious studies and reports on Northern Ireland societies highlight - problems, challenges and concerns are widely shared across groups, affecting each and every individual in the society. Our panel seeks to go beyond "misery research" and invite contributions from participants to sketch potential avenues along which scholars, activists and citizens can mobilise for engagement with racism in Northern Ireland.

PANEL 3 - CHALLENGES TO EQUAL ACCESS

Brexit, racism and access to healthcare

Ruth McAreavey iD, Newcastle University and Dr Katharine AM Wright iD, Newcastle University

In research for the Equality Commission, we highlight many of the inequalities that have arisen due to Brexit. Despite a commitment by the UK government to uphold existing EU legislation and ensure a 'non-diminution' of rights, we found evidence of immigrant women being denied access to healthcare or being wrongly charged for those services. In this presentation we explore rights to healthcare and the experiences of different women to that healthcare. We recognise race as a socially constructed category that can lead to racist behaviour towards a person or group of people who belong to the same group. We draw on Nancy Fraser's framing of social justice as issues of redistribution, representation and recognition.

Our research included a desk-based study; an expert seminar with third-sector organisations working on a range of issues related to Brexit; interviews with individuals representing organisations reflective of the cross-cutting and intersectional identities of women in NI, with a fair geographical spread reflective of rural and urban lived experiences; and focus groups with women from across NI.

Critical Civility

Suzanne Whitten iD, Queen's University of Belfast

For the last several decades, practitioners of 'philosophy with children' have successfully demonstrated how, through critical dialogue and collaborative thinking, children and young people can develop the intellectual and emotional abilities necessary for leading a flourishing life with others. 'The Critical Civility Project' brings these findings to the schools and youth groups of Northern Ireland, providing educators and youth leaders with the tools necessary to explore some of the most pressing ethical and political issues facing society today, to include racism, tolerance, equality, misinformation, and difference.

Unintended consequences? Institutional racism and the Northern Ireland education system

Rebecca Loader iD, Queen's University Belfast

Central to anti-racist practice has been an understanding of racism as simultaneously a systemic, institutional and interpersonal/individual phenomenon (Aspen Institute, 2017; Lander, 2021). Earlier research in Northern Ireland argued that too great a focus on institutional forms of racism in the region had obscured an understanding of racism as an interpersonal phenomenon, including the factors that predict racist attitudes (Connolly and Khaoury, 2008; Knox, 2011). However, over a decade on, and in view of persistent disparities in educational experience and outcomes, this paper argues for renewed attention to the ways that institutions in Northern Ireland sustain educational inequalities. Through policy analysis and the use of vignettes from interviews with educators, policymakers, and voluntary and community sector representatives, the paper examines how educational policy and day-to-day practice shape migrant pupils' access to desirable schools, the development of a culturally appropriate and diversified curriculum, and efforts to address school-based

racist bullying. In particular, this work highlights educational structures and funding processes, unclear accountability mechanisms and a 'policy parochialism' as factors contributing to institutionalised inequalities. Recognising the need to move beyond identifying instances of racism to formulating solutions (Ledesma and Calderón, 2015), the paper also suggests a number of approaches that may help to challenge and reduce institutional racism in education.

Creating Belonging: A Call to Take Up Space in Northern Ireland's Higher Education

Jamie-Lukas Campbell [iD], Queen's University of Belfast & TUS Initiative

Belonging in higher education is more than a buzzword—it is a vital and foundational element of an inclusive and equitable campus. Yet, for many, the reality often feels distant. With a focus on Northern Ireland, where universities face unique challenges shaped by history, community needs, and global market pressures. This paper critiques traditional approaches to anti-racism, including the limitations of students' unions, while exploring alternative strategies to foster belonging across higher education in Northern Ireland.

Drawing on my experiences as a Black, queer, international student, sabbatical student officer, and educator in Belfast, I argue that meaningful change requires moving beyond gestures like performative policies, one-off or non-compulsory trainings and limited resource groups which lack power to direct change. Instead, this paper highlights the power of strategic communication and participatory engagements such as listening sessions as actionable tools for universities to truly hear the voices of marginalized students and staff. By embedding race equality into the fabric of university life and addressing the commercialization of education with care and respect for local communities, institutions can begin to bridge the gap between ideals and pragmatic realities. This paper underscores the need to integrate equity into the everyday practices of institutions and develop accountable and transparent mechanisms for policymaking. The purpose is not to assign blame but to inspire pragmatic, collaborative solutions that embed belonging as a shared and transformative responsibility across the community and a commitment to encourage all – regardless of race, creed, ethnicity or nationality – to take up space.

PANEL 4 - UNSILENCING RACISM: EXPLORING COMMUNITY DYNAMICS AND RACIALISATION IN NI

Convened by Gulseli Baysu [iD], Queen's University of Belfast

Panel Abstract: This panel explores the manifestations of racism and its consequences across various societal sectors. The presentations delve into the complexities of socialization, intergroup relationships, and racial dynamics within different communities in Northern Ireland (NI). The first presentation investigates how parental socialization practices contribute to young adults' critical consciousness and responses to ethnic and community tensions in NI. The second presentation explores factors that promote or inhibit cross-group friendships, underscoring the influence of racial discourse on intergroup relations in the UK. A third presentation focuses on societal attitudes towards several minority groups in NI, and examines whether interventions aimed at community cohesion may also improve attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees, minority ethnic groups and members of the Traveller community. The last presentation examines the racial microaggressions faced by international students at an NI university, highlighting the gap between institutional anti-racism policies and the actual experiences of these students. Together, these discussions

aim to shed light on the subtle and overt ways racism permeates daily interactions and institutional structures, encouraging a more nuanced conversation about its deep-rooted impact in Northern Irish society

Parental Socialization and Critical Consciousness: Exploring Community and Ethnic-Racial Socialization Practices in Northern Ireland

Gulseli Baysu iD, Queen's University of Belfast and J. Kehl

This study examines how parental community socialization (CS) practices in Northern Ireland (NI), a region marked by prolonged intergroup conflict between Protestant and Catholic communities, relate to their ethnic-racial socialization (ERS) practices and young adults' critical consciousness. Amid NI's historical divisions between Protestant and Catholic communities, rising racist prejudice adds complexity to societal issues. We investigate distinct patterns of parental CS practices, focusing on how parents communicate about their own and the other community, including emphasizing cultural heritage, preparing for bias, promoting mistrust or egalitarianism. We then explore whether CS approaches align with parental ERS practices, such as discussing racially minoritized groups' lifeworlds, promoting mistrust or egalitarianism. Additionally, we examine how these socialization approaches contribute to young adults' critical consciousness, i.e., their awareness of societal inequities and actions toward equity. Study 1 included 284 Catholic and Protestant-identified young adults (N=284, M = 20.82 years) in NI. Study 2 is ongoing, aiming to replicate and explore further behavioral outcomes. Latent profile analysis revealed four CS profiles: egalitarian (51%), heritage-focused-egalitarian (28%), heritage-focused-mistrustful (11%), and heritage-focused-non-egalitarian (9%). For ERS, three profiles emerged: egalitarian (63%), color-conscious (21%), and mistrustful (15%). Multinomial regression showed some alignment between CS and ERS profiles with the heritage-focused-egalitarian CS profile linked with the color-conscious ERS profile. In regression analyses, the heritage-focused-non-egalitarian CS profile reported lower critical consciousness, while the color-conscious ERS profile reported higher critical consciousness. Our findings highlight some overlap between CS and ERS practices, and their role in fostering young adults' critical consciousness.

Identifying promoters and barriers to cross-group friendship in adolescence and young adults: Confidence in contact, 'race talk' and diverse friendships

Rhiannon Turner iD, Queen's University of Belfast and L. Cameron, & D. Blaylock iD

Across two surveys in the UK, one involving children and one involving young adults, we found that prior contact with people of different ethnicities and being comfortable with race talk both increased confidence in making cross-group friendship. In addition, intergroup anxiety decreased confidence in cross-group friendship. Confidence in cross-group friendships also predicted cross-group friendship quality. For the children but not adults, social norms around ethnicity was also a predictor of confidence in cross-group friendship. There was also a direct effect of intergroup anxiety on cross-group friendship quality but no indirect effects. In contrast, for adults but not children, indirect contact also predicted cross-group friendship.
The adults also had both a direct and indirect effect, through confidence, of prior contact on cross-group friendship quality. In addition, thematic analysis of focus groups with adolescents in low diversity settings examined barriers and promoters of race talk. Barriers identified included saying the wrong thing and 'cancel culture', and the existence of a disconnect between perceived racial attitudes and everyday behaviour. Promoters included meaningful intergroup contact, the importance of education and information, and the

utilisation of emotional empathy. During the presentation, we will discuss the extent to which these processes are applicable in the Northern Irish context

Bridging Divides: Ripple Effects of Cross-Community Contact on Attitudes Toward the Marginalised Outgroups

Danielle Blaylock iD , *Queen's University of Belfast* and S. Burns, R. Turner iD, & L. Taylor

Northern Ireland's history has been shaped by tensions between the Protestant and Catholic communities, with division remaining a daily experience for children and young people. Contact-based interventions have proven effective in fostering positive intergroup relations, even in the context of serious societal conflict and perceived threat (e.g., Lemmer & Wagner, 2015; Van Assche et al., 2023). Additionally, the secondary transfer effect demonstrates that positive contact with one group can reduce prejudice towards uninvolved groups (Pettigrew, 2009). While large-scale initiatives in Northern Ireland have increased positive, cross-community contact and improved intergroup attitudes (e.g., Blaylock et al., 2020; Reimer et al., 2021), their impact on attitudes towards other minority outgroups has received limited attention. Drawing on two longitudinal surveys of the PEACE4Youth and shared education initiatives, this examines how contact interventions designed to promote positive cross-community contact and social cohesion may also improve attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees (Study 1), minority ethnic groups (Studies 1 and 2), and members of the Traveller community (Studies 1 and 2). It is expected that increases in positive cross-community contact will be consistently associated with an increase in positive attitudes toward secondary outgroups. By leveraging large, representative datasets, the research highlights the potential of cross-community contact to foster broader social cohesion beyond immediate intergroup boundaries. The presentation concludes with a discussion of practical strategies to maximize the secondary transfer effect, emphasising the importance of inclusive programming that acknowledges the interconnected nature of intergroup relations in diverse, post-conflict societies.

Racial Microaggressions on Campus: The Hidden Reality of International Students' Experiences at a UK University

Dr Elida Cena iD, *Queen's University of Belfast* and Yushan Wilson, Eimear Nugent

Universities in the UK claim to have a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination and racism; however, the daily experiences of international students often suggest otherwise. The current study examines international students' encounters with racial microaggressions on campus, offering insights into the forms and impacts of such behaviors, and how they influence student well-being and educational experiences. Qualitative data from five focus groups and eight individual interviews with international students at Queen's University Belfast, predominantly of East and South Asian origin were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Participants reported experiencing various types of microaggressions based on their race, originating from peers, faculty, and others. Microinsults were the most commonly reported form of microaggression, expressed through communication conveying insensitivity, demeaning students' cultural identity or stereotypical assumptions. Microaggressions were found to negatively impact mental health, self-esteem, and student engagement. The ways students responded to these microaggressions varied, with most adopting strategies such as avoidance, minimizing the problem, socializing with other international students, increasing vigilance, or lack of engagement in the classroom.