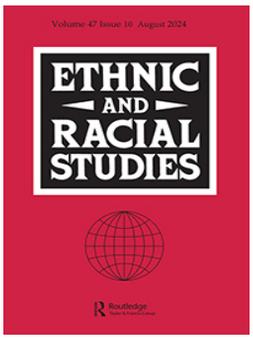

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"Outsiders on the inside": how minoritised elites respond to racial inequality

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ABSTRACT

Given the slow progress on increasing racial and ethnic diversity at the highest levels of society, it is important to ask what role racialisation plays in the experience of minoritised individuals who do reach an elite position. More specifically, this article asks how minoritised elites respond to racial inequality in their careers. Drawing on 30 interviews with British racialised minorities who have achieved positions of notable leadership or societal influence, we map three different strategies they use, from "challenging", to "diversifying", to "role modelling". We also explore how the likelihood of using the three different strategies are classed, gendered and racialised. In doing so, this article details some of the enormous diversity between British racialised minority elites and the different strategies they use to address racial inequalities, including a strong refusal to assimilate.

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KEYWORDS Britain; class; gender; elites; "race"; inequality

Introduction

> I want Britishness to be wider than white, middle-class people. If you have what others would describe as odd-sounding Muslim names as part of that, it widens the definition of Britishness, and that's a good thing. … I'll always look different, because I'm not white. There will always be this sense of, well, he's not quite one of us. … The fact is, we are contributing now to the heart of British society. … We can contribute, and we can be recognised by the establishment. I don't feel part of the establishment. I'll be really frank with you, I feel like the outsider still - having a go on the inside. But the point it makes is that we can be outsiders on the inside and still get recognised.

Veer was born and grew up in London. His mother and father moved to the UK from Pakistan, and worked in a factory and as a postal officer respectively.

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He was educated in a comprehensive school, and then trained in law at a polytechnic university.[1] Although establishing himself in the legal profession was far from straightforward, in his fifties, he now held an influential role in the sector. In the opening quote, Veer was responding to a question about the label elite and in doing so stakes a claim to Britishness and to recognition by the establishment, if not to feeling part of it himself, as "an outsider on the inside". Veer is one of relatively few British racialised minorities[2] to have reached a position of leadership in an influential sector in the UK (McGregor Smith 2017). In 2021, an analysis of prominent positions across various influential sectors found that 73 out of the 1,100 most powerful roles were ethnic minorities, or 6.3% of the total (Woolley and Patel 2021, n.p.). This has gone up in recent years, rising from 3.4% in 2017. A lot of this increase has been in politics (Green Park 2020), however, and when looking at a wider group of elites (such as the people in *Who's Who*) the proportion of racialised minorities is only 2.7% (Reeves and Friedman 2024). Both these figures, irrespective of the problems of measurement, are lower than the proportion of racialised minorities in the same age group in the population (~8%).

The article draws on 30 interviews with British racialised minorities who have achieved positions of notable leadership or societal influence. All of the interviewees were in the elite social registry *Who's Who*, a group who represent just 0.05 per cent of the UK population (or 1 in every 2,000 people). The vast majority of them, or their parents, were part of the migration of British "overseas citizens" to the UK,[3] moving to this context from colonies or former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia. All of them were either the first, the only, or one of only a few racialised minorities to have acquired senior positions in various influential sectors. Progress on increasing racial and ethnic diversity at the highest levels of society has been slow (Reeves and Friedman 2024). However, our interviews happened following a period of significant contestation, when social movements to address racial inequality such as Black Lives Matter may have led to some changes in who holds elite positions. Given this context, it is important to ask what role racialisation plays in the experience of minoritised individuals who do reach an elite position. More specifically, this article asks how minoritised elites respond to racial inequality in their careers.

Twenty years ago, the sociologist Puwar (2004) asked what happens when women and racialised minorities take up elite positions in the hierarchies of influential British organisations. What are the terms of their coexistence? In *Space Invaders*, she describes such organisations as characterised by a white, masculine and middle/upper class "somatic norm", which excluded, erased or exoticised difference. In this article, we revisit her question, in conversation with more recent scholarship on the reproduction of status and hierarchy among a more diverse elite (Khan 2010; Lamont and Fleming 2005; Wingfield and Alston 2014; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 2018), and growing

literature on the strategic responses of Black and South Asian middle classes to a racialised social system that structurally advantages whiteness (Archer 2011; Maylor and Williams 2011; Meghji 2019; Rollock et al. 2015; Saini 2023; Wallace 2019). We map three different strategies that interviewees use to address racial inequalities in their career: "challenging", "diversifying" and "role modelling". We also explore how the likelihood of using the three different strategies are classed, gendered and racialised. In doing so, we aim to advance understanding both of the diversity between racialised minority elites, and of how racialisation, class and gender interact in elite formations.

British racialised minorities entering white-dominated elite sectors

There are still "snowy peaks" in terms of who occupies senior positions in powerful organisations in the UK (Saggar et al. 2016; Vasista 2010). According to an independent review on "race in the workplace":

> 1 in 8 of the working age population are from a black and minority ethnic background, yet only 1 in 10 are in the workplace and only 1 in 16 top management positions are held by an ethnic minority person (McGregor Smith 2017, 9).

Racialised minorities in the UK are both less likely to participate in and then less likely to progress through the workplace, when compared with individuals racialised as white (McGregor Smith 2017, 2). For racialised minorities who do reach elite occupations they still face disadvantage in relation to their class and gender. Black-British women from working-class backgrounds, for example, have average earnings in higher professional/managerial jobs that are £20k less per year than white men from middle-class backgrounds in the same jobs (Friedman and Laurison 2019, 52).

However, there is no single story of advantage or disadvantage in relation to racial inequalities. In their recent report on "race" and ethnicity in the UK, Mirza and Warwick (2022) point out that racialised minority groups, "arrived at different times, from different countries and cultures, and equipped with different levels of educational and human capital. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these groups now show varied fortunes" (1). While it is beyond the scope of this article to articulate precisely how, the entanglement of these groups with British Empire, and its organisation of caste, religion and modes of differential racialisation, have crucially shaped these different outcomes (Brah 1996). As one example of these varied fortunes, while often grouped under the same overarching category of "Asian", the average incomes differ markedly between Indians, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis. Indian men now earn more than their White British counterparts, on average (Mirza and Warwick 2022, 113). In contrast, Bangladeshi and Pakistani men earn significantly less, on average (Mirza

and Warwick 2022, 71). In this context, British Indians are positioned as "the model minority" in a classed and racialised social hierarchy that positions others as less deserving due to their relatively slower social mobility trajectories, or in the case of Muslim groups in the context of Islamophobic hyper-racialisation (Alexander 2000; Archer 2011; Gillborn 2008).

These racial and ethnic pay gaps point to the complex influence of different migration trajectories, socio-economic backgrounds, experiences of discrimination in the labour market, the decline of certain industries and regional differences in salaries, to name a few issues (see, for e.g. Imoagene 2017; Khattab 2009; Longhi and Brynin 2017). An intersectional analysis brings together these various configurations of privilege and disadvantage. In the words of Brah and Phoenix (2004, 76), the idea of intersectionality is regarded "as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts" (129). Research on racial and ethnic inequalities increasingly engages with this complexity.

What this research has revealed – in the UK and elsewhere – is "the intersection between class privilege and racial subordination" (Archer 2011, 136). Black middle class parents, for example, deploy capitals to advance their children's education (Rollock et al. 2015; Wallace 2019) but these middle class identities are simultaneously mediated by "race", ethnicity or religion (Archer 2011; Maylor and Williams 2011; Meghji 2019; Saini 2023). Of particular relevance to this paper, is work that explores a post-racial logic among this group. In their research on the continuum of Black identity and class location among the Black middle classes, Rollock et al. (2015) make a distinction between incidental blackness, "in terms of mere skin pigmentation", and collective blackness, in terms of being "aligned to a political or conscious sense of collective worth and investment" (24; see also Rollock 2013, 495). In terms of the former, Rollock et al. (2015) found that the small group of interviewees adopting an "incidental" view of blackness expressed the view that to "even see or acknowledge race is problematic" (Rollock et al. 2015, 23). Relatedly, in his study of Black middle class Britons, Meghji (2019) identifies individuals towards the "class-minded" identity mode that believe racism is no longer a significant issue in British society and instead emphasise the importance of class to understand inequalities. In their research with Black and South Asian middle classes, Meghji and Saini (2018) argue that examples such as these point to how racial inequality can be rationalised through a post-race understanding, which claims that society has "transcend [ed] the disabling racial divisions of the past" (Bobo 2011, 14).

A smaller body of qualitative work has examined racialised minority elites. As already mentioned, Puwar (2004) has theorised elite organisations as characterised by an exclusionary "somatic norm".[4] While not analysed as elites, Lamont (2023) has studied minoritised "professional change agents" in the USA, some of whom who may qualify as positional and reputational

elites, focusing on their work improving recognition for marginalised communities. Otherwise, scholars have developed a critique of the perpetuation of status and hierarchy among a more diverse elite. For instance, following his ethnography at an elite American boarding school, Khan (2010) argued that elites are more diverse, but not more equal. In a context where privilege is recast as "merit", status and hierarchy are merely maintained in new ways. In their study of how extraordinarily successful African Americans establish equality in the face of white racism, Lamont and Fleming (2005) highlight the particular role of displays of classed competence, which, they argue, in its exclusion of many poor and working-class African Americans poses a problem for racial solidarity. For Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2018), who studied diversity in the American power elite in large banks, corporations, government, the military and law, the increased presence of women and minorities at the top occurs in tandem with a thoroughgoing assimilation of the socially ascendant to the worldviews of the already established elite (9). Relatedly, Wingfield and Alston (2014, 276) developed the concept of "racial tasks" to describe the "work minorities do that … reinforces Whites" positions of power within the workplace". In addition to the expectation that they smooth interactions with colleagues racialised as white, they argue, racialised minority workers are assigned positions and tasks that reinforce the racial status quo. For instance, senior racialised minorities may be constrained to executive roles that solely address minority group concerns, may be required to uphold cultural norms that advantage whiteness, or may reinforce ideological dynamics that maintain racial hierarchies and values (Wingfield and Alston 2014, 277, 278).

Drawing on in-depth interviews, this article seeks to untangle and complicate our understanding of the different strategies elite racialised minorities use to respond to racial inequalities in their careers. Three strategies were identified from our interviews: "challenging", "diversifying" and "role modelling". First, interviewees who deploy the "challenging" strategy framed their careers as motivated by a sense of injustice rooted in growing up or working with communities exposed to poverty and discrimination. They navigate a careful line between leveraging power and influence to advance their interests, and the risk of being co-opted by already existing elites. Second, interviewees who use the "diversifying" strategy frame their work as motivated by the greater inclusion of racialised minorities in influential organisations. Most interviewees using this strategy expressed some ambivalence, either about being labelled an elite or the royal honours associated with it, but compared with the previous strategy were more receptive to recognition as elites as a route to strengthening their diversity work. Third, those who use the "role modelling" strategy framed *their* successful career trajectories as being imbued with meaning for *other* minoritised individuals. Interviewees using this strategy were more likely to accept the label elite if it conveyed meritocratic excellence,

or to reject the label and instead claim to be ordinary. We use vignettes to flesh out the key characteristics and distinctions between each of the strategies, and explore how their use is classed, gendered and racialised.

Methods

This article draws on 30 semi-structured interviews with British elite racialised minorities. The interviewees' position of leadership or societal influence is indicated by their inclusion in *Who's Who*, the leading biographical dictionary of "noteworthy and influential" people in the UK. *Who's Who* makes selections based on a mix of positional and reputational grounds. Around 50 per cent of entrants are included automatically upon reaching a prominent occupational position. These positions span multiple professional fields. For example, Members of Parliament, peers, judges, ambassadors, FTSE100 CEOs, Poet Laureates and Fellows of the British Academy are all included by virtue of their office. The other 50 per cent of entrants are selected each year by a board of long-standing advisors, who make reputational assessments based on a person's perceived impact on British society. The reputational part of the selection process is not entirely transparent in part because we do not know much about the people who sit on this panel. The anonymity of the panel is intentional to ensure that this process is not influenced by politicking. On top of this, entries cannot be purchased. Instead, a long-list is drawn up based on research into individuals who have recently achieved a noteworthy professional appointment or who have experienced sustained prestige, influence or fame. W*ho's Who* has been published in its current form every year since 1897.

Over 98% of the people in *Who's Who* are "White British" (90%), "White Irish" (4.5%) or "White Other" (3.8%) and only 1.4% identify as Black or Asian. For context, around 8.2% of Britons in a similar age group as those in *Who's Who* are Black or Asian. Put another way, the proportion of Black and Asian elites would need to be almost six times higher to be nationally representative of Britons in that same age group. The representation of people of colour within the British elite has increased over time, particularly among those born after 1950. Yet the pace of change is slow – and some groups are starting off from a very low level. There were almost no women of colour included in *Who's Who* in the late-80s and early-90s. At the current rate, it will take Britain another 50 years for Black and Asian elites to constitute a nationally representative proportion of new entrants to *Who's Who*.

Interviews were conducted via video call between October 2022 and March 2023 by the first author. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, bar one following the interviewee's request. The interviews lasted between one and two and a half hours, with the majority lasting one and a half hours. Interviewees were recruited via a survey sent out in June 2022 to entrants to *Who's Who*. In total, 4,075 people responded to the

survey, a response rate of approximately 17.4% (which is similar if not higher than other surveys of elites), and 1722 stated that they would be happy to be interviewed for future research. Of the 55 survey respondents willing to be interviewed who identified as an ethnicity other than White, only 20 had African, Caribbean or South Asian heritage, from whom 18 interviewees were recruited. Twelve further interviewees were recruited via searching *Who's Who* by country of origin and *The Powerlist*, an annual publication since 2007 of Britain's most influential people of African and African Caribbean heritage, before cross-checking whether individuals listed were also entrants in *Who's Who*. Within these criteria, we sampled to maximise heterogeneity in age, gender and class origin. In addition to interviews, we reviewed publicly available material about each interviewee, such as autobiographies, institutional webpages, previous media interviews and selected written outputs, which helped prepare for the interview and provided further details for analysis.

Interviewees were approached as one of Britain's key decision makers. The interviews were semi-structured to follow the participants' life stories, including where they grew up, their family background, education and career. It was only towards the end of the interview that minoritised participants were asked whether they had encountered any particular challenges holding a position of authority in a white majority space. This was because we wanted themes relating to racialisation and racism to emerge inductively, when interviewees deemed them pertinent to their biography and career, rather than in response to the interview's framing. Finally, each interview ended with questions on inequality, empire and elite status. The interviewer is racialised as white, which no doubt shaped the interview process, along with other aspects of her positionality, such as her being female and younger than all of the interviewees (Adamson and Donovan 2002). Her whiteness may have restricted the stories that interviewees felt able to tell (Rollock 2013, 499). On the other hand, interviewees may have more fully explained experiences and interactions knowing that they were outside of her experience (Rollock et al. 2015, 16). However, it is not possible to be more specific as this issue was not raised directly by the interviewer or interviewees.

Participants were born between the 1930s and 1970s. Three interviewees were born in the 1930s, two in the 1940s, nine in the 1950s, 11 in the 1960s and five in the 1970s. Eighteen were male and 12 were female. In terms of university, eight had been to Oxbridge, 11 to a Russell Group university,[5] five to a polytechnic, and six to "other", the largest group of which was higher education institutes abroad. Fifteen had been to a non-fee-paying school in the UK and three to a non-fee-paying school internationally, while eight had been to a fee-paying-school in the UK and four had been to a fee-paying school internationally. Twelve claimed a working class background, 14 middle class and five upper middle class or upper class. Eleven interviewees had South Asian Indian heritage (six of them had migrated, or

their parents had migrated, from a country in Africa), eight interviewees had Black Caribbean heritage,[6] five had South Asian Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage, three had Black African (and more specifically Nigerian) heritage, and three had multiple ethnic heritage. Eighteen interviewees were migrants to the UK and 12 were not. Of those who had migrated, 12 moved to the UK before they were 14. Most participants had built their careers in London, with the exception of a small minority in academia, law and medicine, who worked in other regions of the UK.[7]

Interviewees worked across a range of sectors, including academia, business, creative, education, law, media, medicine and religion. Law dominated with 12 participants working in this sector, three times as many as the next most prominent sectors, media and medicine. This partly reflects broader social realities, as British racialised minorities are over-represented in law (Solicitor's Regulation Authority 2023), and law comprises a large proportion of entrants to *Who's Who*. The other sectors were evenly distributed. While the differences between sectors should not be flattened or homogenised, there are interesting continuities in terms of how racialised minorities negotiate authority in these spaces (Puwar 2004, 10; Rollock 2022, 34). All participant names included in the article are pseudonyms. Given that some of our interviewees are household names, or had unique careers that made them easily identifiable, at times we have omitted details, such as their sector, to protect their anonymity.

Using a thematic analysis approach, we started analysis by familiarising ourselves with the data, then coded the interview transcripts to generate initial themes. Next, we conducted another round of coding to develop and review these initial themes, while continuously seeking out disconfirming evidence, before eventually refining, defining and naming the themes outlined next in an iterative process (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016). The themes derived from the data centred on two questions, first, how participants respond to racial inequality in their careers, and, second, their reflections on holding elite authority. Participants might adopt different strategies at different points in their lives, and different strategies could overlap and feed into one another. As such, the strategies were expressed in a variety of "softer" and more "forceful" versions. However, participants tended to use a particular strategy in relation to their career as positional or reputational elites, which is the focus of this article.

"Challenging"

Responding to racial inequality in their careers

Edward was in his eighties. He was born in the Caribbean where his family owned a small business. He was privately educated before training for his chosen profession in civil society. An early clerical job administering poverty relief was a "crucial" part of his journey as he was "incensed" at the

way white, wealthy landowners "humiliated … poor black people". Once he qualified, hearing stories in the news and from return migrants of racism, violence and uprisings in the UK, he moved to London hoping that, "however small, I could make some contribution to the reconciling of the Black West Indians and the white British people". Arriving in the 1960s, Edward recalled being "confronted with a large amount of poverty", which included "large numbers of West Indians". In a context of racist attacks in the press, and after "trying to raise this matter with people of influence", he decided, "we have to lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps", and was part of a group setting up after-school teaching, credit unions and a housing association. He dedicated his career, "for want of a better term", as he put it, to challenging racism nationally and internationally.

Asha was born in Bangladesh, before her family moved to London when she was a child. Her father initially worked in factories before starting a small business, while her mother looked after the home. She went to a comprehensive school and then a Russell Group university. Her family's prior involvement in liberation struggles, as well as racism from local residents in her neighbourhood and the state, drove her involvement in community activism, such as volunteering in women's centres and writing letters to the Home Office,[8] which were "formative experiences" for her future career. After qualifying in her chosen profession, she turned down a prestigious job opportunity to set up an organisation that specialised in serving marginalised individuals and groups, explaining, "I wanted to be a community resource. … I thought I could do some good in the heart of the community that I come from. We did really radical work".[9] Now in her fifties, she held a senior role in her sector, shaping legislation on matters that affect her community and more broadly.

Arjun, in his forties, was the youngest to use this strategy.[10] He was born in Kenya, before his parents moved to London when he was a child for his education. His father eventually bought a small business, where his mother also worked when she was not looking after the home. Witnessing poverty and racism in the neighbourhood he grew up in motivated Arjun to want "to do something that made a difference". He went to a comprehensive school and then a polytechnic, inspired to study law by an enthusiastic teacher who "tapped into the whole idea that you can improve society by doing law and you can help people". He had built a career focused on advancing civil rights for vulnerable clients.

Prior to, and alongside, the first Race Relations Acts in 1968 and 1976, all of the earlier generations using this strategy were involved in community self-organisation to address discrimination in issues such as housing, schooling and policing (Owusu 2016, 14). For these and later generations using this strategy, the motivations for their careers were framed by a sense of injustice at poverty and discrimination, either in the communities they grew up in or

worked with. As their careers progressed, and the context changed, for some participants, elements of their strategy increasingly overlapped with "diversifying".

Holding elite authority as a racialised minority

Asif was in his fifties. He was born in Pakistan, then moved to London as a child with his family. His father worked in a factory, and his mother looked after the home. He had built a reputation in his career as a specialist in anti-racism – "I'm Mr Race. I'm Mr Racism", as he put it – and had since been offered royal and parliamentary honours, but had refused them on principle. When asked whether he felt part of an elite, Asif reflected on being perceived as part of the establishment:

> Quite a few years ago, I was asked to be on the board of some organisation. I said, "look, I can't," and they said, "but we need you, because you're part of the establishment. You're a recognised name." I thought, "When did I ever become that?" Because everything I've ever wanted to do was to be challenging what the establishment represents and the things that it does. […] I recognise that by being anti-establishment or [to] challenge the establishment, you need to be on an equal and opposite footing. So I want an anti-status. I want an anti-status. I suppose that's what I was trying to do. I thought, yeah, the more I am the establishment, the more the establishment's got to listen to me, the more I may be able to change things. I don't know whether that's true or not. I don't know.

Asif's uncertainty at the end of this quote points to the difficult balance for participants using this strategy of gaining recognition from elite organisations so that you are able to effectively oppose them, while at the same time resisting being co-opted by those same organisations. Similarly, Edward recalled his concern when he was offered a senior role in his profession that it might mean he would lose touch with the community he had set out to work with.

> I remember, when I was [promoted], pleading at a meeting with the Black members of the community—pleading with them not to desert me, and not to leave me at the mercies of the establishment. So I would still hope that, when there were functions in the Black community (social functions, and so on) I could still be invited. I warned them that, because I couldn't be as ever-present in the community as I used to be because of my commitments, they needed to give me as-long notice as possible.

As interviewees progressed in their careers, "the establishment" was commonly identified as something they actively sought to distance themselves from and oppose.

Continuing this vein of ambivalence in relation to "the establishment", Elijah was in his sixties. Born in a city in the Midlands. His mother and father, a nurse and postal officer respectively, had migrated from the Caribbean. For Elijah, while he acknowledged that he was probably was part of

an "establishment" in the creative sector, he differentiated this from the political establishment, saying, "when I go on television, I'm usually arguing with politicians and trying to break down the establishment". He had also turned down a royal honour and was careful in selecting his work, turning down lucrative offers if they did not fit his principles: "I'm not trying to sell out", he said.

Interviewees who use the strategy "challenging" were uncomfortable with the label elite, and most of them had turned down royal honours, which often have associations with the British Empire. They positioned themselves as navigating a careful line between leveraging their power and influence to advance their interests and a strong refusal to assimilate to the worldviews of the already established elite.

"Diversifying"

Responding to racial inequality in their careers

Douglas was in his sixties. He was born in the Caribbean and moved to London with his parents as a child. In the UK, his father worked as a postal officer and his mother looked after the home. Douglas later returned to the Caribbean to attend a prestigious, selective school, before coming back to the UK to study at a Russell Group university. He had built a prominent public profile through his work on racial equality. Reflecting on his career success, he explained that you had to become the best at something:

> To be frank, I became the best at understanding what minorities are about. So generally speaking most of the time for most people that's not that important. But it is important enough to enough people enough of the time to make sure that I never fall out of the elite. Because somebody at some point says, "we are going to have to know something about these people."

Over his eclectic career, Douglas was often the first Black person in various senior roles in influential public and private sector organisations.

Born in Nigeria, Abeni was the third generation of graduates in her family and her parents were both successful professionals. Now in her fifties, she was privately educated throughout, at first in Nigeria, before travelling to the UK as a child to attend a fee-paying boarding school (Ayling 2019). Despite having top grades and strong work experience, Abeni had to make 150 calls to get her first job, which she attributed to name discrimination. During this period, a recruiter told her that her chosen specialism was "too competitive for a Black woman". She reflected:

> That was the first time I was very, very aware that something wasn't fair. Until then, because I was born to privilege, if I'm honest, I hadn't thought about myself being Black, female, nothing.

After being pushed out of her job for taking a period of maternity leave, Abeni became aware of other areas of discrimination from conversations with colleagues and confronted her professional association. She took on voluntary and eventually paid leadership roles advocating for diversity, equity and inclusion in her sector. After George Floyd was murdered, she recalled, "my entire network reached out to me", and she moved into a consultancy role and several non-executive positions focused on diversity.

Nadia was in her fifties. She was born in London. Her mother and father migrated from the Caribbean and worked as a nurse and in a clerical role in the welfare system respectively. She attended a comprehensive school and then Oxbridge, where she worked as an anti-racism officer. When she graduated, she set up a production company in the creative sector. Later in her career, after having a child, she moved into board roles "that have something to say about society". After a couple of roles, she explained, "your name gets seen by a few people, so that sort of kicked off everything". She had built a portfolio career, moving between purely commercial roles and roles with "a mission", although she sometimes tired of "being the person who talks about diversity all the time".

With the mainstreaming and professionalisation of anti-racism, diversity management has taken on a more central role in the workplace (Ahmed and Swan 2006). Many of the interviewees using this strategy had portfolio careers, taking on various roles communicating minority experiences or advocating for diversity as executives, non-executive and trustees in influential public and private organisations.

Holding elite authority as a racialised minority

Rather than the concerns over being co-opted raised by participants using the previous strategy, these interviewees often emphasised the importance of compromise and pragmatism to initiate and sustain change. The management scholar Meyerson (2001) describes such individuals who quietly push for gradual and moderate organisational change as "tempered radicals". For instance, Nadia turned down roles that conflicted with her values, but she added, "I'm a very practical person and there can be a lot of rhetoric around what does helping people constitute and what doesn't. I think people can be a bit purist about it". For instance, she said, "the starting point is always a charity or an NGO" for trying "to change the world", rather than "thinking that in corporate life, people are also trying to do good". Veer held an influential role in his sector with varied responsibilities. However, a significant strand of his work focused on promoting diversity in law, for which he had been awarded a royal honour. He had built a profile in this work, "partly because I've got the energy and enthusiasm to do it, and that's not always the case", but also, he reflected, "I suspect I'm safer in terms of pushing boundaries than some of my colleagues". "I'd rather

make progress", he explained, "than … put people's backs up". However, he was concerned about the limitations of this professional focus, saying, "there's a danger of me being perceived as the [lawyer] who does all the diversity work, rather than being a bloody good [lawyer]". As several participants noted, engaging in diversity work could open up professional opportunities, but it could also constrain them to narrow forms of recognition.

Most of the interviewees using this strategy had accepted royal honours. For instance, after some hesitation, Veer explained why he now put his royal honour in his public profile.

> It's not about my success. It's about each of us. It doesn't matter where we come from … We can be part of the judiciary, we can be part of medicine, accountancy, whatever it is … and we can be recognised because we are recognised by the establishment.

As with the previous strategy, recognition by "the establishment" is deemed important to advance one's work, but in this case less to advance an anti-elite agenda as to widen the pool of who is recognised as part of the elite. In a similar vein, reflecting on accepting a royal honour, Nadia said, "I know it's got lots of connotations with it being … the British Empire, but frankly if they were giving away Smarties, I think Black people should get them". Conversely, in response to a question about the label elite, Abeni strongly refused it, saying, "in a classist society like ours, elite is not a positive thing". Most interviewees using this strategy expressed some ambivalence, either about being labelled an elite or about receiving royal honours, but compared with the previous strategy were more receptive to recognition from already established elites as a route to strengthening their diversity work.

"Role modelling"

Responding to racial inequality in their careers

Deepak was in his fifties. Born in East Africa, his family moved to London when he was a child. His family had been wealthy prior to their migration, but his father could no longer practice as a lawyer in the UK. His father eventually found work as an office manager and his mother looked after the home. Deepak went to a comprehensive school, then Oxbridge, before securing a highly competitive position in a prominent firm where he now has a leadership role. When asked whether he encountered any challenges holding a position of authority in a majority white environment towards the end of the interview, Deepak replied that the prestige of his degree and of his law firm insulate him from racial discrimination,

> I'm conscious that background of having a first from [Oxbridge], being in a really good set of chambers, which then appears at the bottom of court documents and so on, it's a slight leg up. When you appear in court, judges will know that to be in my chambers, you'd have to be pretty bright. I have a feeling that I've been slightly

> insulated from the kind of things that other ethnic minority barristers, operating in different fields have experienced. […] I operate in quite a rarefied sphere.

Interviewees often drew a link between their not encountering racism and their class advantage either implicitly or explicitly. Otherwise, reflecting on his greatest influence in his career was the first time Deepak mentioned his being a racialised minority.[11] Among other professional and managerial achievements, Deepak said,

> I guess, latterly, in terms of influence within the profession, being a role model is quite important. So, I've had a lot of … younger [lawyers] of Indian origin, who have said to me over the years that seeing me progress through the profession has been quite inspirational.[12]

Adebayo was in his fifties. Born in Nigeria, he came from an upper class background and was educated at a fee-paying boarding school in the UK. He worked in business. Similarly, reflecting on whether he had encountered any challenges holding authority in a white majority environment, he responded:

> Never, zero. It's quite interesting actually. Even though I came to England, I've never felt anyone's been racist to me ever, ever, ever. I think a lot of racism is more of a socioeconomic thing than race.

He attributed his not having experienced racism to his class advantage, adding, "it's about income and wealth, which all comes with confidence, ability to speak the language". As with the previous example, Adebayo mentioned his racialised identity for the first time when asked when he had held most influence in his career. Other "high profile successful Africans" has approached him, he explained, and "what I've been told is I've got a responsibility as an African to basically help with just being a role model".

Meera's parents were expelled from East Africa during the Africanisation process. Her father eventually started a small business and her mother worked as a social worker. She attended a comprehensive school and then a Russell Group university. The first in her family to study law, she supported her early career through scholarships. In contrast to the previous two examples, over her career, she frequently felt excluded and side-lined for "being a woman and being Asian". When reflecting on when she had held most influence professionally, she told the story of a particularly successful case, explaining, "my colleagues had to suddenly take me seriously ...I wasn't just … ticking all the diversity boxes". Now in her forties and recognised as a leader in her specialism, she reflected, "the fact I'm here says a lot, because people … need to see people who are like them in a role so that they can aspire to that". Now in a senior position in her sector, Meera made time to mentor women and ethnic minorities and promote greater diversity in her sector.

A significant number of interviewees using this strategy did not mention their minoritised status when describing their elite career trajectory, except latterly as a role model. These interviewees tended to be affluent and/or to have been educated at prestigious universities. For these interviewees, their phenomenological experience supports a post-racial logic (Meghji and Saini 2018). Women and individuals from a less affluent background more often mentioned personally overcoming racism, classism or sexism in their career, and often engaged in diversity initiatives, but these were not central to their career. Either way, for individuals using this strategy, their individual success was itself imbued with meaning for other minoritised individuals as a role model.

Holding elite authority as a racialised minority

In terms of their being labelled as elite, participants using this strategy could be split into two, which often fell along gendered lines. On the one hand, when asked how the label elite landed with them, they accepted they were elite, with the proviso that they were not elitist and that their achievement was meritocratic. For instance, Matthew was in his seventies. Born in the Caribbean and from a poor background, he migrated to the UK as a young adult and had built a career in the creative sector. He accepted the label elite if it meant "luxury" and "excellence", rather than "elitism". The child of migrants from the Caribbean, Joseph was in his fifties and grew up in a town just outside of London. In another example, reflecting on his role in media, he also accepted the label elite, but in a more practical sense, saying,

> I don't go looking to be in an elite. But I recognise in some ways I am part of one. … You can't live the life I've led and not accept that. … I don't get out of bed thinking, "Wahey! I'm in *Who's Who*." But it's nice.

In a final example, for Deepak, in response to a question about being an elite, he said "if you use elite in the right way, as denoting reaching a degree of excellence, or a degree of higher regard within a professional or a job, then I have no problem with that term". However, he also added a caveat, saying, "I think if it's a closed elite, which doesn't allow access to it, then if you use elite in that sense, it's obviously objectionable". This acceptance of the label elite, so long as it was open and meritocratic, pointed to a less ambivalent relationship with already existing elites.

On the other hand, others using this strategy, and notably women, refused to accept they were part of an elite, not because they were politically opposed to the established elite, but as a way of claiming ordinariness. For instance, several members of Sapna's family were also in *Who's Who*. She had built an influential career in the field of education, and had been awarded one of the highest royal honours. Nevertheless, she was clear in her response, "Oh, I don't see myself as elite. Not at all". For her this distancing

was about humility, she explained, "I don't see myself as elitist in any shape or form". Amritha was in her fifties and migrated from India as a child with her parents, who were both professionals, to a city in Scotland. Reflecting on her senior role in law, she said of herself and her peers, "we're quite ordinary in lots of ways, so I don't really think about it as terribly elite". In her sixties and from a city in the Midlands, Salma's parents had migrated from Pakistan and eventually owned a small business. She worked in law, and observed, "I've seen so-called, what other people would call elite … and they're just normal people like you and me". Participants using this strategy were less likely to feel uncomfortable about being labelled as an elite, provided it was not associated with elitism. If they did distance themselves from the label elite, it was to claim ordinariness, a pattern documented more broadly among contemporary elites (Friedman and Reeves 2020; Sherman 2017).

Concluding discussion

How do minoritised elites respond to racial inequalities? Those "challenging" and "diversifying" elite organisations were oriented towards broader societal change, even if they drew on different political traditions to achieve that goal. For participants using the "challenging" strategy, this societal change was rooted in structural approaches to anti-racism often rooted in community activism. They defined themselves in opposition to the already established elite or "the establishment". Participants using the "diversifying" strategy took a more liberal approach to societal change, emphasising reform. They were ambivalent about the label of elite, but more readily accepted recognition from established elites as a strategy to advance collective racialised interests. Finally, in a context where they were the first, the only, or one of very few minoritised elites, the individual career success of participants using the "role modelling" strategy was itself imbued with meaning for other minoritised individuals. They were most likely to accept the label of elite, if it indicated meritocratic excellence, or to deny that they were elite at all, and instead to emphasise their ordinariness.

As mentioned earlier, in their long-running study of diversity in the American power elite, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2018) argue that the increased presence of women and minorities at the top of society occurs in tandem with a thorough-going assimilation of the socially ascendant to the worldviews of the already established elite (9). We develop this analysis through bringing in the "few liberals and fewer crusaders" largely missing from their study of diversity at the top of military, financial and political hierarchies (9). While the individuals "challenging" were not part of the power elite, and may in fact define themselves against this group, nevertheless they held real power – shaping legislation, the regulation of influential organisations, and cultural assets, to name a few. Through adopting a broader lens on diversity in British positional

and reputational elites, this article contributes a more detailed and complex understanding of the various strategies minoritised elites use to address racial inequalities, including a strong refusal to assimilate.

Gender, class, ethnicity and religion shape how racialisation and racism surfaces. This is a qualitative study, which aims to provide empirically rich descriptions of meaning-making. It does not draw on a random sample, nor does it claim to be representative. Given those disclaimers, we now draw tentative conclusions about the classed, gendered and ethno-religious differences in the tendency for participants to use different strategies. Among our interviewees, "challenging" and "diversifying" were more typically used by individuals from a working class background and/or who were part of hyper-racialised Muslim groups. The interviewees using "diversifying" who did not fit this pattern were all women. In contrast, "role modelling" was more typically used by individuals from a middle or upper middle class background. Given the interviewees as a whole, and the strategies "challenging" and "role modelling", were male dominated, it is striking that "diversifying" was female-dominated. This finding supports Ahmed's (2018) argument that women of colour more often tend to do diversity work. These distinctions point to the entanglement and mutual constitution of class, ethnicity, gender and religion in shaping how strategies to address racial inequalities are articulated. These socio-demographic characteristics should not be seen as simple "causes", but as a kind of shorthand for people's experiences and circumstances, which may influence their ideas and actions, in combination with myriad other phenomena. While further details of the experience and role of ethno-religious differences for elite racialised minorities is beyond the scope of this paper, they are an important topic for future research (Saini, Bankole, and Begum 2023).

We can celebrate increased openness at the top – as long as we realise it does not do the work of advancing equality and fairness on its own. In her study of diversity in the British elite, Puwar (2004) criticises the tendency to equate the inclusion of "different" bodies in elite organisations with social transformation, presuming that "women" and "ethnic minorities" are homogenous groups that can generate "a mimetic politics from their shared experiences" (149). Just as the assumption of a homogenous racialised minority elite is inaccurate, there "is not one self-conscious, cohesive and conspiring elite" (Cousin, Khan, and Mears 2018, 227). This article details some of the enormous diversity between British racialised minority elites and the different strategies they use to respond to racial inequalities.

Notes

1. Comprehensive schools are not selective and do not charge fees. Polytechnic universities were established in the UK in the early 1990s and had a reputation for vocational disciplines and applied research.

2. A brief note on our terminology. We use the term racialised minorities to draw attention to the process of racialisation, following the example of Puwar (2004) and Rollock (2022).
3. Seventy-five years ago, the arrival of the Empire Windrush with close to 500 West Indians has become a metaphor for a whole generation of people from the colonies and former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia who came to work and live in Britain after the war. That same year, with the passing of the 1948 British Nationality Act, British citizenship was first defined and simultaneously conferred not only on the population within Britain, but also on the population of her colonies. Although commonly understood as migrants, the Windrush generation who travelled to the UK shared the same citizenship status as those born on the British Isles (Paul 1997).
4. While not defined as elites, Doharty and Esoe (2023) and Rollock (2022) have also explored the corrosive dynamics of racism for black leaders in various managerial professions in the UK.
5. A self-selecting association of 24 research intensive universities in the UK with high academic entry requirements.
6. We do not specify which Caribbean country to preserve anonymity.
7. In addition, most of the interviewees who grew up in the UK were from London.
8. The ministerial department of the British Government responsible for immigration, security and law and order.
9. Rather than transcription, the direct quotes from Asha are from the researcher's notes during the interview, following the interviewee's request not to record the interview.
10. While it is only a small sample, participants using the strategy "challenging" did tend to be older than participants using the other strategies were. The idea it would take longer to reach the kind of positional or reputational elite status recognised by *Who's Who* using this strategy makes intuitive sense.
11. There is one other strategy, which was only employed by two interviewees: both men from middle class backgrounds born prior to the 1950s with Indian heritage. Similar to some individuals who use "role modelling", interviewees who used this strategy did not mention racialisation or racism at all in accounts of their lives or careers. When asked about working in a white majority environment, they denied the salience of racialisation or racism to their careers. However, in distinction, they did not consider themselves, nor did they mention being understood by others, as a role model for other minoritised individuals. This sub-strategy may reveal a generational divide and a position that is becoming less popular with time. However, given that only two interviewees used it, we cannot make any confident inferences.
12. In contrast to the previous two strategies, it was notable that otherwise describing his work in law Deepak said, "I'm afraid it's about money" and "professional pride". He went on, "It doesn't really matter in the grand scheme of things if the one side wins of the other […] I couldn't say there's a great social cause involved."

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Ethics statement

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