Interviews – Version 1 03/06/22

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Online Ethnographic Interviews

Using ethnographic interviews, which involves having a clear interview schedule but allowing the conversation to be personal, dialogic and free-flowing, I carried out 8+ interviews alongside having informal conversations and dialogues in personal conversations and drop-in sessions during the project. During these interviews I got to know a range of people from different positions within the ECEHH and different disciplines, genders, social backgrounds and ethnic identities. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity I cannot say anything more specific about these, but it provided a clear and interesting range of opinions and perspectives on the questions asked. Please find the interview schedules attached as an appendix. The interviews provided a space for honest and frank dialogue between myself and the interlocutors and feed back their challenges and suggestions back into themes for discussion and feedback to the broader ECEHH.

At the time of conducting the interviews, I was a post-doctoral research associate at the ECEHH and had worked alongside or knew some of the interlocutors previously. Others I had never met personally and had only seen in meetings. I am a white-passing mixed-heritage Iranian English cis woman who is often mistaken for being Latina. As a person asking questions about race, decolonisation and whiteness, my positionality is usually one that enables some ability to have these conversations as I am not fully white but am still relatable. As many People of Colour working in decolonisation within universities know, Brown and Black scholars who are critical of whiteness are often deemed threatening and aggressive. In this context, creating an environment that prioritised dialogue and conversation and not critique or judgement was very important.

I contacted people via email and invited them to speak. Some of the people I invited were people I have had some working relationship with before and others were people I do not know personally yet. Through the interviews I got to know each person individually and in some cases conducted follow up interviews in order to go deeper into some of the questions as there were many topics to address. In all cases the interviewees were forthcoming and the conversations led to dialogic and practical suggestions for what could be done to incorporate intersectionality, decolonisation and anti-racist considerations and approaches within the ECEHH moving forward. The main limitation of the interviews is the lack of ethnic diversity amongst people who agreed to do an interview, however this is part of the issue that is addressed within the interviews.

The conversations were productive, insightful and led to many practical and do-able suggestions that enhanced the work and perspectives that already exist within the ECEHH. Many of those I spoke with were conscious of the ECEHH and their own academics fields being predominantly white spaces and had also usually considered some of the questions and issues that were raised within the interviews. Demonstrating that a theme of racism as a public health issue and the universality of whiteness/Anglo-European culture in public health is something that a number of researchers are aware of and work on, brought out the need for there to be more focus on these aspects as an overall theme within the ECEHH and more public demonstration on the website that this is something researchers do work on. How this work can be more integrated and inclusive is part of the future actions to be taken.

Findings

There are a variety of findings from the interviews which are still under analysis (30/05/22). One of them is that a considerable number of people in the ECEHH are interested in working more on decolonising and anti-racism. Another interesting finding is that many people in the ECEHH have already worked with collaborators, activists and charities that focus on the intersection of race and environment and health outcomes. However, there has yet to be a coherent and directed focus on this in any of the research projects at the ECEHH at this point in time.

Other themes from the observations shared by staff members of the ECEHH:

International staff and students

- There is a sense of isolation amongst 'international' students i.e. international and non-UK/European students
- Cornwall has poor infrastructure which prevents more integration between campuses and thus increasing activities for international students and creating communities for students and staff from racialised or marginalised groups

Research practices

- The environmental sciences and public health are observed to be white fields by a number of academics. The only disciplines or areas of academic scholarship thought to be more diverse are those focused on race, equality, diversity and inclusion. This means that race and racism are topics that Brown and Black scholars are allowed to work on, whilst everything else is considered the domain predominantly of White scholars. Social networks and power structures within institutions are recognised as the main reasons why white academics

continue to be in positions of power and influence. Furthermore, white women who succeed are observed to be more often child-less and white men who succeed often have wives that support them or are doing the main child-care. Thus like other areas of academic research, environmental sciences and health sciences privilege white men and women who do not have care responsibilities

- There are major institutional barriers to ensuring more diverse academics and research topics are incorporated into the ECEHH and this is put down to the funding boards of environmental science funding agents
- Staff lack time and resources to do deep work on decolonising their curricula (or they are using time as an excuse for beginning the process)
- White staff members feel unsure of how to approach People of Colour for collaborations on research projects and are hesitant to do so as they do not want them to feel they are being asked just because they are racialised

The future of ECEHH

- Future committments from the ECEHH to be anti-racist and to acknowledge and work through its own power dynamics are required and there are people willing and open to dialogue about these

Recommendations

Networks and communication

- There could be more done to illustrate that the ECEHH has wide-ranging collaborators and people who are feeding into its research and learnings of the academics based in the ECEHH than are acknowledged. The website has photographs of all of the people who are permanent members of staff or contracted members of staff within the ECEHH. However there are multiple partners and collaborating organisations that could be offered to also be featured on the website to demonstrate the diversity in collaborations and working relationships
- There should be a public statement made on the website by the ECEHH that articulates its desire to commit to anti-racist politics and practice and incorporate these perspectives into clear research foci. This statement is then a starting point for people to be held accountable and also to provoke dialogue. This should not be tokenistic but part of the ongoing education process for the ECEHH.

Research practices

- Multiple people felt that qualitative and lived experience based research is valued below quantitative research; therefore continuing to promote these forms of research will also help build the case for epistemic diversity and critiques of claims to universality or apolitical science within the health and environmental sciences
- More connections can be made with academics and scholars throughout the Exeter Decolonising Network (EDN) to contribute to research collaborations that seek to focus on race, ethnicity, marginalisation. But this network can also be used to see if there are researchers and scholars who would like to work in the field of environments and human health within the EDN on other projects as well

Knowledge and training

- It was stated by a number of colleagues that the most enabling factor in their own careers had been good mentorship. Therefore mentorship should be prioritised as something that senior colleagues provide to juniors, especially those who are socially marginalised.
- More seminars within the ECEHH can be scheduled that help people understand the context of institutional whiteness. Seminars can also be used to continue to promote the strength of qualitative and social theory based research within the ECEHH
- More unconscious bias training is required as well as explanation and education on institutional whiteness and reflecting on personal positionalities so people are comfortable and aware of their own privilege and able to acknowledge it
- A number of participants struggled to position themselves racially – the assumption that 'white' is not a racial category and is 'the invisible' needs to be addressed before the issue of racism within university and research contexts can be addressed
- More sessions on language and diversity would be helpful for ensuring people in the ECEHH feel confident to bring up issues regarding diversity and racism without hesitation about saying the wrong thing. More work on social justice and anti-racism through reading groups and invited speakers would help this. But most importantly having more people from diverse backgrounds **and** people working specifically in this field would also help with this. But these are not necessarily the same thing and people who are racialised should not be assumed to want to work on matters relating to racism.

Institutional support

- Pressure should be put on authorities within the university above the ECEHH to allocate resources and time to people to rethink and decolonise their curricula from Exeter University especially within its new social justice remit
- More institutional support is needed for allocated positions for people from marginalised, racialised and ethnic minority backgrounds
- More avenues are required for students to report racist abuse and incidents that make them feel unsafe – especially academics and staff from racialised backgrounds who are likely to understand and appreciate the incidents that occur, especially in a white majority space such as Cornwall

International collaborations
- Ensuring university mechanisms for paying people are set up before establishing international collaborations is critical. Due dilligence protcol should be applied not only to the universities situated outside of the UK but equivalent mechanisms are applied to UK universities also
- More mechanisms are required to ensure collaborators and partners can say how they feel about their UK-based colleagues without worrying about possibly offending them or creating bad feelings – face to face engagements is considered really important for ensuring the necessary relationality can be established
- Awareness of cultural differences and the need for cultural sensetivity should be discussed early on in international projects so that there are no assumptions made about how projects should be run. Instead due communication and dialogue should be established in the beginning of projects about individual working styles and capacities as well as cultural expectations