



Doing Diversity: 'Decolonising' the Social Scientific Study of Religion

**British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group (SocRel) Annual  
Response Day**

[www.socrel.org.uk](http://www.socrel.org.uk)

Wednesday 21st November 2018, 10am – 4pm

Venue: BSA Offices, Imperial Warf, Townmead Road, Fulham SW6 2PY



## Welcome

The social scientific study of religion and the programmes of study associated with it, have emerged in relation to a particular set of narratives, contexts, and assumptions. There is a danger that the 'elite few' have had a disproportionate influence on the shape of the discipline that can directly or indirectly 'exclude' the voices of minorities.

The work of everyone in the field of sociology of religion (and sociology more widely) is shaped by these dynamics and their significance is not only ethical and economic, but epistemic too, since they channel and ultimately distort knowledge in our field. In summary, biases towards elite actors impacts the comprehensiveness and therefore the quality of research and teaching, again, both within and outside academia. To date, responses to issues of elitism in the academy have been to offer popular and scholarly critique, as well as initiatives aiming to revise curricula to better reflect non-elite perspectives. These interventions have been productive, but often ad hoc and potentially unsystematic in so far as various markers of difference are considered in isolation from one another, for example. In the study of religion, this can include a dismissive attitude towards the academic rigour of confessional religious curricula, rather than appreciating this as one among many 'ways of knowing'.

This one-day event intends to examine our discipline critically and constructively. We would like to consider ways in which our teaching and research can reflect the interests and voices of individuals and constituencies that have been, or are in danger of, being marginalised. As well as connecting to broader conversations about elitism and the production of academic knowledge, the growing incorporation of sociologists of religion from a range of minority faith communities is a topic of particular interest. How are they responding to the dominant theories and vocabulary of the discipline, and perhaps transforming it to reflect the multi-faith nature of our society?



## Programme Overview

- 10.00 Registration
- 10.15 Welcome
- 10.30 **Keynote: Doing Diversity and Decolonisation** Abby Day (Goldsmiths) and Lois Lee (University of Kent)
- 11.15 Coffee break
- 11.30 **Diversity & Decolonisation: Opportunities and Challenges**
- Equality, Diversity, Inclusivity, Internationalisation: Institutional inertia to Curriculum Decolonisation* Dave Thomas (University of Kent)
- Inclusion at Work? East Asians in Western Universities* Lin Ma & Aslak-Antti Oksanen (University of Bristol)
- Engaging Subaltern Ritual Practices in the Context of Ethno-religious Conflict: reflections from Sri Lanka* Kiran Grewal (Goldsmiths)
- Discussion & Workshop: Opportunities and Challenges
- 1.00 Lunch
- 2.00 **Diversity and Decolonisation in Practice**
- Case studies:
- Race & Racialised Religion – Decolonizing the Law School* Suhraiya Jivraj (University of Kent)
- Positive Action or Quick Fix? Using Citation Quotas in Research and Teaching* Lois Lee (University of Kent)
- Discussion & Workshop: Experience and Practice
- 3.00 Coffee break
- 3.15 **Looking Forward: Next Steps and the Future of Diversity and Decolonisation Initiatives**
- 4.00 END



## Doing Diversity and Decolonisation? Keynote Speakers: Professor Abby Day (Goldsmiths) & Dr Lois Lee (University of Kent)

Concerns are growing about the dominance of a narrow set of perspectives and interests across all areas of society. For universities, debates have centred on the ways in which people from specific identity-categories dominate the production and dissemination of academic knowledge in teaching, writing, and research. This talk sets out these issues as well as the significant lines of critique and practical activities that have emerged in response to them.

Building on this, we call attention to the need to develop theoretical understanding around issues of elitism, as well as to gather, consolidate, and share practical actions that institutions and individuals within the academy – staff and students alike – can take to address them. We discuss new work which aims to encourage positive and decisive steps beyond critique and towards the growth of ‘pluriversity’ – processes of knowledge production that are, in Achille Mbembe’s words: ‘open to epistemic diversity ... [pluriversity] does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but ... embraces it via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions.’ Our work emphasises the possibilities – and challenges – in identifying and implementing what we, as individuals and a community, can all actually do, both practically and theoretically, to bring about the change that is needed. What visions do we need? How can we each contribute to attaining them? We set out the big questions facing us as all as scholars, as well as a framework for addressing them, them now and in the longer term.

## Equality, Diversity, Inclusivity, Internationalisation: Institutional inertia to Curriculum Decolonisation Dave Thomas (University of Kent)

The much researched, ‘wicked problem’ problem of inequalities in academic attainment (the BME attainment gap) and subsequent campaigns to decolonise the British academe have provoked much debate, in relation to its meaning, form and function. Despite these debates and the institution of interventions, the picture for British students of colour remains inequitable. In light of the increasing tuition fees and reduction in job and career prospects with the non-achievement of a ‘good degree’ (a classification of 2:1 and above), students of colour are demanding more from their educational experience, framing these expectations with a consumer and/ or liberatory paradigm. Allied to these demands are cries to re-curate and re-contextualise the curriculum, by interrogating the hegemonic pillars upon which they stand – predominantly White, Eurocentric, male epistemology and ontology. To what extent does institutional power structures and deficit theories present barriers to the success of campaigns to decolonise the curriculum in the British academe? How can we successfully navigate institutional power structures in advancing the campaign to decolonise the

curriculum? The answer/s to these questions becomes important, given the prominence of initiatives to diversify the higher education (HE) population (widening participation) and the proclamation of the Government's 'BME 2020 vision' – an ambition to realise a 20% increase in the number of students from minoritised backgrounds going to university by 2020. However, a set of defences have been provided by the critics, who accuse participants of the campaign to decolonise the curriculum of 'cultural policing', 'ineptitude to grapple with intellectually difficult questions' and attempting to 'censor history, literature, politics and culture'. Others assume the role as gatekeepers of the 'traditional cannon', for fear of it being desecrated by vulgarism, identity-politics and narcissism. Educators are faced with the conundrum of placating 'the consumers' or challenging learners to be critical thinkers, while defusing the decolonising incursion with more palatable alternatives. For example, inclusive curriculum, accessibility, internationalisation etc. Is there a general understanding within the academe of the concepts of equality, diversity, internationalisation and decolonisation, in relation to the curriculum? To what extent does students' engagement with their reading lists stimulate interest in their curriculum as a whole? Does the curriculum in its current state present opportunities for students to develop cultural democracy?

## Inclusion at Work? East Asians in Western Universities

Lin Ma & Aslak-Antti Oksanen (University of Bristol)

This paper responds to the growing demand for recognising plural forms of knowledge production in higher education, by drawing attention to the inclusion of overseas East Asian students and scholars in Western universities and broader host societies. While postcolonial, decolonial, multiculturalist and feminist scholars have made contributions to the emancipatory inclusion of the majority of humanity, the presence and embodied knowledge of East Asians remain underutilised and peripheral. Multiculturalism primarily works on persistent inequalities of settled migrants and their descendants. Postcolonial and decolonial approaches address a colonial history that most East Asian societies do not share, and feminism also depends on indigenous knowledge of the groups in question. In universities, East Asian students and scholars are included as ethnic minorities; however, they lack historical ties to fully resemble postcolonial subjects that drive the agenda of inclusivity. The question is to what extent they pose challenges to diversity and inclusion in Western universities.

In addressing this question, this paper presents a case study in the sociological research of religion. It regards the Chinese students and scholars as active agents with embodied knowledge and beliefs upon arriving in Britain. By conducting a survey with a newly arrived cohort, this study illustrates their adherence to a belief system less known to the West. Importantly, the results challenge a prevalent perception that views them as the atheist products of contemporary China. Simultaneously, this enables a standpoint to question the nature of inclusion and exclusion of East Asians in current post-Christian research interest in the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR). Furthermore, this study utilises qualitative vignettes that illuminate an active sense-making of Chinese international students and

scholars following their Christian encounters through on-campus contacts. Altogether, it contributes to the discussion on diversity and inclusion in higher education in two ways. First, it identifies an inadequately included group that makes a significant part of Western campus diversity. Second, it provides an example of involving students as campus participants with embodied knowledge about the world, rather than financial contributors or disempowered learners.

In conclusion, this paper acknowledges current initiatives and highlights the East Asian students and scholars as indispensable to the ‘pluriversity’ process in higher education. With a case study of Chinese beliefs and religious encounters in Britain, it demonstrates the plural nature of beliefs that prevails across East Asia. These multiple beliefs coexist in a nonexclusive manner where not all are manifested through rigid institutional affiliations. While institutionalised religious universalism produces a vantage point of inclusion that transcends national fixations in campus diversity, it also carries a risk. Those less known or supported forms of human existence in possession of cultural and spiritual diversities are at the frontline to be homogenised, essentialised, or reduced. Alternatively, whenever a research agenda is obliged to include the East Asian students and scholars as possessors of unique knowledge and spiritual resources, they are invited and encouraged to further enrich an inclusive diversity in British universities.

## Engaging Subaltern Ritual Practices in the Context of Ethno-religious Conflict: reflections from Sri Lanka Kiran Grewal (Goldsmiths)

This paper discusses a current project which engages with religious practitioners on the margins of major religions in the East of Sri Lanka, including ritual practitioners in Hinduism and Buddhism and Sufis in Islam. Working in conversation with cultural anthropology, this project considers how these marginal sites of religion are providing alternate social and political spaces in an incredibly divided society and one where ethno-religious conflict is deeply entrenched and fed by dominant religious and political actors. The project provides both a critique of the dominant discourses, academic and political, on religion, identity and belonging in Sri Lanka while also attempting to engage with and valorize subaltern religious practice and practitioners. Ultimately this paper seeks to centralize and foreground the necessity of decolonial methods and epistemologies come in.

## Workshop: Opportunities and Challenges

Following the presentation and discussion of papers, delegates will consider the opportunities and challenges that are emerging around current critiques of elitism in the academy, and scrutinise the concepts and theoretical frameworks – and assumptions – underlying them. Drawing the papers together, we will discuss what challenges scholars might face in importing emerging actions into new contexts, and whether new issues are or might arise as a result of well-intended interventions. We will consider also any specific insights or concerns which arise in relation to the sociology of religion. This and later workshop activities will



provide delegates with an opportunity to discuss their own practice and share their own experiences.

## Race & Racialised Religion – Decolonizing the Law School

Suhraiya Jivraj (University of Kent)

Universities are increasingly being required to address so-called BME attainment gaps, namely that white students tend to graduate with higher degrees (2.1 and above) than their BME peers. According to the Equality Challenge Unit (now part of Advance HE) in 2015/16 78.8% of white qualifiers received a first/2:1 compared with 63.2% of BME qualifiers – a 15.6 percentage point gap. A variety of initiatives have been launched to address this issue, most notably by Kingston University where they have developed an inclusive curriculum framework to help staff to think constructively about diversifying the curriculum. However, these initiatives are not specifically formulated for law schools and legal education especially as they do not take into account the regulatory requirements of the Law Society to teach core subjects areas to obtain a Qualifying Law Degree (QLD). Coupled with professional law bodies such as solicitors and bar associations being conditioned to expect specific type of knowledge in new entrants, disregarding non-traditional knowledge as surplus or left to be valued by market forces there seems to be little impetus for change in this area (R. A. MacDonald and T. B. McMorrow, 'decolonizing law school'. (2014) 51:4 Alberta Law Review, pp. 717-737. How then can the law curriculum reflect the call from students to decolonize or diversify their experiences in HE in ways that meaningful to them by reflecting the diversity of their own cultural backgrounds and experiences? To what extent are critical race/religion theories, outsider jurisprudence, decoloniality or other theoretical frameworks helpful in enhancing the student experience of (legal) education? How can we better understand or interrogate the role of power in how certain racialised (as well as gendered, classed and cis) forms of knowledge circulating as the 'canon'?

## Positive Action or Quick Fix? Using Citation Quotas in Research and Teaching

Lois Lee (University of Kent)

This paper discusses the possibilities and problems arising from the use of citation quotas to address structural inequalities in the production of knowledge. Coming to prominence especially through the work of sociologist Sara Ahmed, citation quotas can provide a straightforward and effective tool for researchers and students seeking to critically reflect upon the knowledge they draw upon in creating new work. Incorporating citation quotas also in-builds a process of reflexivity into research and writing processes, and avoids the uncritical reproduction of so-called 'canonical work' and the structural inequalities these canons often represent. But citation quotas come with their own practical challenges, as well as their own controversies. This paper presents some common citation quota practices (including my own), as well as some of the issues arising from their use.



## Workshop: Experience and Practice

In this workshop, delegates will have the opportunity to share and discuss further initiatives they have developed or experienced – from within academia and beyond – and to reflect on best practices. We will consider practical difficulties and concerns involved in implementing such practices and develop action plans to troubleshoot any potential challenges we might face. We will develop ideas and plans which we can use in our everyday lives and consider what impact we would like them to have and how best to measure and evaluate the success of our initiatives in order to avoid insubstantial and tokenistic changes.

## Workshop: Looking Forward: Next Steps and the Future of Diversity and Decolonisation Initiatives

Looking forward, delegates in this workshop will develop an action plan of next steps they will take either within their own research, department or teaching in order to diversify and decolonize their practice. We will share ideas, contacts, networks and thinking long term, how we can create a bigger platform for this debate in our discipline, perhaps through a large conference, an edited collection, special issue journal or more creative dissemination methods!

### Notes

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---





Lined writing area consisting of 30 horizontal purple lines.