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# Troubling encounters: Exclusion, racism and responses of male African students in Poland

Edward Omeni[1]*

*Corresponding author: Edward Omeni, Department of Education, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Mainz, Germany
E-mail: edward.omeni@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This paper examines the experiences of a group of *African students in Poland, with the aim of understanding the affective and practical coping tactics they employ in response to social exclusion and racism. The analysis of coping strategies follows an in-depth overview of experiences of racialisation, othering and racial discrimination in both institutional and ordinary, day-to-day encounters. A significant body of literature and research highlights ways in which racism functions through material practices as well as overt and veiled dynamics of exclusion and territorialism. The study sheds light on the bodily nature of racism, highlighting the recurrent practices, contexts and interactions which lead to exclusion and the experience of feeling different, out of place and unwelcome. Among forms of coping, the analysis highlights ways in which individual and group identity of the students is defined and shaped through processes of recognition of kinship based on dimensions of experience in the Polish context, as opposed to concepts of shared cultural or national origin. The empirical approach was in-depth interviews as well as focus groups. Participants were recruited from universities located in the cities of Warsaw and Kracow. (*The terms "African student" and "international student from Africa" are simplified categories used to reference a diverse group of students from multiple countries in the region).

Subjects: Diaspora Studies; Ethnic Identity; Ethnicity; Migration; Multicultural Education; Race & Ethnic Studies; Racism; Study of Higher Education

Keywords: racism; everyday racism; coping; international education

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edward Omeni has a background in both qualitative and quantitative research in healthcare and organisational research settings. His recent experience includes working as a researcher at the Institute of Psychiatry, Kings College, University of London. His published research includes studies on public participation and involvement in mental health settings, including studies on institutional responses to stakeholder led initiatives in healthcare. His main academic interests are in the fields of sociology of health and illness, as well as the sociology of nationalism and racism. He has recently worked on topics related to student security, violence and self forming in the context international educational mobility. He is currently based at the Department of Education, Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz.

## PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

By looking at the experiences of international students, this study highlights important dimensions of inter-ethnic relations in Poland. The focus is relevant, considering the paucity of studies looking at the experiences of minority groups in the country. In addition, the findings highlight the need for a closer examination of the inter-cultural dimensions of international education, including matters of racism and violence; key concerns when considering issues of risk and safety of those undertaking migratory journeys in the context of academic education.

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## 1. Introduction and background

International education has played an important role in the process of foreign exchange in Europe, granting significant opportunities to both host and sending societies and international sojourners alike. However, in some cases the arrival of foreign students from other parts of the world can result in significant friction and conflict between the host society and members of the international student population. Students may enter contexts and settings with pre-existing social tensions (e.g. negative local perceptions/representations of immigrants or minority groups), which may implicate students by virtue of their perceived otherness and expose them to a significant and unfamiliar set of challenges. The constructions of minority groups as well as images and representations associated with ethnic minorities may extend their influence and impact to international students, profoundly shaping their experiences within their chosen country of education.

The following paper looks at the experiences of a group of male African students in Poland who had arrived in the country for the purpose of study during the period between 2004 and 2015 and were living in either Warsaw or Krakow. The main focus was to examine their experiences of dealing with forms of racial othering and racism in its various manifestations (including ideological, discursive and everyday forms and practices). The study was part of a wider project looking at the issues faced by international students in the Polish context, with an overall focus on motivations, social support and experiences of relocation and settlement. A key theme emerging from the broader study were issues of racial discrimination experienced by students from African countries. This paper brings closer attention to these findings highlighting the circumstances and nature of student experiences of racism and othering, as well as forms of coping adopted in response to such challenges. Interviews with twelve African students were considered for the purpose of this analysis.

The sites for the study are important contextual factors. Considering the relatively homogeneous cultural and ethnic composition in both cities, African students despite their small numbers, are a visible presence. As highlighted by surveys carried out by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (European Network Against Racism, 2012), as well as a recent report by the European Network Against Racism (2014), visibility can be a significant barrier to inclusion, with Europe's black population disproportionately affected by racism, discrimination and hate crime when compared with other groups (Kolankiewicz & Nowosielski, 2011).

The pathologies of racism as well as people's ability to respond to them, remain key areas of concern when looking at the cross cultural and inter-cultural dimensions of international education (Baas, 2014; Collins, 2006). A number of studies have highlighted the issues of racism and discrimination as significant barriers for many international students, emphasising the need for a more focused consideration of the problem, particularly in the context of debates on issues of student welfare, both inside and outside of university contexts (Lee & Rice, 2007; Marginson, 2014; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010). Boyer and Sedlacek (1989) suggest that understanding racism and the ability to deal with its various manifestations is a predictor of academic success, further emphasising its central role as a powerful force in the lives of many international students. Unlike discussions on race and racism in relation to people who have been settled in a place, international students often encounter racism as a sudden and immediate impact on their sense of being and relation to place and positioning (Marginson et al., 2010).

The research presented here builds on the findings outlined by Kolankiewicz and Nowosielski (2011), who highlighted racism as a significant problem affecting immigrants in Poland. This raises important questions regarding the impact of forms of discrimination and racial hostility on international students studying in the county. The focus on international students from African countries studying in Poland brings closer attention to a pattern of transnational mobility and a setting that has received little scholarly attention both in the Polish and within wider international academic literature (Piguet & Efionayi, 2014).

The number of African students in Poland remains low with around 2000 educational sojourners arriving each year. Yet in the last 10 years universities in Poland have seen a twofold increase in

admissions of students from this region alongside an overall increase in the numbers of international students overall. Due to the slow and incremental rise of Poland as a destination country for university education, few studies have looked at the experiences of students in the Polish context. One notable survey carried out in 2009, highlighted significant differences in the levels of satisfaction between student groups, with African students the least satisfied with their stay in Poland. While the students positively assessed their experiences and interactions with university administration and academic staff, negative experiences were reported in regard to two areas of contact: (1) Polish students and (2) members of the host society outside of university settings. Students from African countries were more critical in their evaluations of interpersonal relations with Polish people when compared to assessments of students from other regions of the world. African students were also least likely to express a desire to remain in the country upon completion of their studies (Żołędowski & Duszczyk, 2010).

The findings highlight the need for further studies looking at the experiences of international students as well as a further focus on the intercultural dimensions of international education including matters of racism and issues of visibility, which may have a profound role in shaping the experiences of those undertaking migratory journeys in the context of academic education. As argued by Marginson et al. (2010), issues of racism and discrimination represent the "darkest side of international education". Students who experience discrimination are trapped by distinctive characteristics of their being they cannot willingly change, such as appearance, language, and religion.

The accounts presented here give some insight into the bodily aspects of racial minority experiences in Poland, highlighting the various contexts, interactions and practices which mark bodies as different and shape the lives and experiences of those inhabiting these bodies in the Polish context. The affective and practical tactics used to come to terms with social exclusion and racist encounters are examined, shedding light on how individual and group identities of African students in Poland are formed through their relationships and lived experiences with their bodies. The accounts also shed light on the risks and costs of migration and the extent to which prejudice, minority status and forms of ethnocentric othering determine peoples' exposure to these. It is hoped that a close examination of the responses and reflections of the study participants may shed light on the dynamics of racism in the Polish context, bringing closer attention to the realities of those affected by it.

The paper is organised as follows: Firstly the paper presents a brief overview of the history and context of African academic migration to Poland including a broader focus of the various local representations of Africa and Africans. The following Section highlights aspects of theory and research relevant in terms of contextualising the analysis and discussion of the findings.

Section two covers the research and analysis methods used to collect evaluate the data. Finally the findings are presented followed by a discussion of the emerging conclusions.

### 1.1. African students in Poland: background and context

African immigration to Poland has historically taken place in the context of socialist countries student exchange programs. It is estimated that between 1958 and 1980, around 60,000 African students came to the country. Although the number of Africans in Poland remains low, immigration from Africa has continued after the political transition from communism. Most returned to their native countries upon graduation, however some remained, with a small but diverse minority of first and second generation citizens remaining in Poland. Data from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows that approximately 5,000 nationals representing 48 African countries currently reside in the country; including individuals from Malawi, Guinea or Tanzania as well as larger clusters of immigrants from Nigeria, Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia. African countries continue to be represented in Polish universities with students arriving each year on the basis of scholarships for international students. The popularity of Poland as a destination for academic studies is rising and in the last 10 years the number of African students applying for study in the country has more than doubled. Despite this surge in popularity, recent research has highlighted that African immigrants and

students in Poland report unequal treatment and are often victims of racism and hate crime, characterised by discriminatory language, verbal abuse and/or physical violence (Kolankiewicz & Nowosielski, 2011). Similar findings were reported in other studies (Mikulska, 2010).

There is a paucity of research looking at issues of race and racism in Poland. In the few studies covering the subject, researchers have cited histories of anti-semitism and the persecution of Roma people in the country (Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, 2003; Chęciński, 1982; Friedrich, 2010; Kolankiewicz & Nowosielski, 2011; Mikulska, 2010). In recent years studies have traced the slow process of the countries implementation of EU directives requiring member states to take an active stance in combating racism and xenophobia. These include activities such as educational and monitoring initiatives aimed at improving judicial effectiveness and law enforcement as well as the implementation of guidelines and stipulations regarding commitments to tackle hate crime and hate speech (Kolankiewicz & Nowosielski, 2011). Prior to 2004 initiatives aimed at combating racism and discrimination received little attention from authorities and researchers have emphasised the resistance and slow progress in legislative and wider societal concern with such issues (Kolankiewicz & Nowosielski, 2011). As argued by Mikulska (2010) an attitude of complacency has been historically evident around issues of race and racism with public authorities refusing to respond to concerns due to the conviction that the country's ethnic and cultural uniformity protect it from the problems surrounding race and racism. More recent studies have begun to look at the experiences of ethnic minorities in light of the incrementally more diverse ethnic composition, resulting from of increased inward migration in recent years (Kolankiewicz & Nowosielski, 2011; Mikulska, 2010; Narkowicz & Pędziwiatr, 2016). Highlighted within such studies are issues of discrimination, violence and exclusion experienced by immigrants and ethnic minorities in the country. Despite some media coverage on issues of violence and discrimination against minorities, Mikulska (2010) argues that factors such as failure to report racist crime and well as lack of effective mechanisms and effort in monitoring such incidents assures that the problem continues to remain outside of the sphere of media and public interest.

Mincer (2012) positions racism as an ideological force highlighting the "glocal" character of the phenomena, emphasising the interplay of global as well as local-historical and societal factors (Mincer, 2012). As the author points out, in order to understand the "globalisation" of racism as a process of sedimenting global forces in the Polish context, it is worth remembering that this adaptation would not be possible without the existence of appropriate structural and ideological conditions (Mincer, 2012). As argued by Mevius (2005) particular forms of patriotism which developed in the period of socialism have also shaped dynamics of discrimination. As the author points out "patriotic socialism" was actively encouraged in eastern and central Europe, privileging ethnic majorities over minority groups. Fleming (2012) traces histories of ethno nationalist sentiments back to the post war period. The author asserts that it was during this time that tolerance for national diversity disintegrated as a result of the communist party's ideological rhetoric which emphasised the goal of a nationally homogeneous nation state as a way of gaining support in particular regions.

In terms of more recent history, Ambrosewicz-Jacobs (2003) reflected on the surfacing of ethnocentric attitudes in the country, brought about by a sense of insecurity engendered by Poland's transition from communism, accompanied by high levels of unemployment, crime, loss of community and low levels of trust towards state authorities and institutions. As highlighted by Kalb (2009), sentiments have persisted in recent years within segments of Polish society.

Sociologists have looked at other reasons underlying potential tensions in the context of contact with other cultures, ethnicities and religions. Researchers have speculated about the reasons behind cultural tensions and the rather closed attitudes toward religious minorities observed in post-communist Poland. A frequently cited explanation is the perceived cultural homogeneity of the society and the lack of socially accepted and culturally formalised patterns of responses towards various forms of human diversity (Nowicka & Majewska, 1993). Explanations have also looked at the

wider ideological and narrative positioning of Eastern Europe. The prevalence of orientalist stereo-types have fixed many post-socialist nations in a discourse of "otherness" characterised by patronising narratives of lagging civilisation, progress and the need for further growth and maturing under the tutelage of the "West" (Skorczewski, 2009). As argued by Nowicka and Nawrocki (1996) negative features of such narratives have a profound role in shaping the national and individual "self-stereotype", resulting in a state of psychological alienation and feelings of inferiority versus some nations and compensating ideas of superiority over others.

Studies of racism and ethnocentrism in Poland have also focussed on local histories of anti-semi-tism and prejudice against the Roma population; both well documented phenomena in sociological and historical research (Bilewicz & Krzeminski, 2010; Chęciński, 1982; Friedrich, 2010; Gross, 2007; Kligman, 2001; Lendvai, 1971; Sobotka, 2002). Studies on issues of prejudice have emphasised prevalent hostile attitudes and beliefs toward one group of minorities are a positive predictor of negative attitudes towards other ethnic groups. As such, perceived otherness may be enough to implicate new minorities into pre-existing dynamics of exclusion and discrimination which have affected other marginalised groups in society (Volovici, 1994). Prejudice, as outlined by Forbes (1985), may be manifested against any out-group, displaying a more general rather than a specific character.

As highlighted by Mincer (2012), it is worth noting that racism is particularly related to histories of colonisation. European conquests were based on the idea of inequality of individual nations, cultures and "races". Poland did not possess any colonies, however, colonial thinking was not alien to polish culture, considering the nations historical aspirations. Equally relevant is the thesis that Poland benefited and is still tied with colonialism indirectly, through a network of economic relations with the colonial powers of Western Europe, highlighting the ideological and structural connections underlying the spread and sedimentation of racial hierarchies and discourses of difference (Mincer, 2012).

African students have not been the focus of widespread public attention in Poland, evidenced by the paucity of reports in print, online and other media. This might be explained by the relatively limited number of students arriving from African countries compared to other regional groups. Despite the limited public discourse on African students, immigrants from African countries have been represented through a variety of narratives and images portraying a range of economic, cultural and social characteristics. As shown by Collins (2006), there can be a significant overlap between the discourses surrounding international students and those pertaining to immigrants in general and their perceived national or cultural origin. His example of Asian students in Auckland shows how media representations positioned students within wider stereotypical narratives of Asians in general. In a study of media representations of Africa and Africans in the Polish context, Sredzinski (2011) notes that representations have generally centred on the themes of bad living conditions, famine, poverty, disease, AIDS, cruelty, terrorism and war (Sredzinski, 2011). Other research has highlighted similar findings with additional narratives on hate crime against Africans in the Polish context as well as significant coverage of "marriage scams" and immigration fraud which were associated with a prominent case involving a Nigerian immigrant (Sredzinski, 2011).

The focus on media attention and discursive representations and their underlying structures and contexts is important, in particular when considering how the meanings attached to bodies can determine people's experiences by fixing and assigning a role to them within a given social context. Although topics relating African issues have been on the thematic periphery of Polish media coverage, research indicates that existing narratives have been predominantly pessimistic or paternalistic in nature and tone.

### 1.2. Theory and research

The findings in this paper will be discussed in the context of theoretical perspectives on racism, embodiment as well as insights drawn from research on coping.

### 1.2.1. Racism and the body

The term "racism" in this paper will be used to encompass the wide variety of hostile behaviours and forms of exclusion and prejudice occurring in peoples day to day lives, which participants felt were directed at them because of their ethnicity and origin. In this sense, the study draws on sociological concepts of "everyday racism", which highlight the lived experience of racial oppression as well as the practices, day to day violations and subtle interactions which profoundly affect individuals' sense of belonging and wellbeing and result in exclusion and discrimination (Essed, 1991; Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998).

Racialisation refers to the processes of attributing ethnic or racial identities through stereotyping, imagery and language to groups of individuals who do not identify themselves with the prescribed attributions (Murji & Solomos, 2005; Omi & Winant, 2014).

Within sociological theory and research, racism is discussed in the context of its covert and overt manifestations and is positioned predominantly as an ideology reproduced through specific discourses (Goldberg, 1990, 2006; Hall, 1981, 1997; Murji & Solomos, 2005; Omi & Winant, 2014). As argued by Fernandez, racism, to a large extent, involves a multifaceted range of embodied practices. Since racism is often manifested through actions, it is useful to provide a closer focus on its performance and how such performances are interpreted and received by those affected by them. To identify embodied aspects of racism, it is useful to note the ways in which bodies behave and react in the presence of "difference" but also the impact of these actions on those positioned as the other within a given social context. According to Fernandez, such an approach provides a clearer understanding of the subtleties and pervasiveness of exclusion and racism than approaches which predominantly highlight their discursive aspects (Fernandez, 2003). Nonetheless, the materiality of race is partly determined by core aspects of racial discourse (e.g. stereotypes) which are constructed as tangible through associating bodily markers with meaning (Hall, 1997). As such, bodies can be imbued with significance on particular racialised terms, making them crucial to the formation of subjectivity. As illustrated by Fanon (1967, 1970) a focus on representations is a key perspective when analysing the spatial imaginary surrounding bodies and a key focus when considering the lived experience of racial otherness. For Fanon (1967, 1970) the traumatic force of racism lies in its cultural expressions which exert violence upon subjects through forms of symbolism. As he explains, "there is a constellation of postulates, a series of propositions that slowly [...] with the help of books, newspapers, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, radio–work their way into one's mind"; consequently shaping one's view of his or her own humanity and position in the world (Fanon, 1970) . For Fanon the exposure to forms of discrimination, both in terms of its material and symbolic manifestations is a traumatic experience, which becomes inherent to individual personality and subjectivity. The internalisation of the "self" as the "other" is the outcome of this trauma, resulting in the construction of a variety of "black" subject positions, ranging from orientations emphasising acquiescence and adaptation to positions of active resistance and violent opposition. As argued by Hall (1996) and Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts (1978) race is the medium through which class relations are lived and experienced, and dimensions of class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality are key in understanding the various textures of black subjectivity as well as the sites and patterns of resistance. International students may be positioned through historic forms of race and class categorisation that continue to determine experiences of many minority ethnic groups in societies across the world. At the same time, they may be perceived as a "migratory elite" occupying relatively higher social status within the host setting. Such ambiguities pose important questions in regard to the various dynamics of othering and racism and the associated strategies of response.

The perspectives describing international education as a site of privilege and opportunity are often overstated, in particular when considering the significant barriers and problems many are likely to encounter during their studies abroad. As argued by Goldberg (2006), such barriers and borders are often built upon notions of race, violence, exclusion and racist practices which can become resources for othering and penalising those who cross borders or seek to redefine their position (Perry, 2001). In his research on international students in Auckland, New Zealand, Collins (2006) highlights

mainstream media representations, which have positioned and separated students arriving from North East regions of Asia along the lines of racial differences, and problematised interactions with locals. Similar findings were reported by Baas (2014), in a study carried out in the Australian context. Lee and Rice (2007) brought attention to student experiences in the context of tensions and forms of exclusion, inhospitality, and discrimination, highlighting the students' position within the range of unequal power relations and racial hierarchies of oppression in the United States.

Gogia (2006) emphasises that a consideration of people's embodiment is crucial in understanding the different ways in which migrant journeys are facilitated or hindered and the extent to which they can be incorporated into both places of origin and settlement. The migrating body which crosses spatial, cultural and political borders has to cope not only with the changing representations and meanings built around it but also contend with issues of self-preservation. As such, migration is an experience of survival, consisting of ways of moving through spaces and controlling bodily presence and visibility to resist or avoid external threats within unsupportive or hostile environments (Fernandez, 2003). As Haraway (2004) points out, the embodiment of migrants is a crucial focal point for identifying the various forces that remain operational in transnational spaces, while also recognising the role of individuals in reconstructing and navigating these spaces.

### 1.2.2. Racism and coping: psychological perspectives

While the subject of racism, its manifestations and impact can be examined from the viewpoint of body theoretical approaches, research on coping provides a valuable framework for analysing individual and group responses to challenges posed by racism and its various manifestations. There is a significant body of research within psychology looking at ways in which individuals cope with racism, all of which are useful for understanding and categorising the various forms of behaviours students display in response to race-related discrimination (Brondolo, Brady ver Halen, Pencille, Beatty, & Contrada, 2009). Models of dealing with racism have been closely tied with general theories of stress and coping, including problem focussed coping, emotional coping, confrontation, avoidance and social support (Danoff-Burg, Prelow, & Swenson, 2004; Sanders Thompson, 2006; Scott, 2004). Mellor (2004) suggests an alternative perspective for categorising racism related coping that lays emphasis on the function of the coping response as opposed to their substantive characteristics. In his model, he makes the point of emphasising the separation between tasks aimed at preventing personal injury (such as denial, acceptance) from actions aimed at remediating, preventing or punishing acts of racism (assertiveness, aggression, reprisal) (Brondolo et al., 2009). Researchers have also used generic coping measures, modifying the focus and the instruments to inquire about coping responses to race-related discrimination or harassment (Brondolo et al., 2009)

Despite the usefulness of such explanatory models, researchers have identified significant inadequacies within the overall research domain on coping strategies. It is difficult to ascertain the nuances within individual coping strategies using standardised measurement tools. Most models of coping with racism fall short of incorporating both strategies aimed at managing the interpersonal conflicts associated with experiences of racism as well as the emotional consequences associated with such episodes (Brondolo et al., 2009).

Factors such as the timing or specific circumstances or purpose connected to particular coping responses may be difficult to ascertain using standardised measurement instruments. For example, it may be difficult to ascertain the ultimate goal of the coping mechanisms identified in many models, in particular whether the strategies described are targeted at dealing with racism itself or the various consequences associated with racial discrimination such as unemployment and poverty (Brondolo et al., 2009).

The temporal and contextual dimensions of the coping strategy remain important considerations, in particular when considering that coping responses may be effective for a limited period of time and become detrimental if maintained persistently or if applied over longer periods of time. For example, strategies based on silencing negative emotions and reactions may be effective in the short

term, when attempting to avoid the risks associated with confrontation, but may have a negative impact if applied for extended periods of time following the incident. Most models do not examine both strategies aimed at coping with an acute incident and the approaches for coping, with the awareness that experiences of racial hostility and maltreatment are likely to be a continuous stressor. In terms of context, strategies may be more effective in some settings and social spaces, while being completely unacceptable and counterproductive in others (Brondolo et al., 2009).

### 1.2.3. Coping as capital: theoretical considerations

Broader theoretical viewpoints drawn from cultural studies, critical race theory and research on transnationalism provide a useful perspective from which it is possible to augment coping models, particularly when considering how people protect themselves from various forms of adversity in the context of migration and how the various experiences shape perceptions of belonging and identity. Gilroy (1993) emphasised a focus on forms of independent organisation of "Black" groups, acknowledging the ways in which they define themselves, as well the role of experiences of racism in such organisations. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004), propose that identity should not be seen as derived from a single point of origin, nor can it be seen as static and unaffected by significant life events, such as migration and coming into contact with a new set of societal conditions and challenges. Similarly, Marger and Obermiller (1987), suggest that cultural factors, ecology and politics trigger the forming of ethnic groups which can be a source of support and coping for marginalised groups. As proposed by Ahmed (2000), the experience of estrangement and not being fully at home can be a key factor in forming the basis of such communities. As the author further explains, communities are achieved through reaching towards other bodies recognised as being out of place and 'uncomfortable' in the place they inhabit.

Yosso (2005) examines aspects of resilience and coping through conceptualisations of community cultural wealth, as a critical race theory (CRT) perspective on interpretations of cultural capital. The author advocates for a shift away from a deficit perspective of communities of colour as victims of cultural poverty and disadvantage, instead focusing on forms of capital such as the frequently unacknowledged wide array of cultural knowledge, abilities, skills and networks developed by marginalised groups. As the author explains, various forms of capitol can be developed by students of colour including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. Aspirational capital is the ability to retain hope in contexts and structures of inequality, often without the means to exert influence over the surroundings. Linguistic capital are the learned social, intellectual and communicational skills attained through experience of interacting with different cultures and settings. Familial capital describes the forms of cultural knowledge and systems derived from families and communities that serve as a protective factor in hostile environments. The concept of family and kinship may be broadened to include people brought together through a shared consciousness and become connected around common issues and concerns. Social capital refers to the connections and linked resources that may be a source of social support aiding people in the navigation through various societal institutions. Navigational forms of capital are the skills and forms of knowledge developed to survive and thrive in unfavourable or discriminatory settings. It includes aspects of resilience, i.e. the range if inner resources and strategies that facilitate survival and functioning and recovery after stressful incidents, contributing and enhancing overall capacities and functioning. Resistant capital include forms of knowledge of systems of oppression and racism and the motivation and skills and behaviours developed to challenge forms of inequality (Yosso, 2005). The various forms of capitol as outlined by Yosso (2005), are not mutually exclusive or fixed, but operate flexibly, often combining with each other as part of the wider community or group cultural capital.

### 1.2.4. Self-formation in international education

In his research on international students and issues of security Marginson et al. (2010), Marginson (2014), frames international education as a process characterised by self-formation. The author examines functions of self directed reflexive agency in response to environmental challenges which may necessitate adaptation and innovation within ones surroundings (social or institutional). Elements external to the student and beyond their control may determine and frame international

education, including factors such as institutions, academic staff, cultural groups and social networks. Nonetheless, according to Marginson et al. (2010), self-formation occurs within this context as individuals fashion themselves, utilizing identity resources brought with them from their countries of origin as well as those developed in the place of study. The author distances himself from an integration narrative, opposing ideas that the journey undertaken by students is one leading from difference to sameness with the wider society or culture; a transformation into a local identity. Instead, the function of change is the act of learning to survive, cope and be effective within the new environment. As the author highlights, those exposed to a new set of requirements will change in response to the external challenges they encounter such as language and university bureaucracy and local resistance, while also choosing who they want to be. Emphasised here are acts of self-formation which entail reciprocal interactions between locals and internationals, which may lead to mutual learning and transformation. Frequently however, visitors must adapt out of necessity while locals adamantly resist the desire or need to engage. The task is often challenging and some students may be more at ease than others when dealing with ambiguity and plural identity across a number of domains. Marginson et al.'s (2010) research shows there is room for inventiveness within the process of self-forming as some students retain flexibility in their self-formation and are able to synchronise and self define differently depending on social context or the requirements and opportunities and limitations within the environment (e.g. students cultivating relations with internationals from other countries). Despite the creativity, inventiveness and flexibility on the processes of self-formation the process occurs under circumstances they do not control (Marginson et al., 2010). The opportunities to synchronise and achieve harmony may not always be readily available.

International students can be perceived as members of a global elite, in contrast to prevalent perceptions and narratives on labour migration often linked to notions of lower status and hardship (Favell, Feldblum, & Smith, 2007; Luthra & Platt, 2016). Within research, students have been positioned as mobile elites, privileged due to their documented status and relative ease of movement across borders due to lower transitional costs and pressures (Urry, 2007). Equally, they are frequently assumed to be less reliant on networks and help from countrymen or kin and more entrenched in class rather than ethnicity based structures and communities (Beaverstock, 2005; Rizvi, 2005). Important questions remain as to how the positioning in a relatively higher social stratum may condition their experiences and responses to racism. On the other hand, pre-existing social tensions and conflicts may implicate arriving international students. The outcome of this may be a loss of status and the association of students with other less privileged groups in society (Collins, 2006). Issues of prejudice and brutal abuse may be of particular concern to visible minorities, obscuring opportunities for friendships and interaction with domestic students and others within the community. Dynamics of cultural segregation; propelled by factors such as stereotyping, discrimination, resistance and hostility from locals, may obstruct the route to local relations and relegate international students to an outsider status, influencing the adaptation routes available to students. As the author points out, in many cases international students have no choice but to pursue the remaining path of separation, which may give them the chance to avoid feelings of frustration and humiliation.

## 2. Method and material

The research presented here is based on a grounded approach to research on transnationalism as proposed by Walsh (2006), with a focus on the psychosocial and cultural dimensions of migration and mobility. The perspective adopted here does not focus solely on migration behaviour itself; instead, of key interest are the experiences of African students as well as their individual thoughts, feelings and perceptions on Poland as a destination country for development and studies. A qualitative research methodology was used consisting of in-depth interviews and focus groups with International students from African students living in Poland. The data collection phase was conducted between April 2014 and June 2015. The interviews were open ended and focused on eliciting everyday experiences of life in the country (i.e. dealing with day to day challenges, settling into a new cultural milieu, adjusting to a new academic environment and building new relationships).

The diversity of the participants must be stressed and the use of the term African students is not intended to imply a category comprising of individuals who share the same cultural origin. The sample consists of individuals who arrived via a similar migration pathway and were admitted on the basis of university tuition fee scholarships offered to students from African countries. Participants of the study consisted of 12 male students from African countries living in the cities of Warsaw and Krakow and aged between 20 and 30 years old. Participants identified countries of origin as Nigeria, Kenya, Morocco, Cameroon, Mali and Tunisia. Participants were recruited using a non-probability sampling method involving recruitment from social networking, websites and snowball sampling following initial contact with local charities providing services and support for minority ethnic groups in the cities of Warsaw and Krakow. The sample size was determined on the basis of redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) i.e. the sampling and collection of data continued up to the point where the data collected became repetitive and further data collection was not likely to yield new insights. All participants were recruited in the cities of Warsaw and Krakow, with six interviewees recruited in each city. The participants were male. Educational migration to Poland from Africa is predominantly male with only a small number of female students arriving in the country for the purpose of study. Despite efforts to recruit female participants, only male students agreed to participate in the study.

Considering the qualitative nature of the research and the relatively small size of the sample, the study does not aim t make far reaching generalisations nor does it claim to be representative of the experiences of all African international students in Poland. As argued by Walker (1985a, 1985b) the primary aim of qualitative methodology is the discovery of phenomena and their dynamics as opposed to determining their prevalence or scale. Accordingly, the emphasis is placed on the scrutiny of the situation that is being studied and uncovering its dynamic qualities rather than its proportions or frequency (Walker, 1985a, 1985b). This study places emphasis on individual accounts given by international students with a focus on subjective realities and how these are interpreted, understood and experienced. The aim is to shed light on dimensions and dynamics of racism as experienced by some International students, with a close analysis of the responses to such challenges in the Polish context. The smaller size of the sample allowed for an in-depth evaluation of difficult experiences disclosed by the study participants, and it is hoped that the findings obtained here will provide insights to stimulate continued research on race racism and the experiences of ethnic minority students in the Polish context.

Data was obtained via in-depth interviews and focus groups, aimed at yielding participants experiences of life in Poland. As highlighted by Corbetta (2003) and Denscombe (2003) a primary advantage of these data collection methods is the possibility of capturing detailed data by exploring participant perceptions, feelings and experiences while being able to continuously explore new areas of enquiry emerging during the course of the interview.

The focus of each interview was to provide each participant with the opportunity to describe in detail, their experiences of living and studying in Poland, including an examination of the difficulties and challenges they faced in the process of migration and settlement. Interviews were generally divided into two parts. During the initial phase, respondents were asked about their motivations for studying in Poland and their overall experiences of living in the country, including any challenges they may have faced since arrival. The second phase of the interview focused on themes emerging in the first interview phase, and participants were questioned about the various experiences and difficulties they faced and how they chose to deal with them. The issue of racial discrimination and estrangement, as well as experiences of racialisation were recurring themes across most interviews, informing the line of questioning in the second part of the interview in the case of all participants. The interview guidelines were revised on a regular basis to accommodate individual circumstances and include new perspectives based on the data emerging from previous interviews. Focus groups served as a means of gaining additional information from participants and to facilitate discussion about the themes emerging from the individual interviews in more detail. Overall, three focus group discussions were carried out with 10 of the 12 respondents.

In the case of both the focus groups and the individual interviews, open-ended questions were prioritised in order to encourage answers based on the individual experiences and avoid guiding respondents with overly specific lines of inquiry. The approach also enabled an in-depth exploration of the participants feelings and perceptions and facilitated the capturing of detailed and rich data more easily than would have been possible using a more direct or guided approach. Interview times ranged from approximately 45 min to 90 min. Both focus group discussions lasted approximately 90 min. All responses (interviews and focus groups) were recorded and transcribed.

The data was analysed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). Early analysis of the data was conducted at the stage of the interview itself with preliminary themes and patterns identified from the very early stages of data collection. Interviews were coded thematically using qualitative analysis software NVIVO 10/11 and were reviewed and re-evaluated with the help of notes and memos as facilitated by the software. Conclusions and frameworks were grounded in the data and theoretical findings and conclusions were drawn in the process of interchange between analysis and data collection, conducted in an incremental fashion. The analysis was based on an inductive approach, with the focus initially being on single cases with a subsequent progression to broader categories along the line of prevalent themes and recurrences. The categories identified in the data did not strictly derive from a predetermined hypothesis. Initial coding was conducted using a line-by-line method of analysis followed by a focused process of identifying recurring codes and using these identified categories to examine further data sources. Memo writing was used to further group ideas into topics and themes while also serving as a way to drive further analysis and research questions in relation to the overall topic of the research.

## 3. Results and analysis

The analysis presented here is points to a number of broader themes, including how African students in Poland experienced racism and racial othering and how individuals responded to such challenges. Although the main themes emerged from an inductive process, categories were narrowed down and grouped in terms of their relevance to the research questions, with a particular focus on the issue of experiences of racism and discrimination and the responses to such experiences. An attempt was made to retain headings which reflected the nature and content of the prevalent themes emerging from the individual narratives. The findings and themes are organised in the following manner: (1) Studying in Poland (2) Racism: Practices, contexts and interactions, (3) Experiencing Otherness (4) Impact of racism and othering. The data analysis on how the students coped with the racism they experienced are highlighted in the following categories: (1) Practical responses and spatial navigation, (2) Social support (3) Affective and identity based responses.

### 3.1. Studying in Poland: realities and challenges

Participants reflected on a number of challenges associated with student life in Poland. These included the challenge of learning the Polish language, surviving on a low income, problems with securing accommodation, as well as dealing with experiences of racism and hostility both within and outside institutional settings. Participants also reflected on general aspects of their lives, highlighting the context and realities of being an international student. The narratives highlight key factors which are important to consider before the analysis of individual experiences of racism and the associated coping strategies. The results presented in this section serve to contextualise the analysis that follows in subsequent sections of this paper.

### 3.1.1. Coming to Poland

Most of the students came across the opportunity to study in Poland by chance as opposed to an informed process of selecting Poland as a desired country of study. While students were highly impressed by the quality of education and were confident about their academic prospects, many admitted that Poland did not originally feature on their list of desired study destinations. Respondents tended to identify countries such as UK, France and the US as the most desirable pathways, considering the high perceived status of qualifications from such countries, both internationally and in their respective countries of origin. Information about the possibility for studying in Poland was

frequently obtained randomly, through general hearsay; although many had considered studying abroad and had actively been searching for opportunities. Generally, participants disclosed having little to no knowledge about Poland prior to their arrival, although many were exposed to the discourse of Poland being unwelcoming towards "foreigners", with some warned about the possibility of encountering racism and violence.

### 3.1.2. Immobility and income

Participants were relatively restricted in terms of their ability to travel outside of Poland. Students described being limited in their ability to visit family members in their countries of origin due to financial hardship and the high cost of air travel. Typically, most participants had not been able to visit families and friends in their home counties throughout the duration of their studies (up to 4 years or more in some cases). Mobility was also restricted locally and participants disclosed limited travel outside of their respective university cities. Occasional journeys were undertaken between the larger cities of Warsaw and Kracow, Such journeys were undertaken to visit friends and socialise with other international students (although visits were reported as occurring very rarely). Financial restrictions limited their travel opportunities. Students also perceived the larger cities of Warsaw and Kracow as safer than other regions in Poland due to the higher number of international visitors, which was seen as a protective factor against attacks and other forms of hostility. In terms of financial support, most of the interviewed students received grants or tuition fee exemptions. Students were also supported financially by their parents at and families at home. In some cases, income was supplemented through part time work.

### 3.1.3. First experiences

For most of the participants, studies in Poland were the first experience of being outside of their country of origin. Reflecting on this, participants described the challenge of getting used to a new climate, culture, and learning the various subtleties of language, while simultaneously trying to keep up with academic studies. Beyond the practicalities of adjusting to and new environment the students reflected on the experience of transition, from being in a majority cultural and ethnic group in their countries of origin to a minority status in Poland. Participants described "standing out" and feeling foreign in the context of an ethnically homogeneous local community. Most of the interviewees reported experiencing a range of reactions to their presence from members of the host population. A prominent feature within each interview was the experience of racism and violence; a first experience for the students who had never been exposed to racial discrimination based on skin colour. For some, this was unexpected, having a profound impact on their sense of wellbeing and safety. Others, while similarly affected, normalised the experience stressing their status as being in a "different community"; hence the experience of hostility was one they expected and accepted as an integral part of the environment.

### 3.1.4. Settling in and support

Few institutional structures of support were identified by international students. Some completed intensive language courses, prior to commencing their studies. Many peer networks were formed during this time, with students forming bonds and friendships, which were maintained throughout their studies. In most cases, initial experiences of racism occurred during the early stages of their stay. Participants described learning the "rules" associated with being safe in the urban Polish environment as a matter of necessity. Rules included, learning the language and staying away from dangerous areas and contexts believed to be unsafe for non-white people. Despite reports of overall positive experiences with academic and clerical staff at the universities, they were rarely a source of advice regarding issues of safety, nor did they provide support to help students cope with the various difficulties and risks associated with the violence they experienced.

### 3.2. Experiences of racism: practices, contexts and interactions

The interview participants described various experiences occurring in public places involving interactions with locals and feeling singled out because of their skin colour or perceived difference. Experiences, such as being stared or pointed at were a source of frustration, annoyance and distress.

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These were situations which participants identified as occurring on a regular and frequent basis. The students made a clear distinction between practices and forms of looking that were clearly threatening; and behaviours that were more indicative of onlooker curiosity or interest. For instance, participants elaborated on the differences between threatening gazes and curious glances or reactions indicating surprise or fascination. Beyond attracting stares, some participants described having to deal with onlooker curiosity and the occasional encroachment of personal space by strangers, including instances of people touching their hair or skin. Such cases were generally perceived as unpleasant experiences, contributing to feelings of discomfort and foreignness.

Most of the study participants experienced racially motivated violence against them in the form of physical and verbal attacks. Most frequently, violence occurred in public spaces, such as the street and on public transport. Those who had not experienced an attack personally had either witnessed or had known at least one person with such experience. Falling short of experiences of outright, overt violence, were descriptions of coercion and intimidation. These include situations where respondents were victims of physical threats or were asked to vacate public spaces (e.g. being asked to leave the bus or bar while being verbally and physically threatened).

Again, participants identified warning signs, such as gazes and behaviours which were indicative of the potential for aggression or indicated the imminence of violence. Participants also reported recognising likely perpetrators on the basis of their outward appearance and clothing style. An example of this was the figure of the "Hooligan", frequently cited reference in the responses of most study participants.

The likelihood of experiencing a negative event depended on various situational contexts, such as presence in specific parts of the city or being outdoors after dark. Participants described the existence "no-go areas" for African immigrants in both Warsaw and Krakow; the traversal of which was likely to result in being a target of a racially motivated attack. Dangerous areas were identified on the basis of personal experience as well as through advice, given to them by other immigrants. In general, participants kept to central areas of both Warsaw and Kracow, which had larger immigrant and tourist presence, therefore reducing their visibility and likelihood of encountering violence. Areas with fewer numbers of tourists and foreigners were considered less safe due to the perceived threat of violence towards non polish visible minorities.

Students also reflected on instances of discrimination occurring in academic institutional contexts. In contrast to the overt manifestations of racism experienced in public spaces, which were explicitly labelled and identified as instances of racial discrimination, the more subtle forms of discrimination and othering occurring in academic settings were perceived with more ambiguity. Institutional forms of racism such as dismissive attitudes and stereotypes held by academic staff and host country students were contrasted with the more violent and overt encounters occurring outside of university settings. These were perceived as less severe. Despite this, students described strategies aimed at countering negative social perceptions among academic peers and staff, as a way of gaining legitimacy and respect. The very need for such adaptation highlights the impact of forms of discrimination occurring within university settings.

### 3.3. Being "Black", being "African": encounters, narratives and stereotypes

Participants' interpretation of racism incorporated a variety of situations and experiences with a common theme of being targeted on the basis of skin colour and perceived foreignness. Participants frequently stressed that physical appearance and skin colour singled them out as foreign and different, making them a target for racial slurs, violence and other forms of discrimination. As one student explained:

... when they attacked me it was on the basis of my skin colour, because I am not from around here and erm ... yeah I shouldn't be according to them. Erm ... but it's sure that when

they don't know you because ... they are afraid of you because they don't know you ...

Similarly, when describing his experiences of searching for accommodation one participant highlighted the difficulties he encountered due to prejudicial racial attitudes against black people:

... one time I was looking for an apartment and I called. I speak a little bit of Polish so she didn't notice that I was a foreigner, but when I went there she saw I'm black and she said "No I don't want black guys".

Another student highlighted restrictions on movement due to concern for his own safety:

I don't feel totally safe because I cannot do everything I want. I cannot go everywhere want. It's not like I'm in my country where I can do what I want, I can go where I want. There's something different. Some places, I cannot go. It's like its better if I don't go there. Some people find that I'm from another country. Mainly it's for being black if I can say something like that

Being confronted with stereotypes about Africans and black people was another theme often referred to in the interviews. Elaborating on the type of language used to describe people with "dark complexion" another student described the prevalence of negative stereotypes influencing people's biases in the county:

... It's not important whether you are black or a decent, or mixed they call you Murzyn as long as you are dark complexion, they call you Murzyn. (...) "Murzyn" doesn't wash himself ... he likes to play in the trees, ... he doesn't go to school these are the 3 stereotypes they have when they see a black people (...) black people they don't wash, they are not educated, ... and those three stereotypes from the poem... they are still very present in Poland and they will be if nothing happens..

Other students described confronting stereotypes of their intellectual inferiority, backwardness or inability, complicating interactions with local students and academic staff and in the most severe cases preventing them from taking part in classes. As highlighted in the following response:

Mostly, other university students and most unfortunately lecturers may undermine you because they think that you lack their ability to do something. There's a friend of mine who went to an IT lesson and the lecturer asked him, this is really unfortunate, 'have you ever used a computer?' it's actually an IT lesson. Most of this stuff is my opinion but he undermined him by saying that he may never have used a computer, or had no knowledge of a computer, or even if there are computers in Africa! People think that you come from a village where there is nothing or no civilisation, that kind of stuff. This is the thing.

Students also cited first hand experiences of stigma resulting from the association of African bodies with particular meanings and stigmas relating to disease. Participants highlighted examples of reactions and contexts where such forms of stigma were palpably felt and experienced. Students noted experiences of being referred to as "Ebola" and taunted by strangers about possibly being contagious as they traversed their respective city environments. Participants cited feeling subject to similar associations in other contexts, such as in clinical settings (e.g. being queried about conditions such as AIDS or malaria). Although one should emphasise the possibility that such investigations and forms of questioning were part of standard medical procedures, at the very least the example demonstrates the negative the impact of practices of racial stigmatisation on those who experience it.

Participants described feeling singled out by individuals through stereotypical assumptions about Africans and black people in general. Students also reported contradictory experiences within the same social settings which they linked to conflicting stereotypes or sentiments about black people. These complicated social relations with locals from whom students experienced both inviting

attitudes and rejection in equal measure. For example, "blackness" and "having a black friend" was seen a positive by Polish peers in some contexts; resulting in welcoming and inviting gestures and behaviours, while in other cases it was seen as an undesirable trait serving as a basis for exclusion. While acknowledging that some stereotypes granted them access to certain social spaces, the experience of being evaluated upon on the basis of skin colour was experienced negatively. When describing the negative attitudes directed towards him by his peers upon disclosing he wanted to donate blood, one student explained the following:

> ... I'm not stupid. I understood there was something. I just said, "Okay" . The way was like, "Ugh, black blood".... You just think [...] they accept me but they accept just a part of me. When we are talking about Africa, when we drink some beers, but not when I give my blood. One of them told me once, "I want to smoke weed with you". Just to smoke weed, he wants to be my friend because, "Hey, I want to be your friend so I can smoke weed [...] but you can't just come and say you want to be my friend because you want to smoke weed ...

The accounts illuminate the nature of stereotypical narratives and the extent to which imagery and ideas can be linked with notions of race and phenotype, shaping the tone and character of many of the day to day interactions and relationships experienced by students in the Polish context.

### 3.4. Impact of racism and othering

Participants generally interpreted the verbal and physical attacks and threatening stares as an attempt to dominate and instil fear in them. The failure to yield, demonstrate submission or avoidance invariably resulted in being the victim of a violent attack. The sum total of the various experiences were reported as having a negative impact on the study respondents and contributed to feelings of psychological distress, estrangement and helplessness in their respective environments. Reflecting on his daily struggles one participant observed the following:

> So when they see you on the streets, they just call you bad names ... And this was psychologically challenging. You don't feel at home it's like ... you don't feel comfortable. Because everyone is watching at you, talking bad things about you...Not all of the people, but ... some kind of people... [...] Racism actions make you psychologically feel bad ...When you go somewhere you just feel like ... I have to avoid some people [...] that's not normal for people ... You must feel free ... it's important ...

A number of participants described feeling ostracised from locals because of reactions to their ethnicity. This was associated with feelings of unease and discomfort when subjected to gazes or finger pointing from some members of the local population. Although not all of these experiences were seen as overtly racist, many participants highlighted the unpleasant nature of such encounters and interactions. As one participant explained:

> I've never like had any [...] racism experience during the day (...) but during the day ...you can see it, you can feel it ... Someone looking at you in the metro like ... looking at you in a strange way you know when someone looks at you and you know that he has bad intentions towards you because he is looking at you with bad eyes. Like he wants to strangle you or something ...

A common issue emerging from the analysis was the theme of "becoming a foreigner" or "feeling foreign" as a result of the experience of migration and coming into contact with racism and people's intolerant attitudes and behaviours. A number of respondents explained that experiences of violent attacks made them reflect on the significant risks they faced due to being "different" and therefore more vulnerable to further harassment. Participants also suggested negative experiences of racial discrimination and violence were significant barriers preventing them from planning their future in the country. Experiencing racism indirectly (i.e. hearing or knowing of incidents occurring to other people) had a similar effect to personal experiences, influencing feelings and perceptions of safety.

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### 3.5. Practical responses and spatial navigation

#### 3.5.1. Avoidance and spatial navigation

A primary strategy identified by participants was that of avoidance. These included efforts to reduce the likelihood of encountering racism through avoidance of situations and contexts where racism was likely to occur. In such cases, racism was rationalised in relation to place, and negative encounters were built into the knowledge of different locations and different situational contexts, such as the time of day. Strategies of avoidance included avoiding areas perceived as dangerous for black people as well as staying indoors after dark. Knowledge about potential risks and "no-go areas" was gathered from personal experience as well as secondary sources such as fellow students and teachers. In more extreme cases participants describe complete social withdrawal or avoidance of contact with the local population, which was highlighted, both as a strategy for dealing with the problem as well as a negative consequence of experiencing racial violence and hostility.

#### 3.5.2. Emotional coping and acquiescence

The data suggests that participants also engaged in emotional forms of coping and managing internal feelings toward the problems encountered. One such form of emotional coping was the acceptance of racism as a part of their lives or perceiving it as something natural occurring in all countries and settings. In some cases this particular response was the outcome of helplessness while others emphasised aspects such as resilience and positioning racism as somewhat of a side issue that should not be allowed to prevent them from achieving their goals. The prevalent theme here was displaying a resilient attitude in the face of the adversities posed by racial discrimination. In some instances, racism was accepted as a natural phenomenon and an aspect of everyday life that must be contended with. The resilience emerging in the face of adversity posed by racism was seen by some as a demonstration of maturity and masculinity. A further manifestation of an acceptance response was emphasising ones temporary, visitor status in the country and avoiding preoccupation with the issue of racism:

> First of all, when I hear stuff, I'm just saying to myself that I'm here for a moment. I'm already going. When I go back to my country, people will respect me. I will be equal with everybody. It's going to be okay. I will not have to feel that feeling again because it hurts.

Retaining such consciousness seemed to be used as a strategy of acquiescing beyond the immediate spatial environment and social milieu. As such, through emphasising ones ties and allegiance with the country of origin it was possible to escape the disturbing realities of the current surroundings and problems.

#### 3.5.3. Challenging and changing the environment

One form of responding to experiences of racial discrimination identified in the responses of the interviewees was confrontation. These included measures aimed at directly challenging racism, including behaviours such as fighting back when being physically attacked as well as verbally challenging or confronting perpetrators of racial slurs and discriminatory behaviour. Confrontation strategies also included seeking an explanation from the perpetrators, as well as attempting to educate them as well as the wider community. In some cases, interviewees described efforts to dispel myths and stereotypes about Africa and Africans, either in response when confronted with such stereotypes or through their involvement in charity events focussing on educating Polish people about Africa and its inhabitants. These measures appeared to be motivated by the desire to improve the situation through attempts of changing the environment and those responsible for racial harassment and discrimination.

For some the negative portrayals inspired efforts to challenge the distorted beliefs about Africans. One way of achieving this was by "out-performing" local students and thus presenting an alternative to the prevalent negative portrayals through one's own positive example. This was not perceived as

an issue of rivalry but as a way of regaining a sense of agency and control over outside perspectives while at the same time earning respect and setting a positive example:

> People think that if you come from Africa, people have this perception that you are poor and that you don't have knowledge. So you have to convince them that you are just like them—that you have the same, if not more, knowledge than them! Convincing them is what I must do a lot of the time […] for me, that's an important thing. At school, I need to convince some students that I am able to do some things that others cannot do. […] it's not like a challenge where I'm rivalling them or something; it's just showing something to control the respect.

### 3.6. Social support, affective and identity based responses

Interviewees reported relying on social support through sharing their experiences of racism with friends and family abroad as a means of coping with traumatic events and the distress resulting from discrimination. Both local and transnational contacts were engaged in processes of help seeking. A key finding in the study relates to aspects of communication and knowledge sharing in the context of sourcing social support. Informants emphasised the important role of family members and friends when overcoming the emotional difficulties (fear, anger, helplessness and loneliness) associated with experiencing racial discrimination. Despite the reliance on social support, an overarching theme emerging from the interviews was the elements of strategy and self-censorship in the way information was shared with family members in Africa. Migrants reported relying on some relatives as sources of emotional and social support, while simultaneously concealing information about their circumstances from other members of their family. Non-disclosure or partial suppression of information about incidents or social difficulties were reported as strategies designed to prevent certain family members from worrying about their situation. Participants also felt that family members at "home" would not be able to fully understand their circumstances and would therefore be unable to help them.

Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining close links with other Africans living in the country, as a vital source of support and advice. The experience of migration and the exposure to racism in some cases resulted in a change of attitudes towards others, also leading to re-evaluations of participants' sense of identity and belonging. For a number of the respondents, both the experience of migration and coming into contact with a new set of challenges such as racism, affected their perception of self, causing them to identify and associate with other Africans living in country. Interviewees explained that meeting Africans with whom they shared similar experiences was an important source of social support allowing them to deal with some of the distress and sense of alienation resulting from discrimination and racist encounters.

When asked about the reason he chooses to socialise and identify with other Africans one participant explained the following:

> … shared experiences firstly, and also like try to advise each other because most of us we have like common problems so if someone has been living here longer he knows how to handle these situations better, so they like advise us, shared experiences, if someone has a problem we try to help. If it's personal, if it's financially, like in anyway, we always try to be there for each other …

Such forms of alliance building were positioned as ways of dealing with the distress and sense of alienation resulting from discrimination and racist encounters. Participants viewed the African student community as a vital source of social support facilitating their settlement in the country and their ability to deal with the various problems and challenges they encounter. Increased contact with Africans was also linked to associations of positive characteristics and feeling of closeness with people from the region:

> It's important to have contact with other Africans... because in Africa we have a culture that we help each other more than in the normality.

> Africans are more open ... It's like... he will help you like a father ... they are so welcoming you see and they help you more ... and if you have a problem every time they come visit you everything keep in touch with you. That is the best thing about Africans.

### 3.7. "They": Poland and the Polish other

The students located both themselves and others within a system of opposing differences based on a typology of characteristics, simplifications and stereotypes where simple dichotomies and oppositions are established. One instance of such positioning was the classification of Polish society as close minded and backward, as opposed to African and Western European traits of liberalism, openness and positivity.

Racism was rationalised in relation to the national and geopolitical context. ("It's a developing country; this is Eastern Europe ... It's quite a bit tough"). Participants referred to living in Eastern Europe, making allusion to the country's history of socialism as factors explaining experiences of racial hostility and violence.

Also cited were explanations highlighting poor educational standards in the country and a lack of political correctness, with frequent comparisons made to Western European countries such as Germany, France or Spain, which were characterised as "Western countries" where similar problems did not exist.

> I mean Poland is not like in Germany where people are open minded or France or Spain ... it's not the same.

> While positioning racism as a prevalent feature of their experience, participants rationalised the presence of racist experiences as an integral, "normal" fact of life in Poland

> Some people might talk ill of me, somebody might abuse me but actually it's normal for me, I take it as normal here.

Of note was the frequent use of the plural subject pronoun "they" in responses characterising Polish society and Poles in general. (e.g. "they lack contact with people, with the outside world"; "their minds are not open to the outside"; "they are close minded"; "I think most of the people are from the villages." "I'm sorry that I use "They, They, They" but no, most of Polish people think that.").

Far from labelling such responses as discriminatory, when viewed in the wider context of the interview, the explanations formed an attempt to account for and understand forms of violence and racist action primarily initiated and directed against them. The narratives were also characterised by the positioning of members of the host society as the "Other" in relation to both, self and the wider global community; seen as representing attitudes of tolerance and political correctness. Within this dynamic participants could simultaneously rationalise and condemn forms of violence directed against them and achieve a sense of moral superiority and victory over their oppressors. The explanations were also used as a justification for forming peer groups within the African community of students.

### 4. Discussion and conclusion

The preceding analysis looked at the experiences of a group of African students in Poland, with a particular focus on their experiences of dealing with forms of racial othering and racism in its various manifestations (ideological, discursive and day to day forms and practices). The discussions and conclusions relating to the reported finding are organised under the following sub-themes: (1) Encounters of difference: experiencing the material and discursive body (2) "Africans": Identity, community and capital (3) Reasons for racism: Reverse discourse and coping (4) Conclusions.

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### 4.1. Encounters of difference experiencing the material and discursive body

The study sheds light on ways in which the material and discursive body determine peoples' exposure to the risks and costs of migration. Participants reflected on the experience of "standing out" and being visible and "foreign" in the Polish context. The feeling of being "foreign" was prompted by locals reacting to the presence of bodies which were distinct in relation to the features of the majority population. Outside projections of otherness were engendered in a variety of ways and reactions ranging from staring, touching to more severe violations such as forms of abuse and violence. Forms of looking, touching and language were interpreted in terms of their content and perceived intention. However, regardless of the nature or intent of such situations the various types of racial othering (fascination, curiosity, violence) were generally perceived and experienced negatively, leading many students to withdraw and avoid social engagement within wider society. The findings are indicative of important aspects of the experience of everyday racism, as outlined by Essed (1991), underlining the individual/interpersonal practices and behaviours that maintain and sustain inequality and discrimination.

The study participants emphasised the extent to which non-white appearance operates as a proxy for forms of discrimination based on cultural essentialisms, in the form of stereotypes and narratives which fixed them in an unfavourable range of representations. Fanon (1970) described the damaging impact of racism on individual self-perception and positioning in the social order. When reflecting on their experiences, students highlighted shifting perceptions of self in response to the challenges they experienced. While experiences were described as having a negative impact on identity and wellbeing (fear, anger, helplessness and loneliness); the overall narrative was one of resilience in face of adversity.

The strategies of response chosen by some students indicate an acknowledgement of the effect of negative representations. Tactics such as educating the others and proving people wrong on the basis on one's own positive example were aimed at dislodging dominant narratives and improving ones immediate and wider environment; a long term strategy of responding to racial hierarchies and positioning. Beyond resources of individual experience and history, positive conceptions of Africa and Africans were acquired through contacts and exchange with other similarly excluded students. Overall, counter discursive notions of heritage and identity could be formed and experienced through collective acts of mutual support and the performance of a positive counter-narrative.

### 4.2. "Africans": identity, community and capital

Among other long term strategies of dealing with racial discrimination and its various consequences were forms of alignment with "Africans" in Poland, both in terms of contacts with students and through networks outside of the university setting (community organisation, personal networks, social media groups and events). The connections were seen as a valuable source of social support, providing opportunities to exchange and connect around common issues and concerns. Participants discussed developing a shared sense of "African" cultural/continental identity as a result of their experiences and engagement with other Africans in the country. The findings support Ahmed's (2000) assertion that recognition of kinship based on shared experience, rather than shared heritage or origin can act as a powerful social bond thorough which "communities of strangers" can be formed, serving as a resource for social identity and support. While the result may point to the processes of resilience, self-reliance and resourcefulness in sourcing support and building communities in response to environmental concerns, the strategies may be born out of necessity rather than choice. As highlighted by Marginson et al. (2010) dynamics of cultural segregation; discrimination, resistance and hostility from locals, may restrict opportunities for meaningful social interaction leading them to form groups with other international students. The finding emphasises the extent to which identity and strategies of self-forming are established in relation to the specific challenges and conditions within the environment. Developing forms of familial capital through notions of shared consciousness may be a necessary measure and a strategy of survival considering the situation of many students interviewed for the study, in particular considering issues of social isolation and limited opportunities for face to face contact with families and friends at home reported by many students. The strategy formed part of a

wider resilience framework acquired by individuals through a learned process of navigation through unfavourable or discriminatory settings (Yosso, 2005).

### 4.3. Reasons for racism: reverse discourse and coping

Students elaborated on the factors perceived as the underlying reason for their difficult experiences in Poland. A commonly cited rationalisation was the connection between Poland's history of communism and current manifestations of rudeness or hostility towards foreigners. Racism was explained in relation to place and local history, and the analysis was characterised by pessimistic descriptions of locals often falling into the realms of stereotype (e.g. "it's a developing country; this is Eastern Europe"). Comparisons with Western Europe, served as an imaginary contrast to local experiences. A number of participants volunteered descriptions of Polish people as being "backward", "lacking knowledge" or the necessary refinement to deal with issues of diversity. The narratives were often employed in general terms, serving as a justification for avoiding contact with locals for the above mentioned reasons; although a significant number of participants reflected on this stance critically, distancing themselves from similar reactions.

The finding is interesting particularly against the backdrop of student accounts of outside positioning through stereotypes and negative representations of Africa by their peers, locals and wider society. The accounts highlight dynamics of mutual negative stereotyping between locals and international students, which may act as a barrier to the formation of culturally mixed groups and prevent full participation and exchange within wider societal and institutional contexts. One function for the negative labelling of peers and wider society is that of defence. The labelling of wider society and local peers as particular types of individuals may serve as a protective strategy of avoidance preventing exposure and the potential for tensions and hostility. Furthermore, the positioning of individual experiences as emerging from wider societal phenomena effectively collectivises and validates the experience as being shared with others likely to experience similar treatment. Positioning perpetrators and wider society in an unfavourable light may foster a sense of solidarity and group cohesion among those perceived as likely to share the experience of racism in what is perceived as a hostile and intolerant environment. The explanations may also be seen as an attempt to utilise their current outsider (student, non Polish, African) status as a position of privilege, which allows them to build positive contrasts with the polish other, effectively consolidating a position of higher status in relation to wider polish society. Such forms of self and other positioning may point to a coping strategy based on a form s of identity and strategic positioning within the social order. Narratives which position Polish society in terms of insurmountable otherness may serve the function of providing a rationale for attaining group exclusivity and entitlement. In addition, essentialisms and stereotypes constitute an alternative discourse and form of power, to that of the dominant Polish majority from whom they feel excluded. The construction of dichotomies where Polish society is positioned as inferior in relation to the higher moral and civilisational standards of the African community of students is a reversal of the negative positioning of Africans within dominant discourse in Poland. In effect, the explanatory frameworks may serve to invalidate the negative ascribed status, allowing individuals to regain positive self image. As such, forms of self and other identification, involving processes of essentialism, and othering, may open up possibilities and orientations which can be utilised as a form of capitol within different social contexts and scenarios

Although a number of studies have looked at the functions of essentialism, stereotyping and reverse discourse in relation to interethnic relations in the United states and the UK (Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008; Judd, Park, Ryan, Brauer, & Kraus, 1995; Le Espiritu, 2001; Monteith & Spicer, 2000; Ryan, 1996; Weaver, 2010), there is a paucity of research examining these phenomena in the context of the dynamics of a post-socialist setting. Although this paper highlights examples of narrative use in the context of student experiences in Poland; further research on the subject could highlight important dimensions of interethnic relations and forms of identity positioning in post-socialist space. These are important issues and relevant considerations in light of increasing global migration and debate on diversity and mobility across Europe.

## 5. Conclusions

The study reveals the wealth of information that can be drawn from narrative accounts of experiences of migration, highlighting the nature of every day experiences of racism and racialisation occurring in the lives of a number of African students in Poland. Racism, including various forms of violence, verbal harassment and more subtle forms of hostility, required participants to develop a variety of responses to adapt and cope with the challenges. By focusing on difficult experiences of racial discrimination the paper contributes to current scholarship on student security and mobility by highlighting understudied contexts where such mobility occurs and challenging perspectives on international students which position them as a privileged elite.

While the findings are consistent with the broader theoretical conclusions drawn from psychology literature regarding responses to racial stressors (Danoff-Burg et al., 2004; Mellor, 2004; Sanders Thompson, 2006; Scott, 2004), the methodology, in particular its qualitative focus, addressed some of the weaknesses inherent within measure based approaches of analysing coping responses, most of which derive their conclusions from quantitative reviews. The study highlights the long term strategies deployed to deal with racism in the Polish context, in particular, aspects of self-formation, a process difficult to evaluate with large survey based approaches, samples and measurement methods.

The students interviewed for this study, actively fashioned themselves through a prominent reliance on identity resources nurtured in Poland through contacts with other students who shared the same concerns and experiences. Coping strategies entailed forms of adjustment through processes of avoidance, and acquiescence. Coping also entailed the development of frameworks of interpretation, including forms of knowledge about the underlying oppression and racism, which justified and further rationalised the avoidance of potential stressors. As such a direct link can be seen between the forms of knowledge developed by the participants and the impact they have on social relations. Forms of discrimination resulted in exclusion, at times partially self imposed, bringing attention to the dynamics of social exclusion as both, an outcome and response to racism and violence. It is hoped that the findings presented in this paper highlight the need for further research focussing on dimensions of intercultural relations in the context of post-transformational Poland.

### Author details
Edward Omeni[1]
E-mail: edward.omeni@gmail.com
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1067-627X
[1] Department of Education, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Mainz, Germany.

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