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# Critical racial literacy and public sociology: visibilizing race among local authorities in Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

Ireland is no stranger to racisms in their various forms. To the historical can be added the recent increased visibility of violent racist acts and an intensifying, broader climate of racism targeting those deemed as Other in Ireland. These contextual insights underscore the urgent need for public authorities to take the initiative and meaningfully engage in antiracist strategies. Following racial literacy theorists, we apply *critical racial literacy* as a conceptual tool to understand whether and how Irish local authorities understand, negotiate, and resist racial hierarchies. Drawing on sixty-nine in-depth interviews with the staff of seven local authorities across Ireland, our findings demonstrate that hegemonic discourses around equality, diversity and inclusion shape individual and institutional recognition of racism, thus underpinning race-evasive policy and practice. Bringing the concept of critical racial literacy into the field of public sociology, we argue for the development of a counterhegemonic racial literacy within local authorities as institutions, and staff therein, that moves beyond the superficial to recognise racism as systemic, understand racialisation as processual, catalyse reflexivity vis-à-vis positionality, and motivate a change to antiracist praxis.

**KEYWORDS** Public sociology; local authorities; Ireland; critical racial literacy; racism; antiracism

## Introduction

Informed by critical race theory (CRT), we deploy the concept of critical racial literacy in the context of developing antiracism training practices among local authorities in Ireland. In response to Chávez-Moreno's (2022) call for the development of a continuum understanding of racial literacies, we contend that while there are multifaceted, entangled approaches to incorporating 'race' /antiracism

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into policy actions and practices toward racial justice and equity, there is a need for a refusal of reductive, binary understandings of individuals as being either racially literate or illiterate. Moreover, as a sociological study, this paper aims to bring the travelling concept of critical racial literacy into the field of public sociology. Following Burawoy (2005, p. 8), we position this study as a dialogical engagement between sociologists and relevant ‘publics’ as part of a process of ‘mutual education’. The overall study of which this paper is but one part required engagement with multiple publics, namely, local authority staff and Muslim communities living in the areas where these authorities provide services. The experiences of Muslim communities, particularly of anti-Muslim racism in Ireland, provided important evidence-based insights for our engagement with local authorities, underpinning the need to develop critical racial literacies therein.

The below analysis is based on original research findings derived from sixty-nine one-to-one interviews with staff across seven different local authorities in Ireland. The themes that emerged from our analyses of interview data underscore the importance of, and need for, critical racial literacy training in local authorities, training that goes beyond race-evasive,<sup>1</sup> superficial approaches to antiracism to those that emphasise racism as systemic and processual. We argue that addressing critical racial literacy deficits through training has the potential to inform a shift toward more effective antiracist approaches in the provision of public services, incorporating front-line service and policy formation. For such developments to occur, we contend that the retention of a CRT perspective is crucial if we are to move beyond reductive perspectives of racism as isolated incidents of interpersonal animus to a systemic understanding.

In what follows, we will commence by providing contextual insights on the research setting, including those on anti-Muslim racism in Ireland. We then move to situate our research within the theoretical scholarship: unpacking the key elements of the literature on racial literacy, before moving to engage with the broader concept of critical racial literacy, building the bridge between these conceptual approaches and public sociology in the process. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approaches utilised here. We then unpack the key themes that emerged from our interviews with local authority staff; three themes are discussed, providing insights on staff perspectives on racism/antiracism and related training initiatives, encounters with racism in the workplace, and the issue of what we refer to as the ‘diversity façade’. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, which, underpinned by our conceptual framework, demonstrate

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<sup>1</sup> Following Chávez-Moreno (2022, p. 486), we use ‘race-evasive’ instead of ‘race blind’ or ‘colour blind’ to dismantle the ableist use of language and recognize that racialization is not only based on physiognomy.

the need for the development of a critical racial literacy within local authorities as institutions and staff therein in order to move beyond the superficial. Moreover, we contend that this must include a recognition of racism as systemic, an understanding of racialisation as processual, catalysed reflexivity vis-à-vis positionality, and a change from 'nonracist' to antiracist.

## Racialisation and anti-Muslim racism in Ireland

Contextualising the status of Muslim communities vis-à-vis racism in Ireland allows us to examine how Irish local authorities navigate 'race' and 'antiracism' within their districts. In this context, we approach racial categories as the output of processes of racialisation. Approaching racism beyond phenotypical differences, the concept of racialisation refers to a processual formation of 'race' based on political, religious, and economic differences (Selod and Embrick, 2013). The concept of racialisation is crucial for understanding anti-Muslim racism, as it illuminates that today, despite their rich global diversity, racialised Muslimness forms a reductive 'naturalized category' (Alexander, 2017; Babacan, 2023; Carr, 2016).

Significantly, anti-Muslim racism informs and is underpinned by nuanced, racialising processes that position the figure of the Muslim as 'Other', thus legitimising anti-Muslim hostility and discrimination. Muslims and those perceived as such are targeted on the basis of their racialised Muslimness and subjected to exclusions that manifest across a range of social contexts, including acts of interpersonal hostility and discrimination (Alexander, 2017; Babacan, 2023). Drawing on Bonilla-Silva (2015), we argue that it is important to recognise anti-Muslim racism as 'systemic' and move beyond reductive understandings of racist acts purely as interpersonal animus in a sociopolitical vacuum. Bonilla-Silva (1997, p. 474) argues that 'racialized social systems are societies that allocate differential economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines'. Inherent to racialised social systems is 'a set of social relations and practices based on racial distinctions [that] develops at all societal levels . . .' (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p. 474). The racialised thinking that underpins these systems serves to legitimise exploitative and exclusionary practices directed at the negatively racialised Other, ultimately benefiting the dominant racial group (Feagin and Barnett, 2004).

A rich literature on racism has been developing in Ireland over the past three decades. These works have included studies that have deepened our understandings of 'race', racism, and antiracism in Ireland (Fanning, 2012; Garner, 2009; Joseph, 2019; Lentin and McVeigh, 2002); have provided insights on the role of the Irish State vis-à-vis racism (Lentin, 2007); and also

illuminated the specificities of racisms such as anti-Traveller racism (Joyce *et al.*, 2017; McVeigh, 2008), anti-Semitism (Lentin, 2002), and the experiences of mixed-race people in Ireland (King O’Riain, 2021; Mullen, 2023). Until the early 2010s, evidence of anti-Muslim racism in Ireland was sparse, with few reports providing vignettes of people’s experiences of anti-Muslim hostility and discrimination (Carr, 2016). The first large-scale study of this phenomenon in Ireland found that approximately one in three participants ( $n = 323$ ) had experienced specifically anti-Muslim hostility and discrimination (Carr, 2016). Moreover, this earlier work revealed that anti-Muslim hostility manifested in different forms, including physical assaults, verbal abuse, and damage to property. Participants also recalled experiencing discrimination when seeking/in employment, accessing accommodation and a range of goods and services (Carr, 2016). Published reports have continued to illuminate the realities of anti-Muslim racism in Ireland, highlighting similar experiences of hostility and discrimination but also demonstrating the increased presence of online abuse and the worrying growth of far-right actors (see, e.g., Ryan and Carr, 2023).

A significant example of the presence of anti-Muslim hostility in Ireland emerged in the context of the ‘Dublin riot’ of November 2023, an event described by the Gardaí (the national police service of Ireland) as unprecedented in terms of violence in modern Dublin (Lally and Holland, 2023). This violent unrest was triggered by the stabbings of three young children and their carer in Dublin’s North Inner City. In the wake of the attack, anti-migrant and far-right agitators spread misinformation across Irish social media, portraying the attack as an act of ‘Islamist terrorism’ (McDermott, 2023). These far-right actors mobilised protesters, creating havoc, shouting anti-immigration slogans, clashing with Gardaí, and setting vehicles alight (Lally and Holland, 2023). Informal discussions between the research team for this study and contacts within Muslim communities in the immediate aftermath revealed heightened anxieties and rumours of anti-Muslim incidents. Just three months later, the Irish Muslim Council also received email communication that included threats of arson: ‘If you don’t stop spreading bulls\*\*\*. Your office will be in [sic] fire very soon’ (Nolan, 2024). In the latter part of February 2024, an online campaign targeting the Irish Muslim Council circulated on X with images shared of stickers on lampposts claiming that the council was calling for Sharia law in Ireland.

These are highly visible examples of anti-Muslim hostility in Ireland. However, as the aforementioned research demonstrates, these are not in any way isolated incidents underscoring the need to understand *racisms* and the capacities of local authorities vis-à-vis promoting an antiracist approach. Fanning (2012, pp. 12–13) argues that a host of factors, including but not limited to the ‘denial of the possibility of racism’, ‘assumptions of social homogeneity’ and ‘narrow

definitions of racism' among institutions—at times unintentionally—contribute to the perpetuation of racism or discrimination against minorities in Ireland. Denials of the persistence, if not the actual existence, of racism also diminish the capacity of local institutions to consider the needs of a diverse Irish society vis-à-vis service provision. Considering these contextual factors, it is both timely and imperative to investigate a) how racism/antiracism is understood within local authorities institutionally (policies/practices), incorporating ideas of equality and diversity, as well as among staff personally; and b) the potential/need for the development of critically racially literate informed approaches and effective antiracism praxis.

### Local authorities in Ireland

There are thirty-one local authorities in Ireland. Each of these provides or is involved with a range of essential public services (Local Government Management Agency, 2024). Local authorities also play a crucial role in the 'growth and development of connected, inclusive communities' and hold the potential to become key actors in the fight against racism by ensuring that the policies, practices, and services they deliver 'reflect the diversity of the communities which they serve' (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2018, p. 3). In all, seven local authorities participated in the research under discussion here, servicing a population of almost two million people, accounting for almost forty percent of the national population and over sixty percent of Ireland's Muslim communities (Central Statistics Office, 2024).

Local authorities offer tremendous potential as an avenue for greater inclusion and antiracism initiatives at a local level, including those designed to target anti-Muslim racism, working in partnership with Muslim communities and other civil society organisations. In addition to ongoing locally oriented work undertaken by local authorities, legislative and policy developments, both recent and over the longer term, have hastened the need for action to be taken by local authorities in the area service delivery vis-à-vis equality, human rights, and antiracism. Legislatively, the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty places an emphasis on public-sector bodies, including local authorities, to ensure that their policies, practices, and service provision meet the needs of a diverse society (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2024). At the policy level, the National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-27 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023) also specifically refers to local authorities and their role in reporting and responding to experiences of racism and the need to support the inclusion of minorities. Whether in legislation or policy, local authorities have been identified as potentially playing a significant role in the fight

against racism in Ireland. As such, we contend that it is crucial that staff working within these organisations develop a critically informed understanding of racism.

### Critical racial literacy and public sociology

Informed by CRT, we deploy the concept of critical racial literacy to examine whether and how Irish local authorities understand, negotiate, and resist—if at all—racial hierarchies. This concept is broadly referred to as the viewpoints and practices that identify and challenge racial injustices (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). Racial literacy emerged from the CRT canon, understood in this work as articulated by Yosso and Solórzano (2005, p. 121), as ‘a framework that can be used to theorise and examine the ways in which race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on the social structures, practices, and discourses that affect’ racialised people. The main principles of CRT pertinent to this research are as follows. First, it accounts for the centrality of race in research analysis, while also refusing to ignore the intersections of other forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 2001). Second, CRT challenges the perceived dominant ideologies of neutrality and objectivity and is committed to a social justice agenda, aiming to eliminate racial hierarchies in society (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023; Yosso and Solórzano, 2005). In terms of limitations of CRT, these include questions vis-à-vis to what extent it is a pragmatic approach; the manner in which, unlike its radical aims, it is mostly applied as a theoretical tool toward subtle changes—rather than dismantling systems of oppression; and, relatedly, critiques of the practical implementation of key precepts by those utilising them (Alemán and Alemán, 2010; Delgado and Stefancic, 2023).

Emerging from CRT, racial literacy was introduced in social sciences by two scholars, Lani Guinier (2004) and France Winddance Twine (2004). The intervening period has witnessed a burgeoning literature on the topic from different disciplines, including the sociology of education (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Gardner, 2017; Skerrett, 2011) and cultural studies (Greene and Abt-Perkins, 2003; Sealey-Ruiz and Greene, 2015). While critical race studies scholars in education have contributed significantly to this field, a gap remains in examining racial literacy among local authorities and how the development of such literacies could underpin a move toward antiracist approaches in the provision of public services. Thus, we aim to bring the travelling concept of critical racial literacy into the field of public sociology to visibilise ‘race’ as a tool in identifying, assessing and countering intersectional inequalities and hierarchies concerning daily interactions between Irish local authorities and racialised minority communities (in this case, Muslim communities in Ireland, elaborated further later). Within the scope of this paper, we will first delve into racial literacy as developed by

its founding authors before moving to explain our use of critical racial literacy in the context of Irish local authorities and their everyday interactions with the communities they serve.

### **Racial literacy**

In her classic legal study of racial desegregation in the context of the U.S. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court decision, Guinier (2004) argues that striving for racial liberalism has created rulings—such as *Brown*—which enact and sustain racialised hierarchies in society. Guinier (2004, p. 114) claims that as long as the intersectional, structural dynamics of ‘race’, class, and geography are not recognised, racial justice will not be achieved. Here, she defines ‘racial literacy’ as a ‘tool of diagnosis, feedback, and assessment’ (Guinier, 2004, p. 115). Guinier (2004) identifies three main features of racial literacy. First, it is contextual; in other words, it is vigorously constructed through interactions between bottom-up and top-down initiatives and does not offer a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. Second, racial literacy emphasises the relationship between ‘race’ and power (Guinier, 2004, p. 115), considering both the agency of individuals and the institutional structures that delimit one’s agency. Third, while ‘race’ remains the focal component of racial literacy, it is understood as a social construction through an intersectional lens, perceiving it as intertwined with other social factors (such as class, gender, and religion), altogether shaping extant inequalities (Guinier, 2004, p. 115).

For Guinier, racial literacy offers a means to decode the ‘racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies’ (Guinier, 2004, p. 100). In this conceptualisation, racial grammar is understood as a product of racial domination that reproduces the ‘racial order as just the way things are’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2012, p. 174). Such grammar renders racial domination invisible and perpetuates hierarchical relationships in each racial regime (Bargallie *et al.*, 2023; Bonilla-Silva, 2012). In the context of Ireland, we contend that the racial order is underpinned by ideas of hegemonic Irishness with associated markers of belonging such as Whiteness, Catholicness, and nonmembership of the ethnic minority Traveller community (Carr and Haynes, 2015).

Similar to Guinier, in her ethnographic research on how ‘racism-cognizant’ White parents of British multiracial families tackle racism for their children, Twine (2004) defines racial literacy as microcultural social processes within which racial hierarchies are understood, negotiated, and resisted (Twine, 2004, p. 881). Like Guinier, Twine understands racial literacy as a tool (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Guinier, 2004; Twine, 2004), enumerating three main dimensions: first, the provision of conceptual tools to recognise racism as a problem;

second, appreciation and acknowledgement of diverse cultures in relation to minority communities (Twine, 2004, pp. 886–889); and third, the training methods for coping with racism or enhancing self-esteem among racial minority groups (Twine, 2004, p. 892).

While Guinier's conceptualisation emphasises the structural limitations of access to racial justice, Twine furthers our understanding from a sociorelational approach, illustrating how, every day, people navigate and actively resist racisms within the structures of racial inequality. These complementary approaches toward racial literacy have distinct implications on our research. Twine's approach allows us to explore the shifting and complex ways that racism manifests itself. She appreciates the agency of actors within the racial power relations while navigating the broader structural constraints, and her approach particularly guides our examination of how local authorities navigate and/or resist systemic racism. On the other hand, Guinier's focus on laws and policies enables our viewpoint 'to move beyond a politics of recognition that flattens racial justice efforts' (Oto *et al.*, 2023, p. 96). Nonetheless, both maintain that racial literacy can operate as a tool to deconstruct racial hierarchies to achieve social justice.

### **Critical racial literacy**

In advancing the theoretical framing of racial literacy, scholars such as Rogers and Mosley (2006) understand this concept as the discourses people utilise to make sense of identities. It is also framed as a praxis which aims to neutralise the institutional limitations sustaining racism or race-evasive practices (Bargallie *et al.*, 2023; Lentin, 2017), as it decodes 'the rhetorical practices and power of racial ideology' (Bargallie *et al.*, 2023, p. 3). Applying this concept within its critical dynamic potential, Laughter *et al.* (2023) use the term 'critical' to connote a framing that exposes injustices, while allowing for the progression toward new regimes of truth (Laughter *et al.*, 2023, p. 74; Leonardo, 2013). In their description of critical racial literacy, they aim to engage individual, institutional, and societal structures of racism (Laughter *et al.*, 2023, p. 85). To achieve that aim, they revisit Guinier's conceptualisation of racial literacy as an interactive process between individuals and institutions in which 'race' functions as a tool to evaluate and identify social inequalities (Laughter *et al.*, 2023).

Similar to scholars who emphasise critical racial literacy (Gardner, 2017; Laughter *et al.*, 2023), Chávez-Moreno (2022) calls for a '*continuum of racial literacies*' [emphasis in original], refusing to fall into the dichotomy of racially literate versus racially illiterate people. In that sense, she scrutinises the idea that racial literacy necessarily refers to antiracist practices (Chávez-Moreno, 2022, p. 481), thus negating the reality of race-evasive manifestations of racial literacy.

Understanding the concept in its plural form, Chávez-Moreno defines ‘*racial literacies*’ as the sociocultural practices around text and discourse that people use—consciously or not, hegemonically or not—to make meaning of racial ideologies’ (2022, p. 485, emphasis in original). She locates such racial literacies in a continuum between hegemonic and counterhegemonic. The former alludes to practices that understand ‘race’ and racism through structures that maintain and reproduce racial hierarchy, while the latter seeks to tackle and ‘counter dominant racial ideologies’ (Chávez-Moreno, 2022, p. 485). In this context, while racial ideologies present racialised hierarchies as normative, these can be challenged through antiracist approaches, such as *counterhegemonic racial literacy*. Another important feature of the critical articulation of racial literacy is to understand it as developmental in terms of capacity, considering that people *become critically racially literate*—it is processual, wherein the emphasis is on *becoming* rather than *being* (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Rogers and Mosley, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz and Greene, 2015).

Applying critical racial literacy, as both an analytical tool and a means to achieve racial justice, allows us to evaluate everyday interactions between local authorities and the diverse communities they serve. With its radical potential, critical racial literacy allows for local contextual analyses of *becoming* aware of racial discrimination and countering racisms in their multifarious forms and manifestations. Using this analytical tool is an urgent invitation to tackle racism or race-evasive principles that may exist in institutional settings, including local governing bodies. We take on the call by Bargallie *et al.* (2023, p. 2) to consider a critical application of the term ‘racial literacy’ while avoiding the co-optation of such analytical tools by pervasive, race-evasive, neoliberal frameworks which would elide its conceptual roots within CRT and understandings of race therein.

### **Public sociology**

Applying critical racial literacy as both an analytical tool and overall research orientation aligns with the Burawoy’s (2005) call for a public sociology. As defined by Burawoy (2005, p. 8), public sociology requires a dialogical engagement between sociologists and relevant ‘publics’ in a process of ‘mutual education’ . . . ‘to make visible the invisible, to make the private public.’ This position applies in particular to what Burawoy (2005, p. 7) refers to as ‘organic public sociology’, wherein the engagement between sociologists and the publics they are working with is ‘visible, thick, active.’ The overall study of which this paper is a part required an engagement with multiple publics, namely, local authority staff and Muslim communities living in the areas served by these same authorities. For this paper, as an exercise in public sociology with deep, ongoing engagement,

our aim was to understand antiracism policies and practices, if any, through the perspectives of staff working in various local authority functions. In addition to developing our understanding, listening to staff within local authorities also helped the research team to identify opportunities for change, and, importantly, draw from their input on how best to proceed in developing antiracism initiatives collaboratively.

In the context of public sociology, Burawoy (2005, 2009) also refers to the ‘professional, policy and the critical’ as key in the elements in the development of sociological knowledge/interventions. Space does not permit a full exposition; however, it is worth noting that the study under discussion here, as an exercise in public sociology, employed each of these knowledges as ‘moments’ in the research process to a greater or lesser extent (Burawoy, 2005, p. 12; see also Burawoy, 2009). The professional moment was present throughout the project, providing confidence to those we engaged with that the work would be undertaken to a high standard, underpinned by disciplinary, institutional, and reputational gravitas. Second, the policy moment was manifest in the very definite, applied form that project outputs, co-designed with local authority staff, were to take. Finally, a critical focus was retained throughout the work, ensuring that the various engagements and outputs aligned with the overall CRT ethos, including, *inter alia*, the development of antiracism training for individuals working within the participating local authorities. While engaging with staff from a range of functions and levels of seniority, we argue that the development of such critically informed antiracism practices and initiatives at the individual level can potentially have a ‘ripple effect’ on broader organisational policies and practices by encouraging the development of a critical racial literacy approach across institutions (Molla, 2024, p. 20). Adhering to the production of public sociological knowledge, we followed Guinier’s (2004) call to approach critical racial literacy in its context, taking into account the bottom-up approaches to addressing racial hierarchies. We view racism as systemic and not simply the purview of a ‘few bad apples’ in a societal or institutional vacuum. While mindful of the limitations of our work, and in the absence of broader systemic change, the study discussed here, as an exercise in public sociology, and the associated evidence-based outputs arising as a part of the broader Sustainable Alliances Against Anti-Muslim Hatred project are designed to raise a critical racial literacy among local authority staff to inform antiracist policy development and service delivery.

## Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was utilised in this study to gain deep, rich insights into the perspectives of staff vis-à-vis antiracism policies and practice(s)

within each local authority (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). A purposive sampling method was used in this study to recruit local authority staff (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Perez, 2021). As a nonprobability approach, the recruitment of participants via purposive sampling focused on recruiting individuals fulfilling various roles from across a range of functions within local authorities that could offer key insights on the phenomenon under investigation (Oliver, 2006). In particular, the research team set out to include voices and perspectives of those employees who have experiences of public-facing services and those engaging with issues associated with equality, diversity, and inclusion policies/practices. Participation was also sought from those staff working in functions such as community, sports, housing, homelessness, library, customer services, reception, human resources, and inclusion offices. Once identified, staff were offered the opportunity to participate in one-to-one, semi-structured interviews (Quraishi and Philburn, 2015). Interviews were conducted with staff within their relevant local authority offices, providing an easily accessible and comfortable space for those who wished to take part. All staff were provided with information letters and consent forms in advance of any interview taking place. In all, sixty-nine interviews were undertaken, and the majority of participants were from a White, Irish background.<sup>2</sup>

Once transcribed from audio recordings, all data from the interviews were subject to thematic analysis (Nowell *et al.*, 2017), wherein a blend of both deductive and inductive approaches to coding were employed, resonating with the work outlined by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). For the former, an initial list of issues of interest, derived from the literature and research team expertise, was utilised in the design of a codebook for analysis. These were added to during the inductive analysis as additional topics and issues emerged from the data, leading to the development of themes as the process was refined further.<sup>3</sup>

## Findings

Centring the perspectives of staff across seven local authorities in Ireland concerning racism and antiracist approaches in their everyday experiences enables the identification of challenges faced in tackling racial structures of

<sup>2</sup> Given the lack of diversity within local authority staff in Ireland (see Immigrant Council of Ireland, 2025), in the interest of protecting the identity of participants, we are not providing further information on personal characteristics as doing so could compromise anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> This study received approval from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Social Science research ethics committee, University of Limerick. Pseudonyms are used in the analysis to protect the identities of participants. We have also amalgamated data from the seven participating local authorities so it is not possible to discern where participants work.

inequality. It also demonstrates the gap in providing pertinent interactive training programmes and community engagement, which could contribute to the development of critical racial literacy among staff. Drawing on analysis of interview data, this section brings to light our findings of how local authority staff recognise, challenge, and envision racial equity in their workplace. Utilising a critical racial literacy analytical approach (i.e., understanding racism as systemic, racialisation as processual, *inter alia*), we highlight the significance of developing bottom-up antiracist educational initiatives that not only frame the workings of the local authorities but are built upon the knowledge of racialised communities. The following centres on three themes that emerged in our analysis and provide insights into: perspectives on racism; encounters with racism in the work context; and the issue of diversity.

### ***'Catch-up to a changing situation': perspectives on racism***

In general, the question of racism, and institutional approaches to confront it, is understood through a complex set of inextricably entwined factors, including diversity and equality. In this context, one of the main aspects highlighted by the staff in participating local authorities was the recognition of racism and the need to address racism in correlation with the increasingly diverse demography of Ireland. However, participating staff generally perceived their organisation in a positive light: 'very inclusive' and 'proactive' in accommodating strategies to diversify the structure and implementing policies, e.g., vis-à-vis equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). While they acknowledged that individual acts of racism exist in their organisations, staff mainly construed it as the 'problem of the public' as an 'incident' that occurs outside the confines of their work. For instance, this perception was articulated by Siobhán, a staff member with a public-facing position who had experience working in the public sector abroad:

I would see that . . . if we see racism, it's going to be happening like among members of the public. Without . . . any reflection on like, we are actually participating or engaging in it as well. So, I think that might be . . . a first place to start. Because . . . when you're thinking about it as being like something that's happening out there, on the other side of the desk, already your idea of it, is possibly framed in a particular way.

The quote implies the importance of examining perceptions of racism and the possibility of its presence within the organisation and critically reflecting on whether individuals within the organisation may be participating in racist behaviours. Mary feels that racist incidents are on the rise. She particularly points out a racist incident that impacted a family 'outside' her workplace. However,

when asked about her organisation's approach toward racism, Mary believed that her institution overall takes a broad, inclusive approach:

I think the council has tried over the last number of years to be more open and transparent and to provide services to everybody, and that the bottom line was that . . . the local authority, was here to provide services to people. And that it didn't matter who the people were, if they were living in or working in [X] or whatever, that was the important thing. Internally, there seems to have been a lot of work in terms of being open to, you know, all the LGBT groups within the council and disability, the equality officer and the work that they do. So yes, I suppose my opinion would be that it's the council tries to do its best . . .

According to Mary, the underlying principle is that the local authority's core purpose is to ensure everyone has access to its services regardless of their identity and background. She alludes to the councils' diversity initiatives that appear inclusive on the surface (as we call it, a 'diversity façade', which will be discussed further) without making meaningful commitments to antiracist principles. Similarly, other participants also state that they 'treat everybody the same' (Fiona, Niamh) and do 'not make differences' (Niamh) among the service users. Within such a discourse, racism is acknowledged but not named, and it is addressed through a nonracist lens. Moreover, claiming that everyone is treated equally alludes to a noncritical understanding of the racial order while reproducing the hegemonic narratives which elide the possibility of discrimination. Adopting a perspective where everyone is construed as 'the same', being essentially ignorant of differences in identity, even if underpinned by a desire for equality, is highly problematic. Although this approach is framed as egalitarian, it can also justify current inequalities by eliding the issue of racism and maintaining the status quo (Plaut *et al.*, 2018).

One interesting finding is that despite the emphasis on the similar treatment of all service users, local authorities ground their work in EDI approaches to tackle the challenges faced by communities (Newman *et al.*, 2023). Calling herself a public servant, Cara considers the roles she and her colleagues fill in the local authority in terms of 'social justice and participation' regardless of not being named as such. She believes that although they 'don't have the language or discourse' concerning 'race', the aim of their 'daily work' is to achieve equality. Drawing on the legal definition of equality, Cara states

I think it's important in my role that I have a better understanding, you know. I'm from rural Ireland, I'm female, you know, so there's all these things I'm very aware of. So, you know, across the nine grounds [of Irish Equality legislation], I really feel that there's so much within that in terms of equality measures that we need to bring in and be aware of.

As these accounts indicate, following various EDI policies implemented by each local authority, the staff position themselves within those discourses. As

shown by other researchers, discussions surrounding ‘race’ across institutions are framed in the languages of diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion (Lentin, 2004; Rogers and Mosley, 2006). Here, equality mainly refers to the two Irish legal acts, the Employment Equality Act (1998–2015) and the Equal Status Act (2000–2018), ensuring that individuals are not discriminated against based on ‘nine grounds’—gender, ‘race’, age, family status, civil status, disability, sexuality, religion, and membership in the Traveller community. There is an endeavour among the staff to bring diversity awareness to local authorities. Such diversity awareness mainly pertains to respect and recognition of differences among individuals in the workplace (among both staff and customers). The latter is predominantly understood through legislation, namely, the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, through which public bodies in Ireland are required to challenge discrimination (Section 42, Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014).

Therefore, when it comes to the recognition of racism or an antiracism approach, the staff in local authorities mobilise the available policy discourses around equality and diversity rather than directly addressing the issue of racism. As one staff member mentioned, ‘Well, we would have quite strong policies, but they need to be, particularly regarding diversity’. However, as Beeman (2021), a CRT scholar, argues, the minimisation of ‘race’ as a dominant form of discrimination to buzzwords such as ‘diversity and inclusion’ diminishes the issue at stake. Here, language matters, as it shapes everyday racial power dynamics, and by ignoring specific terminologies or emphasising others, the central issue of racism gets erased (Beeman, 2021, p. 1105). Attending to the ways racism is understood among local authorities, it becomes clear that, particularly at the discursive level, staff lack critical racial literacy as a tool to explore and negate cultural and social processes in which racial hierarchies are sustained (Twine, 2004).

### ***Ambivalent antiracism: ‘if there is, I just don’t know it’***

The second central theme concerns the challenges that local authority staff encounter in tackling racially motivated incidents. As mentioned, these challenges mainly arise from the lack of a concise organisational definition or policy around racism. As the participants of this project often mentioned, ‘there is no definition of racism’ (Conor, Micheál) or any ‘policies around anti-racism’ (Aoife). Staff expressed two main challenges: first, they lacked certainty on how to address racist incidents, and second, they were unsure of how to equip themselves and become aware of antiracist approaches. Broadly speaking, antiracism refers to thoughts and actions that are aimed at confronting and eradicating racism. It is also an ability ‘to identify a phenomenon—racism—and to do something

about it' (Bonnett, 2000, p. 3). It is a deficit in the latter that challenged many staff members. As Brigid, whose daily job requires contact with the public, states

I think every staff member should actually be given training on [antiracism]. You know because we have so many different nationalities living in Ireland now, Ireland has become a very multicultural society in the last, over the last twenty years . . . The population has grown, I think more education and training should be required, yeah, definitely.

Local authority staff portray a complex image of their interactions with diverse communities. In a context of race-evasive approaches, a lack of clarity around racism prevails, resulting in subjective, inconsistent understandings of and responses to racist incidents (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). The scant direct training regarding racism/antiracism results in misunderstanding, confusion, and, at times, perpetuation of stereotypes in tackling racist incidents. Many staff members were not aware of indirect means of reporting racism, such as general customer feedback/complaint forms that are established within their institution. The following account brings to the fore the uncertainty that staff experience encountering racism within their work environment. Niamh, who works in a housing department, highlights the need for understanding antiracism strategies:

No absolutely no, no I've never had any [antiracism training]. But again, I think it would do us good. Because you know you can get it. I'm just thinking of another example that we had now . . . Down in one of our complexes we had a [Black] family that we put in. And it was actually only a man, but he had different people coming to see him and all the rest. But this particular loudmouth, a bit of a yob . . . was giving him a bad time. And then was coming down at us, 'what are you housing them for?' 'you'd want to be looking after our own', going mad. All of this sort of stuff. Yea but we had to get this fella in as well and talk to him . . . I felt so sorry for the poor man going in and we had to tell him. And the neighbours, now in fairness, the neighbours next door [said] 'don't think we're all like that here. Because we're not, you know'.

I: Yea, yea of course.

Niamh: But yea I think, I'd be able to deal with it. but I think for the newer people coming in I think it would help them what way to deal with situations like that . . .

Niamh explained that, in the end, it was down to her antiracist standing to address the incident and make those targeted with racism 'welcome'. However, she emphasised that such complaints, although recorded, are not registered as 'racism', implying a subjective response toward perceiving and acting upon racism. Understanding such experiences of encountering racism could be described through Guinier's lens (2004). At the individual, interpersonal level, there is a recognition of a racist assault, and therefore, there is a will to critique how 'race' works in this circumstance; however, as noted, meaningful

institutional recognition is absent. Institutional recognition, in keeping with a critical racial literacy approach, holds the potential to disrupt social mechanisms that reproduce racial inequalities (Laughter *et al.*, 2023).

Another staff member, Aoife, highlights the lack of training or instruction to recognise and follow up on racist incidents. She particularly mentioned the benefits of TACT training, ‘which is Traveller-specific cultural training toward social and racial equity’ and identifies the gap in being equipped with racial literacy.

Not in terms of training really, nothing highlighted specifically in terms of training, unfortunately. It isn’t, not that I’ve come across now anyway and I’ve been with the [local authority] about three years, you know.

Local authorities undertake initiatives and training, such as TACT or ‘cultural competency training’, or implement community projects, such as ‘Building Community Resilience’ (Aileen), to address discrimination against racialised minorities. However, race-evasive approaches, and, as Fanning (2012) suggests, narrow definitions of racism, practically deny or reduce the significance of the prejudice and intolerance experienced by racialised minorities in Ireland. As the examples demonstrate, staff stressed the need for a clear educational system with regards to ‘race’. Following Beeman (2021, p. 1106), aligned with the principles of critical racial literacy, it is imperative to have racism-centred initiatives, such as staff training *inter alia*, in organisations that directly ‘address inequality based on class, gender, disability, sexuality, etc. but do so without denying the uncomfortable issue of racism’.

### **Diversity façade**

In response to the structural impediments of racism, we argue that the local authorities limit their actions and perceptions within a multicultural approach. We call this approach a ‘diversity façade’, which takes a nonracist stance and delimits the institutional activities to, for example, cultural/diversity events. Based on our findings, there are two main reasons for this limitation: first, with very few exceptions, there is no meaningful recognition of racism or mechanism to monitor racist incidents effectively; and second, ideas of inclusion have not expanded beyond suggestions around visibility and representation. Initiatives such as organising an Eid day—as there is an ‘Africa day’—are the manifestation of such tendencies.

For instance, in the context of engagement with Muslim communities, albeit with some variances, local authorities appreciated the understanding of cultural traditions around Muslimness. They mentioned the significance of knowing about Eid or Ramadan and learning of the traditions around them, such as ‘bringing treats’ (Saoirse) and allocation of ‘prayer rooms’ in public spaces

such as libraries (Siobhán). However, as Newman *et al.* (2023, p. 628) reiterate, organisations need to move beyond ‘diversity representation’ to create a social inclusion space. Conor, a participant, passionately states that

So, we would have a very broad range of duties. Which will include events, for instance like Africa day . . . We would collaborate with the local community groups to manage those type of events. And to bring them to the broader spectrum . . . Africa day isn’t just for Africans, or Irish Africans. It’s about bringing an inclusive piece to it. And bringing the awareness of all the things that are actually beautiful about Africa to the people [of X City] . . . So that’s just one element of it. We do a whole pile of those different days . . . [with] other communities as well. And sometimes we do multicultural events. Where people come and exhibit their trades, or their crafts, their culture, their food.

Intercultural dialogue is a key goal for staff vis-à-vis engaging with different communities living in their constituency. Accounts such as these present an opportunity to engage communities in negotiating and raising awareness about cultural differences and their potential vis-à-vis developing critical racial literacies. These perspectives highlight the significance of (un)learning processes that are involved in the cultural representation of racialised minorities in their localities, providing a tool to the public to engage in ‘dialogue about race and racial injustice’ (Laughter *et al.*, 2023, p. 82). Moreover, in her definition of racial literacy, Twine (2004, p. 889) identifies community-based practices in providing cultural knowledge as one dimension of countering racism. For her, such practices create a space which allows for the construction of self-esteem and positive identities among younger generations in Black communities (Twine 2004, p. 892). However, while cultural awareness campaigns can be seen as a step toward racial literacy, or what Rogers and Mosley (2006) term *becoming* racially literate, this objective is not fully realised unless the relationship between power and race is visibly delineated (Guinier, 2004).

Isabel, another staff member, resonates with Conor’s approach to diversity. Although she acutely draws on the necessity of an intersectional approach toward social inclusion (i.e., considering gender, class and ‘race’ together), when it comes to envisaging a solution to address the needs of racially marginalised communities, including Muslims, her answer leans toward showcasing cultural idiosyncrasies within the urban setting as a form of masquerading equality, without challenging the hegemonic racial grammar (Bonilla-Silva, 2012).

Yeah, I think so because like what I was saying there earlier on, it’s unfortunate obviously that that happens, part of it is ignorance, and part of it is the unfortunate part of being human and then a lot of is fear. People are afraid of what they don’t understand . . . I’d say having a strategic diversity piece somewhere to say okay look . . . for example we celebrate . . . Lunar New Year for the population here that celebrates Lunar New Year and that’s an essential part of their year. So somewhere to go and say is there something that can be done for Eid. Can Eid be a focus in our calendar. Somewhere

to have that targeted approach to diversity while we also have the inclusion I think it would . . . it would make it easier, make the initial conversation easier. Even if it was just a network or point to make other network contacts.

Considering the multifaceted approach to critical racial literacy (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Laughter *et al.*, 2023), creating space for minorities to present their ‘cultural nuances’ does not dismantle or question the hegemonic racial grammar of Ireland. Nevertheless, such cultural initiatives are considered an ‘integration piece’ among the staff of local authorities. However, understanding existing racial dynamics through neoliberal multicultural discourses of ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’ postpones or impedes the possibility of moving toward social justice and equity (Bargallie *et al.*, 2023). As Solomos reminds us, ‘in the case of new racism, race is coded as culture. However, the central feature of these processes is that the qualities of social groups are fixed, made natural, confined within a pseudo-biologically defined culturalism’ (2023, p. 185). Therefore, these accounts evidence that discursive engagement with cultural differentiation, while being somewhat positive, leave meaningful efforts at antiracism as severely lacking in substance vis-à-vis their full critical racial literacy potential.

## Discussion and conclusion

As is evidenced, Ireland is no stranger to racisms in their various forms. To these can be added the recent increased visibility of violent racist acts, as exemplified in but not reduced to the ‘Dublin Riots’ and an intensifying, broader climate of racism targeting those deemed as Other in Ireland. In this context, it is crucial that local authorities, among others, step up to challenge the exclusionary rhetoric of these actors and support racialised communities that are targeted by these groups. For this to be effective, steps taken to inform policy and practice implementation must move beyond what are frequently superficial approaches to diversity and inclusion that fail to recognise and understand racism, let alone challenge it.

As noted, this paper is part of a broader study that engages with local authorities in Ireland and Muslim communities living in the regions they serve. From inception, as an exercise in public sociology, engagement with these ‘publics’ has been premised on a process of mutual education. In that context, the research team worked with Muslim communities to further develop our understandings of anti-Muslim racism but also ensure that their voices and perspectives come to the fore throughout the research and output development process. Similarly, our work with local authorities, as the preceding analysis demonstrates, has been undertaken as a process of shared learning to identify gaps and inform meaningful antiracism policies and practices with work continuing at the time of writing to develop and implement same.

Reiterating the CRT underpinnings of this study, we recognise the inherent limitations vis-à-vis challenging systemic racism through interventions that address institutional policies and practices within bodies such as local authorities, as discussed. Nonetheless, inspired by Burawoy (2005), as sociologists working in the area of racism studies, we also recognise that we have certain skills (professional, policy, critical) that can be utilised to inform change in how local authorities understand and address racism.

Our analysis demonstrates the manner in which racism, if recognised within local authorities, frequently falls under the umbrella of ambiguous EDI initiatives. These race-evasive approaches are destined to fail, not necessarily out of individual malice on the part of institutions or people working therein but through a failure, underpinned by a pervading racial literacy and associated hegemonic racial grammar, to understand racism as systemic and challenge its impact on negatively racialised groups. A key learning emanating from our interviews with local authority participants is the need for educational interventions that can develop *critical racial literacy* amongst this cohort. Following Chávez-Moreno (2022), and the work of Guinier (2004) and Twine (2004), our findings underscore the need for critical racial literacy within local authorities as institutions and among staff, a counterhegemonic racial literacy that challenges race-evasive approaches soaked in neoliberal logics of ‘diversity’; recognises the social constructedness of ‘race’; understands racism as systemic and the role of power therein; speaks of racialisation as processual and encourages people to locate their own positionality in this context; and, moreover, educates on how they can move forward from being ‘nonracist’ to actively antiracist.

### AI use disclosure

AI was not used in the writing of this article.

### Data and code availability

Data for this paper are not publicly available.

### Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

### Ethical approval

This study received approval from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Science ethics committee, University of Limerick. Pseudonyms are used in the analysis to protect the identities of participants.

## Supplements

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at [https://doi.org/10.1162/EUSO\\_a\\_00032](https://doi.org/10.1162/EUSO_a_00032).

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