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*This article is an abbreviated version (with permission) of a paper in the Journal of Academic Freedom (Vol 11, 2020).*

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# Whose lives matter?

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MICHAEL BIGGS

ON 25 May, a white police officer in Minneapolis apparently suffocated George Floyd, an African American. On 20 June, during LGBT Pride Month, a Libyan refugee allegedly stabbed to death three gay men in Reading: James Furlong, Joe Ritchie-Bennett, and Dr David Wails. In each case, the perpetrator is awaiting trial for murder. Those trials will presumably reveal whether their actions were motivated (respectively) by racism or by homophobia.

Searching for the names of the victims on the domain ox.ac.uk enables us compare Oxford's response to these tragedies, one 4,000 miles away and one 30 miles away.

A small sample:

University's response to killing in Minneapolis: '*In light of the traumatic effect of the killing of George Floyd, and the global focus it has brought to communities and organisations to take further action on racism, the University is reaffirming its unequivocal abhorrence of and opposition to racism against Black and Minority Ethnic people and discrimination in all its forms.*' Response to killings in Reading: none.

Wycliffe Hall's response to killing in Minneapolis: '*The death of George Floyd has shocked and appalled us, but it is forcing us as a society, as a church, as a college and as individuals to examine ourselves, to identify and repent of the biases, conscious or unconscious, that we find there.*' Response to killings in Reading: none.

Somerville College's response to killing in Minneapolis: '*Like so many, we at Somerville have been appalled and*

*angered by the scenes of violence and oppression that have followed the murder of George Floyd.*' Response to killings in Reading: none.

Law Faculty's response to killing in Minneapolis: '*Almost two weeks have passed since the death of George Floyd in the United States. We have since witnessed a nation in turmoil in the grip of racism.*' Response to killings in Reading: none.

Department of Earth Sciences' response to killing in Minneapolis: '*Racial discrimination was on recent public display with the horrific killing of George Floyd in the USA. At this time more than ever we stand in support of our Black, Asian, minority ethnic members and renew our commitment to expunge discrimination and racism in the Earth sciences.*' Response to killings in Reading: none.

In total, the name 'George Floyd' appears 188 times on the domain ox.ac.uk. The domain contains no mention of 'James Furlong', 'David Wails', or 'Joe Ritchie-Bennett'. (Google search conducted on 16 September. Searching for 'Forbury Gardens', the location in Reading where they were killed, yields no relevant mentions.)

The comparison provokes several questions. Has colonization by U.S. social media companies diminished the value of local lives relative to American ones? Does the moral valence of a killing depend on the identity of the perpetrator as much as the identity of the victim? What determines whether particular deaths become invoked by institutions to advance a totalizing metanarrative?

## NOTICE

Jane Griffiths, literary editor of the *Oxford Magazine*, will be pleased to read literary submissions of any description—e.g. verse, critical prose, very short stories, segments of dialogue, reviews of new dramatic productions and books, etc. Submissions should be no longer than 750 words, and where possible should be sent by email attachment to [jane.griffiths@ell.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jane.griffiths@ell.ox.ac.uk) together with a two-sentence bio.

sane or just? Let the policy be made public: *If you have given money to this college, your near relatives will not be able to study here.* The Development Office may have something to say about that.<sup>4</sup>

In a sense, my preference of answer 2 over answer 1 (I guess answer 3 seems OK also) stems from a simple but crucial thought: *this person in front of me is an individual human being.* They are not a possible statistic, case study, representative of a category, object of a policy decision, or means to a higher end. They are a living, complicated, vulnerable human being, and it is my job to give them a chance to show, as well as they can show in an interview setting, their suitability for being admitted as a student of subject X at Oxford University. This brings me to my final point, concerning the multiple-choice quiz format and what it indicates about the ethos behind the admissions training course.

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I suppose this format has been copied from the kinds of self-assessment programmes prevalent e.g. in business or management. Whether or not that's the case, there are good reasons for thinking it unfitted to the proper assessment of a large range of interviewing skills.

Aristotle speaks of the virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which is an ability to weigh things up – reasons for and against, etc. – wisely and well; and he argues that this ability cannot be encapsulated in a set of instructions, however compendious. Rather, it is acquired through experience: experience of *doing*. He is surely right about all this. Dealing with other human beings, for instance in the context of an interview, requires practical wisdom in this sense. Gauging whether someone is nervous, knows what they're talking about, is getting at something good but in an inarticulate way, is trying to curry favour, lacks real interest in the subject... – all these forms of knowledge (or belief) rest on what Wittgenstein calls a sensitivity to 'imponderables'. Additionally, knowing what sorts of ques-

tions and responses are, in this context, good ones to ask or to make is also a matter of practical wisdom.

Hence the idea that interviewing is a skill that is well assessed (or self-assessed) by what answers a person gives in a multiple-choice quiz must be mistaken. Having 'successfully' completed a list of such quizzes shows nothing, or very little, about a person's capacities as an interviewer – if only because second-guessing the answers and having some short-term memory are all you need (see above). It is bad enough if any faith is put in such 'training'; requiring it of people is an exercise in futility.

Let me be clear: the Undergraduate Admissions Training Course contains quite a lot of useful and accurate information and advice. But it is a great pity that this information and advice should have been mixed in with material whose evident purpose is to achieve ideological conformity among academic staff, a conformity that will make them 'the right sort of people' to be trusted with the job of admitting undergraduates to the University. In addition, skill at interviewing can be achieved neither by the ingestion of unquestioned theoretical claims nor by any box-ticking exercise. Interviewers are human beings with (some degree of) practical wisdom – they are not robots. It is for that reason that the Admissions Operations Team should have aimed at giving advice, rather than issuing instructions. But that is the nature of the Blob.

<sup>1</sup> Take a look, e.g., at the breakdowns of the first three of the six Baseline Survey questions in the Initial Training section.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Briefing for College Tutors on the New OFFA Targets', Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach, November 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Government Equalities Office, *Equality Act 2010: What Do I Need To Know? A Quick Start Guide To Using Positive Action In Recruitment And Promotion*, January 2011, p9.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the worry is that the candidate might repeat what they said outside the interview, so that (if they were offered a place) someone might infer that etc. etc. This wouldn't be a matter of conflict of interest, so much as of institutional fearfulness, and the decision to 'make alternative interview arrangements' would still surely be unjust.

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# On lives mattering

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WILLIAM BOOTH

WHEN I turned to Michael Biggs' 'Whose lives matter?' (*Oxford Magazine*, No 424, Second Week, MT 2020), I anticipated a timely reflection on a crucial current issue; instead I found an extraordinarily mean-spirited, unconvincing, and (I can only assume) disingenuous screech, which – replete as it was with false equivalences – minimises the epidemic of suffering disproportionately exacted upon black (and indeed non-white, more generally) people by the repressive apparatuses of states on both sides of the Atlantic. While I have no doubt of the author's desire that we, as a university, pay better attention to homophobic violence, the manner in which this was conveyed seems – at best – deeply cynical.

The premise of Dr. Biggs' argument rests on two assumptions: first, that the murder (or 'apparent suffocation') of George Floyd was an isolated event, that is to

say the killing of an individual by another individual, decoupled from any broad structural context; the second, though more implicit, is just as troubling: that because of the vague malaise of 'wokeness' in which we find ourselves, the lives of white gay men are devalued because they are not black (and, though I hope this was only clumsily implicit, because they were killed by a brown man?). This seems to point to two linked but distinct imperatives: first, that we, the Oxford University community, ought to be more careful (or, less charitably, more ethnonationalist) in 'ranking' our compassion or grief; and second, that we are unable to care about two events or sets of people at once without demonstrating equivalent compassion or grief 'outputs'.

Dr. Biggs suggests that the perpetrators' "trials will presumably reveal whether their actions were motivated

(respectively) by racism or by homophobia”. While there is a good chance that the trial of the murderer of Furlong, Ritchie-Bennett, and Wails will reveal homophobic intent, the presumption that the trial of a policeman in the murder of a black man would tell us anything about the officer’s racism is fantastical. I struggle to believe a scholar of Dr. Biggs’ standing and expertise truly believes this, given the plethora of cover-ups, obfuscations, and miscarriages of justice in such cases, hence my – I don’t think *ad hominem* – characterisation of the article’s *faux-naïveté*.

While clearly I have serious objections to the tone of Dr. Biggs’ piece, I would also like to engage with the substantive questions he poses. The first is whether “colonization by U.S. social media companies [has] diminished the value of local lives in relation to American ones?” This comes across as rather patronising. I don’t believe the staff and students of Oxford University are being hoodwinked into ignoring murders in Berkshire thanks to the machinations of Facebook or Twitter. The role of social media in holding powerful institutions – powerful, often, to the point of impunity – to account has been a welcome development to activists and campaigners, but is also, I suspect, appreciated by the wider public, and, more importantly, by the victims of such assaults. What is more, systemic police violence against black people (and prejudicial policing against people of colour more broadly) are hardly confined to the United States. Let us consider deaths in custody. In the United Kingdom, since 1969 only one police officer has been convicted in relation to such a death. He did not receive a custodial sentence. Meanwhile since 2010, black people in the UK have been twice as likely to die in police custody than their white peers. These figures are considerably higher when force has been acknowledged to have been used.

And approaching this question from the other side, homophobic violence has been increasing in the UK. Transphobic violence dramatically so. Does Dr. Biggs wish to remove these acts from the sympathetic purview of people outside the United Kingdom? This seems counterproductively parochial. In recent years in the US there have been horrific acts of violence against, for instance, gay men – should we look away simply because they are far away?

Second, he asks whether “the moral valence of a killing depend[s] on the identity of the perpetrator as much as the identity of the victim”. I assume here Dr. Biggs is insinuating that white people are held to a higher standard than non-white people. Clearly this is not so. In any case, the useful question here does not relate to the *identity* of the perpetrator but to his *role*: should we expect better from police officers? Absolutely. Should we expect more from the state when so many police officers – whether white or not – commit this transgression time and again? Yes. We should.

Finally, he asks “what determines whether particular deaths become invoked by institutions to advance a totalizing metanarrative?” Is that really what has happened here? I agree that we need to critique responses to systemic injustice by institutions or businesses that may ride a wave of public opinion while underpinning the inequalities or oppressions they simultaneously deplore, but if the implication here is that the university, its colleges, and its departments have gone out of their way to ‘advance’ a narrative of widespread police prejudice and violence against black people, they are simply acknowledging what exists.

This is not a ‘totalizing metanarrative’ – though I’m not really sure what that means – but is, rather, a pressing, tangible and measurable reality; what’s more, it is evident that many members of the university community oppose this systemic issue, and both individuals and groups have pushed the university to be more proactive in stating such opposition. By extension, I am sure almost everyone who cares about black lives also cares about the safety and wellbeing of victims of homophobic violence, and while we can certainly do better in advancing such guarantees (as a university, as a city, as a country, and as a global community) I don’t see particular barriers to the *advocacy* of such support.

The question ‘whose lives matter?’ strikes me as bait. If the respondent doesn’t say ‘all lives matter’ then they must be racist, or homophobic, or misogynistic. But we have seen how pointless this sophistry is when groups targeted by violence – violence often, though not exclusively, perpetrated by cisgender, heterosexual white men, who are often wearing a badge that serves as a literal get-out-of-jail-free card – form a majority of our populations. So-called ‘competitive victimhood’ is no substitute for solidarity.

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*By mutual agreement Dr Biggs has provided the following response to Dr Booth’s commentary:*

I thank Dr William Booth for his detailed and nuanced response. Of the many important points raised, I will address just two.

He contends that ‘the presumption that the trial of a policeman in the murder of a black man would tell us anything about the officer’s racism is fantastical’. Derek Chauvin is being prosecuted by Keith Ellison, the Attorney General of Minnesota. The notion that Ellison – an African American and progressive Democrat, who as a student led protest against police brutality – will orchestrate a racist coverup is, I suggest, implausible.<sup>1</sup>

Dr Booth concludes by referring to ‘violence often, though not exclusively, perpetrated by cisgender, heterosexual white men’. Men certainly must be blamed for the lion’s share of violence in all known societies, but race is rather less straightforward. According to the most recent figures from the United States, whites perpetrated 41% of homicides (for which the offender’s race is known), while blacks committed 56%.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tim Murphy, ‘Keith Ellison’s Entire Career Has Been Building Toward This Moment’, *Mother Jones*, 1 June 2020; <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/06/keith-ellisons-entire-career-has-been-building-toward-this-moment/>.

<sup>2</sup> FBI, *Uniform Crime Reports*, 2019, Expanded Homicide Data Table 3; <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/tables/expanded-homicide-data-table-3.xls>.