

Insensitive white audiences make black people feel unwelcome at cultural events

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Some black people are being put off attending art galleries and classical music concerts because they are made to feel unwelcome by insensitive white attendees, research says.

The British Sociological Association's annual conference in Newcastle heard today that [black people](#) were stared at and overheard insensitive comments at high cultural events.

Ali Meghji, of the University of Cambridge, spoke to 32 middle-class people of African or Caribbean ethnicity about their cultural activities for his Ph.D. research.

Mr Meghji said that over three-quarters of those interviewed told him that they had been made to feel uncomfortable when attending cultural events, some because they were the only black people present and others because of the behaviour of those around them.

One black woman who works for a charity told Mr Meghji about being stared at when attending art galleries: "Sometimes I think people look at me more than the art. So why would I voluntarily get up and go somewhere where I'm treated like the exhibition myself?"

"I have to ask myself whether it's worth it, whether I actually like it enough to go, and recently I can't think of any shows or exhibitions where I've been willing to put up with that for the sake of culture."

One man told Mr Meghji about attending a history festival: "It was very challenging. I'd forgotten that look that white people give you to tell you 'what are you doing here?'

"I've travelled the world, so I'm used to it. But I'd forgotten how it is so relentless. I got upset, I just wanted to shout to somebody 'who are you f***ing looking at'. I got the sense that they didn't know they were doing it."

A woman told him: "I really like the music, and I really like the art, so why shouldn't I be there? [But] people are shocked to see me – some times they'll assume you're one of the singers.

"It's definitely harder for my dad to fit in at the opera than me, because he's a big tall black guy – so people look at him and they're just like 'what the hell?'"

A [black woman](#) journalist told him: "Not being white and being at certain gigs, where you are perceived to be not the right look, can get you into trouble – you can be assumed to be there to deal [drugs] or something like that."

This reaction meant that few black people attended such events. Another man interviewed by Mr Meghji, who is a chief executive of a company, said: "I love classical music. I'll go to a concert and I'll be the only black guy in the whole place – why?"

Mr Meghji related his own experience attending an art gallery. "I overheard two white women discussing how 'Africans and Caribbeans' have 'very pronounced bodies, you know?' and how the women are not expected 'to cover their breasts when swimming over there' in Africa.

At another exhibition, "I decide I'd like to go to the bathroom first, so

walk towards it, clearly signposted, placed right next to the café. I'm stopped by a white security guard who has a hand to his ear piece, 'can I help you?' the security guard aggressively asks – 'just going to the toilet' I replied. Immediately I suffered the paranoia, common to people of colour, of whether I had just been profiled, or whether the [security guard](#) was genuinely asking if I needed assistance.

"Many of my participants claimed that they are made to feel unwelcome in spaces of traditional middle-class culture, such as [classical music](#) concert halls, art galleries, upmarket restaurants and opera houses.

"While many of my participants claimed that wearing certain clothes, for instance, men wearing suits, and speaking in particular manners were effective strategies for displaying a respectable image, they highlighted how this did not make them immune to being stereotyped according to dominant racial ideologies – such as blackness being aggressive.

"While London is an extremely diverse city, this diversity is not reflected in traditional middle-class cultural spaces. Many of the participants lamented the exclusion of black cultural producers in middle-class cultural spaces. For instance, many said that art institutions were tokenistic in their appreciation of black culture, having an annual 'black exhibit' simply to tick a diversity box.

"I conclude that we need to understand how there has been a partial assimilation of black people into the economic side of the middle-class, but that continuing racial structures impede a cultural assimilation."

Mr Meghji's findings were part of his wider research on the issue of negative representations of blackness in middle-class culture.

Provided by British Sociological Association

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