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The psychological complex in contemporary education policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings together work in critical psychology and network governance to build a distinctive critique of how education policy mobilises the psychological complex to reinscribe deficit accounts of children and young people. While contemporary work in the critical analysis of the global educational policy assemblage has uncovered the undercurrents of scientism working to frame mainstream discourses, this paper excavates the manifestation of this through the 'psy-complex', which works to construct specific, narrow visions of possibilities and pupil subjectivities. To achieve this, the paper draws on critical psychological research to interrogate the dominance of, and position awarded to, psychology in the research report that informs the education inspection framework used by Ofsted to inspect schools in England. The discourses and assumptions produced and reproduced through this resource are of profound influence in wider constructions of, understandings of, and responses to educational contexts. We argue that the framework draws on the psy-complex to reinscribe deficit accounts of children and young people while perpetuating systemic inequities. We call for a more critical approach to research in psychology and education within which cultural, social, and historical contexts of inequality in education and childhood are deployed in explanations of educational inequalities.

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1. Introduction: psychology and scientism in education

In recent years, there has been a turn in education policy towards 'evidence-based' research, particularly in the USA and UK (Straßheim 2024), and debates about the role of evidence-based research continue to shape educational policy across the globe (Dekker and Meeter 2022; Lingard 2023). In particular, in the UK, policymakers increasingly use cognitive psychology to inform interventions, practice, and policy in education (Education Endowment Foundation 2021). Criteria for quality research are increasingly scientistic, with notions of 'evidence-based' or 'scientifically-based' research tied into government agendas promoting randomised control trials (RCTs) as the 'gold standard' of scientific evidence (Burman 2009; Saiani 2019; Thomas 2016). Under this framework, psychology is centred as a privileged discipline; psychologists receive in-depth training in

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methodologies that frequently subscribe to the traditional positivist paradigm, and there is an assumption that researchers with disciplinary origins in psychology reside in a position of expertise in research methods (Burman 1997). Psychological research methods and theories, therefore, command a level of respect, and 'common sense' assumptions regarding the objectivity, validity, and generalisability of these methods receive little critical attention, especially within educational policy discourse. Psychological knowledge is particularly granted authority by its psy-complex, by which we mean the collection of assumptions about the individual, personal responsibility, and social relations that psychology provides (Fryer 2021; Parker 1994). To describe psychology as part of the psy-complex is to recognise it as 'a science that serves the purposes of the powers that be to define a grid of understanding that helps to position people into a certain system of governability' (Nichterlein and Morss 2017, 120). The psy-complex provides a background, not just for psy-disciplines such as psychology and psychiatry, 'but for society at large' (148), laying out a stable, scientific, and predictable framework from which reality can be understood. The psy-complex works in the service of power and has been a key force in the maintenance and advancement of capitalism (Parker 2018) and colonialism (Makkawi 2015). Typically, dominant approaches to psychology provide evidence to support and uphold existing power relations, and its interventions are focused on changing the individuals who do not fit into, or threaten, the workings of dominant systems. In the context of continuing educational inequalities in the UK, it is therefore important to understand the ways in which the psy-complex is mobilised within educational policy.

While claims to objective and value-free science have sometimes been crucial in supporting the struggle for political freedoms (Burman 1997), we, like others (e.g. Flis 2019), argue that the sacred status awarded to purportedly objective methodologies itself draws upon an ideology of scientism (cf. Delahunty 2024) that warrants critical examination within education. There exists a widespread assumption that the application of the scientific method acts as protection against the inherent biases of human thinking and that, therefore, bias is likely to be higher 'in fields where theories and methodologies are more flexible and open to interpretation' (Fanelli 2010, as cited in Flis 2019). The assumption drawn here is that numbers and statistical analyses are more neutral, less tainted by the biases of human cognition, and less open to interpretation than more critical, qualitative methodologies. We seek to challenge this false dichotomy in this paper.

Scientism and psychology hold positivist research as the pinnacle of knowledge (Shahjahan 2011) and this position is considerably privileged in education policy, which increasingly turns to such research to diagnose the nature of current policy problems and to justify chosen policy directions for the purported benefit of all pupils (Delahunty 2024). We argue that the positivist research favoured in mainstream psychology and education neglects to consider deeply rooted, yet often ignored or unknown, philosophical, conceptual, and political issues within research that risk masking systemic inequities within education, and colonising knowledges to normalised white and Western psychological understandings. This paper, therefore, primarily aims to deconstruct and disrupt the dominance of mainstream psychology in education policy, thereby troubling the malformities imposed by its pervasive 'psychological complex' (psy-complex).

We are inspired by emerging critical work on network governance that has mapped the connections between broad networks of policy actors, many of whom draw on the psy-complex, that serve to shape policy based on conservative views of education (D. Gillborn, McGimpsey, and Warmington 2022; McGimpsey, Bradbury, and Santorini 2016). While critical psychology provides a lens to examine how psychology, in its most dominant form, works to maintain and protect existing positions of power, network governance examines the contemporary significance of networks as '"indirect" mechanisms for aligning economic, social and personal conduct with socio-political objectives' (Miller and Rose 1993, p. 76). Critical psychologists have long called attention to psychology's service to power (e.g. Maldonado-Torres 2017; Wilkinson 1991). However, by using a unique combination of critical psychology and network governance, we can both analyse taken-for-granted assumptions and interpretations in psychology *and* examine specifically how they are reinforced and upheld by networks of policy actors who mobilise to govern by these knowledges, to what ends, and in whose interests. Network governance and critical psychology thus inform our critique throughout. We structure our argument in three parts; (1) interrogating the authority awarded to psychological research and methodologies, their influences on education policy, and the networks bolstering psychology's privileged position; (2) critically examining a recent piece of UK education legislation, its selection and interpretation of relevant research evidence, and the existing power structures these interpretations of evidence serve to uphold; and (3) evaluating how the dominance of positivist research and psychological theory in education policy serves to mask systemic inequities in school and colonise children to the white and Western knowledges normalised and standardised through psychological research and in school curricula. This paper, therefore, brings together critical psychology and network governance to build a distinctive critique of how education policy in the UK mobilises the psychological complex to reinscribe deficit accounts of children and young people and the related implications for educational inequalities.

2. Psychology and education: the allure of objective and evidence-based research

2.1. Science in psychology: the common-sense assumption of positivism

Psychology is most frequently focused on locating psychological issues, deviances, and maladaptations as consequences of individual functioning, with little focus on wider contexts and power relations (Bowleg et al. 2022). Such conceptualisations and psychology's construction as akin to a 'natural science' make the discipline an alluring choice for policymakers and governments seeking to change individuals rather than call into question inequities produced by government choices and policy (S. Gillborn et al. 2020). Within the educational policy assemblage,[1] the aggrandising of psychology as the optimal source of evidence in educational politicking is rationalised within the 'common-sense' of late neoliberal phasing. This phasing of late neoliberalism in education has intensified the logics of marketized performativities, altered conceptions of 'good education' from democratic ideals to quantitative gains in high stakes examinations, and ushered in new technologies of surveillance

and capture aligned to behavioural economics (Ball 2015; McGimpsey et al. 2017). Importantly, the productive conjunction of late neoliberalism and scientism has facilitated the permeation of social policy by a predominantly neo-positivist quantitative outlook, that is justified as *the* rational perspective based on an appeal to an illusory 'value-free' objectivity (Delahunty 2024). This broader neoliberalisation of education reveals the sociopolitical milieu in which the psy-complex in education has been emphasised, and where this form of expertise is elevated in policy discourses.

When drawn on in education policy, the 'expert knowledge' of psychologists becomes a key source of governance; the use of scientific (quantitative and positivist) research allows users of psychology to claim that they are merely scientists interested only in facts (C. Crawford 2019) and that knowledge deduced from science is distinct from, and immune to, social and political influences (Harding 1986), positioned as the 'irrationality' of non-scientific subjective approaches to research (Parker 1994). Drawing on psychology therefore allows policymakers to claim they are using evidence-based science to build apolitical and neutral policy programmes (Littoz-Monnet 2017) conceptualised as inherently good and aligned to the broader ideology of developmentalism (Klein 2017). As Williamson (2021), drawing on the work of Nikolas Rose, explains:

> Psychologists have attained a privileged position in policy and governance, with their expert knowledge of human qualities, capacities and behaviours – developed from experimental set-ups, laboratories and field studies – shaping how policymakers understand the individuals and collectives that are the subjects of government. (Rose 1999, 134)

Psychology increasingly influences educational policy through networks of psychologists and think tank researchers who produce highly consumable reports, books, and speeches (McGimpsey, Bradbury, and Santorini 2016) that draw upon the seductive language and sense-making that psychology offers. Dominant psychological theories are underpinned by a positivist epistemology and a realist ontology; that is, the belief that there is one single truth that is 'out there', waiting to be found, that can be inter-subjectively tested using appropriate methods (Popper 1968). Positivism is normalised as the common-sense approach to research in subtle but powerful ways through psychology education. When students encounter questions regarding the philosophy of science and knowledge in their education, this is often as part of their introduction to qualitative methodologies, which is second to the hypothetico-deductive method positioned as the 'general approach' in psychology (e.g. Coolican 2018). Quantitative methods are not contextualised in the same way; positivism is, therefore, positioned as the 'common sense' approach to research by virtue of its absence of explanation or interrogation. This common-sense assumption rests upon the sociohistorical legacies introduced within psychology by the field's shift to behaviourism in the early twentieth century which, among other themes, began reconstructing the discipline of psychological research in line with aspirations towards attaining institutional prestige, similar to the natural sciences (Danziger 1990). The present-day reinforced assumption is that numbers and statistical analyses carry no inherent theory and draw on no ideology; they just 'are'. In contrast, as a result of their relationship to constructivist epistemologies, *qualitative* analyses are often accompanied in teaching by encouragement to write reflexively about analyses, which students often view as a requirement to confess to mistakes, to be 'honest' about

their biases, or to explain away the relevance of their work due to its failure to conform to the dominant positivist paradigm (Burman 1997), thereby viewing subjectivity as a threat to credibility rather than as a resource for knowledge production in contextual and situated research (Braun and Clarke 2021). Positivism is, therefore, clearly embedded as the dominant, common sense, scientific approach to research in psychological education, in opposition to the supposedly ideological and subjective qualitative methodologies.

2.2. Disrupting scientism in psychology: the construction of knowledge

Psychology's dedication to the natural sciences, positivism, and its ideals of validity, generalisability, and replicability is perhaps best exemplified today through the so-called 'replication crisis' of the 2010s (Flis 2019), characterised by a recognition that the results of many psychology studies could not be replicated. For those concerned about a replication crisis in psychology, the norms of 'good science' are at stake, with such 'good science' defined in very particular ways. As Flis (2019) argues, the reform debates that have grown from this crisis 'seem to be completely out of tune with contemporary history and philosophy of science' (p. 159). Moreover, the ideology of this reform agenda elides the centrality of colonial politics embedded within the sociohistorical contexts in the establishment of 19th and 20th century science generally (Harding 2009), and psychology specifically (Maldonado-Torres 2017), continuing within present day discourses of 'good science'. There is, therefore, a need for epistemological, ontological, and critical discussions in psychology that recognise how 'good science' works in ways that serve particular interests, and a need to consider how the implied 'bad psychology' might be that which 'refuses to adjust itself to racism and structural inequality' (Grzanka and Cole 2021, 1334).

To question the objectivity of science is often regarded as a threat to our 'moral, political and psychological institutions' (Harding 1986, 39); yet the unquestioned acceptance of established methodologies and norms in psychology prevents us from understanding the origins of the assumptions we now take for granted and how the contexts of those origins continue to influence our understanding of human behaviour today. By engaging critically with the production and reproduction of dominant psychological knowledges, we are better able to disrupt the discipline's scientism, contextualise its knowledges and norms, and understand the consequences of prioritising the application of these knowledges at the expense of considering critical and contextualised understandings in education policy and research. These implications are particularly salient for the broader field of education and educational scholarship given the mainstream acceptance of psychological methodologies and evidence by educational researchers, many of whom do not hold formal qualifications in psychology and have not studied the sociohistorical evolution of the field.

For example, the organisation 'ResearchED', founded by Tom Bennett and highly subscribed to by teachers globally, has adopted a strong ethos based on behaviourism as a basis for promoting a rhetoric of 'evidence-based education' (McNutt 2021) to improve practice in schools. The conference series regularly hosts speakers such as David Didau, who has written books on the application of psychology, and who has espoused clear views related to a hereditary Black intelligence deficit and white supremacy (D. Gillborn, McGimpsey, and

Warmington 2022). These views, drawing heavily on the psy-complex, are widely represented in the ResearchED movement, whose founder Bennet is regularly observed to block (on social media) challengers to its scientific racisms, and make light of racism himself (see Doxtdator 2017). Situated firmly within a developmentalist conception of education and teaching, organisations and individuals such as these persistently reinforce narrow conceptualisations of science within the common sense of the psy-complex in education. In the context of developmentalism, Burman (2011) argues that 'like banal nationalism and racism ... banal developmentalism should exercise our attention, rather than being overlooked or excused by virtue of its "trivial" status' (425). We, therefore, seek to challenge the banal scientism of psychology in education.

The turn to language in feminist psychology in the 1980s and 90s (e.g. M. Crawford and Marecek 1989) began to draw attention to the normative and normalising function of psychological knowledge by demonstrating how it is intimately intertwined with the social, cultural, and historical conditions it is produced within and the ways in which language constructs realities (Burman 2011). This is much like the way in which science and politics are entangled in processes of co-production inchoately framing designs of social policy, as shown by Jasanoff (2004). Contextualising our knowledge in this way, as constructed rather than self-evident, 'renders problematic the truth claims of bodies of knowledge' (Burman 1992, 46). Knowledge is not objective and value-free; it is provisional, culturally and historically specific, and arises from and contributes to social and political interests. This is as much the case with quantitative, positivist research as it is with qualitative, interpretivist research; for example, numbers and quantitative data do not 'speak for themselves' (C. Crawford 2019), but are interpreted by researchers, scientists, policymakers, and others who draw on their own assumptions, knowledges, and understandings in making sense of the data in front of them.

In addition, there is an assumption of generalisability in psychological research and theory which assumes that theories of human psychology can be applied globally to diverse peoples and contexts, reflecting the field's inherent coloniality (Maldonado-Torres 2017), and its critical support of what Foucault (1979, 26) refers to as governance through the 'political technology of the body'. Psychology therefore provides the knowledge means by which to govern bodies within the broader sociopolitics of neoliberal capitalism. To this end, theories of human development are often not contextualised and, although the majority of research samples are drawn from white and Western participants, their conclusions are presented as race-neutral (S. Gillborn et al. 2023).

Dominant psychology's focus on individualism and its separation of 'mind from matter, individual from environment, masculine from feminine, the fully human from the "less than human"' (James and Lorenz 2021, 386) speaks to the discipline's coloniality and incompatibility with other psychologies, such as Indigenous worldviews that conceptualise people as inseparable from one another, from their communities, and from the environment (Fellner 2018). While dominant (white, western) positivism in psychology is positioned as the single correct way of knowing, the suggestions for practice that arise from such research are frequently promoted as beneficial to all groups in a given context, including – if not especially – marginalised groups, who are positioned as in need of saving from their flawed ways of being and knowing. As Kontopodis and Jackowska (2019) highlight:

> 'Psychology has not only been the science created by and studied primarily by the "white, middle-class man"; it has also been one of the main disciplines that enabled that 'white, middle-class man' to help "Others" to "develop"—the "Others" being from diverse ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. (Mills 2014; Teo 2005, 513)

These specifically culturally located, yet purportedly neutral, theories and concepts of 'human psychology' 'make this way of thinking appear to be a universal truth and a necessary criterion of civilised society' (Smith 2022, 56). This pattern of increased demands for experimental research too, then, is arguably 'imbued with an "attitude" and a "spirit" which assumes a certain ownership of the entire world, and which has established systems and forms of governance which embed that attitude in institutional practices' (64). These practices work to define what counts as legitimate research: that which is quantitative, experimental, and focuses on individualised psychological concepts. The privileging of such evidence furthers neoliberal discourses of learning outcomes, framed as quantitative gains in high-stakes assessments (Biesta 2009), as results of individual skill or teaching methods while simultaneously upholding Western notions of science and truth as the only worthy knowledges (Hall 1992; Smith 2022).

2.3. Banal positivism, governance and control

Although statistical data are no more neutral than qualitative data, quantitative psychological research is privileged in education policy and debate in ways that serve to mask inequalities while operating under the guise of objective and value-free analysis of data. Similarly, research priorities are determined by powerful stakeholders, such as funding bodies and government agencies, with particular interests and drawing upon particular ideologies. In the current context of the UK, under neoliberalism and governance seeking to divert blame for the influence of its policies on inequities in education,[2] there is a clear appeal to encouraging and prioritising the use of psychological approaches and methodologies that serve to individualise inequity and remove children and their educational outcomes from their wider political, social, and cultural contexts.

This turn towards neoliberal rational individualism has culminated in a growing interest in contemporary research across numerous areas, such as 'social-emotional learning' (SEL) in psychology and education (Williamson 2021). SEL constitutes a further example of a construct that should be understood as part of an exercise to measure psychological attributes in the interests of the governance and management of populations (Williamson 2021) and direct interventions at the individual rather than systemic level. Although the ideological underpinnings and scientific evidence base for SEL concepts such as 'grit' and 'growth mindset' are widely contested (Duckor 2017; Sisk et al. 2018; Effrem and Robbins 2019, as cited in Williamson 2021), the study of these concepts is gaining popularity across education policy and practice in the UK, US and elsewhere. This reflects the power of such concepts in advancing individualised explanations of educational outcomes without the need to interrogate cultural and political influences, further bolstering the governance through self-responsibilisation, characteristic of neoliberal capitalist politics (Lynch 2022).

In encouraging us to study education at the individual level, the psy-complex works as a normative and normalising practice complimenting neoliberal exigencies; it creates definitions of normal functioning and regulates and evaluates its subjects against those

constructions that serve to legitimate notions of normality. Furthermore, the psy-complex, through psychological and educational research, serves an ontologising function in colonising frames of understanding under which contemporary subjectivity can be articulated. This is not only linked to the prestige awarded to psychologised modes of understanding socioculturally speaking (De Vos 2012), but is also directly motivated through institutional support, such as through programmes of research funding. Williamson (2021), for example, highlights how SEL research in education is well-funded by government bodies; government support for the means to both measure this skill and provide intervention to improve it in individuals indicate how such individualistic concepts, given authority by the psy-complex's claim to objective science, might serve to benefit the status quo and to nudge subjects into the rationality of late neoliberal existences (Bradbury, McGimpsey, and Santori 2013).

We can see, then, how the psy-complex works to determine standards for research that obscure political and cultural contexts in favour of providing individualised explanations and interventions, thus complimenting the broader late neoliberal apparatuses of governance. Those knowledges and approaches serve a normalising function, working to support the status quo and preserve particular interests of the powerful. Below, we turn this critical analysis onto an important piece of contemporary education legislation in England to demonstrate how the psy-complex serves in education policy contexts to problematise and pathologise individuals and obscure systemic inequalities.

3. Examining the research informing Ofsted's education inspection framework

In order to analyse the psy-complex in education policy, we examine a key source in UK education policy that both indicates and informs the dominant conceptualisation of contemporary educational outcomes. A key source of influence guiding these understandings and assumptions in the UK is Ofsted (Ofsted n.d.), a non-ministerial department of the UK government that inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages in England. Ofsted inspectors provide schools and services with graded judgements on a scale of grade 1 to 4, constituting judgements from outstanding (1) to inadequate (4). As inspection is a key regulatory technology, Ofsted exercises considerable influence on educational discourse, and makes regular high-profile interventions in debates about practice in education. Ofsted publishes an inspection framework that all 21,500 state-funded schools in England are subject to. That framework is underpinned and legitimised by a separate research report (Ofsted 2019) that describes the research evidence informing how schools should be inspected and what standards they should aim to meet. Thus, the Ofsted report (re)produces dominant assumptions about what 'good education' looks like and details what research evidence these assumptions are built on. Analysing the Ofsted report reveals a) how dominant approaches in education policy and practice in England are legitimised and informed through the discursive deployment of research evidence, and b) how dominant interpretations of research evidence by policymakers shape the judgements of value in assessments of 'best practice' (or distinctions between 'inadequate' and 'outstanding' practice) in education.

The Ofsted report is split into four key sections, each consisting of research that informs Ofsted's understanding of the area (e.g. quality of education, behaviour and

attitudes, etc.). Ofsted has been criticised for embedding deficit assumptions about particular groups of children into policy and inspections, in particular the perpetuation of raciolinguistic ideologies (Cushing 2024). This raciodeficitised discourse promoted through Ofsted coalesces with the deficit ontology that structures mainstream psychology and the psy-complex. Through our critical engagement with the research informing these discourses, we seek to demonstrate how the psy-complex in contemporary education policy works to reinforce and scientise these deficit understandings while obscuring systemic inequalities in education, notably in relation to race and racism.

In the following sections, we examine extracts of the report's key points pertaining to student engagement, behaviour, and achievement, evaluating the theories and research drawn upon in order to demonstrate how the report draws upon the psychological complex to remove political accountability from the government and place responsibility for educational success and failure on individuals.

3.1. Quality of education: the 'learning sciences'

The first section provides research around the first key inspection judgement: quality of education. This section culminates in an argument that it is

> 'Important that we use approaches that help pupils to integrate new knowledge into the long-term memory and make enduring connections that foster understanding. For this, we can draw on a growing evidence base from the "learning sciences". Learning sciences is a relatively new interdisciplinary field that seeks to apply understanding generated by cognitive science to classroom practice. . .this field is increasingly generating moderate to strong evidence of practices that can be used to enhance learning across phases and remits'. (Ofsted 2019, 19)

The report highlights interleaving, retrieval practice, elaboration, dual-coding, and cognitive load theory as key practices to enhance learning. Each of these are supported by references to studies that investigate students' retention and recall in the contexts of different teaching styles, thereby conceptualising memory and learning in psychological terms. Here, there is no consideration of wider contextual determinants on students' ability to make connections and recalls in learning; for example, these might include a curriculum that represents students' own diverse cultural experiences, knowledges, and needs (Ladson-Billings 2004; Yosso 2005). The absence of this is particularly glaring in the context of the report's earlier statement that 'what is taught and how, and who is included, appear to be key principles' (Ofsted 2019, 4); this seemingly suggests some awareness of these contexts, yet such questions are absent from the Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted 2023).

3.2. Behaviour and attitudes: obscuring inequality

The second section of the reports discusses research related to 'behaviour and attitudes'. The EIF grade criteria for this inspection judgement includes that the inspected provider should

> [have] high expectations for learners' behaviour and conduct and [apply] these expectations consistently and fairly. . . . [learners] are resilient to setbacks and take pride in their achievements; learners have high attendance and are punctual; [and] learners feel safe and do not experience bullying or discrimination. (Ofsted 2019, 29)

Upon the mention of expectations related to behaviour and conduct, the disparities in how behavioural interventions are applied across groups in education and the chronically low expectations of Black students regardless of class background (Rollock et al. 2015) come to mind. Perhaps in acknowledgement of this, the report states here that

> 'Expectations have been found to be related to pupils' ethnic, gender and background characteristics. These expectations can affect pupils in a variety of (often subtle) ways. . . . there may also be stereotypical expectations of particular groups. Ways to help alleviate these issues may include a sensitive and informed approach to data use, combatting stereotyping through exemplars and being aware of unconscious bias. (Ofsted 2019, 30)

Despite recognition here that expectations can be subject to stereotypes and unconscious bias, and the inclusion of suggestions for alleviating these issues, these challenges to bias are not assessed in the inspection framework. Indeed, inspections related to racism were removed under the Coalition government under which 'race . . . or any type of equality just [wasn't] a factor' in education (Warmington et al. 2018, p. 419). Therefore, while the report here does seem to acknowledge that disparities and unconscious bias exist, it both fails to call attention to racism specifically – allowing the assertion that racism is no longer an issue to remain in place – while failing to assert any expectation that education providers take steps to address these issues (Ofsted 2023). Furthermore, stereotypes and unconscious bias are here constructed as the outcomes of behaviours and attitudes of prejudiced individuals, obscuring the systems and processes through which these biases and stereotypes are reproduced in education. This conceptualisation aligns with dominant psychological theorising around racism (Salter and Haugen 2017). The Ofsted report's mentions of stereotypes and unconscious bias therefore seem superficial in the context of its failure to acknowledge the systemic nature of inequality and encourage any real change around such issues.

In terms of attendance, the report states that the strongest evidence for improving students' attendance appears to be around providing learners with clear pathways from education to next steps, such as higher education or employment, and providing a high-quality curriculum and teaching experience. The report further states that 'There is a relationship between increased temporary drop-out from, and poor behaviour in, class and subsequent chronic non-attendance' (Ofsted 2019, 31). Here, a connection is made between perceptions of the importance with which students regard their education and their likelihood to be absent from school; there is no consideration of wider contexts, beyond student attitudes, that might impact each both their attendance *and* the 'poor behaviour' with which this is linked. For example, evidence indicates that students who are experiencing bullying or victimisation in school are more likely to have lower attendance and be perceived to be behaving poorly (Najam and Kashif 2018, Young-Jones et al. 2015). Such contexts are obscured in the interpretations presented in the Ofsted report. This reflects approaches to data interpretation legitimised through the psy-complex: pupils' attitudes are located as the cause of any deviation from expected

behaviours, and any critical interrogation of the environments that those individuals are expected to engage in is obscured.

Bullying is, in fact, discussed in this section; not as a potential reason for why some students may be in 'chronic non-attendance' but in relation to responding to student behaviour. The report states that

> Behaviour is obviously crucial to maximising time on task, and to minimising bullying and violent behaviour outside as well as inside the classroom. Creating a sufficiently disciplined environment in school and classroom is a prerequisite to any learning taking place … Consistency across practices is important for pupils. One of the reasons for this is that young people, in particular adolescents, are developmentally attuned to concepts of fairness that may be challenged by differential treatment by different teachers or of different pupils. (Ofsted 2019, 32–33)

Despite a reference here to the importance of 'consistency' in preventing allegations of differential treatment, the failure to adequately address group differences in treatment feels a glaring omission, particularly in the context of evidence suggesting that punishments are more likely to be handed to Black students for their responses to discrimination and bullying from peers than to students who engage in such behaviours (Rollock et al. 2015). Moreover, the call for consistent practices in the context of assumed homogenous developmentalism must be read against the backdrop of the increasing neoliberalisation of education, bound up in narratives of 'quality' that forefront a reduction of praxis to technicist procedures and political passivity drawing attention away from broader systemic inequalities (Hyslop-Margison 2010). The inspection framework neglects to state the importance of, or assess the presence of, measures to ensure that behavioural interventions are not used disproportionately or unfairly against particular groups of students, instead presenting this need for consistency in very general terms: 'the provider has high expectations for learners' behaviour and conduct and applies these expectations consistently and fairly' (Ofsted 2023, n.p.).

In the context of responding to behaviour and attitudes in schools, the use of exclusions is a particularly racialised practice, with Black Caribbean students much more likely be excluded than their white peers (D. Gillborn 2024). With regard to exclusions, the report states that the use of exclusions

> Is an essential part of behaviour management systems, used as a last resort when behaviour becomes unmanageable, misbehaviour is persistent, or behaviour is threatening the safety of other pupils or adults in the school. … The impact of exclusions on the excluded pupil can be negative, and some studies report correlations with mental health issues, lower rates of future involvement in education, employment and training, and offending. Excluded pupils are more likely to be boys, eligible for FSM and with SEND. (Ofsted 2019, 34–35)

Note here, first, that the known racial biases in the use of exclusions is entirely omitted, focusing only on students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those who are eligible for free school meals (FSM). This likely represents a model of statistical analyses whereby various factors are controlled for and, in this case, when controlling for FSM and SEND, race and ethnicity appear to be no longer relevant. Such modelling was similarly used in the Timpson (2019) Review of School Exclusion. Critics have referred to this as a 'garbage can' model of analysis (D. Gillborn 2024); while this approach appears at face value to provide a detailed quantitative analysis of the influence

of different factors on rates of exclusions, it is argued to represent 'overfitting . . . asking too much from the available data' (Babyak 2004, 411). Such calculations typically work to reduce the apparent size of race inequality while focusing on other issues (e.g. Timpson 2019) such as, in this case, SEND and FSM-status; thereby drawing on the authority of the psy-complex to assert that racism is no longer an issue. What such modelling fails to consider is the *relationship* between racism, SEND, and FSM-status, assuming – incorrectly (Fisher, Fisher, and Railey 2021) – that race and racism play no role in either SEND diagnosis nor FSM-status.

Furthermore, the discussion around exclusions ends abruptly here; readers are left with the understanding that exclusions can have negative, lifelong impacts on the excluded students, who are more likely to be those with SEND and eligible for FSM, and therefore exclusions work to reproduce systemic inequalities for those students who are more likely to be excluded (Kennedy, Acosta, and Soutullo 2019). Despite this recognition, there are no suggestions for how this inequality in the use of exclusions might be counteracted and exclusions continue to be encouraged 'as an essential part of behaviour management systems' (Ofsted 2019, 34) in the face of repeated evidence demonstrating their role in reproducing systemic inequalities (Dunning-Lazano 2016; Fisher, Fisher, and Railey 2021; Kennedy, Acosta, and Soutullo 2019).

3.3. Personal development: self-belief and resilience in the face of inequality

The third section of the report concerns research related to 'personal development'. The first key concept to be highlighted in this section is self-belief: 'an overarching term for a set of often overlapping and highly correlated concepts such as self-confidence, self-concept and self-efficacy . . . This raises the question of what educators can do to enhance learners' self-confidence and self-belief' (Ofsted 2019, 37). With regards to self-belief, the report argues that

> The main factor seems to be climate. Creating a supportive environment with clear boundaries is particularly important. This means that, while supportive and caring, schools, for example, should also be disciplined, orderly environments with clear, though not stifling, rules and procedures. . . . Expectations, as mentioned in the section on effective teaching, can also affect self-belief. However, as the impact of achievement on belief appears stronger than the reverse, the key to promoting positive self-belief is to ensure that pupils experience successful learning in school. (Ofsted 2019, 38)

There is plenty to unpack here, not least the failure to consider how both self-belief and achievement in schools are impacted by experiences of inequality, whether from peers and teachers, or through more institutionalised means such as representations (or lack thereof) in the curriculum and standardised testing practices (Ladson-Billings 2004; Yosso 2005). There is a notable absence of any recognition of raced, classed, and gendered experiences of self-belief and how this is tied to pupils' understanding and experience of systems of inequality in education and beyond; for example, self-confidence in later educational contexts has been observed to be highest in white men and lowest in Black women (Corra and Carter 2008), likely due to the intersectional discrimination that Black women experience (Crenshaw 1991). The report argues that 'the impact of achievement on belief appears stronger than the reverse', therefore

recommending that successful learning for all pupils is key to promoting self-belief. Yet, this fails to address how achievement *itself* is impacted by inequalities institutionalised in education. In general, the report's discussions of self-concept follow dominant psychological conceptualisations of 'the self' that constitute it as an entity separate from social and political contexts (McVittie and McKinlay 2017).

Besides self-belief, another key concept in this section is resilience:

> 'Resilience, alongside its related concept, "grit", has become a popular concept in education over recent years. In general, resilience is about adjusting to adversity when it happens and bouncing back afterwards. . . . In education, the term "resilience" has been used in a number of ways. "Academic resilience" is typically used to refer to the extent to which pupils recover from setbacks in attainment, or overcome disadvantages of low prior attainment or social background'. (Ofsted 2019, 38)

In research around resilience, the report explains that

> 'There is evidence that resilience, along with optimism and self-control, can help explain why some pupils from highly disadvantaged backgrounds do better in terms of educational and life outcomes than others from the same background. . . . In terms of academic resilience, evidence again supports climate-based models over the effect of peers or the more traditional school effectiveness factors. Caring and supportive teachers, a safe and orderly school environment, high expectations, opportunities for pupils to become involved in the life of the school, and good relationships between school and parents appear to be part of a "community"-oriented climate that can foster academic resilience, in particular among disadvantaged pupils'. (Ofsted 2019, 38–39)

Resilience is a psychological concept, and the American Psychological Association (APA n.d.) argues that 'Psychological research demonstrates that the resources and skills associated with more positive adaptation (i.e. greater resilience) can be cultivated and practiced' (n.p.). The Ofsted report, too, draws on this idea of schools cultivating resilience in their students; in the absence of considering contexts of inequality, the report's only recommendation concerning self-belief and resilience is that while schools should be 'supportive and caring', they 'should also be disciplined, orderly environments with clear, though not stifling, rules and procedures' (Ofsted 2019, 38). This assertion of the value of discipline holds important yet unexplored implications for those pupils historically treated unfairly and disproportionately in disciplinary school environments, particularly Black Caribbean and Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children, who experience exclusions from full-time education at a much higher rate than their peers for less serious behavioural 'offences' (D. Gillborn 2024). Without this recognition and clear guidance about how a 'disciplined, orderly environment' might be sustained – which might be assumed to be supportive of 'the right to exclude' – the report again indicates support for a practice reproducing institutional racism, drawing on the authority of the psy-complex to legitimate it.

In focusing on pupils' resilience in this way, the very systems reproducing those conditions that pupils must be resilient against remain intact. One might argue that marginalised students are thus being encouraged to cultivate their self-belief and resilience within a system that punishes them for responding to inequalities they experience and within which expectations of them, both behaviourally and academically, are chronically low (Rollock et al. 2015). The report ignores these contexts and, as has

arguably been a pattern thus far throughout the report by virtue of its absence, seems to argue that any issue of inequality in education is fictional.

4. The psychological complex in the Ofsted report

In general, the Ofsted report draws upon the authority of the psy-complex to endorse the dominant pattern of wider contemporary UK government discourses, obscuring clear systemic biases in education in favour of deficit models that position minoritised and disadvantaged students as having something intrinsically wrong with them that explains their position in education. This is reflected in governments' long-standing constructions of minoritised pupils as 'low achieving minority ethnic groups' with notable absences of any mention of racism, prejudice, or discrimination (D. Gillborn 2005), therefore constructing this 'low achievement' as a result of innate differences in ability and psychological functioning, rather than discrimination.

It is no surprise that the psy-complex enjoys the status it is awarded in contemporary education policy; it encourages us to seek answers at an individual level, identifying outcomes as a result of children's internal functions and behaviour (Millei and Petersen 2015), therefore seeking to make changes to individually deficit children and schools. Further, it complements the culture of science-based education research that has grown in potency across educational scholarship concomitant to the increasing neoliberalisation of educational policy (Hyslop-Margison 2010; St. Pierre 2006). Similarly, research methods derived from the psy-complex privilege the outcomes observed from presumed 'non-racialised' white children in research, whose observations are then generalised across different children and contexts (Peters 2018; Phoenix 1987). Using psychological research in this way decontextualises our understanding of education; white and middle-class children are constructed as the norm of psychological functioning against which others should be compared, and contexts of racism and inequality are obscured. The psychological complex offers ostensibly scientific answers to neoliberal governments seeking to position unequal educational outcomes as circumstantial rather than related to any consequences of government policy or inaction around systemic inequalities and austerity. In this way, the psy-complex, advanced through network governance, allows policymakers to construct education policy based on deficit constructions of marginalised children with claims that it is informed by apolitical, objective, and 'well-established, evidence-based' research.

The research that currently enjoys status as 'evidence-based' therefore works to halt educational equity by averting criticism of government policy that drives inequity and shifting blame from government to local schools and children. It is impossible to remove our understanding of education from the political contexts in which schools and children work and learn, and educational inequities will continue for as long as policy works from the ideology that what works for those privileged in psychological research will work for all. As we have argued, it is not solely teaching practices (e.g. dual coding) and pupils' individual differences (e.g. self-belief and resilience) that determine academic success. Children's success in education is impeded by whitewashed curricula (Yosso 2005), standardised testing (Ladson-Billings 2004), and harsh exclusionary measures (D. Gillborn 2024) that disproportionately disadvantage marginalised children, to name

but a few of the systemic issues expanding well beyond solely the power of individual students, schools, and teachers. There is intentional use in the Ofsted report of particular kinds of evidence, analysis, and theory that serve to position the state as equal and fair and position educational inequity as a consequence of individual and group differences rather than systemic inequality. The psychological complex in education policy, with its focus on individual functioning and its own failures to recognise institutional racism (S. Gillborn and Gillborn 2021), thus works to support these aims and protect the status quo.

In response to existing critique (e.g. Education Endowment Foundation 2021) over the Ofsted report's emphasis on learning strategies informed by the psy-complex, such as dual-coding and cognitive load theory (CLT), Ofsted's then Head of Research, Daniel Muijs, published a blog post on the Ofsted area of the UK Government website. This response to criticism is interesting, resting primarily on the basis that the theory has been well-established in research for decades and is therefore, at least to some degree, above the criticism that it receives. In his response, Muijs briefly lists three key criticisms of CLT that have been raised and responds that

> Criticism does not invalidate the theory, which . is supported by a large body of research. It does, however, show that we would be misguided if we relied solely on CLT as the basis for our evidence. We have therefore steered clear of doing this. (Muijs 2019, 2)

Muijs is correct in stating that CLT is not solely relied on for the basis of their evidence, and there are, as we have noted, broader psychological theories drawn upon here. However, what remains absent from the review of evidence are vital contexts of what it is that students are being asked to learn and who is included in this, or indeed any mention of wider contexts that impact local schools, including inequality, deprivation, poverty, or racism. None of these words, nor their derivatives, appear at all in the report. The word 'race' appears once in the context of classroom bullying, with racism here positioned as a faulty thinking pattern of prejudiced individuals rather than as systemically reproduced. As we have highlighted, this conceptualisation aligns with dominant psychological theorising around racism (Salter and Haugen 2017).

Muijs (2019) reassures readers that CLT 'is a well-established theory, with over 30 years of research behind it, making it one of the best supported theoretical frameworks in education' (p. 2). Combined with this, his conclusion to the response reveals yet more about Ofsted's understanding of what 'counts' as evidence and evidence-based practice: 'When it takes effect in September, the education inspection framework will be the most evidence-based, research-informed and tested framework in Ofsted's 26 year history' (Muijs 2019, 3). Here, 'evidence-based' is reconstituted as that which is quantitative and, arguably, depoliticised. One could similarly argue that there are decades worth of wider disciplinary evidence to indicate that austerity and institutional racism drive inequity in education and poor learning conditions for children (Forsey 2014; Francis and Mills 2012; Ladson-Billings 2004; Lupton and Thomson 2015; Lupton et al. 2015); yet such contexts are excluded from the evidence Ofsted chose to include in informing their inspection framework. Teaching practices informed by the psychological complex may be effective for some, but obscured in such individualised approaches is evidence indicating that those who feel excluded or marginalised by curricula content are less likely to be able to connect it to their own lives and experiences and, therefore, less likely to recall and make sense of information, whether in meaningful ways or with a means to

passing standardised testing protocols (Ladson-Billings 2004). Dual coding is unlikely to create powerful changes in minoritised students' learning and test scores whilst they continue to be assessed based on their understanding of a white curriculum (Peters 2018).

Therefore, Ofsted's decision about what evidence is most useful or relevant is an ideological one. Evidence related to political, social, and economic contexts is excluded, while the theories drawn from the psychological complex – such as resilience and self-belief, CLT and dual-coding – are upheld as the relevant, 'common sense' explanations. The decision to prioritise quantitative and experimental psychological evidence as that which is 'directly related to our inspection judgements and criteria' (Ofsted 2019, 3) is no more objective and ideology-free than a decision to use qualitative and contextual evidence, either from psychology or wider disciplines, would be. Yet, the psychological complex in this report serves to uphold neoliberal ideology and obscure contexts of systemic inequality while hiding behind assumptions of scientific neutrality.

The allure of the psychological complex in education is thus two-fold. First, it presents ostensibly scientific and objective answers to questions regarding children's outcomes in education. Second, by focusing on the theories and ideas offered through the psychological complex, education policy can use what is lauded as evidence-based science to locate the causes of educational inequality within the psyches of individual children, removed from their wider contexts influenced by the decisions and positions of government and systemic inequality, all while constructing these explanations as neutral and free from ideology. Network governance therefore mobilises the dominant assumptions and interpretations of the psy-complex to obscure systemic inequalities, endorse individualised, deficit conceptualisations of children in education, and to reinforce these conceptualisations as scientific and just.

5. Conclusions

Combining critical psychology and network governance in this paper has enabled us to challenge the status awarded to mainstream psychological research and examine how its dominance not only *theoretically* serves to maintain the status quo but is actively mobilised through network governance to uphold conservative, Western-centric notions of education. As critical psychologists, we are frustrated yet unsurprised at the dominance of the psychological complex in education policy; and as psychology educators, we see the dominant positions of and approaches to psychology that we have described reproduced through Higher Education curricula in the UK and Ireland. We see the implications of how these knowledges are reproduced and solidified with little critical engagement and have written about some of the implications of these knowledges in relation to systemic inequalities when students go on to work in careers informed by psychology (S. Gillborn et al. 2023).

We first argue that education policy must shift from assuming an individualised understanding of childhood education towards understanding the political, social, and cultural contexts of schooling. The research currently privileged as 'evidence-based' cannot do this alone, and indeed often works to obscure the impact of existing structural inequities which are at once (re)produced and ignored by government policy and

positions. Using the psychological complex as an approach to education is no more neutral and value-free than a politically contextualised understanding of education.

Educational inequalities will continue for as long as their purported non-existence is supported by ostensibly 'evidence-based' and decontextualised psychological research. Psychological research does not disprove the existence of inequalities, but the psychology complex's failure to take these contexts into account gives network governance a scientific mandate to leave systemic inequities ignored and therefore maintained. Therefore, we argue that psychology has a duty to challenge these uses of its knowledges to maintain educational inequalities; psychologists have a duty to consider how their research might be used to mask inequalities; and policymakers must seek to engage with research that takes contexts of inequity into account.

Psychologists and researchers who work outside of this mainstream provide alternative research paradigms that better work to make sense of educational inequalities through critical psychological standpoints that consider the effects of systems and contexts on individual functioning. For many, this includes stepping away from a reliance on the tools of understanding that psychology provides and learning from wider interdisciplinary work that draws more on contextual frameworks. Critical psychology takes social, political, and cultural contexts as starting points for critiquing psychology and developing more critically informed approaches to psychological study (Parker 2015). In particular, critical psychologists are increasingly drawing attention to the need for psychology to investigate race and racism; despite race not being 'real' in a genetic or biological sense, it is important sociohistorically (DeCuir-Gunby and Schutz 2014), and racism has real, observable implications for those affected by it (Leonardo 2004) and must therefore be treated with greater importance in psychological research.

In pursuing greater recognition of racism in psychological research and practice, Mngaza (2022) invites educational psychologists to explore Black feminist epistemology as a framework that would support researchers and practitioners to better locate the historical and political contexts of our knowledge and practice. Furthermore, as opposed to the comparative, descriptive, and explanatory reasons for which race is usually included in psychological research, DeCuir-Gunby and Schutz (2014, 2024) argue that psychologists must revisit our taken-for-granted philosophical assumptions and broaden our methodological approaches, suggesting that we should seek to study race-focused and race-reimaged constructs in educational psychology and employ more socioculturally relevant approaches to measurement and research. One practical way in which researchers can achieve this is by utilising QuantCrit (Castillo and Gillborn 2023), an approach to quantitative research that seeks to challenge and improve the use of statistical data in the pursuit of social justice and ensure that inequities – particularly racism – are not erased in the quantitative study of data. Castillo and Gillborn (2023) provide useful suggestions to support researchers and users of research with critical engagement with quantitative data. As users of research, policymakers too should engage with this guidance and should work to ensure that ongoing inequalities in education are not erased and, rather, are central to questions and considerations of 'what works' in education.

Each of the above recommendations has in common an awareness of psychology's inescapable connection with historical and contemporary racism and colonialism and attempts to reincorporate often disregarded yet vital contexts and knowledges into our psychological knowledge and practice. Psychology, in its dominant form, permits policymakers in education to overlook contexts of inequity in the same way that psychology does. If improving equity is a legitimate interest of policymakers, or of those researchers seeking to support policy change, then the political, social, and cultural conditions that drive inequity must be treated as vital contexts in research around education.

Notes

1. We use the notion of assemblage here as drawn from contemporary critical work in the analysis of educational policy (e.g. McGimpsey 2018) particularly within the remit of challenging the logics of late neoliberalism. This conceptualisation, drawing on assemblage theory (Deleuze and Guattari 2013), encompasses the complex mobile apparatus composed of diverse components of the late neoliberal regime which constitute the broad field of mainstream educational discourse active today.
2. For example, within the UK context a corpus of contemporary educational scholarship has demonstrated the misused of quantitative data on 'Free School Meals' (FSM) as a crude indicator of poverty which allows mainstream representation of the 'White working class' as the most disenfranchised demographic in schools despite the fact that treating FSM as a variable discounts most people who consider themselves working class and that only one on ten White British school students who receive FSM (see D. Gillborn 2024).

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Author contributions

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