Research Note

Education and employment: understanding the labour market experiences of graduate minority ethnic women in France and the United Kingdom

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Abstract: *Recent evidence shows that second generation, descendants of non-white minority ethnic immigrants, born and educated in OECD countries, face inequalities in the labour market when compared to similarly qualified white individuals, especially during their school-to-work transition (OECD, 2010). Second generation minority ethnic women are doubly penalised being more likely than young men to encounter difficulties in finding stable jobs despite high educational qualifications. The qualitative research reported here examines the professional experiences of second generation Algerian and Pakistani graduate women in France and the United Kingdom. The aim is to investigate the ways in which these women negotiate their social positioning as they attempt to achieve stable professional positions in republican France and multicultural Britain.*

Introduction

In post-industrial European countries a workforce with high levels of qualifications is considered fundamental to enhance national competitiveness (Müller and Gangl, 2003) as well as workers' career opportunities (Reay *et al.*, 2001). However, while more minority ethnic women are achieving a university education, their employment rates are not increasing (Modood, 2004; Caille, 2005). In France, for example, graduate Algerian women's employment is marked by low employment rates often not commensurate with their degree level (Meurs and Pailhé, 2008). Similarly, in the United Kingdom (UK), graduate Pakistani women are to be found at the bottom of the employment ladder (Khattab, 2012). Rattansi (2007) argued that these disparities are partly explained by negative stereotypes held by potential employers and the existence of racial discrimination.

Although qualitative work has been carried out on the professional situations of second generation minority ethnic women (Meurs and Pailhé, 2008; Dale *et al.*, 2002), the majority of the work is quantitative. It is often single-country focused even though social processes are better understood when compared cross-nationally (Hantrais, 1999). Moreover, studies often analyse broader ethnic categories (e.g. North Africans and South Asians) and therefore undermine issues of ethnicity and religion which differentiate the experiences and positioning of members of these groups. This comparative study explores women's experiences from their perspectives, focusing on specific groups - Algerians and Pakistanis - in France and the UK.

Research questions

The central research question asks how second generation graduate Pakistani and Algerian women negotiate their professional positions within 'multicultural' Britain and 'republican' France. Three sub-questions will also be addressed: (1) what are the labour market experiences of second generation Pakistani and Algerian women and what are the processes that lead to those experiences? (2) what strategies do graduate women put in

place in order to gain employment? (3) how does the specific context of each country affect these experiences, across groups and within groups?

Although the overall aim is to understand the professional positioning of Pakistani and Algerian women, this article will specifically discuss the impact of identification processes on these women's experiences in the workplace.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of translocation positionality is used to argue that the identities that individuals take up or are allocated by others are locally situated depending on time, context and place (Anthias, 2008). An individual can take up multiple identities during the course of interactions with others; identities are not static but flexible and changing. Pakistani and Algerian women's professional experiences can be understood by focusing on how they see themselves and how they are positioned by others.

In this study, the women's academic success has allowed them to experience social mobility and a shift in their class position from working-class to middle-class (Archer, 2011). However, a change in class position does not necessarily mean a change in social identification by others within the workplace (Anthias, 2001). The aim then is to look at how the women negotiate these (multiple) social identifications.

Methodological perspective and rationale for sample

In addition to both being members of the European Union, the populations of France and the UK are also comparable; there are nearly 20 million immigrants and their children (in the 25-54 age cohort) in both countries, especially North Africans in France and South Asians in the UK (Bouvier, 2012). In order to facilitate comparison between individuals, 24 women with similar characteristics were recruited (Hantrais, 2009): they were born in one of the two countries, are tertiary-educated and in professional jobs. To ensure that the findings are not an artefact of ethnicity or nationality, the study examines the experiences of both groups in both countries with six Pakistani and six Algerian women from France and the same numbers from the United Kingdom.

Data was collected over 18 months using semi-structured interviews with all participants. Each interview was recorded and informed consent was received. All participants will be invited for a second interview.

Thematic analysis was used to search through all data for any recurrent patterns and uncover both similarities and differences in women's accounts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data was compared within each group (i.e. Algerians in France and Britain) and across groups and countries (i.e. Algerians and Pakistanis in France). A more detailed analysis will be conducted after the second data collection stage.

Initial findings

Participants were often the first among their siblings to graduate. Although educational experiences differed across groups, all participants acknowledged a lack of guidance throughout their academic lives. Some French participants said they had difficulty in distinguishing vocational paths from more traditional routes in high school, and so could not make informed decisions about subject choices that were to shape their future educational

and professional opportunities. They could not turn to their parents for support as parents "did not know anything about it" (Sonia, French Pakistani).

This self-reliance is not uncommon for working class university students of all ethnicities (Reay *et al.*, 2009) and, for these women, it was also the case once they entered the labour market. Being resourceful during job search was fundamental, as most of the women mentioned the absence of any practical support from within their families. For instance, some British women took an exhaustive approach, "knocking on any visible door as one would eventually open" (Noreen, British Pakistani). This strategy partly resulted from the lack of 'profitable' social networks which all participants felt had hindered their school to work transition.

Both the imposed and chosen identifications were central in shaping the women's relationships at work. For instance, some French participants claimed their job is not appreciated to the full because of being primarily identified as Algerian/Pakistani at work ("I have major responsibilities [as Head of Community and Youth organisation] but when I talk about my job it becomes a joke! [...] because I am Algerian!" Naima, French Algerian). For these graduate women, their skills were not appreciated because "a marketable skill depends on who possesses the skill" (Anthias, 2001, p847); "it's not all about the degree; it's about *who* you are!" (Reema, French Pakistani).

Religious identification is also experienced by all women but differently - especially if they wear the Islamic headscarf at work. Some French Algerian and Pakistani women experienced unfair treatment at work because of their headscarf. For example, Seedra (French Algerian), qualified at Master level, claimed she has responsibilities equal to just undergraduate level because otherwise she would interact with business partners and her employer does not want her to represent the company with a headscarf. The way in which people are identified is strongly linked to the way they are perceived by others - the body being central in this process (Weedon, 2004). For women like Seedra, deciding to display their religious identity is decisive in securing suitable jobs, because of the negative stereotypes associated to Islam.

Unlike French women, for British women, the headscarf is not perceived as an obstacle to employment ("[the headscarf] doesn't make a difference; [women] have all the opportunities" Raheela, Pakistani'). All British participants strongly believe in Britain's multicultural values and therefore in equal professional opportunities according to their qualifications regardless of their religious identification. However, some women still experienced a sense of exclusion. For example, Raheela (British Pakistani) explained how work colleagues exclude her from certain topics because they assume that, as a Muslim, she would be uncomfortable talking about them (e.g. sexuality). For these women, religious identification does not seem to influence their job opportunities but it influences their relationships with work colleagues.

Conclusion

Although the labour market is seen as a social setting for inclusion (Loury *et al.*, 2005), being in employment does not necessarily produce social equality. Pakistani and Algerian women participating in this research have achieved economic equality (i.e. being in professional occupations) through their academic success, despite encountering difficulties (i.e. lack of guidance). However, the intersection of their class, ethnic and religious identifications (by others) shaped their experiences within the labour market (i.e. headscarf and over-qualification). Ethnic and religious identifications seemed to play an important role in the type of job responsibilities these women have regardless of their qualification. Put differently, their skills are weighed against their ethnicity/religion and not the qualification(s) they gained.

Thus, regardless of their own claimed and achieved identities, all women's physical appearance (i.e. skin colour and headscarf) has been central in their social positioning in both countries and therefore in producing their professional experiences.

Contribution of the study

By carefully examining the identification processes in operation for graduate Pakistani and Algerian women in France and the UK, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the labour market experiences of this 'transition' generation. In doing so, it has the potential to help ameliorate future labour market experiences for this generation and following generations.

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