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Title Graduate employability in students of Black and minority ethnic (BME) background: A mixed-methods approach

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Abstract

Existing evidence suggests that the career outcomes of graduates from Higher Education are mixed. People of black and minority ethnic (BME) background and women often face disadvantage when navigating the labour market. The career service at my institution had identified career outcomes as a concern, and suggested confidence as one potential contributing factor. I adopted a mixed-method approach to investigating graduate employability. I made use of institutional DLHE data from 12,313 graduates, which identified complex interactions between ethnicity and gender. Qualitative data from a survey collected by the career service suggested that skill attainment and work experience were the explicit concerns of graduates encountering challenges in obtaining graduate employment. Semi-structured interviews are currently in progress, but suggest that a nuanced approach to the development of career support may be required.

Introduction

Career outcomes in graduates from UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI) vary, with demographic factors such as ethnicity and gender associated with economic disparities (Department for Education, 2016). This data shows that graduates from some ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Black British or Black – Carribean) earn less on average than their white counterparts, while graduates of other groups (e.g. Asian British or Asian – Indian) earn more on average compared to white counterparts. Existing research has demonstrated that barriers to employment exist for marginalised groups such as people of ethnic minority background (Owuamalem & Zagefka, 2014), women (Morrison, 2015), people from lower socio-economic background (Tholen, 2014), and people with disabilities (Lindsay, 2011). While differences in perceptions of employability have been found between groups, recent research has also observed variability within groups (Croucher, Ramakrishnan, Rizov, & Benzinger, 2015). It is also important to remember that individuals have memberships of multiple categories, more than one of which may be marginalised, and that these memberships may interact (McBride, Hebson, & Holgate, 2015; Veenstra, 2013). It is therefore vital to adopt a nuanced approach to investigating issues relating to privilege and disprivilege. The present paper reports on a project conducted to examine psychological factors that may contribute to career outcomes in Black and minority ethnic (BME) graduates.

This project developed from a conversation held with members of the career service at my employing HEI. Members of the service had led a programme designed to provide graduates with additional work experience. This programme was targeted at graduates who had encountered difficulties in obtaining desired forms of employment. The majority of participants in this programme were of a BME background. The career service conducted a short survey of participants in this programme, which included a question relating to perceived barriers to gaining employment. One theme identified by the career service was an experienced lack of confidence. For the purpose of this paper, I operationalize confidence as self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a construct reflecting individuals' beliefs that they are able to produce desired outcomes (Bandura & Locke, 2003). Those with greater self-esteem tend to set more challenging goals (Donovan, 2009), and students with greater self-efficacy have been shown to engage in more proactive career behaviours (Clements & Kamau, 2017). It is important to consider individuals' perceptions of their ability to achieve career goals, because individuals are likely to act upon their beliefs rather than upon their 'objective' employability (van Emmerik et al, 2012). I therefore aimed to explore factors that may contribute to BME employability, including confidence. One of the goals of this project was to explore perceptions of factors that may impact confidence in navigating the labour market.

Method

I adopted a mixed-method design. The use of a mixed-method design allows the use of complementary data that may offer greater insight than the use of a single method approach (Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 2008). Three sources of data were used in the current project. Institutional data from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey was requested and obtained for individuals graduating between 2011-12 and 2014-15. This data was coded and analysed quantitatively in order to help identify interaction effects for demographic characteristics. Data was obtained for 21,699 students, 12,313 of whom participated in the DLHE. For the purpose of this paper, items analysed were ethnicity, gender, and the socioeconomic status of the job held at the time of the DLHE, i.e. six months after graduation.

Secondly access was requested and obtained for the survey of 37 graduates participating in the work experience programme. Content analysis was performed upon open-ended items relating to barriers encountered in attaining graduate employment and motivation for taking part in the programme.

Thirdly, graduates taking part in the work experience programme were contacted, provided that they had indicated prior permission. These graduates were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews. Participants will be asked to provide demographic information to contextualise qualitative data analysis. Interview questions relate to participants' experience of seeking work, the extent of confidence in attaining desired work, and feelings of preparation by the HEI. The interview schedule does not reference ethnicity, in order to avoid influencing participants. The debrief identifies the study research goals; participants will be given the opportunity to add further comment. Data collection for interviews are still in progress. Interviews were digitally recorded to enable accurate transcription. Data will be thematically analysed following guidance provided by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013).

This project received ethical approval from the Psychology ethics committee. British Psychological Society (2009) guidelines were followed in the conduct of this study.

Findings

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to test an interaction effect for ethnicity and gender in relation to the socioeconomic status that graduates from the HEI had at the time of the DLHE. There was a main effect for ethnicity ($F(11,8750)=15.19, p<.001$) and for gender ($F(1,8750)=6.52, p=.011$). There was also a significant interaction effect found for ethnicity and gender ($F(11,8750)=2.13, p=.016$). Higher scores represent lower levels of socioeconomic status. As shown in Figure 1, there are noticeable differences by ethnicity and gender, with some groups displaying noticeable greater disadvantage.

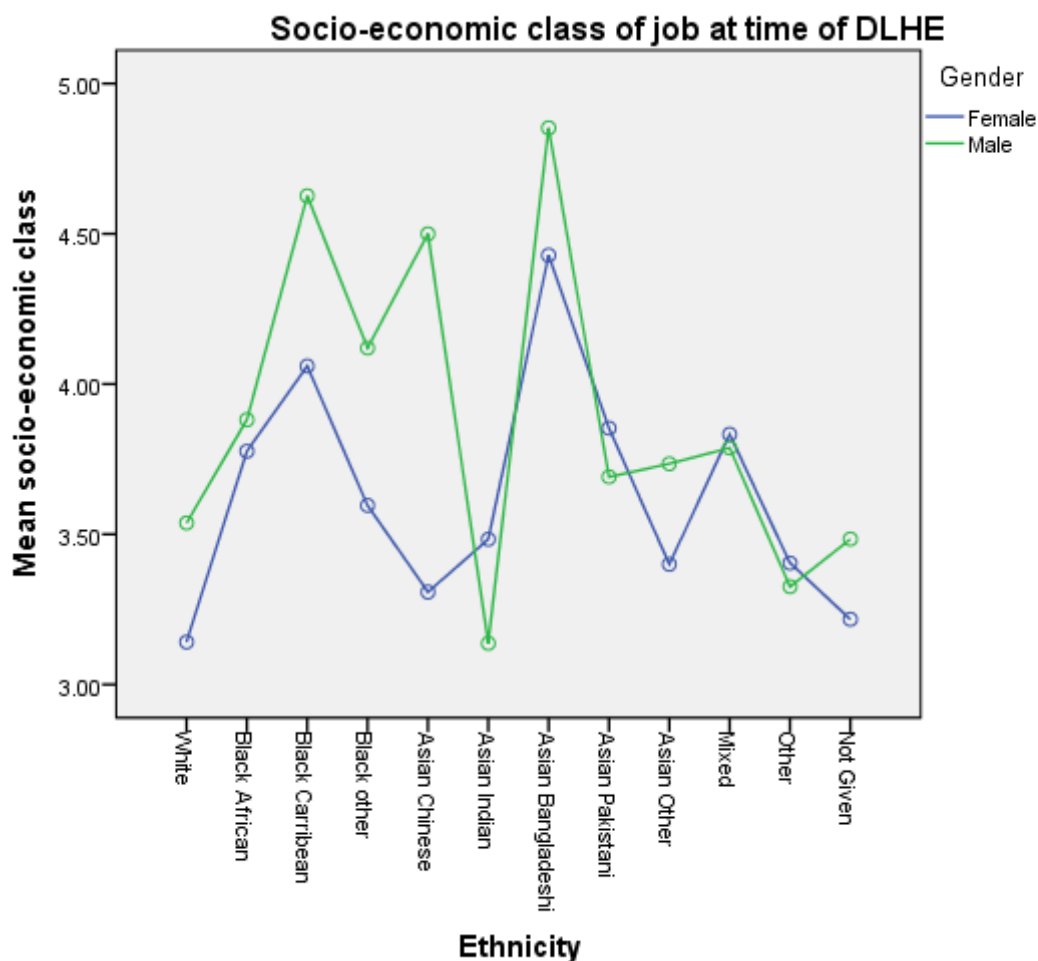


Figure 1: Socio-economic class of work by ethnicity and gender.

Content analysis of the survey conducted by the career service suggested that graduates' main concerns related to perceptions of insufficient skills. While few made explicit reference to confidence, participant self-evaluations may well reflect levels of confidence. Interviews are still in progress, but challenges in gaining experience during the degree program have been highlighted. While participants of the survey did not identify experiences of racism, one interview participant reported encountering discriminatory questions at job interview. Given

variations in outcomes by ethnicity and gender, it may be expected that variations in the experience of seeking work will be identified. Qualitative data may therefore offer insight into specific challenges faced by particular groups of students and graduates. Thus intersectionality may need to be considered in the development of support services for students and graduates.

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