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ARTICLE

**Ethnic Minority Immigrants and their British Descendants in the UK
Labour Market: An Investigation of Black African and Black Caribbean
Current Employment Status in the UK**

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Ethnic Minority Immigrants and their British Descendants in the UK Labour Market: An Investigation of Black African and Black Caribbean Current Employment Status in the UK

Abstract

Ethnic minority individuals endure persistent labour market disparity and employment disadvantages, potentially placing them at high risk of employment loss. Despite research efforts to shed light on the adverse outcomes of labour market disparity on these ethnic groups, the issue persists. Our thorough analysis of their experiences and the factors influencing these disadvantages, using human capital and social capital theories, provides crucial insights for understanding and addressing this issue and offers practical interventions. Our data from thirty-two participants through semi-structured interviews is complemented by secondary sources such as journals. Our findings show that factors such as lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, UK work experience and skills, unequal opportunity for career progression, racism and inadequate social networks contribute to persistent employment disadvantages of these ethnic minority groups. Second-generation ethnic minorities have made progress in the labour market, but ethnic penalties remain.

Keywords: Labour Market, Inequalities, Ethnic Minorities, Human Capital, Social Capital

Introduction

Our research on the current employment position of immigrants and their British descendants in England and Wales, particularly Black Africans and Black Caribbeans, is important because the persistent disparities experienced by ethnic minorities in the labour market have been a significant issue (Li & Heath, 2020; Platt & Nandi, 2020). Academic literature on ethnic minority immigrants in the UK labour market confirms the existence of labour market disadvantages (Clark and Shankley, 2020). It is one of the few studies that examines the relationship between Black Africans, Black Caribbeans, and the labour market. Black Africans and Black Caribbeans, including first and second-generations, experience unequal treatment with higher semi-routine work and lower hourly earnings than the dominant population (Li & Heath, 2020). The United Kingdom's (UK) ethnic minority population was 10.9 million in 2021 (18.3 per cent of the population) (Census, 2021). However, there is a significant gap in our

understanding of ethnic minorities' current employment position in the labour market (Li & Heath, 2020). Previous research by Heath & Cheung (2006) and Li & Heath (2020) found differences in employment outcomes between Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities in the UK labour market. They argued that there is limited research on the factors influencing the employment disadvantages of these ethnic minorities. This study thus explores the significant factors that influence their employment disadvantages.

We define first-generation Black Africans and Black Caribbeans as individuals born outside the UK but now have residency or citizenship status to live and work in the UK. Second-generation Black Africans and Black Caribbeans are children born to first-generation immigrants (outside the UK) or those who arrived as children in the United Kingdom, according to Fratini et al. (2011) and Azzolini and Schnell (2024). Studies on Black Africans and Black Caribbeans in England and Wales's current employment positions remain under-researched, irrespective of their importance. In addition, this study seeks to establish the current employment positions of Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities in England and Wales's labour market because research scholars suggested that further investigation is required in this area (Wang & Seifert, 2020).

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (2015) research concluded that the persistence of employment challenges in the 20th and 21st centuries highlights an enduring concern for ethnic minority groups. Researchers also claim that ethnic minorities in the UK are more likely to obtain university degrees than the dominant population groups yet continue to face employment disadvantages in the labour market on average (Kele et al., 2022). There is evidence that, despite decades of government legislation to protect ethnic minority groups from employment disadvantages, there are still disadvantages that indirectly restrict or hinder their opportunities to contribute to economic growth in the UK (Cabinet Office, 2017). We therefore seek to address the following research question: What factors influence the employment disadvantages of first and second-generation Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities? In addressing the research question, we intend to contribute knowledge to the existing literature on labour market inequalities about the factors influencing the employment disadvantages of these ethnic minorities. This study draws on human capital and social capital theories to provide insights into the contemporary employment position of these ethnic minorities and the dynamics of their experiences of inequality.

Rationale

Most previous studies on ethnic minorities' employment disadvantages have used single cross-section data and understanding of society to contribute knowledge to theoretical debates on ethnic minorities' labour market disadvantages (Longhi, 2020). For instance, some studies, such as Blackaby et al. (2002, 2005), analysed the importance of language competency. Heath and Cheung, (2007) explored ethnic penalties in the labour market. Research has also been conducted on second-generation migrants using theories of assimilation, integration, multiculturalism, social mobility, educational attainment, labour market and identity (Drouhot, 2024). This literature is essential, but a key unanswered question is the current employment positions of Black Africans and Black Caribbeans in England and Wales. A more dynamic analysis is needed to ascertain whether ethnic minorities' employment has improved or declined over time (Heath and Li, 2020). Thus, we adopted a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and human and social capital theories to obtain in-depth insights into the factors influencing their employment disadvantages. Little is known about first and second-generation Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities' current employment positions. Low employment is prevalent among these ethnic minority groups. Persistent ethnic minority labour market disadvantages manifest in several ways, such as the inability of ethnic minority individuals to get a job in the labour market as opposed to their dominant population counterparts, issues affecting the choice of employment, job security and ability to secure the required quality of work, such as career progression etc. These disadvantages in the UK labour market play an important role in continuing high poverty rates and housing, health, and education challenges. Our study fills this research gap by providing insights into their current employment positions.

Ethnic Minorities in The UK Labour Market

The United Kingdom has become increasingly multi-ethnic, with the percentage of ethnic minority groups growing nearly two-fold in the last decades (Cartney et al., 2021). According to Census (2021) data, ethnic minorities constitute 18 per cent of the UK's population. Considering the growing population of ethnic minority groups in the UK and the frequent public debates on ethnic minorities' employment disadvantages in the labour market, research studies continued to gain momentum (Higgins et al., 2024). Immigrants and their UK

descendants continued to experience persistent lower employment than their native-born counterparts (Li & Heath, 2020). Ethnic minorities who arrived in the UK and those born to their overseas parents' employment disadvantages in the UK labour market are indisputable (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015; Li & Heath, 2020). Ethnic minority employment inequality in the labour market threatens the country's overall economic performance and wastes talent. Likewise, they contribute to violence and undermine social cohesion (Mirza & Warwick, 2024).

Persistent Employment Disadvantages Culture

After the Second World War, ethnic minority individuals from the Caribbean began to arrive in the UK in large numbers, stimulated by labour demand. Currently, in the UK, the six most significant ethnic minority groups (in descending order) are Indian, Pakistani, Black Caribbean, Black African, Bangladeshi and Chinese. However, these individuals differ in their arrival times (Dustmann et al., 2010). Considering the growing population of ethnic minorities in the UK, their employment disadvantages have attracted much attention among policymakers and academia (Cabinet Office, 2003-2017). Most of the studies on labour market inequalities have focused on ethnic penalties and their evolution over time and subsequent generations for different ethnic minority groups, as predicted by assimilationists (Mirza & Warwick, 2024). Other research has focused on how these challenges impact the social mobility of ethnic minorities (Li & Heath, 2017; Kanitsar, 2024). These studies have concentrated extensively on testing whether social fluidity has increased, as predicted by the modernisation theory, has remained constant, or even declined over time due to the growing inequality. They have employed descriptive analyses to shed light on ethnic minorities' persistent labour market inequality (Li & Heath, 2017). Scholarly studies on immigration and integration also show that a significant differential in the UK labour market shapes the pattern of assessment and exclusion (Platt & Nandi, 2020). Likewise, research by Li & Heath (2020) indicated that ethnic minority individuals endure persistent labour market inequality and employment disadvantages, potentially placing them at high risk of job loss. They showed that labour market disadvantages faced by ethnic minorities are prevalent in education, housing, health, the labour market, and higher poverty levels.

Improving Black African and Black Caribbean employment positions in the labour market is high on the political agenda in the UK and internationally. Former Prime Minister (David Cameron) described ideas that focus on providing equal access to education as the 'springboard of opportunity' (Austin, 2016). Similarly, successive governments have implemented legislation in the UK to tackle ethnic inequalities (Cabinet Office, 2003, 2017). British Prime Minister (Tony Blair), while in office, set goals 'that in the next ten years' time, ethnic minority communities should no longer face persistent barriers to assessing and realising opportunities for achievement in the UK labour market' (Cabinet Office, 2003, p. 13). Equally, when in office, another former Prime Minister (Theresa May) said, on 12 October 2017, that the entire society must explain or change 'the persistent ethnic disadvantage faced by ethnic minorities'. She further stated that it should be reviewed and rejected if labour market disadvantage could not be explained by legitimate job-relevant factors such as skills and training. However, labour market disadvantages persist (Li & Heath, 2020; Cabinet Office, 2017). Some studies, such as Jivraj and Alao (2023) and Llyod et al. (2024), also indicate that living in deprived neighbourhoods with limited employment prospects influences the employment disadvantages of ethnic minorities. Following the Brexit referendum, the free movement of EU citizens ended, and there were changes in migration as the size of the EU migrant labour force started reducing while non-EU employees began to increase. This was due to the new immigration system that introduced labour market policies easing UK labour market access for skilled non-EU citizens, but visas/work permits were required for EU citizens who had previously faced no restrictions. The work permits would only be granted to EU citizens above a certain skill and salary level. This made most lower-skilled industries, relying on EU workers, unable to issue work visas. It resulted in labour shortages in lower-skilled sectors. Ethnic minorities experiencing difficulties in securing employment were thus overrepresented in low-skilled jobs as a means of livelihood (Portes and Springford, 2023; Clark and Shankley, 2020).

The first and second-generation ethnic minorities in England and Wales, who have experienced persistent labour market disadvantages, require further research to establish the success of equal opportunity in the liberal democracies that are adhered to by developed nations (Luthra & Platt, 2017). In the UK and several other advanced countries, migration has been observed as the primary driver of demographic change (Cangiano, 2014). In 2022, net migration increased the UK population by 606,000 people. This was an increase of 118,000 compared with 2021 (488,000) (ONS, 2022).

Labour Market Disparity and Low-Pay

Ethnicity scholars have continued to shed light on immigrants and their children's labour market disadvantages (Platt & Nandi, 2020; Cabinet Office, 2017). Work-time underemployment is linked to financial hardship (Beck et al., 2024) and contributes to low wage traps; therefore, moving out of unemployment into paid work may seem like the first step on the ladder of social mobility, but taking a relatively low-level position can mean entrapment in poorly paid work (Warren, 2015). Research by the Low Pay Commission (2013) and Howcroft & Rubery (2019) indicate that women and ethnic minority individuals are over-represented among low-paid workers, linked to their past segregation and segmentation into sectors, industries and occupations. According to the Office of National Statistics (2022), Black, African, Caribbean or Black British employees have consistently earned less (£13.53 median gross hourly pay) than the dominant population (£14.35) from 2012-2022. Similarly, Drydakis (2018) found that Black British employees earn less than the dominant population in low-status and high-status jobs but experience a higher wage difference in low-status jobs than in high-status jobs. Ethnic minority applicants have also faced higher levels of ageism than those from the dominant population, with older Black British applicants having less vacancy access (Drydakis et al., 2018). Older women tend to experience more disparity in employment than men in terms of having less access to training, lack of promotion, and pay differences (House of Commons, 2018; Drydakis et al., 2023). Studies on underemployment consequences revealed that the individual well-being of underemployed workers tends to be lower than those who are more adequately employed (Tomlinson & Tholen, 2023).

Theoretical positioning-Human Capital Theory

The human capital theory explains the importance of investment in education and skills, which predict higher employment levels in the UK labour market (Dustmann, 2011). Previous research indicates that first-generation Black Africans who arrived in the UK for higher education without the UK's human capital have remained disadvantaged in the labour market (Heath et al., 2007). Furthermore, Black Caribbeans who arrived in the UK during the post-war labour shortage and those of African origin who came to the UK as seafarers with low levels of human capital have stayed in the bottom levels of managerial and professional positions (Nafukho et al., 2004). Human capital is a significant aspect of the knowledge economy as it suggests that knowledge is the trading asset of many service-based organisations (Owusu,

2013). Human capital is crucial to first-generation ethnic minorities as this has been documented as a barrier to employment opportunities in the labour market (Dustman & Theodoropoulos, 2010). Debates on first-generation Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities' labour market disadvantages have focused on employers' inability to recognise formal qualifications, skills, training and experience from their countries of origin (Zuccotti & Platt, 2021).

In the UK labour market, human capital, including educational qualifications, enables successful employment. However, research evidence shows that second-generation ethnic minorities who were born and raised in the UK continue to experience ethnic penalties (Zuccotti & Platt, 2023). This theory suggests that individuals' human capital, personal abilities, and job experience influence their labour market outcomes (Becker, 1996). It indicates that employers rationally select the job candidates with the highest levels of human capital (Chiswick, 1991) without considering 'normative' or 'ideological' criteria (Heath & Cheung, 2007). Thus, it is argued that ethnic minority employment disadvantages in the labour market can be caused by human capital, not cultural or ethnic-type attributes. In migration literature, for example, human capital is divided into two components, 'education' and 'skills', and these have impacted first-generation Black Africans and Black Caribbeans' employment since their arrival decades ago (Heath & Cheung, 2007). First-generation ethnic minority groups are disadvantaged because they lack human capital such as language skills, education, and experience, with limited knowledge of the workings of the labour market and lack recognition of their qualifications obtained from their countries of origin by employers which have restricted them from obtaining professional jobs/career progression opportunities, leaving low-skilled jobs as the only alternative for survival. While second-generation ethnic minorities have educational qualifications obtained in the UK and knowledge of the workings of the labour market, and as such, have experienced an improvement in their employment outcomes, however, ethnic penalties remain due to their race (Rafferty, 2012; Li and Heath, 2020). The human capital theory thus provides insights into different factors influencing employment disparity between Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities, such as limited knowledge of the workings of the labour market, educational qualifications, skills, and experience. However, these factors only partly explain their employment disadvantages. Hence, the social capital theory is combined to ascertain other factors influencing their employment disadvantages.

Social Capital Theory

Ethnic minorities in the UK have witnessed an unprecedented persistent socio-economic disadvantage in the last decade due to inadequate social capital networks compared to their ethnic majority counterparts (Carmichael & Woods, 2000). The social capital theory acknowledges the importance of human capital but emphasises the resources set in public structure and social contacts (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001). It proposes that information shared among households and friends (bonding social capital) tends to be limited and not broad enough to search for employment. However, the information provided by friends of friends (bridging social capital) may provide access to various employment opportunities if these connections have different or higher-level jobs (linking social capital). Ethnic minority immigrants usually have limited relationships, mainly consisting of fellow ethnic minority groups who could be both disadvantaged and in dire need of employment to survive (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). Scholarly literature has defined social networks as the foundation of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Li, 2015). Social capital resources include qualities that represent relationships with counterparts, subordinates and superiors (Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015). Empirical studies analysing the importance of investing in social capital have shown that the more extensive the ethnic minority immigrants' network, the easier it will become for them to get employment through a job referral system (Luthra & Platt, 2023). Also, the job search referral system has benefited ethnic minorities in the United States (Groot et al., 2004). According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is a strategy for social reproduction whereby privileged individuals in societies assist their families in educational and occupational careers. The author's definition of social capital reflects Black Africans and Black Caribbeans' socio-economic activities in the UK, where ethnic minority communities with less social capital network have continually struggled in the labour market. In simple terms, Bourdieu's concept of social capital is rooted in the stratification tradition where social capital, just like economic theory and cultural capital, serves mainly as an exclusionary device.

Immigrants and their UK descendants with little formal or informal contact have remained at the bottom of the social ladder and have unsuccessful labour market outcomes. On the other hand, middle-class families can combine social, economic, and cultural capital to influence their children's educational achievement with higher opportunities for professional jobs and occupational attainment in the labour market, which Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic

minorities and their descendants have lacked since they arrived in their destination country. Most importantly, the powerful in the society would demonstrate their wealth by empowering their offspring to enrol in prestigious universities, moving them to well-industrialised cities with more extensive job prospects and expensive houses that minorities cannot afford, as it has been suggested that most ethnic minorities reside in a neighbourhood with low employment opportunities with short-term employment contracts (Zuccotti, 2015; Rafferty, 2012). Furthermore, enclave studies show that ethnic minorities tend to live in poorer neighbourhoods with short-term employment (Bourdieu, 1986; Longley et al., 2024).

Social capital is vital beyond possessing university degrees because, when privileged children enter the labour market, most parents will use their social network background to influence their descendants' higher employment position, which ethnic minority groups do not have. Ethnic minorities are different from the majority population in their social network when searching for employment because using contacts is a useful strategy for obtaining employment, especially for those from affluent backgrounds. Immigrants with workless parents have seen their labour market opportunities stalled and experienced longer times to be promoted at the workplace. Research by Culliney (2020) shows that young adults can make use of their parents' network to obtain employment in the labour market. The first-generation ethnic minority groups have poor social networks, and those with jobless parents have seen their labour market opportunities hindered. The findings indicate that they lack access to coherent networks such as family and friends to provide referrals and have experienced difficulties finding professional career jobs. The social capital theory indicates that factors such as inadequate social networks, including the employee referral system, influence the employment disadvantages of ethnic minorities. Thus, the researchers can explain the factors influencing their employment disadvantages by drawing on insights from human capital and social capital theories. Figure 1 summarises the main contextual factors as the conceptual framework through which this study explores the employment disadvantages of first and second-generation Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities.

Figure 1 inserted here.

Materials and Methods

We used a qualitative method to explore the subject in depth to answer the research question. The qualitative method allows full analytical descriptions, which enables broad, thorough descriptions of the participants' experiences (Nicmanis, 2024). This is useful in exploring the lived experiences of these ethnic minorities in the labour market and contributing to standard academic literature (Brookes et al., 2024). When a study is exploratory, semi-structured interviews are commonly used. We, therefore, used semi-structured interviews as they allowed us to discuss open-ended questions and enabled the participants to explain the factors influencing their employment disadvantages in the labour market. Semi-structured interviews also enabled us to use probing questions so the participants could elaborate on their original responses.

Sample and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted through Skype and telephone, and literature on first—and second-generation ethnic minorities' employment disadvantages was used to triangulate the data to ensure trustworthiness.

The first and second-generation Black African and Black Caribbean participants were purposefully selected. The inclusion criteria were based on ethnicity, educational qualifications, employment status, those with a legal residency status to live and work in England and Wales, and those aged 18 and 64 years and gender. By focusing on first and second-generation Black Africans and Black Caribbeans who are UK nationals and have other legal immigration statuses granted by the UK government, the researchers excluded students and other ethnic minority individuals who may face language barriers or lack familiarity with UK institutions and the labour market. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in three regions of England and Wales: London, Manchester, and Cardiff, respectively. The interviews lasted 35 minutes to 1 hour each. The number of participants was not determined from the beginning of the interviews

until data saturation. Data saturation was reached at the 27th interview, with no new themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, the researchers conducted five more interviews to ensure no new themes were missed. All 32 interviews were used in this study. The semi-structured interviews were conducted between 30/06/2022 and 20/12/2022. There were 16 participants each from the first and second generations. The participants from both generations were aged 18-64 years. There was an economic boom post-Second World War when the first-generation immigrants arrived and settled in the UK. The UK began experiencing an influx of ethnic minorities to fill employment positions in the transport and manufacturing industries. Since their arrival, researchers have paid much attention to their socio-economic status, indicating their contribution to the economy through employment (Daniel, 1968).

Before data collection commenced, the study received ethical approval from the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee—approval no. 17/LBS/004. Ethical guidelines from the research ethics committee were to ensure the confidentiality and security of personal data relating to participants in research and provide adequate, accurate information in an appropriate form through suitable procedures to give informed consent. In accordance with these guidelines, a detailed research protocol was developed, including appropriate documentation to support and protect the participants. This included the use of consent forms and participant information sheets to inform the participants about the nature of the research and they were reminded that their participation was voluntary. This meant they could withdraw from the interviews if they changed their minds. They also signed consent forms to participate and consented to the researchers using verbatim quotes in journal articles. Participants were informed that all details would be treated with care and kept confidential in a secure password locker. This ensured all participants' details were protected. Consent was obtained from the participants for audio recording of the interviews. Throughout the interviews, to maintain confidentiality, the interview participants were given pseudonyms, and identifying information was removed before the transcription. The recordings were saved in a password-protected online drive and stored on a lockable filing cabinet. The methodological approaches used in the research are presented in Table 1. The research participants' information is presented in Table 2.

Tables 1 and 2 inserted here.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. It is a qualitative method for classifying, evaluating, and reporting themes within data. This method was chosen because it allows the researcher the flexibility of a detailed account of the data and to summarise key themes of the data gathered whilst highlighting the similarities and differences across the data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2014). There are six steps in analysing data using thematic analysis: transcribing data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We transcribed the data by reading and re-reading it and noting initial ideas. Initial codes were generated by systematically coding interesting features of the data across the entire data set and collating data relevant to each code. We searched for themes by organising the codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each theme. The themes were reviewed to check if they worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. We refined each theme's details, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. We produced the report by presenting these themes in a format that depicted the participants' experiences, relating the analysis to the research question and literature to enable in-depth understanding. Low employment is prevalent among these ethnic minority groups in London, Manchester and Cardiff where the interviews were conducted. For instance, Black Caribbean, Black and ethnic minorities (BME) communities in Cardiff predominantly reside in Riverside, Grangetown and Bute-town, and Wales had low levels of the working class. In Manchester, they were mainly employed in low-wage and low-skilled sectors and self-employment (Brynin and Longhi 2015; Dumangane, 2016). Likewise, in London, these ethnic minority groups are in low wages and low-paid self-employment (Trust for London, 2021; Belcher and Bosetti, 2021). Most participants stated that they had applied for professional jobs linked to their education, while some had applied for low-skilled jobs. When asked whether their current employment is linked to their education, skills, or field of expertise, 35% indicated they worked menial jobs to earn a living and pay bills. 34% indicated their current jobs were 'closely related' to their qualifications. While 33% stated they were 'somewhat related' to their qualifications.

Findings

Lack of recognition of foreign qualifications

The findings indicate that a lack of recognition for foreign educational qualifications and training was the main barrier for only first-generation Black African and Black Caribbean skilled workers in the labour market. 40 per cent of the first-generation interviewees, indicated this factor as a barrier to their obtaining employment. Human capital theory explains that ethnic minority groups are disadvantaged because they lack human capital such as language skills, education, and experience, which has restricted them from obtaining professional jobs/career progression opportunities, leaving low-skilled jobs as the only alternative for survival. (Li, 2010; Mcgrath & Yamada, 2023) Human capital is a significant determinant of successful participation and progress in the labour market. However, during the interviews with the first-generation immigrants who arrived in the UK with foreign degrees and other qualifications, it was found that they had been faced with persistent employment disadvantages by employers who did not recognise their foreign qualifications, which left them with no alternative but to find their way to low-skilled employment that is not linked to their qualifications. The interviews with both first and second-generation immigrants in their geographical areas showed that most of them have undergone relentless employment difficulties in the labour market, and, in some instances, they have changed their careers to blend into the job market and have abandoned the hard work of gaining their foreign educational qualifications, skills and experience obtained in their country of origin. For most of the first-generation ethnic minorities, it appeared they had been treated differently in the labour market.

This lack of recognition of their qualifications has caused many debates among academia and policymakers (Cabinet Office, 2017; Zwysen et al., 2021; Veit & Thijsen, 2021). The current system is not working for these immigrants, and urgent policy changes are needed. Obtaining higher educational qualifications from overseas or in the UK is expected to increase the employment chances of ethnic minority workers. However, these higher educational qualifications do not eliminate ethnic penalties (Cantalini et al., 2023). Research conducted by Rafferty (2012) and Deschepper et al. (2023) shows that ethnic minority graduates are less likely to find employment and are more likely to find jobs for which they are overqualified. Jacobs et al. (2021) show that ethnic minority workers, including those born in the UK, are more likely to be over-educated for their jobs and are paid less than the dominant population

groups. The first-generation participants claimed that unequal treatment by many employers was responsible for ethnic penalties in the labour market. For instance, one of the participants explained that he had to change careers because his qualifications were not acknowledged.

In this country, most African and Caribbean immigrants work as care assistants and support workers, many working night shifts. Thus, I realised that my employment ambition had to be different if I wanted to remain in Manchester, and I needed to rethink.

(P5)

The interviews clearly showed that first-generation Black African and Black Caribbean immigrants born abroad have always experienced greater employment disadvantages than their children (second-generation) born and educated in the UK, especially with well-paid jobs and career progression. Nevertheless, the patterns of employment disadvantages of immigrants' children are broadly like those in the first-generation and only a little smaller in magnitude. During the interviews with participants from both generations, it was clearly understood that most second-generation employment opportunities have improved. However, the employment situation of Black African and Black Caribbean immigrants born overseas remains a long-standing issue and has shown no sign of declining in the past decade. This underscores the need for continued policy changes and support. Empirical evidence suggests that there are some indications that Indians now compete on more equal terms with their majority counterparts (Heath et al., 2006). A participant expressed:

I came to this country 27 years ago as a professional builder, and I am an engineer. I dropped from class 'A' to 'C', let me say so, just for easy explanation. I looked for cleaning jobs everywhere to feed my family, but I am happy now that my kids are grown up and have professional jobs, and I am very pleased with that. When I relocated to London with my family, no one told me about employment inequalities; most employers didn't even believe we had been to university.

(P11)

UK work experience and skills

There have been numerous debates on the importance of investing in human capital to increase employment likelihood amongst ethnic minorities in the UK. For instance, research shows that first-generation Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities continued to experience labour market inequalities despite relentless investment in human capital (Heath & Cheung, 2007; Warrener & Douglas, 2024). Immigrants' children born in the UK or who came as children have seen progress in their search for well-paid employment in local authority areas of England and Wales; however, employment differences exist compared to the native population. The reason for ethnic minorities' human capital investment was to escape employment inequality due to the ongoing discussion that ethnic minorities have poorer access to or less labour market experiences than the dominant majority population.

Throughout the interviews, 55 per cent of the first-generation Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities stated that obtaining a UK degree from a UK university did not increase their chances of getting a well-paid job/career progression. On the other hand, most participants told the researchers that studying for additional qualifications in the UK was a compulsory means to escape the immigration route and remain in the country because of their children. First-generation Black African and Black Caribbean participants, both males and females, are well-educated graduates; over 50 per cent of them have master's degrees from UK universities, and around 47 per cent are graduates with bachelor's degrees from UK universities. Despite variations in the participants' demographics, it was the employment inequalities and employers' refusals to recognise foreign qualifications that most participants revealed as problematic since they arrived in the country. Many also indicated that immigrants continued 'compulsory education' as an alternative strategy to evade low-skill employment and statistical disadvantages from employers. Nevertheless, all these qualifications cannot guarantee a well-paid job.

I was born abroad to African parents and live in London. I have a bachelor's degree in international banking and finance, but I have worked as a security guard with a security company since I graduated eight years ago. Despite obtaining qualifications from a UK university, I have been unable to secure a properly paid job.

(P16)

Unequal Opportunity for Career Progression

The findings showed that 50 per cent of first and second-generation participants stated that a lack of access to opportunities for career progression contributed to their employment disadvantages. This was attributed to issues around promotion and opportunities to further develop their skills within their organisations. Empirical studies by Li and Heath (2023) have been conducted concerning ethnic minority social mobility in the UK; they investigated whether ascriptive factors such as family background, ethnicity, or gender still influence employment outcomes and contribute to employment disadvantages for ethnic minorities. They found that whilst the employment disadvantages of the second-generation have improved, those of the first-generation ethnic minorities remain. Research by Pomianowicz (2024) shows that both first-generation and second-generation ethnic minorities have on average, higher levels of education compared to the majority population. Similarly, the educational improvement relative to their parents' generation is more significant for most second-generation ethnic minority groups than their native counterparts. However, this academic advantage has not translated to better employment prospects for ethnic minority groups. A participant expressed:

I was born and educated in England, but getting a career job as a lawyer has been difficult since I graduated with a 2.1 degree. I got a job at the city council as a case worker, and since then, I have made numerous attempts to put my name for promotion; even though I was qualified, I was turned down, but I have my own law firm.

(P18)

Racism

The ongoing debate on ethnic minorities' persisting labour market inequalities has been documented widely in the UK and European Union nations (Cabinet Office, 2017; Warrener & Douglas, 2024). Abundant challenges facing Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities are primarily due to their ethnic background/race. 65 per cent of both first-generation and second-generation Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities stated that their employment disadvantages in the labour market were influenced by racism. There have been multiple barriers to getting professional jobs and career progression. In the interviews with the

participants, the first-generation ethnic minorities told the researchers that being foreigners made it seem difficult to get employment in most companies within the private sector. An interviewee who arrived in the UK as a professional doctor elucidated the challenges of getting a junior doctor role in the NHS. He stated that he was there for many years before his first promotion to become a General Practitioner (GP), while other junior doctors were promoted rapidly in the same ward with similar professional qualifications. Another participant within the education sector also explained:

My ethnic background makes obtaining a lecturing job at one of the universities in England and Wales problematic. I have applied for nearly 25 job adverts and have had frequent interviews. Still, I have always been told, 'On this occasion, you were unsuccessful; we wish you all the best in your future endeavours'.

(P27)

Another participant also described her inability to get a job due to race:

Initially, I thought I could get a job at one of the statutory organisations in Cardiff city centre. However, on my first day, I noticed some strange behaviours from a lady who asked me repeatedly where my parents came from originally; I then told her I was born in Wales, my parents are Jamaicans, although Windrush generation. She had a certain look on her face and said nothing further. I later came in for the interview, and she was one of the interviewers. I did my best but was later told I was not successful. I managed to get another job elsewhere but have a long time left that employment, and I am currently a full-time registered nanny.

(P29)

Social Network/ Family Connection

The social network has been a major policy discussion among policymakers and academia in recent decades. Ethnic minorities lack adequate information about employment, access to

training, and skills development opportunities, and the participants discussed this during the interviews. The participants were asked if the social network increased their chances of employment. 45 per cent of first and second-generation Black African and Black Caribbean individuals revealed that lack of information is one of the most crucial issues affecting them in the UK.

In my country, it is not like this; getting a job in the UK is very difficult because all the jobs are being advertised online. I got my first job from a friend who lived on the same street as my parents in Manchester.

(P31)

There have been abundant empirical studies on ethnic minorities' employment disadvantages in the UK labour market (Adamovic & Leibbrandt, 2023; Li & Heath, 2020). Throughout the interviews, participants were asked if they had heard about a social network programme funded by the Home Office. The programme aims to support the development of bonding social capital through funding co-ethnic or co-national groups (MRCOs). It was incorporated to support refugees/minority individuals' access to information and to foster the integration process.

I am a graduate of international banking and finance. I worked in a bank for many years before relocating to the UK, with high expectations of continuing my banking career, but no one has even invited me for an interview. You talked about the Home Office programme and all these equal opportunities – they don't work for people from abroad; it is an empty shield anyway. I am currently working at the train station cleaning in London to be able to foot my consequential bills. I got this job from a friend at the mosque.

(P32)

There have been changes in institutional policy to increase access to schools and universities for ethnic minorities as an under-represented group, with the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO). This has led to implementing the Reading

Scholars programme to widen access with an increase of Black students attending universities (McCabe et al., 2022). However, scholarly studies show that most ethnic minorities are less likely than the majority population to attend prestigious universities, and this might affect minority groups' employment since many employers require qualifications from Russell Group universities and students who have graduated from these prestigious institutions tend to earn significantly higher wages than those who graduated from less prestigious universities (IFS, 2022). The difference in education between first and second-generation ethnic minorities is that first-generation ethnic minorities obtained their educational qualifications abroad and in the UK. While the second-generation ethnic minorities obtained their educational qualifications only in the UK.

First-generation ethnic minorities attended schools in their home countries, where English language is taught, so they have English language proficiency. They possess a degree-level qualification taught in English Language. Also, one of the requirements to study for a bachelor's degree in their home countries is to obtain a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), a UK academic qualification in a range of subjects including English Language. After arriving in the UK, those who obtained additional qualifications studied these in English Language. The 2011 Census data on English Language skills also showed that Black Africans and Black Caribbeans spoke English as their main language. However, they have foreign accents. Previous studies have cited a lack of English language proficiency as an employment disadvantage (Dustmann and Theodoropoulos, 2010). The findings of this study confirm that poor English language skills were not barriers because most first-generation ethnic minorities are well-educated with UK qualifications and have lived in England and Wales for decades yet still experience persistent labour market inequality. Also, most employers prefer native English speakers to immigrants with foreign English accents. The foreign English accents are due to their ethnicity and strongly indicate their ethnic group membership. The presence of a foreign accent hinders ethnic minority individuals' chances in the labour market since foreign-accented speech can lead to negative appraisals that impact views of job fitness, recruitment referrals, and promotion prospects (Hideg et al., 2022).

Discussion

Most first- and second-generation ethnic minorities interviewed were graduates of either their countries of origin or UK universities. Yet, most of them are currently in low-paid employment and agency shifts. This is similar to other research, such as Dustmann et al. (2010), Zuccotti (2015) and Li and Heath (2020), which found that Black Africans and Black Caribbeans experience persistent labour market disadvantages, making them willing to take low-paid employment and they experienced employment inequalities such as inactivity, unemployment/underemployment, and lower pay.

Most first-generation immigrants were discouraged because they had not been able to secure professional jobs commensurate with their qualifications since they arrived in the UK decades ago. They felt that racism played a crucial role in their not being offered a professional job and for those of them who had secured employment, it negatively impacted their career progression opportunities. This corresponds with research conducted by Dustmann and Theodoropoulos (2010), Becares et al. (2024) and Black British Voices Project (2023), which showed that Black Caribbeans and Black Africans have continued to experience persistent racial discrimination in the labour market, housing, and education.

Both first and second-generation ethnic minorities were found to have low chances of training/opportunities to develop their skills. This indicated that unequal opportunity occurs in terms of training and promotion. This is supported by ethnicity research conducted by Walker et al. (2024), which also found that ethnic minorities have low chances of training. However, our findings differ from previous studies such as Budría and Carlos Martínez-de-Ibarreta (2021), which indicated that the persistent labour market disadvantage of first-generation ethnic minorities was attributed to a lack of English language proficiency. Our study has shown that second-generation participants were confident English language speakers and graduates. Also, most first-generation ethnic minorities are graduates with foreign qualifications and UK degrees (Some had acquired additional UK qualifications and experience since their arrival in England and Wales), but they have foreign accents. Our findings also indicated that inadequate social networks, resulting in poor knowledge of the labour market, contributed to the employment disadvantage of these ethnic minority groups, and this is supported by similar findings of Li and Heath (2020) and Zuccotti and Platt (2017).

Our research updates previous research findings within the UK on Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities' employment disadvantages, as there has been a quest for more research in this area (Wang & Seifert, 2020). It sheds light on the reasons for their employment disadvantages in the UK, contributing to an under-investigated area of ethnic minority research.

It contributes to the literature on Black African and Black Caribbean men's and women's experiences of inequalities in the labour market regarding career progression despite having UK qualifications and experience. It also adds to the literature knowledge on the lived experience of employment disadvantage of Black African (first generation) and Black British (second generation) ethnic minorities due to race. It contributes to our knowledge cultural, language and ethnic influences on the employment disadvantages of ethnic minorities. The cultural background of first-generation ethnic minorities influenced their employment disadvantage because they come from a different cultural background from the dominant population. Cultural norms influence recruitment processes and vary across countries. The cultural orientation of the first-generation Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities is derived mainly from their home countries. As such, they lack sufficient knowledge of the workings of the UK labour market. Cultural differences thus impact employment disadvantages of ethnic minorities. Language also influenced their employment disadvantage due to foreign accents.

Contributions to theory

The conceptual framework of this study was derived from human capital and social capital theories. Each of these theories indicated that certain factors influenced the employment disadvantages of ethnic minorities. The factors identified from the human capital theory were limited knowledge of the workings of the labour market, educational qualifications, skills and experience. The factors from the social capital theory were inadequate social networks, including employee referral systems. The findings of this study showed that factors from human capital theory, such as limited knowledge of the workings of the labour market and lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, influenced the employment disparity between Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minority groups. The first-generation immigrants lacked sufficient knowledge of the workings of the labour market, which influenced their employment disadvantage. It also showed that first-generation immigrants arrived with foreign

qualifications and experienced rejection from most employers in the private sector, who felt that their foreign qualifications, skills, and work experience were sub-standard. These inequalities in the labour market have actively hindered their access to paid employment commensurate to their qualifications and experience. It found that second-generation ethnic minorities are employed in occupations that do not compensate for their qualifications in the UK despite adequate knowledge of the country's institutions and labour market.

The findings of this study also showed that factors from social capital theory, such as inadequate social networks, including employee referral systems, influenced the employment disadvantages of Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minorities. The first-generation ethnic minority groups have poor social networks, and those with jobless parents have seen their labour market opportunities hindered. They stated they lack access to coherent networks such as family and friends to provide referrals and have experienced difficulties finding professional career jobs.

In addition to these factors, the findings showed other significant factors influencing the employment disadvantages of Black African and Black Caribbean men and women's experience of inequalities in the labour market regarding career progression. Lack of access to career progression opportunities was based on issues around promotion and opportunities to further develop their skills within their organisations.

It discovered that even Black British (second-generation) ethnic minorities born and educated in the UK still experienced unequal treatment in employment primarily due to their ethnic background and social origins.

Recommendations

The HR (Human Resource) department manages organisations' human resources and recruitment processes. Several studies indicate that diverse and inclusive organisations are usually more successful. Realising the full potential of Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minority workers through workplace inclusion and diversity can boost innovation, contributing to business growth and success. However, a key factor that contributes to the employment disadvantages of these ethnic minority groups is race. There is a need to identify

levels of ethnic diversity using HR data and use this benchmark to explore any structural and cultural barriers that maintain workplace inequalities. HR can create an inclusive culture, ensuring race equality is embedded into businesses' values, plans, vision, and mission. It can ensure policies and practices are strengthened by race equality outcomes and impact principles that proactively address disparity and disadvantages.

Lack of access to opportunities for career progression was also identified as a factor. There is, therefore, the need for HR to ensure fair recruitment and career progression opportunities processes such as the provision of ethnic representation on interview panels, the use of anonymised job applications, and providing mentoring and training opportunities. HR can also seek to increase the representation of ethnic minority individuals in the workplace and at higher levels of seniority through quotas and targets since persistent ethnic minority disadvantages in the UK labour market play an important role in continuing high poverty rates, housing, health, and education challenges.

The first-generation ethnic minorities further stated that despite completing additional qualifications at UK universities, they suffered employment disadvantages. Thus, universities can also help ethnic minorities gain employment before graduating by encouraging and providing access to internships and work placements to ethnic minorities. This would ensure that they have UK qualifications and work experience upon graduation, thereby broadening their chances of gaining professional employment commensurate with their qualifications. The UK government is an employer and is the source of policymaking and implementation that influence institutions' policies. It can consult with businesses to ensure fairness at work and challenge existing approaches. Lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, skills and experience has contributed to employment disadvantages. The government can help in gaining recognition of foreign qualifications. It can also gather recruitment and labour force data by ethnicity and migration position to ascertain where disadvantages occur and monitor and assess the effectiveness of measures to prevent bias in recruitment processes. It can commission a review into whether employers fulfil equality duties, particularly on access to senior-level vacancies and responses to workplace inequality.

Conclusion

The key reason why most first-generation Black Africans and Black Caribbeans may have found it challenging to find employment in the labour market of England and Wales, to which they have settled, is due to a lack of human capital. It is well documented that these barriers can be entirely removed if equality of opportunity is followed. First, and second-generation Black Africans and Black Caribbeans could compete for jobs just as the native population in England and Wales. The findings contribute to the literature on labour market inequality, knowledge on key factors influencing ethnic minorities' labour market inequality. The findings challenge assumptions of a meritocratic society and equality of opportunity. They indicate that first-generation Black African and Black Caribbean individuals are less likely to be employed in the labour market, irrespective of their educational achievement. Also, second-generation Black Africans and Black Caribbean individuals are under-represented in managerial, salaried positions despite being born and educated in England and Wales. Existing literature shows similar findings that ethnic minority individuals, in particular Black men aged around 16-24, tend to face disproportionately high levels of unemployment during economic downturns, sometimes reaching over 40 per cent, three to four times as high as their native counterparts (Li, 2010; Mcgrath & Yamada, 2023). The findings show employment improvement among second-generation immigrants in the labour market, but ethnic penalties exist, supported by previous research conducted by Rafferty (2012) and Deschepper et al. (2023). The findings have enabled the researchers to discover a comprehensive account of the labour market 'lived experiences' of first and second-generation Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic minority individuals. Interviews with these ethnic minority groups in the three locations revealed the current employment positions of Black Africans and Black Caribbeans in the Labour Market. The participants' accounts of their 'lived experience' in the labour market show no doubt that most of the first-generation ethnic minority individuals have remained in routine work and agency shifts since they arrived in the UK. Employment is fundamental to life satisfaction and should be accessible to qualified individuals willing to work. Employment disadvantages are a waste of talent, have adverse effects, create dependence on unemployment benefits, and cause civil unrest (Li & Heath, 2020). Thus, addressing the persistent labour market inequalities faced by first and second-generation Black Africans and Black Caribbeans is vital.

Limitations and further research

The findings have presented some important limitations, which can be overcome through further research on ethnic minority individuals in the UK. We did not analyse the third generation of ethnic minorities in the UK who are currently seeking employment. Future research could use quantitative research methods to analyse this generation. This study involved two ethnic minority groups, and it is hoped that future studies will widen the study scope to the whole Black and ethnic minorities (BME) generations and other ethnic minority groups such as Asian ethnic minorities, and include other economic sectors, such as energy, retail, and information technology to get more detailed views regarding employment disadvantages of ethnic minorities in the UK. This could include surveys of larger and more representative samples in both private and public sectors. Future studies could make more comprehensive comparisons between other ethnic minority groups. They could also cover different geographical regions within Europe and Australia (one of the most culturally diverse countries globally), engaging in a comparative analysis of ethnic minorities' employment disadvantages in the UK and other countries.

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Authors' contributions

Conceptualisation, methodology, analysis, and interpretation of the data, drafting of the paper: B. George & S. Foster; critical revision for intellectual content, final approval of the version to be published: B. George & S. Foster.

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