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The Motivations and Choces of South Asian and Black Caribbean Women in Higher Education

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Background

The desire to study and work has been well researched over the last two decades or so (Taylor, 1991; Modood and Shiner, 2002). It has been continuously pointed out that students' experiences of higher education institutions and employment differ based on their minority ethnic background (Mirza, 2009). Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students were less likely to secure employment after graduation and if they did, they had lower salaries (Mirza, 1998) and this continues to be the case (Mirza, 2009).

Shiner and Modood (2002) demonstrate that university applicants from ethnic minorities tend to receive places at 'new' (former polytechnics) rather than old universities. What is more, graduates from old universities are more likely to be recruited by prestigious and higher paying firms than those from new universities and in this context there is a 'cumulative pattern of ethnic disadvantage' (2002:228). Others have argued that parents' social class and educational background can influence the educational success of their children (Reay et al, 2005) in which middle class parents use their knowledge to research the right kind of institution, which offers the best course for their children to attend. Reay et al (2005: vii) argue that the choices of higher education institutions made by students play a significant part in reconstituting and reproducing the divisions and hierarchies that exist in higher education with those from middle class backgrounds clearly at an advantage compared to those from working class backgrounds. Modood (2006) has also argued that students from minority ethnic groups are not only likely to attend less prestigious universities, they are more likely to drop out before completing their degree and with the exception of Indian and Chinese students are less likely to obtain a high grade on completion. Social class, religion, culture and the effect of schools all have an impact on the performance and success of minority ethnic groups in higher education (Connor, et al, 2004).

The last decade has seen increasing participation for all minority ethnic groups in higher education suggesting they have benefited from the expansion of higher education since the 1990s under New Labour's policies to increase participation in higher education. Minority ethnic groups are more likely than white British groups to continue to stay in education after completing compulsory schooling. It is within this context that the paper will explore the motivations and choices that South Asian and Black Caribbean women make whilst in higher education.

Research Questions

This paper will present the findings of two research projects examining the experiences and aspirations of black and minority ethnic women in higher education. The first research project focussed on the experiences of South Asian women and the second on Black Caribbean women's experiences and aspirations. Both the research projects examined the particular motivations and choices of minority ethnic women for choosing their particular university, courses and how they were able to develop strategies for success such as the use of support and friendship networks.

Methods

Both projects were based on twenty case study interviews with women studying at 'new' (post 1992) universities in the South East of England. In-depth interviews were conducted with respondents on university premises, in private. The respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality throughout. The interviews were analysed by using grounded theory as developed by Charmaz (2006). Themes and concepts were developed from which theory was generated.

Frame

The research with Asian women used theories of 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) to develop an understanding of their experiences whilst at university. It examines how Asian women whilst at university are engaged in communities of practice in which they develop sources of support from which to draw in times of need (such as meeting deadlines). The research with Black Caribbean women examines notions of inclusion and exclusion to examine how such concepts affect the choices available to women and the choices they make.

Research findings

The paper highlights women's motivations for attending university and the decisions they make when attending university, such as choice of course and choice of university. We found that the 'localism' and 'critical mass' of students from minority ethnic backgrounds affected the decisions women made.

The findings also show that there is a strong desire to study for higher education qualifications, to find suitable employment and to develop their careers. In the face of structural inequalities the women in both projects have been able to achieve their objectives with reference to education and now they aspire towards achieving similar objectives in the labour market. In this context, the narratives of these women were used to explore their subjective experiences of being at university.

Further, Asian women were more likely to rely on their networks of support to develop strategies for success, this included sharing assignment experiences as well as meeting regularly which ensured a stong sense of support whilst at university. The paper can also add to understandings of inclusion at the policy level for students from minority ethnic backgrounds in higher education.