Multicultural Living? : Experiences of Everyday Racism Among Ghanaian Migrants in London
Joanna Herbert, Jon May, Jane Wills, Kavita Datta, Yara Evans and Cathy McIlwaine
European Urban and Regional Studies 2008 15: 103
DOI: 10.1177/0969776407087544

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://eur.sagepub.com/content/15/2/103
MULTICULTURAL LIVING?
EXPERIENCES OF EVERYDAY RACISM AMONG GHANAIAN MIGRANTS IN LONDON

Joanna Herbert, Jon May, Jane Wills, Kavita Datta, Yara Evans and Cathy McIlwaine
Queen Mary, University of London, UK

Abstract

Since the 1990s migrants from smaller, legally differentiated and non-citizen immigrant groups have formed the main flows of migration to the UK and yet they have been overlooked in academic and public debates and agendas. While much academic research has been devoted to racism, the new forms of racism which accompany the ‘new migration’ have also received little attention. This article, therefore, demonstrates the continuing importance and changing nature of contemporary racisms as experienced by Ghanaians; a less-established migrant group. The article traces the particular forms of racisms experienced within their working lives as well as their diverse responses to racism: a relatively unexplored dimension of discrimination. The various coping strategies which the workers developed to overcome difficulties are highlighted, at the individual and collective levels, and this reveals the importance of diaspora groups and transnational links. It is argued that focusing on responses to racism is a crucial facet in helping to understand the actual impact of racial discrimination and also avoids portraying minority ethnic groups as the passive recipients of racisms. The article is also an intervention into the current debates about multicultural Britain. It is argued that the current discourse on the failures of multiculturalism should focus less on minority ethnic groups as the principal problem for integration and engage with the issues of racism, exclusion and material inequalities which penetrate the lives of low-paid migrant workers.

KEY WORDS★ diaspora ★ Ghanaians ★ migrants ★ multiculturalism ★ racialization

Introduction

There is a considerable ongoing popular, political and academic debate about migration and how to respond to and manage cultural and ethnic diversity in British society. These debates have tended to focus on what is classified as ‘New Commonwealth’ migrants from South Asia and the Caribbean, and the second and third generations from these communities. Scholars have noted that less attention has been paid to the experiences of less-established, smaller migrant groups (Whitwell, 2002; Castles 2003; Berkeley et al., 2006) despite the fact that these groups have dramatically altered the social landscape in Britain (Vertovec, 2006a: 5). Current debates have also tended to focus on what is perceived to be the self-segregation of minority ethnic groups as a key factor in creating a divided society, and have overlooked issues, such as a racism, which foster their exclusion from British society.

To understand the experiences of less-established migrant groups it is crucial to revisit theories of racism, particularly those that focus on the intersections of racism with other identities and consider the agency of people rather than the victims of racism. The article provides a review of the relevant developments in the literature on racism and migration in Britain, before discussing the findings from original survey data and in-depth interviews to examine the experiences of Ghanaians.
living and working in London. This illustrates the poor working conditions endured by the Ghanaian workers, which were shared by other migrants employed in low-paid sectors.

The main focus of the article is on the widespread and persistent feelings of exclusion and racism in Britain’s low-paid labour market. While there is an established body of literature which has highlighted the role of ethnic discrimination in the employment selection and workplace (Jenkins, 1986; Denny et al., 2000; TUC, 2000; Cabinet Office, 2001), the focus of this article is on the respondents’ subjective realm; the meanings they attributed to events, their perceptions of racism and their subsequent feelings and emotions. The respondents detected subtle racisms and strongly felt that their mobility within the labour market was blocked. This sense of exclusion was linked to broader social processes, particularly their class position in Britain and their immigration status. To understand racism, it is also necessary to examine the outcomes and how people respond to challenges; rather than employ one dominant coping strategy, or seek official help, the respondents draw on a diversity of sources to pre-empt, compensate for, or overcome the effects of racism. Finally, the findings are discussed within the context of current debates about multicultural Britain, and it is argued that there is a need to engage with the problems of racism and material inequalities which affect less-established and, in particular, low-paid migrant groups, thus shifting focus from the immigrant subject to the role of society and its institutions.

Multiculturalism, racism and racialization

In Britain the diversity created by migration has been seen as creating particular dilemmas that need to be overcome; namely how to reconcile the balance between fostering a common sense of belonging and at the same time respecting cultural differences and plural identities. Despite the divergent discourses on multiculturalism, the term broadly conveys the efforts to promote tolerance, respect and recognition for different ethnic groups within a limited state-bounded territory, and it is based on the understanding that each group is distinctive and has a right to retain cultural distinctiveness (Schuster and Solomos, 2001). Multiculturalism has recently been targeted for fostering fragmentations and divisions between ethnic communities in Britain (Cantle, 2001; Pfaff, 2005). Trevor Phillips, head of the Commission for Racial Equality, has been a key proponent of this argument. In 2005, Phillips controversially announced that multiculturalism was effectively moribund, and reasserted his concerns the following year with the dramatic statement that parts of Britain were ‘sleepwalking to segregation’ (22 September 2005). Phillips criticized an ‘anything goes multiculturalism which leads to deeper division and inequality ... In recent years we’ve focused far too much on the “multi” and not enough on the common culture’ (Phillips, 2005). From this perspective, multiculturalism is seen as having gone too far and as threatening the common values of British society. As a solution to these problems, politicians have called for greater social cohesion, integration and intercultural contact. This is seen by some as a return to earlier discourses of assimilation, exemplified by the emphasis on allegiance to British values – as illustrated by the promotion of citizenship tests (Worley, 2005). Within this discourse, ‘cultural barriers’ are seen as the principal problem, rather than underlying racisms, inequalities and poverty (Kundnani, 2002). Moreover, the discourse of polarization tends to blame minority ethnic groups for ‘choosing’ to be segregated and inward-looking. There is a need to highlight the role of racial exclusions in creating cultural segregations and feelings of exclusion; a facet which current debates about multicultural Britain have ignored.

To explore racism, especially in relation to migrant workers, it is pertinent to consider the work of Miles. For Miles, the construction of racial dominance was inextricably linked to class exploitation and the process of racialization could not be understood without an understanding of the ‘complex interplay of different modes of production and in particular, the social relations established in the cause of material production’ (1987: 7). Miles’s theory was developed in relation to postwar labour migration to Britain when South Asians were concentrated in unskilled manual work which was characterized by low pay, job insecurity, unsociable hours and health risks (Smith, 1976; Brown, 1984). According to Miles, the process of racialization was related to the conditions of migrant workers which
resulted from an attempt by the state to resolve the contradiction between the need for the mobility of labour in the capitalist economy and the need to draw territorial boundaries and construct citizenship to limit human mobility (1988: 438).

Theorizations of racism were advanced by sociological and cultural scholars in the 1980s. Their work highlighted the historical nature of racism, the evolution of ‘new racism’, and began to probe how racism intersects with other facets of differentiation such as gender and class (CCCS, 1982). In contrast to Miles, who perceived political struggles based on race as limited, Gilroy argued for race to be seen as a key element of the black experience and rejected the view that this was reducible to class relations. In particular, Gilroy (1987) aimed to represent a black diaspora in Britain which moved beyond perpetuating a victim status image.

Ethnographic studies have also contributed to the study of racialized groups, although they were critical of studies which placed too much emphasis on racism and ignored the cultural preferences of minority ethnic groups in explaining their behaviour. However, by favouring culture, some scholars maintained that they ultimately sought ‘to show how immigrants survive with dignity under the conditions of disadvantage, discrimination and sometimes crude racism’ (Werbner, 1990: 7).

Inspired by poststructuralism and postmodernism, the 1990s witnessed a reclaiming of ‘culture’. Interest shifted away from issues relating to race and class to the construction of racial identities and the role of the media in fashioning racial representations and discourses (Cohen, 1992). There were some important developments in the theorizing of the nature of racism. Scholars highlighted how racism could be negotiated and racial meanings subverted and parodied (Back, 1996). There was a growing recognition that there was not a monolithic racism, but a diversity of racisms which are fluid, manifest in complex ways and historically specific (Gilroy, 1990; Goldberg, 1993). It was also acknowledged that racisms continually evolve to new circumstances, have become more subtle and ambiguous, and can produce a racist effect while denying that racism was the cause (Mellor et al., 2001; Solomos and Back, 2001). In particular, scholars have contended that whilst there is a widespread recognition that racism is undesirable in contemporary society, white people continue to employ a racist framework to interpret their social world and may endorse notions of equality while simultaneously retaining prejudice and stereotyped views of minority ethnic groups (Jones, 1997).

Coupled with this, there has been an increased interest in the field of whiteness, which has offered insights into why people use racist discourses (Frankenberg, 1993; Hage, 1998; Bonnett, 2000).

It is important to note that these theories about how to understand and conceptualize racism developed mainly in the 1980s and 1990s primarily in relation to postwar migration from the Commonwealth. There is a need to reconsider racism in the context of the experiences of new migrants, whose lives are shaped by the interplay of a multitude of variables that distinguish them from migration in the postwar era, including different countries of origin, transnational connections and differentiations in immigration statuses (Vertovec, 2006a). Scholars have also called for a return to research on racism. According to Kalra, considering the recent rise in racism in Britain following the bombings in July 2005, ‘it would seem that there has never been a more urgent moment for scholars to gather and address the new vicissitudes and contours of Britain’s racial landscape’ (2006: 467).

Furthermore, previous research has tended to focus on the occurrence of racism as shown through surveys or the extent and prevalence of negative attitudes among dominant groups. There has been significantly less attention paid to everyday experiences of and responses to racism, including perceptions of what constitutes racism and feelings and coping strategies. Some research within this area has been conducted in the United States (Anderson, 1999; Waters, 1999; Lamont, 2000) particularly in the field of social psychology wherein racism has been conceptualized as a stigma, as an attempt to capture the ways in which ethnic minorities feel marginalized and not fully accepted by the wider society (Mellor et al., 2001; Oyserman and Swim, 2001). The importance of understanding the subjective daily experiences of racism has also been highlighted by Essed (2002), who has argued that it is necessary to explore the views of those who experience racism to help identify the covert and subtle nature of contemporary racisms. Essed contends that ‘everyday racism’ cannot be diminished as a sporadic incident; rather, ‘each instantiation of every-day racism has meaning only.
Migration

The migration literature makes a key distinction between the migration of long-established groups in the 1970s and the ‘new migrants’ who have formed the main flows of migrants to the UK since 1991 (Kyambi, 2005; Spence, 2005). A key feature of this ‘new migration’ is the diversity of the migrants’ countries of origin, producing what Vertovec (2006a) calls ‘super-diversity’, particularly in London. There are people from 179 countries now living in London and Ghanaian migrants are an important element of this ‘super diversity’ (GLA, 2005). According to 2001 Census figures, the number of black Africans in London (378,933) has now surpassed black Caribbeans (343,567), and Ghanaians numbered 46,513 in the 2001 Census and ranked ninth in the largest 25 groups born outside Britain and living in London (Mackintosh, 2005). However, while there is a growing body of literature on Ghanaians in the UK, this has tended to focus on issues of development and return migration (Black et al., 2003; Henry and Mohan, 2003; Tiemoko, 2003). There has been a distinct lack of research on the working conditions of Ghanaians in Britain and the implications of their experiences in terms of debates about racism and multiculturalism.

It is important to consider the context of Ghanaian migration. While Ghanaians are distinct from the New Commonwealth migrants who originated from the Indian subcontinent and the West Indies and are part of London’s super-diversity, to characterize Ghanaian migrants as ‘new’ is misleading. That is, Ghanaian migration did not begin in the 1990s but developed in the 1960s due to economic crisis in the country, and by the 1980s and early 1990s, 10–20 percent of Ghanaians were living outside Ghana (Peil, 1995). Households often helped to finance a family member to migrate to a wide range of destinations in Africa, the US, the Middle East and Europe with their move tending to be temporary – with the aim of supporting their family and diasporic communities, improving their standard of living and ultimately acquiring enough capital to establish a business in Ghana (Peil, 1995; Black et al., 2003; Mohan, 2006). Only in the last decade, with increased political and economic stability in Ghana, has return migration become more feasible (Black et al., 2004).

Working conditions

The findings from this article are drawn from a larger data set of 424 questionnaire interviews and 103 in-depth interviews with migrant workers. This article focuses specifically on 163 questionnaires with black Africans and 65 questionnaires and 18 in-depth interviews with Ghanaians. The questionnaire survey revealed the concentration of migrants in low-paid jobs, which can be seen as evidence of an emergent ‘migrant division of labour’ in which migrants are overrepresented in low-paid elementary occupations (May et al., 2007). Our survey also highlighted the significance of black Africans in certain sectors. That is, black Africans mainly from Ghana or Nigeria made up 40 percent of workers in office cleaning, over two-thirds (79%) of those employed as cleaners on the London Underground and over half of care workers surveyed (63%), though many respondents had worked in a range of other occupations, such as construction and customer service, prior to their current job. A key finding from the survey data was the poor working conditions endured by the workers. First, levels of pay were particularly low: 94 percent of Ghanaians earned less than the Greater London Authority Living Wage for London (£6.70 an hour); 76 percent of Ghanaians did not receive sick pay; over two-thirds (71%) had not had an annual pay rise; over half (63%) lost pay if they took time off work for emergencies; and 76 percent received only the statutory number, or less, of paid holidays. Over two-thirds (77%) did not have a company pension scheme. Complaints concerning poor working conditions were shared by all migrant workers in our research; however, racism in the workplace emerged as a key theme from the interviews with Ghanaian migrants.
Racism in the labour market

The respondents stressed how they felt excluded from professional and white-collar jobs. The survey data showed that 52 percent of the Ghanaians interviewed had acquired tertiary-level education before moving to Britain and their sense of unjust exclusion was portrayed in their narratives through listing the relevant skills they possessed, the authority and responsibilities that came with their previous job(s) in Ghana, the qualifications they had acquired both in Ghana and Britain, and their various job-search strategies. Joshua, for example, had worked as a manager for Unilever in Ghana and discussed at length his credentials and the skills he had acquired through studying for an MBA at London Metropolitan University:

You are the person who has done the MBA, at the managerial level of doing things, so you know how to handle people very well, how to deal with cases, how to solve cases and the like, got all this worked out, leadership, personal development and the like, we’ve been taught all this in the MBA.

However, his educational capital did not translate into economic opportunities for him. He reflected:

You will not be taken, and sadly I may say that it is also one part the colour, the racism, we don’t see it but it is happening. Because I’ve been in a lot of interviews, you finish, they will tell you they can’t understand you. I know your accent cannot be my accent. I can’t speak like you do.

Joshua clearly felt that he was consistently judged on unfair terms. His experience and qualifications were disregarded due to his pronunciation, which acted as a marker of difference. He summed up his feelings with the words, ‘It’s more than frustration, more than frustration.’

This was also a key theme evident throughout Jennifer’s narrative. Jennifer emphasized the statistical skills, specific knowledge and the importance of her job in Ghana at a port inspection company. In Britain, she had decided to work in the housing sector and completed a relevant course. However, like Joshua, this did not serve as a route into a job. She commented: ‘So what I have is a certificate. I have never worked at it, it is just a … a bit frustrating sometimes. You know I feel like going [back to Ghana] because I’d spent £400 on it.’ Like Joshua, she felt that the costs embodied in the certificate – the investment of her time, labour and money – did not culminate in any tangible value. While Joshua’s lack of success was explained by employers as a matter of his communication difficulties, Jennifer’s experience was couched in terms of her ‘lack of experience’. Yet, like Joshua, she held a strong conviction that this was actually due to racial discrimination. This belief was influenced by stories from some return migrants whom she had spoken to before she migrated, and was reinforced by comments from her friends in Britain. As she explained:

... a friend of mine told me ‘Jennifer, this course you are doing at university, I promise you, you are not going to get work with it in this country, so why are you worrying yourself?’ You know you hear some of these things and it’s like, what are you to do? So does that mean because of your colour, what you want to do, you will not be able to do it. You know, it’s something that I’m battling with.

Clearly, the respondents felt that a tacit hierarchy existed within the labour market which automatically situated them as inferior to British-born whites. While care work was seen as slightly better than many other jobs, such as serving fast food, it was generally not the respondents’ long-held ideal career. As Joshua commented on his care job: ‘looking at how we’ve suffered, getting all these qualifications and going to somebody who doesn’t care’.

Another common theme to emerge from the narratives was racism from their clients. The respondents frequently commented that they were ‘looked down upon’ as carers, but also that their clients typically responded to them with racist insults. However, they also felt that they could negotiate this. Kofi, for instance, spoke in great depth about the racist reactions from some of his clients and their ensuing conversations, yet he also stressed that with patience the problem was surmountable. He summarized the trajectory of one case:

... when I went there for the first time [the client] was making some comments about my colour, I didn’t mind; one, I saw that he was quite old and he can’t help himself, so now when he’s making a comment, making comment about my colour, whatever, I’m there to help him, so I help him. He is now used to me, let me put it that way. Every time that I go there, he is now happy, he allows himself for me to help him. That’s how it is.
Pamela shared this evaluation. When asked to describe her experiences of care work she claimed:

Honestly it’s really, really quite challenging, very, very challenging. Some of the clients are like oh, you know, as soon as some of them when they see the skin, they don’t even want you to attend to them at all. And sometimes I do understand them ’cause they’re like, ‘Oh, where’s this one, where is she from, yeah?’

However, she concluded: ‘It’s quite difficult with humans, but with time authority shifts.’

While racist responses from clients could be both rationalized and ameliorated over time, differential treatment from managers and colleagues posed more intractable difficulties. Many felt that when they had worked in nursing homes they were treated unfairly by permanent nursing staff because they were agency staff. Respondents argued that they were given the most unpleasant and difficult jobs. As Ellen observed, ‘They don’t kind of work with you … they are kind of like, you know, you are agency, they give you the hard jobs to do, hard, hard jobs to do.’ This corresponds with other research which has highlighted how discrimination towards migrant workers in health-care settings is partly due to the hierarchical structure of British nursing (Allan et al., 2004). Others recalled examples of what they perceived to be racial discrimination. For instance, Komla commented on one of his colleagues in his cleaning job, saying: ‘He wasn’t really nice to me and for no reason. I just thought he didn’t like black people.’ According to Komla, this racism surfaced when he made a mistake and was late for work one day; an experience which was echoed by others.

Nyana, for instance, described at great length a case in her first job in a food-processing factory whereby she was sent home because she was five minutes late. The money she had spent on her travel ticket had been wasted, yet she also noticed how this was part of a pattern in which black people were selected to go home while her white colleagues were not. She recalled the conversation with her supervisor that day as she attempted to save her job:

‘Something happened and I’m begging you, not that I’m not late, I’m trying to say I’m sorry for what I’ve done.’

‘No, get out of here,’ and the way she will shout at you and then they all start staring at you like that, you feel embarrassed.

Look where I come from, I’m well off, you don’t do such work, although we have such work, we don’t do such work. I would never go and do such work in my country. I’m doing this because I need a bit of money. Look at the way this lady is treating me.

Although Nyana felt that this was racism, she also felt it was disguised in a bureaucratic language of standard procedure. In her words:

They will tell you, it’s the procedure, everything is their procedure. You know somebody is crushing you … Who are you going to tell? The managers? You tell them, they will say something nice to cover it up, you don’t have anywhere to go.

She added: ‘They cover it in the modern way, they cover racist kind of things, they cover it in a modern way, you will not find, but they treat us underground.’

Taking Anthias’s (1999) definition that a racist practice can be one that produces racist effects and differential treatment which correlates with ethnic differences, these examples demonstrate how racist practices may co-exist with official recognition that it is unacceptable. Mistakes in the workplace serve as a trigger for differential treatment. Furthermore, it highlights how the respondents were acutely aware that these processes may be presented as unbiased and egalitarian through the language of ‘procedure’.

As recent developments in the field of whiteness studies have shown, apparently neutral social arrangements and institutional practices which appear to have no racial prejudice may in fact privilege whites and reproduce racial dominance (e.g. Hartigan, 1999).

Collectively, the interviews show the many layers and different forms of discrimination identified by the respondents within the labour market and working life, which they saw as having a paramount bearing on the job-selection process, interactions with clients, colleagues, and supervisors, including the implementation of ‘neutral’ policies (see also McGregor, 2006). The life stories also convey the cumulative impact of these experiences on the respondents in terms of the quality of their life and well-being. Arguably, their experiences resonate
with Miles’s understanding of racism as a process which involves the exploitation of labour. Like South Asians and African Caribbeans who came to Britain in the postwar era, Ghanaians have found themselves in the ‘dirty’ jobs characterized by low pay and job insecurity. While South Asian men encountered more overt forms of white hostility, they too shared the experience of deskilling, faced exclusion from professional jobs despite their qualifications, and expressed sentiments of deep disappointment and not belonging (Hussain and Bagguley, 2005; Herbert, 2008). However, it would be erroneous to conclude that the different forms of racism as narrated by the Ghanaians were rooted in class relations. Rather their class position in Britain influenced how they perceived, interpreted, and ultimately felt racism. Previous research has shown how a middle-class status can serve as a buffer to racism (Raj, 2003) and for the Ghanaian respondents their assessment of racisms was entwined with other exclusionary factors, particularly their low class position. Their apparent inability to transcend this and secure a skilled job resulted in feelings of frustration, accompanied by a distinct sense that Britain was demarcated along racist lines.

This sense of exclusion was also influenced by immigration status and a key finding was that for those respondents who held a student visa, these problems were given particular prominence. Those who held such a visa did not have settlement rights in Britain and were only legally allowed to work 20 hours per week. Although there was a possibility that they could change to a dependent status, or for an employer to apply for a work permit, their situation and future prospects were precarious. This was reflected in their narratives, as they turned to genres of suffering to frame their stories and emphasize their struggle in the face of adversity. Nyana, for instance, introduced this at the outset. When asked to describe Kumasi in Ghana she replied, ‘Where I was born it’s very interesting, like I don’t suffer like I have done over here,’ while George relayed his story as a series of misfortunes, interspersed with statements such as ‘We have struggled a lot.’ Some respondents, such as Danso, described a double bind whereby, over the years, they had subscribed to a number of courses but failed to complete them due to lack of funds and the need to work; however, they also knew that this was in breach of their visa and could impede their chances of staying in Britain. Research has also shown that due to the need to send remittances, Ghanaian migrants were more likely to stop studying and take up paid employment compared to other West African migrants (Ammassari, 2004). While research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s revealed how racism intersected with gender and class, this reveals the importance of immigration status in understanding the respondents’ feelings and perceptions of exclusion. Moreover, it shows how immigration policy has become an important dynamic which interacts with racism in everyday lives. Immigration status creates important lines of differentiation within an ethnic group, and new forms of exclusion and polarization between those who can at least attempt to establish a career path in Britain and those whose progression beyond being a cheap pool of labour is blocked, leaving them disenfranchized (Whitwell, 2002; Ruhs and Anderson, 2006).

Responses to exclusions

The participants responded to these negative experiences in the workplace in various ways. Some stressed their powerlessness. For example, Nyana stated that she routinely felt humiliated at work, but her only option was to ignore the problem. She claimed, ‘So for the sake of your job you swallow it. You come back home and talk, talk, it’s not getting you anywhere [laughs] then the next day you are back there, that’s why you have it.’ For Nyana sharing the problem with her friends was her only outlet, but this ultimately proved futile. She lamented: ‘You don’t have the choice. You have to swallow it, swallow it bitterly.’

Social support clearly provided an important arena to vent her emotions (Gaines and Stanley, 2001); however, acceptance is often interpreted as a detrimental coping strategy which thwarts the possibility of collective action or overcoming the situation (Miller and Kaiser, 2001: 83).

Others claimed that they had developed preventative strategies. Ellen, for instance, explained that even though racism was often difficult to pinpoint, she had developed specific measures to evade the possibility of differential treatment. She explained:
I can’t tell if I’ve been discriminated, they haven’t done it straight to my face. Because of my colour I feel a bit discriminated, you know, in some of the actions that they do, but with me I know how to play my cards very, very well. … In the health system there’s a lot of discrimination. They say ‘we don’t discriminate’ a lot, but they discriminate a lot, but what I believe it’s like, if what I’m doing, I know I’m right, I make sure I do it nicely, I don’t make a mistake, whatever you say you don’t get me.

Racism can undermine the person’s sense of control over events and here Ellen responds to this with vigilance to a potential negative attitude but also through reasserting her sense of control over the situation.

A more striking finding was the respondents’ conviction that their adverse situation, in terms of their low-paid job, was absolutely temporary. Some articulated this belief in terms of a religious narrative. Jennifer claimed, ‘I’m a Christian and I believe this situation is not going to be permanent. That’s not where I’m going to end, you hope for this.’ Others emphasized that it depended on their perseverance and commitment. Kessy stressed that she was ‘focusing more’ in Britain and this was echoed by others. Florence stated, ‘Here I’m more focused, I’m on my own, I’m more independent, and I want to strive hard.’ The determination to succeed despite the difficulties was reflected in their positive and active language. Ellen, for example, claimed, ‘I really want to move up, I don’t want to be stuck. ’Cause I’ve seen people who have been qualified for years and years still at the same place, that’s not me. I want to climb up there’; while Jennifer claimed, ‘I just want to set up. I feel hungry now.’ This mindset has been defined as promotive efforts (Miller and Kaiser, 2001) – that is, focusing on attaining positive aims rather than simply avoiding prejudices – and it was expressed by the female respondents rather than the men. This reveals how despite the obstacles, they shared an evaluation that employment prospects were ultimately greater for women in London than in Ghana.

The responses discussed thus far can be seen as individual strategies, yet collective responses which provided alternative sources of respect were also important. The survey data revealed that 81 percent of the respondents belonged to a faith-based organization and there was ample evidence that the Church helped to counter some of the respondents’ feelings of frustration and exclusion. For example, the Church was often described as a respite and sanctuary from their work – for Eleanor it provided support when she had a problem and was ‘like a small family’, while Gladys claimed that ‘there you feel so happy, it’s your people. The church that we go to we are appreciated.’ Kofi defined his church as inclusive and caring:

In my church, when you get here, you see that you are really in a community, you are embraced. Be you a Ghanaian, an American or whatever, you can be from the church community and they’ll see you as a church member, straightforward. So they give you a form to fill, your telephone number, it will be there and maybe the elders will be calling you to see how you are feeling, so much of the time, you feel at home, that is how my church is.

While the church was open to different ethnic groups, many also drew on specifically Ghanaian networks. The respondents frequently spoke of other diasporic associations which provided social interactions through dinner and dance evenings and meetings, and which included groups based on language, religion, schools and home-town associations as well as national Ghanaian associations. Some of the respondents clearly drew on a well-organized and rich associational culture which fulfilled a range of functions beyond socializing, such as self-help and judicial functions (Peil, 1995; Owusu, 2000; Henry and Mohan, 2003; Mohan, 2006).

In particular, many respondents mentioned the importance of attending funeral services and memorial services, which lasted several days and were important celebrations which helped to create a sense of community and Ghanaian diaspora culture. The important role of these events was testified by Elvina, who worked for several Ghanaian community organizations.

... the other good thing about them [funerals and memorial services] is it also enforces that sense of community because in most cases everybody cooks for it, everybody will contribute some money to it, everybody will help you with drinks, the community comes together to give you money to do the event, so obviously if you’re working here loads, it’s … it’s a nice event, it’s free, if you like, you meet a lot of people and there’s free food and drink and it’s a sense of you’re helping because you’re giving that support to someone. And it really does
connect you to something as well and that might be another key reason why they like going to funerals and stuff, because it reminds you, it reinforces the fact that you have a culture. Where you are, you may be the minority but you have something, somewhere else which has meaning and history and tradition and vibrancy ... 

And that becomes more important?

Yeah, so all of that working so ... and then it reminds you of what you're doing and the good ... the good part of what you're doing.

Thus, recreating these traditions helped to counter the negative aspects of working in Britain, the feelings of degradation and the humiliation of racism. It can be seen as an attempt to create a buffering life-space and cultivate a positive identity. Here it is important to remember Gilroy's insights, that while African diasporic culture can be seen as a response to British racism, it cannot be reduced to it. In Gilroy's words, 'black expressive cultures affirm while they protest' (1987: 155).

Visits to Ghana can also be seen as a way of compensating for their experiences in Britain as their class status was relatively higher in Ghana. As Elvina explained, 'you can do things like jet skiing and go and stay in really nice hotels and just do lots of really interesting things, live the life that you can’t really live 'cause it’s far too expensive to do that in London.' She added:

... people are coming back with all of this stuff. They’ve got the widescreen TV, they’ve got the phones, they’ve got the whatever, and that there they can see it. How they got it they won’t tell you, just the fact that they have it is all that they know, you don’t know that that thing they’re paying off it monthly at six pounds a month for the rest of their life, or that the person who’s got that big house has got loans up to their eyeballs and probably really stressed out because ... trying to maintain it and send money home is really doing them in.

Return trips were therefore an opportunity to display to their relatives their success as a migrant and the respect this conferred was testified by Albina who claimed ‘they [relatives in Ghana] also see me differently and they give you some respect, they give you some respect’. This reveals how for migrants class status is experienced not just within national boundaries but also on a transnational scale (Eade et al., 2007).

Another response to racism was their assertion of Ghanaian values and negative assessment of British people's behaviour. Indeed, the interviews were replete with statements about Ghanaian values. This included Ghanaian hospitality. As Joshua remarked; ‘like you come into my country, how I will feed you, I will embrace you, they call it Ghanaian hospitality and I not find it here.’ Others emphasized how Ghanaians were caring and helped others. For example, Abena’s comment that ‘as for Ghanaians we are helpers’ was typical. When Komla was asked to describe Accra where he was bought up, he replied:

Accra is a nice place and you have, people are very nice, more especially when you are a foreigner, they are very nice to you, because it’s kind of the ethics there. So far as you were born in the home and grew up in the home, they give you that kind of training that you have to give respect to elderly people and then you, people you don’t know, you have to show some kind of kindness to them.

The respondents often contrasted their willingness to help with instances in London whereby a passer-by would ignore someone in need of aid, and this shows how Ghanaian values were given a new emphasis in the context of their experiences in Britain (Vertovec, 2006b). This was most evident in Abena’s narrative. For instance, she claimed:

Ghana is better, I prefer because Ghana is my country and then in Ghana … they help us and they protect us. What I see here is, they don’t care about us, especially us black people, they don’t care about us.

Ghanaian principles were given new meanings as a result of their feelings of exclusion and the disrespect they had encountered. By emphasizing Ghanaian values, the respondents can also been seen as constructing a boundary between themselves and others to protect and enhance their self-esteem and dignity (Lamont, 2000). The effect of the narratives was to impart the significant message that while the respondents were not economically successful in London, their code of conduct and attitudes, particularly the respect and compassion they bestowed to others, positioned them as morally superior to the British, particularly in a context where they were perceived to be inferior in everyday life and society.

Comparative statements about Ghana and Britain can also be read in relation to their experiences of
the workplace. Britain was represented as a place of educational opportunities and facilities, but also of work and stress. As Mary claimed, ‘There’s so much stress, so, so much stress [laughs], so much stress over here and Ghana is not like that. We enjoy life, every bit of it.’ Ghana was invariably portrayed as the antithesis of Britain, and associated with sunshine and fresh food. Jennifer, for example, expressed her frustration that she was unable to secure a job in housing and added:

Yeah, sometimes you feel like going back home. [Laughs]. If you think about it. Because over there, apart from that, you get your fresh food to eat. Everything from farms is very fresh. Here you always eat frozen, frozen, frozen. And we have the weather, it’s always summer.

These examples portrayed the distinct sense that their quality of life and sense of well-being was better in Ghana. Others conceded that although the standard of living was higher in Britain, this was ultimately counteracted by the disrespect they encountered. This was clearly articulated by Nyana, whose comments followed a discussion of the discrimination she encountered in the workplace:

It makes you feel, you feel pain, because the happiness or the mind that you go through coming to Britain. I mean the country is very nice to live in. It is far better than our country. I’ve been telling people since I came that I have the electricity, [it] does not turn off, shortage of water and those everyday things, here they have telephones in their houses, you have this, you are well off, I mean we don’t, but we’re fine. We don’t have such things but we’re okay. You have it, but the way we are being treated, sort of makes you feel no good, we don’t feel so good.

The narratives were replete with statements that juxtaposed Ghana and Britain and they were a way of expressing the interviewees’ deep dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their lives in London. Yet they also reveal the contradictions and ambivalence which is at the crux of the migrant experience (Gardner, 2000). This ambivalence was particularly reflected in their statements about their economic situation as they grappled with the paradox of living in London. That is, while London offered the opportunity to earn more money compared to Ghana, the cost of living was also significantly higher. Many stated in the interviews that their wages did not meet the costs of living in London, and particular concerns were the high cost of travel, Council Tax and, specifically, rent. Jennifer discussed the economic opportunities in Britain but stated: ‘One of the main concerns here is when I convert it into our currency it’s a lot of money but because you pay a lot of rent it’s meaningless. Back home you’re not paying as much as this.’ Similarly, Komla claimed that he earned more money in London as a cleaner than as an office worker in Ghana, but he reflected: ‘In London, living is quite expensive and for everything you have to cherish the pound, you really have to suffer for it and the little you get you have to use too. So if you don’t get paid, you can’t eat, you have to be really extremely careful before you can save, that’s one thing I don’t like.’ As a result, many were ambivalent about their plans for their future, stating that they would only stay in Britain if they could secure a better job: but they would only return to Ghana if they could establish their own business.

Implications for multiculturalism

The ways in which respondents drew on religious and ethnic networks and reasserted Ghanaian values could be interpreted as a form of self-segregation, and policymakers and the public typically assume that the more transnational migrants are the less integrated they must be (Vertovec, 2006a). Thus, these responses could be seen as demonstrating a retreat into Ghanaian enclaves as opposed to developing social networks and contact with the ‘host’ society, and cultivating a sense of belonging and solidarity with Britain. However, these networks were clearly part of a survival strategy to alleviate the sense of exclusion and frustration they felt which was not only due to racism, but their poor working conditions and poor quality of life as a result of their low-paid work. Migrants have historically drawn on these forms of survival strategies (Herbert, 2008), yet in the political domain these responses are now stigmatized. However, such survival strategies do not necessarily preclude engagement in the wider society, and might even predicate it. Moreover, many Ghanaians actually embraced multicultural living by working alongside other ethnic groups, interacting with a diversity of people and gaining knowledge about different cultures. As Kofi reflected:
I came to meet a whole lot of people from different countries and I’ve learned a lot from such people … Like the way that people live. You see Indians, their lifestyle is quite different, you see Chinese, their lifestyle is quite different, you see somebody from Russia, you know what I mean? So with this experience, I’ve learned a lot from such different, different, different people in this country.

Kofi’s reflections resonate with Malik’s beliefs on the benefits of living in a multicultural society. According to Malik: ‘Diversity is important not in and of itself, but because it allows us to expand our horizons, to compare and contrast different values, beliefs and lifestyles and make judgements upon them’ (2005: 18). The barrier, therefore, was not with other migrant workers but with the white British. This was confirmed by Nyana:

It’s very difficult to get a white as a friend. If you are not born here and you come from outside the country you can’t get a white as a friend, a British person as a friend. Maybe you are born here and you started school with the person and they’ve been in the same classroom as yourself. But from other countries you get other EU people like, because you all come from outside Britain so we make friendship easier. The real British person is not easy ...

To make friends with?

To make good friends with.

The current political discourse focuses attention on minority ethnic groups as causing fundamental problems for integration, yet white Britons continue to evade scrutiny in this respect. The perceived barriers underlying relationships with white people, alongside experiences of systematic and institutional racisms, particularly in the labour market, highlight that for multiculturalism to function as a two-way process it is vital for white people to change and go beyond a mere lip-service of tolerance (Alibhai-Brown, 2000).

Some policy implications can also be drawn from the interviews. First, the evidence of enduring racisms highlights the need for anti-racism to be incorporated into policy agendas. The interviews highlighted the responses of the Ghanaians to their experiences of discrimination. While a few emphasized their powerlessness, a response which may have intensified the effect of racisms by provoking disengagement and reinforcing feelings of exclusion, many responded with a determination to succeed and had developed coping strategies to negotiate difficulties. Yet despite this range of responses, the respondents did not use formal procedures in the workplace to challenge racisms; in fact the interviews highlighted the conspicuous lack of institutional support. Managers play a key role in providing this support by intervening to tackle discrimination, yet help from managers was also absent in the Ghanaians’ narratives and, instead, respondents recalled situations in which managers had dismissed and denied the issue.

Second, racism was one element of the respondents’ poor working conditions, which included low levels of pay and a lack of work-related benefits. Therefore, efforts to tackle racism need to operate in a broader context and go beyond an effort to afford cultural recognition to incorporate economic justice, through, for example, a London living wage (see also Fraser, 1995). According to Wrench and Modood, equal opportunities are ‘virtually irrelevant’ for those employed in the lowest-paid jobs, as improvements in general working conditions and fairer wages are a greater priority (2000: 2). However, the interviews with Ghanaians reveal that racism did have a significant impact on their lives and should be tackled alongside more general improvements in their poor working conditions.

Conclusion

Scholars have called for the study of less-established migrant groups and renewed focus on racism, and this article has responded by focusing on the experiences of Ghanaians working in London’s low-paid labour market. The experience of racism was not the totality of their lives; rather it was a key aspect of their everyday life in London. The Ghanaians interviewed felt that racism was endemic in the labour market, that they were denied opportunities and stuck at the bottom of the employment ladder. For the respondents, racism and discriminatory practices were often disguised in various forms, and incidents in which racism was concealed provoked the most frustration. Indeed, apart from overtly racist remarks from clients towards carers, racism was largely portrayed as an implicit and silent phenomenon. This shows how we have entered a ‘new age of racisms’, whereby racisms...
are increasingly subtle and diverse (Whitwell, 2002: 17), yet it also highlights how the respondents were attuned to the subtleties of racism and this was influenced by their class position in Britain. That is, their realities of feeling stuck in a low-paid job created an unequivocal sense that British society was racist and they were consequently excluded from opportunities. While previous research has highlighted how racism intersects with gender and class, this article has highlighted the importance of immigration status in shaping perceptions of racisms, and, for those who held a student visa, feelings of exclusion, frustration and anxiety were heightened.

This article has also argued that to gain a more rounded and nuanced understanding of the actual effect of discrimination it is imperative to examine the methods used to cope with these difficulties. Rather than attempting to ignore or silence the problem, the responses were varied and included acceptance, preventive and avoidance strategies and promotive strategies such as cultivating a determination to succeed; a tactic mainly expressed by the women. This article has also revealed that to compensate for their devalued identity, the respondents created a positive identity and buffering life-space based on ‘home’ such as church, ethnic associations and traditions, visiting Ghana, and remembering the positive aspects of Ghana and Ghanaian culture. This highlights the importance of ‘diaspora consciousness’ for migrants, which is formed from both the negative effects of racism and positively through identification with a heritage. Ultimately, the respondents revealed deep feelings of ambivalence regarding their life in Britain and future prospects. Their responses have further consequences. Returning to Ghana with tangible signs of wealth and success perpetuates the notion that London is a place where economic achievements can be made. This not only encourages migration but also heightens the sense of shock and disappointment they may feel when their ambitions are not realized. Moreover, it is expected that the opportunities for economic and social mobility in Britain for this group will become increasingly difficult to achieve as white workers from the Accession States are seen by employers to represent the preferred and more acceptable source of low-skilled labour (Eade et al., 2007).5

The experience of the Ghanaians also has important implications for current political debates. Critics of multiculturalism have argued that it is the main culprit for creating ethnic and cultural conflicts and perpetuating divisions. However, our interview material shows that at this level, divisions and exclusions had little to do with multicultural policies and were the result of older patterns of racisms which current political discourses have tended to negate. The discourse of polarization and segregation tends to indicate that separation is self-imposing, but the narratives reveal that Ghanaians did not choose to feel excluded or separated. Many were trying to integrate by moving higher up the employment hierarchy into more professional jobs but reported failing at the application and interview stage. For our respondents, this failure was a product of their nationality and the racism of employers. Whereas the current political discourse of multiculturalism implies self-segregation, our research highlighted the segmentation of the labour market and the barriers that exist for the upward movement of migrants. In this context, it is hardly surprising that migrants may then cultivate their own ethnic networks to counter the effects of exclusion. Ultimately, the experiences of the Ghanaians we have interviewed clearly underscore the vital need for these less-established migrants to be incorporated into policy agendas aimed at eradicating social inequalities and fostering social inclusion and labour market reform.

Acknowledgements

The research for this article was funded by the ESRC (Award RES00230694) together with the GLA, Oxfam, Queen Mary, University of London, London Citizens and UNISON who funded the preliminary survey. We are very grateful to the people who participated in this research.

Notes

1 For more information about the research see Evans et al. (2005). Approximately half (49%) of the Ghanaians surveyed were women and in the in-depth interviews the
majority of Ghanaians (12) came to the UK after 2000. One came in the 1970s, two in the 1980s and three in the 1990s.

2 In 2005 this was calculated at £6.70. The calculated London living wage for 2006 was £7.05.

3 Twenty days including bank holidays.

4 Overall, the respondents did not tend to report problems caused by colleagues from other minority ethnic backgrounds. Although one carer described unfair treatment from a Jamaican nurse, and several reported tensions with Nigerians, others stated that it was easier to forge friendships at work with other migrant groups.

5 This was also confirmed by an interview with a Home Office representative (4 April 2007).

References


Correspondence to:

Joanna Herbert, Department of Geography, Queen Mary, University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS, UK. [email: j.herbert@qmul.ac.uk]