‘London the Leveller’: Ghanaian Work Strategies and Community Solidarity
Ellie Vasta and Leander Kandilige

In Britain, there is much concern in policy and public discourse about immigrant integration and social cohesion. But how do immigrants themselves perceive the process of settlement in the UK? This question is examined through exploration of the work strategies developed by Ghanaian immigrants in London in their quest to live a decent life. We explore three issues: how Ghanaians negotiate relations of power in developing viable work strategies in London; how those strategies are shaped or mediated by family, community ties and social networks; and how Ghanaians themselves define and live ‘integration’ and cohesion. Our results indicate that some Ghanaians experience a ‘levelling’ process in their work lives in London, where they continually juggle between job exploitation, racism and inadequate pay. In addition, Ghanaians maintain strong family and community ties, a tradition carried over from Ghana. Distinct from the idea that weak ties outside one’s community are likely to provide the most relevant and adequate information and resources, we found that weak ties within the community provide the same function. Finally, immigrants tend to define ‘integration’ differently to ‘sense of belonging’.

Keywords: Ghanaian Immigrants; Work Strategies; Integration; Community Networks; Racism; London

Introduction
Throughout Europe there is a general preoccupation with immigrant integration. An anxiety has emerged concerning identity—specifically ethnic or religious identities—versus the perceived homogenous national identity. One fear is that Western democratic values will be destroyed by too many foreigners or by immigrants whose...
values, seen to be different or inferior, may threaten national identity and have a damaging effect on social cohesion, possibly leading to violence and a loss of freedom. Some also contend that immigrants and ethnic minorities have not done what they were meant to do—that is, become more like ‘us’. Many believe that migrants have not met their responsibility to integrate, thus segregating themselves from the receiving society. In order to deal with these fears and problems in the UK, there has been a shift away from multiculturalism and towards an emphasis on integration and social cohesion.

But how do immigrants themselves perceive the process of settlement in the UK? This question is examined through an exploration of the work strategies developed by a small group of Ghanaian immigrants in London. Ghanaians have been migrating to the UK over the past four decades for many reasons, including an economic downturn and poor governance in Ghana, and the long historical links and common language with Britain. However, the principle reason why Ghanaians migrate to London is to work, attracted by economic factors and the existence of a strong core Ghanaian community already settled in the UK. But migrants’ transnational existence is not without ‘objective vulnerabilities’. Ghanaians in London form part of a migrant workforce faced with obstacles such as a lack of work permits, job exploitation and racism. As a result, they have developed productive work strategies in order to provide a reasonable living for themselves and for their families back home.

This paper emerges from the broader Work Strategies and Networks (WSN) project which investigated how immigrant work strategies (in both formal and informal employment) are shaped or mediated by social networks in the process of settlement and integration in London. As part of their broader immigration trajectory, immigrants develop work strategies or plans that include decisions about the type of job, work conditions, amount of pay, all in relation to levels of exploitation and how they manoeuvre their way around this. In this paper, we explore three questions. The first is concerned with how relations of power (class, gender, ethnic, cultural) operate at the everyday level for immigrant Ghanaian men and women in their quest to find viable and relevant work in London. In other words, how do they negotiate these relations of power in the process of developing work strategies in London?

Secondly, how are Ghanaian work strategies shaped or mediated by family and community ties and social networks, and in what ways do they provide the basis of integration for immigrants into their ethnic/immigrant communities and into the broader ‘imagined community’? Ghanaians activate family and community networks when necessary or develop new ties as needed. Strong ties and networks are considered necessary for immigrants to receive relevant information and help, but they can play an ambivalent role by both facilitating and hindering work strategies and participation. Using Granovetter’s notion of the ‘strength of weak ties’, we explore how solidarity operates among some members of the Ghanaian community in London. How do their networks operate—do their high levels of solidarity always
positively facilitate work and integration strategies or is there a ‘weakness of strong ties’ that can hinder work plans and integration into UK society?

Finally, immigrants, both regular and irregular, construct and contest the degree and intensity of participation in their new social context. Currently, with the swing away from multiculturalism and with the desire that immigrants should integrate into Britishness or British identity, there is a general perception that immigrants are not making the effort to integrate. There is a drive towards social cohesion (see Vasta 2007), but how do Ghanaians themselves define and live integration and cohesion?

Background on Ghanaians Migration

Ghana is a country of both immigration and emigration (Akyeampong 2000; Anarfi et al. 2003; Tiemoko 2004a). Its vibrant economy in the 1950s attracted labour migrants from other British, and also from French, West African colonies to take up agricultural and mining jobs. This trend, however, reversed within the first decade of Ghana’s independence, attained in 1957. Ghana was hit by an ‘economic crisis of an unprecedented magnitude’ owing to oil price hikes in the 1970s as well as a prolonged drought (Anarfi et al. 2000). These, together with bad governance and corruption, marked its economic downturn (Alderman 1994; Fosu 1992). The introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme in 1983 by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund worsened the plight of Ghanaians and ultimately led to increased emigration, the scale of which led to labour being classified as ‘Ghana’s other export’ after cocoa and gold. The persistent out-migration of Ghanaians, to other West African countries initially and later to Europe and North America, was mainly for employment, education and training (Nuro 1999). The overwhelming majority of Ghanaian emigrants in the 1980s were professionals—lawyers, teachers and administrators.

A wide trail of Ghanaian migration can be traced to several countries in Europe and North America as well as to newer destinations like Japan, South Africa, Taiwan, Israel, Australia and New Zealand. One main problem has emerged from the structure, curriculum, funding and management of the Ghanaian education system (Dovlo and Nyonator 1999; Osei 2004). The inadequate funding of education has led to frequent industrial action by teachers and university lecturers, thus disrupting the academic year. Also the mass production of university graduates without a corresponding increase in the growth of the Ghanaian economy has led to high unemployment rates, making the prospect of emigrating to ‘greener pastures’ all the more attractive.

The population of Ghanaian migrants in Greater London is concentrated in the boroughs of Southwark, Lambeth, Newham, Hackney, Haringey, Lewisham, Croydon and Brent. The London economy, and in particular the informal sector, has served as a very strong pull factor into a labour-market stratum that is sometimes characterised by undocumented work, cash-in-hand jobs, and the employment of cheap labour that lacks the legal right to work. The informal labour market in London, like that of the formal one, is hierarchical (Williams and Windebank 1998).
In addition, Ghanaians are drawn to work in London due to the enhanced social mobility they enjoy upon their return home. Successful ‘returnees’ are accorded much respect during public gatherings and awarded a higher status in the public arena. This is one reason why Ghanaians consider it a nightmare for a migrant to return home empty-handed. As a result, individuals who were previously categorised as lower-skilled prior to their sojourn suddenly experience a more fluid social mobility between the middle and upper classes. This experience is aptly captured by Akyeampong, who describes the diaspora as ‘an important space to remake oneself, even to overcome the social liabilities of birth’ (Akyeampong 2000: 186). However, the diaspora also serves as a social space within which some Ghanaians have faced demonisation, racism, criminalisation and blame for living off ‘the sweat of hardworking citizens’ (Manuh 2000: 25). These experiences strengthen migrants’ resolve to return home, where they believe they will regain their self-esteem.

Meanwhile the existence of networks (both strong and weak) of Ghanaians in London facilitates and often defines their work strategies. Family and friends are usually central to the migration experience (Henry and Mohan 2003; Herbert et al. 2006). Family networks play a vital practical role in supporting—financially or otherwise—migrant housing, employment, health and social needs. Ghanaian associations in London foster a very strong sense of community, thus encouraging chain migration largely through family reunion. However, general descriptions of social groups and networks risk masking divisions that can exist along ethnic, religious, linguistic and regional lines (Van Hear et al. 2004).

‘The Power of the Pound’: How and Why They Came

The loss of large and small fortunes during the 1970s and 1980s left Ghanaians with an insecurity that has remained to the present (Akyeampong 2000: 206). Approximately 250,000 Ghanaians have migrated to the US, Canada and the UK alone (Black et al. 2004), forming significant ‘new African diasporas’ within and beyond the African continent (Koser 2003). Ghana’s political fortunes changed in 1992 with the move away from a military government. While the economy slowly improved, recovery was too slow for many industrious Ghanaians.

Ghanaian arrivals in Europe of the past 10 to 15 years form a ‘labour diaspora’. Many, however, have had to find creative solutions to get around the numerous barriers to entry (Manuh 2000), due to stricter entry and asylum procedures in Europe in the 1990s. With the exception of the two returning citizens, and regardless of the visas obtained, the majority of our 30-strong sample came to work and to study, and nearly all arrived legally on family visits, tourist visas, work permits; some have overstayed their visa.

The decision to migrate is often based on family or household resolutions. The emigrant is initially dependant on financial and other support from family and friends, both in Ghana and in the UK (see also Tiemoko 2004a). Similarly, the UK labour market is a strong ‘pull’ factor. Apart from the strong exchange value of the pound in
Ghana, the ‘power of the pound’ is often used as a euphemism for the openness of the London labour market, with the implication that ‘there is plenty of work and we have come to work’. The following reasons for migration were echoed by many respondents in our sample, even if the reference to the colonial masters was said ‘tongue-in-cheek’:

The pound is very powerful ... the language factor was very crucial ... Maybe another factor was that ... the British happened to be our colonial masters so there is that kind of strong bond between Ghanaians and the British so one couldn’t have chosen anywhere else apart from Britain ... I have most of my relatives here in London . . .

With some exceptions, the majority came to work in order to achieve particular goals:

I wanted more. I wanted to go to school, I wanted to work to support my family, and that is the main issue ... I wanted to support my family back home. As I said, I have a sick mum. I have two kids to support at home. And then I wanted to continue my education.

Ghanaians are reliable sources of remittances and many studies have revealed the importance of remittances for household incomes in Ghana (Agyeman 1993; Higazi 2005; Opoku-Dapaah 1993). Three-quarters of our sample send remittances home. Eleven men and 11 women help to support, between them, 31 adults and 33 children in Ghana. One woman has a second job simply to send remittances:

Because the money [from one job] wouldn’t be enough, I have to use one to pay my bills and rent and then send some to Ghana for our parents and brothers and sisters in school to pay their school fees. If not, they will not be in school.

Many also save to buy houses or set up businesses such as schools and hospitals when they return to Ghana. However, whilst the decision to return can generate benefits, it can also yield negative results if inadequate opportunities exist in the home country for migrant resources to be constructively utilised (Henry and Mohan 2003). One female respondent, who had been employed as a secretary by the government in Ghana, complained that her monthly wage had only arrived intermittently. She therefore came to London to re-train as a nurse and to earn a consistent wage:

You know, the money I will get in Ghana nursing would not be like the money I will get in the UK, so I would just prefer to work in the UK for some few years and to get money to go and maybe probably open my own clinic or my midwifery house for people to come there. I would not like to go and work at the government over there any more.

Her dreams, however, differ from her current reality. This respondent over-stayed, has been in the UK for five years and has not yet begun her studies. She has rented a National Insurance number so she can work and pay taxes, and is currently trying to ‘sort out her papers’ by applying for ‘leave to remain’.
Others who could not afford to continue their education in Ghana, believing they could earn enough here to work and study at the same time, have all ended up working; their dream of studying has been frustrated by long and physically-hard work, and by low and exploitative wages. As their dreams recede, they become ambivalent migrants, missing loved ones at home, forever trying to attain their (possibly unattainable) goals:

I miss my parents and children. I wish my children will join me one day. If I had papers I would love to stay maybe five years. If I finish my education I could go and get a job and impart the skills I have acquired onto other keen learners.

Even with their dreams to study thwarted, Ghanaians do not shun hard work. Lesser-qualified Ghanaian migrants perceive hard work and financial accumulation as equivalent to academic pursuits which develop skills and hopefully increase earnings (Manuh 2000: 68).

Ghanaians at Work in London: Downward Mobility and De-Skilling

Up to 46 per cent of the ‘elementary’ jobs in London are filled by foreign-born migrants. This has contributed to a segmentation of the labour market, with certain immigrant groups working in specific industries, with lower pay and poorer work conditions. May et al. (2006) found a tendency towards ethnic segregation at the lower end of the London labour market where, for example, a large proportion of cleaners in the London underground are mainly Black Africans—in particular, Nigerians and Ghanaians. Their results reveal that ‘The lowest rates of pay and worst conditions of employment were found in the hotel and hospitality sector and on the London Underground, where processes of sub-contraction and the use of agency staff are most developed’ (2006: 18–19).

At the 2001 census, 46,513 Ghanaians were recorded in Greater London (55,537 in England and Wales). The London Labour Force Survey (LFS) reveals that 72.2 per cent were employed, with 11 per cent unemployed. The London unemployment rate was 7.3 per cent (Spence 2005: 41, 52). Furthermore, 33 per cent of Ghanaians had higher-level qualifications (compared to 52 per cent estimated by the WSN project) while 48 per cent in both surveys had lower-level qualifications.

Our sample is mainly Asante/Akan and most were under 45 years of age. Nearly all were recent arrivals—11 between 1995 and 1999 and 18 between 2000 and 2003. The majority were single; 17 had children. Some had irregular immigration status, others leave to remain; 4 had British citizenship. The London LFS shows that, for the period under review, 32 per cent of Greater London Ghanaians were in managerial, professional or associated professional jobs; the occupations of the remaining 68 per cent ranged from administrative and skilled trades through to low- and unskilled work (Spence 2005: 113, 65). Our sample shows a much higher incidence of Ghanaians in the lower- and unskilled categories. What is of significance in the WSN sample is the downward mobility and de-skilling that
have occurred for many in this group since their arrival in the UK. Whereas 12 of our respondents were in managerial and professional occupations immediately before leaving Ghana, none were working in those categories at the time of interview. Furthermore, of the 10 respondents who had been in the administrative and skilled trades, only 3 were carrying out those types of job when they were interviewed. Finally, although only 2 were working in personal services/sales/low- or unskilled jobs in Ghana, at the time of interview 28 had jobs in those categories, with 19 of those in unskilled work. Given that two-thirds of the sample arrived before 2003, the majority of our sample had experienced deskilling. Even though 15 of our respondents had completed trade or vocational training in the UK (see also Herbert et al. 2006), for a majority this had not led to appropriate jobs. Among our sample, many were disappointed that, after a number of years, they were still unable to find work to match their skills and qualifications. Their experiences are similar to those of Ghanaian migrants in Toronto, many of whom resign themselves to seeking jobs in ‘lowly occupations’ (Manuh 2000: 9).

One main reason for this downward mobility is that overstayers find it difficult to use their skills in a segmented informal London labour market which thrives on migrant labour (May et al. 2006; Vasta 2004). Irregular immigration status and/or work in informal employment is often a barrier to work in their qualified field. Having to present papers to prove legality in terms of qualifications frequently requires papers to prove legal immigration status:

The job I am doing is a factory job. Although I am a university graduate, I qualify to work in an office. I think that I am multi-skilled ... but one needs to start from somewhere and I decided to start from the factory ... I think I have lost a lot!

‘London the Leveller’

These constraints on black social mobility have had an enormous impact on our London sample, leading to common usage of the phrase, ‘London the leveller’.

Menial jobs that an African would decline back in the homeland are eagerly sought in the West as valuable foreign currencies translate into comfortable incomes in devalued homeland currencies ... It erases all class distinctions African immigrants brought from their homelands. The educated and the semi-literate, the highborn and the lowborn, rub shoulders as they vie for the same menial jobs (Akyeampong 2000: 186).

Although class distinctions are not necessarily erased, Ghanaian migrants of all social classes work and live together across ‘tribal’, class, socio-political, regional and gender divisions. The following female respondent fits this scenario:
I think it’s part of the learning curve or whatever because, when you come to London, if you see yourself back in Ghana you have your good office, you have your car, you have everything at your disposal and the moment you come to London nobody even knows you. You do jobs you are not supposed to do . . . It makes you miserable because when you are back home in Ghana we think when you come to London it’s like heaven, you know, we are coming to get good jobs, live in good homes, and live well . . . but when you enter this country everything turns round.

In the UK, ‘levelling’ usually means the levelling-out of inequalities or the removal of distinctions based on class, status or privilege. Our research reveals that ‘levelling’ in the Ghanaian sense applies to a broader social process than just the intermingling of social classes working at the same menial jobs or simply the crossing of such divides in everyday life. We found that, in addition to highly qualified migrants working at lower-skilled jobs, levelling also occurs due to the unexpectedly high cost of living. Thus, levelling is concerned with the effects of unforeseen exploitative work conditions, low wages and, for some, continual racism.

**Levelling or Flattening?**

When discussing life in London, one of our respondents claimed that low wages and the high cost of living came as a shock:

Yeah, it’s really levelled me. It didn’t level me, it flattened me, it really flattened me . . . It flattened me . . . the first two years I came to this country wasn’t easy because sometimes you don’t even get money to buy this common chicken and chips, you know? You have to work, you have to buy your [train] pass, and you don’t get enough money to provide all that . . . you have to buy new clothing all the time so if you know what I’m talking about you could see it’s not very easy when you come to this country for the first two or three years.

Datta et al. (2006) found that migrants develop income-maximising mechanisms such as working longer hours or at two jobs. Similarly, many in our sample developed such strategies, mainly working in security, catering and retail, with 12 of the 15 females and six of the 16 males working two jobs:

Yes, I really feel pushed to do a second job because . . . I need to send some money back home to my parents, to my children, to my husband and even to take care of some of my nephew and my nieces . . . When I’m even tired, I have to think of the people back home to strengthen myself to do the work, to get the money for them, you know.

Others will change jobs in order to earn more:

No! I left there. I want big money! (laughter) I don’t work in the hospital any more . . . Its just because of the money, that’s why I am here. I don’t like it here! [in a supermarket].
Levelling occurs through exploitative work, which migrants confront on a daily basis. Such exploitation has led some to conclude that they are ‘just existing and not living’. One respondent complained that she received a flat rate when she should have been paid the weekend rate; another had work hours reduced without explanation. Many complained of long hours and low pay, some doing physically demanding hard work:

...12 hours standing on your feet cleaning, washing, doing all sorts of odd jobs which you will never do it to anyone in Ghana. Here you stand on your feet to do these hard jobs and they just give you about £4.50 an hour.

Many spoke of a relentless tiredness:

Life in the UK is tough actually. It is totally different from life in Ghana ... Every day you have to work. If you don’t work you won’t eat. I am not saying that you shouldn’t work but every time you are tired, every time you are tired. It’s tough actually. And when you are here, they are pulling you back at home, they need money.

Deteriorating health is on the rise, particularly among irregular migrants who abstain from accessing health-care services for fear of being identified by the authorities. While some feel trapped, others knowingly accept certain levels of exploitation in the London labour market as long as they feel financially ahead and have built up some human capital. They therefore assess the levels of exploitation they can manage. By interviewing those who have returned to Ghana, Ammassari (2004) and Tiemoko (2004b) provide an important counterbalance to some of our findings. They found that ‘elites’, professionals and lower-skilled returned Ghanaians acknowledged that they had gained new work skills and experience, ideas and specific knowledge, which they put to good use once back in Ghana.

Nevertheless, the myth of return has its own levelling effects on some. ‘Wematu’ came to visit family on a three-month visa but overstayed. She went back to Ghana but returned to the UK within the year:

Ah yes, yes I feel like going back but ... the problem is, when we went to Ghana in January, we realised that our mates, they’ve moved on. So if you go with nothing, the situation is going to be worse. So we had to come and work for money before we go [back] ... but now that we’ve stayed here for a very long time you realise that you spend any money that you get. And if you don’t take care by the time you go back home, the people back home would have been [become] much better [off] than you.

Levelling can also have positive outcomes. Some respondents claimed that, whereas in Ghana people generally associate only with their tribes-people or their fellow brethren, in London the boundaries between ‘tribal’ and other associations and organisations are flexible, and claim that the migration experience had opened them up to other cultural and ethnic ways of life.
Exploitation in the labour market and racism often go hand-in-hand for many Ghanaians. Racism has become a key ‘leveller’ when applying for jobs, due both to their colour and to their irregular status. Sometimes discrimination occurs at the point of entry into the labour market where one woman, for example, reveals

... and they listen to your English and if you are not saying ‘Init? Ini?’ (Isn’t it?) you won’t even ... maybe it might not be the reason why they didn’t employ me but I think the English too is a factor.

However, the problem can also work in the reverse:

Certain [work] places it affects [being black] and certain places it doesn’t affect. Because there are some places that the job is so difficult that the whites don’t like it, that’s the places the moment they see you they don’t care, you understand?

Once in the workplace, discrimination against blacks is a recurring theme:

Yeah, like when you work with these whites you know how hard blacks can really work but when you want something and the white also needs something they have to provide for that person first before you get it no matter how urgent yours [need] is, they will never attend to yours, so they finish with the white first before they will look for you, so ... .

The effects of racism have led to the separation of some families. Many respondents sent their children home to attend school in Ghana and to be cared for by relatives. The strategy acts as a form of protection against racism and the harshness of London life; it is also a way of ensuring the children remain immersed in Ghanaian culture, by learning respect for their elders and their culture.

I don’t want my children to go through the same thing. I don’t want my children to be doing cleaning and for people to disrespect them. So I want to lay a good foundation for them.

Contrary to Herbert et al.’s (2006: 18) results indicating that ‘the barrier ... was not with other migrant workers but with the white British’, we found on numerous occasions that, although much racism does come from whites, respondents also experienced racist remarks from other ‘non-white’ ethnic minorities. In some cases, their job application was apparently rejected by ‘Asians’ because they were black. One woman was told she would have been given a waitressing job had she had lighter skin. In another case, one of our respondents working in a restaurant was referred to as a ‘black slave’ by her Thai boss:

Yes, and from that day, I regretted for coming to this country ... Yes that’s the problem because, I don’t know but this country, I think there are ... they portray
blacks as lazy, drug-dealers, and other things. So when you are black, the Indians and the Thai people, they don’t respect you.

Our respondent explains that, since ‘blacks’ are generally seen as lazy by the English, others—ethnic minorities and other immigrants—will also see them in that light, revealing how racism works as a dominant ideology against ‘blacks’. Dominant group cultural practices and processes that exclude or discriminate against certain groups form part of a dominant ideology (Castles 1996: 31–2; see also Goldberg 1993). It was the ‘black on black’ racism that upset our respondent the most, causing her the most regret about her decision to migrate to the UK. Thus it is possible that shades of skin colour correspond with shades of otherness.

Community Networks

Immigrants tend to rely heavily on their communities and transnational networks, not only as a means of transferring information and resources but to provide sanctuary, especially from racism, a source of identity, shared meanings, mutual cooperation and a refuge from the difficulties of daily life, particularly in the early years of migration and settlement. Racism and social exclusion can prompt a ‘reactive ethnic formation’ (Portes et al. 1999: 232). Akyeampong notes that immigrants use their new community abroad as an important base or space to transform themselves and to prevail over the ‘social vulnerabilities of birth’ (2000: 186).

Baumann (1996) cautions against using the term ‘community’ too loosely, since immigrant groups experience the same cross-cutting social, economic, political, cultural and other cleavages as occur in the broader society. Nevertheless, we found that its usage among the Ghanaians we interviewed corresponds the most closely with the colloquial usage of ‘spirit of community’, where there is a sense of the signifying characteristics of commonality among a group of people—language, the migration experience, ethnicity and class. Despite the recognised differences within the Ghanaian London community, we often heard reference made to ‘my people’, meaning the broad Ghanaian immigrant community in London.

Networks also need to be put under similar scrutiny. Portes suggests that ‘networks are important in economic life because they are sources for the acquisition of scarce means, such as capital and information, and because they simultaneously impose effective constraints on the unrestricted pursuit of personal gain’ (Portes 1995: 8). Immigrant networks can be locally based or more transnational in character and they are closely linked to integration (Snel et al. 2006). They can be empowering, in that individuals are able to take advantage of them through a positive flow of information, resources and links. However, as discussed below, they can also be constraining due to structural factors or where members of networks and communities, as well as the state, act as gatekeepers to the flow of resources (Meagher 2004).
Generosity and Reciprocity

One characteristic strongly felt by many with regard to a ‘sense of community’ can be captured in the prominent proverbs: ‘Umo simbaro na we so gö bagani, indi suah mo’ (‘When one’s sibling is on a tree, one eats only ripe fruit’) or ‘Ni tuo ba jeah’ (‘One who can speak never goes missing’), illustrating the demands placed on migrants to help newcomers and to perceive each other as brothers and sisters once they find themselves in a foreign land. As a result, individual, family, alumni, community, ‘tribal’ and religious networks play a major role in helping Ghanaian migrants to find accommodation and employment, deal with racism, celebrate a birth or solemnise a marriage whilst abroad. Constant interaction among and close association with Ghanaian migrants help to cement their attachment to their home country and also, for some, to focus their attention on planning for their eventual return (Manuh 2000: 73).

Such cultural practices were confirmed by our respondents:

Those who helped me out were Ghanaians . . . it wasn’t only one person, like apart from my partner and a friend of mine and through my cousin, I got to know another lady who was also in town but I didn’t know her till I came here.

Two strong qualities fuel Ghanaian ‘labour’ migration—the desire to succeed and generosity, which is linked to reciprocity. Generosity and reciprocity are important cultural practices in Ghana, and which assume the same significance in the diaspora. All Ghanaians grow up learning the importance of being generous. For example, remittances are generally based on the importance of reciprocity, particularly to one’s parents. Interestingly, among compatriots, reciprocity is acceptably flexible. The loan of money, for instance, can be repaid by finding a job for the lender. Nevertheless, as in Ghana, generosity comes with a price tag:

Yes, because it’s just like somebody is sinking and you’ve thrown a rope to rescue them. When he lands he would ask you, ‘How much do you want? . . . OK, well, whatever it is . . . it’s payback time . . . ’ So it’s time to pay back your due and then move on.

Community Change

Many mourn the changes in Ghanaian customs and traditions: ‘Someone might be working on Saturday so you don’t expect that person to join you for a naming ceremony’. Some complain of a loss of community:

Um, maybe might be work. It is work, work, work. Helping somebody to acquire a job, that’s the only time that there is a bond (chuckle). But you know, after getting him the job, you don’t really see each other.

Such changes have led to an ambivalent attitude towards their community—similar to Levitt’s ‘mistrustful solidarity’ comprising strong community ties with a high
degree of scepticism (2001: 118). Of all the groups we interviewed for the WSN project, Ghanaians appear to have the strongest community ties. Yet the main scepticism revolves around money, with claims that money is the one factor driving a wedge in the community in the UK: ‘it looks like we are obsessed with money’. Thus, in a different but related way, the ‘power of the pound’ pervades immigrant family and community relations.

One respondent’s comment about the Ghanaian community was that support was there, though the drive for money can lead to community exploitation:

They are both ways, both ways [competitive and supportive]. They are supportive in terms of when you come and you are looking for help, when they see that they can make some money off you they wouldn’t let the chance slip by . . . They don’t mind cheating their own fellow countrymen. They are supportive when you find yourself in trouble . . .

Our research indicates that community exploitation centred mainly on the restrictive effects some UK policies had on the migrants—specifically irregular migrants—for whom one major problem is that they cannot open their own bank account. As a result many generous family members and friends ‘lend’ or ‘rent’ their bank accounts to their irregular compatriots. While some do not pay for the service, accepting a relationship based on trust, others are expected to pay for it. Meagher (2005) questions the ‘solidarity thesis’—that networks have positive outcomes only, since contemporary networks are differentiated by class, gender and place, rather than by ethnic identity alone. Whilst social networks consist of high levels of social capital, they can also be exploitative and marginalise their members; there may be unequal forms of political control and unfair redistribution of resources, although we heard of only two cases of severe exploitation among compatriots.

Despite the stated ambivalence of some respondents about their ‘community’ in London, the community comprises over 50 organisations and networks, strongly patronised by local Ghanaians. These include the Ghana Union, the Ghana Refugee Welfare Group, the Ghanaian Nurses Association (Van Hear et al. 2004), and numerous religious organisations that also play an integrative role.

**Strong and Weak Ties**

Many of the issues discussed about community solidarity centre on the strength of community ties and the importance of strong ties. In his article on ‘the strength of weak ties’, Granovetter (1973) introduced a new dimension to the analysis of networks. Previously, strong ties had been considered to be more effective in the transfer of information and resources, and in achieving community cohesion. Granovetter speculated that, if strong ties exist within a tight-knit group which does not mix much with others outside the group, crucial information and resources are less likely to flow into such a community or network (Granovetter 1973: 1367). This issue was explored to see if immigrants have the tendency to interact mainly within
their own community, and whether there is a sense of community closure, which would have an effect on the integration and participation patterns of the group. Our results indicate that strong and weak ties have variable outcomes. As mentioned earlier, and although not a unique characteristic, our Ghanaian sample maintains very strong family and community links, a tradition carried over from Ghana. However, these can sometimes have detrimental effects.

One respondent—Aweniga—was persuaded by his siblings in London to spend his money on a passport, so he could work ‘legally’, earning enough money to set himself up back in Ghana, where he has a wife and child. His close ties, he says, have been supportive but at the same time have served as a hindrance to pursuing his own plans—a case where strong ties have yielded weak outcomes. He believes he would have realised his dual goals of making money and doing a Masters Degree faster if he had broken away from his close ties:

So that’s why I say that they haven’t helped me much . . . . Perhaps if I were to be in a place where I am a bit distant from them maybe I will probably be taking my own decision, like ‘Enough of the money making and let’s go to school’. Probably by now I would have been in school or something.

Our respondents have networks that provide a strong flow of information and resources. They select the most relevant sources, though they tend to rely on family and friends for information on doctors, lawyers and jobs. But when needing information about rights at work etc., they would go to a relevant work colleague first. Those in our sample tended to meet ‘friends of friends of friends’ from back home or from non-Ghanaian networks in the UK. They often mention that they did not previously know the person who helped them out. Thus, as distinct from Granovetter’s idea that weak ties outside of one’s community are likely to provide the more relevant and adequate information and resources, we found that weak ties within the community provide the same function:

I had to rely on other friends. You know when you start with something, it is through that that you meet one person then through that you meet other people. It was through that morning one [job] that I was able to meet other people.

Whatever their problems, their Ghanaian networks provide strong levels of trust. Through inter-‘tribal’ and other ethnic interactions, this social and cultural heterogeneity has introduced a broader set of networks and community involvement in London than they ever had in Ghana. Although studies in Africa (see Vail 1989) reveal the fluidity of identities in Africa, particularly in the context of rural/urban migration, for some of our respondents this was a new experience. Many have developed both strong and weak links with other Ghanaians across previous ‘tribal’ boundaries and with other black Africans. Accessing weak ties within and outside of one’s community links up with debates about segregation, separatism and community cohesion.
Integration and Participation

Immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, usually construct and contest the degree and intensity of their participation in the new context. Instead of understanding immigrant inclusion as a typically passive form of integration, immigrant agency operates through the construction of social, economic and political practices and conditions of everyday life. Networks can be emergent structures, operating as constructive and productive processes. Smith reminds us that people practice ‘multiple forms of accommodation and resistance to dominant power relations’ at the local level (Smith 2002: 118–19).

In the UK, as in other European countries of immigration, there is a desire to manufacture community cohesion (Amin 2002: 968). For example, in the Cantle Report (Home Office 2001) the aim was to bring communities together by attempting to develop common goals and shared visions among diverse groups in multi-ethnic or ‘mixed’ neighbourhoods. Community interaction and the emergence of trust, shared values and sense of belonging can only emerge from the people themselves, at the grass-roots level. Amin suggests it cannot be engineered (Amin 2002: 972).

Thus, it is worth knowing what these terms and processes mean to immigrants themselves. Immigrants tend to define ‘integration’ differently from ‘sense of belonging’. For many of our respondents, integration is instrumental—it means ‘getting a job’, ‘being part of the system’, being a good worker, a good citizen and contributing to the receiving society. This commitment is so strong that some of the undocumented migrants attempt to become part of the system by regularising their status within the constraints of their irregular immigration and labour-market status, a process characterised as irregular formality (Vasta 2006). For example, overstayers, those without National Insurance numbers, and those who do not declare a second job or whose employer does not declare an employee’s job, continually attempt to find ways to ‘regularise’ themselves by buying or renting documents (see Vasta 2006).

Sense of belonging, on the other hand, is much more difficult to achieve, and many claimed that exploitation and racism are major barriers:

Sometimes it depends, when you are somewhere and you are happy with yourself, you can describe the place as your home but the way things are going there’s no way I can describe this place as home. Sometimes if you’re able to use your certificate to work, you get better pay, live in a good area that’s where you can describe here as home.

Conclusion

Crucially, the conditions in which immigrants resettle can shape their identity and affect their life choices there. Our sample of recent Ghanaian immigrants, the majority of whom arrived over the past 12 to 15 years, came to work and study. Their work strategies, development of community networks and participation in London
life reveal a remarkable and complex picture. Drawn by the need to visit family and by the needs of the London economy, many expected that, with hard work, they could make it—be it in the UK or back in Ghana. The reality is that this goal takes longer and proves harder to achieve. Along the way, many experience downward mobility, de-skilling, job exploitation and racism.

Some feel compelled to overstay their visas and to buy documents in order to ‘normalise’ their immigration and work statuses. The irregular immigrants experience far greater levels of job exploitation, though the experience of racism is widespread across the board. Many of our respondents stretch the limits of the law, and cross spatial, institutional and cultural boundaries in order to achieve what they consider to be their right to a reasonable life. Yet those with irregular immigration status are possibly the most objectively vulnerable of all. Some of these perilously fall through the cracks.

Although our Ghanaian respondents actively construct integration into the receiving society through their work strategies, family ties and community networks, nonetheless, contradictions and ambivalences arise over how they develop community networks and negotiate the process of integration. Typically, their networks are both transnational and local. Our sample shows that Ghanaians, who develop and maintain their networks and ties with ease, are extremely adept at tapping into them when needed. Utilising and developing weak and strong networks that span several countries, ‘tribes’ and immigrant groups, our sample reveals how Ghanaians develop—through their local and global networks—cultural meanings and work strategies as part of a process of participation and resistance to dominant modes of power relations, and create the grounds for their participation. Ghanaians are eager to integrate, but find many obstacles in their path. Sense of belonging is more elusive.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Jemima Wilberforce, whose invaluable help and commitment to advancing knowledge and education made our fieldwork much easier. Thanks also to Kate Meagher for the many interesting and helpful discussions we have had on ‘networks’. Her inspiring thesis work provided an excellent understanding of the various theoretical approaches.

Notes

[1] Ghanaians, Portuguese, Romanians, Turks and a sample of British-born people were surveyed (155 in total) for the Work Strategies and Networks project (WSN). A snowball technique was adopted to find respondents, with at least two interviewers for each group, as well as several points of entry, in order to avoid sample and interviewer bias. We used a semi-structured questionnaire for approximately 30 in each group in late 2004 and later selected 10 respondents from each group to conduct in-depth interviews. We also interviewed four key community members who helped to substantiate some of our data and knowledge about the community.
The Asante group belong to the Akan, one of the five major ethnic communities, and the largest in the country. Historically, this groups has been the most migratory.

We are aware of the problems with use of the term ‘tribe’. We have opted to use it in inverted commas not just because that is the term many of our respondents use, but also because it helps to distinguish Ghanaian ‘tribes’ from other ethnic groups in London.

References


