

# **BME MIGRANTS' EMPLOYMENT IN CONSTRUCTION: A MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Nations, organizations and individuals are compelled to deal with issues emerging from the perceptions and politicization of ethnicity as they relate to BME migrants and their descendants. Issues of ethnicity are often primary in the zone of work where the complexities of migration, ethnicity, disability, gender and employment intersect. This paper attempts to highlight the perceptions of BME construction professionals as well as trainees in relation to their employment prospects in the industry. It goes further to explore their retention as well as progression in the sector. Through a study of various sources of available literature and the synthesis of incidents on ethnic minorities in general, the issues of recruitment and selection, diversity management and career progression emerge as themes in the perceived employment experiences of both indigenous and migrant ethnic minorities. The paper, through a process of cultural adaptation known as enculturation stresses the need for the intelligent utilization of human resources in a world that is increasingly multicultural in order to address the shortage of personnel in the sector. Although the UK is the basis for this study, the issue is not geographically limited and takes various forms depending on the level of advancement in such matters of the location in question.

Keywords: BME, culture, employment, retention.

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

The construction industry accounts for about one-tenth of the world's gross domestic product, seven% of employment, half of all resource usage and up to 40% of energy consumption (Hook and Goetjen, 2009). This industry has profound impact on modern lifestyles: the buildings we live and work in, the roads and bridges we drive on, the utility distribution systems we use, the railways, airports and harbours we travel and trade from are all products of this vital industry. Also, the construction industry is a key indicator and driver of economic activity and wealth creation. However, with the increasing lack of tradesmen and rising costs this renowned industry, traditionally, continues to rely on young white males to form the majority of its workforce (Ahmed *et al.*, 2008; Duncan *et al.*, 2005; Agapiou *et al.*, 1995).

As a result, minority groups, especially Black and Minority Ethnic (BMEs) have been under-represented within the trade and professional occupations in the industry. However, demographic forecasts for the UK have indicated that the proportion of the BME labour supply will become increasingly prominent in future, particularly as the BME age profile is skewed towards young age groups, in contrast to the white population (Labour Force Survey, 2009; Ahmed *et al.*, 2008; Ogbonna *et al.*, 1995.).

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Additionally, Construction is a labour intensive industry which is heavily reliant on the skills of its workforce hence the need to rely adequately on skilled labour yet the industry suffers a high turnover of staff (Sommerville *et al.*, 1993) and frequently fails to retain those it trains. Notwithstanding, this issue of skill shortages was highlighted in the Latham Report (1994) urging employers to consider the merits of equality practices and to take measures to adopt equality strategies within the industry in order to catch up with other industries and to lessen the brunt of the possible skill shortages. However, years after Latham, the construction employment and training forecast 2001-2005 highlighted a shortfall between the supply of qualified new recruits and the demand from the industry (CITB, 2001), indicating persistent skills shortages. Also, the Royal Holloway Report (1999) had acknowledged the relatively low representation of BMEs as shown in Table 1 by professions.

*Table 1: Breakdown of BMEs within Specific Professions in Construction in UK*

Profession	Av. winter 2001 – Autumn 2002		Av. winter 2001- Autumn	
	Total No. BMEs	Professions %	Total	professions%
Managers in construction	4839	2.6%	2801	1.5%
Civil engineers	1790	2.9%	4058	5.5%
Architects	3041	6.6%	1655	3.5%
Town planners	565	3.4%	807	4.5%
Quantity surveyors	503	1.2%	1184	2.8%
Chartered surveyors	512	0.9%	1869	3.2%
Architects and town planners	1194	8.2%	888	5.5%
Total % profession	12443	2.9%	132.9	3.1%

*LFS Survey 2004*

Table 1 outlines a more detailed breakdown of some construction professions based on 2001-2002 figures. The Table shows that the percentage of BME people ranges from between 0.9% to 8.2% depending on the profession under consideration, and there have been fluctuations within the professions over the two-year period. Yet, in spite of slight increases within some professions and decreases within others, it is clear that BMEs continue to be under-represented throughout the industry sector as a whole.

Therefore, placing a premium on policies and initiatives for recruitment to encourage more active participation of groups currently under-represented would, potentially, increase BME participation and hence competition for places, consequently, raising the quality of entrants to the industry. A sure way of doing this is ensuring recognition of diversity and this can only be possible upon addressing the barriers hindering the recruitment, retention and progression of minority groups.

## **METHOD**

The overall research process consists of phases of which the first is literature review. Here, a comprehensive study of the processes involved in construction employment is done in order to develop an understanding of the underrepresentation of BME people in the industry. This phase is currently ongoing although the influence of the recession has impacted on the findings. The next stage will involve a pilot study of students on construction programmes from two different institutions who have completed a placement in the industry to help place the current situation in context. This will be done through focus groups and questionnaires survey.

Subsequent to this, a case study strategy using semi-structured interview techniques for data collection will be adopted and applied in five large scale companies and five SMEs in order to establish the source of the problem as, according to the literature

review, they exist on different magnitudes in either organization. These approaches will be triangulated for validity and robustness. The findings from the analysis of the data will then help to propose a strategic framework to aid the uptake of BMEs in the industry.

## **INITIAL BARRIERS AND BME PERCEPTIONS**

Having set the construction industry in context, the factors that inhibit entry, retention and progression in construction are explored below. Of particular importance here are the intended or inadvertent exclusionary practices in employment and its associated procurement of contracts. Although there are differences in the experiences of manual and professional trades, most of the generalizations about barriers to access are applicable in either case.

### **The image of the construction industry**

The construction industry has been perceived to have ‘one of the worst public images of all industries’ with a relatively low status (Loosemore *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, it has been associated with hard working conditions, strictly defined working hours, and a persistent ‘laddish’ culture in a white, male-dominated environment (CABE, 2005; Byrne *et al.*, 2005; Hammond, 2006). Byrne *et al.* (2005) suggest that poor working conditions and long hours are often found on sites with a high proportion of BME employees. The negative image that the construction industry carries from its identification with stereotyped male values and building site mythology, without sufficient career opportunities, is reflected in comments such as ‘the status and image of an engineer in the UK is poor’ (Ahmed *et al.*, 2008). This, in turn, adversely affects recruitment (CABE, 2005) as it negatively impacts the interest and commitment of BME groups (GLA, 2007). Thus, the image of the industry is less attractive and generally does not encourage entry and does little to retain those already in it.

### **Careers service and advice**

Although schools increasingly encourage pupils to enter higher education, a general lack of awareness about the sector’s career opportunities is reported by Caplan *et al.* (2009). Even students on vocational courses receive little specific information about working in the industry, and BME students may receive almost no encouragement to progress to a job in the industry (CEMS, 2000). Recruitment practices based on chance and word of mouth characterize the industry’s employment opportunities, and BME construction employees in manual trades report that their main sources of information have been family and friends and calling personally on construction sites as their experiences with the Jobcentreplus and other employment services tend to be less encouraging. As a result, in order to encourage effective BME networking and support systems to help counter this problem, it is necessary to expand opportunities for work placements as most construction firms tend to be fragmented and family based where institutional nepotism is rife (ConstructionSkills, 2007, Ahmed *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, on the whole, the lack of appropriate advice from career counselling and education services seems to disproportionately disadvantage BME students and trainees, thereby undermining their representation.

### **Discrimination in the construction industry**

A strong perception resulting from excessive discrimination evidenced by actual experience however, means that BMEs face rejection in the recruitment and contracts offices of construction firms (Royal Holloway, 1999; CABE, 2005) therefore, compared with their white counterparts BME applicants do not feel that they could successfully apply directly for jobs to employers on sites. Work experience with

BME-led firms, however, remains the most reliable means for BME students to gain access into construction with a high rate of progression and the ease of retention as pressures such as having to deal with racial banter are virtually nonexistent (CITB, 2002). Yet, as these firms are limited in number and struggle to survive, BME students are likely to experience exclusion in finding work experience, a critical step in establishing the professional contacts in order to secure employment on completion (Byrne *et al.*, 2005; CEMS, 1999). Also, as employers envisage employing or providing a placement to someone who does not fit the traditional stereotype of a construction worker as taking risks, BMEs are bound to face crucial exclusion (ConstructionSkills, 2007). It is, thus, evident that diversity is an issue of great concern for if BMEs can only be given the opportunity to perform better in organizations led by ethnic minorities, the problem of discrimination cannot be solved. This will, in effect, imply the collection of ethnicities into particular organizations defying multiculturalism in the industry and thus undermine the engagement of the viable part of the population.

### **Diversity management**

Equality and diversity policies and practices on the whole have achieved very little in BME engagement in construction. Despite public statements of positive intent, equal opportunities policies and diversity action plans, the construction industry has been unable to effect major change in relation to equality and diversity (Caplan *et al.*, 2009). This failure has been attributed to the fragmentation of the construction industry into complex chains of managing contractors and subcontractors. Moreover, competitive tendering, which emphasizes tight costs and timescales, has been said to have exclusionary impact on smaller firms where BMEs predominate whereas bigger firms are advantaged with more resources at their disposal; informal networks of work experience, recruitment and subcontracting which privilege established partners and methods and these tend to be white dominated (CABE, 2005). Accordingly, it is evident that the politicization of diversity issues does not seem to improve the situation of BME underrepresentation in construction and as a result requires a strategic approach for a better solution to the problem.

Again, in spite of the level of politicization of ethnicity in employment, a lack of coordination and consistency by public authorities in promoting diversity through procurement requirements in tendering, for instance, cannot be sustained and so limits their impact (GLA, 2007). Many failed to fulfil their role in ensuring Race Equality Impact Assessments (REIAs) were carried out and however saw compliance with the duty, at best, as a 'bureaucratic hoop to jump through and, at worst, an irrelevance to be ignored' (CRE, 2007).

Therefore, on all fronts BMEs are disadvantaged as evidenced from the barriers discussed above which, although points out the issues at stake do little to explain the underlying causes. So, this study will further explore the experiences of BMEs and the environment in which they operate in construction to establish the understanding required for fieldwork in order to be in a better position to propose possible solutions.

## **EXPERIENCES OF BMEs IN CONSTRUCTION**

Experiences of BMEs in construction have characteristically led to general perceptions as well as those of the BME community and the impact of this to the recruitment practices of the industry has been negative. The following captures some of such experiences and their impact.

### **Teaching and curriculum**

Significant numbers of BME students on university and college construction courses either fail to complete their course or seek employment outside the industry (Briscoe, 2006). However, studies in the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) Construction and the Built Environment courses in schools and FE colleges found that BME students were more critical than white students of their educational experiences, complained of neglect, and pointed in particular to a lack of structural systems of support (CEMS, 2000). Students overall were broadly happy with the teaching and relationships fostered on vocational courses, possibly because of the informal atmosphere in the classroom as this emphasized the practical culture of the workplace. Given that it is the culture of the workplace which is so often blamed for the failure of the construction industry to attract BME, the report argued that the intrusion of an informal atmosphere into the classroom was not particularly helpful, and a focus on professionalism, gaining relevant skills, and being rewarded for their application would inculcate more important and relevant values (CEMS, 2000). Contrary to Briscoe (2006), education and training is a means to an end which primarily is jobs, the ultimate reason why the intrusion was necessary in order to sensitize future employees and managers to the need for diversity as a means of addressing the shortage of skills in construction.

### **Discrimination in employment**

In a study where just over one-third of employed BME construction staff described their working experience as 'different' from their white counterparts, instances of discrimination cited by respondents included name-calling, bullying, harassment and intimidation and this affected their progression (CITB, 1999). Again, a more recent study in the North West supporting this assertion, reported experiences of discrimination ranging from physical attack, harassment and abuse, restricted training opportunities, limited promotion prospects and unpaid overtime (ConstructionSkills, 2007). Hardly do organizations, usually, construction management companies, trade federations, schools, colleges and unions admit awareness of these problems (CEMS, 1999) – although the result of the *Essa v Laing Ltd* (2004 EWCA CIV 02) judgment, where the contractor on site was deemed liable for discrimination (Personnel Today, 2004) may help create the legal awareness for responsibility.

### **Progression**

For BME staff, apart from being able to cope with assignments, successfully being employed in construction entails extra costs and more challenges, (Dainty and Bagilhole, 2005). To hamper their progression, for example, they end up with less responsibility, are denied opportunities for independent work, and relegated to tea-making and acting as the office hand long after comparable colleagues have moved up, a condition confirmed by white respondents (Caplan *et al.*, 2009). With such perceptions, BMEs see their opportunities for development as severely limited requiring them to work harder than their white counterparts to be recognized and dispel doubts about their competency, in order to progress in the organization (CITB, 2002). 'Satisfactory' performance, as confirmed by Caplan and Gilham, (2005) is not an option for BME employees, and even worst for BME managers. Although, policies for further training and support exist BME trainees hardly benefit from them (CEMS, 1999). Also, according to Race for Opportunity, (2008), they perceive a 'glass ceiling' to progression, through which it is difficult to pass. Primarily, progression is the preserve of one who 'fits the mould' and it is obviously not the BME (Ahmed, *et al.*, 2008). At senior levels, companies usually lack strategies for BME representation, and

even those that attempt to implement equal opportunities policies hardly achieve representation of BME staff into the organization beyond entry even at graduate level (CABE, 2005).

### **Promoting good race relations**

Being able to please white senior management by conforming to a white 'norm' and having to dress according to western standards and codes though restrictive at times are but a few of the pressures put on BME staff to conform (Ahmed *et al.*, 2008). Socializing with work colleagues is seen as fundamental to career progression even though such practices impact disproportionately on some BMEs, especially where it entails alcohol consumption (CABE, 2005). Although some changes have occurred, the drinking culture and coarse language that characterize construction workforce continue to emphasize feelings of being 'other' for those who will never share such a culture because of their background (Caplan and Gilham, 2005). Despite public commitment on the part of sections of the industry towards equality and intolerance of racism, including racist 'jokes' and banter, such acts persist as a characteristic culture of the construction industry (Royal Holloway, 1999; CABE, 2005). Therefore, as culture has been the underlying tone; societal culture (of host and immigrant), occupational cultures, organizational cultures etc. for all the issues raised in this study, it is a crucial factor worthy to be explored further on the basis of a multicultural approach to employment in construction which is what exactly follows from here.

## **CULTURE AND BME ENGAGEMENT IN CONSTRUCTION**

Several attempts to define 'culture' have been made with no commonly accepted one as over 50 years ago Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) found 164 distinct definitions of culture. This, therefore, signifies the magnitude of the effect of culture on humankind. Taras *et al.*, (2009) in their study on culture measurement defined it as 'a group's shared set of distinct basic assumptions, values, practices, and artefacts that are formed and retained over a long period of time'. Furthermore, culture has been proposed as 'the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997). This therefore, brings into focus the various institutional cultures namely national/societal, occupational and organizational cultures.

Primarily, culture has been seen in broader terms and defined on limitations of boundaries, thence Hofstede's (2001) definition of national culture as 'the collective mental programming' of the people of any particular nationality. Similarly, cultures arise among groups of individuals who share common ideologies expressed in speech and behaviour (Trice, 1993) as, for example, practitioners of the same profession tend to band together into occupational communities, draw their identities from the work they do and proceed to share a set of values, norms and attitudes which collectively form a part of the culture of that occupation (van Maanen, 1984). This, Deshpande and Webster (1989) see as the pattern of shared values and beliefs that help individuals understand organizational functioning and thus provide them with norms for behaviours in the organization. Cameron and Quinn (1999) propose that what differentiates successful firms from others is their organizational culture since the ability to understand organizational culture is the basis for examining what goes on in them.

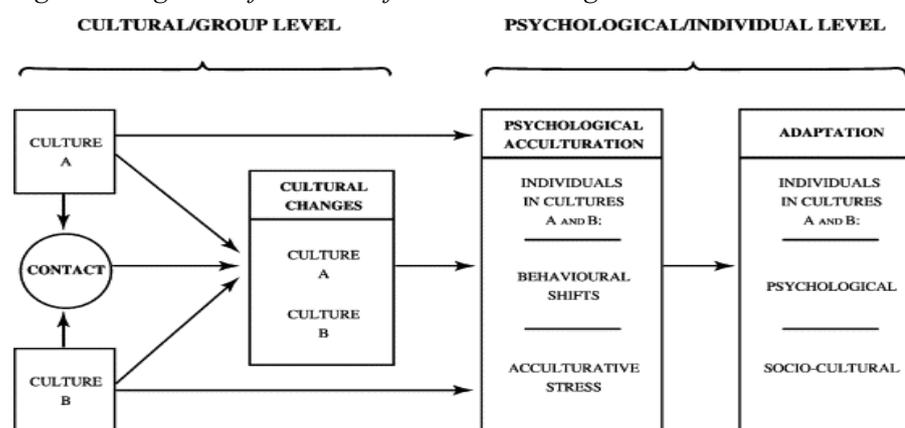
Consequently, it can be said that cultural orientation forms the basis of the behaviour of people and this determines their perception of other cultures and the world around them. So, it is important to stress that, unique and shared characteristics which are

classified as cultural traits identify a group of people from any others. Therefore, it follows that in order to perform creditably; there is the need to learn new values, attitudes and a general way of doing things in characteristically different environments as some learned practices may need to be unlearned. Additionally, it is ethical that difference is acknowledged and recognized as a diverse way of life. This forms the basis for tolerance so that a process of adaptation and mutual coexistence can take place; a process known as acculturation.

### The acculturation process

The process discussed above is known as acculturation and according to (Berry, 2005), it is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups. Subsequently, in order to understand individual behaviours leading to the discriminating culture in construction, it is important to also understand the different cultures that come into contact in the industry. This process of examining cross-cultural contexts (Berry *et al.*, 2002) which results in acculturation is shown in figure 1 below which reinforces the acculturation process with the example of the two culture-level phenomena, referred to as the society of origin (A) and society of settlement (B), and their respective features after cultural transformation resulting from their contact in (A and B). In order to understand the process, the characteristics of the individuals involved must be established before the process to allow an appropriate comparison of the degree of voluntariness in the process. Richmond (1993) argues that migrants can be arrayed on a continuum between reactive and proactive, with the former having exclusionary motivating factors generally negative in character, and the latter having enabling factors generally positive in character which migration motivation refer to as push/pull factors.

Figure 1: A general framework for understanding acculturation.



Source: Berry, (2005)

Conversely, there are the general orientations that a society and its citizens have towards immigration and pluralism. Berry, (2005) notes that some societies have been built by immigration over the centuries, and this process may be a continuing one, guided by a deliberate immigration policy. Therefore, the important issue in the process of acculturation is both the historical and attitudinal situation faced by immigrants in the society of settlement. Some societies are accepting of cultural pluralism resulting from immigration, however, even where pluralism is favoured the level of acceptance of specific cultural, racial and religious practices may vary as indicated in Berry and Kalin, (1995) and Lebedeva and Tatarko, (2004) and according to Berry, (2005) those groups that are hardly accepted often experience hostility,

rejection, and discrimination, yet it must be stressed that the situation can be precarious and very unpredictable.

Therefore, as the factors above bear on the actors performance in construction organizations, it is worthy of note that the numerous professions that come together to complete a particular project each exhibits unique cultural traits which differentiate them from the others and so for one to be part of such a group, it is important that such traits are learnt through the laid down processes and procedures. Notwithstanding, there is the need to recognize that inherent differences exist between individuals and groups and it is only on the basis of such recognition that there can be mutual coexistence and teamwork for the attainment of common aims.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the findings that emerge from literature give an overall picture of a vital industry briddled with acute shortage of skills, yet refusing to engage the group with a more sustained younger population and perpetuating similar business and procurement practices unlikely to widen the pool of labour. As a result, BMEs face limited opportunities in an industry that is not acting favourably enough to encourage them to enter it and progress. This under-representation is even worse in managerial and professional roles notwithstanding, the relatively high take-up of education and training courses in the industry by BME groups which, on balance, points to an interest from that section of the population.

This situation is worsened by the prevalence of word-of-mouth recruitment and tendering practices which creates low levels of awareness within BME communities of the wide range of opportunities in construction as there is a lack of informal information networks within BME communities about work in the construction industry. Again, persistent perceptions of racism, the lack of implementation and monitoring of equal opportunities policies and diversity management makes it even less plausible for the BME to compete for jobs in construction. Furthermore, in the UK, for example, the fragmentation of the construction sector has resulted in creating many trades, small businesses and different, numerous roles which make it difficult to be monitored for good practice compared with other European counterparts.

Also, the resultant transformation from the various stages of an entrant into new culture can be enormous. These processes will vary as with cultural measurements, some originating cultures have characteristics similar to the host's and so are easily adaptable. Notwithstanding, the need to recognize difference and respect a multicultural coexistence remains the key to ensuring a fair representation of minorities. This process of multiculturalism is suitable for building a cohesive group that is capable of working as teams on construction projects.

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