



How do you account for it? A critical exploration of career opportunities for and experiences of ethnic minority women[☆]

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Abstract

This paper draws on new data examining career opportunities and experiences of ethnic minority women. We follow a growing literature in the field of social accounting which has raised awareness of both actual and represented notions of women's roles within accountancy and organisations in general (e.g. [Adams CA, Harte G. Towards corporate accountability for equal opportunities performance. The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants Occasional Research Paper No. 26; 1999; Kirkham L, Loft A. Gender and the construction of the professional accountant. *Acc Organ Soc* 1993;18:507–58; Tinker T, Neimark M. The role of annual reports in gender and class contradictions at General Motors 1917–1976. *Acc Organ Soc* 1987;12(3–4):71–88]), and has demonstrated how social accounts of organisations are generated and represented [Adams CA, Harte G. The changing portrayal of the employment of women in British banks and retail companies' corporate annual reports. *Acc Organ Soc* 1998;23(8):781–812; O'Dwyer. The construction of a social account: a case study in an overseas aid agency. *Acc Organ Soc* 2005;30:279–96]. In producing this paper, we seek to extend such approaches to include race and ethnicity. Thus, our purpose is to reach an explanation as to why, when for 3 decades during which legislation has been in place to outlaw unfair discrimination, and when organisations have policies purporting to support and serve that legislative framework, ethnic minority women continue to struggle for corporate acceptance and progression.

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[☆] The term ethnic minority is used here to encompass South Asian (Pakistani and Indian), African and Afro-Caribbean groups, these terms of ethnicity being self-identified by our participants.

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1. Introduction

This paper draws on new data examining career opportunities and experiences of ethnic minority women. We follow a growing literature in the field of social accounting which has raised awareness of both actual and represented notions of women's roles within accountancy and organisations in general (e.g. Adams and Harte, 1999; Kirkham and Loft, 1993; Loft, 1992; Tinker and Neimark, 1987), and has demonstrated how social accounts of organisations are generated and represented (Adams and Harte, 1998; O'Dwyer, 2005). In producing this paper, we seek to extend such approaches to include race and ethnicity. Thus, our purpose is to reach an explanation as to why, when for 3 decades legislation has been in place to outlaw unfair discrimination, and when organisations have policies which purport to support and serve that legislative framework, ethnic minority women continue to struggle for corporate acceptance and progression.

The structure of the paper is as follows: we begin with a literature review in which we comment upon the nature of gendered categorisation, extending that to take account of race and ethnicity; we then examine our theoretical framework before discussing the methodological approach used for the study. The paper is then divided into sub-sections addressing two significant themes emerging from the empirical work, before progressing to a discussion of those themes and a conclusion drawing together the theoretical, analytical and empirical threads.

2. Exploring the careers of ethnic minority women

White western feminist literature has tended to concentrate on the androcentric character of western society and western theory, with the typical assumption of women as a unitary, homogeneous category against men (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992). The post-colonial feminist critique of white feminism has provided a framework for considering the links between race, ethnicity, gender and class, questioning the universality of women's interests and the tendency to define those interests with reference to an ethnocentric notion of womanhood (Afshar, 1994; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Amos and Parmar, 1984; Carby, 1982).

With some notable exceptions (Calas and Smircich, 1992; Calas, 1992; Galhofer, 1998; Zinn and Hill, 1996) existing analyses have typically assumed an homogeneous category of women, neglecting ethnic minority women's experiences at work, often reflecting and repeating the same 'exclusivity error' that it has levied against the male-dominated corporate hierarchy (Bell et al., 1993, p. 105). Findings have largely been extrapolated to all women, regardless of race, ethnicity and class. Furthermore, 'standard' career theory has been criticised for its gender bias and androcentricity (Halford et al., 1997; Crompton and Sanderson, 1990; Evetts, 1994).

While it has been suggested that new theories of career must give equal value to male and female aspects of being (Marshall, 1989, p. 281), this suggestion does not acknowledge that 'male aspects of being' and 'female aspects of being' are not necessarily homogeneous and that ethnic minority men and women may have different experiences from white men and women. While each of these criticisms is well founded, they tend to assume an ethnic-neutral

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