

The Centrality of Race and Whiteness in the Irish Labour Market

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Although race has been widely acknowledged as an illusion that is socially constructed, skin colour and nationality of descent continue to influence socioeconomic outcomes. Various studies across Europe that measure the experience of discrimination indicate that the highest levels of discrimination based on ethnic or immigrant background is in the area of employment, and is higher towards non-white minorities (McGinnity et al. 2017; Zschirnt and Ruedin, 2016; EU-MIDIS 11). These studies show that skin colour, foreign sounding first or second names, accent and nationality of origin were the main reasons cited by respondents for their experience of discrimination. Unlike the American context where skin colour features prominently in everyday discourse, any other vector but race is centred in Ireland, particularly one of a migrant deficit. These theories attribute differentials in outcome to some form of deficit among marginalised groups. A migrant deficit approach is counterproductive and should be discouraged as it perpetuates racial stereotypes and presupposes that labour markets are meritocratic socioeconomic environments, contrary to evidence which shows they continue to be loaded with structural barriers in which groups encounter and contest their marginalisation (Joseph, 2017).

In the last few years Ireland has earned the right to be described as a multicultural society with over 15% of its workforce being of migrant descent. Ireland was also one of the first three EU states to open its labour market to migrants from the EU accession states in 2004 without restrictions. Despite the interest in diversifying the workplace, the top tiers of both the public and the private sectors of the Irish labour market still remain predominately white. In the 2011 census, 60% of white Europeans as against 37% of Black Africans were in employment, while 1% of white Europeans were said to be looking for their first jobs against 4.5% of Black Africans. While many might credit this disparity to the 2009 recession, the 2016 census shows that the labour market outcome of Blacks in Ireland has worsened. Apart from white EU new member state (NMS) individuals, all other white groups are considerably more likely than non-whites to be employed in managerial and professional occupations (Kingston et.al, 2012: 27). In 2016 the unemployment rate of migrants stood at 15.4% against the natives at 12.6%. This figure obscures sharp disparities which become evident when viewed by race and nationality. It presents a very sharp divide, with Whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom of the economic ladder. For example, Western Europeans recorded the lowest unemployment rate (French, 7%, Germans, 8%, Italians 9%) followed by Eastern Europeans; Black Africans recorded the highest unemployment rate at over five times that of Western Europeans at 42.3% (Nigerians 43%, Congolese 63%). While unemployment today is at its lowest in the last ten years, this positive turn in the economy only applies to Ireland's white population. In 2017 the Garda Representative Association (GRA), which has around 10,500 members, reported there was not a single person of African or Caribbean origin in the force. This level of whiteness in the Irish labour market is not unique to the Garda. Rather what is evident is that being Black in the Irish labour market is a strong indicator of un[der]employment and marginalisation (Joseph, 2017).

Non-white migrants in Ireland, who consistently centre race, have not shied away from naming the varying challenges they encounter in accessing the labour market. For example, in a study concerning African migrants in Ireland, Coakley and Mac Einri (2011) maintained that although the

families they interviewed were all motivated to engage in the world of waged work, they consistently referred to problems encountered particularly during the job search process. Despite anti-discrimination policies, discrimination towards Black Africans persist across Europe including in Ireland. A 2016 survey of over 25,500 migrants across the 28 EU countries by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights shows that respondents with North African, Roma and Sub-Saharan African background indicated the highest levels of discrimination based on ethnic or immigrant background (at 45%, 41%, and 39%, respectively) (EU-MIDIS 11). The respondents reported experiencing recurring discrimination with an average of 4.6 times a year, and with the highest five-year rate reported in the area of employment. 29% of all respondents who looked for a job reported experiencing discrimination, with every second respondent mentioning skin colour or physical appearance (53% at the workplace and 50% when looking for work). 36% believed the reason was their first or last name and 18% thought it was their accent. Compared to White respondents, another study of almost 15,000 adults in Ireland showed that Black respondents also report experiencing higher discrimination in the workplace (McGinnity et al. 2017). Two Irish studies that focused on citizenship and the economic recession showed that visibly different ethnic groups, in particular Black African and non-white European groups reported very high rates of discrimination when looking for work, and their experience of discrimination did not decrease over time (Kingston et al. 2015). In 2014, despite the recent access of naturalised Irish of African descent to European citizenship, they were reported to be 16% less likely to be employed than native Irish (Kelly et al. 2016). While this figure went down by 2% from the 2012 record, and the employment deficit for non-naturalised migrants of African descent is said to have disappeared, the unemployment rate of Black African migrants who make up 1.2% of Ireland's population is at its highest with an increase of 3.7% from the 2011 figure.

Despite these figures where racial difference is indicated in the Irish labour market, race is still not centred in the discourse. There is no focus on race, skin colour or how non-possession of whiteness disadvantages workers in the labour market. This is why I am forced to ask the question, like Sojourner May, *is there not a cause?* Does 1.2% of the Irish population not merit intervention? Clearly, "one does not confront a history of racial domination by ignoring it, since to ignore it is just to incorporate it, through silence, into the conceptual apparatus, whose genealogy will typically ensure that it is structured so as to take the white experience as normative" (Mills, 1998:104). Discrimination is detrimental not only to victims but also to society. Treating individuals differently due to their membership of a specific group is discrimination.

A résumé call-back field experiment carried out in Ireland showed that immigrants in general experience disadvantage in terms of wages and occupational position (McGinnity et al. 2009). The authors of the experiment found that candidates with Irish names were over twice as likely to be invited to interview for advertised jobs as candidates with identifiably non-Irish names, even though both submitted equivalent CVs. While the Irish study did not find significant differences in the degree of discrimination faced by candidates with Asian, African or German names, a similar OECD 2014 report which mapped the nationalities against which rich countries discriminate showed the résumés of Africans and Blacks in Ireland had the highest representation for those with a call-back ratio greater than two. Though this suggests a higher level of difficulty in accessing paid employment which is predicated on racial difference as the applicants' names on those CVs suggests, there is an increasing intellectual shift towards individualistic rather than collective

explanations of labour market disparities. Such explanations absolve society of responsibility and blames victims for their marginalisation.

Racial inequality in the labour market is however not new in Europe. Many grapple with how best to represent this data. However, in the last decade the plight of Black workers, despite worsening across Europe, has almost fallen off the agenda and is subsumed under labels like “diversity” in Ireland and “widening participation” in the UK. In a special issue which examined racial inequality in the USA and Britain, Song (2004) addressed the question of whether a racial hierarchy framework helps in explaining racial inequalities and group differential experiences in those two Western multi-ethnic societies. Several Irish scholars (Lentin and McVeigh, 2002; Fanning, 2002; 2009) suggest that Ireland has increasingly become hostile and intolerant to its migrant population, with more recent reports documenting both anti-Black and anti-Islam sentiments (Michaels, 2016). The idea that migration affects socio-economic outcomes and labour market experiences is widely accepted. What is problematic, however, is the disparity in the way it affects different migrant groups, how this is presented and more importantly, which issues are addressed.

In a recent study where I compared the labour market outcomes of migrants of Nigerian, Polish and Spanish descent living and working in Ireland (Joseph, 2017), three data sources showed that Ireland has a white over black ascendancy. What this means is that white Europeans are stratified at the top of the economic ladder and Blacks at the bottom. They outperform people of Black African descent even when controlling for education and right to work. The analysis of a database of 625 people of migrant descent who accessed an employability programme (EP) between 2009 and 2011, after controlling for all measurable variables, shows that race appeared to be the only macro variable that accounted for any significant difference in outcome in the participants’ quest to attain paid employment. More specifically, migrants of Nigerian descent recorded the highest progression rate proportional to their population (at 89 per cent), compared to Poland (84 per cent) and Spain (85 per cent). However, when the participant’s progression was categorised into paid and unpaid employment, the Nigerian group recorded the lowest progression rate into paid employment (at 40 per cent), as against Poland (60 per cent) and Spain (69 per cent). What became obvious was the over-representation of migrants of Nigerian descent in unpaid employment at 49 per cent, representing over half (55 per cent) of the total labour market activity recorded for this group. Migrants from Poland and Spain recorded much lower figures in unpaid labour, at 25 per cent and 16 per cent respectively, representing less than a quarter of their labour market activities. This suggests that the labour market participation of a high proportion of migrants in Ireland is without financial remuneration, with a much higher proportion of Nigerian migrants (more than one in two) caught in this group.

This is worrying as Blacks have historically been exploited in the labour market. Does this point to some form of economic exploitation or are Black workers in Ireland seen as only good enough for unpaid but not for paid employment? Despite the widely held belief that Blacks in Ireland are spongers who are unwilling to work, the data show that Nigerian migrants had a higher participation rate in the labour market than any other group. This is in spite of the difficulties reported by the Black interviewees in navigating the labour market. This data presents a prime example of remarkable inconsistencies in outcomes between different groups and how this can become more explicit when the data is viewed through the lens of race.

A Colour-Coded Hierarchy in the Irish Labour Market

Although there is little mention of whiteness in the public discourse on labour market outcomes, inequalities and discrimination, whiteness continues to be a silent but key factor in recruitment, promotion and labour market experiences. Suffice it to say that all Whites are not treated the same in the labour market, nor are Blacks treated the same as Whites. From analysing the labour market outcomes from EP in my study, a hierarchal placement through inter/intragroup ordering of the migrants similar to the Irish 2011 and 2016 census becomes evident. First, the European groups had a better outcome than the African group, even when comparing like with like in terms of highest educational levels attained. This suggests that Europeans are stratified above Africans in the Irish labour market regarding their economic outcomes. Second, despite the Spanish and Polish migrants having white physical appearance, Spanish migrants had a better outcome than Polish migrants who in turn had a better outcome than the Nigerians. Third, while gender affects the intra-group layering of workers across all groups where the males outperformed the females within the same racial group, gender did not seem to buffer the impact of racial differences as all the African and European males did not perform better in the labour market than all the African and European females. This means that the layering appears to be broadly connected to racial difference, and more specifically to nationality difference. My data shows that Spanish females still fared better than Polish and Nigerian males, and Polish females in turn fared better than Nigerian males and females. Whiteness and skin colour matters on many levels as there is a clear distinction between the labour market outcomes of Spanish migrants from Western Europe and Polish migrants from Eastern Europe despite both groups being white Europeans.

Why Should we Centre Race in the Discourse of the Labour Market?

Despite the ongoing arguments on the relevance of race today, every European country and institution still structures access to its resources and residency rights around race and nationality. Whether a person is categorised as EU or non-EU, from the Third World, developing or developed world, it impacts on their labour market outcome. It affects the status, privileges or negative judgments attached to each category and the challenges they present to the categorised person when exercising their agency. Migration is more than the movement of people across borders. It is a way of socioeconomic enhancement. Thus labour market mobility is fundamental to integration and inclusion. Evidence suggests that race has been commonly applied to distinguish, classify, tag and pigeonhole groups through the application of a scale of values that is markedly ethnocentric. Considering the various ways race impacts on labour market outcomes, it is imperative that race is central to the discourse, interventions and interpretations of data and outcomes.

The black-white binary which I have presented here is a paradigm that suggests that Blacks “constitute the prototypical minority group” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012: 75). Despite the undeniably contentious and even divisive nature of such thinking, based on the lived experience of Black workers and on statistical evidence, some of which I have presented here, the impact of race needs to be made plain. Anything less will fuel the ambivalence by Whites about the impact of race on labour market outcomes which often silences victims and demonstrates a lack of commitment to addressing the consequences of racial inequality. It is also a way of denying white advantage and the implication of race (DiAngelo, 2011). When race is centred in an inquiry, a societal deficit is

implicated, when individualistic attributions are centred, a migrant deficit is implicated (Joseph, 2018, expected). While race is a socially constructed phenomenon, skin colour is used as an identifier for non-whites with real social consequences. If race existed only on condition of being believed, its life would have ceased long ago (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). It is therefore important to understand what the possession of whiteness does to the possessors and non-possessors of whiteness and the ways it structures their lives.

Whites however rarely openly acknowledge that possession of white skin colour advantages and oftentimes protect them in society. Peggy McIntosh described whiteness as ‘an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious.’ Since the early 1990s, whiteness has been framed as a racial social category characterised by a privileged position in society (Frankenberg, 1993), typically at the top of the economic and racial hierarchy. The critical legal scholar Cheryl Harris (1993), who exposed the hegemony in the way whiteness operates and is positioned, writes that whiteness has evolved from its initial construction as a form of racial identity, into a form of property, “something that can both be experienced and deployed as a resource”. Today, whiteness is not seen as a resource, yet it continues to advantage whites against their non-white peers in the world of work. By juxtaposing the narratives of my interviewees (my third data source in the study), the ways the white groups are given positive regard and ascribed positive attributes over Blacks was evident. For example, the expectation was that white Europeans would be hard working, punctual, trustworthy and competent, while Black Nigerian migrants report experiencing disregard, disrespect and an ascription of deficiency. This unequal access to what I like to describe as un-reckoned hidden resources exacerbates labour market discriminatory practices and inequalities by advantaging Whites in their economic pursuits. The problem with white privilege research, however, is in not looking at white supremacy, or not observing Whites who claimed ignorance of their privileged world because it meant Whites could escape taking responsibility (Leonardo, 2004, p.138). This complacency and ambivalence about race is problematic because ‘when Whites who do not acknowledge they are privileged still accept and benefit from unearned public and private power they are given, they embody and enact White supremacy’ (Pappas, 1996, p.3). The UN General Assembly proclaimed 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent, yet I struggle to find any strategic plan concerning Blacks in Ireland and across Europe, apart from activities engaging in their dance, diet and dress. Without downplaying their significance, they are all activities which do not reduce the marginalisation of people of Black African descent in the labour market.

While centring race in mainstream, first world political philosophy is challenging, it should not and cannot be ignored. For true change to occur, Black workers must continue ‘resisting’ the racial order (not through violence but by enhancing their achievement attributes – education, skills, experience and resilience). White and Black allies who will act and demand change must step up. Lastly, unless we centre race and name it in its entirety, it will continue to provide an unfair advantage for Whites while remaining unacknowledged yet powerful in destabilising any effort towards levelling the playing field.

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