

Young adults of ethnic minority background on the Norwegian labour market: The interactional co-construction of exclusion by employers and customers

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0(0) 1–18

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DOI: 10.1177/1468796812467957

etn.sagepub.com



Abstract

Labour market participation is commonly conceptualized as an indicator of immigrant integration, although integration is not something that should be conflated with inclusion. The mere fact of employment is no silver bullet. The sociology of work needs to consider experiences of exclusion both before and after entry to the labour market. This article is based on a 25-case selection of 50 in-depth interviews that we conducted with young adults of ethnic minority background in Norway. We analyse their experiences of, and reactions to, exclusion in the labour market. While for several interviewees the possibility of being met with ethnic prejudice from employers looms large, more experiences of this sort were reported among interviewees engaged in customer contact, where the inside of an organization intersects with the outside world.

Keywords

Customers, discrimination, employers, ethnic minorities, exclusion, labour market, Norway, young adults

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How do young adults of ethnic minority background experience different forms of exclusion on the labour market? How do they react when it occurs? Utilizing a two-fold analytical distinction between ethnic prejudice from employers and customers, this study analyses young minority ethnic adults' inclusion and exclusion on the Norwegian labour market.

When employees or job-seekers are met with ethnic prejudice on the part of employers, this can be defined as ethnic discrimination. According to The Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (C11), meant to guarantee against discrimination against women, discrimination is any distinction, exclusion or preference based on race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin (among other characteristics), 'which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity and treatment in employment or occupation' (ILO, 1958). Being met with scepticism or hurtful comments from customers is not discrimination in the strict sense, because customers cannot nullify or impair equality in treatment. Instead, customers' bad treatment of these young adults may be a result of xenophobia or racism or merely disrespect for people in lower positions, regardless of their ethnic background.

Racism is often strictly defined as the connection of biological dispositions in humans with moral dispositions. In the classical sense, racism is a belief in the superiority of one particular race and prejudice based on this conception. Racism is also a theory that human abilities and other characteristics are determined by race. In the course of the last 30 years, this strict definition has been expanded to include 'new racism', 'cultural racism' or 'symbolic racism' (Fangen, 1998). Ethnic discrimination can be a result of racist attitudes or at least of xenophobia, which is a less clearly defined scepticism towards everyone who appears foreign. We chose the broader concept of social exclusion because we want to index all experiences of bad treatment that our informants bring up in their narratives, regardless of any possible racist component in the attitudes of the people who exclude them.

Labour market participation rates are commonly regarded as key indicators of integration by all European Union (EU) states. Associated with income security, they are seen as instruments for fuller participation in society and independence from public assistance (Entzinger and Biezeveld, 2003: 14–15). That said, it is necessary to distinguish between integration and inclusion. Being integrated in terms of holding a job does not necessarily preclude feelings of exclusion, which can occur at work or while in the process of applying for a job. Unsurprisingly, the first EU-wide survey of immigrant and ethnic minority groups' experiences of discrimination and victimization in everyday life finds that employment 'emerges as the main domain where minorities experience the greatest levels of what is perceived as discriminatory, both when looking for work and at work' (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009: 6). In Norway, as elsewhere in Scandinavia, Nordic welfare-state ideologies regard the principle that everyone of working age be active on the labour market as a primary measure to prevent social exclusion (Wahlbeck, 2007).

The so-called Anti-Discrimination Act that came into force in Norway in 2006 was meant to, *inter alia*, prevent discrimination based on ethnicity, national origin,

descent, skin colour, language, religion or belief. To this end, public and private employers who regularly employ over 50 individuals must make and report on their active, targeted and systematic efforts in fields such as recruitment, pay and working conditions, promotions, development opportunities and protection against harassment.

Broadening the usual scope from employers to also focus on customers, our objective is thus to see how exclusion is subjectively perceived and experienced among young adults of ethnic minority background in Norway. On the basis of our interviews, we find that the possibility of employer discrimination looms large for several interviewees. Actual experiences of exclusion were more common among interviewees engaged in customer contact where the inside of an organization intersects with the outside world. A key finding, however, is that the line between actual and possible experiences of exclusion is often blurred by ‘attributional ambiguity’, a social psychology concept first coined by Crocker et al. (1991). The core meaning of this concept refers to ‘a situation in which the reasons for feedback (or other kind of treatment or outcome) is ambiguous, typically one in which the recipient’s group membership is a salient potential reason for the feedback received’ (Ruscher, 2001: 99–100). The degree of attributional ambiguity, we argue, both structures the experience of (possible) exclusion for stigmatized young people and the use of counter-strategies when faced with it.

The following section presents background information on Norway and a note on our methodology. We then turn to analysis of our interviewees’ subjective experiences of exclusion and the strategies they use when it occurs in interactions with employers and customers. A conclusion summarizes our findings and points to implications.

Background on Norway

For young immigrants and descendants of immigrants (hereafter referred to simply as ‘descendants’), experiences of inclusion and/or exclusion on the labour market occur within the structures of an extensive welfare state (Fangen et al., 2010: 139). The Nordic social democratic model of welfare is characterized by universal social benefits, emphasis on full employment, relatively even income distribution and gender equality (Lahelma et al., 2002: 610). The labour market integration of immigrants and descendants must therefore be seen in the context of Norway’s low unemployment, high female labour market participation and high gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (Liebig, 2009). This generates a complex of opportunities and barriers to young newcomers and descendants (Fangen et al., 2010: 139).

Norway was a country of net emigration until the 1960s. Immigration remained modest until the late 1980s (Fangen et al., 2010: 140). These descendants are gradually thus entering the labour market. Although their education and labour market outcomes lag somewhat behind those of comparable children of natives, the differences are smaller than in most European Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Liebig, 2009: 73). According

to the OECD, the labour market outcomes of immigrants and descendants in Norway are 'quite favourable in an international comparison' (Liebig, 2009: 68), although discrimination against them on the labour market 'is an area where research in Norway has been underdeveloped' (Liebig, 2009: 65). Available statistics reveal the following: descendants below age 25 are almost on a par with their majority peers in terms of being active in work or education; the difference between them increases slightly above age 25; there is a considerably larger difference between immigrants and their native peers, who are more active, though this only holds for immigrants who have been resident for a short time (Olsen, 2010: 5).

Despite good overall rates for labour market participation of immigrants and descendants, we have indicators that discrimination may be an issue. Highly educated immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America run a considerably greater risk of unemployment than their Norwegian peers, even when their qualifications are obtained in Norway (Støren, 2005: 51). In the period 1987–2007, Norway's long-term unemployment was between three and five times higher among minority backgrounds than majority backgrounds (Rogstad and Orupabo, 2007: 33).

According to the survey 'Young in Oslo', youth of immigrant background in Norway's capital in 2007 were more than twice as likely to express concern about finding a job after finishing their education (28%), than non-immigrant youth (13%) (Øia and Vestel, 2007). Perceived discrimination in the labour market may be seen as an explanation for this gap (Øia and Vestel, 2007: 183–184).

Not all differences in labour market outcomes are attributable to discrimination, however. Ethnic penalty, as defined by Heath and Cheung (2006), refers to any remaining disparity that persists in ethnic minorities' chances for securing employment or higher-level jobs or income after accounting for their measured personal characteristics of qualifications, human capital and the like. Ethnic penalty factors include different social and professional networks, language fluency and knowledge of the labour market, and can partly explain that immigrants work in different sectors than non-immigrants in Norway, and are overrepresented in unskilled labour. In 2006, around 25 per cent of immigrants worked in sales, service jobs and healthcare (Tynes and Sterud, 2009).

Method

The empirical basis for this study is qualitative data from the EUMARGINS research project on experiences of inclusion and exclusion among young adult immigrants and descendants in seven European countries. The life-story interviews were conducted with 18- to 26-year-olds of ethnic minority background. The empirical data presented here therefore form a subset of the project-level data. For this article, we use 25 selected cases from our Norwegian data sample of 50 interviewees. All reside and were interviewed in the capital city of Oslo or its vicinity. All have work experience. Slightly more than half are immigrants, with their average length of residence in Norway being 11 years; the other half were born in Norway to immigrant parents.

It was a deliberate project goal to include a variety of background characteristics such as ethnic origin, level of education and job experience. About half our informants completed or are in the process of completing higher education. The remaining half are evenly distributed among those who completed secondary education, are in the process of doing so or have ended their education after Norway's compulsory nine years. This article focuses on those who have completed at least upper-secondary school. This means our selected cases are biased towards highly educated immigrants and descendants, presumably also of higher socioeconomic status. It is hard to say how this affects our conclusions, however, as highly educated interviewees also relate experiences they underwent before reaching their current level of education.¹ Informants have been given pseudonyms. We translated our interviews from Norwegian.

Analytical framework

Young adults of ethnic minority background experience different forms of exclusion on the labour market. Some experiences can be categorized as discrimination, while others as racism or ethnic prejudice. Some may not be related to their ethnic minority background at all; these are not discussed in this article.

A vast literature details coping strategies and responses to racism and perceived discrimination, such as stress reactions like depression and withdrawal, drug use, flight into religion and aggression (Fangen, 2006b). McNeilly et al. (cited in Essed, 2002) outline response categories such as speaking up, remaining silent, ignoring the situation, working harder, praying, getting violent or repressing memories. Swim et al. (2003) propose analytical categories such as comments directly made to the perpetrator, retaliatory comments, behaviour directed at the perpetrator through someone else, comments to someone other than the perpetrator, abruptly ending an interaction, avoiding, ignoring or boycotting the perpetrator and nonverbal looks and gestures. On a less disaggregated level, Smyth and Yarandi (1996) typologize responses as active coping, avoidance coping and minimizing the situation.

Our concern here is not stress reactions, but rather the strategies young adults of ethnic minority background use when dealing with the labour market, whether as job applicants or employees. The term 'strategy' is often applied to an individual consciously choosing between different alternatives for action. A modified form is used here: we do not necessarily think persons in all situations actively calculate how they should respond to perceived ethnic discrimination (cf. Fangen, 2006a). Some responses *are* strategically chosen to evoke a certain reaction from employers or customers. Others, however, are more instinctive, reflecting prior experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

Exclusion by employers

Employers may exclude job-seeking young people of ethnic minority background in various ways, including whom they choose to recruit and not recruit.

For instance, this might take the form of statistical discrimination: when asymmetries in information lead employers to rely on group-based, stereotypical generalizations (Phelps, 1972). It could also be taste-based discrimination: where an employer's preference is so strong that he or she discriminates even if it means forfeiting income (Becker, 1971).

Fewer callbacks

Few interviewees described having experienced exclusion by employers on the job once working. Rather, the main challenge seemed to be the job-seeking process.

Omar, a 19-year-old with Turkish parents, believes that Norwegian citizenship means nothing on the labour market. As he put it: 'As long as you're black, or dark-skinned, and your name is not Hans or Henrik, then . . . It gets more difficult. It does.' Many of our informants more or less shared Omar's belief that employers are, to varying degrees, inclined to reject applications with a foreign-sounding name. While some informants acknowledged this as a slight possibility, others only half-jokingly said that applications with a foreign name go straight to the dustbin. One interviewee stated that her Indian mother and father intentionally gave her and her sister western-sounding names that could function both in India and Norway so they would not suffer discrimination on the labour market. Two interviewees separately cited a typically Muslim/Arab name as one that disadvantages job-seekers.

Azadi, a 26-year-old Iranian immigrant, attributes his purportedly poor prospects to the combination of his field, being a political scientist, and his name. While he sees a job interview as 'a chance to correct stuff' and an opportunity in which 'you might get the chance to say "I'm not Muslim"', for instance, he has had negative experience. Azadi described the following episode to support his view of discrimination as a deeply rooted political problem in Norwegian society:

When I was applying [for a public office job], and entered the reception area, I said I had come there for an interview. The man there, he points to the street nearby and says: 'That's where you need to go for asylum interviews.' He was Norwegian. I talked Norwegian – he talked English back to me. 'No, no, no', and pointed to the street. I said: 'Take it easy, I'm here for a job interview.' Then he understood. And then I thought: 'Do I look like an asylum-seeker?' [laughs]

In a recent experimental method study of differential treatment in the hiring process in Norway (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2012), two equally qualified fictitious job applicants – one with a Norwegian-sounding name, the other with a foreign-sounding name – were presented to real employers in the context of 900 posted vacancies in six different sectors of the economy. The results show that discrimination in hiring constitutes a substantial obstacle for employment access among people of ethnic minority background. The probability of receiving a callback for applicants with a foreign-sounding name was about 25 percent less than for

equally qualified applicants with a typically Norwegian one. Subsequent interviews conducted with employers in the study revealed that these results cannot be explained by one factor alone. Rather, discrimination stems from a combination of employers' varying familiarity with ethnic minorities, their own past experiences, ethnic stereotypes and, simply, the uncertainty many feel when confronted with foreign-sounding applicants.

Ethnic prejudice at the interview

Studies on how non-dominant ethnic applicants feel about job interviews where cross-cultural exchanges occur have only recently emerged, as research has long privileged managerial interests (Buzzanell, 1999). Campbell and Roberts (2007) observed how lacking 'job-interview English' disadvantages foreign-born ethnic minority candidates on the labour market in Britain. Candidates from this group are often seen by employers as being 'inconsistent', 'untrustworthy' and 'non-belongers to the organisation'.

This corroborates with the story of Haile, a 22-year-old Ethiopian immigrant who came to Norway through family reunification with his mother and stepfather. He got generally good grades in upper-secondary school and communicates well in Norwegian, though he faced serious obstacles when his vocational education in auto mechanics proved fruitless. As he put it: 'Oh, the job-seeking was really difficult. I applied to several places, I went for several interviews. So they look at the language. I couldn't be bothered to apply for more jobs.' Parveen encountered similar circumstances when applying for a job at an Oslo bakery chain. At the job interview, the 24-year-old child of Indian parents, who was in the process of completing her master's in social science, learned that her prospective employer would not want to hire her to work in more affluent parts of town on the grounds that she was not 'charismatic' enough. Parveen walked out of the interview feeling that hers was a case of ethnic discrimination simply dressed up in a seemingly more acceptable criticism of character.

Other respondents reported disrespectful treatment and/or inappropriate questions during the interview. When Omar, mentioned earlier, applied for a skilled labour position in the service industry, he was given a telephone interview:

So first they asked if you're Norwegian, so I said 'no'. Then they asked if I was a fan of Vålerenga [the local football club], and I said 'no' to that as well. 'But then this job is not for you', he [the interviewer] said. So I asked if it was because I'm a foreigner. He then replied that: 'It's because you're not a fan of that team.' So I thought this was bullshit.

Though the job interview opens young adults of ethnic minority background to the risk of experiencing prejudice, face-to-face interaction was stressed by several interviewees as an opportunity to engage in impression management and correct possible negative stereotypes – thus a step towards employment.

Twenty-five-year-old Safet came to Norway from Bosnia on humanitarian grounds 16 years prior to our interview. He now has a specialized master's degree in mathematics, which should make him a highly sought-after candidate. Mostly but not entirely regardless of his migration background, Safet believes it is easier to self-present and make a good impression at an in-person interview than on a job application. In his words: 'I would at least assume that they see that I'm fairly normal.'

Utilizing networks

A problem for young immigrants is that they often lack networks that lead them to appropriate kind of jobs (Wiborg, 2006 cited in Fangen, 2010). Using one's networks for this purpose might be seen as a way to counter the scepticism job-seekers with a foreign name experience on the labour market – what Shorter-Gooden (2004: 406) calls 'leaning on shoulders' and 'relying on social support', or what we identify as an external coping strategy in the face of racism.

After having sent out numerous unanswered applications, Haile, cited earlier, mobilized his personal contacts and began seeking work outside the field in which he was educated. Through friends, he finally landed a job at a nursing home. Encouraged by a former teacher and his new colleagues, Haile subsequently decided to pursue another field of study in Norway: nursing.

The importance of social networks is also exemplified by Ahmad, a 20-year-old immigrant from Afghanistan who obtained residency through family reunification five years prior to our interview. After having had numerous others, he expressed surprise and happiness about securing his job as a truck driver, which matches his vocational transportation study qualifications. While his job is seen as difficult to get, Ahmad says it is easier to find work doing unskilled labour through personal contacts. This point is underscored by Lien, a 27-year-old with a Master's in psychology whose parents are Chinese labour migrants: 'People talk about having a network, people you can ask [about jobs], but there is something about having the right networks, too.' While Lien agrees with the importance of networks, she also sees affirmative action and foreign-language skills as strengths, making her background an asset rather than a liability on the job market.

Ethnic hierarchies

It is doubtlessly harder for people from particular ethnic backgrounds to get work than others. Across Europe, we see a tendency for greater scepticism towards Muslims, Africans and Middle Easterners than towards Eastern Europeans, South Americans and South-East Asians (Fangen et al., 2010).

Employment statistics to a certain extent also reflect the ethnic hierarchy in Norway. Register data show that first-generation Eastern Europeans have the highest employment rate among immigrants (Olsen, 2010: 17). Their entry as labour immigrants is the most significant reason for this, but our data also suggest that these employees are met with less prejudice than Middle Easterners and

Africans (Fangen et al., 2011). Groups from Asia and Africa have lower activity rates: lowest of all are Afghans, Somalis and Iraqis – these second and third groups also being at greatest risk for low income among all immigrants (Kirkeberg, 2009).

In a large survey from 2009, over 70 per cent of respondents from non-western countries of origin residing in Norway for several years said that discrimination by Norwegian employers is one of the greatest barriers facing immigrants on the labour market. National origin, as opposed to duration of residence, figured as a key variable (IMDI, 2008: 51). While the survey is not without its methodological flaws (e.g. non-response, bias towards less mobile respondents, language issues) and its sample is biased towards more resource-rich, educated, non-western immigrants (Djuve et al., 2009: 26, 35, 49), interesting findings emerge. Results show that 28 per cent of African respondents report having experienced discrimination while applying for a job or promotion in 2006, compared to 13 per cent from South and Central America, 16.5 per cent from Eastern Europe and 14 per cent from Asia (IMDI, 2008: 57). Illustrative of these statistical findings is the contrast we see between Lien's positive outlook, as discussed in the previous section, with that of another interviewee. 26-year-old Najat was born to Moroccan labour migrants and also holds a master's in economics:

It's very different from employer to employer, and very dependent on those who choose the actual candidates. But I think that sometimes... I do keep in mind that I have a foreign name, so I may be pushed out even though I'm qualified. And it depends on who's applying, how many are applying, and so on. But regarding the job-seeking process, having a foreign name is a disadvantage. I think about that often.

What is viewed as a disadvantage for Najat, of North African background, is an advantage for Lien, of East Asian background. Another interviewed Chinese immigrant was baffled when asked if his background could be an obstacle on the labour market. He replied: 'The Chinese, we don't have a bad reputation, do we?'

If, because of her background, Najat is statistically more at risk of being discriminated against by employers, how does she conceptualize and act on this risk? First, she does not regard discrimination as endemic, but rather as specific to some employers. At the same time, she views discrimination not so much as a racist phenomenon, but more as a matter of information processing, in line with Phelps' (1972) theory of statistical discrimination. She consequently engages in impression management and is proactive in communicating this aspect of her identity, by mentioning her Moroccan background in the job application and the fact that she was born and raised in Norway – 'so they know what to expect'. It is well documented in Norway that visible minorities fare worse than the ethnic majority when it comes to recruitment. Exactly where the line runs, however, between visible and invisible minorities, is difficult to pinpoint.

Despite being immigrants, two Bosnians we interviewed do not conceptualize discrimination by employers as an imminent threat to their careers. Yasmina, a 25-year-old who had resided in Norway for 16 years on humanitarian grounds, is

certain she will get a good job and attributes any risk of being discriminated against by employers equally to gender and ethnicity. She feels that employers will be even more persuaded to hire her when they meet: 'Because then they can see how I am, how I talk, how I express myself. Yeah, how I am.' A similarly optimistic view by Safet, introduced earlier, was expressed as follows: 'the only thing that matters is how good you are'.

Our Bosnian informants come from a European country, thus being seen as 'visible minority light'. This means they are likely to be considered foreign, but not 'too foreign' (although they are also highly educated, and there are reasons to expect immigrants with higher levels of education to be better integrated on the labour market than those with lower levels (Brekke, 2006: 173)). The ethnic hierarchy is further explicated when we consider the case of 26-year-old Azadi, who immigrated to Norway at age 14 as a quota refugee. He is Kurdish by ethnicity and was born in Iran. He worked hard to obtain a master's, hoping to inspire members of his extended family, few of whom have had higher education. However, only months after completion of his degree, Azadi found himself working as a traffic warden and feeling pessimistic about his chances of getting a public sector job to match his qualifications – this despite the fact that the Norwegian state, according to the OECD, has expended much effort to promote immigrant employment (Liebig, 2009). When we interviewed him, Azadi had spent only two months searching for a new job. One may speculate whether previous experiences of discrimination in low-skilled work (e.g. some potential employers considered him too dark-skinned to work as a waiter and thus engage in customer contact) underpinned his pessimism. Regardless, unemployment among non-western immigrants completing higher education in 1997–99 in Norway was found to be almost twice as prevalent than among ethnic Norwegians (Støren, 2005: 54). This does not necessarily imply discrimination, although it does point to ethnic penalty, where discrimination may be a factor.

As pointed out by Heath and Cheung (2006: 34), it is possible immigrants and descendants rationalize job rejection as resulting from racial discrimination when it is in fact because of a lack of qualifications. On the other hand, it is possible they underestimate how often they are discriminated against, because they may be unaware that their skills and experience exceed those of native applicants getting the job. This uncertainty complicates the interpretation of findings from studies that rely on self-declaration answering the question 'Have you been discriminated against?' Meanwhile, Clark et al. (1999) argue that although other self-reportable measures of stress have been widely accepted (e.g. those assessing job strain, life events and daily hassles), there may be a tendency to discount reports of racism simply because they involve a subjective component. The tendency to discount perceptions of racism as stressful is inconsistent with the stress literature, which highlights the importance of the appraisal process. For example, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) noted how it is both the individual's evaluation of the seriousness of an event and his or her coping responses that determine whether a psychological stress response will ensue. That is, the perception of demands as being stressful is

more important in initiating stress responses than objective demands that may or may not be perceived as stressful (Burchfield, 1985; Matheny et al., 1986). In other words, the subjective component has real consequences and cannot be downplayed.

Self-reporting is also far from arbitrary. Among our informants who had public office jobs, were PhD students, ran their own legal consultancy, worked at a law firm or held another kind of high-status position, not a single interviewee reported discrimination by employers. When they spoke of any such experience it was from earlier in their career, while doing low-status jobs. A number of highly educated interviewees reported unusually high-seeming application success. One child of Pakistani labour migrants with a master's in biology applied for six jobs, was invited to interview for four and received an offer for all, while also being offered a PhD position. In general, our data indicates immigrants and descendants with a master's in natural sciences find it easier to get a job than those with a master's in social sciences (Kvittingen, 2011).

Countering discrimination

Among those who did counter discrimination in the job-seeking process, this was not an altogether negative experience. One interviewee stood up against what she deemed a discriminatory dress code, compelling a revision of the company's policies. Hoda, the 24-year-old child of Somali parents, was offered her job on one condition: to stop wearing a hijab. She explained how when she refused, 'they asked if I could [instead] wear a little kind kind of scarf which wasn't... It wasn't a shawl [hijab].'

Although Hoda found it empowering to effect change in her company's policies, it is worth noting that employers who try to ban the hijab in Norway violate the Gender Equality Act and the more recent Anti-Discrimination Act (Sim and Skjeie, 2008). While legal frameworks can only partly regulate employers' practices, discrimination by customers takes place in what is the less regulated intersection between the formal and the informal spheres.

Exclusion by customers

Customer contact is where an organization's inside intersects with its surroundings. Employees who operate between the company/organization and its environment, often referred to as 'boundary spanners' in American management literature, are particularly prone to stress (Singh et al., 1996; Stamper and Johlke, 2003: 570). In the sociology of work, several studies examine the customer's social embeddedness in status hierarchies, although the role of race in the employer–customer relationship is a neglected theme (Lopez, 2010). An ethnic Norwegian and a person of ethnic minority background residing in Norway may both be maltreated by customers because of classist stigmas accompanying low-status jobs. Yet, sharing a class does not necessarily equal sharing social status (Tsuda, 1998: 323), and the possibility of being met with ethnic prejudice or racism is a distinguishing factor.

Plummer and Slane (1996) found that, when comparing the coping behaviours of white and black Americans in stressful situations, the latter use significantly more emotion-focused strategies. This finding is generalizable to youth of ethnic minority background who experience much maltreatment as stemming from the customer's ethnic prejudice, thus making it more humiliating (Fangen, 2006b).

Azadi, introduced earlier as the newly educated political scientist working as a traffic warden, described the following exchange with a woman he issued with a parking ticket:

[She said she] could understand why I stayed in such a job, that it was because I couldn't get anything better. So I asked her: 'Do you know what kind of education I have?' She said 'Nothing!' Then I said: 'You're at the first year at your university, I have a master's.' She was shocked, then said: 'Yeah, but you're still stupid.' . . . She was just angry that I gave her a fine. But at the same time she assumed [that I had taken] 'just a Norwegian course, nothing else' . . . That I couldn't get other jobs than this.

Irate drivers commonly heap their scorn on traffic wardens, the negative attitudes and behaviour towards them being a major source of stress for this professional group (Englund, 2007). Azadi told his story as an ethnic prejudice narrative even though ethnicity was not mentioned in the episode. In his eyes, the woman essentialized him as an asylum-seeker whose sole educational achievement was the Norwegian language course to which asylum-seekers are entitled and whose job opportunities are limited. At other times, nothing abusive is verbalized by the customer, but feelings of prejudice are inferred from general knowledge and/or through relevant comparisons of racist and non-racist situations (Essed, 2002).

18-year-old Laila, the child of Pakistani parents, described a customer at the fast-food restaurant where she worked as 'racist' even though he used no words. 'When he handed me the money he didn't bother to put it in my hand, but just dropped it from there', she said, miming how the money was let fall into her hand from some height. For young adults of ethnic minority background, the possibility of being met with ethnic prejudices is an inevitable part of everyday life, complicated by the kind of attributional ambiguity (Ruggiero and Taylor, 1997: 373) that Azadi's and Laila's stories indicate. In some situations it is unclear whether customer negativity comes in response to employees' low-status job or is related to their ethnicity.

Sometimes customer behaviour more obviously reflects ethnic prejudice, such as when an employee's imperfect language skills provide a target for a verbal blow. The only time Ahmad, now a truck driver, experienced maltreatment by customers throughout his five years in Norway was while working at a kiosk:

[J]ust that day I experienced it, because she [a customer] said so much revolting stuff that I experienced as racist. Simply, so she asked about something, a tram ticket. And I couldn't find that tram ticket . . . , and I asked what kind of card it was. And she says: 'Yes, I've bought it many times, can't you speak Norwegian?' So there I experienced something.

As Bourdieu (1991) pointed out, language is not only an instrument of knowledge, but also an instrument and medium of power. For immigrants, language mastery can become a synecdoche for the social person. Isir, a 19-year-old, Somali-born immigrant granted asylum in Norway at age 11, hints at the existential dimension of language mastery. At the fast-food restaurant where she worked, a customer openly refused to place his order with her, preferring to address the white Norwegian girl working alongside her. '[The customer] says: "You don't know Norwegian that well so you can't... you can't do anything at all. What are you, like, doing here?"'

Strategies to counter customer maltreatment

We now turn to strategies our interviewees used in response to customer maltreatment. The literature on behavioural coping strategies related to racism is less developed when it comes to customer contact and ethnic minority service-providers, whose autonomy and available coping strategies are restricted by their professional role. Mirchandani (2003: 22) finds an almost complete silence on the racialized nature of such work, noting that 'much of the literature to date is based on a unidimensional understanding of stratification in terms of gender or class difference'. Drawing on our empirical data and the categories listed in the analytical framework, we propose two broad conceptual categories of responsive face-to-face behaviour towards racist customers: understanding and confrontation.

Whatever their ethnic background, anyone who engages in customer contact is normatively bound by limits imposed by employers, a company code of conduct and the community of employees. Empathizing with the customer – seeing things from his or her viewpoint – can be thought of as an attempt to reconcile organizational feeling rules with the need to maintain personal dignity vis-à-vis racist or abusive customers. A counter-strategy to maltreatment is, hence, understanding, as exemplified in the story of Atal. This 19-year-old Afghan immigrant who obtained Norwegian residency through family reunification three years prior to our interview takes a conciliatory stance towards customers at his part-time supermarket job:

At work I get some difficult customers, and it was actually very hurtful to me. They can discriminate, but I don't have a negative view on them. I think that if a Norwegian would travel to my country then he'd surely feel the same. It's common. I try not to care about it.

Atal suggests that customer maltreatment is unpleasant and even hurtful, but can be understood through identification and empathy. By rising above hostility and offering understanding, young adults of ethnic minority background communicate magnanimity and reclaim moral ground. It is also psychologically gainful to minimize the perceived levels of hostility by seeing acts of maltreatment as motivated by something other than ethnic prejudices (Fangen, 2008: 88; Matthews, 2006).

18-year-old Luljeta, born in Norway to Albanian parents, recalled during a focus group discussion how an old lady scolded her and other foreign-looking persons at a supermarket for being criminals and ‘taking over the country’. ‘But we didn’t say anything. We understood what she meant, so we were like, “OK, fine,”’ explained Luljeta. She says she did not get upset by the episode because she could empathize: ‘The elderly, I feel that they don’t know.’ Indeed, Norway became an immigration country only in the late 1960s (Fangen et al., 2010), and the older generation of ethnic Norwegians generally has less direct contact with non-ethnics. Luljeta’s understanding nevertheless has its limits:

Where I’m working now, there is an old lady who eats porridge for breakfast. So I bring her the porridge [but] I don’t make the porridge, they make it in the cafeteria, but then [once] it wasn’t cooked properly... And she just went like: ‘The porridge wasn’t properly cooked. So when you come to Norway you need to learn how to cook porridge.’ And then I’m just looking at her. She’s like – ‘Yes? Where are you from?’ And I got really upset. I say: ‘I’m Norwegian.’ She’s just like: ‘Oh no, I doubt that.’

Some of the residents at Luljeta’s workplace do not want to be handled by her or her colleagues of foreign background. ‘But they don’t say much. They don’t say it with words’, notes Luljeta. Her response is soft-spoken, showing the elderly a little extra care and treating them particularly well, since they are ‘a bit like that’. Listening to Luljeta’s narrative, Yasmeen, a co-discussant who was born in Norway to Pakistani parents, cuts in. She, by contrast, can become confrontational at the small shop where she works:

Me, I get really annoyed when I get this kind of customer. I’m sorry, but I talk back! If I get that kind of customer here I reply: ‘Sorry, but I was born and raised here, you can’t talk like that to me.’

The general phenomenon that 18-year-old Yasmeen subsequently refers to – ‘I can’t accept that a person comes to discriminate another person all the time’ – is exacerbated by her being treated as a foreigner although she was ‘born and raised here’. Later in our group discussion, she elaborates on the constraints of her organizational setting and the limits to her autonomy: ‘I really need to take care because I need to be nice and kind because they are customers. But when it’s really going haywire, to put it like that, I talk back.’ The risk of engaging in confrontation may be smaller in one-off encounters with customers than in permanent worker–recipient relations, as in Luljeta’s case, but organizational feeling rules prevail.

Conclusion

This article presented data on the interactional co-construction of exclusionary practices on the Norwegian labour market. The complex phenomenon is not

easily captured by survey-based studies using structural indicators for analysing immigrant incorporation from a host state perspective. Drawing on interview-based data and focusing on the social reality of young adults of immigrant background, we saw relatively few incidents of discrimination by employers, especially after respondents obtained a job, though there were somewhat more incidents of maltreatment while interacting with customers. A two-fold analysis of customers and employers proves useful for conceptualizing these two dimensions of exclusion and the coping strategies associated with each.

The possibility of discriminating employers is shrouded in attributional ambiguity, raising the question: ‘What can I do to correct for negative ethnic stereotypes and attitudes the employer may have?’ The onus is on the job applicant’s proactivity, such as impression management at interviews, informing employers about ethnic identity at an early stage and utilizing social networks.

For ‘boundary spanners’ in the service sector, the perceived reality of being maltreated by customers is more attributionally clear. Still it raises another question: ‘How can I respond to customer maltreatment without violating employee rules?’ Coping strategies here are of a more reactive nature; non-confrontational strategies seem most frequent, perhaps suggesting that organizational feeling rules have been internalized. A pertinent analytical question not answerable here is whether negative frontline experiences motivate or disincentivize upward social mobility.

Employers and superiors in Norway and elsewhere in Europe have legal and moral responsibilities to not discriminate against staff or job-seekers. That none of our interviewees reported any discriminatory incident or even seemed aware of the possibility of reporting it should one occur, is typical, as elsewhere in Europe (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009). Customer contact is less researched and, by necessity, less regulated, though this article demonstrates its relevance. We believe employers, legally obliged to not discriminate, also have a moral responsibility to support frontline workers who are vulnerable to exclusionary practices in encounters with customers. In this way, hurtful experiences are not exacerbated by uncertainty about what constitutes permissible reactions to them. Developed by an organization’s administration, a set of principled guidelines delineating not only what kinds of uneven exchanges are permissible but also how employees may respond to them, could be empowering – provided they promote rather than cripple individual agency. The customer may always be right, goes the slogan. But, as one superior made clear for a grateful frontline worker at a fast-food chain: ‘We are not their slaves.’

Note

1. That most complaints by higher-educated migrants would relate to their experiences in low-skilled occupation does not necessarily suggest that cultural capital is irrelevant. Instead, it could mean that the fact of occupying a position at odds with/inferior to one’s cultural capital sharpens the experience of discrimination (or the attribution of bad treatment to one’s ethnic origin).

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