Experiences of South Asian Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

The focus of this study is to explore the nature of South Asian students' experience of Higher Education (HE). It is important to note that academic literature surrounding South Asian students' experience of HE is limited in quantity and scope. The limited research material has focused on the experiences of Black students or it has often homogenised all minority groups, speaking of a collective experience. The research explores the South Asian students' experience of HE with specific interest as to how much the students would value having a lecturer from a South Asian origin and explores experiences of isolation in a predominately white institution. Finally, the research demonstrates that there are many unique and dynamic factors contributing to the experience of South Asian students in HE: isolation is felt acutely and the desire for ethnic minority lecturers is advocated by the students. The narratives create a rich matrix of experiences and perceptions of HE.

Introduction

As a woman of South Asian origin, with the experience of oppression and a multitude of struggles within the educational process, my understanding of and commitment to opposing the individual, institutional and structural nescience of Higher Education is important to me. Causes for concern include the significant low number of ethnic minority lecturers in Higher Educational institutions. The concern leads to the questions of institutional racism, and as a sociologist I feel it is important to challenge this denial of institutional racism and, in the case of Higher Education, this is not an altogether difficult thing to do. As a researcher, my task is to explore and ask how social systems really work, how ideology or history conceals the processes which oppress and control people. The barriers facing ethnic minority students are numerous: lack of relevant information on post-16 education; discouragement from thinking about Higher Education (HE); isolation once in HE; discrimination by staff and students in HE; unresponsive curriculum responses to ethnic diversity in HE; (Bird, 1996) and lack of ethnic minority lecturers in HE. For a small scale study, such as this type, I will not be able to cover all areas of discrimination. Therefore, the focus of the study will be: to explore the nature of South Asian students experience of Higher Education with specific interest as to how much the students would value having a lecturer from a South Asian background. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with male and female students from South Asian origin. The findings suggest that the students would benefit from having a lecturer from the same origin as there would be 'better understanding culturally', there would be greater communication and students suggested that South Asian lecturers would be a source of inspiration with regards to role models.

The main focus of institutional and classroom development, and of related literature and research, has been the school rather than the post-school sector. This relative lack of post-school attention is reflected in the limited amount of good practice or attention to such concerns in universities (Leicester, 1993). Incomes to the attention of all educationalists that race, ethnicity and discrimination in HE are issues that have been ignored and sidelined. Furthermore, the narratives of ethnic minority students' experience

of HE have been neglected and under researched. This ethnographic study attempts to fill the gap in the literature.

The success of many black students gaining entry to HE despite the background of discouragement in schools and stereotyping, is encouraging and some groups of black students are succeeding in spite of discrimination. It is important to note that those of Indian origin are more qualified than those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin. Thus, '71 per cent of 16 to 19-year-olds from ethnic minority groups were in full-time education in 1997, compared with 58 per cent of young white people' (Observer, 18th March 2001). Contrary to the discouragement of schools and stereotyping, Anwar (1998) found that great emphasis was placed on education by Asian parents: 'education is valued highly within the community as a primary means of improving life chances and is regarded as a self-defining and personally empowering process' (Anwar, 1998:35). Bhatti (1999) found that many mothers and fathers had not been given the opportunity of receiving any form of schooling and found that Asian parents were either self-employed or unskilled or semi-skilled employees in large organisations such as factories and hospitals. All the parents in her study wanted their children to do well and they encourage them for a higher standard of education. However, although the statistics indicate greater participation of ethnic minority groups in education, ethnic minority students often experience HE as isolating and discriminatory when they get there.

Isolation is experienced in a number of ways: isolation from peers where there are few black students on the course; isolation from white students, some of whom actively discriminate; isolation within largely white institutions; isolation from parents and parental cultures. Asian students tend to come from predominately clustered backgrounds with other Asian students around them at school and college. Entering HE, many Asians feel isolated within a white institution. Bird (1996:25) suggests 'great degrees of isolation are expressed by Asian students in general, and by Asian women students in particular'. However, it is important to recognise that there are different experiences of isolation for different ethnic minority groups: some minority groups may see social class differences as the root of the isolation; others may see age as the major factor of isolation; Asian women may feel isolated

from white woman in HE and from their peers who are not in HE. Furthermore, where ethnic minority students are in a minority, isolation is felt acutely.

Institutional racism defined by the Swann Report (1985) is the way in which a range of long-established systems, practices and procedures in education and the wider society, may unintentionally work against minority groups by depriving them of opportunities open to the majority population. The Commission for Racial Equality outlined in the McPherson Report (1999) 'if racist consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs or practices, the institution is racist whether or not the individual maintaining those practices have racial intentions'. Thus, a study conducted by Bird (1996) in a group of schools and higher education institutions found that many black students felt that relationships with staff were made more difficult because of the lack of black staff in HE. Bird's study found that the lack of black staff was a central issue for black students even though some students obtained support from other black students. It is important to note that ethnic minority staff and lecturers can act as role models for ethnic minority students. Thus, Carr (1993) suggests, we need teachers who provide good role models for all their pupils, who have a wide range of academic and personal experiences, and who reflect and are sensitive to the needs and aspirations of a similar wide range of pupils. Brah's (1996) research of Asian school children reflects the discontent expressed at the underrepresentation of Asian and black teachers in schools, and the relative absence of black people from positions of authority and power. Thus, the pessimistic view and 'the excuse that such a range of potential teachers does not present itself for admission at the doors of the teacher education institutions is not acceptable – teacher educators should be setting out actively to look for them' (Carr, 1993: 114, cited in Siraj-Blatchford). Further, Brah (1996) indicates educational disadvantage accrues if the formal and hidden curriculum of the institution is eurocentric and the cultures and identities of Asian students are devalued;

> 'if there are very few Asian teachers in the school [in the case of this study we should also include FE and HE institutions] and even fewer Asian people in the power hierarchy of the educational system; if the ideology that 'black people are a problem for white society' is not challenged; and generally if no connection is

made between the educational process and the broader social context to the arrival and settlement of Asian and other black groups in post-war Britain'

(Brah, 1996: 80).

Furthermore, it is important to note, not only is race an issue but women (white and black) are also neglected and less visible than their male counterparts in HE institutions particularly in positions of authority. So until students see men, women, black and white working together in all subject areas, heading departments and taking policy decisions will students, particularly women and ethnic minorities, have positive role models.

Methodology

Bhopal (2000) defines as 'South Asian' whose ancestors originated from the Indian subcontinent: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. For this study the sample of South Asian students were taken from numerous universities: Sheffield, Leicester, Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Brighton. Thus, the value of conducting ethnography, gaining access to the perceptions that people have of their social positions and locations, is in this sense, the aim of this research. It is therefore, to build up a detailed knowledge of students experiences and their attitudes towards ethnic minority and white lecturers in Higher Education.

20 semi-structured interviews were carried out with undergraduate students aged between 18-27. Further as a participator within Higher Education as an undergraduate and postgraduate I draw upon my personal experience as a participant observer. The individuals interviewed came from diverse social and economic backgrounds. Interviewing was considered to be an appropriate method of obtaining the views of South Asian students because semi structured interviews produce a wealth of valuable data and allow the researcher to follow up ideas, probe questions and investigate motives and feelings (Bell, 1993). However, it is important to recognise the limitations of the study and the research process. Interviewing is a highly subjective technique and therefore there is always a danger of bias. However, contrary to the above argument there can, in fact, be considerable advantages of a South Asian person conducting interviews on South Asians students. The advantages can include a supportive environment in which

sensitive and difficult issues such as isolation in a predominately white institution can be discussed. However, as one of the respondent indicted;

> 'these Asian lecturers think they are 'Mr English', trying to treat people equally, because they are Asian, but they are just stressed out trying to impress white lecturers and trying to push the students' (Anhar, 25, Engineering and Technology).

The respondent feels that having an Asian lecturer does not provide him with a supportive environment. The comment indicates resentment of Asian lecturers, this could also possibly be true of a researcher, who maybe perceived as being 'Ms English'.

Further, I reflected on concrete experience and reflexive observation. Thus, the advantage of using participant observation as a technique is its directness: you do not ask people questions, you listen and observe their actions. However, there is a major issue concerning the extent to which the observer affects the situation under observation. Furthermore, it is important to note, due to the size of the sample and the sampling techniques used, the research cannot be considered representative. However the research provided valuable insights of the experience and attitudes of South Asian students in Higher Education.

Results

A rich matrix of experiences and perceptions emerged from the interviewing process. The interviews identified several significant themes: greater degrees of isolation occurred when students were the minority on their course: South Asian students stressed the importance of South Asian lecturers as a source of inspiration, advocating South Asian lecturers as strong role models for Asian students: Racism and white lecturers stereotyping Asian students was a reoccurring theme for South Asian students.

Isolation

Isolation was experienced greatly where Asian students were isolated from their peers and where there were few Asian students on the course. Thus, Jatinder advocates;

'I wish there were more Asians on my course, they're all white I can't even relate with them, sometimes I even think that there on a different planet. I need people on the same wave length' (Jatinder, 18, Social Science).

In relation to the above comment Jatinder quoted;

'All my friends back at home, in Southall, were Asian. I came to this uni thinking that there will be a few Asians here…obviously not. All the uni nights are English, even the freshers week, it was all English' (Jatinder, 18, Social Science).

Kiran also desired to have more Asians on the course. Again the framework of seeking 'other' Asian students, having more in common, greater understanding and solidarity was expressed;

'I feel I can't relate to whites like I do with Asians…I wish there were more on my course' (Kiran, 22, Textiles).

The above quotes indicate a clear relationship between understanding, solidarity and the desire to have more Asian students on the course. Essed (2000) extends the argument suggesting that the environment of white universities is different from their (South Asian) home and previous school experience. For many South Asians students of my generation, they were the first to attend university in their families. It is a leap that has taken South Asian students from Asian homes and neighbourhoods into white universities, where narratives of alienation and loss are acute.

Role models

…in my career path it would be beneficial to see an Asian face because I do not know hardly any sports coaches or a lot of Asians in the sports sector or even participants. This is lacking greatly and would be nice to see a change… (Deepa, 27, Science and Technology).

From the interviewing process a recurring theme emerged; the importance of South Asian lecturers in university departments. Essed's (2000) study outlined

the desire, expectations and outcomes of women of colour in university departments:

> 'drawing from their own experiences as minorities in graduate school, most women of colour are likely to have an understanding of the situation of students of colour'. (Essed, 2000: 893).

The argument that 'most women of colour are likely to have an understanding of the situation of students of colour' was prevalent in the interviews. I extend this argument to male and female students having a South Asian lecturer and not specifically to female students. Thus;

> 'if I was having family problems I would rather speak to an Asian lecturer than a white lecturer because they know the score' (Anita, 24, Business Studies).

However, when students were asked 'if the ethnic background of the lecturer was similar to yours, would the gender of the lecturer be an issue?' It became apparent that in some cases this was an issue. A female interviewee quotes;

> 'even though men would know where we are coming from … you know parents are harsher on girls than boys, boys get away with what they want. Women would be more understanding to women's problems'. (Kulwinder, 20, Social Science).

Therefore, as the interviews suggest not only is the race of a lecturer an issue but, the gender of the lecturer is of importance for some South Asian students, particularly women.

White lecturers and stereotyping

In the interviewing process comparative comments were made about Asian lecturers and white lecturers with reference to communication and stereotyping. Overall all respondents suggested that they would prefer to have a South Asian lecturer compared with a white lecturer. Interviewees stressed that if they had problems regarding racism or the family they would prefer to speak to an Asian lecturer. Thus;

> 'I think that it would be quite beneficial to have an Asian lecturer… especially if I wanted to talk about issues of race or racism and the family' (Sandeep, 21, Physics).

What emerged from the research material was that students were willing to talk to Asian lectures regarding issues of racism and family. However, some students stated that they would prefer to speak about relationships with a white lecturer. Thus;

> 'yeah, with family problems I would speak to an Asian lecturer, they would have more understanding. But with issues like relationships they might be more judgmental' (Jatinder, 18, Social Science).

Jagdeep outlined a situation which occurred at university where he desired an Asian lecturer, or an Asian person of authority to be present;

> 'when I was barred to enter my own union in the evening because of my kirpan. I would have liked to have been with another Sikh at the time of the incident, preferably one with authority' (Jagdeep, 22, Mechanical Engineering).

Some interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with white lecturers, accusing them of prejudice, racism and stereotyping Asian students. Thus, there were repetitive examples of what white lectures think: *'whites always think that our parents are too strict', 'the lecturer was very biased, wasn't really helping, I think it was a slight racism'*. Further, Ashwin outlines a friends scenario and the white lecturers' insensitivity to cultural practices;

> 'Muslims had Ramadam and the lecturer didn't appreciate it. My friend was fasting and praying he didn't have time for preparing for his practicals and the lecturer didn't understand it….it mentally drove him to alcohol' (Ashwin, 23, Pharmacy).

Ashwin advocates the *"old school"* way of thinking of white lecturers; (he refers to "old school" as: '*sort of posh…more superior, they look down at you…*')

> 'also teachers don't understand your upbringing they're a little more posh. Asian (Asian lecturers) would be a bit less old school. Old school teachers think they are a little bit more superior than you, Asians wouldn't have the old school… (Ashwin, 23, Pharmacy).

The above quotes question to what extent lecturers, who are predominantly white, act as role models for all students. May be a lesson can be learnt from Carr's (1993) literature: the need for teachers who provide good role models

for all their pupils, who have a wide range of academic and personal experiences, and who reflect and are sensitive to the needs and aspirations of a similar wide range of pupils.

Conclusion

Some educationalists and sociologists question the reasoning of addressing minority students' needs and not white students' needs. Which distinct issues that black and Asian student face that makes their lives different from their white counterparts? The above research is not and does not attempt to be a comparative study. However, there is a distinct disparity between the experiences of white and Asian students in Higher Education. Thus, Bird (1996) adequately summarises the distinction;

> 'for instance, many White students have self-concept problems, but these do not include the alienating effects of racism. Whites may lack a support person [or system], but the process of developing such a relationship is not the same as for Blacks because of racial and cultural variables' (Bird, 1996).

The research has demonstrated the many unique and dynamic aspects of being South Asian in a predominately white institution. Thus, in conclusion, the experiences of South Asian students in Higher Education are in need of concern and further research, with the issue of role models at the forefront of debate. All students in the research findings advocated the desire for greater ethnic minority lecturers in Higher Education as a source of inspiration and greater communication. Thus, in relation to the lack of ethnic minority lecturers in HE, educationalists and sociologists should assess the recruitment process of ethnic minority lecturers.

Further, the research findings suggest that students' experience of isolation is mainly with other students on the course. Perhaps there should be greater need to work with all students, white and minority groups, to enhance greater understanding and awareness amongst all groups. Therefore, anti-racist training and education should extend and reach all boundaries of Higher Education, not just lecturers and academic staff.

Furthermore, it is important to note the students preferred to speak to Asian lecturers regarding issues of racism and the family. To what extent is Higher Education delivering the needs of its students if it fails to recruit ethnic minority lecturers?

A number of issues have emerged from the research process. Firstly, the need for greater number of ethnic minority lecturers in Higher Education. Secondly, the questions surrounding South Asian students' experience of isolation in Higher Education, an area largely ignored by all disciplines, requires further research. The perceptions of South Asian students of White lecturers indicates a need for greater integration and understanding of the experiences of South Asian students by a predominately white institution. Overall, this paper attempts to contribute to progressive social change within Higher Education, thus;

> 'action research is not research for social change, or research on social change, but research as social change (Schratz and Walker, 1995). We investigate reality in order to change it; we change reality in order to investigate it' (Kemmis and Wilkinson, (1998: 25)., cited in Walker, 2001).

Furthermore, I hope lessons can be learnt form from the narratives of South Asian students' experiences of Higher Education, and issues of concern for ethnic minority students emerge on policy agendas of faculties and departments.

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