

ETHNICITY AND ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS: MAKING SENSE OF THE GAME AND LEARNING ITS RULES

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ABSTRACT

Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) employees are underrepresented in senior roles, yet the study of ethnicity in organisations has been largely overlooked, particularly the impact of informal/political processes on BAME experiences. It has been suggested that BAME employees are 'left out of the loop' when it comes to developing understanding about these processes but this assumption lacks theoretical underpinning and has not been empirically investigated. The proposed research therefore adopts a social cognitive perspective, examining how individuals learn about political processes and, using attribution theory, make sense of them. The project has important implications for supporting workplace diversity.

SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE

The number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) employees in the UK workforce continues to rise; yet representation in senior positions remains disproportionately low. Just 5% of senior UK managers are BAME compared to 12.4% of the working population (ONS, 2013). Despite the urgent need to understand why this disparity exists ethnicity has been rather neglected in organisational research.

In a review of organisational psychology articles since 1952, Kenny and Briner (2007) identified just 32 with ethnicity as a primary focus. Importantly, research that has examined ethnicity largely mirrors the approach of legislation, policy and practice by focussing on the role of *formal* workplace processes (eg, reducing bias in selection and assessment) in the workplace experiences of BAME employees. While this has been significant in enhancing the representation and experiences of BAME individuals in the workplace, much less attention has been paid to the parallel informal and political workplace processes (ie, those that are not regulated, influenced by *informal* relationships and open to bias: Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). Adopting a social cognitive perspective, the research presented here seeks to redress this gap by exploring BAME experiences of politics in the workplace.

Organisational politics and diversity

Organisations have been defined as 'political arenas', where individuals and groups engage in political activity to compete for power, influence and resources (Mintzberg, 1985). Thus, political behaviour, defined as "behaviour not formally authorised, officially certified, or widely accepted by the organization" (Ferris, Frink, Bhawuk, Zhou & Gilmore, 1996, pp. 26) is important for enhanced job performance, leadership effectiveness, satisfaction at work and career success (see Kimura, 2015 for a review).

Theoretical work has proposed that BAME employees may experience greater stress in political workplaces and may be 'politically deficient' in learning about and making sense of informal and political processes, as information about them may be passed selectively via informal interactions between demographically dissimilar co-workers (ie, white males: Charles & Nkomo, 2012; Ferris, Frink & Galang, 1993). In a recent study examining the career paths of BAME and white senior managers Wyatt and Silvester (2015) found that it is indeed the political side of organisations that presents particularly problematic barriers for BAME employees' progression, including difficulty accessing networks, gaining supervisory support and enhancing visibility. Yet we know very little about when and why these differences emerge.

Social cognition

In order to address this gap there is a need to examine social cognition in relation to BAME experiences of politics. Two forms of social cognition may be particularly important for formulating political strategies and achieving success in the workplace (Silvester & Wyatt, in press):

- Political learning is the development of knowledge about informal and political processes, or the 'rules of the game' (eg, who has the power and what are their needs and strengths).
- Sense-making relates to how individuals understand and explain an organisation's political landscape so they can decide how to respond to political behaviour.

Yet while social cognition represents a vital area of study to inform our understanding of what shapes individuals' political effectiveness and how BAME employees may be hindered in this respect, it has been largely overlooked in the literature.

Attribution theory, an established social cognitive theory, is of particular relevance to this study as this proposes that individuals are motivated to make sense of events that they consider novel, surprising or threatening, such as politics in the workplace, and this helps such events become more controllable and predictable and may influence how individuals respond (Martinko et al., 2011). If a political incident is perceived as out of an individual's control, for example, they may experience greater negative outcomes and be less willing to engage in political behaviour in the future and thus less able to progress (Kimura, 2015; Silvester & Wyatt, 2015). The present research will therefore examine how BAME employees 1) learn about and 2) make sense of informal and political workplace processes.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

Interviews were conducted with 45 BAME employees, 21 were male, the average length of career was $M = 16.73$ years ($SD = 7.65$) and they had career histories in both public and private sectors. We asked participants to identify their own ethnicity, so terms vary through this report (ie, Indian, Asian, British Indian etc). Participants were recruited using opportunity sampling from a mailing list associated with diversity in the workplace. An email was sent through this network asking for participants to assist with research about careers and experiences of the workplace. All participants were voluntary and were assured confidentiality.

Interviews were semi-structured, lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were largely conducted on telephone. This approach allowed participants to talk freely as they could schedule interviews during non-work hours. Questions focused on participants' career histories more broadly and then on their understanding of politics and the role it played in their experiences of the workplace. The critical incident technique (CIT: Flanagan, 1954) was used to investigate significant events, incidents, processes and outcomes related to both the positive and negative impact of politics. CIT was particularly useful in this research because it allowed each incident to be explored in order to understand the cognitive, affective and behavioural factors associated with politics in the workplace. Interviews were recoded and transcribed verbatim for analyses.

Analyses

To identify how individuals learnt about politics in the workplace the interviews were analysed using content analysis. This involved counting instances where text fits specific categories (Mayring, 2000). In this study text was coded according to three broad categories that were generated from the data: How individuals learnt about politics, who initiated these learning opportunities and what was learnt. Codes were added to each category during analyses, for example, 'mentoring', 'reading', 'formal training' were added to 'How individuals learnt about politics'. Transcripts were reanalysed based on these additional codes.

In order to examine how individuals made sense of political experiences, analyses focussed on passages of text that contained causal attributions about politics. These were identified using the definition by Joseph et al (1993, pp. 250) of 'statements identifying a factor or factors that contribute to a given outcome...where a stated or implied causal relationship has to be present'. Causal statements were deemed to be about politics when they were about behaviour that the speaker felt was not formally authorised by the organisation and not in line with official, sanctioned organisational procedures. Although it is common to code attributions along a number of dimensions, in this study it was the *content* of attributions that was important. Once extracted, these causal statements were organised into themes that emerged from the data.

FINDINGS

Political learning

All 45 interview transcripts were coded using content analysis and there were 180 incidents where individuals discussed learning about organisational politics. A random sample of 10 transcripts were second-coded by a second coder to check inter-rater reliability. The Kappa value was .74, suggesting a good level of reliability (Fleiss, 1971). Figure 1 presents the methods interviewees discussed in relation to *how* they learnt about politics. This suggests that observation and mentoring (provided by managers or senior colleagues) were the most used method of learning about organisational politics.

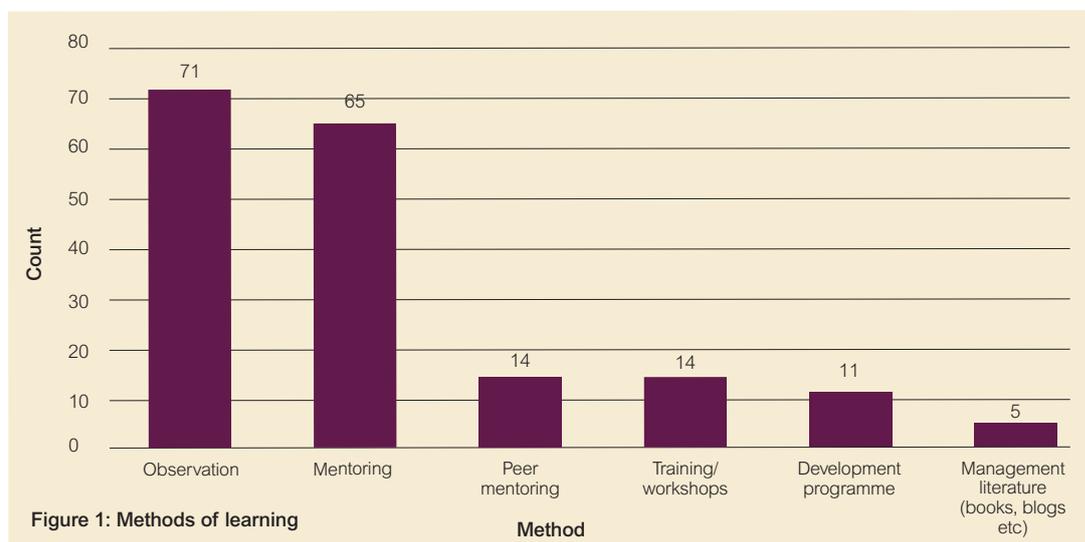
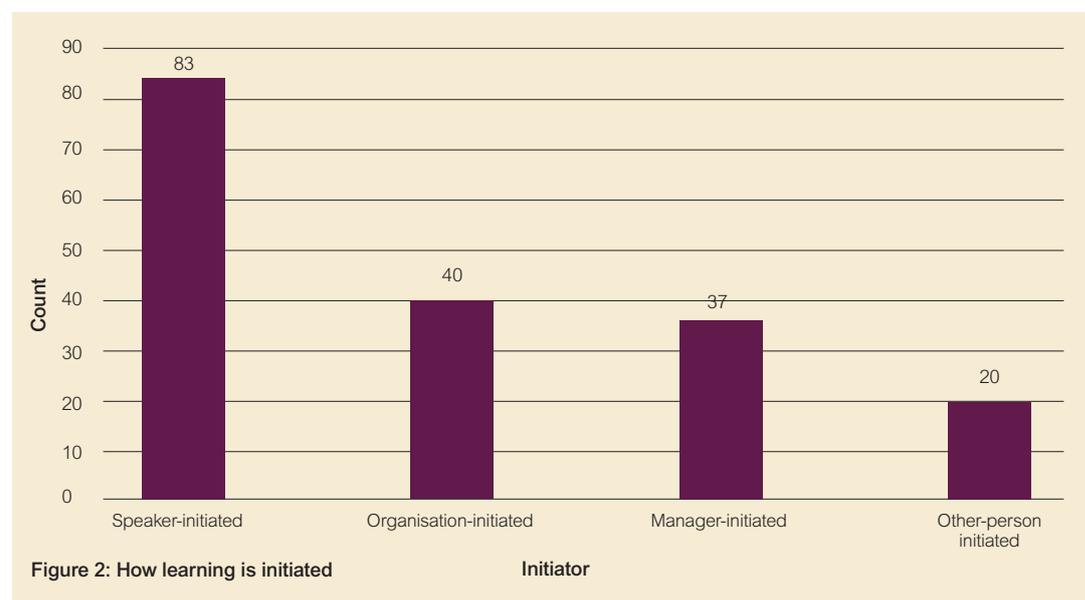


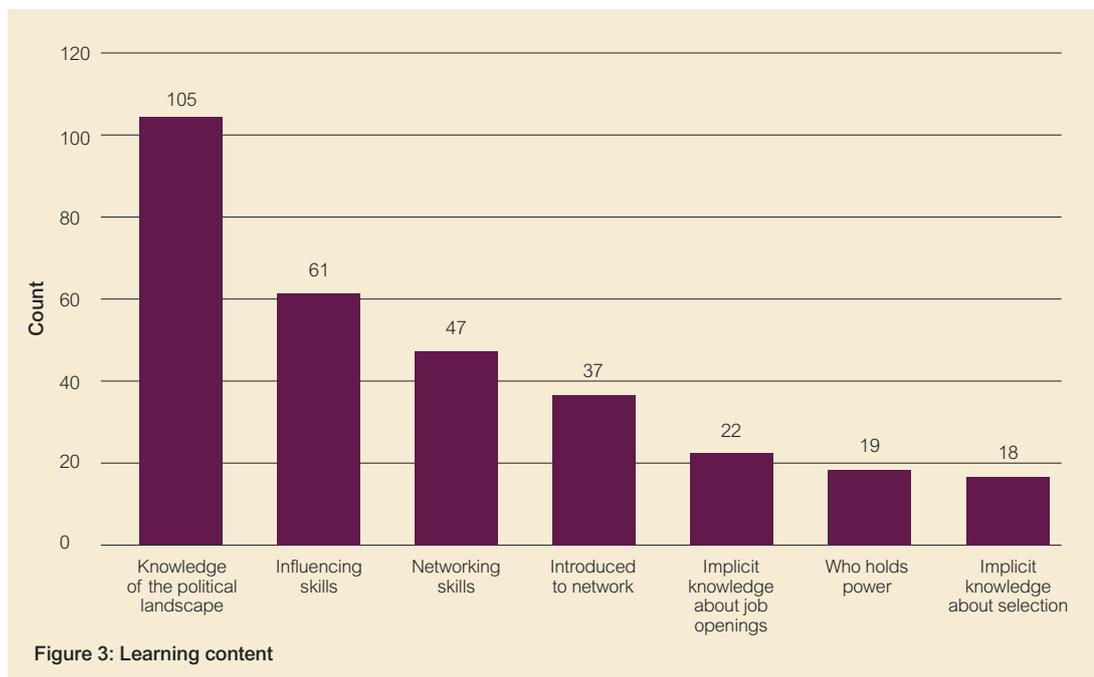
Figure 2 shows that these learning opportunities were most likely to be initiated by the speaker themselves.



CONTINUED OVERLEAF

FINDINGS (CONT)

Figure 3 shows that these experiences largely imparted knowledge about the political landscape. This category included knowledge about 'how things are done around here' and the informal processes that functioned in organisations. Learning experiences also developed skills in influencing and networking and to a lesser extent, knowledge about specific processes such as selection.



Although the content analysis revealed that mentors, including managers and senior colleagues can provide important access to political information and skill development, much of the political learning that BAME interviewees experienced was self-initiated and often relied on simple observation. This finding is in line with accounts from our interviewees who reported feeling left out of the loop when it came to developing political knowledge, a finding that is supportive of theoretical work which suggests BAME employees may not be savvy to political information because it is passed selectively through white male networks (Ferris et al., 1993):

"There are a lot of sort of political machinations that are unwritten but that exist and which no-one points out or tells you about" (Participant 40, Male, British Indian)

"There are always the black and white rules of what's needed to progress in your career but also the hidden rules which nobody ever tells you about" (Participant 34, Male, Black African)

Several interviewees even described experiencing sudden realisations that others were benefitting from political behaviour and it was an important part of career development:

"First of all I was never aware of it before and I used to think that, you know, you just have to put in the hard work and do the application and go through the interview process ... I think I now realise that I've been completely in the dark and I didn't have a realistic view of the workplace" (Participant 41, Female, Middle Eastern)

"To me I thought if you are good enough, you've got your qualifications, you've got the experience then you should be able to progress but I've come to know that a lot of the time it's not about what you know" (Participant 33, Male, Asian)

These findings therefore suggest that BAME employees have little formal access to learning about organisational politics and developing political strategies and behaviours. What they do learn is largely from independent learning and observation.

Political sensemaking

When examining how participants made sense of political experiences, we examined causal statements for positive events, where the outcome was beneficial for the speaker, and negative events, where the outcome was detrimental.

Attributions for negative events: Overall, politics was described as negative force for BAME employees, which was seen as detrimental for career and workplace experiences:

"There's still a glass ceiling whether I like it or not. I've been around here and I've seen people that are from minorities and they seem to find it quite difficult to climb; politics has really pulled them back" (Participant 34, Male, Black African)

Perhaps as a result of this, a key finding was that interviewees were often strongly opposed to engaging in organisational politics themselves:

"I tend to avoid getting involved in politics." (Participant 7, Female, British Indian)

"I've always thought you're judged on your abilities and you get rewarded for the work that you put in – that's my whole thing, you know, and this is why I have a problem with politics. I mean it would have been easy for me and in fact it would be very easy for me...to get that job from my mentor and go ahead and retire. But no, I couldn't do it. No. There's no way" (Participant 15, Male, Black African)

"you think 'oh my god, I wouldn't do that' or 'that seems a bit sneaky' or 'why are they doing it this way?'" (Participant 18, Male, Asian)

Based on existing research (eg, Doldor, Anderson & Vinnicombe, 2013; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015), these findings suggest that BAME individuals in particular are strongly opposed to organisational politics, valuing meritocracy and relying on formal systems, perhaps because of the greater challenges they've experienced engaging in informal organisational processes.

Specific political experiences that were described as detrimental to the speaker included favouritism during selection and promotion, individuals attacking one's reputation, others receiving favouritism from managers, and managers exploiting formal regulations to manipulate agendas.

"Somehow before we could go for interviews – I certainly didn't have a problem with in terms of coming through that favourably – the rules were kind of changed to say well instead of an interview we'll go by consensus. So a management team then was set up to look for candidates outside the formal process and I lost that job and clearly I know the only reason why I lost it is because I didn't go for an interview." (Participant 33, Male, Black African)

'You sense there was a clique and you weren't part of the clique no matter how hard you worked.' (Participant 16, Male, Indian South African)

These experiences were largely attributed to external and uncontrollable factors, such as others' behaviour, particularly the actions of managers. This suggests that either interviewees are attributing these negative experiences externally to protect their self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989), or are genuinely experiencing events that are largely out of their control when related to workplace politics.

Attributions for positive events: The types of experiences discussed that were reported as positive were similar to those that were perceived as negative, such as politics being useful in selection, promotion and division of work. This suggests that perceptions of politics are influenced by an egocentric bias (Tanaka, 1999), so that the same political behaviour is perceived as positive or negative depending on the outcome for the speaker.

For positive events, based on existing theory about self-serving bias (Miller & Ross, 1975), it was expected that individuals would take credit for their own successes. However, interviewees largely spoke about positive political experiences being caused by external and uncontrollable factors, usually assistance from managers or mentors, which were not initiated by the speaker.

"my mentor sort of like said to me, "Look, go and see him." You know, "He'll show you how to do [your application]" (Participant 14, Male, Black African)

"that manager got me involved in that event, so she got me to raise my visibility" (Participant 18, Male, Asian)

"my friend told me to sort of change a few sort of things in the office so make sure I was... so we hot desk for example and he was saying make sure you sit outside Partners offices who are the most senior people." (Participant 7, Male, Indian)

This pattern may reflect the values individuals hold about politics in the workplace. If it is perceived as immoral, attributing beneficial political behaviour to external sources makes such acts seem unintentional and therefore less Machiavellian (Ferris, Bhawuk, Fedor & Judge, 1995). Yet this may also reveal that BAME individuals are excluded from engaging in the political arena and need mentors and sponsors to be able to effectively achieve political aims.

DISCUSSION

This research addressed a gap in the literature by using social cognitive theory to explore politics and diversity in the workplace. Specifically, the research examined how BAME employees 1) learn about, and 2) make sense of political experiences at work. It was found that BAME employees reported feeling detached from the ‘political arena’, that political behaviour is often out of their control and they often experience its negative effects. It was also found that BAME employees report being reliant on mentors and the patronage of managers and other senior colleagues to engage effectively in organisational politics.

What is less clear is whether these explanations of political behaviour are due to cognitive bias, where individuals prefer explaining political behaviour, that can potentially be seen as Machiavellian, as caused by others because of a need to protect self-esteem and reduce conflict with the meritocratic values they hold, or whether they are in fact excluded from the political arena. Yet, regardless which explanation is accurate, and it may well be both, this research suggests that BAME employees need greater support from mentors, managers and senior colleagues so that they are not excluded from engaging in organisational politics.

Practical implications

Practically, organisations may need to consider providing positive action, in the form of training, mentoring and development courses that specifically target the development of political knowledge and skill amongst BAME employees. This raises ethical questions about whether organisations should train people in politics, given that it involves behaviour that is unsanctioned by the organisation. Yet, BAME employees appear to be disadvantaged not only by political behaviour of others, but also engaging in political behaviour themselves, which impacts a number of their career outcomes (Kimura, 2015; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015).

Positive action courses could look to adopt storytelling methodology to introduce individuals into the prevalence of organisational politics, train individuals in skills such as influencing and networking, and provide individuals with mentors who may act as guides through the political arena.

Limitations and future research

Although the original aim of the project was to make comparisons with a matched sample of white employees, the researcher chose to focus solely on a BAME sample for two reasons. First, ethnicity research has often overlooked the need to give BAME employees a voice so this was prioritised over a comparison with white employees (Stanley, 2009). Second, diversity research in particular is highly sensitive and participants are often unwilling to reveal their participation to colleagues. Given the broad range of participants, it would have been difficult to find matches without revealing that the interviewees had participated in the study, thus betraying their confidentiality. Future research could aim to replicate the project in a sample of white employees. It would also be useful to follow up interviewees and examine how their explanations of political experiences influenced their future willingness to engage in politics.

Dissemination and impact

This research has produced an employer toolkit; a document that has been circulated to a range of HR, diversity and occupational psychology practitioners that highlights the issue of organisational politics and diversity and identifies ways that organisations can support BAME employees. Ideally this research will form at least two academic papers, one on learning about politics and one on sensemaking, which will be submitted to top tier journals such as *Journal of Vocational Behavior* and *British Journal of Management*. The research is also being presented at the British Psychological Society's Division of Occupational Psychology conference in 2017, which is an academic and practitioner conference within the discipline. The researcher is willing to present the findings to any interested organisations and develop positive action workshops to support BAME employees in the workplace.

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