Ethnic Minority Personnel Careers: Hindrances and Hopes

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Autobiographical note

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Abstract

Personnel departments often have particular responsibility for equal opportunities within their organizations. This paper explores equal opportunities within personnel departments themselves, in relation to the careers of ethnic minority personnel practitioners. Through primary research, it identifies a range of criteria which can affect personnel careers, of which ethnic origin is often one. However, although being categorized as of ethnic minority origin often hinders personnel careers, the paper reveals that it is sometimes possible for individuals who are so categorized to overcome that negative effect through demonstrating some of those other criteria. Thus, the paper suggests, it is not just organisational equal opportunities practices which may provide hope for ethnic minority personnel careers but also – and perhaps more importantly – the actions of the ethnic minority individuals themselves. Ways in which personnel departments might support these actions are discussed.

Keywords: Personnel Careers, Ethnicity, Equal opportunities, Discrimination, Management of Diversity, Britain.

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This paper seeks to explore the relationship between ethnic origin[1] and careers in personnel departments[2] in Britain. Some limited evidence of ethnic minority under-representation and disadvantaging in personnel management exists: for example, data from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the professional body of the personnel management occupation, indicates that in April 2003 4.6% of members who responded to an ethnic monitoring question categorised themselves as being of an ethnic minority origin; however, they were disproportionately over-represented at the lower membership levels, and under-represented at the higher levels, for which substantial experience of personnel work is a pre-requisite. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that people of ethnic minority origin are disadvantaged when pursuing careers in personnel management (see for example Ridley, 1995).

However, none of this evidence is sufficient to demonstrate the existence of ethnic minority under-representation in personnel management positions in Britain, nor its possible causes. Firstly, as the Institute's own careers documentation notes[3], membership of the Institute is not always a pre-requisite for entry to personnel management positions (see also AGCAS, 1999). As a consequence many personnel practitioners do not belong to the Institute, and it is therefore possible that the sample of personnel practitioners belonging to the Institute is biased. In the second place, if under-representation does exist, it may have a number of causes, not only disadvantaging as a result of ethnic minority origin; for example, it is possible that people of ethnic minority origin are less inclined to pursue personnel management careers than their "white" counterparts.

Furthermore, although the anecdotal evidence suggests that disadvantaging is a factor in ethnic minority representation in personnel management positions, the validity of such anecdotal evidence is open to question; there may, for example, be factors other than ethnic minority origin which have led to the exclusion of those individuals, which they themselves have not recognised. Certainly, the fact that some people categorised as being of ethnic minority origin have been able to reach senior positions in personnel

management (c.f.Overall, 1998) suggest that the relationship between ethnic origin and personnel careers is not a simple one.

This paper is not intended to fill all of these gaps in current knowledge. It does not seek to identify the extent of ethnic minority representation throughout personnel departments in Britain, nor to explore the impact of supply-side issues, such as individuals' career choices, upon that. Rather, it aims to identify the structures and processes which affect careers in personnel departments and the relationship, if one exists, of ethnic categorisations to these, and, having done this, to suggest ways in which ethnic minority representation throughout personnel departments might be improved.

Literature review

This research draws upon a range of literature, and this is reviewed in this section. The section starts by reviewing literature on personnel careers in general, and then progresses to look at the different forms workplace discrimination may take, followed by possible models for tackling it. Finally, the situational approach to ethnicity is presented.

Existing research indicates that personnel careers in general do not conform to any one pattern. In relation to routes into personnel departments, the Association of Graduates Careers Advisory Service's information notes that "Personnel management can be entered in a number of different ways" (AGCAS, 1999: 7). The routes cited by the AGCAS include gaining promotion from an administrative position in a personnel department; direct entry to personnel management after completing a full-time course in the subject; direct entry to a personnel graduate training scheme after completing a degree in any subject; and entry to personnel via an organisation's general management trainee scheme (ibid.). The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development also notes that entry to personnel management may be via a graduate trainee scheme or direct into a personnel management position, occasionally straight from school, but more often after achievement of A-levels or a degree.[4]

The criteria which are necessary for personnel positions, therefore, may vary. In particular, there is variation in the extent to which a specialist personnel qualification is needed. In a survey of personnel specialists Lupton and Shaw (2001) found that only 52% of those in the public sector, and 44% of those in the private sector, were professionally qualified. Even in Hall and Torrington's research, the sample for which was derived from people studying for the professional qualification, 7% of personnel departments contained no professionally qualified staff, and in only 43% were half or more of the staff professionally qualified (Hall and Torrington, 1998: 5). In fact, the 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey found that only 45% of the employee relations managers surveyed had qualifications in personnel management or a closely related subject (Millward et al, 2000: 56).

However, there is evidence that specialist qualifications are increasingly required for inclusion in personnel departments. Both the AGCAS and CIPD now claim that employers often prefer to appoint people who are professionally qualified, particularly to more senior personnel positions, and Millward et al's analysis of the 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey reveals a trend towards the possession of specialist personnel qualifications among both new and established employee relations managers (ibid.: 57).

The career paths subsequently followed by personnel specialists also vary. In particular, commentators note the existence of both "linear" and "non-linear" personnel careers (Ulrich, 1997), i.e., personnel specialists who have built their careers exclusively within the personnel occupation, and those who have moved in and out of the personnel occupation and other functional areas. Hall and Torrington's survey of senior human resource practitioners, for example, found 43% had been within the personnel occupation throughout their careers, while the remainder had experience in range of other functional areas (Hall and Torrington, 1998: 174), a pattern also identified by Beardwell (1998) and Kelly and Gennard (2000). Indeed, Ulrich (1997) argues that there is a growing trend towards such "non-linear" careers.

This variety of career paths, and the fact that different criteria may be needed to progress a personnel career in different departments, may make planning a personnel career difficult. In particular, there is some suggestion that this variety may cause particular difficulties for people of ethnic minority origin. Both Brown (1992) and Modood (1997) suggest it may be easier for people of ethnic minority origin to win inclusion in professions than in some other occupations because they can do so more on the basis of their professional qualifications (which they can achieve through individual study), rather than having to rely upon the "acceptance, endorsement and help of white employers" (Brown, 1992: 62). The absence of a consistently-applied professional personnel qualification, noted above, may therefore leave people of ethnic minority origin more vulnerable to discrimination.

Research into the relationship between ethnic origin and inclusion in personnel departments, however - as indicated in the introduction - is limited. However, more general research into ethnic minority employment provides some insights into the kinds of barriers people of ethnic minority origin might face. A study of ethnic minorities in Britain, for example, revealed that, while different ethnic minority groups are differently distributed across the labour market, all are under-represented amongst employers and managers of large establishments (Modood et al, 1997) – the very establishments most likely to have specialist personnel functions.

Nor does the fact that personnel practitioners often have key responsibility for ensuring equal opportunities in their organisations necessarily mean that people of ethnic minority origin will not be discriminated against in their own departments. Indeed, various researchers have found evidence of some personnel practitioners adopting or countenancing potentially discriminatory practices (see for example Jenkins and Parker, 1987; Collinson et al, 1990; Collinson, 1991), although a more recent survey by Noon and Hoque, 1999 found no evidence of unequal treatment in responses to speculative enquiries.

Research into discrimination – both on the grounds of ethnic origin, and also on the grounds of other characteristics such as gender –reveals the many forms such unequal treatment may take. Often it involves access discrimination (Greenhaus et al, 1990), that is, discrimination which takes place at the point of entry to an occupation, in the recruitment and selection process. A recent survey of equal opportunities in the private sector in Scotland found that almost twice as many ethnic minority men and women as "white" considered that they may have been discriminated against during the recruitment process (Commission for Racial Equality, 2000). A survey of ethnic minority solicitors, indeed, found that they were more likely to obtain positions in firms specializing in ethnic minority cases because of the difficulty of gaining sponsorship from mainstream law firms (King et al, 1990).

However, Greenhaus et al also identify the existence of "treatment discrimination" which takes place after access to the occupation has been achieved. Such discrimination can have a substantial effect upon performance in a current job, and thus upon future career development (Snizek and Neil, 1992; Benokraitis and Feagin, 1995).

Treatment discrimination can take the form of, for example, exclusion from challenging tasks (Snizek and Neil, 1992; White et al, 1992), the use of gossip and technical jargon to retain the exclusivity of a group (Noon and Delbridge, 1993), exclusion from informal meetings (Kanter, 1993, The Local Government Management Board, 1992), or racial harassment and abuse (Commission for Racial Equality, 2000). A survey of ethnic minority managers in local government found additional barriers to their career development included lack of credibility because of stereotypical assumptions, and lack of support for ethnic minority managers working with discriminatory staff (The Local Government Management Board, 1992).

Further examples of discriminatory practices are presented by Benokraitis and Feagin (!995), who classify discrimination as a whole into three types: overt discrimination, subtle discrimination, and covert discrimination. While this model is, like some of those above, derived from research into sex discrimination, it again provides a useful

framework for the consideration of discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity also. The first category comprises those practices which are easily recognized as discriminatory, such as direct discrimination in recruitment, and harassment. The second comprises those practices which are visible but rarely noticed because such behaviour is regarded as natural (and which may not be intentionally discriminatory), including the kinds of practices of treatment discrimination noted above. The final category comprises practices which are hidden, intentional and malicious, for example tokenism.

Given the variety of forms discrimination may take, it is perhaps hardly surprising that a strategy for ensuring equality has proved elusive. Various models of ensuring equality have been proposed. One of these is the adoption of fair procedures to preclude discriminatory decisions, particularly in relation to recruitment (see Young, 1990, Liff, 1999). A development of this is the use of positive action (Liff, 1999) which seeks to compensate for past disadvantaging by providing support and development to members of under-represented groups, whilst still retaining the practice of fair procedures at the point of recruitment.

Although such procedural approaches are common (see Commission for Racial Equality 1995 and 2000) and remain "deeply embedded in understandings and approaches to equality in the UK" (Liff, 1999: 66) they have been widely criticized for ignoring the effects of gender and race (see for example Gregory, 1987; Liff, 1999). Furthermore, it has been claimed that such approaches are insufficient to improve the representation of disadvantaged groups within occupations (Jewson and Mason, 1986).

Other commentators have therefore looked to alternative approaches. Edwards (1995) and Law (1996) favour positive discrimination, in which recruitment decisions discriminate in favour of members of under-represented groups in order to ensure that they achieve equal representation. Indeed, Jewson and Mason (1986) claim that a number of organizations claiming to be following a model of fair procedures and positive action actually adopt positive discrimination because it is the only way of achieving their target of equal representation. Again, however, positive discrimination has been criticized for a

number of reasons (see Young, 1986, Edwards, 1995). Cockburn, for example, argues that it does nothing to change the structures which lead to inequality and argues for a more "transformational" approach (Cockburn, 1989: 218).

Another approach which became more popular in the UK in the 1990s is that of managing diversity (Liff, 1999). Although the meaning of the term has been contested (ibid), key features of the approach are that diversity should be valued and diverse contributions encouraged (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995; Arrendondo, 1996; Kossek and Lobel, 1996); that all sorts of diversity should be embraced, rather than just gender and race (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995), and, relatedly, that the focus should be on individuals, rather than upon disadvantaged groups (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994). As such, it is very different from positive action and positive discrimination, which focus upon certain identified groups.

However, in spite of these claims, as Liff (1999) has noted, managing diversity strategies still tend to be implemented alongside group-based approaches such as positive action, and managing diversity discussions still focus upon key social groups (Litvin, 1997). Indeed, it has been argued that managing diversity's rejection of categories such as women and ethnic minority groups ignores the collective disadvantage which members of those groups experience and undermines the potential for them to fight those disadvantages (Liff and Wacjman, 1996; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992).

Yet collective categories such as "ethnic origin" are problematic, as has already been noted. Indeed, as Mason (1995) argues, there is no universally accepted definition of ethnic origin itself. Rather, definitions are based upon a variety of factors including language, religion, national origin and race (Simpson and Yinger, 1985; Gordon, 1978). These factors themselves are problematic: as Miles (1982) has pointed out, for example, "there are no 'races' in the biological sense of there being distinct and discrete, biological groups" (Miles, 1982: 280).

Rather than perceiving ethnic categories as primordial and fixed, many commentators therefore argue that they are socially constructed and dynamic (see for example Pilkington 2001, 2003). Furthermore, they argue that ethnic minority individuals possess multiple identities (Pheonix, 1998; Pilkington, 2003), enabling them to adopt different identities in different circumstances, sometimes drawing upon ethnicity and sometimes not (Pilkington, 2001). This accords with the situational approach to ethnicity advocated by Banton (2000), which argues that individuals have many different potential bases for collective action, which they may use if it suits the particular situation in which they find themselves.

This recognition of the multiple categories to which individuals may belong leads Pollert (1996) to argue for micro-level empirical research to reveal how those different structures mesh together, and this is the approach taken here. In order to understand the careers and experiences of ethnic minority personnel practitioners the research presented here examines not only the impact of their ethnic categorisation, but also the impact of the other characteristics they possess which affect careers in personnel departments, and the micro-level processes by which this is effected. By so doing, the research seeks to show how, as Pilkington (2001) argues, some individual members of ethnic minority groups are able to resist racial / ethnic discrimination, in this case overcoming the hindrances presented to their personnel careers.

Notes on methodology

This paper draws upon the findings of a questionnaire survey of personnel practitioners of ethnic minority origin and five case studies of personnel departments in British organizations.

The questionnaire was distributed to an availability sample of personnel practitioners of ethnic minority origin to identify some possible issues for further research. In total, 41 responses were received from this sample; no response rate can be calculated as questionnaire recipients were encouraged to pass copies of the questionnaire to relevant

colleagues. The questionnaire responses, along with secondary research, informed the design of the case study research.

The case studies involved interviews with personnel practitioners and collection of relevant documentation from five British organizations. Organisations were selected via a mixture of purposive and availability sampling; in particular, case study organizations were required to include personnel practitioners of more than one ethnic origin, in order to facilitate discussion of the effects of ethnic origin upon personnel careers, as well as the effects of other criteria. The case study organisations were selected to provide representation of a range of industries, and included two local authorities, one privatized utility, one restaurant chain, and one manufacturing company. Given the potentially-sensitive nature of the research, assurances of anonymity were given. As a consequence – and because some of the organisations might be identified even if just their industry were made known – the sources of individual responses are usually not identified in the analysis of the research below.

Interviews were conducted with personnel practitioners from at least two personnel departments in each organization, in order that departmental, as well as organisational, factors affecting inclusion might be distinguished. Care was taken to ensure that interviewees represented various levels of seniority, both genders, and more than one ethnic origin to facilitate comparisons. In total 53 individuals were interviewed across the 5 organisations; of these 24 categorized themselves as of ethnic minority origin; a further 2 were sometimes categorized by others as of ethnic minority origin, while they themselves did not always do so (a point which will be developed below).

The interviews sought information on interviewees' career paths into and through the personnel hierarchy, the formal processes and criteria of inclusion, and interviewees' experiences of the actual practice adopted in their organizations, including any day to day treatment which affected personnel careers.

Given the particular emphasis upon ethnic origin in this paper, it may also be relevant to note that the author, who also conducted the interviews, is a "white" woman. While, as

Rhodes (1994) notes, there is a view that data collection is enhanced if the interviewer shares the ethnic origin of the interviewee, and that an interviewer who is "white" will be less able to understand the ethnic minority experience (see for example Mirza, 1992), the fact that this research sought to research people of all ethnic origins meant that it would have been impossible for the researcher to share the ethnic origin of all those interviewed. Moreover, as has been pointed out above, ethnic origin is by no means the only relevant "social signifier", and there are many other points of similarity which can lead to a sense of shared identity (Rhodes, 1994). Furthermore, it has been argued that the fact of being of a particular ethnic origin does not by itself invalidate the findings identified (Hammersley, 1993; Allen and Macey, 1994). Indeed, any claim that the researcher should share the ethnic origin of the interviewee would appear to suggest that there are essential ethnic origins, a suggestion which contradicts the conclusions of much of the secondary research discussed above.

Research findings: Hindrances to Ethnic Minority Personnel Careers.

The research reveals a number of ways in which the experiences and careers of people of ethnic minority origin may differ from those of their "white" colleagues. As tables I and II show, 22.5% of the questionnaire respondents believe that their ethnic origin has affected their recruitment to personnel posts in some way, and 52.6% believe that it has affected their experience of working in personnel once in post. The effect of ethnic origin upon personnel careers is apparent in a broad range of organisations, evidence of some such effect being apparent in each of the case study organizations.

Take in table I

Take in table II

The effects noted by questionnaire respondents and case study interviewees take many different forms. In some cases, as table I shows, they take the form of access discrimination. In most cases this is perceived to have a negative effect upon people of

ethnic minority origin, as in the case of the ethnic minority male questionnaire respondent who claims that he has been

> *"turned down for a job because, rightly or wrongly, the interviewers thought / felt the unions might object to conduct negotiations with me purely on the basis of my colour / origin".*

Similarly, one case study interviewee claims that *"If I wasn't of ethnic origin [sic] I should have got promotion"*.

However, the findings indicate that access discrimination may *occasionally* work in favour of the recruitment of people of ethnic minority origin. Indeed, a third of the questionnaire respondents who believe that their ethnic origin has affected their recruitment to personnel positions believe that it has had a positive effect, and two personnel managers interviewed during the case studies express a preference for appointing people of ethnic minority origin. Furthermore, in some of the case study organizations being of ethnic minority origin has enabled people to access positive action traineeships from which some people have moved into permanent personnel positions, leading some interviewees to argue that ethnic minority categorization can aid recruitment via that means.

However, even where ethnic minority categorization is believed to have a positive effect on recruitment, that positive effect often appears to be limited and does not extend to later career moves. One questionnaire respondent argues that ethnic minority origin can have a positive effect but "becomes a big stumbling block if I wish to pursue my career". Similarly some interviewees argue that the benefits of positive action traineeships are undermined by covert discrimination, former positive action trainees being given responsibilities but not the support necessary to succeed in them: "*there's a deliberate setting up to fail sometimes"*, one interviewee claims.

The research also indicates the existence of treatment discrimination. As table II above reveals, over half of the questionnaire respondents believe that their experience of working in personnel has been different from that of most of their "white" colleagues.

These differences take a number of different forms, shown in table III. However, all of them are likely to have a negative effect upon ethnic minority careers.

Take in table III

Some of this different treatment appears to be "covert" discrimination, as when both questionnaire respondents and interviewees report that they have been "encouraged" into marginal positions, usually dealing exclusively with ethnic minority issues. However, much of it falls into the category of "subtle discrimination", for example, the different ways in which other staff behave towards them and the additional difficulty of networking. Examples of subtle discrimination from the case studies include reduced support from "white" managers and reduced access to challenging tasks: "*I have found I have been given the less interesting, more menial tasks*" one interviewee explains.

However, it is important to note that the different experiences of personnel practitioners categorised as of ethnic minority origin do not arise only from the actions of personnel managers and colleagues but also from the actions of those outside the personnel departments, notably line managers, and from the organisation's strategy. This became particularly apparent during the case study stage of the research. Thus in some of the case study organizations the criteria for recruitment to personnel departments reflect the concerns of line managers. Furthermore, the need for personnel specialists to work closely with line managers in a number of the organizations means that the actions of those line managers can have a detrimental impact upon their personnel careers. Organisational policy or strategy can also affect the careers of people of ethnic minority origin in the case study personnel departments. For example, one organization has a policy of seeking to increase the proportion of employees of ethnic minority origin.

Ethnicity as a Resource?

The research findings therefore suggest that ethnic minority categorization often hinders personnel careers. However, as the above analysis indicates, there are occasions when

such categorisation may have some positive effect: for example, if the manager particularly wishes to include people of ethnic minority origin, or if the organization has a policy of developing employees of ethnic minority origin.

A number of the interviewees appear to be aware that the effects of ethnic minority categorization may vary from situation to situation, as throughout the case studies examples are found of interviewees altering the emphasis they place upon their ethnic categorisation depending upon the particular situation they find themselves in and their assessment of it. For example, in two organisations a number of interviewees sometimes label themselves as of ethnic minority origin because being categorised as of ethnic minority origin can support their careers in some way, either through positive action policies or through the existence of support groups and networks of similarly categorised staff. On other occasions, however, they resist such categorisation, for example referring to people of ethnic minority origin in the third person. In this way the findings support the situational models of ethnicity discussed above, suggesting that ethnicity is a resource to be used or not to fit the circumstances.

However, the findings also reveal some conflict over who can lay claim to membership of certain ethnic categories, with two interviewees categorizing themselves as "white" but being categorized as ethnic minority by some colleagues. In one example a personnel officer who was born in South America struggles when asked to describe the ethnic composition of his department, explaining that "*It depends whether you count sort of like me [sic] as a white*".

As that interviewee points out, the ethnic categories themselves are shifting and variable:

> *It depends on how you want to categorise people.... you find that different companies, different organisations, different sectors, some of them have eight categories, some of them have four, some of them have ten and whatever.*

This shifting nature of the categories is also apparent in the findings of the exploratory questionnaire, where some respondents altered the categories given in the questionnaire or ticked one category but added an additional one also.

Thus not only do interviewees categorize themselves according to ethnic origin at some times and avoid categorizations by ethnic origin at others, but they adopt different ethnic identities depending upon the situation in which they find themselves. One personnel manager interviewee, for example, categorizes herself as "Black" at some times and "African" at others. In this way it is sometimes possible for individuals to win inclusion by manipulating their ethnic categorization.

However, it is important not to overstate the possibility of winning inclusion by changing ethnic categorizations. As Jenkins (1997) and Pilkington (2001) have argued, ethnicity is not infinitely malleable. Indeed, the categories to which the interviewees can lay claim are limited, because the characteristics upon which claims to membership of an ethnic group may be based, such as skin colour, birthplace, and cultural norms of behaviour, have material grounding. The fact that ethnic categorisations in Britain are most often based on the physical characteristic of skin colour (Mason, 1995) means that very few of those who can be categorized as of ethnic minority origin are, like the personnel officer from South America, also able to be categorized as "white".

Other resources

Of course, ethnic origin is not the only criterion which affects careers in personnel departments. Nor is the ability to achieve certain ethnic categorizations the only resource individuals possess. As noted in the review of literature above, individuals possess multiple sources of identity and these can enable them to demonstrate some of those other criteria.

Asked what, if anything, might prevent them from achieving the personnel post they want to be in in five years' time, the questionnaire respondents therefore identify a range of other criteria in addition to their ethnic origin which might affect their personnel careers (see table IV), including gender and qualifications.

Take in table IV

Similarly, the case studies reveal that criteria such as past experience, qualifications, gender, age, being known to the person with power over personnel careers, and demonstrating particular behaviours can help to further personnel careers in those organisations.

However, a number of these other criteria may still be more difficult for people of ethnic minority origin to demonstrate. For example, the research finds that qualification requirements can indirectly exclude people of ethnic minority origin, several interviewees from one organization arguing that a decision not to recognise overseas qualifications excludes a number of people of ethnic minority origin who were not educated in Britain, while some personnel managers in another organisation fear that their company's policy of recruiting mainly from a limited range of universities may mean that people of ethnic minority origin are more likely to be excluded than their "white" counterparts. One personnel manager even claims that the use of the professional personnel qualification as an entry requirement, at least in the past, "*excluded certain people, there were very few black people doing IPD [sic] courses*".

Requirements to demonstrate particular behaviours sometimes have a similarly indirect, negative affect upon ethnic minority careers. For example, the way in which ethnic minority individuals behave in response to racial disadvantaging is crucial: one interviewee claims that an ethnic minority colleague has failed to gain promotion because she is "bolshy black – you have to be grateful". In another example, one "white" interviewee comments of her manager that "*Because he's Indian… [he] doesn't come across as he ought to*", supporting Jenkins" (1986) claim that behavioural criteria such as "manner" and "speech style" are ethnocentric.

A criterion of being known to those who have power over personnel careers may also indirectly affect the careers of people of ethnic minority origin, because where the manager is not of ethnic minority origin (which most managers are not) they may be less

likely to be known to him or her. They may be less likely to be related to him or her, or to belong to groups which would give the manager the impression of knowing them, such as the freemasons (both of which are alleged to aid personnel careers in at least one of the case study organizations).

The hopes for ethnic minority personnel careers

The analysis thus far has tended to focus upon hindrances to ethnic minority personnel careers, revealing ways in which people of ethnic minority categorization may be disadvantaged in pursuing personnel careers. Even where ethnic minority categorization appears to have a positive effect, it has been shown, this may be undermined through covert discrimination.

What hope is there then, for ethnic minority personnel careers? Adopting procedural approaches to equality, it might be argued, will reduce the existence of blatant discrimination at the point of recruitment to the personnel occupation. However, the literature suggests that such approaches are unable to remove more covert and subtle forms of discrimination which, it has been argued, also affect ethnic minority personnel careers. Certainly all of the case study organizations have already adopted such policies and procedures, and yet the findings indicate that such discrimination still arises.

Some of the case study organizations have also adopted positive action strategies, again, with mixed success. While it did seem that, where used, such strategies have increased the proportion of people of ethnic minority origin in personnel departments, a number` of the individuals recruited by those means have not succeeded in progressing their careers. As some of the literature discussed above argues, such approaches are insufficient, by themselves, to transform organizations and remove structural inequalities.

The literature review points to managing diversity approaches as a possible alternative, and three of the case study organizations claim to be following this approach. However, none of these organizations have completely rejected collective categorizations, as

managing diversity approaches advocate; rather, they have adopted managing diversity approaches alongside more procedural, group-based approaches, as Liff (1999) found in her research.

Furthermore, there is little evidence of the personnel departments in those organizations valuing all sorts of diversity. In fact, the findings suggest that in all of the case study personnel departments career progression still depends to some degree upon demonstrating some similarity with those who control personnel departments, whether through shared collective criteria such as gender or ethnic origin, or individualist criteria such as possessing similar qualifications, values, or ways of behaving. Indeed, even within the managing diversity literature itself there is an implicit recognition that organizations cannot value *all* difference: Herriot and Pemberton, for example, exhort organizations to identify and reward "required" behaviours (ibid.:210).

In fact, it is precisely this feature of managing diversity models – the identification of the behaviours which are required for career success or, in Kandola and Fullerton's terms, ensuring that "all employees have an understanding of how the organization operates, what it values, and how it expects employees to behave" (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994: 50) – which the research presented here suggests is particularly beneficial for ethnic minority careers. Because ethnic origin is not the only criterion which affects personnel careers, and because people possess many more resources than just their ethnic categorization, people of ethnic minority categorisation can achieve senior positions within personnel departments by using their various possible resources to emphasise their possession of some of those other criteria – providing, of course, they know what they are. While, as argued above, it may be more difficult for people of ethnic minority categorisation to demonstrate some of those criteria, it is not impossible.

Indeed, in the case study organisations there are numerous examples of people of ethnic minority categorisation progressing their personnel careers through demonstrating and being categorized according to some of those criteria rather than according to ethnic origin. Thus one ethnic minority interviewee has achieved promotion through her polite,

grateful and non-threatening behaviour; another through being known *("[my managers] knew me and knew my work potential"*); while another has found her career aided by her gender, reporting how one "white" female manager "*used to say to me, you know, there are so many incompetent men out there, you know, you're competent, you can do it, so she really pushed me*".

By contrast, some of their ethnic minority colleagues have failed to demonstrate and win categorization according to any of these other criteria. Thus one marginalised ethnic minority individual is described by an ethnic minority colleague as "*Bright, full of potential, who I know will not get on*" because, rather than demonstrating appropriate behaviours "*he rubs up the system the wrong way*".

What distinguishes those who reach the more senior levels of personnel departments from those who do not is therefore not the possession - latent or otherwise - of some essential ethnic origin, but their identification of those criteria which are needed for personnel careers in their organisation, and their ability to demonstrate at least one of these and to ensure that they are categorised according to that criterion. While this may be considerably more difficult for those whose ethnic minority origin is embodied in skin colour, it is not necessarily impossible.

Achieving this, however, requires a shift in the organisation's role with regard to equal opportunities projects. Rather than ensuring equality by itself, the organization *facilitates* the individual's pursuit of equality by providing information about the criteria which will lead to career success. In so doing, it recognises that the individual is not merely a passive victim of discrimination but an active agent in the attempt to overcome it. As Pilkington (2001) argues, "once we acknowledge that people are not merely victims but active agents the coexistence of racial discrimination and ethnic minority progress becomes explicable" (ibid.: 186).

Particular considerations for ethnic minority personnel careers

The research indicates, however, that the difficulties people who can be categorised as of ethnic minority origin face in identifying these criteria correctly may be particularly marked in personnel departments. The lack of a clear, single route into personnel occupations makes identifying the criteria necessary for inclusion problematic, since those criteria vary from organisation to organisation, and, in some of the case study organisations, from department to department also. Furthermore, as noted above, the roles of personnel departments and their relationships to other parts of the organization means that it is often not only personnel managers who define the criteria which affect personnel careers, adding to the difficulty of identifying those criteria.

The fact that personnel departments usually have responsibility for writing down policies about equal opportunities also means that people may receive misleading messages about the criteria personnel managers themselves value, and these messages may be particularly misleading for people of ethnic minority origin. This certainly appears to be the case with a positive action policy to help increase the proportion of people of ethnic minority origin in one of the case study organisations. The fact that it was written down and apparently championed by the "white" personnel managers has led some ethnic minority interviewees from the organization to assume that those managers will be keen to further their careers because they are of ethnic minority origin. However, there is evidence that in practice, as indicated above, those personnel managers actually look for other criteria, often criteria which suggests some similarity with themselves.

Thus one ethnic minority individual who appealed to the organization's stated aim of increasing ethnic minority representation in an attempt to make managers give him access to more challenging work – and thus perhaps ultimately to a more responsible position – reports that the response was covert discrimination in the form of a sudden increase in his role and no support: "*I felt they'd put me in at the deep end and said, ' right, swim out this one because you've been asking for it'*". By contrast, one of his ethnic minority colleagues has achieved greater career progression through de-emphasising his ethnic origin and instead emphasizing his degree qualification - a criterion which his manager shares.

These findings suggest that positive action strategies need to be used with great care. Not only can the benefits of positive action be undermined by subtle and covert forms of discrimination, but positive action can also lead to misunderstandings about the criteria which are important for career success, and thus, ironically, make that success even more difficult for people of ethnic minority origin to achieve.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper indicates that the careers of people of ethnic minority origin are often affected by their ethnic categorization, and that overt, covert and subtle forms of discrimination may all play a part in hindering ethnic minority personnel careers.

However, it also – as Pollert (1996) advocated - identifies a range of other criteria which also affect careers in the case study organizations, and it is these which provide much of the hope for ethnic minority personnel careers. While it is not claimed that this list of criteria is exhaustive or representative of all personnel departments, it does reveal that, even where ethnic minority categorisation tends to hinder personnel careers, those who may be so categorised can further their careers by correctly identifying, demonstrating, and being categorised according to some other criterion which does afford inclusion – perhaps, for example, one which suggests some similarity with those who control personnel departments.

However, the paper also indicates that identifying correctly those criteria which will further personnel careers is particularly problematic. As one questionnaire respondent notes, "*Personnel is probably perceived [by those who could be categorized as of ethnic minority origin] to be too vague and therefore too risky*".

For those who would seek to increase ethnic minority representation across the personnel occupation, the implications are therefore twofold. Clearly, personnel departments should

continue to strive to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin, for example by using procedural approaches to equality.

However, the research reveals that such organization- or department-led actions are often limited in their effects. The greatest hope for ethnic minority personnel careers in the research, therefore, arises from the actions of the individuals themselves. The personnel departments, it is suggested, may support these by adopting some of the features of the managing diversity approach, notably identifying other criteria which may lead to career success and communicating them, so that all are aware of those criteria and have the opportunity to try to demonstrate them. Armed with this knowledge, this paper argues, it is possible for people to overcome any potentially negative effects of their ethnic minority categorization, and to further their careers on the basis of some of those other criteria. It is in this way that the combination of different approaches to equality advocated by Liff (1999) may ensure that, even if ethnic minority categorization itself remains a hindrance, there will still be hope for ethnic minority personnel careers.

[1] The terms "ethnic origin" and "ethnic minority origin", which are used throughout the paper are problematic. For the primary research analysed here the ethnic categorisation used was that adopted by the 1991 Census of Great Britain (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1993). It is, however, recognised that definitions of "ethnic origin" such as this are classificatory systems, and this is the sense in which the term will be used in the research analysis, discussion and conclusions. Thus by a "person of ethnic minority origin" will be meant a person who categorises himself or herself, and / or is categorised by others, as being of ethnic minority origin according to the 1991 Census categorisation. Similarly, following that categorisation, those who form the ethnic majority of the population of Britain are categorised as "white".

[2] "Personnel departments" are defined as those departments which specialise in people management activities, including those labelled as "personnel management", "human resource management" and "training" departments.

[3] CIPD (2002) "Getting into Personnel", CIPD. Available
http://www.cipd.co.uk/Careers/CareerPath/Gettingintopersonnel.asp.

[4] ibid.

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Table I: Has your ethnic origin ever affected your recruitment to personnel posts?

Response	Number responding to question	% of those responding to question
Yes	9	22.5
No	16	40.0
Don't know	15	37.5
Total	40	100.0

Table II: Do you feel that your experience of working in personnel has been different from that of most white personnel staff?

Response	Number responding to question	% of those responding to question
Yes	20	52.6
No	9	23.7
Don't know	9	23.7
Total	38	100.0

Table III: Ways in which experience of working in personnel differs from that of most "white" personnel staff.

Response	Number	% of those responding to question
Given more menial work	2	10
Pushed towards equal opportunities work / work with ethnic minority groups	5	25
More difficult to network	2	10
Managers do not accept your advice	2	10

Discriminated against in promotions	2	10
Other staff behave differently towards you	5	25
Not involved in certain areas of work	2	10
Have to be better	2	10
Total believing that their experience differs	20	

(Note: table only shows responses from those who believe that their experience of working in personnel differs; responses do not add to 100% as some respondents gave more than one answer).

Table IV: What, if anything, might prevent you from achieving the personnel post you want to be in in five years' time?

Response	Number	% of those responding to question
Race / ethnic origin	9	29.0
Gender	2	6.5
Family commitments	2	6.5
Lack of opportunities	9	29.0
Lack of personnel qualifications	2	6.5
Not fitting in to norms	1	3.2
Lack of degree qualification	2	3.2
Lack of confidence	2	6.5
Lack of career development / training	2	6.5
Not being able enough	1	3.2
Lack of motivation	1	3.2

Other reason	2	6.5
Nothing	1	3.2
No response	6	19.4
Total wishing to be in personnel in five years' time	31	

(Note: table shows responses only from those who wish to be in personnel positions in five years' time; percentages do not add to 100% as some respondents gave more than one answer).