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Non(belonging) of Ethnic Minority Communities in Britain: Researcher reflections

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Introduction

There is limited research concerning the experiences of people belonging to ethnic minority communities in predominantly White places (Cline et al., 2002; Garland & Chakraborti, 2006; Scourfield & Davies, 2005). Predominantly White places are those that are inhabited by people from ethnic minority communities with restricted communication with places of worship, cultural institutions and educational norms of their communities, for which they do not feel included (DfES, 2004). In these places, these people not only reside in an invisible state (Bhopal, 2014), but their voices also stay unheard (Chakraborti & Garland, 2004) in official records (Pac-Soo & Taylor, 2023). Studies show that ethnic minority communities experience racism, discrimination, and marginalization in these places due to the hostile attitudes of the majority White community based on factors like race, ethnicity and religion (Myers & Bhopal, 2017). This is problematic, having implications for their belonging in such places. Based on a chief theme of my research findings, which is a sense of belonging, this evaluative critique discusses the reflections of a researcher from an ethnic minority community settled in Britain for over two decades.

Sense of belonging

The concept of belonging has been widely researched (Anthias, 2008; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Carter et al., 2018; Vaillant, 2012). Belonging is a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Kelly, 2009) characterized by a positive (Hagerty et al., 2002) and subjective feeling of an individual so that they feel integral to family, school, workplace, friends' circle, community, and physical places like parks and superstores (Allen, 2020). A sense of belonging as a feeling of connectedness is an individual's psychological requirement, deeply linked to their emotions (Chin, 2021), significantly shaping their

attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, self-esteem, confidence-building, and achievement (Moncrieffe et al., 2020; Osterman, 2023). Sense of belonging is a chief component of the concept of multiculturalism, widely discussed by scholars (Modood, 2019; Parekh, 2000; Race, 2015). To Modood (2014), multiculturalism stresses not only minority group identities but also national identity in which all citizens have a sense of belonging. Multicultural (national) belonging highlights the dynamic nature of inclusion/exclusion categories in belonging and implies a reciprocal integration between the majority and minority communities within the society that may enable the minorities to feel that they fit in (Chin, 2019; 2021; Modood, 2019).

Study background

My doctoral study (Bagchi, 2024) explores experiences of multiculturalism of teachers, students and parents in four primary schools located in a predominantly White place in southwest England. Data were collected through the adult participants' semi-structured interviews, observation of students' classroom activities and field notes supplemented by classroom and corridor displays. Compatible with the study's interpretivist epistemological stance, which acknowledges individuals' multiple perspectives and feelings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), reflexivity was applied. Reflexivity is a potential tool for ethical research and a continuous essential process in a qualitative study leading to critical reflection (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Takhar, 2013). Being reflexive means acknowledging and reflecting on the researcher's subjectivity (Chan, 2017; Jackson & Mazzei, 2011; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Rees et al., 2020). Subjectivity, which includes the researcher's background and experiences, was a key feature in my research that significantly influenced my entire research endeavour. I navigated between an outsider researcher and an insider researcher positioning for a rational understanding through meaning-making (Gregory & Ruby, 2011). However, a participant shared one particular incident that made me feel more connected with the ethnic minority communities as the incident narrated the voice in the margins that also reflects my sociocultural contextual positioning.

Discussion

In my research, the concept of a sense of belonging is important to explore whether the participants from ethnic minority communities feel included in schools. The concept was discussed by some participant teachers who raised it in the context of some racist incidents that ethnic minority students and parents experienced in schools. In one instance, a teacher described an incident when they talked to parents from both sides following racial abuse of an ethnic minority student by an ethnically White student. The teacher shared with me that the ethnic minority parents were understanding about the matter. According to the teacher,

the parents did not want any trouble as they thought that the parents did not want to stand out in their sheer desire to belong and be accepted as everybody else in mainstream society. This critical incident stands out for me from the rest (Martin, 1996) in my dataset, boosting reflection significantly (Schön, 1987). The following section discusses my experience of and reflection on an uncomfortable 'truth' similar to this incident, both of which helped to shape my assumptions and interpretations on the subject of belonging of ethnic minorities.

Researcher reflections

The desire of the parents to fit in in their sheer want to belong to mainstream society resonates with my personal reflections on two racist incidents at a former primary school in Greater London. A Chinese student's parents, who were our family friends, lodged an official complaint against a racist incident that the head teacher dismissed. The parents then discussed the case with the ethnically White governing body chairperson, who also dismissed it. In another incident in the same year group in another class around the same time, an ethnically White child repeatedly racially abused a Bhutanese child. The mother of this Bhutanese child, who was my friend, anxiously shared with me the incident, saying that despite complaining to the head teacher, her child was being racially abused. According to Sue et al. (2007), racism cuts across classes as ethnic minorities experience it regardless of their class or status. The Bhutanese child belonged to a low socioeconomic background, while the Chinese child belonged to an affluent background. Despite coming from different socioeconomic statuses, both children experienced racism at the school.

I feel that, at one level, the ethnic minority parents mentioned by the participant teacher in my research study, the parents in the Greater London school, and I are the same. I admit that we all are different, as identities are complex and fluid (Beaman, 2016). Yet, we are all connected because I think that in a similar position as the ethnic minority parents, I would have taken a similar step as these parents in my utter urge to feel a sense of belonging with mainstream society. Therefore, despite being heterogenous, we all experience shared racialized othering (Davis et al., 2023), irrespective of whether we know each other or not. This denotes a change of the singular narratives of ethnic minority people described above into collective narratives, enabling me to relate to other ethnic minority people, highlighting how our voices positioned as 'others' merge and entwine in dynamic ways (Erel, 2007). I think that it is the same story for us from ethnic minority communities who often find themselves in a tug of war. On the one hand, we want to keep our sense of identity intact, which facilitates us to follow particular cultural habits like religions, dressing styles, native languages and eating habits. On the other hand, we are driven by the desire to

feel that we are “personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in their social environment” (Prince & Hadwin, 2013, p. 238).

Conclusion

This paper highlighted the researcher’s reflections based on a sense of belonging as a key theme of my research study. While it discussed one participant’s critical views, it was vital in my reflexive process as I applied the crucial element of subjectivity in qualitative research (Chan, 2017), embracing the intertwined sociocultural and historical contextual factors (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). The story shared by the teacher allowed me to interact with the ethnic minority parent at a personal level in an imagined world, as we share commonalities in our sociocultural identity, positionality, and contextual experiences. My personal feelings and reflections on a sense of belonging helped me to interpret and analyse the teacher’s views of the experiences of ethnic minority parents in the school. I am hopeful that this account helps other researchers in applying the authentic, robust, and continuing reflexivity necessary for ethical and rigorous research.

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