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Reflections on the labyrinth: Investigating Black and Minority Ethnic leaders' career experiences

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Abstract

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) employees appear to experience more difficulty reaching senior leadership positions than their white counterparts. Using Eagly and Carli's (2007) metaphor of the labyrinth our aim was to give voice to black and minority ethnic managers who have successfully achieved senior management roles, and compare their leadership journeys with those of matched white managers. This paper used semi-structured interviews and attribution theory to examine how 20 black and minority ethnic and 20 white senior managers, from a UK government department made sense of significant career incidents in their leadership journeys. Template analysis was used to identify facilitators and barriers of career progression from causal explanations of these incidents. Although BME and white managers identified four common themes (visibility, networks, development, and line manager support), they differed in how they made sense of formal and informal organisational processes to achieve career progression. The findings are used to theorise about the individual and organisational factors that contribute to the leadership journeys of minority ethnic employees.

Keywords

Ethnicity, Minority Ethnic, Race, Leadership, Labyrinth, Diversity, Careers, Career Progression, Sense-making

Despite a continuing rise in the number of Black and Minority Ethnic¹ (BME) employees entering the U.K. workforce, their representation in leadership roles remains disproportionately low. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2013a), BME employees comprise 12.4% of the total working population, 8.4% of managers, but only 5% of senior managers. Importantly, the gap between the proportions of BME employees in management and non-management roles appears to be widening (from 1.1% in 2006 to 4% in 2013: ONS, 2013a), with BME employees continuing to receive less pay and fewer promotions than their white colleagues (Cohen and Huffman, 2007; Rafferty, 2012). Similar figures from other developed Western nations such as the US, where 35.16% of those in employment are non-white, compared to 11.70% in management positions (EEOC, 2012), point to a comparable pattern of increasing diversity and differential career progression. This suggests an increasingly urgent need to understand and support BME employees on their leadership journeys.

Although several possible barriers to BME leadership progression have been identified by researchers, remarkably little attention has been paid to the voices of BME individuals in questioning prevailing assumptions about the factors that influence their leadership journeys and whether these adequately reflect lived career experiences (Kenny and Briner, 2007). Of particular note is the paucity of research on the experiences and perceptions of BME employees who have successfully achieved leadership roles (Stanley, 2009). The present research addresses this gap and contributes to current knowledge by giving voice to BME *senior managers*; a group whose members are uniquely positioned to share their insight into both the positive and negative experience of navigating a leadership journey.

Our research responds to calls for more psychological research into the individual experiences of BME employees. In a review of psychological literature on ethnicity in the workplace, Kenny and Briner (2007: 450) point to a “distinct lack” of qualitative research

and argue that “The type of qualitative research that is needed is that which seeks to gain a better understanding of how the individual has experienced/is experiencing the workplace and what impact that might have on their perceptions and career decisions”. We address this gap using attribution theory, which can provide insight into how individuals make sense of, and make decisions in response to, important career experiences (Silvester, 2004; Weiner, 1986). Adopting Arthur, Hall and Lawrence’s (1989: 8) definition of a career as “the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time” we investigate how BME ($n = 20$) and white ($n = 20$) senior managers from the same UK government department and matched for grade and role make sense of career events along their leadership journeys. Template analysis is used to identify similarities and differences in the spontaneous causal explanations made for these career experiences (i.e. events that interviewees believe have helped or hindered their efforts to progress to senior positions at work), and the findings are used to theorise about the individual and organisational factors that contribute to differential leadership journeys. Using a case study approach, we contribute to the existing literature by giving voice to BME senior managers to examine how they make sense of significant career experiences. Whilst being mindful of the specific context of this research, we explore the implications of the findings and identify mechanisms by which barriers and facilitators operate over the course of leadership journeys.

Ethnicity, differential leadership journeys and the ‘labyrinth’

It has been proposed that whilst women face a ‘*glass ceiling*’ in their efforts to achieve senior roles, BME employees more typically encounter a ‘*concrete ceiling*’ - a barrier that is both denser and less easily shattered (Davidson, 1997). However, Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest that these metaphors focus on absolute barriers to leadership positions that occur at the penultimate stage of individuals’ careers and therefore fail to encompass the

complexity and variety of barriers faced by individuals throughout their leadership journeys. Instead, they advocate using 'labyrinth' as a metaphor to describe the elaborate maze that individuals must navigate in order to reach the prize at the centre: achievement of a leadership role. Eagly and Carli argue that "passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead" (pp. 63). Moreover, as labyrinths may have several viable routes to the centre, each individual's experience of navigating the complex paths will be unique because it reflects their efforts to understand and deal with the dead-ends they encounter, by back-tracking and trying different routes. Consequently, although the 'labyrinth' has mostly been discussed in relation to women seeking leadership roles, we argue that it is equally relevant for understanding the leadership journeys of BME employees; with the barriers they experience representing the complex twists and turns of the labyrinth.

In common with the career literature more generally (Khapova and Arthur, 2011), existing research on barriers to leadership progression experienced by BME employees is largely driven by discipline. Much of this research takes a sociological perspective and focuses on the social structures that BME employees are required to navigate on their leadership journeys. For example, researchers using social network analysis have found that BME employees' relationship networks, or 'ties' at work, tend to be concentrated at lower organisational levels compared to those of their white colleagues (McDonald, 2011). These findings have been explained in terms of 'homophily' (i.e., the tendency for people to create network ties with ethnically similar individuals at work: Ibarra et al., 2005), with researchers claiming that BME employees are disadvantaged in their efforts to achieve leadership positions, because there are fewer ethnically similar individuals in powerful positions with whom they can form homophilous ties. The result is more impoverished social capital providing limited access to career-related assistance or guidance from senior members (Ibarra

and Deshpande, 2007; James, 2000; Parks-Yancy, 2006; Parks-Yancy et al., 2008).

Evidence from in-depth qualitative studies supports this assertion, indicating that BME individuals feel excluded from important social networks (Tomlinson et al., 2013; Bell and Nkomo, 2001). For example, the BME women interviewed by Fearfull and Kamenou (2006) attributed their exclusion to managers' cultural stereotypes and assumptions about their career motivation. These studies also show that BME employees often find it necessary to downplay aspects of their cultural identity in order to assimilate themselves more effectively into organisational networks (Davidson, 1997; Dawson, 2006; Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006).

A second related area of research on occupational segregation has been explored predominantly by economists and sociologists. These researchers argue that BME employees are often channelled or segregated into less prestigious work roles (e.g., roles that focus on 'black issues' or 'diversity work') due to managers' stereotypes about their aptitude, motivation or interest (Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006; Maume, 1999). As these types of roles generally provide fewer opportunities to develop human capital or marketable skills, BME employees can find it particularly difficult to progress to leadership roles (Stainback et al., 2010). A contrary argument suggests that segregation does not necessarily reflect bias on the part of others, but rather an individual's preference to work with similar others, perceived likelihood of labour market discrimination, and cultural expectations about 'appropriate' career paths (Bell and Nkomo, 2001; Fouad and Byars-Winston, 2005; Kirton, 2009). More likely, however, is that the leadership journeys of BME employees will be influenced by *both* the perceptions and actions of others *and* how they themselves seek to make sense of, and respond to, situations at work.

To date most psychological research on ethnicity in the workplace has concentrated on the causes of prejudice, social categorization and stereotyping (Allport, 1954; Tajfel and

Turner, 1986), and its consequences for differential advancement among BME employees (Wilson, 2010). It is generally accepted that biased performance evaluation can impede career progression (Kraiger and Ford, 1985; Stauffer and Buckley, 2005), and social psychology research on leader-member exchanges has also shown that ethnically dissimilar subordinates typically receive less support, fewer career-related resources, and less opportunity for autonomy and discretion at work from their managers (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Schaffer and Riordan, 2013). These findings are explained using similarity–attraction theory, which predicts that the more similar two people are in terms of their attitudes, values, personality or demographic characteristics, the more prone they are to like, trust and interact with one another (Byrne, 1971). Thus employees who are ethnically similar to their line manager are more likely to receive opportunities to demonstrate their ability and potential to progress than are their colleagues who are ethnically dissimilar (Brouer et al., 2009).

These findings relate to research focusing on the importance of mentoring for career advancement, and mentee-mentor relationships in particular. Although BME and white employees are reported to have similar access to mentoring relationships (Ragins, 2010), there is considerable evidence that BME employees are less likely to find powerful mentors who are racially similar (Blickle et al., 2009; Dreher and Cox, 1996). As a consequence, they have less opportunity to establish good quality relationships with individuals who are able and willing to share information about the more covert aspects of organisational functioning that is often required to advance to higher level positions (Blass et al., 2007; Ragins, 1997).

Despite the important contribution this research has made to our understanding of barriers likely to be faced by BME employees on their leadership journeys, most studies focus on specific topics in isolation (e.g. networks or occupational segregation), resulting in a somewhat fragmented view of what is important for individuals' careers (Arthur, 2008). To enhance our knowledge about how barriers operate across the course of careers, and how

individuals experience them, it is important to adopt a more holistic perspective and examine leadership journeys as a whole (Khapova and Arthur, 2011).

Furthermore it is particularly significant that most studies focus on how managers interpret and make sense of BME employees, rather than how BME employees make sense of manager behaviour and other career related events (Wyatt, 2012). For example, previous research drawing on attribution theory has focused on how managers explain the behaviour of BME direct reports (Fadil, 1995; Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1993), not how these workers explain their own behaviour or the behaviour of others. More importantly there is a distinct lack of research into the accounts of senior BME managers reflecting on and explaining their own *successful* leadership journeys.

This failure to provide BME employees with a voice means that research has generally concentrated on identifying *what* barriers BME employees face rather than *how* they explain and strive to overcome them. Moreover, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Al Ariss et al., 2013; Bell and Nkomo, 2001), research focuses on the experiences of BME employees at lower organisational levels rather than senior leadership positions. Yet as Eagly and Carli (2007, pp.70) maintain “labyrinths become infinitely more tractable when seen from above” and when a person is able to see “the whole of the puzzle – the starting position, the goal, and the maze of walls” solutions begin to suggest themselves. Their argument therefore makes two points: that individuals who have successfully navigated the labyrinth and achieved leadership roles are best placed to (a) look back and understand the multiple barriers and opportunities that others are likely to encounter, and (b) share their understanding of how to traverse the labyrinth with those earlier in their leadership journey. Consequently, as BME senior managers are uniquely positioned to ‘see the whole of the puzzle’, we argue that it is vitally important to listen to their experiences in order to understand how they successfully overcame career barriers.

The present study seeks to meet this need by examining how BME senior managers explain the significant career experiences they have encountered and how they have successfully navigated the twists and turns of their leadership journeys. Our approach is primarily psychological; we draw on attribution theory, and use Eagly and Carli's 'labyrinth' metaphor, to investigate the way in which individuals explain career related events, decide how to respond and progress in their leadership journeys. While sociological approaches enhance broader understanding of the interplay between structure and agency in relation to differential career progression, a psychological approach can help improve understanding of how the individual's sense-making contributes to decision-making in relation to leadership journeys at work.

Making sense of the labyrinth

According to attribution theory individuals are motivated to engage in a process of sense-making when they encounter novel, surprising or potentially threatening events (i.e., such as those likely to be encountered in the career 'labyrinth'), in order to render such events more predictable and therefore controllable (Heider, 1958; Martinko et al., 2011; Wong and Weiner, 1981). The theory therefore provides a useful lens through which to examine career events (positive and negative) that have triggered causal sense-making for BME managers who have achieved senior leadership roles. Existing attribution research has found that the way individuals make sense of important events is associated with career attitudes and decision making in adolescents (Janeiro, 2010; Luzzo and Jenkins-Smith, 1998) and many different workplace outcomes such as job behaviour, satisfaction and motivation (Martinko et al., 2006; Welbourne et al., 2007; Xenikou, 2005).

However, most researchers take a predominantly positivist approach, studying causal attributions as an essentially private component of social cognition, despite considerable

evidence that spoken attributions are common in natural discourse; particularly when individuals aim to build a shared understanding about why events have occurred (Silvester, 2004; Silvester et al., 1999; Wong and Weiner, 1981). For example, researchers have extracted and analysed spoken attributions to explore the sense-making episodes that are triggered by important social events (Anderson et al., 2001; Silvester and Anderson, 2003; Silvester et al., 2002), their influence on subsequent emotional, motivational and behavioural responses, and, ultimately, how individuals navigate their social environments (Weiner, 1986). Thus spoken causal attributions can provide researchers with valuable insight into how senior managers make sense of, and respond to, significant career barriers encountered during their navigation of the labyrinth. Yet, as far as we are aware, there has been no investigation of BME employees' causal explanations for their own career experiences.

In order to redress this important omission, we investigated BME senior managers' explanations for significant career events experienced as they navigate the labyrinth to reach leadership roles (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Drawing on attribution theory as an organising framework to identify episodes of sense-making related to significant career events, we used template analysis to compare spontaneous causal explanations produced by BME and a matched group of white senior managers from the same organisation. Our aim was to explore similarities and differences in these narratives in order to achieve a richer understanding of differential career progression by 'viewing the labyrinth from above'. Our specific research questions were (1) how do BME senior managers explain their leadership journeys, (2) what are the barriers they have to navigate, and (3) in what ways are these similar or different to those experienced by white senior managers?

Method

Context

The UK Civil Service exists to assist the government to implement its policies as effectively as possible. It is comprised of central government departments, agencies, and non-departmental government bodies, and employs approximately 447,000 people in total (Gov.uk, 2014). The present research was conducted in one of 24 central government departments.

The Civil Service has traditionally been regarded as a group of organisations (i.e., ministerial departments) that is dominated by white Oxbridge educated males, who enjoy lifelong career mobility within a strong internal labour market (Greer and Jarman, 2010; Puwar, 2001). However, initiatives pioneered by the Labour government (1997-2010) based on diversity and inclusion efforts in other sectors (e.g., the *10-point-plan*: Cabinet Office, 2008), have been introduced to address entrenched stereotypes, reduce inequalities and discrimination, and make the Civil Service more representative of the citizens it serves (Walker and Boyne, 2006).

In fact, a recent biographical analysis of top team membership across Whitehall² by Greer and Jarman (2010) suggests that those from Oxbridge are now in a minority and that the Civil Service can no longer be considered a 'career for life'. Many senior officials now have career backgrounds in the private sector and other public (non-Civil Service) bodies, and evidence also suggests that the Civil Service as a whole has become significantly more diverse and inclusive; the representation of women and BME individuals now more closely approximating the wider working population (Andrews and Ashworth, 2013). This is also reflected in figures for the government department where this case study was conducted: here

18% of the total 2,800 Civil Servants are BME compared to the UK national average of 12.4%. Of particular relevance for the present study, however, is that the proportion of BME employees at senior levels is much smaller, averaging 5-7% depending on function.

The host organisation reflects these Civil Service initiatives in several ways. It has declared commitment to equality and diversity, which includes an aim to be 'a workplace that offers mutual respect, dignity and support to all employees'. In practical terms there is an organisational team dedicated to achieving a cultural change to improve equality and diversity across the organisation, senior organisational members act as diversity champions and change agents, diversity data relating to selection, promotion and re-deployment practices is routinely monitored and published, and formal personnel assessments are scrutinised for adverse impact. In addition, a formal BME network provides support to employees at all levels of seniority, and positive action development courses are available for those striving for senior positions. Greer and Jarman (2010) report that the department now has one of the lowest representations of senior officials with Whitehall backgrounds, and highlight it as one of the more diverse and progressive departments, most distanced from the traditional Whitehall model.

Participants

Forty senior managers (20 BME and 20 white) participated in the study. All were matched for grade, gender and work area. While we recognise the importance of examining BME experiences in their own right, we used matched samples as our aim was to compare experiences in order to establish similarities and differences across two ethnic groups (Cox, 2004; Kamenou, 2008). Mindful of the need to prioritise the voices of BME managers, however, we interviewed these managers first, using the analysis of their transcripts to guide subsequent analysis of interviews with white managers.

All managers had line management responsibility for up to 50 staff in different organisational functions (i.e., human resources, communication and IT, policy development and operations). They were educated to degree level and four from each group had postgraduate qualifications. The BME group comprised five men and 15 women, and the white group six men and 14 women; these proportions correspond broadly to the organisation's demographics where 60% of BME managers are women (Greer and Jarman, 2010; ONS, 2013b). BME managers described themselves as Black African ($n=4$), Black Caribbean ($n=5$), Indian ($n=5$), Pakistani ($n=2$), Chinese ($n=1$) and mixed background ($n=3$). Reflecting the general trend for fewer lifetime or career Civil Servants, 17 of our sample (9 BME and 8 white) reported having worked previously outside of the Civil Service in private or public sector organisations.

We used a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants following Cornelius and Skinner's (2008) recommendation that this strategy should be used with hard to reach sub-populations. An initial email was sent to all employees explaining the aims of the research and how to participate, although we did not specify a focus on ethnicity (Buchanan and Bryman, 2007). An email was also sent to members of the BME support network, and five participants in the final sample were recruited from this network. Snowballing was used with BME participants in two ways: first, they were asked to refer other BME colleagues to the research, and secondly they identified white colleagues matching their own gender, grade and work area, whom the researchers could invite to participate in the research. One female BME manager was matched with a white male manager, as this was the best match based on seniority and work type. All participants were assured of confidentiality.

Procedure

Prior to interview all managers were asked to complete a career 'timeline'. The timeline method has been used extensively in career counselling to encourage interviewees to reflect on their career either during or in advance of an interview (Brott, 2004). It involves asking participants to draw a pictorial representation of the general sequence of their career, recording any incidents considered to have had a significant positive or negative impact. As almost half of the participants in our sample were not career-Civil Servants, managers were asked to reflect on their entire career (i.e., inside and outside the Civil Service). For the purposes of this study experiences with a negative impact on career progression were defined as events or conditions, either within the person or in his or her environment, that impede career progression (Swanson and Woitke, 1997: 434), and positive experiences were defined as events or conditions that *assist* career progression. The timeline was used as a tool to guide semi-structured interviews by identifying significant career incidents. Examples of incidents from both groups included achieving or being passed over for promotion, attending training or development and working on (un)successful projects. These career incidents were explored during interviews using Critical Incident Technique (CIT: Flanagan, 1954), a method that encourages individuals to engage in sense-making, to elicit managers' explanations for each incident (Silvester, 2004).

All interviews followed a similar format: managers were first asked to provide an overview of their career using the timeline as a guide, next the interviewer used CIT to explore each positive and negative experience on the timeline. With the permission of interviewees, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Analysis

Template analysis (King, 2004) provides a flexible method of reclassifying data to form a hierarchical 'template' with broad higher-level themes encompassing more specific findings. Template analysis is particularly suited to comparing differences in the shared perspectives of different groups, and has been used in previous diversity research (King, 2004; Mallon and Cassell, 1999). As existing research can be used as a starting point for developing an initial template and a-priori codes, template analysis builds on previous work but avoids constraining the analysis to established findings (Crabtree and Miller, 1992).

In this study analysis was focused on passages of interview text that contained causal attributions about career incidents. In line with existing research that analyses attributions from qualitative interview material (e.g. Silvester et al., 2002), these passages were identified using Joseph et al. (1993: 250) definition of attributions as 'statements identifying a factor or factors that contribute to a given outcome... (where) a stated or implied causal relationship has to be present'. Although recent attribution research attempts to quantify causal beliefs by categorising statements to different attribution dimensions, this can lead to a narrow, mechanistic interpretation of individuals' experiences where the richness of qualitative data is somewhat lost (Anderson et al., 2001). Therefore, in this analysis we focus on the *content* of attributions made during sense-making episodes triggered by important career incidents, rather than causal dimensions.

The template analysis was conducted in two stages. BME interviews were analysed first in order to develop a template for BME managers, then a second template was created following analysis of the transcripts of interviews with white managers by amending the BME template. It was decided to develop the BME template first, because this meant that the initial *a priori* higher-order codes could be grounded in the existing research on differential career progression (i.e., occupational segregation, networking, mentoring, line manager

support, and performance evaluation), and investigating the perceptions of BME managers first allowed us to prioritise the voices of members of an under-represented group when examining similarities and differences.

To develop the template for BME managers, attributional statements from all twenty interview transcripts were analysed using a cyclical, reflexive approach that involved reading through each transcript, and identifying additions and changes to the template. Statements were examined multiple times as the template evolved. Changes were made to the template that included deleting, adding and redefining codes, and changing the importance and placement of codes in the template. Two new higher-order codes 'visibility' and 'development' were added to more accurately reflect interviewees' descriptions of their experiences, and two *a priori* higher order codes (i.e. 'performance evaluation' and 'occupational segregation') became lower-order codes, subsumed under 'line manager support' and 'visibility' respectively. 'Mentoring' was also repositioned as a second-order code under 'development'.

Once the BME template had been agreed, it was used as a starting point for developing a second template for the white managers. Instead of beginning with the original *a priori* codes, the BME template was adapted by adding, changing and removing codes as required. Many of the lower order codes from the BME template were discarded for the white template as they were not discussed by these managers. Three code insertions were made exclusively for the white template; 'self-promotion' under the networks theme, 'building reputation' under visibility and 'informal developmental relationships' under the development theme.

Reflexivity was important throughout development of both templates to avoid culturally or ideologically biased interpretations (Andersen, 1993; Stanfield and Dennis, 1993). This involved constantly questioning and scrutinising coding decisions, and a BME

research colleague, experienced in qualitative analysis also examined and coded sections of the data; a procedure recommended in diversity research to ensure assumptions about the data are questioned and to force coders to be explicit about coding decisions (Gunaratnam, 2003; King, 2004).

Finally, the templates were presented to a convenience sample of original BME ($n=5$) and white ($n=4$) managers who discussed individual codes within their own group's template. There was general agreement on both templates, but placement of one code was changed (i.e., 'blocks training and development' moved from development to line manager support), though the meaning remained the same. The final templates are shown in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Results

Initial inspection of the templates reveals that the BME template is far more detailed and expansive than the template for white managers. Despite following the same procedure, BME managers typically talked for longer than white managers (an average of 60 and 40 minutes respectively) and identified more career experiences that they described as significant for progression into leadership roles. BME and white managers also identified similar themes as important, as evidenced in the four higher order codes: Visibility, Networks, Development and Line Manager Support. However, differences emerged in second- and third-order code insertions, where several themes identified by BME managers were either not discussed by white managers or described differently. The following sections explore these differences and similarities in more detail.

Visibility: The parapet

Visibility was inserted as a new higher-order code, because BME and white managers identified the need to achieve visibility, and be seen by senior decision makers, as important for career progression. Visibility was important both in their work roles and the organisation more broadly. 'Work content', inserted as a second-order code, was described by managers in terms of how much autonomy they were able to achieve in their role and the need to work on 'high profile assignments'. Both of these were seen as important for gaining exposure to senior decision makers and thus being identified as someone with potential to advance to leadership positions: "*You have to get the jobs that have got a bit of an edge to them and then prove yourself. You need exposure really.*" [Participant 39: White, Male]. As found in previous research, however, BME managers typically reported having less autonomy and discretion in their roles, and felt they had had fewer opportunities to obtain high profile assignments (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Brouer et al., 2009).

Three second-order codes emerged exclusively from the analysis of BME interviews: 'role type', 'recognition' and 'rocking the boat'. 'Role type' replaced the *a priori* code occupational segregation as a second-order code, because whilst *all* BME managers expressed dissatisfaction with what they observed to be an unequal spread of BME employees across different organisational functions, occupational segregation was discussed mostly in relation to 'visibility'. More specifically, certain work roles were seen as less prestigious and therefore less likely to provide opportunities for exposure or more likely to lead to the wrong type of visibility. As researchers in the US and UK have found (Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006; Maume, 1999) some managers described working in diversity-related roles, which they believed had damaged their opportunity to progress:

“Being a black female within the equality arena isn't sometimes a good thing. You get typecast. I have noticed when applying for other jobs, people can't see beyond the fact that I am a black woman who has worked in an environment that talks about black issues. Now I'm looking to move on, I am finding it very challenging” [Participant 20: BME, Female].

The second-order code 'recognition' reflects BME managers' comments about finding themselves in a double-bind situation with regards to Visibility. Increased visibility was perceived to have negative and positive consequences for career progression, because they felt more scrutinised than their white colleagues and therefore saw the need to put in more time and effort at work in order to receive equal credit:

“...if you stand out from the norm, then by default, it's human nature that you will be noticed a little bit more, and there is always a greater pressure to essentially follow the rules even more closely... there is more chance that when you get it wrong it will be spotted more quickly, and ultimately your work will get noticed more than others'. It's not that anybody has said anything to me, (but)... I have always worked harder, worked longer hours and maybe just go the extra mile than some of my counterparts.” [Participant 17: BME, Male].

Thus, BME but not white managers tended to see visibility as a necessary but high-risk strategy for career advancement that meant having to tread carefully to raise their profile.

The third code insertion for BME managers 'rocking the boat' supports previous findings that BME employees are concerned that using formal equal opportunity policies to seek recourse for disadvantages at work can label them as troublemakers (Fearfull and

Kamenou, 2006). However, we found that BME managers were concerned that raising ethnicity as an issue formally *and* informally could have negative consequences for career progression:

“...being BME has held me back, based on my experience. That is my perception, whether or not other people agree with me is another matter. But that is a very dangerous thing for anybody to say. Once you say it you are in big trouble, you stand out like a leper. You are then ‘trouble’. You will not make progress anywhere... any other person will be wary about taking you on. It’s very career limiting to say things like that” [Participant 13: BME, Female].

Only one code was inserted exclusively for white managers: ‘building reputation’. This describes these managers’ perceived need to proactively build their personal reputation within the organisation in order to progress. Several white managers identified informal reputation building as *more* important for career progression than formal procedures like appraisal and promotion and described efforts to enhance their reputation through influential contacts:

“I took on that role and a few projects that were outside my remit, I did that because I knew I would get a good name out of that, someone who could be relied on and senior people would hear more about me” [Participant 28: White, Female].

Overall, both groups of managers recognised the need to achieve visibility: in terms of the labyrinth metaphor to scale the walls and raise their heads above the parapets to be seen by senior decision makers who are closer to the centre. But, BME managers were more

constrained in their efforts to achieve visibility, often finding it necessary to 'keep their heads down' and exert more effort into day-to-day work to influence supervisors' impressions of them. In contrast, white managers generally saw themselves as proactive agents capable of engaging in informal networks, managing their environment and influencing supervisors. Importantly, BME managers reported that becoming more visible could actually jeopardise their career because raising their head above the parapet risked being shot down.

Networks: Knowing fellow navigators

Networks remained a higher order code. All managers identified 'informal networks' in particular as important for career success, because these allowed managers to benefit from knowing other navigators of the labyrinth who could provide them with assistance and information. In this organisation formal promotions are held every six months and involve a rigorous process of evidence-based assessment (e.g., interview boards and assessment centres). In between, however, temporary promotions are commonly used to 'trial' potential applicants and ensure that roles are filled, and both groups of managers saw informal networks as important for gaining temporary and thus more permanent promotions. For example, most interviewees thought it important to know a recruiting manager before being considered for temporary or permanent promotions, and frequently referred to 'pre-determined candidates'. Moreover, individuals promoted temporarily were usually well networked and in contact with senior decision makers. Not being part of an informal network was considered a significant barrier to career progression:

"You find someone who's new in a role and that job hasn't been advertised... Since he arrived (my head of unit) has kind of pulled the unit together and now (it's) comprised of people he's worked with before, and he likes. He has recruited them into those jobs,

because he likes them, and not because that job has actually been advertised. So networks are really, really important” [Participant 37, White, Female].

The templates also reveal differences in how BME and white managers experience informal networks. In support of existing research (e.g. Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006; Ibarra and Deshpande, 2007; Tomlinson et al., 2003) BME managers described difficulties accessing informal networks and (perhaps unsurprisingly) were more likely than white managers to see informal processes as unfair:

“I actually got that fed up that I resigned, on the basis that there was an opportunity for promotion, temporary promotion and it had been fixed basically for somebody else to get the job, so it wasn't open and fair recruitment” [Participant 12, BME, Female].

Similarly, few BME managers described engaging in self-promotion, and several expressed dissatisfaction with the self-promotion tactics of others:

“He got a job, by getting a friend of his to ring the line manager and say what a good egg he was, and I just felt that that was wrong” [Participant 14, BME, Male].

In contrast, white managers were far more ambivalent towards informal networks and, even if they thought their career progression had been hindered by not being part of a network, they considered ‘self-promotion’ acceptable and saw it as their responsibility to improve their promotion chances by asking contacts to recommend them to hiring managers, or by directly contacting hiring managers or departments directly:

“the posts were advertised, and these were sought-after posts, you know, crème de la crème and I kept on bombarding the guy who was advertising with emails, and phone calls. I knew of him before, from a previous job, so it was like trying to use our personal relationship to try and get this job.” [Participant 32: White, Female].

The level-two code ‘formal networks’ was inserted exclusively into the BME template, because BME managers only discussed benefits of networking in relation to being part of the Support Forum, a formal network created by the organisation to improve career opportunities for BME employees. As studies of BME membership of formal networks and unions (e.g., Bradley et al., 2004; Friedman et al., 1998; Healy and Oikelome, 2007) have found, perceived benefits included opportunities to access peer support, learn from BME role models, and raise diversity concerns with senior management collectively. A few BME managers also reported having experienced a ‘backlash’ from colleagues resulting from their membership of the forum, supporting claims that membership of such groups can be career-jeopardising (Friedman and Craig, 2004; Healy et al., 2004). Yet, most BME managers in this study identified ‘professional’ or legitimate forms of networking as more helpful for career progression:

“In the [support forum], I was taught how to chair meetings, how to network with people, how to speak to senior management, how to socialise in a professional way. Whereas in [my department], I wasn’t heard, I wasn’t developed, I wasn’t talked to, and I was looked down at” [Participant 11: BME, Male].

Development: Shortcuts and guides through the labyrinth

As managers reported 'Development' in general as important for their careers, this replaced Mentoring as a higher order code. Both groups described attending 'mainstream development courses' as important for career progression as these provided shortcuts to leadership by fast-tracking participants to senior grades upon completion. However, the perceived benefits were again associated with networking opportunities rather than skill development, and some courses were thought to provide a privileged identity for attendees:

"I think what is good is that when you've got that [development program X] badge on you, you are recognised by people as having passed a very difficult test to get in and you know, being good and I think that helps and I think a lot of senior people will look down and think "they're a [development program X], maybe I'll give the work to them or I'll just look at what their career's doing" [Participant 27: White, Female].

BME managers described these courses as providing more 'legitimate' opportunities for networking.

Whilst all managers recalled difficulties accessing mainstream development courses, BME managers described this in relation to being diverted towards positive action development paths that catered specifically for BME, women and disabled employees. Although encouraged in the Equality Act 2010 positive action may disadvantage career progression, because it can be perceived as a form of special or unfair treatment (Kirton and Greene, 2002). Certainly, BME managers in this study reported feeling pressurised to attend less prestigious courses, although their main concern was the *status* of such courses:

“I don't think departments take it that seriously, the brand, so I don't know how useful [positive action courses] are. People were very eager for me to go on [the positive action course] because it was the BME one. That's why I think, there is always the potential of being ghettoised rather than being part of the mainstream, and I cautioned against that” [Participant 17, BME, Male].

Mentoring was available to all managers as a way of providing a guide to help progress in their careers, but only BME managers discussed 'mentoring' to any meaningful extent, and then only in relation to formal mentoring programmes operating across government departments. Although managers had no difficulty accessing mentoring relationships, they expressed frustration at not being able to find 'suitable mentors' (Ragins, 2010). That said perceived 'suitability' varied with some managers seeking same-race mentors as potential role models and others sought high status cross-race mentors to gain alternative perspectives on possible career barriers:

“[my mentor] has helped me and the challenges, we talk through challenges and being able to see things from a different perspective. If you are not progressing as you think you should there is a tendency to think that there might be one contributing factor – I'm black. But I think I have been able to see things from a different perspective” [Participant 2, BME, Female].

Whereas BME managers focused on formal mentoring arrangements, usually with a single mentor, white managers were more likely to report initiating multiple 'informal development relationships' including mentoring via networking contacts (Rock, 2006). Compared to BME managers' experience of mentoring, which generally involved more

formalised arrangements with timescales, agendas for meetings, and progress tracking by programme managers, the mentoring experience described by white managers was more informal and less structured:

“[my project manager] has kind of been my mentor. I tended to turn to her for advice. In fact I have three people, I was also mentored by one of the very young successful people...and I go to the pub with another one, and they are the people I go to when I need advice about jobs or when I need a job.” “It’s networking within a wider family, you get to know people and find out where to go for information, people whose judgement you trust and then in turn play that role yourself for others and their careers” [Participant 19, White, Female].

Line manager support: The gatekeepers

Second- and third-order codes for Line Manager Support are the most similar for both groups of managers. We describe line managers as gatekeepers because participants described them as having power over access to a number of methods of career assistance. Both groups identified ‘sponsorship’ as important for career success: line managers were described as acting as advocates for employees by introducing them to senior decision makers, hiring managers and informal networks. But BME managers described more mixed experiences of sponsorship: whilst some recounted situations where they believed their line managers had sponsored other team members but not them, others reported very supportive line managers:

“[my line manager] was actively looking for opportunities for me, putting my name forward if something came up that she thought I would be good at. It felt like she was looking out for me” [Participant 31, BME, Female].

BME managers had similarly mixed experiences in relation to line managers showing 'career interest': whereas some had received very little support others had line managers who had invested considerable time and effort nurturing their career:

"She was very supportive. In the discussions she very tactfully and subtly started me thinking about 'what do you really want to do', 'where do you see your career going....if so these are the avenues that are open to you', 'you should be applying for these posts', 'if not, just think wider'. And she didn't actually say where to go for the posts; it was just that support that she gave me that I thought was a definite step change" [Participant 20: BME, Female].

A significant difference between the groups was that although white managers recognised the benefits of line manager support they were more likely to rely on developmental advice and career guidance from a broad range of contacts across the organisation.

"My manager is OK for objective setting and reviews and things like that, but I've gone out and found other people, sort of more informal people to give me different viewpoints" [Participant 35: White, Female].

Both groups reported 'career impeding behaviour' from line managers, and most interviewees described line managers blocking requests for training, development and career moves, but whereas white managers tended to attribute this to situational factors like lack of budget, BME managers were more likely to attribute it to a conscious attempt to undermine their career progression:

“He has stopped them all, but I mean it has not stopped me from developing, because obviously if you do know how to, there are other ways of doing it, but yes, he has categorically said I can’t attend the [development course], even though I was accepted on it,” [Participant 18, BME, Female].

The second-order code ‘performance evaluation’ was inserted exclusively for BME managers. Although originally included as an a priori code, biased performance ratings (e.g., during appraisal) were only reported by two interviewees and therefore was removed as a higher order code. Instead BME managers focused on the quality of day-to-day feedback received from line managers: most felt that line managers tended to focus on what they were doing well at work, avoiding any discussion of areas where they were under-performing. This lack of robust day-to-day feedback was seen as problematic for career progression, because it reduced opportunities for BME managers to change or improve:

“There is nothing worse than saying ‘well we think you are wonderful’, because that doesn’t help me - it doesn’t tell me what more I need to do. I just got very fluffy feedback” [Participant 10, BME, Female].

However, line managers often provided more candid written feedback in formal end of year appraisals. BME managers described these as surprising and suddenly unforgiving after the positive informal feedback they had received throughout the year, and some speculated that line managers were apprehensive about providing negative verbal feedback for fear of appearing discriminatory (Croft and Schmader, 2012).

Gender intersectionality

The primary focus of this study was on the career experiences of BME senior managers and how these compare to those of white managers in equivalent leadership roles. Gender was therefore not a central component of the analysis. However, as a significant proportion of the managers interviewed were women, we were mindful to reflect on the potential role of gender in our participants' leadership journeys. Moreover at the end of their interview each manager was asked whether they considered that their gender had been of any significance in their career experiences. Analyses of responses found that gender did not emerge as a significant issue, indeed, the BME women managers referred predominantly to ethnicity. Similarly, a question about possible gender effects was also raised as a discussion point during the focus groups with managers to consider emergent templates. Again, gender did not appear to be particularly salient. It is not entirely clear why this was the case although recent discussion with contributors would seem to suggest that ethnicity may 'trump' gender as an issue for women BME managers, particularly in this organisation where there is a relatively strong representation of women in senior management roles (Greer and Jansen, 2010; ONS, 2013b).

Discussion

This study gave voice to BME senior managers by identifying the career experiences they considered significant over the course of their leadership journeys, and examining how they made sense of them in order to navigate the labyrinth. Drawing on attribution theory and using template analysis to compare the experiences of BME senior managers with those of a matched group of white senior managers, we sought to understand the similarities and differences in explanations provided by individuals who have achieved senior leadership roles and are now able to look back and describe their journeys. Our specific research questions

were (1) how do BME senior managers explain their leadership journeys, (2) what are the barriers they have to navigate, and (3) in what ways are these similar or different to those experienced by white senior managers?

A key finding was that BME senior managers talked for longer, and identified more career experiences they considered significant, than white managers at the *same hierarchal level*. This resulted in a more detailed and populated template. According to attribution theory, individuals seek to make sense of their world in order to understand why things happen and decide how best to respond (Heider, 1958). Sense-making is most prevalent when people encounter negative, surprising or challenging events (Wong and Weiner, 1981). Therefore one possible explanation for these findings is that BME managers encountered more unexpected and challenging situations on their leadership journeys, which required them to invest more cognitive effort into understanding how to navigate and make progress through the labyrinth.

In response to our research questions, we identified a number of twists and turns that both groups of managers had to navigate in order to reach senior roles (i.e., achieving visibility, accessing networks, acquiring development and securing line manager support). These experiences occurred throughout participants' careers; both within and external to their current organisation. Some of these findings corroborate existing research conducted in the UK and internationally; suggesting that whilst our approach primarily focuses on a case study, they may transfer beyond the host organisation (Gomm et al., 2000). The findings therefore add to an evidence base concerning factors that are important for leadership journeys in different contexts. Importantly, by examining spoken causal attributions we make a specific contribution to the extant literature in identifying similarities and differences in *how* these events were experienced by both groups.

The overarching theme that emerged from the templates related to how BME and white managers made sense of, and engaged in, informal and formal organisational processes in order to progress their career. More specifically, BME managers found it harder to access informal organisational processes (e.g., from networks) to increase their visibility and reputation with senior decision-makers. Instead they relied on formal processes, such as focusing on working longer and harder in their roles, learning how to pass formal promotion assessments, or participating in formal networks, development and mentoring schemes in order to progress. In contrast, white managers treated formal and informal routes as equally legitimate ways to progress their careers. They also perceived themselves to have more influence over informal behaviours, such as using self-promotion to develop network contacts and access informal support.

A distinction between formal and informal organisational structures has long been made (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). Whilst formal organisational structure comprises policies procedures, strategies and goals, the contrasting informal structure includes networks of interpersonal relationships, managerial values and group norms that influence decision-making (French and Bell, 1987). Diversity and inclusion practices have traditionally focused on formal organisational processes; emphasising the need for transparency and consistency in communicating and implementing assessment criteria (Healy et al., 2010; Noon et al., 2013). This has involved making job specifications and performance standards explicit, training decision-makers in how to assess candidates or appraise staff, and monitoring progression data (Guillaume et al., 2013; Kirton and Healy, 2009). Changes to organisational practices have also formed an important discourse in terms of persuading staff that such measures help to ensure fair treatment and equal progression within organisations.

While informal processes have also received attention from researchers, for example in relation to difficulties experienced by BME employees when accessing networks and

developmental relationships (e.g. Johnson and Eby, 2011; McGuire, 1999; Parks-Yancy, 2006), these studies typically examine the development of social capital as a topic isolated from other career experiences and the wider context, including personal social and structural factors. Furthermore, research findings are often based on large-scale surveys that fail to consider how individuals make sense of and navigate these processes. Thus, by examining sense-making for experiences throughout individuals' leadership journeys it is possible to provide a framework explaining how informal and formal processes act as an overarching mechanism to influence career barriers for BME employees.

What our findings appear to show is that these formal processes run in parallel with informal means of progressing through the labyrinth. But because BME employees find it more difficult to access informal sources of information to navigate the labyrinth they are more reliant on formal procedures to help them through. Yet as Katz (1964: 132) asserts, "*an organization which depends solely on its blueprints of prescribed behaviour is a very fragile social system*", and BME employees who depend on the formal organisation to progress are likely to be similarly disadvantaged. More specifically, a lack of the type of knowledge typically acquired via informal sources (i.e., networks, mentors and informal relations with senior managers), which aids understanding about these 'hidden' routes, is likely to mean that BME employees will not progress as swiftly or easily as their white counterparts.

Building on Eagly and Carli's (2007) metaphor, we argue that individuals navigating the 'labyrinth' progress fastest if they are able to understand and engage in *both* formal and informal organisational processes. Whereas formalised processes involve demonstrating high levels of task performance and being judged by decision-makers as having the competence to progress, informal processes focus on the individual's ability to demonstrate contextual performance and judgements of their suitability for leadership roles based on personal reputation.

Task performance is defined as “the effectiveness with which job incumbents perform activities that contribute to the organization’s technical core either directly by implementing a part of its technological process, or indirectly by providing it with needed materials or services” (Borman and Motowidlo, 1997: 99). In this study, BME managers focused on task performance by working harder and longer in their roles and focussing on the technical requirements of assessments such as appraisal and promotion. This is perhaps not surprising as task performance is dependent on explicit knowledge (i.e., information described in written documents and transmittable in formal language: Nonaka and Krogh, 2009). Organisations codify information relating to formal procedures (e.g., by providing clearly defined competency requirements for promotion) and information on how to succeed and improve task performance is also made explicit through appraisal systems and training that highlights required levels of skill. By making such information widely accessible, organisations provide a map that makes formal structures more predictable to assist BME and white employees navigate the labyrinth.

In contrast, informal processes rely more heavily on contextual performance, which according to Borman and Motowidlo (1993: 73) includes job behaviour that can “support the organizational, social and psychological environment in which the technical core must function” such as volunteering and co-operating with others. In our study contextual performance was evident amongst those who achieved ‘high profile’ work assignments, which, despite requiring similar levels of task performance, were considered superior due to their greater contribution to the organisation’s objectives and the resulting exposure they gave managers.

Conceptually, contextual performance is broadly similar to other concepts like prosocial organisational behaviour (POB) and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) in that it focuses on behaviour that is essentially extra to specified role requirements and is

therefore unlikely to be captured in job descriptions, competencies or performance objectives. For this reason it is difficult to capture as part of formal performance monitoring procedures, although there is evidence that individuals who demonstrate such behaviour are rated more favourably by their managers (Motowidlo and Van Scotter, 1994; Podsakoff et al., 2000), with proactive efforts to help others and build relationships likely to influence supervisors' ratings of organisational commitment, likeability and reputation (Allen and Rush, 1998; Bateman and Organ, 1983; Hall et al., 2009; MacKenzie et al., 1991).

Importantly, contextual performance relies more heavily on tacit knowledge of organisational practices, which is rarely written down or formalised (Nonaka, 1994), but acquired through shared experiences and communication via workplace relationships with those who have the know-how and understanding of the skills required for specific contexts (Nonaka and Krogh, 2009). As such, tacit knowledge is likely to be accessed via guides, such as mentors, network contacts and relationships with senior personnel (Blass et al., 2007); the very relationships that BME managers report difficulty forming here and in previous studies (Ibarra and Deshpande, 2007; Ragins, 2010). This suggests that they will find it more difficult to gain the knowledge or 'golden thread' to help them navigate informal routes through the labyrinth. Not surprisingly, the BME senior managers in this study were also more likely to perceive these procedures as unfair, underhand, negative or even political (Charles and Nkomo, 2012).

Therefore, these findings appear to indicate that BME senior managers have been successful in achieving leadership positions, because they have put more effort into task performance *and* into making sense of informal organisational processes. Thus, there would seem to be an important need for researchers and practitioners to understand how the informal aspects of organisational culture impact on differential career progression, and the potential interplay between formal and informal organisational processes. The metaphor of the

labyrinth is particularly useful in this respect as it acknowledges the multiple barriers that BME individuals face along their leadership journeys, shifting focus away from simplistic solutions and interventions. It also highlights the need for individuals to make sense of the twists and turns that lie ahead, and seize opportunities that may sometimes be somewhat intangible, elusive, yet necessary³.

Study limitations

Naturally, the present study is not without limitations. The relatively small number of BME managers in our sample's population meant that it was not possible to explore differences between minority ethnic groups (e.g., Black African, Chinese etc.). Yet as these groups vary in terms of cultural background, relative power and stereotypes, their experiences of organisations are also likely to vary. Therefore future research should aim to compare their experiences in greater detail. Moreover, whilst we were reflexive about the role of gender during our analysis, there is undoubtedly a need for further study of the intersectionalities between gender, ethnicity and other areas of diversity such as class or age. A potentially interesting question concerns the possibility that minority groups in general (i.e., BME, women, LGBT and disabled employees) might find it more difficult to access information about informal aspects of organisational culture and processes. Further research could also extend the use of attribution theory to examine how minority group employees make sense of important career events by investigating the dimensional structure of causal attributions by using methods such as the Leeds Attributional Coding System (Munton et al., 1999) to code individual statements extracted from interviews. Finally, as a case study, we were limited to interviewing managers in a single UK public sector organisation, but clearly there is a need to replicate and extend these findings to a broader range of organisational settings within the UK and internationally.

Conclusions

These findings support and extend current understanding of factors that contribute to differential career progression by identifying the importance of formal and informal organisational processes in understanding how to progress through the career 'labyrinth' to leadership roles. History suggests that designers of labyrinths are often sworn to secrecy. Yet, there are also many examples, like Theseus and the Minotaur, where individuals have been given secret information about how to navigate the twists and turns they are likely to encounter on their journey. Whilst BME managers may have to rely on explicit knowledge about formalised paths to reach their goal, it seems that white managers are more likely to be passed a 'golden thread' to help guide them through informal channels, allowing them to progress more quickly to leadership roles.

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Notes

¹ Although this an umbrella term that does not differentiate between ethnic groups, we adopt it here because it is commonly used in organisations and statistical analyses of demographic groups

² Whitehall is an area of London where many government departments are located; Whitehall is therefore used as a metonym for UK government administration.

³ We thank an anonymous reviewer for offering this insight.

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Table 1. Final templates for Black and Minority Ethnic and white managers

BME	White
1. Visibility 1. Work content 1. Discretion 2. Profile of assignments 2. <i>Role type</i> 1. <i>Role choice</i> 2. <i>Value of diversity</i> 3. <i>Recognition</i> 1. <i>Scrutiny</i> 2. <i>Extra work effort</i> 3. <i>Receiving credit</i> 4. <i>Rocking the boat</i>	1. Visibility 1. Work content 1. Discretion 2. Profile of assignments 2. <i>Building reputation</i>
2. Networks 1. Informal networks 1. Temporary promotion 2. Predetermined candidates 3. <i>Accessing networks</i> 2. <i>Formal networks</i> 1. <i>Peer support</i> 2. <i>Self help</i> 3. <i>Backlash</i>	2. Networks 1. Informal networks 1. Temporary promotion 2. Predetermined candidates 3. <i>Self-promotion</i>
3. Development 1. Mainstream development 1. Networking 2. Prestige 2. <i>Mentoring</i> 1. <i>Suitable mentors</i> 2. <i>Mentoring support</i> 3. <i>Positive action development</i> 1. <i>Channelled</i> 2. <i>Ghettoised</i>	3. Development 1. Mainstream development 1. Networking 2. Prestige 2. <i>Informal developmental relationships</i>
4. Line manager support 1. Sponsorship 1. Advocate 2. Introduces networks 2. Career interest 1. Highlights opportunities 2. Career guidance 3. Career impeding behaviour 1. Blocks training and development 2. Blocks career moves	4. Line manager support 1. Sponsorship 1. Advocate 2. Introduces networks 2. Career interest 1. Highlights opportunities 2. Career guidance 3. Career impeding behaviour 1. Blocks training and development 2. Blocks career moves
4. <i>Performance evaluation</i> 1. <i>Quality of feedback</i> 2. <i>Appraisal</i>	

Note. Codes unique to each template are denoted by italics

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