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**Abstract**

**Legitimising the unacceptable and accepting the illegitimate: symbolic violence in the engineering profession in the UK**

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to contribute to an understanding of the experiences of people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities in the UK engineering profession by identifying the processes by which BME people are excluded and marginalised, but also the strategies that they employ to negotiate and navigate the pathways of the engineering labour market. There is a general acknowledgement among scholars of equality and diversity that, in spite of the paralysis of legislative instruments aimed at eradicating racism in the UK labour market, overt racism and discrimination are now rare in organisations. Yet processes by which BME people (and other minority groups) continue to be discriminated against and disadvantaged in organisations and the labour market have been documented and discussed time and time again and the hidden nature of some of these processes have been highlighted (Acker 2006; Healy et al 2010). Guided by a theoretical perspective based on Bourdieu’s concept of *symbolic violence*, the paper aims to understand the experiences of black people in the engineering profession, both in terms of the process of gaining entry to the profession as well as their experiences of working in it.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of the concept of symbolic violence and this is followed by an overview of the context of the engineering profession in the UK. We then outline the methodological approach taken and methods employed in collecting the data before we move on to present of our findings. The final section presents our conclusion.

**Symbolic violence as a theoretical framework**

Symbolic violence “refers to the subordinating effects on people of hidden structures that reproduce and maintain social domination in covert ways” (Calguori, 2010, p.389) and includes the multiple processes through which people are subjugated and dominated, from ideologies to institutions. Wacquant suggests that it is “the subtle imposition of systems of meaning that legitimize, and thus solidify structures of inequality” ([1993, p.264](#_ENREF_18)). It is unnoticed and partly-unconscious, practiced and maintained by individuals in everyday life. Because it is “gentle, invisible violence” ([Bourdieu, 1990, p.127](#_ENREF_4)), it goes unperceived and unrecognised by its agents and victims who actually tend to participate in and accept the domination ([Krais, 1993](#_ENREF_12)), thus hierarchies, privilege and inequalities are naturalised and reproduced ([Adkins and Skeggs, 2004](#_ENREF_1)). Bourdieu sees it as both everywhere and nowhere, i.e., it is everywhere in the symbolic systems that impose hierarchies on which our knowledge of the world is based in a way that limits the possibility of a better system; and it is nowhere because it is so subtle and gentle that its very existence or its origins go unrecognised ([Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992](#_ENREF_8)).

Symbolic violence is exercised with tacit complicity, i.e. the agents and victims remain unconscious of wielding or accepting it ([Bourdieu, 2001](#_ENREF_5)). Hierarchies and domination systems are internalised by the societal members who accept their ‘social trajectory’ as legitimate ([Tabb, 2011](#_ENREF_16)). The dominant classes with privileged positions only have to “let the system take its own course in order to exercise their domination” ([Bourdieu, 1977](#_ENREF_2)). Because symbolic domination is “absorbed like air”, escape or resistance to it is difficult ([Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992, p.270](#_ENREF_6)). Based on the taken-for-granted assumptions, the dominated ways of practice are embodied by the subject but not necessarily enforced by physical violence (Pedersen 2011).

The values of a ruling privileged class are imposed onto the dominant group through a socio-cultural process of ‘misrecognition’ to the extent that even the dominating may not be aware of perpetuating the norm and the dominated tend to be accepting of the domination ([Johnson et al 2008, p.278](#_ENREF_11)). It is repeated over time through formal and informal social and family institutions, and is consumed through the everyday discourse, practices by people and cultural products, and is internalised mostly without resistance. Therefore, it is seen as “a more effective and more brutal means of oppression” than structural violence ([Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992, p.115](#_ENREF_6)).

In everyday life, symbolic violence is wielded in different ways. It can take the form of “people being denied resources, treated as inferior or being limited in terms of realistic aspirations” ([Webb et al 2002, p.xvi](#_ENREF_20)). For example people with ‘regional’ or ‘foreign’ accents may experience personal anxiety and lowered self-expectation when faced with meeting people who speak the “Queen’s English’. In this example, the subtleness and invisibility of symbolic violence results in “very real…suffering and reproduction of class hierarchies” ([Schubert, 2008, p.193](#_ENREF_15)). What is misrecognised here is the sense of superiority of those who are confident in the use of ‘proper’ English. They perceive “that the legitimate culture is not made for him [sic] (and is often made against him) so that he is not made for it” ([Bourdieu, 1984, p.327](#_ENREF_3)).

Bourdieu (1998) argues that schools teach students particular subjects, in certain ways, in specific language, based on particular logic, while neglecting others in a system of social classification that is considered natural, but which is actually based on the logic of the dominant group. Therefore, students who possess the required cultural and linguistic capital are better prepared to succeed in schools than other students; this is attributed to their natural ability. Consequently they are seen as ‘naturally’ superior to the students from the non-dominant groups who do not do well and are blamed for their poor performance. Bourdieu argues that this “lack of ﬁt… and the blaming of the individuals involved for their poor performance, is a form of symbolic violence through which social class hierarchy is reproduced” ([Schubert, 2008, p.185](#_ENREF_15)). In this vein several studies have examined the relationship between symbolic violence and the underperformance of black children in schools, arguing, in the main, that black children exclude themselves from further education because they misrecognise and attribute their academic failure to their own natural talent or lack of it.

Symbolic violence is perpetuated in the labour market and involves a process of ‘othering’ that is deemed natural or legitimate, and remains unquestioned. Ariss et al (2013), for example, suggest that the negative portrayal of ethnic minorities in Germany as deficient labour market participants because they by and large work in the fruit and vegetable trade, is a form of symbolic violence because there is no questioning of the state policies that have created that problem. Also, many professions have a dress code, which symbolises job positions, power and an assurance of being perceived as ‘professional’. This has associated connotations of competence, expertise, dedication and care. It is a practice that is considered natural and engaged in without a questioning of its legitimacy. Inevitably, groups who, for one reason or other, do not, or are unable to, participate in that dress code (e.g. women wearing hijabs) are unconsciously perceived as not having the competence or expertise to partake equally in that profession, irrespective of relevant meritocratic criteria.

There is limited work on symbolic violence in the organisational setting. Nevertheless, many dimensions of work organisation, from the ways in which bureaucratic control is exercised and power is distributed across organisational hierarchies, to the subtlety of ordering produced in language and symbols and shaped by particular logics of practice, but in ways that remain hidden in organisational discourse, results in symbolic violence. Indeed Sanada (2014, p64) posits that:

“the idea of symbolic violence indicates that fair selection, whose original aim was to deconstruct the power structure of the past … in fact, contributes to the reproduction of class positions… Symbolic violence is possible when the nature of social selection appears inclusive”.

In that vein, Acker (2006) has referred to ‘inequality regimes’ in organisations while Noon et al (2012) have highlighted how the ‘hyper-formalisation’ of selection procedures can result in inequality in organisations. Symbolic violence has also been used to explain how HR practitioners “enact symbolic violence on employees who raise claims of bullying against their managers by attributing managerial bullying behaviours to legitimate performance management practices” (Harrington et al 2015, p. 368).

Agents who are subject to symbolic violence (and recognise it) can, and sometimes do, use their agency to resist the domination. However, the ability to liberate oneself from the socio-cultural norms is based on individual decisions, and a critical reflection on the previously unconscious beliefs. For example, Richardson (2011) has argued that Kanye West uses rap music (which has been vilified by mainstream media as being mainly about violence, gangs and female exploitation), to question the legitimacy of university education and expose the symbolic violence inherent in it, in particular against black and working class communities in the USA.

We must, therefore, caution against an overly structural view of BME experiences in engineering. Obviously, BME people themselves exercise their agency in firstly making the decision to work in engineering and secondly, devising strategies in order to cope with the conditions of their employment. As such, the participation of BME people in the profession is ordered to a large extent by a process of subordination and marginalisation that is legitimised by existing norms and practices, but which is also influenced by the their own strategies. Yet the imbalance caused by a transformation of an agent’s habitus can create ripples in the fields and the habitus of other players agents who share the field ([Fathzadeh, 2014](#_ENREF_10)). Consequently this process of reflexivity and resistance can reinforce symbolic violence ([Pedersen, 2011, p.4](#_ENREF_13)), for example, by disapproval, punishment or condemnation by members inside or outside the ‘group’.

To advance research, in this article, we use the concept of symbolic violence, as well as Bourdieu’s other concepts such as habitus, and capitals, to draw attention to the processes by which BME people are evaluated, marginalised and excluded in the engineering profession. We highlight workplace challenges faced by BMEs in the sector. Additionally we reveal strategies employed by Black engineers to resist symbolic violence and traverse the disparate experiences they face in seeking and finding employment in the profession.

**Context of Engineering in the UK**

Engineering in the UK is characterised by both definitional issues and problems of image. Commonplace usage of the terms ‘engineer’ and engineering’ have evolved over time and as a result, anyone in the UK can describe themselves as an engineer; in everyday language the term is often used to encompass those who are in some way associated with engineering, including design, manufacture, maintenance or operation of a technical product or system. However, the specific titles that denote professional engineering, such as Chartered Engineer (CENG) or Engineering Technician (EngTech), are protected by law and their usage restricted. It is these more specific articulations that form the focus of the current paper. A further challenge for those researching in this sector is the sheer size and diversity of UK engineering. There are currently over fifty different branches of engineering, each represented by its own professional body.

Interestingly, graduate employment rates in engineering are generally higher than average, however, although young people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds are attaining degrees in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects, few of them enter the engineering profession when compared to their white counterparts (Engineering UK, 2013); the majority of engineers in the UK are white males (Royal Academy of Engineering, 2013). The profession also demonstrates an ageing workforce.

It is against this backdrop that the current research (as described in the next section) was undertaken.

**Methodology**

The data for this paper is drawn from a wider study which explored the issues and challenges faced by black and minority ethnic (BME) people and those from socio-economically disadvantaged (SED) backgrounds when choosing engineering as a profession in the UK. The research, which took a qualitative, inductive approach, was undertaken in two distinct phases over a nine-month period in 2013 and 2014. In total we spoke with 158 people from diverse backgrounds, including differences in ethnicity, gender, age, engineering experience, and socio-economic background. During the first phase we carried out a series of scoping interviews with 17 key stakeholders in the engineering industry. This was followed in the second phase by a series of focus group interviews (n9) with engineering apprentices (n75) and additional in-depth semi structured interviews with individual engineers (n66 in total). We also made site visits to several engineering organisations. All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. The focus group and individual interviews followed a life history approach (Robson, 1993), which allowed the participants to give voice to their experiences of working in the engineering profession in the UK. Questions in the interviews included themes such as: personal backgrounds; educational and career histories; how people gained entry to engineering; what influenced their choice of engineering as a profession; career prospects and aspirations; general experiences of working within the engineering industry and their feelings regarding their future prospects.

We took a thematic approach to the analysis of the data and recurring themes and patterns emerged. For example, we found that there was evidence of domination and dominated amongst the experiences of the BME engineers interviewed and also both overt and covert racism. As will be discussed in greater detail below, it was evident that despite formal policies and practices operating within organisations to eliminate discrimination, white hegemonic structures and norms are often prevailing features of symbolic violence which help shape the life chances of non-white engineers.

**Legitimising the unacceptable and accepting the illegitimate: lack of resources**

One of the most significant factors that emerged from the thematic analysis was that access to resources, whether these be economic, social or cultural, were viewed as a pre-requisite for entering into, and developing a career in, the engineering industry. Capital in the form of ‘formal qualifications’ were viewed as a normal pre-requisite, however, access to other, often less overt capitals was of great significance, albeit sometimes going unrecognised by the participants. Although this was found to be the case irrespective of class, gender or ethnicity, it was apparent that people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds generally felt somewhat inhibited by lack of these capitals; such inhibition was often, but not always, multiplied where SED background and BME background intersected.

A well-known route into engineering is through unpaid internships in organisations. By definition, this route is more accessible to those from more affluent backgrounds and can indirectly exclude people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Randle et al 2014). What this research found was that there were a lack of young BME people being accepted onto intern programmes:

*The young people I see coming in for work placements, for shadow opportunities, they are not from ethnic minority backgrounds* (Interviewee 54 – BME Female)

Clearly, there can be a number of different reasons for this and it could even be attributed to racist practices. Nonetheless, it is possible to see how, by accepting the dominant organisational structures at play, people can become victims of social violence. For some, it is not the organisation at fault when a black person does not get a job, it is the person themselves:

*I have never experienced it [racism] directly . . . If I went to an interview and I got turned down, I tend to say I was not good enough . . . I never said, it’s because I was black or anything like that . . . I have not experienced it, but I must say it does exist* (Interviewee 16 – BME Male)

By refusing to acknowledge that racism is a possible underlying inhibitor to his getting a job and accepting that he is simply not good enough, this participant internalises and accepts processes of inequality. Likewise, once they gain entry to an organisation, the normal hierarchical, i.e. white male, structures are subtly controlling some workers, as this participant who was ‘amazed’ at getting a job in an ‘all white’ organisation states:

*I felt an overwhelming feeling that I had to do better than all the others in order to prove to the person that hired me that he made the right decision and to my colleagues that, yes, I deserve to be in that position . . . I felt that I had to try even harder than I normally would have done just to make sure that I got the respect . . . that was not anything that was consciously explained that I needed to do, I just felt that I needed to do it and four months in, it hasn’t been an easy ride* (Interviewee 18 – BME Male)

Despite the evidence that there is a paucity of BME people, particularly black people, in engineering, this successful black engineer is confident that there is equality of access and refuses to believe that ethnicity is an inhibitor:

*‘If you are good, if I have someone who is good, I don’t care whether you are blue or black, whatever colour you are, if you are good and can deliver the goods, I will keep you, if you are not, then I am not keeping you* (Focus group interviewee – BME Male)

The behaviour here is replicating the views of the majority white that it is not colour that is a problem it is the lack of ability. This perception, of course, relates to ones position in the ‘field’ or in the organisational hierarchy and highlights the value of using Bourdieu’s concepts given their relational nature. The misrecognition of this interviewee of the symbolic violence being perpetrated against Black people in the profession, as both a manager and a Black man, makes him complicit in two ways, both as perpetrator and victim.

**Legitimising the unacceptable and accepting the illegitimate: ‘a feel for the game’**

Bourdieu (1986) talks about how people position themselves within the social space, or ‘field’ in which they are operating, in this case within the engineering profession in the UK. He postulates that the capitals we acquire over our life time helps us to operate within our social fields and those who are ‘perfectly adapted’ to their field possess a ‘feel for the game’ and hence ‘their habitus is invisible’ (Bourdieu, 1980: 117 cited in Robinson and Kerr, 2009: 881). Those who do not have such a ‘feel for the game’ are subtly excluded.

Some of our BME engineers where distinctly aware of this ‘feel for the game’ and whether or not they possessed it:

*[They] always say we are lacking engineers and yet [they] are recruiting the same people, people who look like themselves, act like themselves, are like themselves and I include myself in that because I got recruited because I was very much like the people who interviewed me, and that personality is not necessarily related to colour or sex, it’s something that says that person is like me, I need to pull that person in* (Interviewee 9 – BME Female)

In this case, she had the correct social capital to be included but this was not always the case with others. One senior lack engineer suggested that organisations tend to ‘recruit someone that [they] have something in common with’.

The argument is frequently that ‘we have to select . . . people who fit in teams’ (Interviewee 17 – BME Male) and as the engineering profession is characterised by white males the inference speaks for itself. Once again, we see how the dominating social order within organisations is reproduced in subtle ways that legitimise a form of social violence.

We also found that there was a fear of fitting in, or of lacking this ‘feel for the game’. One black engineer, who possessed the ‘correct’ capitals due to his Oxbridge education, found that when he tried to encourage youngsters in schools to enter the engineering profession they already held pre-conceived ideas of fitting in. They frequently asked him whether it was not “a bit strange, like how many coloured people are there?” and then they commented “I just won’t fit in there”. Without recognising the situation, these young people had already internalised the dominant system and accepted the idea that ‘fitting in’ equates to ‘white’.

**Legitimising the unacceptable and accepting the illegitimate: personal identity**

The notion of fitting in and ‘whiteness’ or ‘Britishness’ was frequently extended by participants to encompass their personal identity. What we found was that, in order to gain entry to the engineering profession and to subsequently progress their careers, many participants either had to change their identity, or felt that they should do so. This identity change was related to accent, hair, dress, social skills or name.

A remarkably common theme was that of name-changing; several BME participants talked about changing their name, considering changing their name or knowing people who had changed their name when applying for a position in engineering (and other spheres of work). Some described how they had been advised to change their name to one that sounded more ‘English’ and were accepting of this as a practice that would help them in the future. One BME participant was considering changing the name of his son as ‘I don’t want his name to be a barrier in the future’ (Interviewee 16 – BME Male).

Others told how they had been by advised by parents who were ‘saying it from experience’ (Interviewee 58 - BME Female) or recruitment agencies who suggested that a foreign sounding name would be disadvantageous (Interviewee 20 – BME Female). Changing one’s name to get a job may be viewed as a tactical move involving personal agency but it is also conforming to a subtle process of institutional domination.

Paradoxically, having a ‘foreign’ sounding name can work in favour of the applicant. It is common practice now for (particularly) public sector organisations in the UK who put engineering project bids out for tender to stipulate that they are looking for a diverse workforce. Interviewees spoke of this system and claimed that they were ‘chosen’ for such projects due to their name. Several viewed this as the organisation ‘playing the game’ and do not view it as a form of symbolic violence:

*[I]t was convenient that I tick the box of ethnic minority. It wasn't let's put me there because I am Asian, it was I can do the job - and by the way, I tick the box for that as well* (Interviewee 17 – BME Male)

Alongside name changing, we found people felt the necessity to change their hair (cutting off dreadlocks / tying up beards) and their dress. Indeed, the latter was deemed necessary by one of our Key Informants who worked for a charitable organisation that provided career advice to young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. He told us how some young black men did not know the ‘appropriate’ way to dress when going for interviews. Ironically this advice was very good on one level as the young men were able to present themselves in a way that ‘conformed’ to the dominant values whilst on another level, he was perpetuating these dominant values and subjecting these same young men to acts of symbolic violence.

**Conclusion**

The paper has drawn upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu and in particular his concept of symbolic violence in order to frame and explore the career experiences of people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds in engineering. His work is beneficial here as it allows us to consider the societal and institutional practices that interplay to create – and recreate – inequality in the work-life experiences from people from BME backgrounds.

It is apparent from the empirical data that the possession of capitals is often crucial to enable an individual to enter the field, in this case the engineering profession. Such capitals are often lacking for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and this lack is multiplied when intersected with race and ethnicity. Even when access to the field is gained, those operating within in it help perpetuate the habitus by confirming the social structures that reproduce and maintain the dominant norm. Such practices may be covert to both the perpetuator and the victim.

Those thinking about accessing the field are often deterred by a belief that once in, they would lack a ‘feel for the game’ and may unconsciously exclude themselves from the field. The way in which they absorb this perceived domination “like air” ([Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992, p.270](#_ENREF_6)) continues to restrict access to these marginalised groups.

The research demonstrates how ‘whiteness’ and ‘Britishness’ can be seen as synonymous with ‘fitting in’ and this is symbolised through individual identity. By accepting and changing parts of their identity research participants in this study internalised and tacitly accepted the symbolic violence being directed towards them and a “practice-acceptance-internalization-practice cycle” (Randle et al 2015) continues.

Finally, it is clear that the participants in this study were also active agents and it would be incorrect to designate a large number of them as victims. Indeed, for some, their ethnicity partially provided entry to a field; however, even this is arguably legitimising the illegitimate.

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