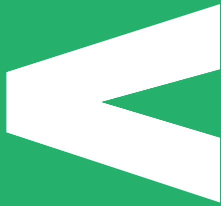

Inequality

The IFS Deaton Review

Ethnic and racial inequality in the UK: a comment from a German perspective

Claudia Diehl

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Ethnic and racial inequality in the UK: a comment from a German perspective

Claudia Diehl (University of Konstanz)[1]

Introduction

The minority population in the UK is more diverse than in Germany, where the population with an immigrant background has long been shaped by the legacy of the immigration of guest workers mostly from countries such as Turkey, Italy, Spain, Greece and the former Yugoslavia. In general, the academic and societal debates focus on ‘ethnic inequality’ related to immigration rather than on ‘racial inequality, though the topic of racial disadvantage and discrimination has gained importance in recent years. Over time, inflows have diversified in terms of countries of origin and skill levels. Education-wise, the share of individuals with tertiary education is now higher among newcomers than in the majority population (Sprengholz et al., 2021). Nonetheless, research on immigrants’ structural integration in the education system and the labour market still focuses on explaining the persistent disadvantages of some origin groups. The countless studies on ethnic inequality in these areas have yielded some robust findings. Most importantly, the majority of children with an immigration background – this includes many German-born children – come from households with rather low levels of education. This educational disadvantage is passed from generation to generation, a process that is reinforced by the German education system where early tracking – that is, sorting children into different academic and non-academic paths at a young age (after fourth grade when the children are about 10 years old) – is the norm.

The so-called ‘primary effects’ of children’s socio-economic backgrounds (parental socio-economic status) play an important role in this transmission process: most importantly and much as in non-immigrant families, at the onset of primary school, children whose parents have low formal education already have lower academic competencies. In addition, many school children are not yet proficient in German because of the processes of ethnic replenishment (Esser, 2003), which refers to the ongoing immigration of spouses who join co-ethnic but native-born partners in the destination country (i.e. individuals who belong to the ‘second generation’ of immigrants). As a consequence, many families speak a language other than German at home. Some of the children who grow up in these households lag behind in terms of their German language skills, even though they were born in Germany. This, in turn, hampers their academic success. With respect to the secondary effects of children’s socio-economic backgrounds, however, we see advantages for immigrants. The term ‘secondary effects’ refers to educational choices that systematically differ by parental socio-economic background – even at similar levels of academic competencies. While these secondary effects usually mean that native children of parents who have a low socio-economic status make less ambitious choices, this is not the case for immigrants. *Ceteris paribus*, they are more likely to choose more ambitious educational tracks than native children (Dollmann, 2017). However, these positive secondary effects do not fully make up for the disadvantages related to the lower competencies of immigrant children.

These educational disadvantages also shape immigrants’ integration into the labour market later in life. Controlling for the level of education explains much of the difference in occupational status between immigrants and native Germans, even though gaps may persist in earnings and unemployment. The remaining gaps partly reflect a lack of social ties to members of majority groups, which can be helpful in acquiring important information, for example, about job vacancies (Lancee and Hartung, 2012; Kalter and Kogan, 2014). A French study shows, for example, that language courses increase labour force participation partly through access to better information about the labour market and application procedures (Lochmann et al., 2018). Some authors point out that cultural factors also hamper labour market integration, especially for religious Muslim women (Koopmans, 2016). Still others emphasise that discrimination contributes to ongoing disadvantage, especially for women wearing a hijab and for young men entering the system of vocational training (Diehl, Friedrich and Hall, 2009; Weichselbaumer, 2020). Overall, however, empirical evidence suggests that ethnic and racial inequality in Germany

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primarily reflects low levels of education that are transmitted from the first generation of immigrants to the second generation (Diehl and Granato, 2018).

I will discuss some findings from the chapter by Mirza and Warwick (2022) against this backdrop. What renders the comparison with the UK particularly interesting and worthwhile is that in the UK, there is a greater heterogeneity in terms of immigrants' overall skill level, their cultural background and their 'visibility'. As a consequence, the overall picture is more complex than in Germany. One challenge in comparing both countries is that – reflecting different understandings of belonging and nationhood – some figures in the report do not differentiate between native and foreign-born. In the following, I discuss findings from a German perspective in four areas: gender differences in labour market inequality, tertiary education, the role of discrimination in explaining inequality and the COVID-19 crisis.

Gender differences in labour market integration

One of the strengths of this chapter is that it provides a lot of information and discussion about gender differences in the education system and the labour market. In terms of the overall labour market participation of members of minority groups, integration is a success story compared with many countries in the European Union. For example, the overall gap in employment between immigrants and natives is smaller (–1.2 percentage points) in the UK than in France (–7.9) or in Germany (–8.1) (see OECD, 2019). However, because of the above-mentioned heterogeneity in the minority population, these figures conceal important differences by gender and ethnicity. Similar to France, where Turkish people and women from the Maghreb are by far the most disadvantaged groups in terms of their labour force participation (Brinbaum, 2018), Pakistani and Bangladeshi women stand out in the UK and have particularly low employment rates. The discussion in the chapter on the situation in the UK provides a lot of insight into the reasons behind this.

In general, labour force participation rates reflect not only the resource endowments of minorities, most importantly their education/skills (partly reflecting the challenges faced in having foreign credentials recognised in the destination country), but also other resources relevant to the labour market, such as proficiency in the destination country's language and social ties to non-immigrants. Their motivation to join the labour force matters as well, particularly for women (Koopmans 2016, Schieckoff and Diehl 2021. It is influenced, among other things, by their cultural and religious orientations and, related to this, attitudes about gender and work. Finally, the opportunities to actually find a job matter. These are shaped by the general characteristics of the labour market, such as the unemployment rate and degree of credentialism. Ethnic and racial discrimination can limit labour market opportunities substantially.

While resource endowments (e.g. levels of education) can be directly observed in most datasets, this is rarely the case for motivations (reflecting, for example, attitudes about gender and employment) and opportunities (limited by discrimination, for example). The roles of these factors are therefore difficult to assess – let alone disentangle – when it comes to explaining majority–minority gaps after controlling for resource endowments. A comparison between a group's labour force participation and unemployment rates provides a first insight into the relative role of motivation versus opportunities. In this respect, the chapter shows a similar picture for the UK and France. In both countries, unemployment among those who are searching for a job does not seem to play the largest role for females from both groups. The analysis provided in Figure 33 is particularly helpful in this respect. About half of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women are not active in the labour market. One may argue that this reflects mostly individual preferences and that Western ideas about women's economic independence should not be imposed on to immigrants, especially when they or their parents come from a conservative environment. However, the failure to integrate female immigrants into the labour market has wide-ranging implications for them and their household.

Economically speaking, female labour force participation is important for avoiding welfare dependency and poverty, especially by establishing a stable financial situation before reaching an age where working is no longer an option. It also has an impact on the integration of other members of the household. Low female employment has been shown to negatively affect the chances of immigrant children attending a public childcare provider – which in itself has a

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positive impact on their language acquisition and school success, as reported by Peter and Spieß (2015), for example. Additionally, labour market (in)activity is a behaviour found to be transmitted from mother to daughter (Farré and Vella, 2013). Thus, inactive mothers are likely to result in inactive daughters, furthering the negative effects of this phenomenon from one generation to the next. On top of all this, labour market integration can be a crucial step for female immigrants' economic and legal independence, enabling them to escape abusive or exploitative relationships. Undoubtedly, many immigrant women may not work because they cannot find/afford childcare for their children. The large differences in labour force participation rates between origin groups suggest, however, that group-specific preferences for labour market participation also play a role – along with a (lack of information on) the availability of childcare. In Germany, data show that children of non-working immigrant mothers are less likely to start childcare at an early age, even though German legislation has guaranteed a childcare place for children aged between 1 and 3 with working parents.

Several factors may contribute to a lower motivation of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women to join the labour force. This could be an indirect effect of discrimination, in the sense that females from these groups anticipate high levels of discrimination in the labour market. After all, the chapter also shows that about a quarter of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women feel discriminated against, and 'work' is one of the areas where discrimination is most strongly felt. This could contribute to a perception that searching for a job is not worth the experiences it entails. However, it seems unlikely that this factor is key to explaining the low labour force participation of these groups – and not only because a majority reports no experiences of discrimination in the last five years. What seems to be more important than an anticipated lack of opportunities are conservative attitudes about the role of women in the family and in the labour market. For many immigrants, attitudes and employment-related behaviour were shaped in the country of origin – and transmitted across immigrant generations. As the chapter emphasises, the female labour force participation rate in the countries of origin (i.e. Bangladesh and Pakistan) is quite low (Mirza and Warwick, 2022, p. 53). Employment rates of women who have emigrated are often higher than among those who remain – but are still lower than the average in the destination countries.

What is puzzling, however, is that gender gaps in educational success (as displayed in the chapter on education inequalities by Farquharson, McNally and Tahir, 2022) are small. One important finding is that despite their educational success (in the sense of surpassing their parents' levels of education): 'Pakistani and Bangladeshi women do less well than one might expect given their educational attainment and social origins' (Mirza and Warwick, 2022, p. 85). In other words, when it comes to education, members of minority groups experience more upward mobility than natives with similar social backgrounds, but they are unable to translate this advantage into similar labour market success. In Germany, children who belong to the most disadvantaged ethnic groups are – despite their ambitious educational choices – similarly (un)successful in their educational achievements as their German peers with similar family backgrounds (i.e. socio-economic status). What happens afterwards on the labour market does, however, mostly reflect their comparatively poor educational attainments. In both Germany and the UK, there are no gender differences between educational aspirations and the school success of immigrant children from disadvantaged groups. But why, when the school system in the UK is more successful when it comes to minority students' educational upward mobility, can this advantage not be transferred to the labour market?

Mirza and Warwick (2022, p. 69) mention that discrimination plays a role and that even the expectation of discrimination may influence labour market decisions. They concede, however, that the focus on discrimination is too narrow. Another relevant hint may be provided by the finding that a large share of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women work part-time (Mirza and Warwick, 2022, p 60). In fact, these are the groups where part-time work is more frequent than among the reference group of White British. This suggests that the compatibility between work and family life and the acceptance of mothers working may play an important role. After all, these two groups have a much higher fertility rate than other origin groups and more often report children living in the household. I am not familiar with the availability and costs of childcare for working families in the UK, but in France – where childcare availability is considered good and female employment rates are overall high – the labour force participation rates of women from Turkey and the Maghreb are still low (Brinbaum 2018). The overall higher levels of religiosity of Muslim immigrants may also play a role in this respect, as strong individual religiosity has been shown to negatively affect female labour force participation, not only among Muslim immigrants but also among Christian immigrants (Schieckoff and Diehl, 2021).

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Against this backdrop, the discussion about the hesitancy of minorities to start vocational training after school – and the limited possibilities for doing so in the UK – is important. In Germany, after the arrival of many refugees in 2015–16, the system of vocational training was perceived by policymakers as a system that may offer an alternative path to respectable and often decently remunerated jobs for newcomers. However, one challenge for many refugees, besides a lack of familiarity with this system, was that they felt pressured to earn money right away and support their families back home. They may not want to spend as much time in the 'preparatory system' where newcomers learn German and achieve basic educational skills and degrees that are a (if not formal, at least factual) precondition to finding a position in vocational training. Part-time vocational training has been discussed as an alternative. After reading the chapter, I wondered whether a greater flexibility in the types of training positions offered, for instance the opportunity to attend part-time, would also better fit the needs of women from Pakistan and Bangladesh. This might allow them to balance their family obligations, high educational aspirations and the necessary acquisition of formal skills. Such a 'structured transition' from the education system to the labour market may be a promising strategy when it comes to increasing the labour force participation among female immigrants in minority groups where female labour force participation is low. I will return to this topic in the following section.

Ethnic and racial inequalities in tertiary education

According to Mirza and Warwick (2022), there are rather strong positive secondary effects (in the above-described sense) in tertiary education for all groups but Black Africans and Caribbeans. This finding is in line with findings from Germany, which show that members of minority groups are more likely than natives to move on to university once they have successfully obtained their *Abitur* – a precondition for doing so. However, their dropout rates are substantially higher and their performance worse than that of students without an immigration background (SVR Forschungsbereich, 2015). In the UK, this is also the case. In fact, the chapter points out the existence of substantial attainment gaps at the upper end of the grade distribution in high school, which seem quite relevant to the question of how well minority students will perform at university. One reason for minority students' higher dropout rates in Germany is their language skills. Even for second-generation immigrants (i.e. those who speak German fluently), academic writing is challenging for many, and this has been shown to hamper their success at university. Minority students, on average, have lower academic competencies at the beginning of their university education (partly reflecting their higher likelihood to move on to university after completing their *Abitur*) as well as lower social embeddedness at university, which also contribute to higher dropout rates (SVR Forschungsbereich, 2015). It would be interesting to see whether these factors play a role in the UK as well.

For those students who want to continue their education but who are not sufficiently prepared to succeed at university or who feel that an academic education is not the right choice for them, it is important to offer alternative career paths. The German system of vocational training has played an important role in absorbing the large flow of young refugees in 2015 and 2016. So I tend to agree with the comment in the chapter that, in accordance with the Sewell Report, the system of vocational training has been neglected in the UK, and that it may help in reducing ethnic and racial labour market inequality. Needless to say, this should by no means imply that minority students should be 'talked out' of their ambitions to gain a university degree. But high dropout rates and low attainment are worrisome because attending university comes along with considerable financial and time investments, especially for students from low socio-economic status families. Thus, it seems important to have a strategy that simultaneously aims (a) to improve the academic performance (e.g. by improving writing skills and students' social integration at university) of those minority students who are determined to go to university, and (b) to offer alternatives to a university education for those who just go to university because of a lack of (familiarity with) attractive alternatives.

One challenge in making this strategy a success for minority students is, again, ethnic and racial discrimination. Findings from Germany suggest that discrimination can be particularly severe in the vocational training system. This is because employers' ideas about applicants' soft skills play an important role at this career stage. Information on such young applicants is scarce and basically limited to school certificates, which leaves room for prejudiced ideas about, for example, the personal characteristics of minorities. Available research suggests that the formalised selection procedures for applicants for vocational training positions, typically used by larger

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firms and organisations, reduce discrimination (Hunkler, 2014). To involve these in a strengthening of the vocational training system seems important, especially because anticipated discrimination may be one reason why minorities prefer tertiary education over entering the labour market. Offering these vocational training positions as part-time positions may be an important additional strategy to involve females from groups who are clearly ambitious in their educational attainment but are not ready to enter university for various reasons, and who have a low motivation to enter the regular labour market (see the previous section).

The role of discrimination in explaining inequality

The chapter's findings on perceived discrimination are difficult to interpret. A majority of individuals from minority groups in the UK – about 65% – state that they have not experienced discrimination in the last five years, which is a rather long period. This overall finding is similar to the experiences of minorities in Germany, where data from the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) show that only a small minority of about 10% claim that they have experienced discrimination 'often' in the last two years. Most say that they have never experienced discrimination. Of course, discrimination often happens without being noticed by the victims, and vice versa (Diehl, Liebau and Muehlau, 2021).

Throughout the chapter, discrimination is indirectly linked to economic outcomes (Mirza and Warwick, 2022, p. 98). As outlined above, numerous studies in Germany show that low educational attainment is by far the most important reason for gaps in employment, occupational status and earnings. To me, the most startling difference in the chapter is that the general story is partly a different one in the UK. Substantial gaps in earnings (Mirza and Warwick, 2022, p. 68) and employment (Mirza and Warwick, 2022, pp. 48–50) remain even after controlling for the highest educational degree, the place of birth and the number of hours worked in the UK. The gaps diminish most strongly for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis after controlling for resources and other variables. Language skills seem not to matter a great deal in the UK, as stated in the chapter (p. 52). Because English is considered to be a lingua franca and part of popular culture, it may be more attractive and easier to learn than, for example, German. In sum, it seems that unexplained gaps play a much larger role in the UK than in Germany. This renders an explanation that focuses on discrimination more convincing, especially as the unexplained gaps are particularly large for 'visible' minority groups such as Black Caribbeans and Africans, which are groups that are not in the focus of research on ethnic disadvantage in Germany (on the experiences of discrimination among Black individuals in Germany; see Aikins et al., 2021).

I finally want to point out that the debate about how strongly discrimination shapes ethnic and racial inequality is a different one from how serious the problem of discrimination is. Discrimination is only one potential explanation for the persistent gaps in labour market outcomes between members of minority and majority groups, and multi-faceted interpretations of these gaps should be more commonplace. Discrimination is, however, a problem in itself and it is unfair, regardless of how much it contributes to explaining labour market outcomes. In addition, minorities may anticipate discrimination but compensate for it by 'trying harder', for example, by writing more applications. In that case, discrimination would not be visible in labour market outcomes but still come at a high price for those exposed to it. Comparably low levels of subjective well-being among Black Caribbeans and Africans speak for themselves (Mirza and Warwick, 2022, pp. 111–112).

Last but not least, I am not sure whether the fact that minorities report less discrimination when they live in neighbourhoods with many other individuals from minority groups is not an artefact (Mirza and Warwick, 2022, p. 29). It most likely reflects the phenomenon that more disadvantaged individuals – and thus those who usually live in more segregated areas – are less sensitive to discrimination than those who have become more similar to members of majority groups in many respects. Highly integrated individuals have higher aspirations for equal treatment, can fully grasp even subtle forms of discrimination and recognise that a lack of success in the labour and housing markets can no longer be attributed to alternative explanations such as a lack of resources; see Diehl et al. (2021) on this aspect of the 'integration paradox' (see also de Vroome, Martinovic and Verkuyten, 2014; Verkuyten, 2016). Starting out from this (predominantly Dutch and German) literature, more 'modest' aspirations and lower sensitivities for equal treatment, rather than a lower exposure to perpetrated discrimination

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among minorities who live in segregated neighbourhoods, seem to be the most likely mechanisms behind this finding.

COVID-19

From the perspective of a German scholar, this part of the chapter is remarkable because it shows that the UK is so much better off with respect to data availability. In Germany, information about the social and ethnic/racial background of individuals who were infected with COVID-19 – and even of those who died – is unavailable and can only be inferred from aggregate data (e.g. on infection rates by share of foreigners or average socio-economic status in the area). Similar to what has been shown for the US, data from the UK reveal that excess mortality of minority groups is dramatic even after controlling for age. According to the report, higher infection and mortality rates reflect exposure rather than comorbidities – this, of course, presumes that comorbidities are captured in an appropriate way (Mirza and Warwick, 2022, pp. 89–90).

While this is an important message, I was wondering whether an altogether different discourse can be found in the UK as well, namely the role of cultural factors and an allegedly low compliance with containment measures among immigrants. In Germany, the head of the Robert Koch Institute, the government's central scientific institution in the field of biomedicine, mentioned in a press conference that the majority of those in intensive care units at the time were immigrants, and insinuated that this reflected their lower compliance (e.g. with contact restrictions). After the press conference, it became obvious that this comment was unfounded and based on anecdotal evidence from one clinic. Reports – often with a xenophobic undertone – about mosques allegedly not sticking to restrictions and 'illegal' gatherings of large families among immigrants contributed to this perception. While it seems clear from a scientific perspective that the higher infection numbers and deaths among members of minority groups reflect, above all, these groups' greater vulnerability in terms of occupational segregation and work and housing conditions, it seems important to communicate this message to the public in order to debunk myths about the role of culture in explaining why minorities were hit so much harder by the pandemic.

The chapter also mentions the slower uptake of vaccination among minorities, and this is framed as a problem of a lack of confidence. In vaccination research, low confidence is but one factor in explaining vaccination hesitancy; complacency (i.e. not taking the disease seriously enough) is another. In the context of the chapter, however, a third factor seems most important: so-called 'convenience-related reasons', which can be barriers to getting vaccinated, such as a lack of information, a lack of time and no easy access to vaccination sites. Survey data from Germany show that vaccination uptake (e.g. against measles) among immigrant children is generally slightly lower than among native Germans. However, when asked about their motives, immigrant parents are less likely to report lack of confidence or complacency-related reasons and are slightly more likely to report so-called convenience-related reasons (e.g. barriers to access) than non-migrants (Diehl and Hunkler, 2022). Vaccination sites set up in segregated quarters of large cities have worked very well in Germany ('surprisingly well' as some journalists commented, again with a xenophobic undertone) and the queues were long. The studies cited in the chapter (e.g. Razai et al., 2021; Woolf et al., 2021) suggest that a lack of trust was an important cause of vaccine hesitancy in the UK and also varies between groups. In any case, the question of why the vaccine uptake among minorities was lower, whether or not this is specific for vaccinations against COVID-19 and how this differs between groups and countries, does not yet seem to be fully settled.

In summary, I want to emphasise that a comparative view on ethnic and racial inequalities is important and fruitful in order to better understand the phenomena and puzzles discussed in this very informative, rich and detailed chapter and elsewhere. Coherent and comparable data collections in countries with such diverse migration histories, such as Germany and the UK, are rare and demanding, yet remain important. After all, the groups and contexts we study shape, and sometimes constrain, the variables we focus on, the concepts we use, and the racial and ethnic categories we apply. Developing an explanatory framework that specifies which factors are most relevant in explaining inequality in a specific contextual setting remains key to understanding, and ultimately tackling, the challenges related to ethnic and racial diversity.

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