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**PERSONAL MERITS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL:
THE EXPERIENCES OF GETTING AHEAD IN THE
LABOUR MARKET AMONG SOUTH ASIAN
MINORITIES IN HONG KONG**

*Pui Yan Flora Lau**

Hong Kong Shue Yan University, China

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to identify the methods through which South Asian minorities are able to overcome the structural barriers and discriminatory experiences they face in the Hong Kong labour market. Qualitative in-depth interviews of nine South Asian minorities who were born or grew up in Hong Kong were conducted. They were competitive in academic results, compared to local Hong Kong Chinese, or were engaged in middle class jobs. In addition to their personal strengths, the author found that all interviewees benefitted from social, and particularly inter-ethnic, ties at different stages of their lives (e.g., when they began their first jobs or received important information). South Asian minorities are often portrayed as passive and disadvantaged, but this article explores how they can actively become achievers in Hong Kong. The role of agency is also re-asserted in discussions concerning ethnic minorities.

Keywords: Personal merits, ethnic minorities, labour market, agency, social capital

INTRODUCTION

The disadvantages and discrimination encountered by ethnic minorities in the labour market have been widely studied over the past decades, by both academic researchers and NGO professionals (Braddock & McPartland, 1987; Blackaby, 2005). The central issue has been why

* Corresponding author: Pui Yan Flora LAU; Email: pylau@hksyu.edu.

and how ethnic minorities lose out (Erni & Leung, 2014). For example, studies in the UK illustrated that a lack of fluency in English, racial discrimination and institutional preference are key reasons for relatively low employment levels, lower incomes and the persistence of low-level unskilled jobs for ethnic minorities, compared to their white counterparts (e.g. Heath & Yu, 2005; Blackaby, Leslie, Murphy, & O'Leary, 2005). These studies do, however, focus on the constraints imposed upon ethnic minorities rather than on their choices (Tatli, 2011; Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Ozbilgin, & Game, 2013).

In Hong Kong, where this study was conducted, conventional research into ethnic minorities is predominately policy- and academic-oriented. Policy-oriented research is mainly conducted by NGOs and concentrates on reviewing the experiences of social exclusion and the social acceptance of the ethnic minority population (Hong Kong Unison, 2006, 2012; Erni & Leung, 2014). Academic research is social sciences-oriented, examining demographic, employment, migration, globalisation, cultural heritage and human rights issues (Erni & Leung, 2014). Research into employment is very limited, and is basically confined to the discriminatory experiences encountered by ethnic minorities in the Hong Kong labour market (Ku, 2003, 2006; Caritas Community Centre, 2010).

In general, the research into ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, particularly that conducted by NGOs, has concentrated on their unfortunate experiences. This had contributed to the view of ethnic minorities as 'uniformly a victimized class waiting, or fighting, to be liberated' (Erni & Leung, 2014). The author believes that the question of 'under what circumstances ethnic minorities can succeed' can be equally important if one wishes to empower and to identify appropriate interventions for those who are in a disadvantaged condition. This chapter aims to answer this important question by bringing the concept of agency back into the discussion surrounding ethnic minority, and by exploring how those with an ethnic minority background actively utilise social capital to enter the formal labour market, and advance their careers. Social capital is therefore regarded as the means by which we can understand how ethnic minorities take the initiative to break through the barriers.

Social Capital and Job Search among Ethnic Minorities

It has been suggested that social capital contributes to economic outcomes, including access to the labour market (Aguilera, 2002; Drever & Hoffmeister, 2008), wage levels (Granovetter, 1973; Boxman, DeGraf, & Flap., 1991; Aguilera, 2005) and occupational status (Lin, 1999). Conventional social network research suggests that whereas strong ties serve emotional functions, weak ties tend to connect people to different social circles and are better able to provide new information, including that related to jobs. For example, Granovetter (1973) suggests that weak ties enable individuals to be in a better and more advantageous position when job searching, as they are able to extend the scope of the information they receive beyond their close circle, and thus access non-redundant information from acquaintances. Whether individuals are able to climb the career ladder or not depends on the information provided by their social ties. Recent research has shown that the various social characteristics of network members, such as status in a hierarchy, rather than the strength of their ties, connect them to new information and thus determine the effectiveness of social ties (Lin, 1999).

Contemporary research into ethnic minorities and social networks has mainly focused on how bonding and bridging social capital can help ethnic minorities access and utilise resources

in various social settings, such as education, career choices, establishing businesses and social life (Li, 2004; Fernandez & Fernandez-Mateo, 2006; Anthias, 2007; Battu, Seaman, & Zenou, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Saint-Blancat & Zaltron, 2013). These studies either conceptualise the idea of bonding and bridging social capital or assume a positive direct relationship between social ties and positive outcomes. Other researchers argue that inter-ethnic ties, i.e. ties with members of other ethnic groups, enable ethnic minorities to more effectively attain better positions in the labour market (Smith, 2000; Ooka & Wellman, 2003; Patacchini & Zenou, 2008; Kmec & Trimble, 2009). From this, Lancee (2010) identifies two types of crosscutting ties: identity and status bridging. Identity bridging ties, such as inter-ethnic ties, span culturally defined differences, such as ethnic origin. Inter-ethnic ties are particularly important for immigrants, as they help to create a wider network providing valuable host-country-specific and diversified social resources, such as job opportunities and higher status jobs (Mouw, 2002). Status bridging refers to ties that span vertical arrangements of power, wealth and prestige. Through knowing those with higher socio-economic status, an individual is more able to move up the social ladder.

The Role of Agency

Existing theory and research has long focused on the barriers and discriminatory experience encountered by ethnic minorities, and rarely on the agency that they deploy (Pio, 2005; Laer & Janssens, 2011; Ariss et al., 2013). Agency refers to an individual's power and influence to affect changes in their lives and work. Agency of ethnic minorities implies their ability to shape their own career choices and outcomes. Studies have indicated that educational qualifications and social aspirations influence social networking and the construction of personal experiences and interests. The more that those from a minority have invested in their education and careers, the more likely they are to receive social capital via inter-ethnic ties and therefore to achieve materialistic goals (Ooka & Wellman, 2003; Csedo, 2008; Ryan, 2011).

Ariss et al. (2013) use a Bourdieuan framework to discuss how social capital (i.e., resources derived from one's social connections) and cultural capital (i.e., education and commensurate professional experiences) is used by ethnic minorities for personal advancement. Bourdieu explains agency through an examination of an individual's resources, strategies and activities available in the society. His concepts of capital are used to understand how resources, i.e. human, social, cultural and symbolic capital, are interrelated and how they facilitate or limit the agency of ethnic minorities. Discrimination may constrain ethnic minorities in their accumulation and deployment of capital, and consequently limit their agency to navigate their career choice. However, their ability to implement agency depends on their ability to engage in vertical bridging, or weak ties, which is determined by the cultural capital, language skills and educational background at their disposal (Bourdieu, 1986; Csedo, 2008; Ryan, 2011).

Further, Ariss et al. (2013) suggest that integration is the dominant concept framing the agency of ethnic minority people. Their research illustrated that highly skilled Lebanese people in France have the agency to shape many aspects of their work and lives. One of the strategies to make use of agency is "blending in", where the individual renders themselves invisible through imitating normative practices, and benefits from resources when complying with social norms (Healey, 2012). The strategies of 'blending in' include building up contacts of professional and influential people, and cultural capital, which is expressed in terms of education and professional experiences. Over time, individuals develop an understanding of

the systemic constraints they faced, and through the deployment of cultural capital, they are able to subvert racial discrimination. Their human capital (i.e., education, training and work experiences), and the securing of key contacts, also help in their careers. The reputations of particular schools (i.e. symbolic capital in Bourdieu's discourse), also enabled Lebanese people to achieve successful careers in France.

The above abbreviated literature review demonstrates how ethnic minorities can have a different outcome in the labour market as a result of access to social capital. Rather than assuming that social capital has a positive effect without considering the active role of the receiver, the literature accounts for the concept of agency. The capacity of agency substantially depends on the ethnic minorities' education level, generational status and personal exposure. It also depends on the resources embedded in their social networks, of which, inter-ethnic ties are most beneficial for job opportunities and higher status jobs.

AIMS OF THE CHAPTER

It is the aim of this chapter to identify the ways through which ethnic minorities, in particular South Asian minorities, are able to overcome the discriminatory experiences in the Hong Kong labour market. It particularly focuses on an individual's capacity to access and utilise social capital, and explores how personal merits (as defined by personalities and educational background) are relevant. The author will address the following questions:

- 1) For ethnic minorities who might have experienced discrimination in different social settings, what role does personal merit and social capital play in the attainment of professional or managerial jobs?
- 2) How can their success stories contribute to the understanding of agency in breaking barriers? In particular, how can their stories shed light on the role of social network in achieving career success among ethnic minorities?

The article contributes two significance points. First, contemporary research into ethnic minorities and social network has focused substantially on the different effects of bridging and bonding social capital, and indicates a positive direct relationship between social ties and positive outcomes in different social contexts.

The mechanisms involved, e.g. an individual's role in building up social capital, have not been examined. This chapter attempts to fill this gap. Second, mainstream researchers and NGO practitioners in Hong Kong (and in Western academia) have commonly explored the issue of 'why and how ethnic minorities lose out'. This paper discusses ethnic minorities from the opposite perspective.

The author attempts to address the question of 'under what circumstances ethnic minorities can succeed' as success stories may also shed light on appropriate interventions for those who are in disadvantaged situations.

METHODS

Qualitative in-depth interviews of nine South Asian minorities (5 females and 4 males) were conducted between April and September 2014. The interviewees were between 20 and 50 years of age, and were either born or grew up in Hong Kong. They were competitive in academic results compared to local Hong Kong Chinese, undertaking white collar jobs (preferably professional or managerial) and able to socially integrate into the local community.

All interviewees were contacted through personal networks, referral by local NGOs and snowballing through the referral of interviewees. Rather than claiming representative samples, the author aims to identify diversified experiences of successful ethnic minorities. Therefore, the author's primary goal was to carefully listen to the personal experiences of ethnic minorities, and to discover how social ties and personal merits can lead to success. Each interview lasted about two hours and took place in either the interviewee's office or a public cafe. All interviews were conducted in English. The following table summarises the background of the interviewees:

Table 1. Background of interviewees

Name	Approximate age	Ethnicity	Place of birth	Occupation	Highest education level attained
Mr A	30	Indian	Hong Kong	Computer programmer	Bachelor
Ms B	20	Pakistani	Pakistan	Student	Bachelor
Mr C	25	Nepalese	Hong Kong	Student	Bachelor
Ms D	40	Filipino	Hong Kong	University lecturer	Postgraduate
Ms E	30	Filipino	Hong Kong	Head of an NGO	Bachelor
Ms F	30	Thai	Thailand	Public relations	Postgraduate
Mr G	50	Indian	Hong Kong	Police officer	Bachelor
Ms H	45	Indonesian	Indonesia	Public relations	Postgraduate
Mr I	50	Pakistani	Pakistan	CEO	Bachelor

The author started the interviews with general questions, followed by more sensitive and complex questions, to develop a rapport. Interviews were based around the following questions:

- Can you tell me about your family / education background / work life? What was the role of your family / school teachers / friends / mentors in your study?
- Can you tell me your work trajectory (first job, second job etc.)?
- Have you encountered any (other) barrier in school or in the labour market? If so, how did you manage to get through it?
- How did you manage to receive the offer for each job (cold call / referral etc.)?
- How do you find, as a non-Hong Kongese or non-native Chinese, getting a job in the labour market in Hong Kong? What is your key to success in the labour market?
- To what extent would you say being a non-local person is a barrier in getting a job and promotion in Hong Kong?
- Have you encountered any situation in which you found yourself socially excluded? How did you get through this?
- How open do you think Hong Kong is on the issue of anti-discrimination to minorities? What is your expectation regarding this issue?

All interviews were tape-recorded. Full transcripts were completed and ethical issues including the confidentiality of interviewees' identity were clearly explained before the interviews.

FINDINGS

When examining the success stories of the interviewees, the author found that all of them benefitted from social ties (be they bonding or bridging) at the stage of entering into the labour market and changing jobs.

The Use of Social Ties for Referral and Direct Contact

Ms D, a Filipino who was born and educated in Hong Kong, received her first job offer through the headmistress of her high school (vertical weak ties) with whom she had maintained a good relationship. When she was about to graduate from university in the early 1990s, the headmistress called her to see if she was interested in teaching English. She had not previously expressed to her any intention that she was searching for a job. Since then, she worked in the school for over ten years. Ms D summarised this weak tie as follow:

All the opportunity that this woman had given me has completely changed my life and I feel that I owed my school.

The headmistress is from Hong Kong, and the high school is also local (an elite local school providing free education). Her case illustrates that inter-ethnic ties were used in the job referral.

Interviewees also shared the way they used social ties for personal advancement. Mr I, a Pakistani who had been in Hong Kong for more than twenty years, is currently a founder of a sports company with more than twenty staff members. He worked as a senior manager in local and international corporations before setting up his own business. He told the author how he managed to be re-employed after the head company in Silicon Valley closed, as a result of the 'dot com' crash in the early 2000s:

I made a lot of networks. I am very good at connecting with people. One of the guys – actually a very famous lawyer in Hong Kong, his name is xx. He told me: 'Mr I, are you looking for a job? I have this technology company, come and work as my CTO.' (It was the time when you had just lost your job?) Yea, that's right. He said, 'no worry, come and work for me. I need somebody. But, it's not permanent. I give you a place to stay, to live and to search for your new job.' So then I started working in it for one year.

Again, through weak ties (horizontal and inter-ethnic, in this case), Mr I managed to survive in the labour market. One year later, he was able to work as a director in a Chinese-based technological corporation. The good relationship with the lawyer continued.

Transferral of Information for Job Openings

Another area showing the positive effect brought about by social capital is the transferal of information for job openings. The experiences of interviewees suggest that the types of ties involved are weak (vertical or horizontal). For example, Ms E established an NGO to advocate the rights of ethnic minorities in 2010. Born in Hong Kong and a graduate from a university in the Philippines in 2008, she obtained her first full-time job as a newspaper writer in 2009. She spent more than a year searching for a full-time position and during this time had three part-time jobs and was unemployed for several months. She managed to get the full-time job via weak (horizontal) ties:

I have a group of friends whom I went to school with. We had a barbeque one night. We were all talking about looking for a job. Some of them talked about their situations, like they don't speak Chinese. Some of them are okay when they spoke in the phone, but when they meet they reject him. At that time I have already been unemployed for 5 months, starting to get frustrated. And then one of them said to me, they know that I like writing, they said one of their friends are looking for a writer. I just said, okay I'll send my CV to her tomorrow. I didn't expect that but it was the one that gave the hope.

The woman who recruited her was an editor who had been in Hong Kong for many years. Without her, Ms E would not have been offered a full time job:

My editor was a journalist who came to Hong Kong in late 1940s, once worked for the xxx. She understood my troubles. She opened the door for me and I couldn't be more grateful for that. Because, without her giving me opportunity, I wouldn't be talking and sharing with you now.

The referrer of the job was a young Filipino man, while the recruiter was a British woman. In this case, both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic ties were involved.

Ms H was an Indonesian interviewee who had previously worked for several NGOs. She informed people around her of her previous experience, and that she was searching for a job. People transferred information to her (predominately weak ties) because of this:

But then the thing is, if you do not show who you are, what you want, people doesn't know, whether this is something that's useful for your knowledge. (Ya, that's true.) So I think the key in life is if you are being honest of who you are, and be open about who you are. If you open yourself, things can come in. But if you don't open yourself, then how do my friends know?

Ms H was able to obtain her current job because she spoke her mind. When attending an overseas conference four years ago, she met the head of a Hong Kong NGO. She mentioned that she was hunting for a job, and was told about the opportunity. Ms H was unfamiliar with this lady, who is from Hong Kong, but because of the inter-ethnic weak tie, she received a very useful piece of information.

Some interviewees, however, stressed the importance of social ties in an opposite way. For example, Ms E asserted that because of the lack of information flow, she panicked, and her choices were limited. This partially explains why she started an NGO for youth mentorship:

I was a lot younger and there were so many things that I did not understand. I was not well-equipped. I was not well informed of the choices and our situations.

The lack of information flow to a certain extent determines the opportunity of choices for ethnic minorities. Schools and parents were either ignorant or indifferent:

And that (being active in the secondary school) makes my expectation went so high. When we reached Form 5, it was sort of like a dead end, so I was like, what? This is it? If we don't pass HKCEE [Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination], then we cannot make it happen? It was until the end of 2003, when we were Form 5, we all woke up. What? Just a few months away. It's scary. We expected the education system would continue. And then you hear about what happened to the seniors, like some of them said, oh we didn't pass HKCEE, we just go and find a job. (It seems that it was a nightmare to you.) Yes, it was a nightmare to me. But maybe to the others, it was not. You know, the previous generation might not treat that as an issue.

The dialogue with Ms E does not directly relate to racial discrimination in the labour market (rather, it relates to schooling and future choices), but it does reflect the way information flow affects the future of an individual.

Personal Merits and Social Capital

The effects of social capital only partially explain the issue. Personal attributes, expressed in terms of cognitive and attitudinal aspects, were crucial for each interviewee. In terms of cognitive merits, all interviewees have/had undergone university education and this, to a large extent, proves their cognitive ability. In term of attitudinal merits, attributes such as the drive for success, perseverance, dedication and the capability to make strategic decisions are equally important for each of them. All interviewees mentioned how they had to be determined and dedicated to succeed.

Interviewees also shared the view that the ability to mobilise social resources depended on their background, particularly their education. For example, Ms D explained precisely how social capital can be derived through school and university, which in turn helps career advancement in general:

Definitely. I think the social network is a very important thing but it's not the social network as in how many people you know. It's whether they the right people to help you to make up the right connection to enhance your career. I think that's very important. I think that people learn from their university years. You meet people from different disciplines and when you graduate you can say 'well I know a doctor I know a lawyer I know a sociologist I know a psychologist' and that's your social network. You automatically have a pool of people that... I mean if you've got a healthy social network, as a student, as an undergraduate or whatever or as a postgraduate, you will naturally form that network.

Without being exceptional, i.e. having merit, it would be difficult to receive opportunities via social ties. Another noteworthy point is the importance of a clear goal in life. Ms F, a corporate communication officer originating from Thailand, explained the core reason for her

success, which enabled her to equip herself with personal merits and develop well-elaborated networks:

The question you need to ask yourself is not how can I get the test. The question you need to ask yourself is: who do you want to be? If you know who you want to be, then you'll understand whether the test would fit in terms of getting you to that point, right?... Always have a goal, and what do I need to do to get there. I've always had a goal. When you achieve one goal, you don't want to just sit there, right? You want to keep going. I think you have to be able to push yourself and set another goal, trying to be more proactive about, you know, making an effort and trying new thing.

Setting a goal is a prerequisite for accumulating personal merit, and is also a foundation for gaining access to social capital.

CONCLUSION

This chapter explores the experiences through which South Asian minorities manage to break through the “ethnic curse,” and are able to obtain a white collar job or engage in a professional/managerial job in Hong Kong. Rather than achieving representativeness, the author describes the diversity of encounters of ethnic minorities in the labour market. Two major functions of social capital in the labour market are described: job referral and the flow of information. Interviewees had managed to meet the right person at the right time, maximising the role of social capital in the labour market outcome.

The contributions of this chapter are as follows: first, rather than portraying South Asian minorities as passive and disadvantaged entities, as in other social science literature, this chapter explores how individuals became achievers in Hong Kong by being proactive. The role of agency is re-asserted in discussions regarding ethnic minorities, in both local and international contexts. Second, personal merit is regarded as the key for accessing and utilising social capital. The stronger the drive to succeed and the more educated an individual is, the more likely he or she is able to access the (vertical) weak ties in which social capital is embedded. Third, the experiences of the interviewees suggested that both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic weak ties are utilised in the job hunting process, though the majority of situations showed that vertical weak ties are much more useful than horizontal ones, which is comparable with conventional ethnic minority studies. The success of ethnic minorities depends on access to social capital, which is to a large extent influenced by personal merit. Viewed in this way, this chapter suggests that empowerment programmes, such as mentorship and internship, can be crucial to the well-being of ethnic minorities in the labour market, and can complement anti-discrimination policies. Research surrounding this theme can be conducted in the future.

This research uncovers other issues that could benefit from further exploration and discussion. For example, what variation is there among different ethnic groups? The current research has not explored each particular ethnic group as a separate entity. Based on the observations of the author, Indians are economically better off than other ethnic groups in Hong Kong. Does this imply that Indians are more able to benefit from weak ties than other ethnic groups? Do members of different ethnic groups receive similar opportunities for education and empowerment, which helps in gaining access to the labour market? Gender is another

dimension that can be examined separately. Do men and women have different experiences and coping mechanisms regarding disadvantages in the labour market? Do both sexes have similar access to social capital with regard to receiving positive outcomes in the labour market? Further exploration into the different experiences of first and second generation ethnic minorities can be carried out. Researches in the West suggest that second generation ethnic minorities still fail to close the gap in the labour market (Zhou, 1997; Silberman et al., 2007; Algan et al., 2010). Currently, no research has been conducted in Hong Kong exploring the condition in the labour market for different generations. Is there any difference in the disadvantageous experiences and coping mechanisms across generations? Dale (2005) had identified this as being one of the key questions in ethnic minority research. Can the educational experiences of the second generation enable them to accumulate personal merit and expand weak ties through social integration? These questions can be addressed by future research into ethnic minorities in the labour market of Hong Kong.

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