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The importance and limitations of social networks and social identities for labour market integration: The case of Ghanaian immigrants in Bergen, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Whereas refugees and larger immigrant groups' integration in the Norwegian labour market has received considerable research attention, less is known about the labour market integration of small, non-refugee immigrant groups from West African countries such as Ghana. The purpose of the article is to examine the role of social networks and social identities for the differentiated labour market integration outcomes among Ghanaian immigrants in the city of Bergen. Based on data produced through in-depth interviews, participant observation and informal conversations, the authors argue that Ghanaian immigrants' ability to obtain jobs is determined by more than simply having the appropriate educational and language qualifications, and largely depends on having favourable social identities and being embedded in social networks beyond the Ghanaian immigrant community. They find that those who mainly relied on Ghanaian networks found it difficult to circumvent labour market hindrances and they predominantly obtained menial jobs. The authors conclude that Norwegian job-seekers networks played a crucial role in the immigrants' opportunities and for potential Norwegian employers' perception of their employability, especially in professional and semi-professional jobs.



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Introduction

Successful labour market integration, which means obtaining 'a permanent, full-time job with pay and position providing a close fit to the individual's type and level of skills endowments' (Schmitt 2012, 257), is widely acknowledged as key to immigrants' participation in host societies. In line with this recognition, migration research in Norway has explored the employment status, performance and earnings of immigrants as measures of labour market integration (Stören 2004; Galloway 2006; Brekke & Mastekaasa 2008; Liebig 2009; Fangen 2010; Friberg 2012). Liebig (2009) identifies a correlation between immigrants' qualification levels and employment status, and shows that highly qualified immigrants are better integrated than low-qualified immigrants with little or no education. However, Stören (2004) found that non-Western immigrant graduates experienced higher rates of unemployment than native graduates.

Brekke & Mastekaasa's (2008) study of graduates from Norwegian universities between 1993 and 2002 revealed that immigrants' employment and income levels were lower than those of native Norwegians.

This article contributes to the literature through our examination of how Ghanaian immigrants' social identities, such as gender, race and citizenship, affect their employment processes and shape their social networks, which translate into differential job-seeking processes and labour market integration outcomes in Norway. Our study looked at the experiences of Ghanaian immigrants in Bergen, Norway's second largest city. Ghanaian immigration to Norway started gradually in the 1970s and increased in the 1990s, and immigrants primarily came to obtain education sponsored by the Norwegian government (Statistics Norway 2015; Badwi 2016). As a non-refugee and relatively unproblematic West-African immigrant group, Ghanaians have been subject to little

media and research attention compared with major non-Western immigrant groups (Hauff & Aglum 1993; Hayfron 1998; Liebig 2009; Valenta & Bunar 2010; Eriksen 2013; Østby 2013). Apart from Kassah's (2014) study of dual citizenship among Ghanaians in Oslo, no studies have focused on this immigrant group in Norway. Whether and how Ghanaians in this group have integrated into the labour market is a neglected issue.

Social networks are important means through which migrant access labour markets (Granovetter 1995; Lin 2001; Harvey 2008; Ryan 2011). Many of the Ghanaian immigrants who participated in our study had higher education and were proficient in Norwegian, but very few had extensive Norwegian social networks through their family, friends or colleague relationships. Limitations in their labour market integration were therefore not necessarily the result of inadequate human capital but may have been related to their rather limited access to Norwegian networks. We contend that independent of their human capital (i.e. previous work experience, educational qualifications and Norwegian language skills), the embeddedness of Ghanaian immigrants into social networks mainly consisting of other Ghanaian immigrants is crucial for the degree and type of their participation in Bergen's labour market. Using the concept of intersectionality, we explore how 'positional differences', created through the combined effect of gender, race, nationality, citizenship, and educational status, shape the labour market experiences of and outcomes for different categories of Ghanaian immigrants.

Social networks and immigrants' labour market integration

Social networks are 'conduits for the flow of information, influence and resources' (Gross & Lindquist 1995, 329) and are crucial for obtaining employment (Granovetter 1995). In a study of how professional, technical and managerial workers in Massachusetts located and secured jobs, Granovetter (1995) found that they depend on their personal contacts rather than formal methods of job applications. Similarly, studies from Ghana (e.g. Overå 2007; Ablo 2012; Langevang et al. 2015) have shown social relations such as kinship, conjugal and collegial-based networks were relevant for both employment and business creation. Some researchers argue that social networks create spaces that offer opportunities for immigrants to interact with members of host societies and to acquire cultural codes and enhance social and language exchange (Montgomery & McDowell 2009; Ryan 2011; Lomicka & Lord 2016).

Ryan (2011) argues that immigrants' relationship with their host society enhances their language proficiency,

access to relevant information, and perceptions of opportunities in the labour market. However, Hayfron (2001) shows that while Norwegian language proficiency is important for immigrants' entry into the Norwegian labour market, it has no significant effects on their incomes. Social networks provide access to important social capital and, as Fuglerud & Engebretsen (2006) demonstrate in their study of Tamil and Somali immigrants in Norway, family-based networks versus friendship-based networks influences trust among migrant groups, with implications for their labour market participation.

Although social networks play essential roles in labour market integration, the types of social relations within which job seekers are embedded can produce systemic differences in their labour market outcomes. Thus, a person's position in a social network matters in terms of their access to resources that can create competitive advantages. Consequently, some individuals or groups within a network may have more strategic advantages or disadvantages than others, due to their position within the social network (Harvey 2008). Hence, people whose network connections are wider and open, with many connections outside their close relations, have better access to resources than groups or individuals with smaller and/or closed network connections (Granovetter 1995).

Additionally, social networks are important for exerting influence on potential employers (Lin 2001). Such influence may be acquired in the form of information through intermediaries about job opportunities and recommendations to employers. The intermediaries are often friends, kin, neighbours, school friends, work associates, and ethnic group members. Such intermediaries, who are often successful in their workplaces, recommend job seekers in their network to employers. Granovetter (1995, 93) hypothesises that those who acquire the attractive jobs are those 'who use personal contacts that are occupational rather than close friends and relatives, whose networks are larger rather than small, and who are in information chains that are short'. We draw on this idea in order to show how access to and use of networks (e.g. Norwegian networks as opposed to Ghanaian networks) is decisive for getting jobs that match immigrants' qualifications, skills and aspirations.

Intersectionality and labour market participation

The concept of intersectionality focuses on socially constructed identity categories such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity, and how their combination and

relationship to each other unravels various dimensions of social injustices and inequality (Browne & Misra 2003; McCall 2005; Valentine 2007; Shield 2008). Collins (2000, 227) conceptualises these intersecting social inequalities as the ‘matrix of domination’. It is well established that within this matrix an individual or group can simultaneously experience hindrances and privileges through the specific combination or intersection of gender, race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality (Browne & Misra 2003; Shield 2008). An intersectional lens is useful for understanding how differently composed identities produce multiple forms of labour market experiences (Crenshaw 1989) for Ghanaian immigrants in Norway. This is crucial for gaining insight into both challenges and opportunities for labour market integration by various categories of Ghanaian immigrants, depending on their gender, age, educational background and citizenship.

Intersectionality as an analytical tool describes various ‘axes of inequalities’ (Knapp 2005, 262). It assumes that dominant groups control productive resources and social institutions, and that these groups and persons are likely to secure employment. Thus, compared with individuals with the ‘lowest’ social identities, individuals who have the ‘highest’ social identities (Browne & Misra 2003, 493) will be successful in integrating into a labour market. In other words, a person may occupy a high position on what we (the authors of this article) call the *intersectional ladder*, which involves an advantageous combination of the individual’s multiple social categories, such as being a highly educated male Ghanaian immigrant who speaks Norwegian fluently. Similarly, a person may occupy a low intersectional position when a greater aspect of their multiple social categories poses difficulties for their labour market integration, such as being an uneducated Ghanaian migrant woman who cannot speak Norwegian fluently. These can be termed *positional differences* and are shaped by the intersection of personal variables, thereby influencing immigrants’ employability and to some extent their access to appropriate jobs.

Although employers often claim that they engage workers who possess the most needed characteristics for the job, their perceptions, biases and vested interests based on gender, race, class, age, and ethnicity, among other variables, have been found to translate crucially into hierarchies of inequalities in the labour market (Browne & Misra 2003, 492). In this article, we examine the factors that enable some Ghanaian immigrants to climb upwards on the *intersectional ladder* and the privileges that come with more or less advantageous identities. This enabled us to map out who gets what type of job in Bergen’s labour market, and to identify factors that hinder or facilitate employment, and thus explain

the concentration of Ghanaian immigrants in low-skilled occupational domains, such as cleaning and health-care jobs.

Data collection

This article is based on data produced through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and informal conversations over a three-month period between June and August 2015 in Bergen. Prior to the start of the fieldwork, ethical clearance was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and all participants participated voluntarily in the study after having given their informed consent. Their anonymity was guaranteed and all participant names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

Guided by a semi-structured questionnaire, we conducted 40 audio-recorded face-to-face interviews. The issues discussed included the employment opportunities, challenges and strategies that Ghanaian immigrants deployed to circumvent various obstacles to their integration into the labour market. In total, 40 participants (22 men and 18 women) were selected through snowball sampling. They were first-generation Ghanaian immigrants residing in Bergen at the time of the study. Of the 40 participants, 27 had received tertiary education, while the other 13 had received at least a vocational or technical education. Of the 27 participants, 25 had received their tertiary education in Norway. A total of 28 participants had some knowledge of the Norwegian language, and 17 of those were proficient. Despite the overall high level of education and Norwegian language skills, 10 of the 40 participants were unemployed, while 12 worked in menial jobs in Bergen (Table 1). The information gained from the informal conversations was used to gain a broader understanding of the participants’ job-seeking situation

Ghanaian immigrants’ labour market experiences and outcomes

In this section, we present the immigrants’ initial motives for moving to Bergen and their experiences in accessing

Table 1. Migrants’ occupation before and after migration

Occupation prior to migration	Frequency		Occupation in Bergen	Frequency	
	Male	Female		Male	Female
Professional worker	2	1	Professional worker	5	3
Semi-professional workers	12	8	Semi-professional workers	2	6
Self-employed	2	3	Self-employed	1	1
Menial workers	3	0	Menial workers	12	0
Unemployed	4	5	Unemployed	3	7
Totals	23	17		23	17

the labour market. Based on nationality, length of stay and citizenship, we classified the participants into 'Ghanaian-Norwegian' and 'Ghanaian immigrants'. The term 'Ghanaian-Norwegian' referred to participants who either had Norwegian citizenship (i.e. they were ethnic Norwegians) or held permanent resident permits. By contrast, the term 'Ghanaian immigrant' referred to immigrants who did not have Norwegian citizenship and only had a temporary residence permit.

Initial purpose of migration to Bergen

Although a much smaller city than Oslo, Bergen is an attractive destination for immigrants because it is a university city with relatively diverse job opportunities in construction and the oil industry. A combination of economic, political and educational factors motivated the participants' migration to Bergen, with education emerging as the main reason. Of the 40 participants, 20 attended the University of Bergen as students funded through the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund (Lånekassen). Finding jobs was thus not their most important reason for migration to Bergen. However, after completing their studies, some participants found jobs that enabled them to obtain a residence permit, while others found part-time jobs that enhanced their financial capacity to continue residing in Bergen. The latter participants, who continued to enrol in different academic courses in order to have their residence permit renewed, were referred to by their fellow Ghanaians as 'recyclers' (Badwi 2016). Other participants' migration to Norway was influenced by information they received from friends, kin, neighbours, school friends, and work associates, about job or education opportunities in Bergen.

Case 1: Migration for employment

As an unemployed technical school graduate, 'Ato' (aged 35 years) left Ghana in 2000 and after travelling and working his way through West Africa to North Africa, he settled in Spain. Ato married a Spanish woman, acquired Spanish citizenship, and worked on Spanish fishing vessels for several years. After the 2008 financial crisis, Ato and his wife decided to try 'their luck' in Norway. Their decision to settle in Norway was influenced by information Ato had received from one of his co-workers on a fishing vessel. According to Ato: 'On the boat where I was working, one cook had been here [Bergen] before so he briefed me about Norway. I had a lot of information from him and I decided that [Bergen] would be a better place for me.'¹

Upon arrival in Bergen, Ato met a Ghanaian who recommended him for employment as a cleaner with an African entrepreneur. By mid-2015, Ato had been working as a cleaner for five years, and had earned enough income to enable him to conclude that his relocation to Bergen had been quite successful. After he had acquired Spanish citizenship, Ato's social relations through marriage had enabled him to move freely within the Schengen Area. Although influenced by the global economic downturn in 2008, his decision to migrate to Bergen was influenced by the crucial information he received from his co-worker on the fishing vessel. However, the type of job he secured upon his arrival in Bergen was influenced by his identity as a Ghanaian and African as well as his relationship with other immigrants.

Categories of jobs in Bergen's labour market

The various jobs that the participants engaged in can be broadly categorised as professional, semi-professional, menial, and self-employment. Professional jobs require a longer period of education, higher skills, experience and proficiency in Norwegian than semi-professional jobs. Menial jobs and self-employment have no 'strict' educational and skills requirements. In this article, we use the term 'appropriate' job to refer to, for example, professional and semi-professional jobs for which the job seekers had matching qualifications.

Prior to migration to Bergen, two men and one woman had professional jobs, twelve men and eight of the women had semi-professional jobs such as administrators or teaching assistants, two men were self-employed, three women worked in poultry farming and petty trading, and only three of the participants (all men) had worked in menial jobs prior to migration. Nine participants (four men and five women) were unemployed at the time when they left Ghana.

After migrating to Bergen, the proportion of participants who were originally unemployed did not change much. However, the number of participants with professional jobs increased after migration from Ghana to Bergen, whereas the number of participants in semi-professional jobs was reduced. More women than men were unemployed or had semi-professional jobs, particularly as health-care workers (*helsefagarbeider*). Although health-care workers and qualified male nurses are in demand in the Norwegian health sector, the male participants in our study had a broad range of job types other than nursing and health-care jobs. A significant proportion of the employed men had menial jobs such as cleaning. The participants identified various factors for such gender variations in their occupational outcomes. For instance, one woman (aged 48 years), who had

lived in Bergen for 27 years, noted a combination of accessibility to caring jobs in the welfare segment of Bergen's labour market and the Ghanaian culture of women caring for elderly relatives as the factors accounting for women's concentration in health care jobs. The immigrants' cultural norms and value systems thus influenced their perception of the labour market and the types of jobs they sought.

In Ghana, a significant proportion of the population is engaged in trading and other self-employing activities (Osei-Boateng & Ampratwum 2011). However, the Ghanaian participants found that self-employment was difficult in Bergen. They attributed this partly to the relatively small number of Ghanaian customers in Bergen, and to their own lack of information and ability to finance businesses. With the exception of a 'Ghanaian-Norwegian' who operated a well-known design business, few Ghanaians were self-employed. A 52 years old health-care assistant who had resided in Bergen for 20 years shared her experience of attempting to run a business as a shopkeeper of a grocery store: '[It] was too stressful for me because I had to pay an auditor in addition to the employee and the exorbitant rent. Before I finish all expenditure, then I am back with nothing. You don't make any profit!' Due to such challenges of establishing and running businesses, most participants looked for waged work in the private or public sector.

Social networks and Ghanaian immigrants' labour market participation

Social networks consisting of friends, colleagues, relatives, former supervisors, and church members had provided important assistance in the job-seeking process for all 28 participants who were engaged in waged work. According to one female participant (aged 35 years) who had lived in Bergen for nine years, Ghanaians relied on informal means to secure jobs because, 'most of the time we [Ghanaian immigrants] contact other Ghanaians because we want the quicker way of getting into the job market.'

Many participants, especially those working in menial jobs, had secured their jobs through social relations established through religious communities, mainly Christian charismatic churches, which Ghanaian immigrants commonly attend. Participant observations and interviews revealed that these church communities were important social arenas for sharing information about resources, opportunities and connections to the job market. The church was thus a place where people spent substantial amounts of time not only for religious purposes but also to get to know each other and build relationships that led to exchanges of information.

Newcomers who showed commitment to the congregation and played active roles in church activities often received attention and assistance from the more established immigrants. In some cases, church leaders or those who could offer job-seeking assistance referred job seekers to potential employers whom they knew personally. Prominent church members and leaders usually prefer to offer job-seeking assistance to persons with high positions in the church. For example, in contrast to ordinary church members who do not play a major role in church activities, an organist will receive job-seeking support.

Although religious community networks played an important role in the participants' job acquisition, we found that the nature of these networks also hindered their opportunities for access to a wider range of social contacts beyond the Ghanaian community and thus the range of information about available jobs. While Ghanaian networks were useful for gaining menial jobs, Norwegian networks appeared to be essential for gaining professional and semi-professional jobs. In Case 2 below, we discuss the relevance of Norwegian networks for accessing relevant information and recommendations to gain Norwegian potential employers' trust in immigrants' expertise and capabilities.

Case 2: 'I am just looking forward to a cleaning job'

'Nana' (aged 54 years), who was a former university research assistant, travelled to Norway in the 1980s to take a master's course as part of a master's degree programme funded by Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund. His decision to travel abroad was influenced by the available financial support for education and his desire to escape the unsafe political atmosphere in Ghana at the time. Although he was required to study Norwegian for one year, Nana never used his language skills to search for a job. Rather, he relied on information from his Ghanaian colleagues living in Norway, who, according to Nana, said: 'the jobs available for an average Ghanaian or international student are menial', implying that proficiency in Norwegian was not required. Therefore, he never attempted to search for jobs that matched his educational qualifications, previous work experience, or linguistic abilities. Nana was willing to take any job to earn extra income during his study period. With the assistance of a Ghanaian colleague, he first found a job as a roof repair assistant. When his contract ended, he secured a summer job as a cleaner in the laboratories in the same educational institution as where he studied. When the contract ended after the summer, Nana began to search for another menial job.

When a Norwegian administrator at the institution where Nana studied asked him about the job he would do during the next summer break. Nana enthusiastically replied: 'I'm just looking for a cleaning job.' Surprised by this reply, the administrator advised him to seek employment at a hospital where several of Nana's Norwegian fellow students worked. Nana heeded this advice and gained employment as a public health practitioner working with handicapped people in the hospital. Nana's mindset changed and thereafter he searched for jobs that matched his qualifications. He found work as a teacher and researcher at a tertiary educational institution. According to Nana, until he was advised by the administrator, he had always believed that Ghanaian immigrants could only have menial jobs, a view shaped by information he had received from other Ghanaians.

It is thus clear that the source of information about job market influenced the categories of jobs that the participants looked for. Nana's consistent search for a 'normal menial job' without trying to get jobs that matched his qualifications was an outcome of his embeddedness primarily in Ghanaian social networks with a narrow scope of information about the labour market in Bergen. Contact with Norwegian person who provided no other resources than a piece of critical information had opened new perspectives and possibilities for Nana. Although information available to immigrants upon their arrival in any new destination is essential for their initial entry into the labour market in their destination country, it may be incomplete and limit their perception of how the labour market works. This could further undermine their agency for finding employment in appropriate segments of the labour market.

In addition to access to information and the opportunity to secure recommendations, an important benefit of Ghanaian networks is that they provide what the participants called 'apprenticeship' and 'cover-up' (a word used by Africans to denote a substitute worker) opportunities for newly arrived Ghanaian immigrants. An 'apprenticeship' was an informal learning process that occurred between employees and job seekers without the knowledge of the employer. This type of employment assistance gave new arrivals an opportunity to learn the 'Norwegian way' of performing tasks and to become established in the Norwegian system of work. Unlike 'apprenticeships', 'cover-ups' or working as a *vikar* (Norwegian term for substitute worker) required the Ghanaian job seekers to follow a formal recruitment process. In both cases, the job seeker occasionally had a chance of becoming an employee of the contact person who was an employee too. During an interview with a male participant (aged 35 years) who was working as an 'apprentice', we found that recent arrivals who had

become 'apprentices', in the hope of being recommended to employers for 'cover-ups' or future employment, were sometimes exploited by the contact persons.

Intersectionality and the challenge of securing a job

The participants with Norwegian citizenship were relatively successful in their career advancement in the labour market. For example, more female 'Ghanaian-Norwegians' with a high school certificate were employed in the semi-professional segment of the labour market than female or male participants who had received tertiary education but did not have Norwegian citizenship. Such discrepancies were a result of institutionalised structures that assisted and favoured permanent immigrants over temporary immigrants. By contrast, many 'Ghanaian-Norwegian' men with high school education or vocational qualifications tended to remain in menial jobs. Although gender clearly played a role in shaping the immigrants occupational choices and chances, other factors were highly influential, such as age, motive for entry into the labour market, length of stay, and employers' scepticism towards immigrants in general. Case 3 below highlights how personal characteristics such as nationality, length of stay and education intersect to create multiple hindrances to or opportunities for labour market participation.

Case 3: 'Ofosu used me and made a fool out of me'

'Kojo' (35) worked as a cleaner in Bergen. He had left his job as an insurance officer in Ghana and travelled to Norway to pursue postgraduate studies after his brother, who lived Norway, had convinced him of the prospects for a better life in Europe. By mid-2015, it had been four years since Kojo had arrived in Bergen and he was combining his cleaning work with studying for a second master's degree. He was thus a 'recycler'.

Upon his arrival in Bergen, Kojo became an 'apprentice' to 'Ofosu', who was a 'recycler' with multiple cleaning jobs and a friend of Kojo's brother who lived in Trondheim. Kojo was an 'apprentice' for four months and hoped that Ofosu would eventually give him one of his jobs or introduce him to his employers. According to Kojo, this was common practice among Ghanaian newcomers who had an 'apprenticeship'. Kojo sometimes worked for four to five hours without pay and, as he later discovered, Ofosu had simply been interested in benefiting from his work and had not had any intentions of training him to become qualified for a job or of recommending him to his employers. Kojo felt that

Ofosu had taken advantage of him and made a fool out of him, so he stopped his ‘apprenticeship’. Kojo began searching for any work that would enable him to cater for himself and finance his education. He started working as a ‘cover-up’ for a female Ghanaian friend, who eventually helped him secure a job as a cleaner.

Kojo’s case serves to show that, irrespective of educational qualifications, navigating the Norwegian labour market can be a challenge for immigrants when they first arrive in Norway. Ofosu’s length of stay and work experience gave him the power to offer job training assistance to newcomers such as Kojo. However, such relationships could be exploitative. Kojo’s short-term residency and his citizenship status prevented him from accessing assistance from state institutions. In order to avoid unemployment, Kojo continued to do jobs for which he was overqualified.

Case 4: ‘I worked there voluntarily for ten months before getting a job’

‘Mrs Hansen’ (aged 35 years) moved to Bergen in 2008, after she had married a Norwegian man. She had a master’s degree and teaching job at a Ghanaian university, which she gave up before relocating to Norway. Upon her arrival in Norway, Mrs Hansen focused on improving her Norwegian language skills to communicate easily with her Norwegian family, who also expected her to find a job that matched her level of education. She enrolled in an intensive language course and was fluent in Norwegian at the time when we interviewed her. Despite her educational qualifications, work experience, and fluency in Norwegian, Mrs Hansen, who had expected help from her Norwegian family in securing a desirable job, did not receive any such assistance:

It is not much different if you are married to a Norwegian or not, especially, when it comes to the job market. I never had any help from my husband or anybody in my husband’s family who are Norwegians and have contacts on the job market. They think you are not really integrated into their culture and so it is hard for anybody to trust you. Even your own husband finds it hard to recommend you because he does not know your capability. They don’t even know what you have to offer and they don’t want to feel the shame of recommending someone [who might be incompetent].

Mrs Hansen participated in workshops organised by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and was recommended to a company employer for an internship. She considered herself fortunate compared with other African immigrants who were not able to obtain assistance from NAV because of their status. Mrs Hansen viewed her internship with the company

as a stepping stone to formal employment. According to her, a major challenge that every migrant faced was employers’ lack of trust in their abilities:

They don’t trust us [foreigners] to be good enough to do what they are doing ... With all my qualifications, I was still given odd jobs in that company. I cleaned, washed the dishes, cleaned the sinks, sat at the reception ... answered the phone, and did some petty jobs.

Sometimes she assisted in the company’s accounts department. Mrs Hansen continued working for the company without a salary (except for the transportation and food allowance from NAV) hoping for a vacancy she could fill. After 10 months, Mrs Hansen left her internship because she felt she had been unfairly treated by her boss:

She knew I was capable of working [since] I had worked at the reception and the accounting department. I had done other things and she knew I could work, but still, she was enjoying my services for free. Even when there were opportunities, I wasn’t given any job.

However, her free services eventually paid off:

Five or six months after I had quit the job, that same manager remembered me and called me for a cover-up. After my cover-up contract ended, she recommended me to the human resource manager for employment at the accounts department. Three months after employment, I was promoted to the finance administrator of the company.

Mrs Hansen’s marital status provided her with access to Norwegian relations, citizenship status, and facilitated her Norwegian language skills and access to job-seeking assistance from public job recruitment institutions. However, she had to adopt a ‘voluntary service’ strategy to overcome her Norwegian employer’s scepticism regarding her competencies.

Importance and challenges of social networks and social identities for immigrants’ labour market integration

Theories of social networks and intersectionality constituted the main analytical frame for our study. Focusing on a social network involves analyses of interpersonal relations that cut across class, gender, and kin, while intersectionality enables multidimensional analyses of the constraints that men and women face when searching for jobs. In common with other studies of immigrants (Owusu 2000; McDowell 2008; Pedersen et al. 2008; Fangen 2010; Aure 2013; Agyekum 2016), our study revealed that social networks and relations played a crucial role in the employment process and outcomes among the Ghanaian immigrants interviewed in Bergen.

In Cases 1 and 3, the participants had relied on information from friends, colleagues, and former co-workers about the labour market conditions prior to moving to Bergen and had relied on their social contacts for help with their choice of destination.

Migrants need the assistance from their social networks to translate and understand job information, which is usually published in Norwegian. In our study, such social relations also attested to the participants' productivity to employers who played key roles in hiring decisions. This, the participants primarily relied on members of the same ethnic group as themselves, close relatives, colleagues, church members, and other associates to circumvent language barriers and lack of trust in immigrants' qualifications by prospective employers. For job-seeking assistance in the form of language and information, they largely depended on social relations with Ghanaian and 'Ghanaian-Norwegians', and to some extent, Norwegian social relations developed mainly through education, marriage and work. As shown in Case 4, Mrs Hansen's Norwegian relatives and relationships motivated her to learn Norwegian and improve her Norwegian language skills, and these skills were greatly improved through her interactions with her Norwegian family.

'Ghanaian-Norwegians' often had good knowledge of Bergen's labour market because of their length of stay and citizenship status and had a reasonable command of the Norwegian language. As a result, Ghanaians who had arrived more recently sometimes relied on them for assistance in reading job publications in the media, writing CVs in Norwegian and learning how to present themselves during job interviews. Others relied on Ghanaian colleagues for 'apprenticeships' and 'cover-ups' to learn about Norwegian working culture and to improve their chances of getting a job. Different kinds of contacts thus generate different kinds of 'resources' (Granovetter 1995; Lin 2001; Friberg 2012; Aure 2013), such as language learning, translation, and interpretation, which have significant implications for the types of jobs immigrants search for and eventually acquire.

Lin (2001) argues that social contacts are most effective when they exert influence on employers. Employers may rely on the trust they have in their employees (i.e. those who are contact persons in a job-seeker's network) to recommend productive and trainable prospective workers for recruitment. This could explain why a significant number of the study participants relied on social contacts to learn about their jobs and to secure employment. Most of the participants who were unemployed were not embedded in relevant networks that could have improved their employability. They also occupied lower positions on the intersectional ladder.

Since information circulates better in a network (Granovetter 1995) than through formal job-seeking channels, it is possible that the participants who belonged to Norwegian networks would have benefited from access to information about job vacancies and would have received the recommendations needed to convince employers while participants without any such relevant networks (occupying lower positions on the intersectional ladder) would have been excluded from relevant resources needed to access jobs.

We found that although the participants relied greatly on their Ghanaian networks for securing jobs, this limited their access to information outside the networks about appropriate jobs. As a result, highly qualified Ghanaians without Norwegian networks often had menial jobs. This supports Granovetter's claim that the types of jobs immigrants secure depends on influence from their network types, irrespective of their qualifications (Granovetter 1995). For example, while Nana (Case 2) relied on a Norwegian acquaintance who linked him to professional jobs, Kojo (Case 3) continued to rely on Ghanaian networks and could only do cleaning jobs.

Thus, getting an appropriate job in Bergen's labour markets depends on more than simply having an appropriate educational qualification and language skills. A significant number of the participants with higher educational qualifications (bachelor, master's, and/or doctoral degrees, or diploma qualifications) only found menial jobs or were unemployed, while many of those with lower qualifications were employed in semi-professional jobs.

As demonstrated in Case 2, Norwegian language proficiency and relevant experience helped Nana to secure a job in an institution. However, neither his language skills nor his educational background were sufficient to enable him to find a better job than a menial job. Nana's case was similar to that of Mrs Hansen (Case 4), who despite her qualifications and language proficiency only did menial jobs in the company, until she was recommended by her superior for employment as the company's financial administrator. Our findings are in consonance with Liu's (2006) assertion that one of the main hindrances immigrants face in a new destination is employers' unfamiliarity with immigrants' credentials. The implication here is that there is a tendency among some Norwegian employers to discriminate based on race, nationality and perceived cultural differences as well as scepticism towards immigrants' productivity levels. In effect, combinations of the Ghanaian participants' social identities (Valentine 2007), which placed them either high or low on the intersectional ladder (Browne & Misra 2003), significantly influenced their perceptions of and prospects in the labour market. In addition to receiving

information about existing job opportunities, relevant Norwegian social networks are an important medium through which immigrants can communicate their competence and expertise effectively to Norwegian employers and gain their trust.

Immigrants' labour market participation and outcome are shaped by multiple factors that are at play and unfold over time. Drawing on the concept of intersectionality (McCall 2005), we argue that Ghanaian immigrants are more likely to be considered for jobs when their combination of personal characteristics or identities (Browne & Misra 2003) is favourable, for example having a tertiary education and language skills that place them in 'high' position on the intersectional ladder. Low-skilled and recently arrived job seekers who occupy a 'low' position on the intersectional ladder face greater challenges due to combination of unfavourable social identities (such as being Ghanaian, female and semi-literate) together with limited Norwegian contacts and knowledge of how the labour market operates for foreigners. In our study, the participants with Norwegian citizenship, language proficiency, and greater knowledge of Bergen's labour market compared with the other participants gave them greater access to assistance from appropriate job-seeking channels in addition to assistance from their social contacts. Mrs Hansen's marital status and citizenship facilitated her Norwegian language skills and access to job-seeking assistance from state institutions. For participants without Norwegian citizenship, additional factors such as membership of religious groups improved their chances of climbing the intersectional ladder and receiving assistance to find jobs.

Clearly, individuals within the group of Ghanaian immigrants in Bergen were positioned differently. As a newcomer, Kojo (Case 3) had relied on Ofofu for job-seeking assistance but was exploited in an asymmetrical power relation because he occupied a 'lower' position relative to Ofofu on the intersectional ladder. Paradoxically, their shared Ghanaian norms regarding gender-appropriate work limited the likelihood of either of them seeking better-paid, health care jobs. Additionally, their short-term residency and non-Norwegian citizenship status deprived them of the needed assistance from state institutions for job seekers. Migrants with higher education often settle for jobs for which they are overqualified, simply to avoid unemployment.

Conclusions

By examining both the importance and limitation of social networks and social identities for immigrant's employability, we have explored how social networks shape immigrants' integration into foreign labour markets.

Specifically, we have shown the relationship between the characteristics of social networks and immigrants' perception of the labour market and the type of jobs they aspire to and ultimately acquire. Immigrants' positionality, which emerges from the intersection of socially constructed categories, such as gender, race, citizenship, religious membership, and marital and educational status, is crucial for their formation of social networks and for the strategies they adopt in the employment processes.

The composition of the networks in which immigrants are embedded will shape their possibility to improve their position on the intersectional ladder and their access appropriate jobs, but social networks may also impede their access to appropriate jobs if they are homogeneously composed of members from the same immigrant group. We found that Ghanaian immigrants in Bergen often have a wide social network, but that there was a tendency for their networks to be composed mainly of fellow Ghanaian immigrants. The challenges they faced in acquiring relevant information and accessing formal job-seeking avenues thus resulted in their reliance on 'apprenticeships', 'cover-ups', and providing free services as their main strategies to find jobs.

We conclude that Norwegian language skills, Norwegian networks, and an understanding of Norwegian work practices are essential for the successful integration of immigrants into the labour market. Improved possibilities for job seekers to demonstrate skills and abilities doing a job could reduce potential employers' perceived risks and scepticism towards employing Ghanaian immigrants, or African immigrants more generally, which in turn would facilitate the immigrants' labour market integration.

Note

1. All interviews and informal conversations were conducted in English.

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