



# Ethno-religious identities and persisting penalties in the UK labor market



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## ABSTRACT

Most studies of minority group penalties in the UK labor market have focused on groups classified by their self-assessed ethnicity only, without taking into account major divisions within such groups, notably by religion. Using a large sample taken from the quarterly Labor Force Survey, this paper analyzes levels of both unemployment and obtaining posts within the salariat for fourteen separate ethno-religious groups. Estimates of both gross and net penalties are derived, the latter taking the individuals' human capital resources into account. They show that most non-White groups face an employment penalty, but Muslim groups – both men and women – experienced the greatest penalties. These penalties are exacerbated when searching for any job turns into searching for a managerial or a professional job suggesting that inequality is preserved through mechanisms of color and cultural racism which intensifies as minority workers seek jobs at the more lucrative end of the labor market – which, if persistent, could have long-term implications for the cohesion of the UK's multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society.

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## 1. Introduction

Finding a job that matches one's educational qualifications is easier for some groups than others in the UK labor market, and there are major differences among ethnic and religious groups in the extent of their success in this exercise (Cheung & Heath, 2007; Johnston, Sirkeci, Khattab, & Modood, 2010). Most previous studies have referred to such inter-group differences as ethnic penalties, suggesting that they result, in part at least, from disadvantages – and even discrimination – experienced by members of ethnic minority groups (Carmichael & Woods, 2000). Although

the general patterns are clear-cut, however, there is also considerable unaccounted-for variation both within and across groups. Studies do not show, for example, whether the penalties are constant across individuals' careers or are more pronounced at certain stages only, nor whether they vary according to their occupational status – are the penalties greater for those pursuing professional and managerial as against more routine occupations, for example?

To address some of these questions, this paper expands the estimation and appreciation of such penalties by focusing not only on a single indicator – unemployment among those seeking work – but also in more detail on individuals in one occupational class only – the salariat, comprising those in a range of professional and managerial jobs. It deploys three strategies to minimize the unaccounted-for variation across individuals. First, it uses a substantial number of explanatory variables to account for variations in terms of individuals' human capital and other resources

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that might impact upon their labor market experience. Secondly, it analyzes a large-sample data set that allows for within-group heterogeneity to be decomposed, rather than deploy a small number of relatively inchoate categories only. Thirdly, and most importantly for studying minority group penalties, rather than use a single categorization of groups based on their self-assessed ethnicity alone, it combines that information with the individuals' stated religion, thereby more closely recognizing the separate cultural identities co-existing within individual ethnic groups, such as between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs among those claiming Indian ethnicity.

The core argument is that the labor market penalty facing minority workers tends to be exacerbated as they move from finding any job, for example in lower occupational classes, to a better job in a higher occupational class. The extent of any ethno-religious penalties will depend in part on the attractiveness of the sought after jobs by workers, including majority group workers. To evaluate that argument, the modeling procedure adopted provides robust estimates of the extent of the penalties experienced by Britain's ethno-religious minority groups at two important employment junctions: entering the labor market and attaining a salariat job.

## 2. Racialization, discrimination, and inequality

Previous studies have shown that racial disadvantage, possibly resulting from discrimination, is a major factor accounting for the under-performance of many minority groups in the British labor market, relative to their educational qualifications and other resources. [Virdee \(2006\)](#), for example, shows that employers' racism and discriminatory practices combine to form one of the main influences on minority group members' position in the class structure; others ([Edwards, 2008](#); [Meer & Modood, 2009](#); [Rana, 2007](#)) argue that these practices are based not only on inter-group physical (phenotype) but also on cultural differences. Neither physical appearance nor cultural norms trigger racist and discriminatory practices to the same extent, however; other factors are involved in determining the extent of any labor market penalties.

Some studies, mainly from the US, highlight a number of ways through which labor market penalties against minority groups are created and reinforced. For example, drawing on theories of group threat and competition, a number of scholars have identified associations between the size and visibility of Blacks within local populations and the extent of the penalties they experience ([Cohen & Huffman, 2007](#); [Huffman & Cohen, 2004](#)). They find a greater white-black inequality in high proportion Black labor markets. However, they also find that at very high levels of Black concentration, the white-black inequality gap tends to narrow, which suggests a positive effect of group size for Blacks in large US cities. Other studies of minority-majority racial inequality and discrimination point out that some minorities can either minimize or offset the effect of discrimination practiced by dominant-majority groups against them by working within their own ethnic economic enclaves ([Portes & Manning, 2001](#); [Wilson & Portes, 1980](#)) where they are less dependent on

majority-group employers and do not have to compete, at least not directly, with majority-workers – which can significantly reduce the negative impact of discrimination.

The levels of ethnic residential segregation in the UK are much lower than those experienced by Blacks and other minorities in the US, however, and as such the chances for developing ethnic labor market enclaves that might protect minority workers from discrimination are respectively lower. Most UK minority workers, including those seeking jobs within the secondary labor market, depend on majority-group employers and establishments, and many of them still need to compete with white workers over jobs, exposing them to greater risks of labor market penalties.

In recent years, some of the main victims of such penalties in the UK have been Muslims. [Werbner \(1997\)](#) identifies the disadvantages they suffered in the late twentieth century, and others ([Allen, 2005](#)) demonstrate that anti-Muslim feelings have been exacerbated since 9/11 in 2001: the result was considerable Islamophobia in which 'in the climate of fear initiated by 9/11, all Muslims without distinction are widely seen as the enemy within (others, 'sleepers', fifth columnists) as well as without ('axis of evil, 'green menace': [Allen, 2005](#): 50–51). The rise of such Islamophobia and the associated cultural racism – exacerbated by the 7/7 event in London in 2005 – have thus linked color racism and cultural discrimination. According to [Rana \(2007: 149\)](#):

Without a doubt, the diversity of the Islamic world in terms of nationality, language, ethnicity, culture, and other markers of difference, would negate popular notions of racism against Muslims as a singular racial group. Yet, current practices of racial profiling in the War on Terror perpetuate a logic that demands the ability to define what a Muslim looks like from appearance and visual cues. This is not based purely on superficial cultural markers such as religious practice, clothing, language, and identification. A notion of race is at work in the profiling of Muslims.

It is then possible that Islamophobia, on the one hand, and the attempt to racialize them culturally and phenotypically, on the other, have pushed Muslims as a group toward lower positions within the British ethnic-racial structure. Since structures based on race are hierarchical in nature ([Edwards, 2008](#)), this implies that people from superordinate groups are considered more worthy, relevant, and important than people from subordinate groups. Thus, the superordinate groups can more easily access desirable places in which to live, work, and educate their children.

Such general conclusions do not explain the benefits the advantaged groups gain from their discriminatory practices, nor why their motivation to discriminate may change across groups and over time. Some employers may prefer candidates from their own ethnic-racial group on the grounds of taste discrimination ([Becker, 1957](#)); others may deny employment to some individuals because of racist instincts or desires. These are unlikely to be a majority of employers, however. Others may exercise statistical discrimination ([Phelps, 1972](#)), denying employment opportunities to members of certain groups because of believed lower productivity levels compared to other

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