

“Too Much Mushkilla”: Sociolinguistic and Cultural Challenges of Ghanaian Migrant Workers in Qatar’s Education City

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Abstract

This study examines the sociolinguistic and cultural challenges faced by Ghanaian migrant workers in Qatar’s Education City. Despite the growing number of studies on migrants and migration in Qatar and the GCC, previous studies have primarily focused on the physical abuse and treatment of these workers, neglecting to recognize migration as a sociocultural phenomenon. This research aims to address this gap by employing Bourdieu’s theory of practice as its analytical framework. The study adopts an ethnographic case study approach and utilizes qualitative methodology, including in-depth semi-structured interviews with 9 Ghanaian workers in Education City. Through this methodology, the study identifies three main sets of challenges the workers face: social, linguistic, and economic. These challenges encompass various aspects such as dietary practices, experiences of discrimination, and the homogenization of cultural diversity. While these challenges hinder the social integration of Ghanaian migrants in Education City and Qatar as a whole, the study reveals that the workers employ various coping mechanisms to address them. These individuals exhibit agency through the establishment of kinship ties, adaptation to the dominant linguistic structures, etc. This research contributes to the academic discourse by emphasizing the necessity for enhanced intercultural communication strategies and the development of more inclusive policies within Education City. Such initiatives are critical for fostering the well-being and social integration of migrant workers in increasingly multicultural work environments. The study also contributes theoretically by framing sociolinguistic and cultural challenges within a Bourdieusian framework, revealing habitus adjustments and the accumulation of capitals within migratory fields.

Keywords: Migrant Workers, Habitus, Field, Capital, Sociolinguistic and Sociocultural Challenges

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Introduction

The outpouring of low-skilled migration to Qatar has gained significant media attention and criticism, notably since Qatar secured the hosting rights for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The nation has faced intense global scrutiny regarding the well-being of workers tasked with constructing and maintaining the country's infrastructure (Ewers et al., 2020). Numerous news outlets have reported on the mistreatment of migrants in Qatar. In addition, a substantial body of academic literature, including much of the qualitative and ethnographic work on labor migration in the Gulf States, "has focused on the challenges, problems, and rights-based issues confronting migrants in the region" (Gardner et al., 2013, p. 2). The predominant focus of recent migration literature on Qatar revolves around the well-being of migrant workers (Ewers et al., 2020; Simkhada et al., 2022), citizens' attitudes toward migrants (Diop et al., 2017; Diop et al., 2020), working conditions of the laborers (Bener, 2017; Diop et al., 2016) discrimination against minority groups (Imerion, 2017; Offia, 2023; Syed, 2017), and to some extent, the psychological implications of migration on low-skilled migrants in Qatar (Khaled & Gray, 2019; AlAbdulla et al., 2022; Gardner et al., 2013; Nagy, 2006).

The Gap in the Sociolinguistic and Cultural Challenges Faced by Migrants

Despite the considerable attention given to these aspects, there is a notable gap in our understanding of the sociolinguistic and cultural challenges faced by migrants within their multicultural working environments. In this study, I ask the following questions: (1) What are the primary communication barriers that Ghanaian migrant workers encounter when engaging with colleagues, supervisors, and the broader population within Education City (EC)? (2) To what extent does Bourdieu's concept of habitus and the values held by Ghanaian migrant workers align or diverge from those prevalent within the migrant community in EC? (3) What sociocultural adaptation mechanisms do Ghanaian migrant workers utilize to navigate challenges related to language, communication, and cultural differences within the social fields available to them? This study aims to address this gap by examining the sociocultural integration challenges encountered by Ghanaian migrant workers in diverse working environments within EC. The guiding objective is to shed light on these challenges and potentially offer practical solutions to the existing issues.

Conclusions

This qualitative study represents the first exploration of the sociolinguistic and cultural challenges migrant workers face, utilizing a Bourdieusian framework. Previous studies have often overlooked migration as a sociocultural process (Diop et al., 2012; Ewers et al., 2020). This study delved into the sociolinguistic and cultural obstacles encountered by low-skilled Ghanaian migrant workers in EC. Specifically, it examined the social and linguistic integration of low-skilled migrants within the multicultural context of EC. Drawing upon data collected from semi-structured interviews and observations, I identified three primary categories of sociocultural challenges confronting Ghanaian migrants within EC: social, economic, and linguistic challenges. My analysis revealed that factors such as the prevalence of broken/pidgin English, discrimination from superiors and colleagues, and dissatisfaction with the provided food contribute to the impediments preventing these migrants from achieving sociocultural integration within their operating fields. While these challenges exert multifaceted impacts on migrant workers, they have devised strategies to acquire specific forms of capital to mitigate some of these obstacles. For instance, in response to linguistic challenges, migrants have

cultivated linguistic capital through non-verbal communication or adapted pidgin-style communication to enhance their intercultural competence.

The role of Qatar Foundation (QF) and the contracting companies in facilitating the migration of workers to EC is of paramount importance in empowering these migrants. Given the significance of cultural awareness in navigating their roles within this context, it is imperative for all entities overseeing migrant labor to provide comprehensive intercultural awareness programs prior to their deployment in EC. Such initiatives would enhance their understanding of the diverse cultural dynamics at play within EC. Furthermore, implementing intensive language training programs can equip migrant workers with the linguistic skills necessary to navigate the challenges present in EC effectively. By enhancing the linguistic capabilities of both Ghanaian migrants and their Asian counterparts, the burden of adaptation would not rest solely on the Ghanaian workers. For instance, food constitutes a fundamental aspect of every culture. Therefore, QF may reconsider its policies regarding dietary practices within EC to better cater to the health and well-being of workers, which are significantly influenced by their dietary intake, making it essential to accommodate diverse culinary preferences and dietary requirements. Lastly, addressing the issue of open discrimination is paramount for fostering cultural and social integration among workers. Existing structures for lodging complaints, such as the 'camp boss' and managers, must be revamped to ensure effective resolution of discrimination-related grievances. It is crucial to establish robust mechanisms that take such complaints seriously and actively work towards resolving them rather than perpetuating or exacerbating the issues, as reported by respondents. This entails instituting a more robust and impartial framework to address the discrimination faced by migrant workers.

In conclusion, the present study offers three significant contributions. Firstly, it provides an empirical contribution by addressing the gap in the exploration of sociolinguistic and cultural challenges faced by migrant workers within the Qatari context, particularly within the multicultural setting of EC. Secondly, the study contributes theoretically by framing sociolinguistic and cultural challenges within a Bourdieusian framework, revealing habitus adjustments and the accumulation of capitals within migratory fields. Lastly, the study offers practical insights into the challenges encountered by these workers, thereby raising awareness and providing concrete contributions to the enhancement of policies in EC.

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