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SALWAY, Sarah

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PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION

**Labour market experiences of young UK Bangladeshi men:
identity, inclusion and exclusion in inner-city London**

Sarah Salway

Abstract

Detailed qualitative data are used to explore the processes perpetuating labour market disadvantage among young UK-Bangladeshi men living in central London. Strong forces of inclusion within the Bangladeshi community are found to interact with forces of exclusion from ‘mainstream’ society to constrain aspirations and limit opportunities. Though diverse forms of young Bangladeshi masculinity are found, a common pattern is heavy dependency on intra-ethnic networks. Negative experiences of, and isolation from, ‘mainstream’ society further reinforce reliance on ‘our own people’. However, acute ambivalence towards belonging to a dense Bangladeshi community exists, exemplified in the widespread denigration of the restaurant trade. Many respondents express the desire to ‘break out’ and access new experiences. The findings support current policy emphasis on ‘connecting people to work’ but highlight the more fundamental need to connect *people* across ethnic boundaries. The paper urges researchers to ‘unpack’ ethnicity – to carefully consider what ethnic identity implies in terms of access to resources and opportunities for different individuals in different contexts – in order to better understand the diversity of labour market outcomes and the persistence of disadvantage.

Bangladeshi, inclusion, labour market, men, identity

Introduction

In 2002 the UK government's Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) produced a detailed analytical report that clearly illustrated the persistent disadvantage of ethnic minorities within the labour market. On virtually every indicator of labour market achievement, a significant gap is found between the white majority and all other ethnic 'groups'. That said, diversity is also readily apparent, with Indians and Chinese commonly faring better than other groups. The position of Bangladeshi men, the focus of the current paper, is particularly shocking.

Labour Force Survey data for 2002-3 indicate that around 18 per cent of economically active Bangladeshi men were unemployed, the highest of any enumerated ethnic group, and far higher than whites (5 per cent) or Indians (7 per cent). Economic inactivity rates are also particularly high among Bangladeshis, with almost 30 per cent of working age men being economically inactive in 2002/03 (National Statistics Online 2004a). This disadvantage persists among younger, UK-educated Bangladeshi men, with 14 per cent of 16 year-olds not in education, training or employment in 2004, higher than any other ethnic group and double the level among whites (DFES 2005). Measures of occupational achievement further illustrate the extremely disadvantaged position of Bangladeshi men. Despite evidence of a rise since the mid 1990s in the proportion of employed Bangladeshi men in the salariat, the great majority continue to hold semi- and unskilled manual jobs. Twomey (2001) reports that over 60 per cent of working Bangladeshi men is employed in the 'distribution' industry and 52 per cent in the restaurant sector alone. In 2000, the average weekly wage for a Bangladeshi male employee was less than £150, compared to over £200 for Pakistanis and around £300 for both whites and Indians (PIU 2002).

A number of explanations have been advanced for why ethnic minority groups suffer labour market disadvantage, including: weak human capital, religio-cultural factors, low social class origins, limited social networks, poor access to transport, geographical concentration in deprived areas, and racial discrimination (Mason 2003; Ratcliffe 2004). For UK Bangladeshi men, weak human capital is a clearly significant barrier, with around 40 per cent having no formal qualification (National Statistics Online 2004b). However, it is clear that poor skills and qualifications offer an incomplete explanation. Weak human capital cannot account for the extreme concentration within one particular occupational sector. Furthermore, multivariate analyses confirm that having controlled for education, Pakistani and Bangladeshi men (these analyses invariably combine these groups) have the largest negative differential in unemployment rates compared to whites of all ethnic groups (Blackaby et al. 1999; Berthoud 2000; Clark and Drinkwater 2005). A lack of effective social networks and racial discrimination seem likely additional factors contributing to Bangladeshi disadvantage, though surprisingly little evidence exists to support or reject these explanations.

Social networks

Explanations for ethnic minority labour market disadvantage that focus on social networks have their origins in the concepts of acculturation or assimilation (Gordon 1964; Park and Burgess 1969) and social capital (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000)¹ as well as work on homophily in social networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001). Residential concentration and social isolation are argued to encourage dense intra-ethnic bonds (which may provide some types of employment opportunities) but inhibit inter-ethnic networks or ‘bridging bonds’ and particularly ‘linking bonds’ to more powerful and privileged groups, which generally offer better options (Leslie et al. 1997). While a large US literature has established the pervasive importance of social networks in labour

markets (Montgomery 1991), the focus has tended to be on the access to information and job referrals that such networks provide (Calvo-Armengol and Jackson 2004). Similarly, Wrench and Qureshi's work with 'low achieving' Bangladeshi men indicated that employment was heavily concentrated within their own community and word-of-mouth was commonly used to convey employment information (1996). Work on minority self-employment in the UK, while cautioning against overly culturalist explanations, suggests a wider variety of processes through which intra-ethnic ties may influence employment outcomes, including privileged access to loans and labour (Basu and Altinay 2003). However, despite increased interest in the idea of 'ethnicity as social capital' (Loury, Modood and Teles 2005), as Reingold (1999) notes, more needs to be understood of the nature and extent of social networks within different ethnic groups so that a greater understanding of whether and how networks contribute to poor employment outcomes can be achieved. Heath (2001), in his report to PIU, concluded that 'the role of social isolation from mainstream society and of social assimilation is unclear. However, lack of the necessary social networks and contacts might have a role in explaining ethnic minority disadvantage in finding work' (p.3).

Racial discrimination and exclusion

The PIU's review concluded that 'it is undeniable that racial harassment and racial discrimination persist in the UK labour market' and that these forces 'occur in many different forms', and provide 'a partial and important explanation for the persisting disadvantage of ethnic minorities' (2002; pp128). Quantitative analyses also suggest that racial discrimination 'pushes' minority individuals into self-employment and provides at least partial explanation for the predominance of this form of activity among some groups (Clark and Drinkwater 1998; 1999). However, evidence also suggests that racial discrimination is not a simplistic force, but rather is taking new, multiple and often covert

forms (Mac an Ghaill 1999; PIU 2002; Mason 2003). Whether greater experience of racist discrimination is a factor explaining the particularly disadvantaged labour market position of Bangladeshi men is unclear. While there is some evidence that whites report greater prejudice against 'Asians' and 'Muslims' than against 'Caribbeans', or 'Chinese', Bangladeshi respondents' own reports suggest lower levels of racial abuse and less discrimination in the labour market than other groups (Modood et al. 1997). Such variation between groups may reflect in part the differential exposure to 'mainstream' white society, pointing to the need to consider the inter-play of processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Unpacking ethnic identity

It is increasingly apparent that diversity *between* ethnic groups in labour market outcomes must imply the operation of complex and nuanced processes, and demand specific, rather than general, explanations (and solutions). Theoretical developments in understanding ethnic identity offer the possibility of greater insight into how ethnicity patterns labour market experience. In contrast to earlier approaches that tended to essentialise difference, presenting ethnic identities as fixed and hierarchically ordered, identities are now recognised to be shifting, multiple and often hybrid (Gardner 2002). The importance of historical and contextual influences on identity formations and ethnic relations is also acknowledged (Hall 1992; Mac an Ghaill 1999; Bhavnani and Phoenix 1994). As Ville and Guerin-Pace's discussion of self-identity formation highlights 'positions in social space weigh differently according to the values and experiences associated with them' (2005, p. 241) so that the significance of ethnicity as a component of identity varies between individuals. Furthermore, divergence in shared experiences and histories means that ethnicity 'weighs differently' on collective identities too. Recognising the contested and malleable nature of both the content and boundaries of ethnic 'group' membership is

important because it cautions us against seeking explanations for disadvantage that are over-generalised. It reminds us not to expect simple relationships between identity vis-à-vis 'mainstream' society and position within the labour market hierarchy (Itzigsohn, Giorguli and Vazquez 2005), and to look closely at what is implied by ethnic identity in particular situations.

While acknowledging the utility of such differentialist approaches, we nevertheless argue that identity formation remains 'deeply rooted in the organization of society' (Ville and Guerin-Pace 2005, p237). There are limits to the ways in which individuals can fashion their identities. Importantly, holding a racialised identity remains a central element in the experience of minority ethnic individuals in the UK and minority self-identities are shaped by beliefs regarding the way in which 'mainstream society' / majority 'others' perceive them (Jenkins 1994; Modood 1988; Modood 1998; Karlsen 2004). Such beliefs are built upon not only an individual's own inter-personal interactions, but also the group's collective experience and understanding of their place within 'mainstream' society with the labour market being an important site of identity construction. Earlier work on self-employment has been useful in highlighting the need to adopt an 'interactionist' approach that 'stresses the interplay between internal group resource endowments and external opportunity structure' (Ram et al. 2000 p496).

Family, kinship and wider ethnic structures may place important constraints upon an individual's ability to negotiate their identity both directly through the use of sanctions and indirectly via the loss of rights and claims. It is therefore important to understand 'sameness', identification and belonging (Mac an Ghaill 1999), in other words, the processes of inclusion, as well as those of exclusion. We therefore subscribe to Bhavnani and Phoenix's notion of identity as the 'site where structure and agency collide' (1994, p6).

Aims

The current paper adds to existing empirical evidence regarding the causes of persistent labour market disadvantage among young UK Bangladeshi men. We aim specifically to examine the processes of inclusion and exclusion that relate to the formation of ethnic identities, and the ways in which these processes shape labour market experience and opportunities.

By presenting analysis of detailed qualitative data we are able to give voice to young Bangladeshi men's own experiences of the labour market and thereby complement recent reviews that have focused primarily on quantitative data.

An exclusive focus on Bangladeshis is also unusual since analyses commonly combine this group with Pakistanis. Originating from regions separated by over 1,000 miles, cultural heritage, language and history all differ importantly between the two. Furthermore, the timing and circumstances of initial migration to the UK were different with Pakistani immigration peaking in the 1970s, a decade earlier than Bangladeshis (Haskey 1997). The UK experience of Bangladeshis continues to be distinct from, and in many respects more extreme than, Pakistanis (Owen *et al.* 2000; Platt, 2002).

Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted in the London boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Camden, home to high numbers of Bangladeshi individuals, by the author and four research assistants.

Initially, the author spent January and August 2003 observing and chatting with individuals and groups at a variety of local places. Detailed field-notes were recorded during this period relating to over 40 informal observation and conversation episodes. Seven group discussions, involving 19 men and 24 women, were held in which ranking

and mapping methods were used to engage participants in analysis of their local communities. Key Informant interviews were also conducted with six Bangladeshi individuals working for community-based organisations. Following this period of orientation, multiple, open-ended, ethnographic interviews were conducted with three young men (Spradley 1979). Findings from these interviews fed into the development of a semi-structured interview tool that was used to collect detailed information on labour force experience from ten Bangladeshi men aged 18-35 years (five had received secondary education in the UK, and five in Bangladesh). A further 18 detailed interviews were conducted with a range of male and female Bangladeshi individuals unrelated to the young men's sample to gather further information on male labour force experience, in addition to contextual information. Interviews were conducted in the language of respondent's choice (either English or Sylheti), tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field-notes and transcripts were reviewed during the course of data collection to identify emerging themes for investigation. QSR Nudist 6 was used to organise and attach coding to the data, though the actual process of coding was done 'manually'. Our approach drew on the principles of 'critical ethnography', in that we attempt to synthesise the traditional ethnographic focus on subjective meanings and beliefs of respondents with the insights gained from a broader historical and structural analysis (Wainwright 1997). While we give a central place to the ways in which young Bangladeshi men describe themselves and their experiences of the labour market, we nevertheless consider that such accounts require situating within an understanding of the broader social structures that constrain the avenues open to individual actors.

Findings

We describe first a set of inter-related themes that relate to the construction of young Bangladeshi male identities. We find evidence of multiple influences upon, and diverse

forms of, young, Bangladeshi masculinity. Nevertheless, inclusion within dense co-ethnic networks and alienation from ‘mainstream’ society was keenly felt by many of our respondents. Having provided this backdrop, we turn to describe how these processes of inclusion and exclusion influence, and in turn are influenced by, the places occupied by young Bangladeshi men within the UK labour market. Our data suggest that young Bangladeshi male identities impact importantly upon employment experiences in at least three inter-relating ways. Firstly, being recognised as Bangladeshi by other Bangladeshis, particularly men, implies access to particular networks and resources as well as imposing certain expectations and obligations. Secondly, being categorised as Bangladeshi (or Asian, or Asian Muslim) by non-Bangladeshis, notably those in powerful positions, has implications for how one is received, or rejected, by the ‘mainstream’ labour market. Thirdly, at an individual level, these processes of inclusion and exclusion reinforce each other to create, but also to constrain, employment opportunities.

Bangladeshi male identities: opportunities and constraints

In this section we integrate earlier work that has charted the historical development of the Bangladeshi community in London with our own empirical data to explore influences on young Bangladeshi male identities in the 2000s. Eade (1997) has described how Sylheti seamen, or lascars, made their way to the London docklands area in the 19th century and laid the foundations for the first wave of male migrant workers who came to the UK in the 1950s and 60s in response to the labour demands of Britain’s expanding post-war economy. The following years saw a rapidly growing and increasingly concentrated Bangladeshi population in Tower Hamlets, particularly in the Spitalfields, Whitechapel and Stepney Green areas. First the employment voucher system (heavily dominated by Sylheti brokers) and subsequently the tightening of immigration laws, encouraged early migrants to arrange for immediate family and other relatives to make the journey to the UK (Eade 1997; Gardner and Shukur 1994). This system of chain migration created strong social and cultural ties both within the London community and between London and rural Sylhet. Eade (1997) has also described how the war of independence and the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 led to a rise in secular Bangladeshi nationalism in

Tower Hamlets. He also notes the infiltration of second generation Bangladeshis into the political and administrative arenas of Tower Hamlets in the 1980s and 1990s and the way in which these individuals have influenced public discourse regarding the needs and rights of the Bangladeshi community. While these forces have no doubt contributed to the emergence of a strong Bangladeshi group identity within the UK, for the average Sylheti family, the continued links with Sylhet through marriage transactions, joint land ownership and responsibility towards relatives, as well as the growing UK kinship-based networks, seem likely to have been more influential in forging a strong sense of 'being Bangladeshi'. The huge growth in community organisations, mosques, services and shops serving the needs of Bangladeshis is evidence of the energy expended in constructing the ethnic community in this area, and similar developments have taken place in the Somers Town and Regents Park areas of Camden; the other site of our fieldwork. At the same time, Bangladeshi men in East London have tended to remain heavily concentrated in unskilled and semi-skilled manual work within a narrow range of employment sectors. Having found employment opportunities in the garment manufacturing industry in the 1960s and 1970s, many lost their jobs with the contraction and out-sourcing of this work in the 1980s (Kabeer 2000), and sought jobs within the Bangladesh-dominated 'Indian' restaurant sector. Thus, large numbers of UK Bangladeshi men have tended to both live and work alongside their fellow Bangladeshis.

Earlier writers have drawn attention to the changing forms of Bangladeshi identity as the number of UK-born and educated individuals rises, marriages are increasingly arranged to UK-based spouses, land and asset ownership in Sylhet seems less relevant to life in the UK and trips to Bangladesh decrease in frequency. As Gardner and Shukur (1994) argue, the self identities of British Bengalis are increasingly shaped by local experience and commonly reflect a 'dynamic plurality of social categories and affiliations' (Eade 1997 p105). We too present evidence below of the ways in which young Bangladeshi men negotiate diverse influences on their self-identity. However, it is important to note that being Bangladeshi, or Bengali,² remains a prominent part of individual identity for the great majority of young Bangladeshi men and women, expressed in terms of a connection to the country or culture of Bangladesh (referred to as 'back home' even by those who had never visited) as well as membership of a 'community' in the UK.

I'd say I am British Bengali. Yes, that's a very important part of who I am... I do have the links to the culture, to the Bengali culture. That's a part of what I am. [Female, UK-educated, degree, 25-30 years]

Our Bangladesh-educated respondents used, and many of the UK-educated were familiar with, the concept of '*shomaj*'. *Shomaj*, which can be roughly translated as 'moral community', is associated with 'proper living', as a civilized, Bengali people, though what is considered to be 'proper living' may vary considerably between settings (Blanchet 1996). In contrast to a rural Sylheti village, the *shomaj* of inner-city London neighbourhoods are difficult to delineate as physical entities. Nevertheless, as a symbol of morality, and of the Bangladeshi way of life, that sits in opposition to 'Englishness', the *shomaj* remains salient for many.

In our fieldwork areas, dense patterns of settlement and concentration within schools persist and mean that daily interactions predominantly involve other Bangladeshis. Furthermore, kinship networks, including links to Bangladesh, remain active for many, binding the Bangladeshi community together both socially and economically. In addition, respondents referred to the role parents play in instilling a sense of Bangladeshi identity and membership of the *shomaj*. Though most UK-educated individuals acknowledged having school-based friendships with non-Bangladeshis, across the board both men and women reported that most of their friends, and in particular their 'close friends', were Bangladeshi. Respondents talked of a common Bangladeshi (and in some cases Muslim) identity easing communication and understanding.

The emergence and persistence of a strong Bangladeshi identity must also be understood within the context of racial exclusion by mainstream white society. Earlier work has argued that the experience of white racism provides a central element of Bangladeshi self-identity (Gardner and Shukur 1994) and has encouraged attachment to roots and cultural heritage as well as the tendency to adopt segregated patterns of living (Eade 1997; Gardner and Shukur 1994), though it is likely that the allocation of council housing has also contributed importantly to the latter. Our respondents revealed the continued influence of forces of racial exclusion on their daily lives. In inter-ethnic interactions, the extent to which a specifically Bangladeshi identity is recognised and responded to depends on context and the prior experience of the actors. Our respondents noted that in many contexts they were assigned a generic 'Asian' identity. Physical appearance, particularly skin colour, is clearly an important cue to Bangladeshis and non-

Bangladeshis alike in assigning an identity to a stranger. As one respondent stated, ‘I cannot hide what I am, my identity goes with me’. A generic ‘Asian’ identity is, increasingly, refined to an ‘Asian Muslim’ identity, with actors often picking up on cues related to dress (or simply assuming that all Asians are Muslims), and further to a Bangladeshi identity in certain contexts. Many teachers, community workers, GPs, police and other significant actors in areas of high Bangladeshi concentration hold these more nuanced, conceptions regarding ‘Bangladeshis’. Nevertheless, it is evident that the core of most versions of ethnic identity that are ascribed to Bangladeshi individuals is typically negative. Elements that are salient include being: unable to speak English, uneducated and ignorant, religiously fanatical, abusive towards women, involved in drugs and gangs, a drain on social services, and insular.

Bangladeshis themselves are aware of these negative images and frequently speak in similar terms about their fellow community members. An important theme that emerged during our fieldwork was the acute ambivalence felt by many towards being a part of this community. Though expressed by some respondents from all age-groups, feelings of ambivalence were particularly evident among younger, UK-educated respondents. While respondents felt that a concentration of Bangladeshis meant lower risk of racist abuse, access to useful resources and information networks, mutual help and feelings of security and belonging, such claims go hand-in-hand with obligations and expectations. Frustrations centred on the stifling nature of the community within which gossip and scandal are rife and behaviour is policed for fear of loss of family honour. Inclusion was also felt to narrow choices, as fellow Bangladeshis were viewed as lacking commitment to education and having limited aspirations. The local neighbourhood and past employment experience of older men were also felt to offer limited opportunities (particularly since the manufacturing sector that once employed large numbers of Bangladeshi men has now all but disappeared). A desire to escape from these down-lelling influences and to engage with different types of people and new experiences was expressed by varied respondents.

They [the authorities] seem to think we have no rights. Is this the policy? To keep us all lumped together here in this inner city area, in this environment? The English [housing] officer asked me why I had not put down Camden. “There are lots of you people here” he tells me... I just asked him straight back, would he want to live here with his children? And he acknowledged “no”. So I said, so why must I spell out all the reasons

for not wanting to live here, it's obvious to anybody. That's all you see [Bangladeshis]. You go out with them, you come in with them. You end up being like them! [Male, Bangladesh-educated, 50-55 years]

And the reason I moved out. I don't, um, I shouldn't be saying this, but actually, the system, because most people are Bengali here. Everyone works in either restaurant, they don't study, and, um, the environment, I don't like it here, they are into bad things, not good things. [Male, Bangladesh & UK-educated, degree-level, 25-30 years]

As the above quote indicates, some young Bangladeshi men are actively seeking to reinvent their identities, often rejecting elements of a Bangladeshi identity that they do not value or find restrictive, and incorporating new influences. In some cases, individuals were found to actively promote their attachment to particular identities in a variety of ways, including dress, hair-styles, consumption patterns, association with others, speech and overt behaviours. Such allegiances can be seen as both a response to and a defence against racial exclusion and the 'deeply ambiguous location in British society' (Gardner and Shukur 1994, p160) that UK-educated young Bangladeshi men find themselves in.

A number of influences on young Bangladeshi male identities were particularly evident, and these were frequently 'essentialised' by respondents as they described different 'types' of Bangladeshi male.

I: So, how would describe the characteristics of those who are 'getting on' round here? I mean Bengalis who are getting on well?

R: Well, there are different types of smart. You know, dodgy; quiet and study well; and then the religious type. Those that go to uni, then that's good, innit. Some can manage both, they can be out on the street and can be doing well with studying. Out there, it's like hassle. [Male, UK-educated, GCSE, under 20 years]

The most salient in the narratives of respondents, both young and old, was the 'street' identity. Associated with 'gangs', the largely UK-educated young men who promote this identity are perceived to be intimidating and anti-social. A common theme was the need

to contain these young men; to 'take them out of the scene'. These perceptions appear overly negative. In particular, claims that they lack respect for elders and ignore filial duties jar with reports of the same young men contributing money to the household, protecting sisters' reputations and assisting parents with benefit applications. Nevertheless, accounts from young men themselves suggest that many do subscribe to a 'street' identity and that faction, violence, petty crime and the informal economy are pervasive forces in these individuals' lives.³ Elements of what might be termed an 'oppositional culture' were then apparent among many of the young men we encountered. However, it was clear that this did not relate to any degree of 'assimilation' into white working class culture, as has been suggested in American work (reviewed by Heath 2001).

Another 'way of doing' Bangladeshi male identity that respondents identified gives Islam a central and overt place. Eade (1990) drew attention to the growing significance of Islamism in Tower Hamlets since the 1980s and Glynn (2002) has argued that 'Islamic brotherhood is a potent antidote to alienation' (p975) among the youth of Tower Hamlets. We too found evidence of some young men in both study sites claiming overtly Islamic identities and adopting a life-style heavily influenced by ideas of 'revisionist Islam'.

A further strand to the discussions of Bangladeshi male identities related to achieving well at school, gaining a university education and pursuing 'professional' careers. Respondents were aware that small numbers of Bangladeshi men were 'getting on' and this was admired across the board. In some cases, young men who saw themselves as 'professional' had actively disengaged with the wider Bangladeshi community either by moving geographically or by consciously restricting social contacts and, in a small number of cases, developing links across ethnic boundaries. However, in all these cases the individuals retained a strong sense of being Bangladeshi and strong ties to their immediate family. Furthermore, others maintained their community links moving between their professional world of work and the local neighbourhood with apparent ease and often fulfilling a desire to 'give something back' to the community through voluntary work.

These newer influences on Bangladeshi male identity were often set in opposition to the 'typical Bangladeshi' in respondents' narratives, with the latter commonly being denigrated, though for different reasons. Those who claimed a strong 'street' identity

expressed distaste for the poor dress sense and general ‘uncoolness’ of individuals who are perceived to be recent arrivals with little competence in British society; while those viewing themselves as more ‘professional’ distanced themselves from the ‘traditional’ male who is uncouth, uneducated and has limited aspirations. Newer versions of Islamic male identity also commonly emphasise difference from ‘traditional’ Bangladeshi Islam which is seen to be tainted by Bengali cultural traditions and misinterpretations.

This is a stereotype of a hashpot⁴, you know he’ll be a bit dark, you know dark, messed up hair you know long hair, down, and maybe a yellow, brownish, orange-ish, not good quality material shirt, you know you can see it and may be just a normal bottom, you know, and no-name brand trainers. [Male, UK-educated, GCSE, under 20 years]

Despite the tendency for respondents’ narratives to emphasise difference and distance between ‘types’ of Bangladeshi male, closer inspection revealed the many ways in which individual identities were themselves syncretic and dynamic. Those individuals who overtly promoted a strong ‘street’ identity did not simply reject ‘traditional’ Bangladeshi culture. Instead, respondents displayed ambivalence; at once celebrating parts of Bangladeshi heritage while actively distancing themselves from other elements.⁵ Also, importantly, across the board our respondents held a positive identification with Islam, though there was great variety in the way this was expressed.⁶

Life-cycle and migration patterns also create continuities across individuals and generations, though these tend to be downplayed in people’s narratives in favour of the disjunctures that cause tension within families and the community at large. People migrate at various stages of their lives and are exposed to different degrees to the UK educational system. The tendency to equate migrant Bangladeshis with the ‘older generation’ ignores the fact that there is continued immigration of significant numbers of young men, particularly following marriage and also to enter the restaurant sector. Also, it is not unusual for Bangladeshis to spend significant periods of their adolescence and adult lives in both countries. Therefore individuals do not always fall neatly into the category of first or second-generation migrant. Furthermore, gendered norms surrounding (preferably arranged) marriage and the adoption of the role of breadwinner/patriarch remain strong influences on young men’s life paths and many expect to ‘settle down’ in their twenties. Thus, several respondents talked of the ‘street’ identity as

something that young men ‘just have to go through’; a life-style that does not last for long. Furthermore, marriage often unites UK-born and Bangladesh-born partners and, through extended family living arrangements, may bring an individual into close contact with relatives who have been born and educated in the other country. Such ‘hybrid’ households mean greater continuity across ‘generations’, particularly post-adolescence, than is perhaps apparent at first sight.

In seeking explanations for labour market disadvantage, the importance of distinguishing between the experience of first-generation migrants and second- (or third-) generation UK-born minorities is frequently asserted (Heath and Yu 2005). The above discussion has highlighted various ways in which young Bangladeshi masculinities merge diverse influences. In many cases, respondents were found to actively construct their identities and seek to distance themselves from forms of ‘Bangladeshianness’ that they did not value. Ambivalence towards belonging to the Bangladeshi community and denigration of ‘traditional’ ways was evident among many respondents. As we shall describe below, the discontinuities perceived and created between younger cohorts of men and their older co-ethnics have implications for networks of inclusion as well as the avenues that individuals perceive to be open to them, closing off certain employment options. However, despite diversity of expression, important continuities are evident that also have implications for understanding labour market experiences. Firstly, the salience of a Bangladeshi/Bengali identity and a strong reliance on intra-ethnic social networks characterises the great majority of young men, regardless of their claims to particular identities. Secondly, the common experience of racism (though it may take new forms) remains significant. The resilience of these patterns of inclusion and exclusion means that new avenues of opportunity have not been effectively created, as we explore in more detail below.

Employment options: preferences, opportunities and aspirations

Although a few respondents identified advantages to working with ‘our own people’, the majority, regardless of age or country of education, equated ‘good jobs’ with ‘English jobs’. A ‘good job’ is preferably office-based, but even jobs in supermarkets, retail outlets, and fast-food restaurants were considered superior to working in Bangladeshi-run enterprises. In many cases, respondents compared the restaurant sector, as the archetypal

Bangladeshi employer, to a less precisely defined ‘English’ alternative. However, some respondents had experienced working for and with Bangladeshis in other settings and were nevertheless quick to identify disadvantages. Common complaints were abusive managers and unsystematic working practices. It was striking to hear respondents refer to ‘Bangladeshi culture’ or ‘Bangladeshi behaviour’ in generally negative terms, while describing ‘English’ jobs as ‘regular’, ‘standard’, respected and secure. Clearly, these sentiments relate to the more general ambivalence towards being part of the Bangladeshi community discussed above.

I don't think it was a good idea to come where there are a lot of Bengali people. But this was the best place I knew, it was close to my house and I knew everyone..... I don't want to go to another place where it's all Bengali, I mean especially Bengali manager. [Male, UK-educated, GCSE, under 20 years]

Perhaps surprisingly, economic considerations were not the first thing mentioned when discussing the desirability of alternative employment options. This may reflect the narrow range of perceived options (and wage levels). In contrast, a criterion commonly identified as important was that a job should not be physically hard work and the working hours should be convenient and fixed. ‘Office jobs’ were commonly perceived to have these characteristics in contrast to the employment more typically associated with Bangladeshi men. Finding employment that brought job satisfaction and opportunities to learn were also frequently mentioned criteria.

The ‘Indian’ restaurant sector is increasingly being rejected by UK-born Bangladeshi men as well as migrants who have gained skills and qualifications since arrival. For some, the restaurant sector was associated with all that is negative about ‘traditional’

Bangladeshi culture.⁷ Respondents talked of people ‘wasting their lives’ in the restaurant sector, of stagnating and remaining isolated within the ‘bad environment’. Restaurant work was commonly identified as low status; something for a past generation. Respondents with good qualifications, or aspirations for higher education, emphasised the lack of alternatives for first-generation uneducated Bangladeshis.

Restaurant work is for them [parents’ generation], to carry on because they are not educated and they have nowhere to put their foot ahead, so their world is really limited. [Male, Bangladesh & UK-educated, degree, 25-29 years]

Many UK-educated young men objected to restaurant work primarily in terms of a clash of identity, though abusive management was also a concern.

They [the younger people] don’t like restaurants, they just don’t like it, you know the whole image of restaurants, it’s all hashpots, like nobody wants to work with hashpots, they’re gonna be talking in Bengali, you know what I’m saying? [Male, UK-educated, GCSE, under 20 years]

A mate, ‘cos he didn’t get no GCSEs his parents sent him back home for four years..... When he came back he tried to be like everyone else, but he’s not to us ‘cos straightaway he went into a restaurant, and he started talking like our fathers. And we didn’t really like that. [Male, UK-educated, GCSE, 20-25 years]

In addition to status considerations, respondents identified many specific, practical reasons why restaurant work is undesirable, including: long and anti-social working hours; limited holidays; low pay; insecurity when sick; and hard physical labour.

Despite the pervasive desire to ‘escape’ from restaurant work, the vast majority of respondents still had close connections to the sector, and many had spent periods of time employed in a restaurant. For most newly migrant men, the restaurant sector is their first point of contact with the labour market irrespective of qualifications and experience. Therefore, while acknowledging its downsides, these respondents saw restaurant work as a valuable claim that could be drawn upon by virtue of their Bangladeshi identity. Importantly, however, this claim may be weakening for UK-educated men. Older respondents noted that these men are unsuitable for restaurant work since they speak Sylheti poorly and lack the cultural competence to fit in. Several respondents also observed that UK-educated men are not offered jobs since newly arrived workers accept very low wages, pricing others out of the market.

Despite expressed preferences to move beyond the restaurant sector into ‘good jobs’ and ‘English jobs’, our discussions with young Bangladeshi men revealed, in most cases, very limited ideas for, or exposure to, alternative sources of employment. As one respondent put it: *‘Rice and curry is all we know’*.

The main ‘English’ employment that Bangladeshi men had entered into in large numbers was retail work, particularly in supermarkets, and to a lesser extent, the fast-food sector. This pattern no doubt partly reflects the fact that these are large employers offering entry-level jobs requiring few qualifications. However, the ready accessibility of these workplaces and the public visibility of their workforce are also important factors (as

discussed below). Some also spoke of plans for self-employment (an option that would by-pass exclusionary practices of 'mainstream' employers discussed below), but were often constrained by lack of financial capital. For individuals with poor English language skills, taxi-cabbing was another perceived option. However, other jobs that might be considered possible for those with limited academic qualifications, including skilled manual work such as plumbing or electrical work, were beyond the imagination of most respondents.

I: It seems that not many Bengalis are involved in skilled work like electricians or plumbers, have you ever thought of that?

R: What, that's like working for the council, for Camden?

I: It might be, but it could also be setting up your own business or

R: I don't know, I'm not sure, 'cos like it's never come to my mind as well.

We probably don't see enough workers doing that kind of thing, and like if

I wanted to become a plumber then I wouldn't know what to do, where to

apply, where to go. I wouldn't know where to start. [Male, UK-educated,

no qualification, under 20 years]

Most respondents reported reluctance to travel any great distance from home for work and largely limited their aspirations to the shops, hotels, and supermarkets that were close-by. A few respondents had had jobs in other parts of London, but most had not lasted long and the preference was for jobs close to home. Clearly then, employment options were importantly shaped by where these young men lived. An exception was where men had taken up employment with relatives outside London, but this again was exclusively in restaurants.

It would be wrong to imply that no Bangladeshi men think beyond their immediate experience. During the course of fieldwork we came across individuals who were already working in professional jobs as well as others with clear career plans. However, as quantitative statistics confirm, these individuals remain a small minority. This leads us to consider the processes of inclusion and exclusion that operate in the job search arena.

Finding employment: processes of inclusion and exclusion

The persistence of narrowly perceived employment options and heavy concentration in particular types of work appear to result from the interplay of powerful processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Several respondents reported experiences of active discrimination or exclusion based upon their ethnic identity. Such experiences were reported by a variety of our respondents, though there appear to be differences in the ways in which such active exclusion is experienced. Young men who had achieved good UK qualifications and presented themselves as ‘professional’ individuals reported having difficulty securing jobs despite their eligibility, though the precise reasons for failure were often obscure, and presumed racist attitudes of employers had not been substantiated. In contrast, some of the men who had adopted more overt Islamic identities had experienced direct religious-racist abuse, and confidently cited anti-Muslim feelings as a significant barrier to employment.

They [employers] see my hat (topi) and beard and think I am a fundamentalist (laughs). My son wants to change his name. His last name is Islam. Now he wants to change it. He thinks it is not good to

have such a Muslim name. [Male, Bangladesh-educated, 50-55 years,
translated from Sylheti]

Importantly, among young men who claim a salient ‘street’ identity, territoriality among ‘gangs’ can mean exclusion from certain areas, based on actual or threatened physical attack. Such exclusion influenced respondents’ decisions about where to look for work and educational opportunities.⁸

I went there [to my new job] for a week and then like a group of Somalian boys who also worked there and also live around there they sort of like chased me away from there..... they started chucking things at me, planks of wood and stuff and I thought I’m not even gonna go back to that place.
[Male, UK-educated, GCSE, 20-25 years]

As well as reports of racist exclusion restricting access to job opportunities, other respondent stories told of being sacked or forced out of their jobs, of being overlooked for promotion and of receiving lower wages than other workers because of their ethnicity.

In casino we [Bengalis] can get promoted up to cook, not to chef. They, unofficially they offer the title of ‘chef’, but they do not provide any written document on this. Because if they make it official then our salary would be above 16,000 pound. But they offer us only 10,000 pound. How can you run a family on this sort of money?! [Male, Bangladesh-educated, 30-35 years, translated from Sylheti]

The ways in which direct experience, and fear, of racial discrimination act to constrain people's horizons should not be downplayed. However, our findings also reveal the importance of more 'passive' forms of inclusion and exclusion.

It is a common saying in Bangladesh that you can do anything if you have the 'strength of an uncle' (*mamar jor*) that is, the right connections, on your side. Heavy reliance on inter-personal networks for access to employment opportunities is also clearly evident among UK Bangladeshis. Though particularly emphasised in relation to restaurant work, this route is also commonly exploited to secure jobs in retail and fast-food outlets. Respondents reported recommending friends or relatives to their supervisors, passing on information about job vacancies, and even recruiting directly when in positions of authority.

We mainly hear about jobs from people that we know... If they come to know that somewhere needs a worker then they let people know. This is how you get to know about jobs. [Male, Bangladesh-educated, 30-35 years, translated from Sylheti]

Then I found out that one of my uncles was working in McDonalds and he said "I can give you a free interview - I can give you a job without an interview, but then it's up to you to keep the job" [Male, UK-educated, no qualification, 20-25 years]

While being included within Bangladeshi networks clearly provides access to certain opportunities, it also appears to limit people's options and imagination. Furthermore, feelings of exclusion from, and in some cases direct negative experiences with, mainstream agencies reinforce the tendency to rely on 'our own people'.

Basically, I don't believe in the Job Centre. They used to say that they have a job and give the phone number. But after calling them they say that the work has already gone. This often happens. I don't know why. They can't provide the work. So we prefer our own way through our circle of friends.... The job we get through our friends, it is good and more reliable. [Male, Bangladesh-educated, 30-35 years, translated from Sylheti]

In addition to personal, intra-ethnic networks, young Bangladeshi men appeal to a more general Bangladeshi identity in their approach to the labour market. This strategy is most formalised in the East London recruitment agencies that cater to the needs of men looking for restaurant jobs.

In relation to 'English jobs', the visibility of other working Bangladeshis contributes to the sense of what is possible and gives confidence that an application may be successful. Thus, a common strategy is simply to hand in a CV to nearby retail outlets where other Bangladeshis can be seen working. Certain organisations become labelled as 'Asian' or 'Bengali places'.⁹ In contrast, other work places are constructed as outside the realms of employment possibility, despite individuals having no direct experience of them.

R: It would be hard for me to get into, for example, a black area or a white area, somewhere it is all white people working there, I don't know.

I: So you think that would be hard? Why?

R: I don't really know. I wouldn't go for that job. I don't know. I don't mind working with blacks or whites or whatever. Like for example an

office. I would love to work in an office but I never seen any Asians working there and so it would be hard for me to be one of them working there, or for me to get that job. [Male, UK-educated, A-level, 20-25 years]

The role of ‘mainstream’ services such as employment agencies and job centres in facilitating access to employment for young Bangladeshi men appears to be very limited. Several respondents who were neither in education nor actively seeking work had no experience at all of the Job Centre or the youth-targeted service, Connexions. In other cases, respondents knew that the Job Centre existed but expressed a lack of familiarity and a reluctance to visit, or had little confidence in its ability to actually provide jobs. This lack of engagement with ‘mainstream’ services was common regardless of country of education. Far from being confident users, many of the UK-educated men expressed feelings of isolation and exclusion from these services, particularly those self-identifying primarily with a ‘street’ identity.

I tried to use a recruitment agency but I know that I won't get anywhere really 'cos I'm not like a smartly, well-presented person, if you know what I mean. I mean I look like I come from street life. I look like I'm street life. I don't look like very professional. Yeah and you know most of the recruitment agencies it's mostly like administration and office work, receptionist. You know, things like that. And they just don't see me as one of those sort of person. [Male, UK-educated, GCSE, 20-25 years]

Breaking out? : opportunities and positive signs

The limitations of being deeply immersed in the tightly-knit Bangladeshi community are increasingly recognised by many of its members. Many young men, both UK- and Bangladesh-educated, express the desire to ‘break-out’, form wider ties, and have new employment experiences.

I: So why did you say that you wanted to get away from the Asian community?

R: ... Why? ‘cos everyone knows me and they see me all the time, wherever I go to hang out I see the same people that I see in my work place as well, even if I go out at night to clubs and that I see the same people..... my mates, we don’t go there anymore ... we want to go out there and meet other people, I don’t know, it’s weird and it’s hard sometimes as well. [Male, UK-educated, GCSE, 20-25 years]

In our fieldwork areas some community-based organisations were providing valuable opportunities for training and work experience to young men. In many cases these activities remained heavily focused on the Bangladeshi community, but in others they had involved bringing Bangladeshi men into contact with a wider network of co-workers and clients. Where these placements provide not only the opportunity to develop useful skills, but also exposure to ‘mainstream’ society, they appear to be particularly important at increasing confidence and a sense of inclusion. However, the reach of these organisations is limited and only a few young men can benefit from such opportunities. Furthermore, cases of scepticism were found, particularly on the part of older parents, who questioned the usefulness of extended periods of voluntary work and did not recognise the value of gaining experience and exposure to new ideas, preferring instead the wage that a restaurant job would provide.

Though several studies have claimed that UK Bangladeshis value education highly (Dale et al. 2002; Crozier et al. 2003), many of our respondents felt that the competing demands to earn money for the family (which is often living on a very low income) often undermine young men's educational and career aspirations. Stories of parents encouraging children to leave school and take up restaurant work were common. Furthermore, a 'street' life-style, even if short-lived, had clearly undermined many young men's educational achievements. Nevertheless, there was evidence of an increasing commitment to education and a belief that educational qualifications will open up wider employment prospects.

"[My Dad] doesn't want me to work in a restaurant; he just tells me it's a really hard job. Like he says, "If you don't want to study, then you might as well work in a restaurant. If that's what you want to do, if you want to work your arse off, then do that, otherwise listen to me and study" [Male, UK-educated, A-level, 20-25 years]

Some young men were combining part-time work with college in order to both contribute money to their families and pursue higher education. Supermarket jobs can be particularly useful in this respect with long opening hours and flexible shifts. Attending college can mean not only acquiring marketable qualifications but, perhaps equally importantly, forging links beyond the Bangladeshi community and broadening horizons. However, here again we found the forces of inclusion and exclusion in evidence with many of our respondents opting to attend institutions close to home that were heavily populated by 'Asians'.

Discussion and conclusions

Despite high levels of research and policy interest in tackling ethnic minority labour market disadvantage, a lack of understanding persists regarding the complexity of processes that contribute to inequality. We suggest that this situation reflects, at least in part, a failure to adequately ‘unpack ethnicity’. There has been a tendency for researchers to focus on particular elements of ethnicity while overlooking others. For some, the focus has been on the social capital that ethnicity implies, for others the racist structures of exclusion within the labour market. However, as the above analysis illustrates, this is a false dichotomy. Processes of inclusion and exclusion inter-relate in complex ways to reproduce ethnic boundaries across schools, communities, and the labour market. Furthermore, the above findings, though based on one ‘ethnic group’ point to the need to more carefully consider what ‘ethnicity’ implies for different ‘groups’ in terms of access to resources and opportunities.

While acknowledging that our fieldwork tended to overlook those Bangladeshis who have moved out of heavily concentrated areas (and those in higher socioeconomic groups) whose experience may be quite different, listening to young men’s stories is convincing evidence that the inter-related forces of inclusion within the Bangladeshi community, and exclusion from ‘mainstream’ society, impact importantly upon the employment experiences of many.¹⁰

A little over ten years on from Wrench and Qureshi’s (1996) study, we find worrying signs that old barriers persist and that newer forms of disadvantage also operate. Young Bangladeshi men, whether UK or Bangladesh-educated, remain largely geographically concentrated and socially isolated from the majority white and other minority groups. Strong forces of inclusion create a salient Bangladeshi identity and a strong sense of difference from others. UK Bangladeshi identity must be seen within the broader

historical context of recent, largely chain migration, a newly independent 'home' nation, cultural norms that promote collectivity over individuality and generally weak human and material capital, all of which may predispose towards the fostering of strong intra-ethnic ties. Nevertheless, the persistence of a strong sense of Bangladeshi identity in the UK must also be seen as a response to a society that is frequently hostile towards and presents limited opportunities to its minority groups.

The response of some young Bangladeshi men could be seen as resigned submission to exclusion, as they actively invest in intra-ethnic ties and exercise their claim to employment in the restaurant sector. However, many others are seeking new ways to redefine themselves, often combining diverse social influences to which they are exposed in inner-city London. Nevertheless, while our findings confirm the hybrid, contingent nature of young Bangladeshi male identities, alternative ways of 'being Bangladeshi' are frequently essentialised by social actors within and beyond the Bangladeshi community, as well as broader social discourse. Focusing on differences rather than similarities, new networks of inclusion and exclusion are thereby created (and older ones perpetuated) rather than the range of opportunities available to individuals being expanded. For some UK-educated Bangladeshi boys, the stigma of belonging to a racialised minority makes the adoption of a 'street' life-style attractive. Ironically, while offering a sense of valued belonging this identity distances young Bangladeshi men from older members of their own community, and further solidifies boundaries between them and 'mainstream' white society. Some young, Bangladesh-educated men who have migrated to the UK in early adulthood are also found to be rejecting elements of the 'traditional' Bangladeshi identity. The restaurant sector, often regarded as a symbol of all that is backward, is increasingly viewed as a last resort. However, for this group too, exclusion from mainstream opportunities was clearly evident. Glynn (2002) has commented on the 'increasingly separate lives' (p984) that adherents to Islamic revivalism may lead in Tower Hamlets

with significant divisions evident between themselves and other sections of the Bangladeshi community as well as other ethnic and religious groups. Our own data confirm that the promotion of an overtly Islamic identity can further heighten exclusion from mainstream employment opportunities.

Our findings suggest that the Ethnic Minority Employment Task Force (2004) of the DWP is right to focus on three main areas of activity: building employability; connecting people to work; and equal opportunities in the workplace. However, there appears to be a more fundamental need to 'connect people to people'. For young Bangladeshi men, the avenues for establishing 'linking networks' are highly constrained. Higher education and voluntary placements offer these possibilities to a small minority at present. Many more remain embedded within dense intra-ethnic networks. Our findings suggest that these processes of inclusion and exclusion are more significant than merely providing and limiting access to particular job information and referrals (though these functions are of relevance). What appears to be far more important is the way in which aspirations are inhibited and the realms of possibility constrained.

While it is important to harness local organisations and tailor approaches to the needs of different minorities (EMETF 2004), our findings alert us to the need to also recognise diversity within communities. Alternative, and shifting, versions of Bangladeshi maleness must be appreciated so that programmes appeal to all groups of young men. Furthermore, specialist efforts to reach out to marginalised communities must avoid further contributing to their identities as isolated and different. With respect to Bangladeshi young men, the visible presence of 'Asians' that are identified with, is a key factor. The challenge is to design programmes that young men perceive as relevant, where they can belong, that simultaneously promote inter-ethnic links to 'mainstream' society.

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Notes

1. Space prohibits a lengthy discussion of the varied ways in which the concepts 'social capital' and 'acculturation' have been defined and operationalised. However, as our arguments below illustrate, we consider formulations that identify social networks/resources (within and across ethnic/social group boundaries) as properties of individuals and households to be most useful.
2. The term 'Bengali' was used by some UK-educated respondents. While some clearly articulated a difference between 'Bangladeshi' and 'Bengali', others had appropriated the term 'Bengali' in a fairly unconscious manner. Some Bangladesh-educated respondents actively rejected the term 'Bengali' since to them it identifies a non-Sylheti Bangladeshi. Others identified 'Bengali' purely as the language spoken and 'Bangladeshi' as the appropriate term for people with family origins in Bangladesh.
3. Alexander (2000) documents similar findings in South London.
4. 'Hashpot' was a derogatory local term used to describe young men who retained 'traditional' Bangladeshi characteristics, often those who had recently arrived in the country.
5. Mac an Ghail and Haywood (2005) report similar findings in Newcastle.
6. Furthermore the leadership of Bengali revisionist Islamic organisations has been found to be dominated by well-qualified professionals who can act as role models for disaffected working class men (Glynn 2002).
7. Respondents commonly call these Bangladeshi-owned and run restaurants 'Indian'. Attitudes to restaurant ownership were more favourable. However, in reality individuals had often moved between owner and worker over time since many restaurant ventures were unsuccessful.
8. While this can have an ethnic dimension, rivalry between Bengali 'gangs' is a commonly reported problem in our fieldwork areas that also restricts opportunities.

9. In areas of dense Bangladeshi concentration, the term 'Asian' is often used as a synonym for 'Bangladeshi'. However, some respondents had at times appealed to a broader 'Asian' identity in seeking employment with Indians or Pakistanis where they felt they would 'feel easy' and be considered suitable employees.

10. The 2001 census revealed that 23% of all UK Bangladeshis lived in Tower Hamlets (Daniel Dorling, Personal Communication). It is also worth noting that we interviewed several individuals who had chosen to move out of the study areas but retained links through employment and voluntary work. Furthermore, Crozier (2000) and Mac an Ghaill and Haywood's (2005) work in parts of the country with much lower concentrations of Bangladeshis suggest similar levels of exclusion from 'mainstream' social networks.

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Sarah Salway

Principal Research Fellow

Centre for Health & Social Care Research

Sheffield Hallam University

33 Collegiate Crescent

Sheffield

S10 2BJ

s.salway@shu.ac.uk