

**New ethnicities among British Bangladeshi and mixed-heritage youth**

Martyn Barrett<sup>1</sup>, John Eade<sup>2</sup>, Marco Cinnirella<sup>3</sup> & David Garbin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Surrey

<sup>2</sup> Roehampton University

<sup>3</sup> Royal Holloway, University of London

2006

Final Report to The Leverhulme Trust

## **New ethnicities among British Bangladeshi and mixed-heritage youth**

This multidisciplinary research project was funded by The Leverhulme Trust. It drew upon the disciplines of Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology.

### **Objectives**

The research aimed to understand how British Bangladeshi and mixed-heritage adolescents living in London negotiate the demands of living with multiple cultures, and how they “manage” their multiple identities in different situations and contexts. More specifically, the project aimed to address the following specific questions:

- How do these individuals construe themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality and religion, and how do they construe the broader society in which they live?
- What types of acculturation strategies do these individuals adopt?
- To what extent are the identities and cultural practices of these individuals fluid, situation-specific and context-dependent?
- How do the participants relate to a majority culture where racism and discrimination are endemic?
- What are the life goals and aspirations of these individuals?
- How do these individuals’ self-categorisations, subjective identifications, cultural practices, levels of perceived discrimination, self-esteem, life satisfaction and life aspirations inter-relate?

### **Research activity**

The research took place in two phases:

- In the first phase, qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 British Bangladeshi and 12 black-white mixed-heritage adolescents to allow in-depth exploration of identity and acculturation issues.
- The second phase used a quantitative questionnaire, developed on the basis of the findings from the qualitative interviews, administered to a large sample of 569 pupils from 3 London schools. This sample included 132 Bangladeshi and 107 mixed-heritage individuals, as well as a large number of individuals from other ethnic backgrounds. The mixed-heritage group contained 43 individuals who were of black-white mixed-heritage, with the remaining individuals being drawn from a diverse range of different heritage mixes.

The data were collected from participants in London in 2005-2006.

## Findings

Some of the principal findings from the qualitative phase of the research are as follows:

### *Self-categorisations and identities*

- The Bangladeshi participants often prioritised their Muslim identity. However, other identifications were also important for these individuals, especially Bangladeshi identity.
- Bangladeshi participants had low levels of identification with Englishness, and Englishness was often associated with whiteness.
- When asked if they felt ‘between two cultures’, none of the Bangladeshi participants expressed a ‘crisis of identity’, with discourses usually displaying identity combinations.
- Mixed-heritage youth preferred ‘mixed-race’ to other expressions (such as ‘mixed-parentage’, ‘mixed-heritage’, etc.), and identified with this category. However, for several of the black-white mixed-heritage participants, religious and Caribbean or African identities were also very salient, as was British identity. ‘Being English’ was not equated with ‘being white’, and a black identity was not prioritised even if these individuals were often perceived as black.
- There was no feeling of marginality or of being ‘between two cultures’ amongst the mixed-heritage participants. Instead, their identities were fluid and contextually contingent. Indeed, for many, the most positive aspect of being ‘mixed-race’ was the ability to negotiate and navigate between both black and white social worlds.

### *Contexts of identities*

- The Bangladeshi participants tended to identify with ‘Bangladeshi’ and ‘Bengali’ in the domestic sphere, which was linked to the dominant use of Sylheti/Bengali at home. In the school sphere, several justified their choice of ‘British’ in this context via language use (i.e., English). Three-quarters of these participants had at least one Bangladeshi amongst their three best friends.
- There was greater diversity of identities chosen by the mixed-heritage participants in different contexts. In the domestic sphere, there was no dominant trend, although where parents lived separately, a sense of biculturalism with an ability to navigate between two different social/domestic worlds was expressed. Attachment to a black-dominated peer group did not necessarily involve prioritising an exclusive black identity.

### *Popular culture and tastes*

- Hybridised, diasporic genres in music (e.g., bhangra) were salient for some Bangladeshis, while black codes and hip-hop subcultural styles were important for participants from both groups.

- Regarding television and cinema, there was relative homogeneity of taste amongst both groups, with most participants watching popular mainstream genres (e.g., sitcoms, soaps, American blockbusters, etc.), although younger Bangladeshi girls also said that they liked Bollywood films.
- Few participants read British or Bangladeshi newspapers regularly.
- Several Bangladeshis assumed that ‘supporting Bangladesh’ in cricket was the ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ option, using expressions such as ‘cos it’s my country’ or ‘cos it’s where I’m from’. These expressions denoting symbolic notions of national origin and belonging were not associated with England or Britain.
- Several mixed-heritage participants supported England in cricket but Jamaica in the Olympics, suggesting bicultural identifications.
- Bangladeshi participants typically consumed ‘traditional’ foods (e.g., ‘rice and curry’) in the home, although some also mentioned other foods dubbed ‘English’ or ‘Western’ (e.g., pizzas, pastas, chips, etc.).
- Mixed-heritage participants consumed a diverse range of food at home, but several also consumed Caribbean or ‘black’ food regularly. Differences in the cooking practices of fathers and mothers were pronounced in the case of separated parents, where food played a role in the construction of a cultural boundary between two different domestic environments.
- Fast food was the most common food consumed outside the home by both groups.

#### ***‘Traditions’, rituals and religiosity***

- The Bangladeshi participants had all received some religious ‘education’, but none showed a strict, scriptural sense of religiosity.
- Within the mixed-heritage sample, individuals who had a religion tended to define it as ‘Christianity’. However, for several mixed-heritage participants, religious practice was non-existent.
- While Islam occupied a central role in the discourses of the Bangladeshis, the relationship to religion seemed more intimate and ‘privatised’ for mixed-heritage participants with religious commitments.

#### ***Multiculturalism, racism and discrimination***

- Participants acknowledged Britain’s cultural diversity, and viewed it positively.
- The majority of participants thought the police adopted discriminatory practices.
- Many Bangladeshis noted a growing Islamophobia after the 9/11 attacks in New York and the 7/7 bombings in London.

- Many Bangladeshis and one-third of the mixed-heritage participants reported having been verbally abused, but none mentioned having been a victim of a physical racist attack.

Some of the principal findings from the quantitative phase of the research are as follows:

### *Identities and outcome measures*

- The strength of ethnic identity was similar across all ethnic groups in the sample, but there were significant differences in the strength of British identity across minority ethnic groups, with black Caribbean-white mixed-heritage participants having the highest levels of identification.
- The strength of religious identity also varied across groups, with Bangladeshi participants having the highest levels.
- For the Bangladeshi participants, religious identity was stronger than ethnic identity, which in turn was stronger than British identity.
- For the black Caribbean-white mixed-heritage participants, there were no differences between the strength of the three identities.
- For the black African-white mixed-heritage participants, ethnic identity was stronger than British identity, with religious identity midway between the two.
- For Bangladeshi participants, perceived discrimination correlated negatively with ethnic and religious identity. However, ethnic and religious identities correlated positively with self-esteem and life satisfaction.
- For the black Caribbean-white mixed-heritage participants, perceived discrimination correlated negatively with ethnic but not religious identity. Identities did not correlate with self-esteem or life satisfaction.
- For the black African-white mixed-heritage participants, ethnic, religious and British identity did not correlate with self-esteem or life satisfaction.
- Across the sample as a whole, ethnic identity, religious identity and life satisfaction were positive predictors of self-esteem.
- Across the sample as a whole, ethnic and religious identities did not predict life satisfaction, However, life satisfaction was predicted by perceived discrimination (negatively).
- The sample as a whole thought they were likely to achieve their desired occupations in future life. Ethnic, religious and British identity did not predict perceptions of this likelihood.

### *Cultural practices*

- Gender differences were pronounced in the cultural practices of the Bangladeshi sample (e.g., girls listened to R&B and Bollywood music, watched Indian/Bollywood films, and ate Bengali and Indian food more than boys). Bangladeshi girls had lower occupational aspirations than boys.
- In Bangladeshi participants, high perceived discrimination was associated with listening to Bollywood music less and UK Garage more, having fewer Bangladeshi friends, and having a low status job as an occupational aspiration.
- The cultural practices of the black-white mixed-heritage sample also displayed gender differences (e.g., boys listened to less R&B but more Rap and UK Garage, and were more likely to support national sporting teams, than girls).
- Black-white mixed-heritage participants low on perceived discrimination were more likely to think that they would enter a professional occupation.
- Both Bangladeshi and black-white mixed-heritage participants were more likely to eat fast food, and less likely to eat Indian/Bengali or Caribbean/African food respectively, when out with their friends than at home. Language use also differed across contexts in both samples: minority/community languages were associated with the home, English with the school and with the peer group. Thus, both food and language practices were situation-specific and context-dependent.
- 24% of the Bangladeshi participants indicated that they would date, and 14% that they would marry, someone from another ethnic group. The figures for the black-white mixed-heritage participants were 72% and 52%. Thus, both groups thought they were more likely to date than to marry someone from another ethnic group.

**Further information**

For further information about the project, please contact one of the researchers below:

Professor Martyn Barrett  
Department of Psychology  
University of Surrey  
Guildford  
Surrey GU2 7XH  
UK  
m.barrett@surrey.ac.uk

Professor John Eade  
Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism  
University of Surrey  
Guildford  
Surrey GU2 7XH  
UK  
j.eade@surrey.ac.uk  
or  
School of Business and Social Sciences  
Roehampton University  
Roehampton Lane  
London SW15 5PU  
UK  
j.eade@roehampton.ac.uk

Dr. Marco Cinnirella  
Department of Psychology  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
Egham Hill  
Egham  
Surrey TW20 0EX  
UK  
m.cinnirella@rhul.ac.uk

Dr David Garbin  
Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism  
Roehampton University  
Roehampton Lane  
London SW15 5PU  
UK  
d.garbin@roehampton.ac.uk