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The impact of inter-generational change on the attitudes of working-class South Asian Muslim parents on the education of their daughters

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This paper presents the findings of ethnographic research into inter-generational attitudinal change of parents towards the education of young British Muslim women. Based on in-depth interviews with parents of different generations, given social class and ethnicity, there is a universal belief in the importance of education for young Muslim women per se, with economic and cultural factors significant in shaping this sentiment. A range of important differences in attitudes towards Islamic schooling and mainstream education, and questions relating to marriage, however, were found. There are complex issues of identity and religion among Muslims in relation to educational issues, but there has been a move towards Islamisation among both generations; the first generations through a form of cultural traditionalism and the second generations through Islamic conservatism. Although this finding is based on a study of a relatively small and isolated working-class Muslim community in a declining post-industrial town in the West Midlands, it is argued that this Islamisation places both particular risks and opportunities in relation to young Muslim women in education in such isolated and disaffected communities which have a wider conceptual, theoretical and policy impact.

Keywords: South Asian Muslims; inter-generational change; attitudes; education

Introduction

The term ‘British Muslim woman’ immediately conjures up an image of a passive individual, dominated and oppressed by certain patriarchal family values. With educational or employment prospects often bleak, the only conceivable purpose of her life is marriage. Her parents play the single most important role by constraining her freedom and choice (cf. Archer 2002). In reality, the individual young Muslim woman has little choice or opportunity available to her. Are these really stereotypical images or in fact more representative of a hidden reality? Is the experience of a young Mirpuri-Pakistani Muslim woman any different from her mother’s? How have the attitudes of parents changed towards the education of second-generation Muslim women? These are the questions which this paper aims to discuss with reference to a particular community of ‘Mirpuri’ British Pakistanis/Azad Kashmiris in the West Midlands. Using ethnographic research methods and in-depth qualitative interviews, the study is

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an attempt to analyse and contrast the perceptions of first- and second-generation Mirpuri-Pakistani parents towards the education of their daughters. It attempts to make an important sociological and anthropological contribution to the understanding of the problems and concerns of British-Muslim families, particularly in the post-9/11 and post-7/7 climate.

First, a demographic overview of Mirpuri Muslims is provided. Second, the research design and methodology are elucidated. Third, the analysis is presented, one aspect focusing on different perspectives of the different generations under study, and the other in relation to conceptual and theoretical reasons behind this transformation. Finally, in conclusion, it is argued that there is a changing religiosity among different generations, the first focused on a more conservative approach to a traditionalised form of Islam, while the second are re-interpreting the very same Islamic ideals to find a new direction in relation to the education of young South Asian Muslim women. This finding has implications for issues of Islamisation of Muslim communities and in the context of post-7/7 anti-terror/community cohesion policy-making the ‘(re)turn to Islam’ (cf. Akhtar 2005) is potentially a positive asset.

Mirpuri presence in UK

According to the UK 2001 Census, South Asians constitute just over 3.5% of the total UK population (about 2,084,000 out of nearly 58,800,000), and, of this number, 1.3% are Pakistani (747,000). The Pakistani population is dispersed throughout the country, with the highest proportions in the West Midlands (21%), followed by Yorkshire and Humberside (20%). While the majority of this population is Sunni Muslim, there are different strands within it, such as Deobandi and Barelvi, both of which are part of the Hanifi School (Robinson 1988). Despite the lack of precise statistics, it can be safely assumed that the majority (well over half) of this population hails from the Mirpur district of (Azad) Kashmir (Shaw 2001). Mirpur is an under-developed area with the majority of its population engaged in small-scale farming, artisan or craftwork (Ballard 1983). It has had a long history of economic and social under-development; even during British rule it was under the reign of an exploitative non-Muslim Kashmiri sovereign. In post-independence Pakistan, it has not fared any better despite the fact that it provides a major source of revenue to the country through remittances sent by overseas Pakistanis.

Early migration from Mirpur began at the turn of the twentieth century when many workers sought jobs as engine-stokers in Bombay (Ansari 2003). By the end of World War II, the fall in demand for coal-fired ships and an increase in industrial jobs in Britain attracted Mirpuris in large numbers. By the 1960s, as their financial situation improved, they encouraged their male relatives to migrate by taking advantage of the ‘voucher system’ offered by the government. This led to the development of a substantial Mirpuri community in the Midlands, Yorkshire and Lancashire (Anwar 1979). A noteworthy aspect of this process was that these men left behind their wives and dependants, and it was as late as the 1970s and 1980s that they reunited with their families in Britain. The typical residential pattern of a Mirpuri family in Britain was in the inner cities, with limited access to quality education and employment opportunities, as well as adequate housing or health services. Due to the small size of houses, the extended family structure could not be maintained, but members of a single family invariably lived close to each other. Ballard (1982, 189) notes that migrants ‘tried their best to sustain the unity of their families, both because
this proved an excellent way of coping with their economic circumstances, and also because this was perceived as the most effective bastion against the corrosive influence of the Western culture.

In Britain, the Mirpuris did not do well in terms of upward mobility, compared with other immigrants from the Punjab (Ballard 1983). As they lacked basic education and fluency in English their options were limited to the heavy industrial jobs. The experience of prejudice, racism and discrimination also impacted on the reality. In the 1970s and 1980s, manufacturing industry faced a severe recession, leading to massive unemployment and in particular amongst Mirpuris. With little alternative skills, deepening racism in the labour market and hopeless conditions in Mirpur these migrants found themselves the most deprived of all South Asian sub-groups of Britain. The post-war experience of immigration, settlement and adaptation are important in the relative achievement of different South Asian groups in education, and in relation to young South Asian women in particular.

Indeed, there is a genuine distinction between a structuralist and culturalist argument in relation to the nature of educational experiences of Muslim women in British schools. The former focuses on Islamophobia, alienation, racism and discrimination impacting on the wider social experiences of Muslim women in society which also impact on education, while the latter attends to matters of culture, i.e. Muslim women are subservient to the Muslim men, and that Muslim women chose to self-exclude themselves because of the dress Muslim women wear, for example. This has impacted on the type and nature of research carried out on Muslim women in education. For example, there are those which seek to suggest that there are religio-cultural sensibilities which impact on educational outcomes with little or no appreciation of the structural context. Invariably, there are others who focus on issues of structural racism and discrimination, giving little or no emphasis to notions of agency to improve the lot of ethno-religious minorities through more effective efforts to integrate into majority society. In relation to the present topic, this research takes on board the fact that the groups under study are relatively disadvantaged and alienated communities, who live and work in a given locality and that they therefore represent a unique conceptual, theoretical and empirical context helping to better elucidate the nature of perspectives of what are often an under-researched group.

These structuralist and culturalist perspectives reflect a whole host of sensibilities re-awakened in the post-9/11 climate, many of which revert to age-old Orientalist stereotypes of the ‘Muslim woman other’ (Afshar, Aitken, and Franks 2005), and they will be important to bear in mind when imagining the experiences of Muslim women and the impact of inter-generational change in relation to education.

**Research setting and methodology**

Initially, social research on the academic performance of ethnic minority groups tended to focus mainly on young men. It is suggested that ‘intellectual capacity, family structures, cultural differences, disadvantage and social background, language problems, low self-esteem and racial prejudice as explanations’ for their educational underachievement (Tomlinson 1991, 125–6). The subject of women’s experiences only came to light in the 1980s when research on Pakistani and Bangladeshi women found the strong influence of parents in the education of their daughters. While all parents valued education and success for their daughters, they were concerned about the effect of ‘Westernisation’. They wanted their daughters to have the best of both
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worlds: receive Western education and yet maintain their conventional religio-cultural values (Basit 1997a, b; Bhopal 1998; Haw 1998; Ahmed 2001; Dale et al. 2002).

Studies conducted so far have exclusively concentrated on first-generation South Asian parents. No study has attempted to draw a comparison between the attitudes of migrant parents and second-generation British-born parents. This aspect is crucial in understanding whether second-generation parents have integrated effectively in the Western society or are still upholding traditional values. Therefore, important questions this study aim to explore: (1) to what extent second-generation parents follow in the footsteps of their parents in terms of attitudes towards their daughter’s education? (2) What are the major concerns and apprehensions regarding the education of their daughters; and (3) what factors account for the continuity or discontinuity in the patterns of attitudes possessed by these two generations of parents? In other words, what has changed or not which causes the perpetuation of certain perspectives and ideas across generations in a particular religio-ethnic minority group.

This study is based on a concentrated Mirpuri community in Tividale, in the town of Oldbury, West Midlands. Before elaborating on the research topic in greater detail it is important to consider the socio-demographic statistics of Oldbury. According to the UK 2001 Census (Office for National Statistics), Oldbury has a total population of 10,830, comprising 62% white British, 16% Indians and 9% Pakistanis. This proportion of Pakistanis is substantially higher than that of the West Midlands (2.93%) and only slightly lower than Birmingham which is the largest city in the region (with 11% Pakistanis). Birmingham, however, has a higher percentage of Muslims (14.3%) than Oldbury (10.2%) and West Midlands in general (4.1%), due to a large presence of Indian and Bangladeshi Muslims. Overall indicators of health and well-being in Oldbury are poor. It has one of the lowest rates of life expectancy along with a high proportion of people (22%) suffering from a limiting long-term illness. In terms of employment, there is a stronger presence in the elementary occupations (17%) compared with other parts of West Midlands, such as Birmingham (14%). Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are most likely to be unemployed and to take care of the home and the family compared with women from other ethnic minority backgrounds. There is an overall gender inequality in the occupational sector as only around 1% of women are in higher professional jobs compared with nearly 3% of men in the 16–74 age categories. The educational outcomes of the population in Oldbury are dismal, as almost half (47%) of the men and women aged 16–74 possess absolutely no qualifications. The number of people at each level of education (i.e. GCSE, A Level, degree and post-degree) is lower than the national and regional average for both men and women. Amongst those enrolled in full-time education, the number of young men exceeds young women, but the latter are outperforming boys at GCSE level and have been for some time. Using official labour force survey data, Lindley, Dale, and Dex (2006) conclude that educational qualifications are closely able to predict likelihood of employment, with increasing divisions found between those who possess higher degrees or not. Although limited education and the impact of regional variations can explain differences between those who do and those who do not succeed in the labour market, the authors argue ‘a significant unexplained racial discriminatory component may still exist’ (Lindley, Dale, and Dex 2006, 374).

Tividale is a village located in the Oldbury ward with a total population of 6,490, comprising 94% white-Britons and 2.2% South Asians. The overall socio-economic
profile of Tividale is similar to Oldbury, reflected by the fact that 42% of men and women of working age do not possess any educational qualifications and only 63% are in employment. The research was mainly carried out amongst Pakistanis residing in three significant roads. These areas are largely residential, with a mixture of both council and privately owned properties. The streets are noisy as groups of young Pakistani young men congregate outside small corner shops and takeaways in the afternoon. Young women are not a common sight on the streets but older women move around with relative freedom. There is a strong presence of police and surveillance cameras in the streets, largely as a result of the involvement of some young South Asian men in low-order drug dealing. There are no industrial or major retail centres and the majority of the working men operate taxis or shops. The houses are fairly spacious, although built to late Victorian standards and often remain in dilapidated conditions.

Initially a sample of 15 men and women from Tividale was planned but only 11 gave a positive response to requests for interviews. As the research question demanded a comparison between first- and second-generation parents, care was taken to include those whose country of birth was in Britain as well as those who were born in Pakistan. The sample population comprised seven females and four males, all of whom were married, divorced or widowed, and in the age range of 25–60 years. It needs to be noted that six interviewees were born in Pakistan while five were British-born Pakistanis. Overall, the respondents can be classified as working class. Of the female sample, only two were working (in the service sector) and the remaining others were housewives. The majority of the men were taxi drivers with the exception of two; one was a doctor and the other in the pharmaceutical industry. In terms of educational qualifications, only one woman and three men had attained degree-level education. The fieldwork was carried out during the early part of 2007. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

The relatively limited sample size clearly suggests that it is not possible to make generalisations relevant to the wider Mirpuri presence in British society. Nevertheless, the focused nature of the study and the in-depth qualitative approach does provide the basis for more dedicated study in this area. This study consisted of in-depth unstructured interviews with the participants in Urdu, Mirpuri and English, and carried out by the principal author. Using snowballs and networks made available to the researchers, it was relatively unproblematic to acquire the relevant sample. Moreover, the impact of similar ethno-cultural identities between the researcher and the researched helped positively in interacting, engaging and ultimately understanding the experiences of respondents (cf. Gunaratnam 2003). The questions covered areas such as personal details, migration history, attitude towards the British educational system and the education of young Muslim women in general. Parents were asked about their hopes, expectations and fears regarding their daughters’ education. Issues often related to marriage and the answers were varied. In this paper, we explore the major themes emerging in the analysis of interviews.

Attitudes toward South Asian Muslim women in education

The overwhelming response to the question of the importance of educating Muslim women was positive. All parents recognised the need for young Muslim women to achieve higher education. They did not differentiate between young men and young women by stressing that Islam does not discriminate on the basis of gender. On the
whole, there was no difference between first- and second-generation mothers and fathers as they unanimously agreed that there was no reason why women should not acquire education. Moreover, neither did the level of education of parents affect this choice. The reasons for getting an education nevertheless varied, for example, the most common response was to provide women with a ‘security net’ in case they are faced with economic troubles. They believed that education gave women a sense of independence and confidence which was crucial for their personal development. Zahra Begum, a 66-year-old mother of five, described the hardships she had to face as an illiterate woman in England, ‘girls must get education! I remember when I came here … even if a postman rang the bell and handed me a letter, I did not know what to do with it … I would run to the neighbours house to ask someone to read it for me … it’s very hard to live in this country without education’. The response here suggests that education is important not just to improve on human capital for labour market purposes but the extent to which it helps lubricate social interaction and the ability, therefore, to more usefully engage in day-to-day activities. Mohamed Asif, a 37-year-old father who had obtained only GCSE qualifications in relation to his own school education reiterated the significance of education for young women, but was minded to point out its gendered nature. Mr Asif had moved from a small town to Birmingham in order to provide his children with better education. He remarked, ‘Of course! Girls should study as much as they can … They should become teachers and doctors … It would be a shame if our sisters had to go to a male gynaecologist for a check-up due to lack of female doctors’.

From the above analysis it can be safely determined that, on the whole, South Asian parents valued Muslim women in education for several reasons. This finding is in line with previous research on South Asian Muslim views on women’s education. Shaikh and Kelly’s (1989) research on South Asian Muslim parents living in Manchester in order to learn about their attitudes towards single-sex education included questions about the reasons for young women receiving education. They concluded that the overall response was positive, as 38% of the fathers and 71% of the mothers deemed education important because it ‘helps in getting a job’. More recent research by Fauzia Ahmed (2001), based on South Asian undergraduate students from working-class backgrounds, showed that despite their low levels of education, parents strongly valued education for their daughters. Basit (1997a, 31) interviewed 24 working-class Muslim (mainly Pakistani) parents and found a tremendous eagerness amongst parents for their daughters to achieve an education; ‘most parents were willing to let their daughter study for whatever qualification she wanted and was capable of attaining’. Abbas’ (2003) research on young South Asian women in education found that parents were positive about the education of their Muslim daughters as much as Sikh or Hindu parents were positive about their own, although there are particular issues in relation to social class, the effects of schools, ethnicity and religion that are important to bear in mind in relation to opportunity structures and outcomes. Hussain and Bagguley (2007), Tyrer and Ahmed (2006) and Shain (2003) all affirm how young South Asian women, including Muslims, are able to negotiate their education with cultural concerns in relation to marriage, analysing this in the context of racism and Islamophobia in wider life.

Nevertheless, all of these studies have challenged the stereotypical view that Muslim parents do not value education for young women, and the responses from two generations of parents in this study suggested a similar set of observations, which are explored in detail below.
Gendered apprehensions

While all parents tended to agree that women should get an education they, however, showed serious concerns about sending their own daughters to schools in England. They did not want them to attend a school where ‘boys and girls mix openly’ as this was against their religious and cultural beliefs, particularly when puberty sets in. Moreover, they feared that by interacting with different people in schools, their daughters would become Westernised and ‘corrupted by Western values’. These Western norms were ‘unlimited freedom and independence’, ‘extra marital sex’ and ‘devaluation of the institution of marriage’. The issue of wearing Western clothes was raised by some parents as well. Anwar (1994) provided evidence that 60% of the 358 British Muslims in his sample population were averse to the idea of Muslim women wearing Western dress. Basit (1997b, 426) argued that British South Asian Muslim families attach a great deal of importance to education, but many parents, however, while encouraging their daughters to receive a full education, still remain concerned about the ‘perceived corruptive influence of a largely secular society’. While, on one hand, schools are viewed as instrumental in determining upward social mobility, on the other they pose a possible risk to youthful daughters (Afshar 1989). In our sample of respondents, one father related an interesting incident which reflected his anxiety over his daughter’s education in a Western European school,

My four-year-old daughter goes to a mixed school and of course has male friends … One day I took my daughter to a park where I met the parents of one of her class mates (boy) … While the kids played, the mother of the boy asked cheekily ‘So, where is the couple?’ … This shocked me … What values is [sic] my daughter learning? I fear that she will grow up thinking that it’s okay to have a boyfriend!

It appears that there are inherent fears in relation to the social world Mirpuri daughters are expected to take a part in. Any sense that Muslim daughters might be led astray is met with trepidation and bewilderment. There is a burgeoning sense that majority non-Muslim society is morally corrupt and unassailable. Razia, a 47-year-old housewife with two daughters, narrated the story of her elder daughter, who was married at the age of 17,

I noticed that she had started to get influenced by the Western world she witnessed at school … feared that she might get corrupted and bring dishonour to the family … so, I took her out of school and married her to a cousin … However, the marriage did not prove successful and ended in divorce … This is because she had made wrong sort of friends in school…

It is noteworthy that first-generation parents did not feel as concerned about sending their sons to school as they did about their daughters. Parents allowed sons unlimited freedom while curtailing the activities of their daughters. Ballard (1987) has addressed this issue of differential treatment of young men and young women amongst South Asian Muslim families, suggesting that it can be explained in terms of the concept of honour or shame (izzat), which is exclusively associated with women; ‘to sustain male izzat, wives, sisters, and daughters must be seen to behave with seemly modesty, secluding themselves from the world of men. The ideas of shame thus reinforce the formal hierarchy of relationships within the family’ (Ballard 1987, 186).
The striking feature of this theme was that second-generation parents did not make this distinction based on gender. They seemed equally worried about sending their sons to schools but in a qualitatively different way. While the notion of sexual modesty was still associated with young women, parents also feared that their boys might become ‘morally corrupted’ and end up in the ‘wrong company’ (implying criminal activities such as drugs). These parents resented the ‘double standards’ of their culture that treats young men differently from young women. It was surprising to note that they did not derive the justification for the equality between sexes from the Western liberal discourse. In fact, they referred to the equality granted by Islam, for example, Iqbal Hussain, a 28-year-old divorcee said,

Islam does not differentiate on the basis of gender. If a man commits adultery he is as guilty as an adulterous woman. There are equal punishments for every sin. Regardless it was done by a man or woman. So, I should be equally worried if my son does something wrong because he has as much chance of going to hell as my daughter.

The issue of religiosity of the second generations will be elaborated upon later in the paper, but, here, it must be noted that there is a discontinuity between the two generations regarding the idea of women being the repository of men’s honour, resulting in differential treatment of sons and daughters. The decision to educate their daughters was not straightforward for South Asian Muslim parents whose religio-cultural values are in contrast to wider societal values. How do these parents cope with the situation? What do they perceive as a solution to the problems they face in educating young women? It was surprising that all the interviewees had a common solution to their problems: Muslim schools (cf. Anwar 1998; Modood et al. 1997). It seemed as if parents viewed Muslim schools as a panacea for all their worries and anxieties regarding their daughter’s education. There was an enormous demand for single-sex schools in their vicinity, where children could receive both Western and religious education. All parents, despite differences in terms of age, sex and education, claimed that they would let their daughters study as much as they wanted in a Muslim school. When asked if they were worried about the standards of education in these schools, only one respondent (30-year-old mother) showed some concern. On the other hand, one person remarked, ‘I would send my children to a Muslim school even if I had to compromise on the quality of education’. Previous research by Anwar (1994) supports these findings, as he found that 76% of British Muslim parents supported single-sex education for their daughters. One parent in Anwar’s study exclaimed, “co-education is okay until they are teenagers, then the problem starts about going out with boys, etc., because we like our girls to marry into our own religious group and see them happy” (1994, 31).

Despite the shared support for Muslim schools, motivations for sending their daughters to such schools differed amongst the two generations. The reasons cited by first-generation parents were typically the need to protect their daughters from the ‘corrupt Western influence’. Second-generation parents emphasised, moreover, the need to impart religious education to their children. Therefore, the perceived benefits of Muslim schools were not restricted to the mere idea of same-sex education but to specifically increase religious awareness amongst their children.

**Facts of reality**

While Muslim schools are certainly the ideal solution for parents living in Tividale, the reality is that there are no such schools in their vicinity. When asked what they
would do in the present situation, there were predominantly two types of responses which reflected the difference in opinion of first- and second-generation parents. Like Razia, many first-generation parents believed that the solution was to withdraw their daughters from the Western educational system and ‘marry them off’. Zahra Begum explained her reason for taking such an action as following,

My husband died when my girls were young. I had to take the responsibility of protecting them … I could see that my daughter had started making white friends … She started copying them. She was becoming rebellious against our traditional values … so I took her out of school at 15 and married her … At least it prevented her from doing something wrong.

When asked if in retrospect she thought she took the right step, Zahra Begum confidently replied that she would do the same even today with her granddaughter. While this tendency to take their daughters out of the system was prevalent amongst all first-generation parents (with the exception of only one), second-generation parents were convinced that this was not the appropriate solution in the long run. Reflecting on their own experiences and aspirations, they believed that it produced a rebellious attitude amongst children. Samia, a 30-year-old mother of one daughter, proved her point by relating a story,

My neighbours had a 10-year-old daughter. Like every kid she liked playing on streets but every time she would step out, her mother would shout, ‘Nisha! Girls don’t play outside! Come in!’ Nisha had to stay in the house. I say this is the wrong attitude … Let Nisha play outside! Let your girls go to school! The solution is not to take them out of the society but to give them such strong values that they can go in to the society and still know what’s wrong and what’s right!

The notion here reflected much in relation to the attitudes of second generations. Educating daughters was a route to empowerment, self-awareness and the necessary social and intellectual tools to engage in wider society. Kausar Begum, a 29-year-old school worker, reinforced this issue,

Even if you take your daughter out of school, how will you protect her from the influence of the TV, songs, films, even billboards? You cannot isolate her from the wider society. It just does not address the root cause … you have to make the home a stronger base for inculcating the right values.

Thus, second-generation parents emphasised the need to instil the ‘right values’ and morals in their daughters which would aid them to ‘repel the attractions of the Western world’. They were optimistic that if given the ‘right’ training, which usually meant religious education, young women could better cope with the pressures of being torn between many different cultures.

The multi-generational Mirpuri parents were presented with a hypothetical situation where they had to decide whether to accept an attractive marriage proposal for their daughter while she was still studying. Again, there was a marked difference between the responses of first- and second-generation parents. The majority of the former (save for one father) chose marriage over education and believed that marriage was the ‘ultimate goal’ in a woman’s life. Most of the second-generation parents, however, thought that it was important for a young woman to first complete her education. For example, one mother noted, ‘if it is in her destiny (kismat), she would...
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get that proposal even after her studies’. These answers were reflective of the relative significance each generation attached to education. It was evident from this question that the first generation still clung on to the cultural notion of marriage being the sole accomplishment in a woman’s life.

Analysing continuity and change

In light of the discussions thus far we must probe into the reasons for continuity or discontinuity in the attitudes of first- and second-generation parents in our study sample. At the outset, it is important to state that there is no seamless continuity or outright contradiction between the perceptions of these two generations. The reality lies somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. As mentioned earlier, both groups share their enthusiasm for Muslim women’s education but when probed about their own daughter’s education, there were serious reservations amongst both sets of parents. There was a common fear of the influence of ‘decadent Western society’ destroying the moral and cultural values of their daughters. While first-generation parents exclusively associated this fear with their daughters the second generations did not make this distinction. Furthermore, the second generations believed that marriage or taking women out of the educational system was not the right approach towards the problems faced by them. These observations lead us to the crucial question of why this difference? Is it because the second generations, born and educated in Britain, have ‘assimilated’ more into society than their parents? What cultural and social factors have changed to perpetuate certain attitudes or prohibit others? The remaining paper deals with this rather difficult problematic.

Certainly, amongst all the factors considered in the analysis, social class could not be incorporated because all the members of the study sample essentially belonged to the same class. It could plausibly be argued that inter-generational attitudes have not altered because of social class. Thus, it is wholly possible that the similarities and differences can both be explained with reference to the religion and culture of the interviewees (in the context of various limits to opportunity structures). Broadly, we argue that the views and perceptions of the first generation can be largely characterised by their adherence to the ‘Mirpuri’ or (Azad) Kashmiri cultural way of life. This culture is intermeshed with Islam in a multi-faceted way to produce a ‘Mirpuri version of Muslim culture’ (as would be found, for example, in relation to a ‘Somali version’ or a ‘Yemeni version’, etc.). First-generation migrants with little or no education possess limited formal knowledge of their religion and in fact adhere to a version of Islam mixed with distinct cultural practices. Often these parents did not fully translate or appreciate the fullness of the Qur’an, and in relation to its teachings they relied on Imams from the sub-continent operating in mosques. The community in our case study research largely followed the Barelwi school of thought and had a mosque in their vicinity. During interviews, it was clear that first-generation parents did not always differentiate between religion and culture. They did not question the source of any particular edict or knowledge appropriated to Islam. For example, differential attitudes towards freedom of young men and young women or preference of early marriage have no basis in Islam, and are more a cultural prerogative. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, the preference for Muslim schools was determined by their concern for their ‘honour’ (again a cultural concept) rather than a desire for religious education for their daughters, which again is encouraged in Islamic teachings per se.
The second generations maintained some aspects of their parent’s perspectives towards their daughter’s education, such as apprehensions regarding mixed education and Westernisation. There was also, to a certain extent, a desire to restrain or protect women’s sexuality before marriage. The second generations presented a sharp contrast to the first generations in a majority of other aspects, however. They were not only more knowledgeable about Islam but more practising in comparison with the first generations. This was linked to an Islamisation process, based on inter-generational adaptation at one level and the desire to return to a literal form of Islam on the other, largely because of inherent limitations in relation to both. They had studied the Qur’an in greater detail and, as one woman declared, ‘tried to be better Muslims’. It was interesting to note that these people clearly distinguished between culture and religion, according greater value to the latter. During the interviews, due to their knowledge of Islam, they were more likely to refer to religion by adding ‘this is in the Qur’an’ or ‘this is Sunnah’. They were more critical of their culture, reproaching it for creating ‘double standards’ for men and women, although it is also clear that a zeal appeared in relation to current attitudes, largely a function of perceived and actual problems of structural and cultural racism and discrimination (Abbas 2005). For example, on this subject one man exclaimed,

This is not our religion! Nor are Quls or Chaleeswan [death rites in South Asia] and the like … These are all cultural traditions … We should distinguish between what our religion prescribes and what our culture demands … I don’t feel comfortable about sending my daughter to school because it’s my religion which does not permit co-education, Western attire or open mixing between sexes.

Thus, in the second generations one witnesses a resurgence of Islam and Muslim identity. It should be mentioned that the tendency amongst second generations to set apart religion from culture can be partly attributed to their British education which fosters rational and critical thinking. Samad (1994) has addressed the subject of inter-generational change increasingly becoming visible in South Asian British Muslims (Pakistani and Bangladeshis). He contends that a Pakistani youth is experiencing a language loss since most of their parents speak primarily in Punjabi (or variations in dialect such as Pahari), not a written language, while children are not at all fluent. Thus, the ‘oral traditions, customs and religious practices are, at best, only partially transmitted and this produces difference between generations in Islamic understanding and identity’ (Samad 1994, 17). Further, the youth are more likely to access religious books (widely available in stores here) of a revivalist genre and written in the English language. Thus, the step away from oral traditions means that customs and rituals, regulating the lives of the elder generations, do not get transferred effectively. At the same time there is a complementary in this development in emphasising Islam rather than regional (Mirpuri or Sylheti; Husain 2007) identities.

Another tendency amongst South Asian British Muslim youth is increasing dissatisfaction with the local Imams in mosques who are seen as imparting the traditional ‘village values’ rather than the ‘true’ knowledge of Islam. Like first generations, these Imams are considered conservative but in a cultural sense not a religious sense (Dyke 2009; Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board 2006). Thus, disenchanted youth seek a form of Islam which is free from culture and inevitably resort to variations on ‘Salafism’ (literalist interpretations of Islam). Many such people join organisations like Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Al-Muhajiroun (until October 2004), and there is considerable social commentary on Muslim youth radicalisation that stems from the recent focus
on such groups. Apart from language loss and inter-generational tension, contemporary global developments such as post-9/11 hostility and Islamophobia are important factors pushing youth adoption of Salafism. Low social class positions coupled with religious and cultural isolation place many young people outside of the spheres of civil society. Facing hostility both inside and outside of the home, these Muslims are more likely to find solace in Islam and invariably a puritanical version of it. This provides young people with a grievance-based identity and the politico-ideological framework in which to exact ‘solutions’ of various kinds. Here, the case of Muslim women of the diaspora is particularly interesting (cf. Dwyer 2000). Samad (1994, 20) observed that for second-generation young women (from working-class backgrounds), the main concern was to ‘contest patriarchal norms, introduce notions of gender equality and create space to make their own decisions concerning dress, codes, education and marriage. For them scriptural Islam becomes an emancipatory form of customary practices’. Consequently, for example, by citing Qur’anic sources, these women are able to persuade their parents to allow them to get education or work, as Islam provides them with all the permission to do so.

Concluding thoughts

This paper has been an attempt to understand the nature of inter-generational change amongst British Pakistani parents regarding attitudes towards the education of their daughters. On the basis of the theoretical sample of 11 parents from the Mirpuri community in Tividale, we can recognise some patterns of change. While both generations stressed the need to educate women, there were serious apprehensions towards the impact of Western values on their children. A prominent theme which emerged from the analysis was that the second generations, unlike the first, were equally concerned about the ‘Western influence’ on their sons. These parents were more inclined towards religion than their parents, and this was reflected in each of the themes discussed above. In conclusion, among this sample of parents, first-generation attitudes towards their daughter’s education are largely a function of traditional and conservative religio-culture norms and values, laced with Islamised interpretations of Muslim life. On the other hand, the second generation has reacted against this very culture, due to a constellation of factors discussed, and adopted sterner Islamised values of their own. Their attitudes are largely determined by their re-understanding and re-interpretation of their religion, and in the context of today’s social challenges.

It is important to emphasise, however, that by exclusively focusing on culture we are not denying the impact of wider structural factors shaping the lives of South Asian British Muslims. There are persistent problems of systematic racial inequality in terms of social class, education and employment, and all of these factors impact on opportunities for successful economic and cultural integration and assimilation. Young British Muslims, torn between different cultures, often find themselves in the lowest rungs of society with bleak opportunities for economic progress or social mobility. The events after 9/11 and the London Bombings of July 2005 have led to a greater sense of disaffection amongst certain South Asian Muslims as they now have to counter Islamophobia, discrimination as well as racism. These developments have certainly impacted negatively upon the development of cultural and social capital among young Muslims, which relate to generating positive notions and outcomes of trust, community cohesion and civic participation. Differences in inter-generational
attitudes towards Muslim women in education could also be a product of these primary factors. There is need for further research into this area as the education of Muslim women has wide-reaching implications for questions in relation to identity, patriarchy, culture, social class, inequality, discrimination, and on the nature and orientation of inter-generational change in these particular ethnic and religious minority communities.

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References


