



PHD

British-born Bangladeshi Women in Higher Education: Intersectional Experiences and Identities

Scandone, Berenice

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British-born Bangladeshi women in Higher Education: Intersectional Experiences and Identities.

Berenice Scandone

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Bath

Department of Social and Policy Sciences

June 2017

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	1
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	2
1. Introduction.....	3
1.1. Research aims and rationale.....	3
1.2. Chapters outline	5
2. The interplay of class and ethnicity in shaping education and employment prospects	10
2.1. Introduction.....	10
2.2. Ethnic inequalities in labour market and social mobility prospects.....	11
2.3. Class and ‘achievement’ in ‘mainstream’ social mobility literature.....	15
2.4. Experiences of social mobility and educational ‘achievement’	18
2.4.1. Social class and ethnicity as cultural capital and habitus.....	18
2.4.2. Class and ethnic inequalities in higher education	22
2.5. Conclusion	25
3. Working with Bourdieu’s conceptual ‘toolbox’ to understand material and symbolic inequalities	27
3.1. Introduction.....	27
3.2. Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice	28
3.2.1. Field	29
3.2.2. Capitals.....	31
3.2.3. Habitus	34
3.2.4. Theory of practice as sociological method	37
3.3. Reproduction VS transformation	39
3.4. Gender, ‘race’/ ethnicity and intersectionality	43
3.5. Conceptual and political issues around 'race' and ethnicity.....	48
3.6. Conclusion	53
4. A profile of the UK population of Bangladeshi origins.....	55
4.1. Introduction.....	55
4.2. History of migration and settlement.....	55
4.3. Socio-demographic profile.....	58
4.3.1. Socio-economic and demographic aspects	58
4.3.2. Religion, culture and identity.....	61
4.4. Employment and education.....	63
4.5. Conclusion	68
5. Research design, methodology and ethics	70

5.1. Introduction.....	70
5.2. Research design, setting and participants	70
5.3. Research methodology	74
5.4. Methods.....	77
5.5. Positionality and ethics	80
5.6. Conclusion	85
6. Aspirations and the capacity to realise them.....	86
6.1. Introduction.....	86
6.2. Valuing education and ‘achievement’	86
6.3. Aspirations as an aspect of habitus	91
6.3.1. The interlacing of past, present and future, individual and collective	91
6.3.2. The dynamism of practices	96
6.4. Career aspirations and pathways.....	100
6.4.1. ‘Known routes’	102
6.4.2. Aspirations and self-identification	105
6.4.3. Actualising aspirations.....	108
6.5. Conclusion	110
7. Experiences of higher education	112
7.1. Introduction.....	112
7.2. Perceptions of ‘fitting in’	112
7.2.1. The role of multiple dimensions of social identity and habitus	112
7.2.2. The impact of symbolic violence on 'choice' and self-perceptions.....	116
7.3. Academic experience	119
7.4. Social experience	122
7.5. Conclusion	128
8. Minority ethnic identities, social class and participation in higher education.....	130
8.1. Introduction.....	130
8.2. How middle-class status can help sustaining ethnic identity.....	131
8.3. Hierarchies of value and processes of ‘self-distancing’	135
8.4. Participation in higher education and the ‘re-claiming’ of ethnic identities.....	139
8.5. Social class understandings and identifications	144
8.6. Conclusion	148
9. Muslim identities.....	150
9.1. Introduction.....	150
9.2. ‘Being Muslim’ as transcending and encompassing ethnicity and nationality.....	150
9.3. Islam as offering guidance and enabling resilience	154

9.4. Inclusivity of Islam VS exclusivity of nationality and ethnicity	157
9.4.1. Tensions generated by ethnic and national dimension of identification.....	157
9.4.2. Unity and equality within Islam.....	161
9.5. Negotiating gender roles and expectations	164
9.5.1. Islam, clothing and representations of femininity.....	164
9.5.2. Contesting Bangladeshi ‘cultural’ gender norms.....	168
9.6. Conclusion	170
10. Conclusions.....	172
10.1. Introduction.....	172
10.2. Research overview	172
10.3. Contributions to knowledge	177
10.3.1. Theoretical contributions	177
10.3.2. Empirical contributions.....	178
10.4. Implications for policy and practice.....	180
10.5. Further research suggestions	184
REFERENCES.....	186

Index of Figures

Figure 1: Economically active men in full-time employment, part-time employment, self-employed and unemployed (%), by self-described ethnic group, 2011.....	64
Figure 2: Economically active women in full-time employment, part-time employment, self-employed and unemployed (%), by self-described ethnic group, 2011	65

Index of Tables

Table 1: Institutions attended by participants (pseudonym and type)	73
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ABSTRACT

This study engages with the perspectives of British-born female undergraduate students of Bangladeshi heritage with the aim of addressing the following questions:

- 1) How do social class and ethnicity intersect with one another to influence access to and experiences of higher education, and progression to the labour market?
- 2) How do Bangladeshi immigrants' female descendants construct their identities by drawing on different dimensions of identification, and how is this informed by participation in education?

Women of Bangladeshi origins, who have long been considered as 'problematic' for their low rates of participation in education and employment, have substantially increased their presence in universities in the last 20 years. Like those of most ethnic minority backgrounds, however, students of Bangladeshi heritage are over-represented in generally less prestigious post-'92 institutions, tend to have lower retention levels and degree grades compared to their white middle-class peers, and lower employment prospects and wages once controlling for qualifications and socio-economic origins. In this study, I draw on in-depth interviews with 21 British-born women of Bangladeshi background in their early 20s, attending undergraduate degrees at a range of differently ranked universities in London. I apply a Bourdieusian lens to the analysis of their narratives, with the intent of exposing the influence on stances and practices of multiple dimensions of social identity such as class, 'race' / ethnicity, religious faith and gender. Findings show how these dimensions are interconnected in terms of the material and symbolic resources they give access to. The findings also reveal how they qualify one another in shaping processes of 'conditioned transformation' of structural inequalities. In particular, participants' economic, social, and cultural resources appear to be simultaneously inflected by class, 'race'/ethnicity, faith and gender. The relation of these resources to the capital that is privileged in the contexts where participants engage contributes to either facilitate or hinder the accumulation of further capital. In doing so, it conditions their capacity to renegotiate material and symbolic positions, and the 'strategies' they can adopt.

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This thesis is dedicated to my father, Paolo Scandone (1939 – 2016), whom I love and miss dearly.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Research aims and rationale

This thesis aims to provide a theoretically informed, nuanced understanding of the following:

- 1) How social class and ethnicity intersect with one another to influence higher education attitudes and experiences, and employment aspirations, of British-born young women of Bangladeshi origins.
- 2) How these young women construct their identities by drawing on different dimensions of identification, and the ways in which this is informed by participation in higher education.

This interest mainly springs from a concern with the persistence of complex ethnic inequalities in the UK labour market (Nazroo and Kapadia 2013; Catney and Sabater 2015; Kapadia et al. 2015). People of minority ethnic background generally experience substantial disadvantages in accessing and progressing in employment compared to their white British peers. Yet, significant differences exist both within and among ethnic ‘groups’. UK residents of Bangladeshi heritage suffer in particular from some of the highest levels of income poverty, with about 51% of Bangladeshi households living on less than 60% of the median household income (DWP 2015). Compared to other ethnicities, Bangladeshi women’s rates of unemployment (19%) and economic inactivity (60%) are among the highest, and a larger proportion of men is in part-time employment (35%) (Nazroo and Kapadia 2013). Men and women of Bangladeshi heritage are also disproportionately concentrated in routine and semi-routine occupations, and under-represented in professional and managerial positions (Clark and Drinkwater 2007; DCLG 2009; ONS 2012b). In-depth analysis of underlying processes, with specific attention being paid to the ways in which these are shaped by multiple dimensions of social identity as ethnicity, gender, and class, seems therefore much needed.

For those of all ethnic backgrounds, including Bangladeshis, holding a higher education qualification has been shown to considerably affect the likelihood of being employed, especially in managerial and professional occupations (Clark and Drinkwater 2007). The advantage associated with participation in higher education is particularly strong for women of Bangladeshi origins, with

a 40% increase in employment chances for those in possession of a graduate or postgraduate degree. With respect to the other major ethnic ‘groups’, Bangladeshis have the lowest proportion of university graduates (Lymperopoulou and Parameshwaran 2014). For women, such low rates of participation in higher education and of economic activity have long contributed to mark them as ‘problematic’ in both public and policy discourse, as they are often attributed to the constraining influence of patriarchal religious and cultural ‘norms’ (Brah 2001; Casey 2016; Women and Equalities Committee 2016). Yet, the number of those attending university has in fact increased significantly over the last decades (CoDE 2014; Lymperopoulou and Parameshwaran 2015). According to Census statistics, the proportion of people of Bangladeshi background aged 16+ holding degree level qualifications rose from 5% to 20% between 1991 and 2011, with women accounting for around half of this latter percentage (ONS 2011a, 2011b; Lymperopoulou and Parameshwaran 2015). This trend is in line with those registered for minority ethnic students more generally, whose university participation has been increasing since the turn of the century more rapidly than that of white Britons (Basit 2014; CoDE 2014; Modood 2014; Lymperopoulou and Parameshwaran 2015). Except for those of Chinese heritage, minority ethnic students are however more likely than their white British peers to be enrolled in the generally less prestigious post-’92 universities, to drop out of higher education, and to graduate with lower-class degrees, which can impact negatively on their employment prospects (Runnymede Trust 2010, 2012; Boliver 2013; Basit 2014; Modood 2014; Alexander and Arday 2015).

This research engages with the narratives of some of these young women of Bangladeshi heritage who have gone into university. Data was collected through two rounds of semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation conducted with 21 female undergraduate students. These women were all in their early 20s, and were attending a variety of courses at a range of differently ranked universities in London. London was chosen as a setting for carrying out ‘fieldwork’ as it is home to the highest concentration of Bangladeshis residing in the UK (ONS 2011c). Given the higher education landscape of the city, this has also allowed me to purposefully recruit participants in such a way as to consider the experience of women at different institutions ranging from Russell Group universities¹ to ‘old’ non-Russell Group ones and ex-polytechnics. This seems especially important given the aforementioned over-representation of minority ethnic and working-class students in ‘new’ universities. In terms of family background, most of these young women’s parents were born in Bangladesh and came to the UK at different points in their lives. Participants came from both

¹ The Russell Group is an organisation that represents 24 top-ranking, research intensive UK universities, with a widespread reputation for academic excellence

‘working-class’ and ‘middle-class’ families. This variation in social class origins has enabled me to tease out the interplay of class and ‘race’ / ethnicity in shaping stances and practices, and thereby to obtain a better picture of the diversity that these categories subsume and of how they come to qualify one another. Collection and analysis of data were guided by a Bourdieusian informed approach, intended specifically as a conceptual framework and toolkit through which to unpack intersectionality by bringing the influence of multiple social structures to the foreground (Horvat 2002; Brah and Phoenix 2004).

I argue that a Bourdieusian analytical framework can help us to recognise differential aspirations and experiences as being born of (mis)matches between young people’s classed, racialised and gendered dispositions and ‘stock’ of economic, social and cultural capital, and those that are privileged in different educational and employment contexts. I show that the young women of Bangladeshi origins who took part in this research expressed high aspirations irrespective of their social class background, and I highlight the role of classed and ethnicised dispositions stemming from the internalisation of previous generations’ struggles and achievements in upholding these aspirations. I also show, however, how these women’s positioning in terms of social class, ‘race’ / ethnicity, religious faith and gender still functioned to substantially constrain their ‘horizons for action’, as it generated complex forms of exclusion and self-exclusion from networks of relations and contexts of engagement. Finally, I contend that the understanding of processes of (dis)identification from / with specific categories of social identity can be aided by an analytical perspective which pays attention to the intersections among multiple social structures (e.g. of class, ‘race’ / ethnicity, nationality, gender and religious faith). In this respect, I show for example that the material, social and cultural resources acquired through participation in higher education and upward social mobility can enable a ‘re-evaluation’ and ‘re-claiming’ of minority ethnic identities. I also consider how Islam is especially significant for these young women as a source of identity, as it offers symbolic ‘tools’ through which the tensions experienced in relation to other dimensions of social identity can be ‘reconciled’.

1.2. Chapters outline

This thesis comprises ten chapters, and is structured as follows:

Chapter 1 introduced this study by setting out its aims and by placing it in context, thereby making the case for its relevance. I have then outlined its empirical scope, briefly discussed its methodology, and provided a rationale for the theoretical framework adopted.

Chapter 2 provides a critical discussion of academic literature on ethnic and class inequalities in employment prospects and educational ‘achievement’. I start with a general overview of ethnic inequalities in the labour market, and point to three aspects to which large-scale quantitative research has drawn attention: the ways in which these inequalities are informed by social class origins, the role that is played by educational qualifications, and the persistence of ethnic and religious ‘penalties’ in employment access and progression. I then briefly consider how the relative significance of class and ‘achievement’ has been traditionally understood in ‘mainstream’ social mobility studies, before moving on to discuss the insights that are offered by qualitative work on the lived experiences of working-class and minority ethnic students and upwardly mobile individuals. In particular, I show how this literature has drawn attention to the cultural and embodied features of class, ‘race’ / ethnicity and gender, thus highlighting how different education and employment pathways carry distinct costs and benefits for individuals of different backgrounds. I conclude by arguing for more theoretically informed research that takes an intersectional approach to investigating how class, ‘race’ / ethnicity and gender contribute to shape differential access to, and experiences of, higher education, and argue for the value of this perspective in interpreting ethnic inequalities in the labour market.

Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework underpinning this research. I introduce Bourdieu’s theory of practice by discussing its key concepts of field, capital and habitus, and how they come together to provide a specific understanding of agents’ positions, dispositions and practices. I then assess, and provide a counter-argument to, two main criticisms addressed to this framework which are of particular relevance to this study. That is, first, its assumed inability to account for change, and, second, its lack of analytical insight in dealing with dimensions of inequality other than class. I contend that far from precluding any effective engagement with these issues, Bourdieu’s conceptual toolbox can in fact be especially useful in unveiling the conditions of possibility for change to take place in either structures or practices, and in examining the processes that link multiple and intersecting structures (i.e. not only classed), cultures and practices. In this chapter, I also consider some of the major conceptual and political issues which are raised by the notions of ‘race’ and ethnicity, and detail how these have been defined and employed in this study as contextually and relationally constructed categories of identity and inequality.

Chapter 4 contextualises the empirical research by offering an overview of the main characteristics of the UK resident population of Bangladeshi heritage. After having briefly outlined its history of migration and settlement, and provided a broad description of its socio-demographic profile, I explore in more detail patterns and trends of participation in education and the labour market, and the explanations that have so far been advanced to account for them.

Chapter 5 details the design of this research and the methodology that has been employed in carrying it out. It restates the main questions driving this study, and sketches some key characteristics of setting and participants, especially in terms of residential distribution, profile of the institutions attended, and family background. I then consider the methodological underpinnings of this study and the methods adopted for the collection and analysis of data, before drawing some reflections on issues relating to researcher positionality and power differentials between myself and participants as they pertain to and contribute to shape the research process.

Chapter 6 offers a reading of participants' education and career aspirations through Bourdieusian lenses. In doing so, it advances a theoretically informed understanding of aspirations, which accounts both for the multiple factors that contribute to shape them, and for their relative implications in terms of future employment pathways. Building especially on Bourdieu's notions of habitus and capital, I conceptualise aspirations as an aspect of habitus. This allows me to effectively acknowledge the role of intersecting structural and cultural components related to class and ethnicity in the shaping, re-shaping and possibly fading of aspirations. It also provides a means for getting to grips with the mutually informing influences of aspirations and capital on practice. In this sense, the valuing of education and social mobility expressed by those of Bangladeshi and other minority ethnic origins can be seen as integral to collective constructions of 'what people like us do', which are grounded in diasporic discourses. Throughout the discussion, I further emphasise the significance of social and cultural capital for young people's capacity to aspire and actualise aspirations, as these inform their 'horizons for action'. The notion of 'known routes' (i.e. of employment pathways of which there is an established knowledge among the Bangladeshi 'community') is in this respect put forward as a way to make sense of aspirations, expectations and pathways, and the role of institutions in forging possible futures is highlighted.

Chapter 7 teases out the intersecting roles of class, 'race' / ethnicity and religion in informing participants' experiences of higher education. I especially focus on perceptions of 'fitting in' at particular institutions, and on the ways in which these relate to self-identifications in terms of the aforementioned categories and to understandings of selves as learners. I then move on to detail how

class, 'race' / ethnicity and religion play out in relation to some of the most common issues that these young women confronted at an academic and social level, and emphasise resulting inequalities in their capacity to 'benefit' from higher education. In making sense of these issues, I claim that it is especially useful to think about the (mis)match among students', institutions' and subject areas' habitus and valued cultural capital, all of which are both classed and racialised.

Chapter 8 draws on participants' narratives to consider some of the ways in which their respective positionings within the dimensions of class and ethnicity contributed to shape their self-identification in these terms, and how this was informed by participation in higher education. Particular attention is paid to these young women's own understandings and constructions of their classed and ethnic identities, and to underlying dynamics. With respect to ethnicity, the analysis presented challenges straight-line assimilation models by showing how middle-class status and upward mobility can coexist with a strong identification as Bangladeshi. Adding to segmented assimilation theories, it also highlights how upward mobility can promote a re-evaluation and 're-claiming' of ethnic and religious identities. Within this process, I argue, it is especially important to recognise the dynamic and relationally defined character of the meanings and value that are attached to ethnic categories, and the crucial role of economic, social and cultural capital in affecting the capacity to shape these meanings. As for the meanings and significance that were given to class categories, analysis points to the relational character of class constructs and (dis)identification. In this respect, it reveals in particular how minority ethnicity can add to working-class background in contributing to problematise identification with 'middle-classness'.

Chapter 9 explores how Islamic faith plays out in participants' lives as a source of identity. Findings highlight how integral Islam is to these young women's conceptions of who they are. They indicate that its appeal rests on enabling the construction of a positive and coherent sense of self, and on the provision of support and guidance. Islam speaks closely to these women's social worlds and lived experiences, especially as it allows them to transcend the partiality of, and tensions between, ethnic and national forms of identification, whilst simultaneously providing a space from which to contest and negotiate the terms of both. By drawing on specific discourses of Islam, participants affirmed valued gender roles, and negotiated competing gender expectations expressed by 'mainstream British society' and by their 'Bangladeshi community'. The discussion conducted further draws attention to the dynamic, experientially-informed character of Muslim identities, by revealing how Islamic values provide tools for these women to interpret their situations, and are themselves being interpreted in the light of experiences and interactions.

Chapter 10 recaps the study conducted and considers some major strengths, challenges and limitations of the theoretical and methodological approaches adopted in the collection and analysis of data. It then moves on to outline the main contributions that this work makes to current knowledge at both theoretical and empirical levels. I finally draw a few implications of findings for policy and practice concerned with ‘integration’ among ethnicities and religions, and with education and labour market inequalities, and advance some suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2

The interplay of class and ethnicity in shaping education and employment prospects

2.1. Introduction

This chapter critically assesses research exploring ethnic and class inequalities in employment prospects and educational ‘achievement’. I start with a general discussion of the differential position held by distinct ethnicities in the British labour market, highlighting both the common disadvantages suffered by minority ethnicities and the diversity that exists among and within ‘groups’ (Nazroo and Kapadia 2013; Catney and Sabater 2015; Kapadia et al. 2015). In doing so, I underscore the significance that has been attributed to processes of class mobility in accounting for these patterns, while also recalling the lower returns that people of minority ethnic origins have been found to have on investment in education (Modood 1997a; Shiner and Modood 2002; Platt 2005; Zwysen and Longhi 2016). I then move on to consider how social mobility has been traditionally conceptualised by large-scale quantitative studies, and the different interpretations that have been given of its rates and determinants (Blau and Duncan 1967; Halsey 1977; Goldthorpe 1980; Halsey et al. 1980; Heath 1981). Goldthorpe’s (1980) class structural approach has in this respect importantly drawn attention to the persisting impact of family background on one’s capacity to move up the occupational ladder, with the education system playing a major role in the reproduction of class privileges. Yet, although fundamental in spotting the presence of these processes, studies of this type cannot provide a fine-grained understanding of the ways in which they are experienced at a subjective level. The final section of the chapter brings in this experiential dimension by turning to qualitative research on the perspectives of working-class and minority ethnic students, and upwardly mobile individuals.

In reviewing this last body of literature, I especially emphasise how class and ‘race’ / ethnicity have been crucially recognised as significant dimensions of identity and identification, expressed through preferences and practices that are potentially in tension with those which are privileged in given contexts (Lawler 1999; Reay 2002; Ingram 2011b; Rollock et al. 2011). I also discuss how these studies have called attention to, and begun to disentangle, the multiple and complex ways in which class and ethnicity contribute to shape differential access to, and

experiences of, higher education. In this sense, they have shown in particular how the disadvantage that is experienced in terms of employment prospects by working-class and / or minority ethnic students compared to their white middle-class peers, has to do both with the lower proportion of university graduates, and with their under-representation in 'high-status' institutions and lower rates of attainment of upper class degrees (Reay et al. 2001b; 2009a; Ball et al. 2002a, 2002b). I conclude by arguing for more theoretically informed research that takes an intersectional approach to the investigation of higher education experiences, and for the usefulness of this perspective in aiding the interpretation of ethnic inequalities in the labour market.

2.2. Ethnic inequalities in labour market and social mobility prospects

Taken as a whole, minority ethnic 'groups' are known to face considerable disadvantages in access to, and experiences of, employment (Catney and Sabater 2015; Kapadia et al. 2015). Their employment rates have been shown to be consistently lower than those of the white majority, whilst unemployment and economic inactivity have been found to be higher (Brown 2016; DWP 2016). It has however to be noticed that substantial differences exist both among and within 'groups'. Unemployment figures, for example, are especially high for those of black (14%), Pakistani and Bangladeshi (11.5%) and mixed (11.2%) origins, while those of people of Chinese (4.9%) and white (4.8%) heritage are very similar. The unemployment rates of those of Indian background fall somewhat in the middle between these two extremes (6.4%) (DWP 2016). Differences between men and women are minimal in all ethnic 'groups' except the Bangladeshi, where women's unemployment doubles that of men (Nazroo and Kapadia 2013). Variation is also present in the prevalence of part-time and self-employment (Nazroo and Kapadia 2013). Furthermore, for those in employment, occupational segregation tends to be higher for people of minority ethnic origins than for white Britons, with certain 'groups' being largely over-represented in given sectors and skills levels (Catney and Sabater 2015). Ethnic inequalities in the labour market have been strikingly persistent over time (Catney and Sabater 2015). Even though occupational patterns such as economic inactivity, prevalence in certain employment sectors and part-time and self-employment may be a matter of individual preferences, they may also reflect difficulties in accessing the job market and / or specific occupations. Where this translates into higher job insecurity and lower wages, in particular, it represents a significant issue for concern. These considerations, together with the recognition of the complex character of these inequalities, call for in-depth analyses of

underlying processes, with specific attention being paid to the ways in which these are shaped by multiple dimensions of social identity such as ethnicity, gender and class.

In the attempt to provide a better understanding of these patterns, research looking at ethnic inequalities in employment has drawn attention to the extent of downwards mobility experienced by immigrants establishing themselves in the UK (Daniel 1968; Heath and Ridge 1983). It has been suggested that a number of factors account for this weakening, in the process of migration, of the intergenerational transmission of class advantage. Although racial discrimination has been put forward as one of these, the fact that white migrants also experience such disadvantage points to the existence of other potential explanations. Those which appear to be more plausible are a lack of fluency in English, and a lack of social and cultural capital, that is, of connections which might help secure better positions, of local qualifications, and, more generally, of knowledge and skills which are relevant to the local context (Heath and Ridge 1983; Heath 1999). Actual rates of socio-economic mobility among immigrants are however a matter of debate. In contrast with accounts of downward mobility in the process of migration, more recent research points in fact to considerable levels of upward mobility over longer periods of settlement, although still linked to substantial disadvantages in the job market compared to non-migrants from similar economic backgrounds (Heath and Smith 2003; Heath and McMahon 2005).

It has also been suggested that, if the disadvantage experienced by immigrants within the labour market was actually due to the lack of language proficiency, local qualifications, and a net of connections on which to draw, we should see, for descendants of immigrants who are born and raised in Britain, a very different pattern, as these would have acquired the resources their parents lacked (Heath and Smith 2003; Heath and McMahon 2005). Generally speaking, people of minority ethnic background of second generation have been found to experience rates of net upward social mobility that are similar to those of British-born whites (CoDE 2014). Considerable variation exists however as mentioned among different 'groups' in relation to labour market status and type of occupation (Catney and Sabater 2015; Kapadia et al. 2015). These patterns have been primarily explained in terms of recovery of pre-migration, or 'latent' class position, with minority ethnic 'groups' returning to the class composition they held before migration (Modood 1997a; Pilkington 2003; Platt 2005). The underlying idea is that the resources that immigrants bring with them in terms of cultural, social and economic capital are crucial in facilitating the social mobility of their offspring, whose noticeably high levels of upwards mobility can be seen as compensating for the downwards mobility experienced by their parents on arrival in the UK. Corroborating this thesis is the finding that minority ethnic 'groups' are stratified in terms of class in much the same way as

British whites (Heath and Smith 2003; Heath and McMahon 2005; Platt 2005). Class origins, that is, bring with them similar advantages and disadvantages for individuals belonging to minority 'groups' as they do for the white majority. The main way in which class advantage is transmitted, as we will see, appears to be for both majority and minority ethnic 'groups' the acquisition of academic credentials (Shiner and Modood 2002; Modood 2004; Zwysen and Longhi 2016).

General trends point therefore to a declining differential in occupational outcomes between individuals of minority ethnic origins and British-born whites of similar class background, achieved primarily through participation in higher education. Investment in university qualifications is also higher for working-class ethnic minorities than for working-class white Britons, with a stronger increase in access to higher education (Basit 2014; Modood 2014). Yet, the first still appear to suffer from an 'ethnic penalty' which leads to equally qualified people faring less well in the labour market (Modood 1997a; Pilkington 2003; Social Mobility Commission 2016; Zwysen and Longhi 2016). Returns on investment in education are not the same for different groups. One of the main reasons for this seems to be that, despite rapidly expanding access, minority ethnic students remain disproportionately concentrated in the generally less prestigious post '92 universities, and tend to graduate with lower grades (Runnymede Trust 2010, 2012; Boliver 2013; Alexander and Arday 2015). Lower degree class and status have been shown for example to impact substantially on the wage received for a given occupation, with wage differentials compared to white British workers increasing over time (Zwysen and Longhi 2016).

Other inequalities appear however to persist irrespective of educational attainment, such as the especially high rates of unemployment suffered by those of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Caribbean heritage, and the higher likelihood for people of minority ethnic background to be unemployed in the first months after graduation, with negative consequences for future employment (Modood 1997a; Zwysen and Longhi 2016). A major reason for this seems to be the persistence of racial discrimination in employment (Mirza 1992; Shiner and Modood 2002; Botcherby 2006). Zwysen and Longhi (2016) have also highlighted the role that is played by resources and connections that can be accessed through one's family and 'community'. The lower social mobility prospects experienced by Indian Muslims and Sikhs, compared to those of Jewish, Hindu and Christian faith, have additionally led to re-interpretations of the considerable labour market disadvantages suffered by those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origins, most of whom are Muslims, as a 'religious penalty' (Modood 1997b; Platt 2005). The existence of a specific form of disadvantage affecting Muslims, especially women, has been more recently confirmed in a report by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2016), which cites both cultural

barriers such as ‘pressure from traditional families’ and structural aspects like discrimination as concomitant factors. While drawing on survey data and practitioners’ and researchers’ views, the report provides however no analysis of the processes that generate these conditionings. This seems a significant lacuna, especially where we consider the impact that structural elements such as unemployment rates and education levels are likely to have on cultural ‘norms’.

I have started this section by drawing attention to persisting ethnic inequalities in the labour market, where considerable differences exist in employment prospects both among and within ethnic ‘groups’ (Nazroo and Kapadia 2013; Catney and Sabater 2015; Kapadia et al. 2015). In making sense of these patterns, scholars have referred to processes of downward socio-economic mobility suffered by immigrants at their arrival in the UK, and of recovery of ‘latent’ class position (Daniel 1968; Heath and Ridge 1983; Modood 1997a; Pilkington 2003; Platt 2005). According to this thesis, minority ethnic ‘groups’ would be returning to the class composition they held before migration, with the transmission of parents’ ‘hidden’ class advantage being favoured by available economic, social and cultural resources, and enacted especially through the acquisition of academic qualifications (Zwysen and Longhi 2016). While enabling to understand much of the inter- and intra-‘group’ variation in occupational prospects, however, there still appear to be elements that this model leaves unaccounted for. In particular, an exclusive focus on social class does not seem to be sufficient in interpreting the higher likelihood for those of working-class and minority ethnic origins to hold a university degree compared to their white British working-class peers, nor the lower returns on investment in education experienced by minority ethnic graduates in accessing and progressing in the labour market (Modood 2014; Zwysen and Longhi 2016). Given the specific form that the disadvantage encountered and practices adopted have been found to take for different ethnic, religious and gender ‘groups’ (Modood 1997a, 1997b; Platt 2005), it seems on the other hand necessary in the investigation of processes generating differential education and employment prospects to consider class in its interplay with these other dimensions of identity. Having assessed the significance of social mobility processes in informing the socio-economic incorporation of minority ethnic ‘groups’, I take a step back in the following section to provide a chronological overview of debates and research milestones that have concurred to influence current ideas around mobility.

2.3. Class and ‘achievement’ in ‘mainstream’ social mobility literature

A specific interest in social mobility, intended as the intra and inter-generational movement of individuals and groups from one social class to the other, emerged in the UK around the end of the 19th century, as part of broader debates between revisionist socialists and radical liberals around the extent and legitimacy of social inequality (Goldthorpe 1980). Liberals saw high rates of mobility as providing support to the liberal-democratic order as the one where talent is best allocated (Sorokin 1927). Socialists, on the converse, presented the discrepancy that existed between actual mobility rates and those that would be found in a perfectly open society as evidence of the persisting influence of ascribed characteristics of class in structuring disadvantage (Glass 1954).

In the light of these debates, the question of the relative weight of achieved status, such as educational and occupational achievement, versus ascribed characteristics of class, gender and ethnicity, in defining social mobility ‘chances’, appears a central one in assessing the degree of ‘openness’ of a given society. This issue was raised for the first time by Blau and Duncan (1967) in their study on ‘The American occupational structure’, where they analysed the direct and indirect effects of one’s father’s education and occupation, those of their own educational level and initial position, and the interplay between these variables, on one’s current job. Findings indicated that, although social background still carried importance in determining one’s occupation, its direct relevance (i.e. net of educational attainment) was declining, while the weight of one’s own qualifications and previous job was growing. This led the authors to conclude that the high rates of social mobility existing in America were associated with a fundamental trend towards an increasing ‘universalism’, brought about by the enhanced need for skilled labour in modern industrial societies, and finding expression in the primacy of objective, universal criteria for evaluation over particularistic values (Blau and Duncan 1967, pp. 429-430). Status advantage that is, could no longer be directly inherited, and had to be legitimised by socially recognised credentials. According to Blau and Duncan, this trend towards the establishment of objective standards for selection, obtainable through the training provided by an expanding educational system, would have eventually led to a society where individuals would be less and less discriminated because of ascribed factors. This conclusion appears however problematic, as it constructs achievement and ascription as two separate entities, and does not provide an adequate recognition of the strong bearing that ascription has been found to have on achievement itself (Savage 2000, 2009).

Although reporting similar findings for Britain about the growing relevance of education as a determinant of one's career trajectory, very different conclusions were drawn by Halsey (1977). Analysis of data from the 1972 social mobility survey showed that here as well the influence that social origins had on occupational prospects once accounting for educational qualifications was lowering, while the role of academic credentials was rising. At the same time, however, educational attainment was becoming increasingly dependent on family background. Even though one's class of origin did not exercise as much direct influence on their occupational position, therefore, its overall effect remained broadly the same. For Halsey, then, this pointed to the definition of new strategies of transmission and legitimisation of privilege, enacted largely through the educational system.

This interpretation has been further supported by the classic work of Goldthorpe (1980), which stands within the tradition of British socialists' concerns with 'openness' and real equality of opportunity, and continues to inform current understandings of and debates around mobility in Britain (Savage 2000, 2009; Friedman 2013). The specific interest was here twofold, including both the implications of social mobility for class formation, analysed in relation to absolute levels of mobility, and the issue of openness, addressed by considering relative mobility rates. Relative rates, indicating the chances of different social groups to achieve mobility compared to those of others or to those defined by a set standard, were measured by Goldthorpe for the first time, and have since become the main way of empirically treating questions of 'fairness' of a given society in relation to specific characteristics defining a group (e.g. class, ethnicity, and gender). What was found was a systematic increase in absolute mobility rates, which reflected the changes occurring at the time in the occupational structure, and especially the expansion of non-manual occupations (Goldthorpe 1980, pp.70-74, 85). The relative chances for mobility held by each class remained however generally stable, indicating that even though there was more opportunity for everyone to climb up the occupational ladder, this opportunity was still unequally distributed in much the same way among classes (Goldthorpe 1980, pp.74-87). Despite economic growth and educational expansion since the Second World War, British society in the '70s had not become any more open.

Goldthorpe's class structural approach to the study of social mobility draws significant attention to the strong correlation between class and individual occupational outcomes, which brings about the reproduction of inequality structures. In doing so, it highlights the explanatory power of class in understanding individual mobility chances, and calls for a better investigation of constraints and opportunities operating in this sense at individual and group level. In interpreting these patterns, Heath (1981) has importantly noted the role of schools as agencies of selection and distribution rather than of education and training. He saw the privilege of the higher classes as being

maintained not only through better access to education, but also through dynamics operating within the educational and occupational system, which favoured a specific culture:

‘The use of educational criteria in selection may thus have the guise of universalism but the reality of particularism, since those with the highest levels of achievement will differ in their social character and culture – the real ingredients which employers are seeking.’ (Heath 1981, p. 177)

Some of the processes taking place within this system, which led to the perpetuation of class advantage, have been discussed by Halsey et al. (1980). With the implementation of the Education Act 1944, resulting in the tripartite system of grammar, technical, and secondary modern schools, a considerable educational expansion had certainly taken place, enabling more working-class children to obtain education and achieve some kind of qualification. However, working-class boys were still less likely than those from the service-class to enter selective schools, and to stay as long within further and higher education, thus ending up with credentials of lower level and status. There were, therefore, substantial class differentials among children, which widened along the educational hierarchy, and substantially affected their future employment chances.

The role that is played by formal education in the intergenerational transmission of class position, and the question of whether this points to the establishment of increasingly meritocratic standards of selection in the job market, has been more recently explored by Marshall et al. (1997). Two decades after the study carried out by Halsey, the conclusions that can be drawn are strikingly similar. That is, while the direct effect of family background has been declining over the years, the association between socio-economic origins and schooling on the one hand, and between schooling and occupation on the other, have both become stronger (Marshall et al. 1997, pp.129-131). The overall effect of class of origin on class of destination has remained therefore substantially unaltered, although increasingly mediated through educational achievement. Within this process, Marshall et al. (1997, p.129) also highlight how it is degree-level qualifications that are becoming more important in order to secure higher occupational positions, while the relative value of lower level credentials is diminishing. The acquisition of a competitive advantage within the labour market is thus increasingly coming to depend on the capacity to stay longer in education, which is itself conditioned by the availability of a number of material and cultural resources that are linked with class background. Pearce (2011) has additionally called attention to how some of the economic trends that have affected the UK labour market since the ‘90s, such as economic contractions, labour market polarisation, and tendencies pointing to declining levels of absolute mobility, have contributed to exacerbate the competition for employment positions.

To this point, I have reviewed what can be termed as ‘mainstream’ social mobility literature (Friedman 2013), represented by large-scale quantitative studies focusing on the rates and determinants of mobility. I have discussed how absolute and relative occupational mobility rates have come to be seen in the UK as measures of the ‘openness’ and ‘fairness’ of a given society, and the way in which this research has brought to attention persisting class inequalities. Findings of a lower likelihood for individuals of working-class rather than middle-class background to benefit from upward mobility, in particular, and of an increasing dependency on class of educational ‘achievement’, have pointed to the occurrence of dynamics and strategies of class reproduction taking place through education (Halsey et al. 1980; Heath 1981; Marshall et al. 1997). Some of these views have long been reflected in British policy concerns and discourses, as evidenced by the persistence of a social mobility rhetoric, espoused by governments of all sides and accompanied by initiatives targeting students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds and aimed at ‘raising aspirations’ and ‘widening participation’ in higher education (DfES 2003; HEFCE 2010; Payne 2012; BIS 2014, 2015). Less recognition has however been given by policy-makers to the processes underlying differential experiences, attitudes and behaviours in relation to education and mobility, and to the ways in which these are informed by intersecting dimensions of social identity such as class, ‘race’, ethnicity, gender and religion, and by associated, unequally valued, cultural and material resources. These questions have been addressed since the late ‘90s by a growing body of literature, which has focused on the classed, gendered, and racialised aspects of subjective, lived experiences of occupational mobility and access to / participation in education. It is to the insights that are offered by these studies that I turn in the following section.

2.4. Experiences of social mobility and educational ‘achievement’

2.4.1. Social class and ethnicity as cultural capital and habitus

Classed processes such as those of mobility and educational ‘achievement’ have increasingly been analysed, by critical / feminist studies concerned with exposing dynamics of social injustice, through the lenses offered by Bourdieusian theory (Lawler 1999; Reay 2002; Ingram 2011b; Rollock et al. 2011). This has shed light on the ways in which class, rather than merely indicating an ‘objective’ position in the labour market, becomes part of one’s subjectivity, being internalised and expressed through their ‘habitus’ and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Lawler’s (1999) analysis of the narratives of upwardly mobile women has shown in this sense how this form of capital, described by participants in terms of the possession of certain tastes

and dispositions, might in fact be seen as a more important marker of class position than a given job or income. Social mobility does therefore not simply entail a movement from one occupational category to another, 'but involves processes of detachment from, and attachment to, particular class cultures' (Friedman 2013, p. 7). The notion of habitus also helps us to conceptualise the internalisation of social structures and relations. Habitus can be considered as a matrix of perception that builds on subsequent individual and collective classed - and, I suggest, racialised (Horvat 2002; Archer and Francis 2006, 2007) - experiences, and engenders practices in line with that pre-reflexive understanding (Bourdieu 1977). Where Bourdieu discusses what happens when socialisation takes place in contexts marked by different and often incompatible class cultures, for example in relation to working-class students in French higher education (Bourdieu 1998) or to his own trajectory from low social origins to academic consecration (Bourdieu 2004), he speaks of 'a cleft habitus, inhabited by tensions and contradictions' (Bourdieu 2004, p.100).

The tensions and contradictions of a cleft habitus also characterise Lawler's (1999) women's accounts of their experiences of transition between classes, as these have generated an increased awareness of the assumed inferiority of cultural traits associated with their class of origin and a feeling of shame in 'pretending' to be middle-class. Having acquired the markers of 'middle-classness' later in life, these women are moreover conscious of their inability to ever fully inhabit the middle-class habitus, with all the sense of unease and unworthiness this brings. Their habitus combines dispositions attached to different class cultures and yet, precisely because of this, it never finds itself 'as a fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.127) in either working-class or middle-class environments. This sense of uncertainty, which comes with the possession of different class tastes in socially mobile individuals, has been defined by Friedman (2012) as 'cultural homelessness'. In contrast to 'mainstream' accounts of upward mobility as unproblematic transitions from one social class to the other, unequivocally characterised by individual contentment, these readings underscore instead the difficulties that these processes present for subjective identities (Friedman 2013).

The inner struggle and pain that derive from the encounter of the working-class self with a field dominated by middle-class values have also been highlighted in the studies of Reay (2002) and Ingram (2011b). These have both contributed, by bringing attention to processes of pathologisation and their consequences, to illuminate the tensions that can arise for working-class boys in the educational context. Because working-class masculinities are generally considered to be incompatible with academic success, in striving for achievement, these boys face the dilemma of having to reconcile aspects of the self which are constructed as antithetical, which implies

considerable psychic costs (Reay 2002, p.223; Ingram 2011b, pp.300-301). This as well can additionally be seen as an instance where, in encountering a field of which it is not the product, habitus finds itself like 'a fish out of water', which leads to one becoming more self-aware (Bourdieu 1990a) and can in turn generate 'a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences' (Bourdieu 1999, p. 511). The idea of cleft habitus has been built upon by studies such as those of Reay et al. (2009a, 2009b), Ingram (2011b), and Abrahams and Ingram (2013), which have brought to light a more nuanced situation, with the students' habitus responding in different ways to the newly encountered context, and performing a varied range of adaptations to the institutional environment ranging from detachment to immersion.

In their articles on the experiences of working-class students in higher education, moreover, Reay et al. (2009a, 2009b) have argued that, like individuals, higher education institutions too have a habitus, which mainly includes 'curriculum offer, organisational practices, and less tangible, but equally important, cultural and expressive characteristics', and of which academic status is an important aspect (Reay et al. 2009a, p.3). Their research highlights how there is in fact no 'easy fit' between social identities, dispositions towards learning (learner identities) and different institutional habitus. Some of the students in predominantly working-class institutions, characterised by a 'laid back' approach to study, felt like they 'fitted in' socially but not academically, while most of those in high-status, predominantly middle-class institutions, experienced the 'paradox of fitting in in terms of learner orientations' (Reay et al. 2009a, p.11). Drawing on data collected as part of the same research project, Crozier et al. (2008) have importantly called attention, in addition, to how students' experiences and perceptions of 'fitting in' are not only differentially shaped by institutional habitus but also, within institutions, by 'subject sub-cultures'. Both social and learner identities are further modified, reinforced or transformed through the experience of university. As all of these studies point out, however, even where students appear to be able to 'successfully' adapt to the university environment, this involves nonetheless considerable distress. Crozier et al. (2008) have noticed in this sense the difference with students of middle-class origins, whose learned dispositions (habitus) are such that the transition from secondary school to university is for them 'often seamless'.

As well as unveiling the distress and unsettlement brought about by mobility and educational 'achievement', this line of inquiry has on the other hand drawn attention to the resources acquired by individuals throughout this process. Both Reay et al. (2009b) and Rollock et al. (2011) have pointed in this sense to the creative potential of habitus as it is transformed through the encounter with unfamiliar fields. In exploring the narratives of working-class students attending

elite universities, Reay and colleagues underscore the resilience they have built in order to cope with the difficulties of combining working-class origins with strong academic dispositions. These students also exhibit a versatility which allows them to participate in a predominantly middle-class environment while maintaining enduring connections with their working-class families and friends. The capacity to employ different codes according to the context, referents and aims, has also been highlighted by Rollock et al. as characteristic of the socially mobile blacks taking part to their study. For them, the acquisition of middle-class cultural capital has enabled the adoption of specific markers, such as a certain accent and posture, which permit to be recognized as middle-class and to reduce in this way the effects of racial discrimination. In both Rollock et al.'s middle-class blacks and in Reay et al.'s working-class students, the ability to move across boundaries, of class and of race, appears to result from a sense of self-awareness developed in early childhood because of 'not fitting in', being it as black students in predominantly white schools, or as students with strong academic dispositions in working-class environments. In relation to their research participants, Reay et al. have noted how the effort required to manage the conflicts arising at an early age between their identity and the contexts they found themselves into, has led to the generation of a reflexive habitus, where 'reflexivity ceases to reflect a temporary lack of fit between habitus and field but itself becomes habitual' (Sweetman 2003, p. 541, cit. in Reay et al. 2009b, p. 1115).

In addition to the classed character of habitus and cultural capital highlighted by the work discussed so far, Archer's and Francis' (2006, 2007) study with pupils of Chinese heritage has importantly cast light on the ways in which these are also informed by ethnicity. Archer and Francis (2007, p. 140) talk in particular of a 'British-Chinese diasporic [collective] habitus', upholding students' profound commitment to educational 'achievement', their efforts aimed at obtaining high grades, and the widely shared intention to progress into college and higher education. This was expressed by both students and parents through discourses that constructed the valuing of education and high aspirations 'in specifically racialised cultural terms, [...] as "something that we [as British-Chinese] do"' (Archer and Francis 2007, p. 140), and were grounded in the experiences of migration of the British-Chinese diaspora. It is observed how these type of discourses were also adopted by those of working-class background, in contrast with what has been found for white British working-class families where value is being placed for example on 'not getting above your station' (Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Lawler, 1999; Reay, 1999). Yet, it is also noted how the cultural capital held by Chinese families of middle-class status is not the same as that possessed by the white British middle-classes, thereby putting Chinese students at a disadvantage compared to their white British peers. The recognition of the salience of multiple dimensions of social identity in

informing habitus and forms of capital is crucial in enabling us to move away from homogenising views of class, gender, and ethnicity to provide a more accurate understanding of differing patterns and trends of participation and ‘achievement’. This recognition calls in particular for a more complex and holistic investigation of the multiple conditionings that bear upon identities, and therefore upon perspectives and practices, where the influence of each is considered in its intersection with others and over time.

2.4.2. Class and ethnic inequalities in higher education

Increasing attention to the subjective dimensions of class and ethnicity, and to the intersections between the two, has also been given, since the turn of the century, by research investigating unequal access to, and experiences of, higher education (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Reay et al. 2001a, 2001b, 2009a, 2009b; Ball et al. 2002a, 2002b; Archer and Yamashita 2003; Basit 2012, 2014; Modood 2014). This literature has importantly highlighted how university ‘choices’ and concrete experiences are still substantially linked to students’ socio-economic background, and to the economic, social and cultural capital that this gives access to. The issue of ‘choice’, in particular, has been explored extensively in the attempt to account for the under-representation of working-class students in higher education, and for the over-representation of those of working-class and / or minority ethnic origins in new, generally lower status institutions (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Reay et al. 2001a, 2002b; Ball et al. 2002a, 2002b; Archer and Yamashita 2003). Ball et al. (2002a) have argued in this respect that to frame decisions on higher education in terms of choice is misleading, as it presupposes that all options are equally open to all individuals, while this process can be better understood as decision-making, involving both power and constraint. Carrying on to higher education, and attending specific institutions, has in fact been shown by these studies to hold very different material and identity risks, costs and benefits depending on one’s socio-economic origins. While not implying mechanistic responses, this does result in classed and racialised patterns of ‘choice’.

Firstly, financial constraints limit the possibility of moving far from home in order to attend higher-status universities, as well as well as impacting on the quantity and quality of time that can be dedicated to study and thus ultimately on ‘achievement’ (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Reay et al. 2001b). Also relevant is the availability of social and cultural capital that can provide appropriate knowledge on which to draw in decision-making processes (Ball et al. 2002a, 2002b). Research by Archer and Hutchings (2000) has additionally highlighted how, compared to their middle-class peers, ‘common sense discourses’ circulating within one’s social networks and drawing on other

people's as well as their own past experiences of education contribute to produce for working-class students a heightened anticipation of possible failure. Significantly, moreover, university 'choice' has been found to be affected by perceived 'fit' with one's own classed and 'racially' defined identity (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Reay et al. 2001b; Ball et al. 2002b; Archer and Yamashita 2003; Archer et al. 2007). Reay et al. (2001b) and Ball et al. (2002b) have shown for example how, while by no means the only consideration, perceived lack of 'ethnic mix' and 'white predominance' in the student population appeared to discourage some students of minority ethnic background from applying to certain universities, as this tended to produce an anticipation of being regarded as 'other' as opposed to 'fitting in'. As stated by Ball et al. (2002a, p. 54), therefore, 'cultural and social capital, material constraints [...], social perceptions and distinctions, and forms of self-exclusion [...] are all at work in the process of choice'. Resulting patterns contribute to reinforce existing divisions in relation to institutional intake and attributed status, as predominantly working-class and minority ethnic student bodies produce the attribution of negative judgements (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Reay et al. 2001b). Although less researched, similar processes have been revealed by Reay (2002; 2004b) to also take place in secondary education.

While these studies have enhanced the understanding of the disadvantages that are faced by working-class and / or minority ethnic students in accessing higher education, others have attempted to explain why working-class students of minority ethnic origins are more likely than their white British peers of similar socio-economic background to be enrolled at university (Shah et al. 2010; Basit 2012, 2014; Modood 2014). Literature exploring the dynamics that can potentially account for this trend has mainly engaged with concepts of cultural and social capital as variously defined by Bourdieu (1984, 2007a), Coleman (1988, 1990), Portes (1998) and Putnam (2000). Shah et al. (2010) and Modood (2014) have especially questioned the ability of Bourdieu's theoretical framework and conceptual tools, developed to explain the reproduction of class advantage, to offer insights as to why minority ethnic 'groups' appear to be overcoming class inequalities in access rates. On the converse, they see conceptualisations of social capital advanced in US research on minority ethnic 'communities', primarily by Coleman (1988, 1990) and Portes (1998), as more apt at capturing these processes. Building on these studies, they point to the role of social network closure, which is found in closely-knit 'communities' such as the British-Pakistani, in favouring the intergenerational transmission and enforcement of norms that encourage young people's strong valuing of education and 'achievement'. These resources, which encompass a mix of social and cultural features of ethnic 'groups', are referred to as 'ethnic capital'. Basit (2012, p. 140) proposes on the other hand the notion of 'aspirational capital' as a way of conceptualising an 'amalgam of

positive thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs and actions that parents hold or undertake on behalf of their children', and enable young people lacking middle-class cultural and social capital to succeed in education. Another way to account for the high aspirations expressed by individuals of minority ethnic background is represented by Archer's and Francis' (2006, 2007) aforementioned 'aspirational habitus'. Albeit emphasising different elements and processes, all of these studies assert the need to revise class theory to make sense of the ways in which ethnicity also enters into play.

Like 'choice', the experience of higher education is itself strongly shaped by structures of gender, class, and 'race' / ethnicity (Osler 1999; Tyers et al. 2004; Reay et al. 2009a, 2009b; Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Bathmaker et al. 2013). Considerations of affordability, family care and work commitments, capacity to navigate the education system, and perceptions of 'fitting in' at specific institutional environments, not only affect decisions of whether and where to go to university, but also of whether to continue towards graduation. Furthermore, they impinge on students' ability to achieve high grades as well as to participate in social and extra-curricular activities, functioning as both objective and 'internalised' constraints (Reay et al. 2009a; Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Bathmaker et al. 2013). In other words, these elements all act as concrete limitations on one's capacity to do something, as well as producing an anticipation of one's limits, either at a conscious or subconscious level, which can lead to the avoidance of people, places and activities that become perceived as 'not for the likes of us' (Bourdieu 1984; Reay et al. 2001a, 2009a). I have already discussed in this respect the considerable identity work that is required of working-class students in education institutions which are generally dominated by middle-class values, and the associated psychological costs (Reay et al. 2009a, 2009b).

With respect to ethnicity, issues highlighted by research have mainly to do with limited finances, feelings of social isolation, more or less direct experiences of racism and Islamophobia, scarce attention to ethnic diversity in curriculum and practices, and with perceived lack of academic support, including low expectations from teaching staff (Osler 1999; Tyrer and Ahmad 2006; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Dhanda 2010; Alexander and Arday 2015). Some of these aspects can be traced back to students' class background, with ethnicities such as the Pakistani and Bangladeshi being especially affected due to the prevailing working-class composition of their student population (Modood 2014). Yet, it is clear that 'race' and ethnicity also play a major role. As well as revealing instances of explicit 'racial' discrimination and harassment, all of these works mention students' sense of isolation and their concerns for the lack of diversity in institutional culture and social networks as recurring themes in participants' accounts. In this regard, the substantial under-

representation of minority ethnic academic staff appears to feed into the mono-culturalism and institutional racism prevailing in university environments, while stripping students of the benefits of a more diverse range of perspectives and of important role models (Andrews 2015; Shilliam 2015). These studies have also shown the importance of considering how ‘race’ and ethnicity intersect with other dimensions of social identity such as gender and class in understanding the forms that exclusion, stereotyping, and racism can take (Osler 1999; Tyrer and Ahmad 2006; Bagguley and Hussain 2007). While providing fundamental insights into the experiences of higher education of minority ethnic students, however, this literature does not offer a theoretically grounded interpretation of underlying processes.

The research discussed in this section highlights the complexity of ways in which class, ‘race’, ethnicity, religion and gender intersect with each other in the definition of differential opportunity structures, and the diversity of responses enacted by individuals. Particular attention is drawn to how identity, of which social class, gender, ‘race’, ethnicity and so on are multiple sites, is produced, reproduced and transformed in the encounter with others. The predominance in public and policy discourses of pathologising views of classed and racialized cultures, where these are assessed against the standards of legitimacy defined by white ‘middle-classness’, is shown therefore to complicate the possibility for movement across boundaries, as it engenders mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion, tension and resistance. Contrary to these discourses’ assumptions of working-class and minority ethnic cultural ‘deficit’, moreover, the studies reviewed have the additional merit of bringing the emphasis back on the powerful influence of structural inequalities. These insights challenge unproblematic views of social mobility as a policy priority, especially where this contributes to the overlooking or the justification of marked inequalities in living conditions, and to the reinforcement of hierarchies of value among different forms of culture.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has called attention to the significance of social class origins in informing relative mobility ‘chances’ among individuals and groups, and in explaining differential employment prospects among and within minority ethnic ‘groups’. I have also discussed how class advantage has been shown to be increasingly mediated by educational qualifications, and by higher education credentials in particular. In this respect, I have pointed to the richness of insights that are offered by research exploring working-class students’ and upwardly mobile individuals’ ‘choices’ and experiences through Bourdieusian lenses. I have argued that this analytical framework enables

us to effectively detail the complexities of reconciling one's working-class identity with hierarchies of value which privilege middle-class 'norms', whether it be in relation to 'appropriate' tastes and behaviours, academic dispositions, or 'choice' of university. Yet, I have also maintained that an exclusive focus on social class does not seem to provide a full picture of the experiences of participation in education and social mobility of individuals of minority ethnic background. Thus, I have argued for the need, in order to produce a better understanding of ethnic inequalities in the labour market, of taking an intersectional approach to the exploration of higher education and social mobility experiences. Research of this type should consider in greater detail the meanings and implications that multiple categories of social identity have for different people in different contexts, and the set of opportunities and constraints they provide in shaping practice and mediating agency.

While the strength of Bourdieu's framework for making sense of class inequalities is now well established, its applicability to the understanding of minority ethnic students' experiences is however still a matter of debate (Archer and Francis 2006, 2007; Shah et al. 2010; Basit 2012; Modood 2014). Because Bourdieu's conceptualisation of practice was developed to explain the processes through which class inequalities persisted throughout generations, it has been claimed that it cannot offer an adequate understanding of why for minority ethnic students' access to university is less strongly related to class origins than it is for their white British peers (Shah et al. 2010; Modood 2014). For the same reason, it is maintained that it cannot explain why inequalities centred on ethnicity are reversed when it comes to working-class students' participation in higher education. On the other hand, studies such as those of Archer and Francis (2006, 2007) and Archer et al. (2012a, 2014) have highlighted the potential held by notions such as those of habitus and capital when recognising and accounting for the ways in which these concepts are shaped by gender and 'race' / ethnicity as well as class.

The following chapter introduces Bourdieu's theoretical framework. I start by outlining the cardinal concepts of Bourdieu's theory of practice and their mutual inter-relations. I then move on to assessing their explanatory capacity in interpreting instances of both transformation and reproduction in social structures as they pertain to multiple dimensions of inequality. In doing so, I argue for the value of this framework in exploring the experiences of participation in higher education and social mobility of individuals of minority ethnic origins. In particular, as it helps us to see these experiences as being shaped by the mutual inter-relations between students' classed, racialised, ethnicised and gendered resources and dispositions, and those that are privileged in the contexts they are involved in.

Chapter 3

Working with Bourdieu's conceptual 'toolbox' to understand material and symbolic inequalities

3.1. Introduction

In what follows, I present an overview of Bourdieu's theory of practice, on which I have drawn to underpin my analysis of participants' narratives, and consider some of its main strengths and limitations as they relate to the aims of this research. I start by introducing Bourdieu's theoretical approach as a sociological method, focusing on each of its key components of field, capital and habitus, and on how they link together to provide a specific conceptualisation of agents' outlooks and practices. In this respect, I stress the importance for this study of the relational perspective that ensues from this 'method', in terms of directing attention to both the inter-relatedness of habitus, capitals and field in shaping practices, and to the relations of power and inequality that these concepts express. In the last two sections, I turn to assessing the major shortcomings that this framework might present, according to its critics, with respect to my research. In particular, I evaluate its effectiveness in accounting for transformation and change, and the analytical insights it offers in dealing with dimensions of inequality other than social class. I conclude that, despite Bourdieu's own limited treatment of these issues, his theory of practice does not a priori preclude this engagement. On the contrary, it provides a useful framework for unpacking the processes that link structure, culture and practice in their mutual inter-relation, and for understanding the grounding of intersecting inequalities in specific material and symbolic structures. I contend in this sense that the strength of Bourdieu's 'method' is far from being restricted to the explanation of the reproduction of class inequalities. Rather, it rests in representing a powerful reminder of the structurally defined (rather than determined) boundedness of 'the possible', and in offering effective tools through which to unravel the conditions of possibility that lead to either social reproduction or change, whether material or symbolic.

With respect to my study of British-born young women of Bangladeshi heritage in higher education, in particular, I argue that a Bourdieusian-informed analytical approach allows us to expose, examine and evaluate the profound effects of unequally distributed material and symbolic resources on attitudes, practices and experiences. Such a framework encourages us to look at shared

positionings and trajectories of class, 'race', ethnicity and gender as located in hierarchical social spaces entailing relations of material and symbolic 'dominance' and 'subordination' among individuals and groups. Individuals' positionings and trajectories can thus be seen as conditioning access to economic, social and cultural resources that are valued differently in the various domains where they engage, such as family, school, peer networks and higher education, and to produce differentially valued dispositions in line with the necessities and potentialities that are attached to such distribution of resources. I additionally consider how the same conceptual framework also provides the means to overcome precisely that structural determinism for which Bourdieu has often been criticised. In this respect, I maintain that the origin of its dismissal as a useful resource for interpreting minority ethnic students' experiences, to which I have pointed in my literature review, lies in this excessively deterministic reading of Bourdieu's theory. This reading, I contend, stems from the lack of an adequate recognition of the full implications of his conceptualisation of practice as born out of the interplay between objective and internalised structures.

3.2. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

At the heart of Bourdieu's 'sociological *method*' (Bourdieu 1990b; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Wacquant 2007, p. 5) lies the intention to overcome the limitations of objectivist and subjectivist modes of knowledge, which respectively attribute all explanatory power to structures at the expenses of agents and vice-versa, and to integrate insights from the both in a 'general science of practices'. This method consists 'in a manner of posing problems' through 'a parsimonious set of conceptual tools and procedures' (Wacquant 2007, p. 5) that can be applied to the study of the most varied issues, historical periods and geographical contexts as 'special case[s] of what is possible' (Bourdieu 1998, p. 2), and are aimed at capturing both 'the experience of social agents and [...] the objective structures which make this experience possible' (Bourdieu 1988, p. 782). The specific, significant merit of this approach rests in the attempt to lay the foundations for an analysis of the social universe concerned with discerning its 'most profoundly buried structures' (Bourdieu 1998b, p. 1) and the processes that contribute to their reproduction or transformation. To this end, Bourdieu proposes a theory of the logic of practice he defines as 'constructivist structuralism [or] structuralist constructivism' (Bourdieu 1989, p. 14), which attends to the mutual inscription of structures and agency and of individual and society, and as such allows to bridge long-standing dichotomies that he sees as debilitating scholarly thought (Bourdieu 1990b; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1998). This theory is summarised by Bourdieu (1994, p. 101) through the formula [(habitus)

(capital)] + field = practice. Below, I provide a detailed discussion of each of these components, and consider how they work together as an integrated system.

3.2.1. Field

Through the concept of field, Bourdieu (1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) emphasises the relational nature of ‘the real’. That is, he makes clear that what appears to us as an immediately visible social world, populated by individuals and groups with intrinsic tastes, outlooks and behaviours, is in fact ‘a space of relations’, where agents’ own existence and practices are rooted in their ‘difference’ (Bourdieu 1998, p. 31). In modern societies, the main principle of differentiation among individuals and groups is for Bourdieu (1984) the relative distribution among them of economic and cultural capital. The possession of capital, as I will show in the following section, is for agents both an end in itself and the means through which that end becomes achievable. The social space is thus constructed as a tri-dimensional space organised around the axes represented by the volume of capital, composition of capital, and the change in the two over time (Bourdieu 1984, p. 114). Within this space, agents are located at a relative distance from one another depending on their stock of capital, which defines their ‘objective position’. An ‘*objective class*’ comprises of all those who share similar conditions of existence, and therefore find themselves in positions ‘imposing homogeneous conditionings’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 101). The overall volume of economic and cultural capital that is held by agents marks the difference between dominant and dominated classes. The composition of capital, that is, the relative weight of economic or cultural capital compared to the other in one’s stock, works instead as a second principle of distinction among different fractions within each class. The concept of field is especially fundamental to a full appreciation of the generative capacity of habitus, as it represents the actualisation of the space of social positions in different spheres of life which makes the production and expression of the latter possible.

Bourdieu (2007b, p. 97) states that in highly differentiated societies there are different, relatively autonomous fields, i.e. multiple spaces of social relations such as that of culture, education, or the labour market, governed by logics that are ‘specific and irreducible’ to those of other fields. Each field is defined by the ‘forms of *specific capital*’ that operate within it, and on which it imposes its logics of accumulation and exchange (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 108). Individuals’ and groups’ tastes and practices, which are shaped as we will see by the conditionings imposed on them by their objective position in social space, take therefore different expressions depending on the specific logics and capitals of the field where they are involved. Yet, what is most significant is

that there is among these varied expressions an underlying unity, ensured by the ‘structural and functional *homologies*’ (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 105) that exist among the most diverse fields and the space of objective social positions, which is also a (meta-)field of power (Bourdieu 1984, 1996; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). As in the latter, agents’ relative positions within the structure of the distribution of relevant capitals are also characterised in all other fields as relations of dominance and subordination. These relations of power are everywhere the object of struggles, and are subject to processes of reproduction or change stemming from the encounter between the fields’ logics and agents’ ‘strategies’, themselves informed by agents’ relative positions and trajectories.

Thus, fields are both ‘field[s] of forces’ (Bourdieu 1998, p. 32), where agents’ practices conform to regularities rather than rules (Bourdieu 1990b; Bourdieu 2007b, p. 98), imposed by the particular structure of the distribution of specific capital and depending on their relative position, and ‘field[s] of struggles’ (Bourdieu 1998, p. 32) aimed at conserving or improving one’s position. These fundamental dynamics are illustrated by Bourdieu’s analogy, albeit with important differences, of fields as games (Bourdieu 2007b, pp. 98-99). The respective volume and composition of capital they hold, and the change in these over time, define individuals’ and groups’ ‘investment’ in the game, that is, the ‘interest’ (*illusio*) that pre-consciously guides them, as well as the ‘strategies’ that they are also pre-consciously inclined to employ. By playing, they grant recognition to the value of the game and its stakes (*doxa*). Bourdieu (2007b, p. 99) writes in this respect:

‘We can picture each player as having in front of her a pile of tokens of different colors, each color corresponding to a given species of capital she holds, so that her *relative force in the game*, her *position* in the space of play, and also her *strategic orientation toward the game*, [...] the moves that she makes, more or less risky or cautious, subversive or conservative, depend both on the total number of tokens and on the composition of the piles of tokens she retains, that is, on the volume and structure of her capital [and also on] the *evolution over time* of the volume and structure of this capital’.

This means that, according to their relative positions within the field (e.g. insider / outsider; dominant / dominated) and to their trajectories over time, agents will orient their ‘moves’ by investing more or less heavily on the different forms of capital they possess, as well as by attempting to modify the relative value and exchange rates of specific capital to favour the types they hold more of. Crucially, none of this relies on a rational calculation but, as I will discuss in more detail in relation to habitus, on a practical ‘feel for the game’, that is, on ‘the dispositions (habitus) [of agents] constituted in [their] prolonged relation to a definite distribution of objective

chances' (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 99). In this sense, it can be seen how agents' stock of capital and trajectory do not only concretely permit or inhibit certain moves, but they also affect the propensity to adopt them because of the perception one has of the field from a specific position within it (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 101). It is also worth noting that fields, while subject to regularities, are essentially dynamic (Bourdieu 1998, p. 88; Wacquant 2007, p. 18; Bourdieu 2007b, p. 102). This is because the configuration and rules of the game are all at stake in the struggle among individuals and groups, and agents' 'feel for the game' undergoes (limited) transformations grounded in their trajectory.

3.2.2. Capitals

Capital is, according to Bourdieu (2007a, p. 46), 'accumulated labor', expressing itself in three main forms: economic, cultural, and social capital. All of these can be derived from, and re-converted into, economic capital, i.e. wealth in the form of money or property, although at the cost of more or less lengthy and risky transformations, which are necessary for capital to assume its specific value within the field where it is deployed. Economic, social and cultural resources function as capital, in particular, when they establish a social relation of power, thus becoming both the aim of struggles for appropriation among individuals and groups and the means through which this appropriation is made possible (Bourdieu 1996, p. 265). Symbolic capital, in addition, is the form that is taken by each of the three fundamental types when the arbitrariness of its distribution goes unquestioned, paving the way for its recognition as a legitimate form of power (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 122, 2007a, 2007b, p. 119). Academic credentials from prestigious institutions, for example, or certain ways of being and doing, such as being articulate or displaying confidence, all tend to function as symbolic capital in dominant fields.

Bourdieu (2007a, p. 46) significantly argues that

'as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, [capital] contains a tendency to persist in its being [...] so that everything is not equally possible or impossible'.

Since the possession of any form of capital is the pre-requisite for the accumulation of further capital of the same type or of another through a work of conversion, the unequal position of individuals and groups in the structure of the distribution of capital informs at every moment their 'chances' of accumulation, and is therefore at the very origin of the regularities characterising the social world. The conceptualisation of economic, cultural and social resources as potential forms of

capital enables the development of a ‘general science of the economy of practices’ which sees all practices as oriented, albeit not always consciously, toward accumulation and exchange. This economy of practices extends beyond strictly monetary exchange to include and account for all of those practices that are not socially recognised as economic (Bourdieu 2007a). Such a framework is especially important in that it helps to unmask all forms of accumulation as interested, and to recognise processes of power reproduction even in their most disguised and socially legitimised forms.

The concept of cultural capital, in particular, was originally advanced by Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) as a way to explain the observable regularities linking pupils’ academic ‘achievement’, and consequently the profits they derived from schooling, with their families’ objective position in the social space, which tended to ensure the intergenerational reproduction of this position. This process is generated, according to Bourdieu, by parental transmission of ‘legitimate culture’ (Lamont and Lareau 1988) in the form of long-lasting cognitive and behavioural dispositions (embodied cultural capital), which enables the symbolic appropriation of cultural goods (objectified cultural capital) and is positively sanctioned by the educational system through the attribution of academic qualifications (institutionalised cultural capital). In its most fundamental form, cultural capital presents therefore itself as preferences, aptitudes, manners, and more generally as ways of thinking, being and doing that become the precondition for the appropriation of cultural capital in its objective and institutionalised states.

The inculcation and assimilation of this embodied cultural capital presupposes an investment of time in pedagogic action, which Bourdieu sees as being performed primarily by the family and subsequently through schooling. The institutional sanctioning of its value through the awarding of conventionally recognised credentials plays then a major role in its (re)conversion into economic capital, as it establishes the relative monetary value of different qualifications and, consequently, of their holders (Bourdieu 2007a). Given that this value is defined relationally, it is the scarcity of academic certificates, rather than the certificate per se, that confers an advantage in the labour market competition.

While the concept of cultural capital has been criticised for its theoretical ambiguity, for the methodological difficulties it presents in terms of operationalisation, and for its inability to engage adequately with working-class cultures, its merits in drawing attention to the influence of structural inequalities on unequal educational attainment and related ‘profits’ are widely acknowledged

(Lamont and Lareau 1988; Nash 1990; Swartz 1997; Reay 2004a). According to Nash (1990, p. 446),

‘through Bourdieu’s work we have been able to reconstruct a theory of the family and recover the centrality of family resources to educational differentiation within a radical context which allays the fears of a retreat to cultural deficit theory’.

Cultural capital enables in fact to see how those from the ‘dominant classes’ tend to secure through the education system higher profits for their children than can be done by those from the ‘dominated classes’. Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1998, 2007a) points in particular to the ways in which, in families who already possess the cultural capital that is valued by schools, that is in middle-class families, the embodiment of such capital in children starts from the very onset, providing them with a head-start compared to working-class pupils whose dispositions are seen instead as in need of being ‘corrected’.

Compared to those from the working-classes, moreover, middle-class students have access to both the cultural and economic resources that allow them to stay longer in education, as well as being oriented by their habitus and enabled by their capital to attend more prestigious institutions and courses, and are thus at an advantage in the competition for scarce institutional titles. The previous chapter and the upcoming discussion of my research findings evidence the operation of some of the strategies enacted by the middle-classes to ensure a higher profitability of investment in education in terms of occupational prospects, such as private schooling, tuitions and the selection of higher status institutions. Yet, findings from this study also show how strategies related to university status are being increasingly taken up, to the extent permitted by their economic and cultural capital, by students of working-class as well as of middle-class background. Bourdieu (2007a, p. 49) stresses in this sense that, because it is ‘subject to a hereditary transmission which is always heavily disguised’, middle-class cultural capital sanctioned by university credentials is particularly predisposed to be seen as legitimate competence rather than privilege, and to function therefore as symbolic capital. Its value as specific capital rests therefore precisely in its going unrecognised as such, which both requires and encourages a certain degree of working-class participation to ‘the game’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, pp. 208-209; Bourdieu 1998, p. 24). As such, cultural capital acquired through participation in higher education is also subject to the risks attached with the de-valuation of qualifications deriving from expanded access to the field. It is these processes that call into play the necessity for the middle-classes to find ever new strategies for distinction, examples of which can be found in the above mentioned differences in the selection of

institutions, or in the use of social capital to access and gain experience in the labour market (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, p. 231; Bourdieu 1984, pp. 125-168).

Social capital is, for Bourdieu (2007a, p. 51), ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’. Similarly to the embodiment of cultural capital, the establishment of such network also requires the investment of time and effort, and thus more or less directly of economic capital, in the consolidation of reciprocal bonds the strength of which derives from the ‘profits’ (in terms of access to economic, cultural and further social capital) they make possible. Bourdieu (2007a, p. 51) additionally maintains that in order for there to be a network there needs to be ‘a minimum of objective homogeneity’ among its members. From this, it derives that social capital as a property of individuals or groups is connected to their objective situation in the space of social positions, that is, it is classed, with those in ‘dominant positions’ being once again favoured. This is because they are able to participate in broader networks, as their resources are such that they can invest more in establishing relations with others. Those who belong to the ‘dominant classes’ are also more sought after by others, in that their acquaintance offers higher profits. Each member of the networks they are part of moreover possesses, and thus enables to access, a higher volume of capital in its different forms. Social capital, therefore, also has a tendency to reproduce and expand itself like economic and cultural capital. This is further accentuated by the fact that the propensity and competence to invest in the ‘effort of sociability’ which is necessary for one to build and maintain their networks are themselves internalised in the form of dispositions. This research’s findings point in particular to some of the ways in which social capital contributes to the reproduction of relative positions of power among individuals and groups through its translation into cultural and economic capital, as it comes to substantially shape opportunities for labour market entrance and participation. As I have touched upon in Chapter 2 and will elaborate through my empirical discussion, this is especially important in understanding how ethnicity enters into play in shaping aspirations and employment pathways.

3.2.3. Habitus

The notion of habitus is especially central to Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. Habitus conceptually bridges the individual / society, structure / agency, objective structures / subjective experience dualisms which Bourdieu sees as crippling the understanding of practice (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1990b; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu 2005). Bourdieu

(2007b, pp. 126-127) speaks of habitus as ‘a socialised subjectivity’, and defines its two-ways relation with the field in the following terms:

‘On the one side, it is a relation of *conditioning*: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of the field (or of a set of intersecting fields [...]). On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or *cognitive construction*. Habitus contributes to constructing the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one’s energy’.

Habitus can therefore be seen as ‘a complex internalised core’ (Reay 2004a, p. 435), integrating, with a certain inertia, subsequent individual and collective experiences taking place from a given objective position within a set of intersecting fields, and the objective chances they present. Such core then ‘functions at every moment as a matrix of perception, appreciation and action’ which ‘makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks’ (Bourdieu 1977, p. 83), that is, transposed to different fields and confronted with the most varied situations, it shapes agents’ understanding of those situations as well as their practices.

To illustrate this two-ways relation between objective and internalised structures, Bourdieu (1998, pp. 12-13) refers to a quote from Pascal: ‘the world comprehends me and swallows me like a point, but I comprehend it’. He then goes on to explain that it is precisely because the world comprehends me, as situated in a particular point within the space of objective positions, that I comprehend it, through the schemes of thought I have developed by internalising the constraints and opportunities specific to that situation, and that it appears therefore to me as ‘self-evident’ (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 128). In its encounter with different social worlds, governed by their own logics but characterised by structural and functional homologies, habitus allows to understand how practices, as the product of a ‘practical sense’, can be ‘reasonable’ without being ‘rational’ (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 120; Wacquant 2007; Bourdieu 2005, p. 48). Habitus, which generates dispositions attuned to the objective necessities and potentialities of which it is the product, operates in the fields where it is engaged as a ‘sense of the game’ (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 125), pre-consciously guiding ‘practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends’ (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 125). And while Bourdieu explicitly admits the possibility for a conscious calculation of one’s ‘chances’ based on past experience, the concept serves to stress that this anticipation is first and foremost performed at a pre-conscious level (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 53). Although this immediate, seamless adaptation of habitus and field, or of internalised and objective structures, takes places whenever agents’ objective conditions within the field are homologous to those of which their habitus is the product, agents can also find themselves

in different objective conditions. It is in these moments of disjuncture between ‘initial and present positions in the social space’ (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 109), such as that experienced for example by working-class students in elite institutions (Reay et al. 2009a, 2009b), that the conditions of acquisition of habitus emerge as visible. That is, the attitudes and practices they produce tend to ‘stand out’ rather than ‘fitting in’ with the current conditions. As I will consider in the next section, these moments are especially relevant in that they offer increased opportunities for reflexivity (Reay 2004a; McNay 2001; Ingram 2011a).

Habitus is thus both ‘practice-generating’, in its encounter with different fields and circumstances, and ‘practice-unifying’, as the principle underlying the objective unity of an agent’s practices across fields and of the practices enacted by agents belonging to the same objective class (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 101, 173; 1990b, p. 53). An objective class is, as mentioned, a class of similar conditions of existence and attached conditionings, which derive from the relative stock of economic and cultural capital that these conditions enable to access. This similarity of conditionings, defining a certain range of ‘more or less equally probable trajectories’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 110) for all of those on whom they impinge, produces a ‘class habitus’, that is, a common ‘system of dispositions’ (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 59). It is this class habitus that generates, without the need for explicit intention, a ‘unitary’, or rather ‘harmonised’ (Bourdieu 1977, p. 80; 1984, p. 173), set ‘of choices of persons, goods and practices’ (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 7-8) being adopted across different fields by individuals sharing similar conditions of existence. Importantly, Bourdieu considers habitus to be ‘the precondition not only for the co-ordination of practices but also for practices of co-ordination’, linked for example to political action, which are all the more likely to take place the more similar the objective positions of those involved (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 59).

As we will see, the concept of habitus has been subject to widespread critiques of excessive determinism, which also apply to the supposedly limited possibility for individuals belonging to the same class to have different preferences and take different paths (Throop and Murphy 2002; Reay 2004a). As for other aspects, some of Bourdieu’s formulations appear indeed to support these charges, such as his definition of habitus as an ‘immanent law, *lex insita*, inscribed in bodies by identical histories’ (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 59). Yet, in other instances Bourdieu talks instead about the ‘structural affinity of habituses belonging to the same class’ (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 125), and of the ‘loose systematicity which characterises human behaviour’ (Bourdieu 2005, p. 45). This suggests that the internalisation of given objective positions generates a correspondence among agents’ dispositions and practices, but does not necessarily translates in these being identical. His elaboration of the concept additionally indicates that, while habitus’ initial conditions of formation

always retain a certain force in informing both the likelihood for one to encounter certain circumstances and the responses they enact, this is nonetheless permeable and re-shaped through subsequent experiences. In this respect, Bourdieu (1993, p. 46) states in fact that ‘just as no two histories are identical so no two individual habituses are identical’.

Following from the reflections made so far, I argue that habitus does not limit practices to the mechanical reproduction of the structures that produced it. Rather, its conceptual strength rests in the capacity to make sense of the permanence in present practices of individual and collective histories, and in so doing to account for the prevalence of ‘regulated transformations’ over radical change in the objective structures of fields (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 54). Similarly to the notions of field and capital, it helps us to acknowledge that not all trajectories are equally likely for any one person. Habitus only generates dispositions that are compatible with the specific relation to objective ‘chances’ that has characterised its formation. As a system of ‘virtualities, potentialities, eventualities’, however, habitus only realises itself through actual practices in relation to definite structures of relations and power within fields (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 135). Thus, practices cannot be simply deduced from the conditions of production of habitus. They can only be understood ‘by relating the social conditions in which the habitus that generated them was constituted, to the conditions in which it is implemented’ (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 56). It is the uncovering of these relations between habitus and fields that represents, according to Bourdieu (2007b, pp. 126-127) ‘the proper object of social science’.

3.2.4. Theory of practice as sociological method

Throughout the above discussion, I have woven together the central tenets of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, and called attention to some of the main features that characterise it as a sociological method. Essential to this method is a relational conception of individuals’ and groups’ perspectives and practices as underpinned by their relative synchronic and diachronic positions in multiple, intersecting spaces of social relations (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1998). In each of these spaces, agents’ positions are defined by the differential distribution among them of the forms of specific capital that are valued within that field. These spaces are additionally conceived of as homologous to one another, in that everywhere the relative possession of capital establishes relations of dominance and subordination among individuals and groups. In particular, all fields bear a homology to the space of objective positions, which is also a meta-field of power. Here, it is the relative volume and composition of economic and cultural capital that function for Bourdieu as primary and secondary principles of distinction among agents.

Because of the differential stock of capital they give access to, objective positions also entail specific possibilities and necessities for those who occupy them. This relation to one's 'objective chances' is internalised by individuals in the form of dispositions (*habitus*), which concur in turn to shape their perception of different fields and consequently the practices they engage in. Dispositions, however, do not only engender 'objectively classifiable practices', but they also produce classifying judgments of those very practices. Contrary to 'the substantialist mode of thought', which sees the preferences prevalently expressed by those who belong to a certain 'class' as essential properties, to draw attention to their relational character is then an act of anti-classism and anti-racism, as it reveals the arbitrariness of classifying judgments, grounded in unequal social structures, over what is considered as 'legitimate culture' (Bourdieu 1998, p. 4).

The identification of a relation of homology between the meta-field of power and all other fields uncovers the hidden unity underlying preferences and practices of individuals sharing similar objective positions and taking place in the most varied spaces of existence. Yet, these position-takings are not a direct reflection of agents' social positions expressed through the dispositions that the latter produce. Rather, they depend on the encounter between agents' mutually informing dispositions and stock of capital, and the specific logic of the field where dispositions realise themselves (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1990b; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Swartz 1997). Wacquant (2007, pp. 16, 19) underscores the relational logic of this system, where he notes that not only 'the key concepts of *habitus and field designate bundles of relations*', but they are also 'relational in the additional sense that they function fully *only in relation to one another*'. Furthermore, Bourdieu considers capital as 'a social relation, i.e. an energy which only exists and produces its effects in the field in which it is produced and reproduced' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 113). This means that practice can only be fully understood as emerging from the inter-relation among the set of relations incorporated as *habitus* and that which is inscribed in the field of practice at hand, each of the two being defined by the relative distribution of relevant forms of capital among individuals and 'objective classes'. With respect to my study, this approach of analysis has the merit of directing the focus of attention on the mutual influence among participants' relative stock of specific capital and its change over time, the particular logics of the different, intersecting fields where they are involved, such as that of higher education or their family and peer networks, and their practices through time. As such, its adoption enables us to counter both explanations of practice that attribute excessive responsibility for dispositions and position-takings to the individual, and those that by overlooking the mediatory role on position-takings of the encounter among capital,

habitus and field do not contemplate the possibility for change (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 121; 1990b, p. 52).

3.3. Reproduction VS transformation

One of the most enduring criticisms addressed to Bourdieu is that he provides an overly deterministic understanding of practice, which underplays the possibility for conscious, purposeful agency, and ultimately leads to the reproduction of agents' relative position in social space (Jenkins 1982; Nash 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Swartz 1997; McNay 2001; Throop and Murphy 2002; Reay 2004a; Bourdieu 2005). The question of the extent to which his framework recognises and allows for the exploration of changes in material and symbolic structures, and in individuals' positions within them, is central to my research, as this informs its capacity to make sense of key issues such as minority ethnic working-class educational 'achievement', occupational mobility, and of their implications for identity.

In this section, I will engage with these critiques to highlight how dynamism and uncertainty, rather than mechanistic reproduction, are in fact integral to Bourdieu's conception of practice, and will focus in particular on the potential for agency and reflexivity that is inscribed in the notion of habitus (Bourdieu 1990b, 1993, 2005; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; McNay 2001; Lizardo 2003; Reay 2004a; Ingram 2011a). On the other hand, I also maintain that his emphasis on structures is what gives this conception its explanatory force, as it grounds the possibility for reflexive agency and change in specific configurations of the relations between these structures in their objective and internalised form, and draws attention to the psychic costs that result to the individual from the inertia of habitus (McNay 2001; Ingram 2011a, 2011b). Both of these lines of argument will be taken up again in the following section, and developed further in terms of their salience for the analysis of intersecting axes of inequality such as gender and 'race' / ethnicity and of related struggles for the symbolic re-signification of classed, gendered and racialised identities (McNay 1999, 2001, 2004; Fowler 2003; Lawler 2004; Dillabough 2004).

Critics of Bourdieu's work have long contested its fundamental inability to effectively deliver what it explicitly intended to do, that is to transcend the conceptual opposition between structures and agency in accounting for practice (Jenkins 1982; Nash 1990; Throop and Murphy 2002). It is claimed, in particular, that his model, where practices are determined by the internalisation of social structures and tend to their re-production, 'negates the theory of action,

blurs the concept of choice, and introduces confusion, circularity and pseudo-determinism' (Nash 1990, p. 445). Accusations of determinism have been directed especially towards the notion of habitus, which is seen as characterised by an overestimation of 'automaticity, habituation and non-conscious processes' at the expenses of 'consciously felt goals, feelings and ideals' (Throop and Murphy 2002, p. 199). Yet, I concur with counter-critiques in contending that despite the aforementioned determinism of some formulations, and Bourdieu's own prevailing concern with instances of reproduction rather than transformation of structures, there is nothing inherently deterministic in his theory of practice and concept of habitus (McNay 2001; Lizardo 2003; Reay 2004a; Ingram 2011a). Rather, such interpretations appear to derive from a cursory reading of his work as well as a failure to fully appreciate the implications for practice of habitus being produced, and finding expression, in intersecting and relatively autonomous fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 2005; Ingram 2011a, pp. 41-49). A more thorough reading of and engagement with his conceptual framework makes therefore attempts at 'reconciling' it with theories of agency by hybridizing the notion of habitus, as proposed for example by Elder-Vass (2007), seem unnecessary and redundant. Far from negating any 'recognition of self, or choice or action' (Nash 1990, p. 434), Bourdieu's theory of practice as a 'practical sense' can better be seen as enabling us to recognise how processes of identity construction, preference formation and expression of practices are always constrained by specific and multiple structural influences.

As we have seen, habitus is the product of the conditionings, as necessities and possibilities, inscribed in the agent's objective conditions of existence and socialisation, which itself produces perceptions, dispositions and actions that are 'compatible' with these conditionings. Contrary to deterministic readings of habitus, however, Bourdieu clarifies:

'I said habitus so as *not* to say habit – that is, the generative (if not creative) capacity inscribed in the system of dispositions as an *art*, in the strongest sense of practical mastery, and in particular as an *ars inveniendi*. In short, [commentators] keep to a mechanistic vision of a notion constructed against mechanism' (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 122).

Habitus is thus thought of by Bourdieu as 'a practical mastery of invention', a 'transposable matrix' (Lizardo 2003, p. 392) which enables one to deal with the most varied situations by shaping their understanding of and responses to the circumstances they encounter. 'Choice' is precisely what habitus allows, although not only within the boundaries defined by the external set of opportunities and constraints that one faces, but also within the limits imposed by habitus itself on what is 'thinkable' for 'the likes of us' (Bourdieu 1990b; Lizardo 2003; Reay 2004a). In other words, being the internalisation of the constraints and opportunities that characterise one's conditions of

existence, habitus pre-consciously perceives some courses of action as plausible, others as conceivable, and yet others as unthinkable. It is flexible, and as such potentially leading to very different and even contrasting courses of action, but still within the limits imposed by the internalisation of objective structures:

‘Because the habitus is an infinite capacity for generating products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning’ (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 55).

To the above, it must be added that habitus is not only shaped by agents’ objective position within the field, that is by the amount and composition of their specific capital, but also by their individual and class trajectory vis-à-vis that of others (Bourdieu 1984). Crucially, moreover, it is formed and finds expression in multiple fields, governed by specific logics and power relations (Bourdieu 1990b; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Habitus can therefore be seen as integrating the conditionings deriving from subsequent individual and collective experiences, taking place across different, intersecting fields. It always retains a certain inertia, due to both its tendency to make experiences which contribute to confirm it more likely than those that generate tensions, and to its influence on the agent’s very perception of those experiences (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 133). Nevertheless, it is ‘permeable and responsive to what is going on’ (Reay 2004a, p. 434), and as such transforming itself ‘from restructuring to restructuring’ (Bourdieu 1977, p. 87). All of this contributes to bring in further complexity and potential for dynamism:

‘Being the product of history, [habitus] is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal!’ (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 135).

Bourdieu (1977, p. 87) refers in particular to the mutual influence of dispositions developed within the family and school environments, and asserts that while early socialisation experiences have a pre-eminent influence, with the dispositions thus acquired affecting the experience of schooling, such an experience can itself be transformative of initial dispositions.

As it engages in these fields and is shaped by them, habitus may or may not find itself in concordant, homologous positions, that is, in positions reflecting its conditions of formation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 2005). When it encounters conditions similar to those of which it is the product habitus finds itself ‘like a “fish in water”’: it does not feel the weight of the

water, and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu 2007b, p. 127). Discordant positions exert however on habitus structural ‘double-binds’, which give way to a ‘destabilized habitus, torn by contradiction and internal division, generating suffering’ (Bourdieu 2000, p. 160). Reay (2004a, p. 435) envisages for example the related range of possibilities as a continuum, at the extremes of which habitus is either re-confirmed or transformed. Significantly, she points out that this transformation is brought about by ‘a process that either raises or lowers an individual's expectations’, which is what is likely to happen, for instance, to working-class students participating in higher education or to migrants who settle in a new country. Ingram's (2011a, pp. 55-57, 2011b) analysis of the ways in which working-class pupils' habitus is modified by the encounter with the school, and the deriving typology of abandoned, re-confirmed, reconciled and destabilised habitus, highlights its flexibility and capacity of adaptation, as well as showing its inertia and the psychological effort that result from this in the process of restructuring.

Bourdieu's most recent work stresses additionally the elements of consciousness that are involved in the restructuring of habitus, both in terms of a conscious perception of pre-constituted dispositions arising from experiences that challenge them, and of conscious intention potentially initiating and guiding action that leads to their transformation:

‘Being a product of history, [habitus] may be *changed by history*, that is by new experiences, education or training (which implies that aspects of what remains unconscious in habitus be made at least partially conscious and explicit). Dispositions [...] may be changed by historical action oriented by intention and consciousness and using pedagogic devices’ (Bourdieu 2005, p. 45).

This quotation illustrates how, in contrast to readings of dispositions and practices as strictly determined by objective structures, reflexivity and purposeful agency are in fact part and parcel of habitus, and are ‘in constant interaction’ with pre-conscious dispositions (Ingram 2011a, pp. 44-45). In particular, agency is conditioned, rather than determined, by pre-conscious dispositions, but can be directed towards courses of action that contribute to reshape them, as well as involved in processes of self-reflection on those very dispositions. For Bourdieu (2007b, p. 133), reflexivity (what he calls ‘socio-analysis’) is encouraged by the disjuncture between habitus and field(s), and is thus more likely to occur when agents find themselves in ‘new’ fields or in different objective positions. This limitation of reflexivity to instances of discordance between a ‘well-developed habitus’ and a field or structural position different from the one of which it is the product has however been criticised by Reay (2004a, p. 438), who sees ‘disjuncture and the resulting striving, resistance and / or new awareness’ as potentially taking place as habitus is being formed, and as such as possibly constitutive of it.

In addressing the question of whether habitus still represents a useful concept ‘to account [...] for the tremendous changes we observe in contemporary societies, including at the level of daily life’, Bourdieu (2005, pp. 43-47) responds:

‘Habitus [...] must be used in relation to the notion of field. [...] In such fields, [agents’] actions, words, feelings, deeds, works, and so on, stem from the confrontation between dispositions and positions, which are more often than not mutually adjusted, but may be at odds, discrepant, divergent, even in some cases contradictory. In such cases [...] innovations may appear [when] misfits, who are put into question by structures (operating through the positions) are able to challenge the structure, sometimes to the point of remaking it’.

In contemporary Western societies, agents’ engagement in varied and diversified fields, where they take up a number of different roles, makes the perfect alignment of dispositions and objective positions that tends to engender the reproduction of objective and internalised structures less likely, thus opening up increased opportunities for changes in both. In relation to education, for example, the participation of working-class and / or minority ethnic students in environments dominated by the white middle-classes, such as private schools or elite universities, is likely to prompt in these students a heightened sense of self-awareness and a re-structuring of their habitus. On the other hand, if this participation undergoes a sustained growth, the forms of cultural capital that are privileged by the institution can become increasingly detached from those brought in by students, with the consequent manifestation of pedagogic problems (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, pp. 99-100). Should the proportion of students experiencing this discrepancy surpass a certain threshold, we might expect pedagogic problems to become unsustainable for the institution, leading possibly to the restructuring of teaching methods and / or curriculum.

3.4. Gender, ‘race’/ ethnicity and intersectionality

So far I have assessed whether Bourdieu’s framework allows for agency and the transformation of both internalised and objective structures. A second question that warrants consideration in the context of this research is that of the usefulness of his conceptual toolbox in making sense of axes of inequality other than class. Indeed, Bourdieu’s own engagement with other ‘forms of division, domination and exclusion’ (Sayer 2005, cit. in Reay 2004a, p. 436), such as gender, ‘race’, ethnicity, religion, age and sexuality, to name a few, has been very limited, and his definition of these as ‘secondary principles of division’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 107) has troubled

feminist sociologists for implying a lesser relevance compared to class (McCall 1992; Skeggs 2004). In those instances where he has explored these issues in more depth, moreover, as is the case for gender in 'Masculine Domination' (Bourdieu 2001), his analysis of the processes underlying and ensuring the persistence of gender inequalities has once again been accused of excessive determinism and inability to give adequate recognition to processes of emancipation (McNay 1999, 2001; Fowler 2003). Here, I examine some of the interpretations that have been given by feminist sociologists of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of gender and of the insights that can be gained through such a perspective (McCall 1992; McNay 2004). I relate this discussion to Bourdieu's understanding of symbolic violence. In doing so, I argue for the value of his approach in accounting for intersecting inequalities as embodied and reproduced through specific social structures and power relations within multiple fields, and as such as durable but not immutable (McNay 1999, 2001; Fowler 2003; Dillabough 2004; Lawler 2004).

The first aspect to pin down relates to the structural and structuring role of gender, ethnicity and so on in Bourdieu's theory of practice, that is, of the ways in which these dimensions of identity intervene in defining social class positions and dispositions. Focusing on gender, McCall (1992) offers two possible readings of this relation, of which she privileges the second. In the first, although it is acknowledged that class position is defined by many indicators, occupation is seen as the 'primary organizing variable for positions in social structure', with 'gender, ethnicity, age and geographical place of residence' operating as 'secondary determinants' (McCall 1992, p. 839-840). The second reading, on the other hand, 'rejects the singular primacy of occupational and educational capital while examining the interaction of gender with class distinction through the lens of embodied cultural capital' (McCall 1992, p. 839). According to this interpretation, gender is 'secondary' in that it is 'hidden' within the class structure, but is still 'constitutive' rather than 'derivative' of it, as it functions as 'a distributing mechanism *within the* social group' that works through (gendered) embodied cultural capital and dispositions (McCall 1992, p. 842, 852).

Bourdieu's writings appear to support this understanding of secondary principles of division as 'hidden', as he states that 'social class [is defined] by the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 106). When we consider the effects of occupation on distinction then, and consequently on practices, it is not the occupation per se that defines it, but rather the complexity of its distribution in terms of other categories of social identity such as gender, ethnicity, and age. On the other hand, Bourdieu also asserts that 'the factors constituting the constructed class do not all depend on one another to the same extent' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 107). Instead, 'the volume

and composition of capital [as identified by occupation] give a specific form and value to the determinations which the other factors (age, sex, place of residence etc.) impose on practices' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 107). Again, it is not age, nor sex, nor place of residence per se that defines practices, but the way in which these are inflected according to the agent's relative stock of economic and cultural capital, which is why, for example, 'there are as many ways of realising femininity as there are classes and class fractions' (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 107-108). Still, this cultural capital is itself gendered, as it encompasses gendered dispositions in the form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 105-106). Thus, we can see how this dimension of identity is in fact constitutive of the class structure as it functions as a principle of inclusion / exclusion with respect to occupations that privilege a certain kind of cultural capital compared to another. From these considerations, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of agents' relative positions in social space and related dispositions emerges as a strongly intersectional one, with secondary principles both characterising and being characterised in their expression by occupational and educational status.

An especially convincing reformulation of how gender can be conceived of by taking a Bourdieusian perspective has been put forward by McNay (2004, p. 175), who advances the idea of 'gender as a *lived social relation*', as opposed to 'gender as a structural location' within either material / economic or symbolic / discursive structures. This strongly resonates with Bourdieu's theorisation of social class as realising itself through habitus, as the internalisation and manifestation of relations of distinction. I contend that it holds significant analytical potential, as it encourages us to pay attention to the multiple ways in which gender inequalities 'are expressed [...] differently through social structures, discourses, relations and bodily representations' (Dillabough 2004, p. 494). Central to this understanding of gender and gender domination as taking shape in the reality of experiences that are fundamentally relational is the notion of symbolic violence, which habitus both exercises and is subjected to (McNay 1999, 2004; Lawler 2004). Bourdieu writes in this respect that 'individuals or groups are objectively defined not only by what they are but by what they are reputed to be', with this depending on both 'material properties, starting with the body', and on 'symbolic properties which are nothing other than material properties when perceived and appreciated in their mutual relationship, that is, as distinctive properties' (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 135; see also 1998, p. 9). Habitus, which incorporates and expresses the conditionings specific to a particular relational position, is responsible for both the production of 'objectively classifiable' dispositions and for their classification (Bourdieu 1984, p. 170). As such, it is at once exercising judgment and subjected to judgement, involving a 'sense of one's place' as well as a 'sense of the place of others' (Bourdieu 1989, p. 19). Yet,

‘in the determination of the collective classification [...] not all judgements have the same weight, and the dominant groups are able to impose the scale of preferences most favourable to their own products’ (Bourdieu 1990b, p.139; see also 1989, pp. 21-22).

Among agents’ properties, ranging from clothing to body shape, to ways of speaking, to leisure activities and formal qualifications, the symbolic value they are attributed varies in relation to their objective position in social space, with those associated to dominant groups being attributed more value. Symbolic violence is the process through which these arbitrary hierarchies of value are normalised and integrated in common, taken-for-granted beliefs (Bourdieu’s ‘doxa’), thereby contributing to legitimise the power of certain groups over others by contributing to the ‘domestication of the dominated’ (Bourdieu 2002, p. 167).

The role of symbolic violence in ensuring the persistence of gender, class and ethnic domination, among other types, is apparent where we consider how associated power relations are inscribed through habitus in agents’ mind-sets, dispositions and bodies, which are in turn hierarchically valued. Habitus, as noted by Lawler (2004, p. 113), is therefore

‘an important means through which ‘large scale’ social inequalities (such as class and gender) are made real, and are also made to inhere within the person, so that it is person themselves who can be judged and found wanting, and person themselves who can be made to bear the ‘hidden injuries’ of inequality’.

In this sense, classed, gendered and racialised ways of being are differentially judged as (un)worthy depending on where they stand in relation to those of agents in dominant social positions. And while individuals and groups can resist, and attempt to challenge, such positioning, there are some who are more able than others, because of their objective position and related habitus, to make that judgment count (McNay 2001; Dillabough 2004; Lawler 2004).

Habitus can thus be seen, to use Reay’s (2004a, p. 436) words, as ‘a method for analysing the dominance of dominant groups in society and the domination of subordinate groups’, and can as such be applied to the analysis of multiple, intersecting dimensions of inequality. Importantly, the adoption of such framework enables us to bring to the foreground the relations between agents’ classed, gendered and racialised positionings within unequal social structures, the dispositions they express in the various fields where they engage, and the differential value that is attributed to these dispositions. The exposure of the arbitrariness of value judgments that derive from essentially arbitrary social relations provides a significant means through which we can start challenging ‘the taken for granted’ (Lawler 2004, p. 113). By drawing attention to these processes, we engage in

what Bourdieu (1990b, p. 141; see also 1989, pp. 20-21) calls ‘subversive action’, the efficacy of which ‘consists in the power to bring to consciousness, and so modify, the categories of thought [...] through which distributions are perceived and appreciated’.

On the other hand, Bourdieu’s framework also allows us to acknowledge the limits imposed by unequal social structures on agents’ capacity to effectively modify these categories of thought in such a way as to promote and establish a positive re-evaluation of their (classed, gendered, and racialised) habitus and identities. In this sense, the unpacking of the processes through which symbolic violence is exerted and experienced is one of the keys to understanding how the construction and negotiation of social identities is embedded in, and informed by, specific ‘context[s] of visible and latent power relations’ (McNay 2004, p. 188). As I have shown in the previous section in relation to objective and internalised structures, Bourdieu’s theory does not a priori foreclose the possibility for habitus and / or field to be transformed, but helps instead to define the parameters that enable and favour this transformation. Likewise, and as a specific instance of structural change having to do with the relative distribution of symbolic capital, Bourdieu does not appear to deny the possibility for agents to (re)negotiate the meanings and symbolic value that are attached to their ‘group’ identities. Rather, a more in-depth engagement with situations of potential misalignment between positions and dispositions, such as when habitus finds itself in a ‘new’ field or structural position, can aid the identification of the conditions that make reflexivity and consequent attempts at symbolic re-signification possible (McNay 1999, 2001; Fowler 2003; Dillabough 2004).

Opportunities for such disjuncture to take place are intensified, as we have seen, both by the proliferation in modern societies of ‘distinct fields of action’, and by the increased entry of agents sharing similar conditions of existence in fields where they have been traditionally under-represented, as for women in male-dominated jobs (McNay 1999, pp. 106-107), or for the young women of Bangladeshi background of this research as they take part in higher education. In these situations, reflexivity becomes more likely, opening up the potential for the questioning and challenging of established material and symbolic structures. In linking to specific objective conditions the likelihood of individuals’ and groups’ attempts at, and success in, modifying such structures, Bourdieu reminds us however of the limits imposed by unequal conditions of existence on agents’ ability to reshape identity (McNay 1999, p. 113). The adoption of such a perspective encourages therefore to explore the conditions and processes that contribute to shape agents’ differential capacity to (re)negotiate the meanings and value that are commonly attached to their social identities. In other words, it provides us with a framework for an intersectional analysis of

symbolic as well as material inequalities which helps for example to see how ‘the efficacy of certain types of identity politics often presupposes access to economic and social capital denied to other social actors’ (McNay 2001, p. 148). In the context of my research, particular attention will be paid in this sense to the role of class locations and trajectories through participation in higher education in informing not only the differential educational attainment and employment prospects of the young women interviewed, but also their possibilities for the (re)negotiation of racialised, gendered and religious identities.

3.5. Conceptual and political issues around ‘race’ and ethnicity

To this point, I have engaged with Bourdieu’s theoretical framework and its main critiques to make the case for its usefulness in analysing and explaining transformation as well as reproduction in material and symbolic structures of inequality related to multiple and intersecting dimensions of social identity, and in agents’ positionings within them. In this section, I turn my attention to some of the major conceptual and political issues which are raised by the use of the notions of ‘race’ and ethnicity. I focus in particular on Gilroy’s understanding of ‘race’ as especially expressive of its salience in informing identity and action, as well as of the relational and intersectional character of racialised identities and experiences. I also consider how ‘race’ and ethnicity have been treated with respect to one another, and how different conceptions of these notions and debates around their meaning, significance and usage can be better understood as located within specific socio-historical contexts and as linked to distinct political and theoretical concerns. I finally advance my own conceptualisation of ‘race’ and ethnicity as ‘relational ontological spaces’ (Anthias 1998, p. 510) where individuals and ‘groups’ are hierarchically positioned with respect to one another. I briefly reconnect this approach with Bourdieu’s emphasis on agents’ relative ‘stock’ of capital as key to informing their dispositions, practices and outcomes, and highlight the analytical potential of such a perspective for the investigation of social inequalities.

The need to acknowledge the significance of ‘race’ as a powerful dimension of social identity and inequality, and to understand this as distinct from though inextricably linked with social class, has been forcefully called for by Gilroy (1987) in his classic monograph ‘There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack’. As well as offering a critical analysis of racism in post-war Britain, this study crucially challenges the sociological approaches to the study of ‘race’ and ethnicity which were dominant at the time and advances some key points regarding the conceptualisation and analysis of ‘race’. Gilroy’s (1992, pp. xvii, 2-20; 1994, pp. 50-51) critique is in this respect twofold.

On the one hand, he warns against the dangers of class reductionism, where class is attributed either exclusive ontological and epistemological validity or primacy over 'race' and racialised outcomes are explained as effects of capitalist relations of production and consumption (e.g. Rex and Tomlinson 1979; Sivanandan 1982; Miles 1984). On the other, he criticises the treatment of racism as independent of other relations of power and the tendency to consider ethnic categories and cultural divisions as absolute, both of which he sees as marking much of the 'race relations' literature of the time. In contrast to these approaches, Gilroy (1992, pp. 19-20) maintains:

'The primary problem for analysis of racial antagonism [...] must be the manner in which racial meanings, solidarity and identities provide the basis for action. Different patterns of "racial" activity and political struggle [...] are not conceived as a straightforward alternative to class struggle at the level of economic analysis, but must be recognized to be potentially both an alternative to class consciousness at the political level and as a factor in the contingent processes in which classes are themselves formed.'

Far from indicating any essential attribute of individuals and 'groups', 'race' is thus seen from this perspective as a 'social and political construction' (Gilroy 1992, p. 35) that is generative of action, the boundaries and meanings of which are open to struggles. In this construction, skin colour enters into play in the 'formation and reproduction of "race"' as it is turned through ideological work into a signifier of difference which comes to ascribe 'a variety of social effects' (Gilroy 1992, p. 36). This is a strongly relational and intersectional conceptualisation of 'race', which requires that attention is placed in analysis on processes of 'racialisation' and on the 'the complex interplay between struggles based around different forms of social subordination' in the definition of racial meanings and identities (Gilroy 1992, p. 20).

Within this framework of analysis, the emphasis is thus on the processes by which racial meanings are defined, struggled over and subject to change. It is of central relevance that racialisation can involve for Gilroy a multiplicity of signifiers of difference, ranging from phenotypical to cultural variation, which come through 'elaborate ideological work' to form the basis of 'concrete systems of differentiation' (Gilroy 1992, p. 35). According to him, racism should not, consequently, be treated as unitary but should instead be recognised as multifarious, changing and contextually defined:

'The concept [of race formation] supports the idea that racial meanings can change, can be struggled over. Rather than talking about racism in the singular analysts should therefore be talking about racisms in the plural. These are not just different over time but may vary within the same social formation or historical conjuncture.' (Gilroy 1992, p. 35)

Drawing on Fanon (1967), Gilroy (1992, p. 38; 1994) points in particular to the emergence of a 'new racism' which assumes a reified and homogeneous cultural essence rather than biological inferiority as the marker of difference among individuals and groups. As highlighted by Solomos and Back (1996, p. 18), 'the central feature of these processes [of racialisation and racism] is that the qualities of social groups are fixed, made natural, confined within a pseudo-biologically defined culturalism'. Conceived as static, absolute and binary, it is racialised minorities' assumed cultural difference which is seen as being responsible for the multiple disadvantages they experience in various social domains (Bhavnani et al. 2005, p. 11). In this sense, different forms of racism can be seen as ways of exerting symbolic violence as conceptualised in the previous section, and therefore of securing the reproduction of existing racialised structures and relations of power. Anthias (1992, p. 432) convincingly argues that racism, 'occurs when race or ethnic categorisation is accompanied by discourses and practices of inferiorisation and subordination' that function to 'deny full participation in economic, social, political and cultural life'. According to her, this importantly 'involves the ability to impose those beliefs [...] as hegemonic' (Anthias 1992, p. 432), and is thus a prerogative of dominant racialised 'groups'. Over the last half century, the aforementioned 'cultural racism' has become increasingly prominent (Goldberg 1992, 1993; Bhavnani et al. 2005). A pertinent case in point is anti-Muslim racism, which 'relies on notions of the "non-civilised", and supposedly inferior and un-desirable, character of Islamic religion and way of life' (Anthias 1992, p. 433).

Gilroy (1994, pp. 50, 55-57) underscores the risks of such essentialist and reductive notions of 'culture' and cultural difference, which he sees as informing Thatcher's 'New Right' and contemporary approaches to anti-racism alike. In particular, he warns against the divisive effects of these conceptualisations and related tendencies towards ethnic absolutism and fragmentation vis-à-vis 'the inclusive and openly politicised definitions of "race" which were a notable feature of the late seventies' (Gilroy 1994, p. 56). In so doing, Gilroy (1994, p. 57) does not dismiss the salience of 'culture' and identity, but stresses instead their fluidity, hybridity and ever-changing character, as well as highlighting the 'inherently political character' of 'race'. It is to be noted that a number of critiques have in fact been moved to the use of the term black as a political and analytical category by a number of British scholars of minority ethnic origins (Solomos and Back 1999, pp. 134-135). Modood (1988, 1992, 2005), in particular, has powerfully advocated for the recognition of the specific instances brought forth by South Asian 'groups' alongside those of African-Caribbeans, and for a conceptualisation of ethnicity which would adequately account for the significance of religion in shaping identities and experiences. Brah (1994, p. 128) has noted in this respect that the

usage of the category of black in post-war Britain until the late '80s did not imply any reference to culture, but was instead explicitly intended to bring together the distinct though common struggles against racism of differently racialised minorities. As such, she maintains, this category cannot be seen as excluding the perspectives and claims of South Asian 'groups'. Still, she rightly acknowledges that we need to remain attentive to the implications for different 'groups' of having been 'racialised differently under varying circumstances, and on the basis of different signifiers of "difference"', and of being therefore relationally and hierarchically positioned with respect to one another within racist 'structures of representation' (Brah 1994, p. 133).

These debates, which I have only just touched upon superficially, give us a sense of the highly contested and politically charged character of the terms 'race' and ethnicity. They also highlight the need to understand the different usages and meanings of these notions as historically situated and contextually defined, and as linked to specific political, analytical and theoretical endeavours. This is further illustrated by Hall's (1994) discussion of the shift towards an increasing recognition of ethnic diversity which took place in the British politics of black cultural representation between the late '80s and early '90s. The term black was initially used, according to Hall (1994, p. 252), as an 'organising category of a new politics of resistance' which by referring to a 'common experience of racism and marginalisation' cut across ethnic differences. The period in which he writes is marked instead for him by 'the end of the essential black subject' (Hall 1994, p. 254), entailing a realisation of the rich diversity of histories, experiences and identities that are encompassed by this category. This leads firstly to recognise that the notion of black is fundamentally 'politically and culturally *constructed*' (Hall 1994, p. 254). Secondly, it engenders a heightened appreciation for the intersectional nature of 'the central issues of race', which are viewed as 'always appear[ing] historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions [...] of class, of gender and ethnicity' (Hall 1994, p. 255). What is at stake in the debates that characterise this shift is for Hall (1994, p. 256) 'the meaning of the term "ethnicity" itself'. In this respect, he argues for a re-signification of this term, which challenges dominant attached connotations of insurmountable cultural difference and inferiority of minority ethnic 'groups', and moves instead towards 'a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture' (Hall 1994, p. 258). In asserting that 'we are all [...] *ethnically* located', Hall (1994, p. 258) draws therefore attention to the diversity of ethnic identities of individuals and 'groups' as well as to the relationally and contextually constructed character of such identities. In particular, he illuminates the power differential that underlies these constructions, by showing how Englishness is itself an ethnicity, developed in the

specific historical context of imperialism and colonialism, which places itself as ‘the norm’ and through its lenses defines a pathologised ‘other’ (Hall 1997).

Having provided a broad overview of some of the main political and conceptual issues that have informed sociological discussions of ‘race’ and ethnicity in Britain, it is necessary at this point to make my own position on the matter explicit and to detail how the terms have been used in the present work. I see the difference between ‘race’ and ethnicity as having to do with the markers of the boundaries around which the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is constructed, and with the implications this has in terms of specific material and symbolic conditionings being faced by individuals and ‘groups’. In particular, I take ‘racial’ boundaries as being constructed around phenotypical difference, and especially skin colour, while ethnic boundaries are understood as being defined around common origins, whether real or imagined (Bhavnani et al. 2005). ‘Racial’ and ethnic ‘groups’ are conceived of here as socially constructed categories of social identity and differentiation whose boundaries, meanings and defining features are fluid, contextual and struggled upon both within and among such ‘groups’, albeit as categories which have very real material effects on those who are either included or excluded from them (Bulmer and Solomos 1999, p. 5; Anthias 1992, p. 425). It is as such that they are of particular interest to the investigation and explanation of social inequalities, and are employed in my analysis of the outlooks and experiences of British-born young women of Bangladeshi heritage.

Similarly to the theorisations of class and gender discussed in the previous sections, ‘race’ and ethnicity are conceptualised in this research as ‘relational ontological spaces’ (Anthias 1998, p. 510), where individuals and ‘groups’ are hierarchically positioned with respect to one another according to the type and amount of resources they hold. Different ‘racial’ and ethnic ‘groups’ are characterised by power differentials among them in terms of access to material and symbolic resources, and of capacity to determine the value that those resources hold in different contexts (i.e. to turn them into capital). As noted by Anthias (1998, p. 513), such a conceptual and analytical framework:

‘reaffirms the central role of “struggle around resource allocation” [...] within different kinds of arenas or ontological domains [...] where the production and reproduction of valuational and material inequalities take place, and where relational and antagonistic social relations are embodied and performed’.

From this perspective, the exploration and explanation of social inequalities thus requires that attention is directed to the processes by which access to valued resources is enabled or precluded on

the basis of class, gender, 'race', and ethnicity among other dimensions of social identity, and to how this functions to shape individuals' and 'groups'' outcomes in different contexts. Bourdieu's understanding of practice is in this sense especially helpful, as it encourages us to consider which and whose resources (including the body, as embodied cultural capital and habitus) are accorded value, under what conditions they function as capital, and to what effects. Given the conceptualisation of 'race' and ethnicity outlined in this section, the Bourdieusian-informed approach that characterises my analysis of participants' narratives invites us to pose a number of questions. In particular, it prompts the examination of the ways in which these young women's ethnic, racial, religious and national identities are relationally and situationally constructed in different contexts and through different processes of racialisation. It also begs the question of how their positioning within each of these dimensions of social identity is informed by access to specific resources, and in turn contributes to inform it. Finally and equally importantly, it raises the issue of how each of these positionings, as well as those in terms of class and gender, intervene in defining identification within other dimensions of identity, and of how these multiple positionings intersect with one another in shaping practices and outcomes in different contexts.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter has laid out the main features of Bourdieu's theoretical framework. It has also considered two major lines of critique that have been addressed to his theory of practice and are of particular relevance to this research: its assumed inherent determinism, and its limited explanatory capacity to inequalities of class. I have assessed the main arguments that have been advanced in this respect, and argued for the applicability of this framework to the understanding of both reproduction and changes taking place in material and symbolic relations of power among individuals and groups, which are centred on multiple, intersecting and co-constituting dimensions of identity. In particular, Bourdieu conceptualises agents' schemata of perception as deriving from the integration of successively internalised structural conditionings, which arise from their relative objective positions in different fields. The perspectives expressed by individuals and 'groups', and the practices they engage in, are consequently to be interpreted as being engendered by the interplay between these schemata, the availability of social, cultural and economic resources, and the structure and logics of the intersecting spaces of relations where they are involved.

I have argued that Bourdieu's theorisation of practice enables us to examine and explain those experiences that might contribute to the reproduction of class and ethnic inequalities in

education and employment, such as difficulties with the academic workload or a 'limited' range of aspirations. This framework also helps to explain those processes that might concur to closing these gaps, such as the high rates of increase in university attendance of minority ethnic students irrespective of class origins. I have additionally maintained that a Bourdieusian analytical approach can be applied to the analysis of processes of identity construction involving the negotiation of symbolic as well as material inequalities. In both these respects, this approach calls for a focus on the distinctive opportunities and constraints that derive for participants from being of working-class or middle-class origins, Bangladeshi background, female gender and Islamic faith. In particular, in terms of their relative stock of material and symbolic resources that are of value in the contexts where they engage, such as family, peer networks, university and broader society.

In the next chapter, I turn to contextualise my study by outlining some of the main characteristics of the socio-demographic profile of the UK resident population of Bangladeshi heritage. In doing so, I show the importance of post-war Bangladeshi immigrants' histories of migration and settlement in British society in understanding current patterns of disadvantage among people of Bangladeshi origins. I also look at current demographics and residential patterns, ethnic and religious identities, and consider some of the major changes that are taking place in relation to participation in education and employment. This discussion will serve to provide an understanding of the social-structural positioning and trajectory in British-society of individuals of Bangladeshi background, that is, of those factors which contribute to shape dispositions and access to economic, social and cultural resources.

Chapter 4

A profile of the UK resident population of Bangladeshi origins

4.1. Introduction

This chapter sets out the context for my research by outlining some of the main characteristics of the UK resident population of Bangladeshi background. I first trace its history of migration and early settlement, and consider the main implications of this for current socio-economic conditions. I then go on to sketch the population's general socio-demographic profile, touching on aspects such as age distribution, geographical location and spatial concentration, religious affiliation, and ethnic identity. The last section will be dedicated to exploring in more detail patterns and trends of participation in education and employment, and the explanations that have so far been advanced to account for them. While acknowledging that an analytical focus on particular ethnic 'groups' might risk obscuring other relevant dimensions of incorporation (Glick Schiller 2008), I argue that such an approach is still needed where there appear to be inequalities which are structured along the lines of 'race' and 'ethnicity' (Esser 2004). Insofar as being recognized as Bangladeshi contributes to shape the opportunity and constraints one faces in everyday life (Salway 2008), there is an ongoing need to understand how this is the case. Rather than being exclusively concerned with ethnicity, however, or assuming it as the most relevant factor, I will attempt through this chapter to highlighting the interplay of multiple structures of ethnicity, class, religion, gender, age, and locality in defining specific configurations of opportunities and constraints informing patterns of socio-economic incorporation.

4.2. History of migration and settlement

The vast majority of British residents of Bangladeshi background (around 95%) either come from or can trace their origins to the Sylhet district, located in the north-east corner of the country, with smaller numbers originating from the south-eastern regions of Chittagong and Comilla (Asghar 1997; DCLG 2009). Recent migration from Bangladesh is on the other hand mainly represented by students and skilled migrants coming from areas other than Sylhet, bringing increasing diversity to the UK Bangladeshi population (DCLG 2009). The first immigrants, mostly

landless peasants, started coming to Britain during the 18th and 19th centuries, working under very hard conditions as seamen (*lascars*), cooks and cleaners on British merchant navy ships and travelling to port cities like London and Cardiff, and eventually jumping ship in the search for better employment opportunities (Gardner and Shukur 1994; IOM and MEWO 2004). When the Second World War ended, the coincidence of the conflict between India and Pakistan on one side and the post-war economic boom in the UK on the other encouraged more people to migrate, taking advantage of the links established by their fellow countrymen. These early migrants found stable employment in the factories of industrial cities, facing local labour shortages, and formed communities which were to be the nucleus of later Bangladeshi settlement (Asghar 1997).

Immigration from Bangladesh increased steadily during the late '50s and early '60s, fostered by the growing demand for unskilled labour in industrial cities, and reached a peak just before the passing of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, with men coming in large numbers in the attempt to 'beat the ban' (Asghar 1997). Under the 'voucher' system established by the 1962 legislation, migrants could only enter the UK if sponsored by an employer in order to cover an available position. This had the consequence of further reinforcing the 'chain' pattern of migration, as men from Sylhet were able to take advantage of the sponsorships arranged for them by their friends and kinsmen to work in British factories (Gardner and Shukur 1994). Patterns of settlement thus followed available employment opportunities, with Bangladeshi immigrants mainly concentrated in the East End of London, especially in Spitalfields, and in the industrial cities of the north such as Birmingham, Bradford and Manchester. Here, Bangladeshis found employment in lower status jobs, with hard working conditions and poor pay (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Asghar 1997). For these men, who did not see themselves as settlers at the time but only thought of their stay as provisional, these jobs afforded higher earnings than they would have ever been able to make in their country. Having the intention to eventually go back to Bangladesh, they worked long hours and lived frugally, in order to send home as much money as possible (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Asghar 1997). Yet, as noted by Gardner and Shukur, many of these people moved on to working in other businesses once they had accumulated some finances, especially in restaurants and clothing factories. Through subsequent changes in legislation which took place throughout the '60s migrants' entry in the UK was then gradually restricted, until the possibility to enter for economic reasons finally came to a halt with the 1971 Immigration Act (Asghar 1997).

Since the early '70s, migration patterns from Bangladesh substantially started to change. With the legal stop to economic migration and growing restrictions to free movement between the two countries, men were increasingly being re-joined by their wives and children, who gained

official entrance to Britain as dependants (Gardner and Shukur 1994). Family reunification had its peak in the '70s and continued at lower rates during the '80s (DCLG 2009). With respect to the two other major South Asian 'groups' of nationals (from India and Pakistan, respectively), Bangladeshi families were the last to be reunified, and those which consequently suffered the most from immigration restrictions (Asghar 1997). Patterns of employment also began to change, with jobs in industrial factories becoming increasingly scarce, and Bangladeshi immigrants turning in ever larger numbers to the restaurant trade. The number of 'Indian' restaurants expanded considerably during the '60s and '70s, and this economic sector has now become a national institution (Asghar 1997; Choudhury and Drake 2001). At the turn of the century, more than eight out of ten of these restaurants were owned by Bangladeshis (Gillan 2002). As I will discuss later in this chapter, even though a majority of British Bangladeshis still work in the 'curry industry', the younger generations, who were born and educated in the UK, are increasingly distancing themselves from the business and seeking positions in other professions (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Salway 2008). The collapse of the textile industry which hit the country in the '70s also made many men redundant, as cloth factories, where they were mostly employed, started closing (Asghar 1997). With their families being reunified in the UK, these men started turning to social welfare and council housing (Asghar 1997; Choudhury and Drake 2001).

Living conditions in the early years of settlement and the relations established with the host country and with the white British majority are of key importance in understanding current educational and occupational trajectories. This is because the position occupied by Bangladeshi immigrants within the host country socio-economic context entails specific material and cultural constraints on individual action, which contribute to shape the opportunity structures within which subsequent generations make their 'choices'. Labour market position, spatial concentration, social relations, and 'the combination of multiple affiliations across and beyond national societies' (Diewald and Faist 2011, p. 6), all have a bearing on the production of social inequalities, to the extent that they define differential 'participatory chances in different spheres of life'. These aspects are also crucial to comprehending the different trade-offs between incentives and costs of participation in the society of settlement, and the value attached to participation by individuals themselves. Post-war Bangladeshi immigrants suffered from very high levels of unemployment, were mainly employed in poorly retributed and low-status occupations, and were residentially concentrated in overcrowded council estates in the poorest neighbourhoods of industrial cities (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Asghar 1997). They held, therefore, a substantially disadvantaged

position in relation to all areas of participation. Major changes are however taking place in this respect throughout generations, which will be considered in more detail in the following sections.

4.3. Socio-demographic profile

Having provided an outline of the history of Bangladeshi migration to Britain, I go on to describe the socio-demographic profile of the Bangladeshi ‘community’ in the UK. While this offers a contextual reference within which to frame my research, it is always important to keep in mind that underlying these general aspects is a much higher diversity than it is here possible to capture and summarise. Although UK-resident Bangladeshis have long represented a relatively homogeneous group in terms of geographical provenance, language, religion, and socio-economic origins, throughout the years this population is becoming increasingly differentiated along lines of educational and employment trajectories, as well as of local and transnational ‘affiliations’ (Garbin 2005; DCLG 2009). As already indicated, this is both a consequence of processes shaping the lives of subsequent generations within Britain as well as of new arrivals from Bangladesh coming from different areas and substantially different socio-economic backgrounds (DCLG 2009). Some of these issues pertaining to increasing socio-economic stratification, changing lifestyles and habits, transnational connections and identity, and the effects of locality, will be briefly covered in the following discussion.

4.3.1. Socio-economic and demographic aspects

According to the latest Census data (ONS 2011c), there were a total of 436,514 official UK-residents defining themselves as of Bangladeshi ethnicity in 2011, making up around 0.8% of the population. Of these, those born in Bangladesh were less than half (ONS 2011d). As already mentioned, those of Sylheti origins represent approximately 95% of the Bangladeshi population, although most recent migration comes in prevalence from other regions. While the size of the population of Bangladeshi background has increased rapidly in the last decades, from 6,000 residents in 1961 to the current number, it has done so to a lesser degree compared to other ethnicities, and in particular to the other two main South Asian ethnic ‘groups’, i.e. the Indian and the Pakistani (DCLG 2009, p. 27; ONS 2012a). The age and gender profiles depict a very young population, with males and females relatively evenly distributed across age groups (ONS 2011b). Compared to other ethnicities, Bangladeshis experience the highest levels of income poverty, with about 51% of Bangladeshi households living on less than 60% of the median UK household income

(DWP 2015). Such disproportionately high levels of income poverty are mainly accounted for by the larger number of workless households, and by the prevalence of lower pay rates among those who work (Palmer and Kenway 2007; ONS 2012b; DWP 2015). This last point is especially related to the concentration of Bangladeshi workers in routine and semi-routine occupations in low-paid employment sectors (Clark and Drinkwater 2007). Bangladeshis are also more likely than others to live in conditions classified as 'overcrowded' (44% in 2001), and in council or housing association properties (DCLG 2009, p. 35).

As reported in the above account of their migration history to Britain, Bangladeshi settlements were mainly established in the industrial cities of northern England and in the East End of London, where immigrants were attracted by the large demand for unskilled labour. The great majority lives in Inner London (163,838), predominantly in the Eastern Boroughs of Tower Hamlets (81,377), Newham (37,272) and Camden (12,503), although major concentrations can also be found in Birmingham (32,532), Bradford (9,863), Luton (13,606), and in Great Manchester (34,186), especially in Oldham (16,310) (ONS 2011c). The opportunities and constraints shaping Bangladeshis' socio-economic incorporation need to be understood as strictly linked to the characteristics of these localities and their relative trajectories within the post-industrial global economy, and to the livelihood possibilities they consequently present to their inhabitants (Glick Schiller 2008). In this respect, Amin (2002) and Phillips (2004) have for example drawn attention to how the economic restructuring of the former industrial base of Bradford and Oldham, once important textile centres and now marginal spaces in the global economy, has profoundly affected the lives of the local population, including Bangladeshis. Here, as it is likely to have happened in other places, high levels of unemployment and urban deprivation have not only substantially undermined economic prospects for subsequent generations of residents, but have also contributed to the deterioration of relations between 'groups' facing increased competition for the same scarce resources. While much of the public and political debate around the riots which took place in these two cities in 2001 has tended to emphasise the cultural aspects of separation and confrontation, these studies have thus stressed the necessity to recognise the relevance of economic factors in the shaping of inter-ethnic relations.

Whether social relations between minority and majority ethnic 'groups', and the economic and mobility outcomes of the former, are hampered by their residential concentration and segregation is a question which has received much attention in both academic literature and policy circles, in the UK as well as in the rest of Europe and the US (Home Office 2001; Musterd 2003; Bolt et al. 2009; Casey 2016; Zuccotti and Platt 2016). Concerns about this issue, which has been

strongly politicized, revolve around two main aspects. Firstly, there is the problem of socio-economic disadvantage, to which spatial concentration in deprived areas is seen as contributing. Empirical evidence linking neighbourhood ethnic and socio-economic ‘mix’ with the labour market prospects of minority ethnic ‘groups’ appears to be mixed (Musterd 2003; Bolt et al. 2009). A recent study from Zuccotti and Platt (2016) suggests however that having grown up in an area characterised by a greater presence of individuals of the same ethnic background does, in fact, have a negative impact on Bangladeshi and Pakistani women’s social class and probability of being economically active or employed. The second aspect of the issue, which has increasingly been brought to the fore, is the contention that ethnic segregation will ultimately undermine the establishment of mutual understanding and ‘good relations’ among ethnic groups. In Britain, in particular, this latter aspect has gained much prominence in policy discourses on the integration of Muslim minorities, especially in the aftermath of the riots that took place in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in 2001 (Phillips 2006; Bolt et al. 2009; Kalra and Kapoor 2009). The overarching policy framework has seen in this respect a substantial shift from the promotion of ‘multiculturalism’, as encompassing discourses and practices that favour the retention of minority ethnic ‘cultural specificities’, to a preoccupation with ‘community cohesion’ and minority ethnicities’ embracement of ‘shared British values’ (Home Office 2001; Kundnani 2002; McGhee 2003). More recently, concerns over the higher levels of neighbourhood segregation and concentration among Muslim minorities have been reiterated in the Casey review into opportunity and integration (2016).

This portrayal of British Muslims as withdrawing themselves from a so-called ‘British’ society, and leading ‘a series of parallel lives’ (Home Office 2001; Phillips 2006; Casey 2016) is however substantially problematic. In the very first place, by framing the ‘problem’ in terms of self-segregation, it ignores the fact that residential patterns are also, if not predominantly, shaped by the preferences and practices of the white population and UK institutions. From this perspective, the concentration of minority ethnicities in specific areas can be seen as a consequence of employment opportunities at the time of the first waves of migration, white self-segregation, and the role of discriminatory housing policies and racial harassment in constraining residential choices (Lakey 1997; Amin 2002; Phillips 2006; Bolt et al. 2009). In presenting the views of British Muslims living in Bradford, Phillips argues for example that minority ethnicities do not seem to wish to live segregated lives, but actually express a desire for more interaction with people from other ethnicities. Discourses on self-segregation also tend to overlook the positive aspects of ethnic concentration, and related social and cultural capital, in terms of individual well-being, especially for newcomers and more vulnerable sections of the population such as the elderly and women (Bolt

et al. 2009). Finally, through its emphasis on cultural aspects, this reading of the situation obscures as already mentioned the significance of material deprivation and racialised inequalities of power and status in engendering separation and conflict (Amin 2002; Phillips 2006; Kalra and Kapoor 2009).

4.3.2. Religion, culture and identity

Most people of Bangladeshi origins living in Britain define themselves as being Muslim (around 92%) (DCLG 2009, p. 40). Currents of thought, religious beliefs and practices, degrees of adherence, and the meanings that are ultimately attached to being Muslim, vary however substantially within the 'community' (Eade 1994; Gardner and Shukur 1994; Hussain 2007; DCLG 2009). It has been noted that there has been an increasing tendency among younger generations to define their identity primarily in terms of religious affiliation and belonging to a global Muslim Ummah, rather than as Bengalis or Bangladeshis, and to draw on Islam rather than on secular and nationalist values and movements in the articulation of interests and concerns (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Glynn 2002; Eade and Garbin 2002; Garbin 2005; Hussain 2007; DCLG 2009; Hoque 2015). This however, as it has rightly been stressed, does not have to be seen as a return to old traditions, but as stemming from evolving local and global circumstances. Hussain (2007) has for example drawn attention to the ways in which the global expansion of capitalism has brought to the definition of new hierarchies of power and inequalities, and to the growing affirmation of cultural identities as a source of meaning on which to rely in confronting such processes. Islamism, defined by Glynn (2002, p. 970) as 'a constructive engagement of unquestioned Islamic fundamentals with the realities of the modern world to develop an all-embracing modern, religious, moral and political ideology', is seen in this respect as both providing a strong, positive identity and heightened sense of solidarity, and as a way of combating poverty, racism and exclusion. Its emancipatory potential rests in particular in enabling the articulation of socio-economic interests at the local level, and in the global connection of local 'communities' through the establishment of transnational political and financial links (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Hussain 2007).

A re-orientation of values and commitments is also visible in the changing relations with Bangladesh (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Garbin 2005). As reported by Garbin, levels of investment in Sylhet have substantially declined over the past decades, and while during the '60s and '70s approximately 85% of Bangladeshi families were sending remittances, this proportion has fallen in 1995 to 20% and is now likely to be even less. These trends are related to major changes in the social institutions of land ownership and marriage, which have long favoured the maintenance of

links between the UK and Bangladesh. With respect to land ownership, Gardner and Shukur discuss how family reunification, and the growth of new generations of Bangladeshis who are born and raised in Britain, has made the maintenance of family land increasingly difficult, as it diminishes the older generations' capacity and willingness to remit savings and to embark in regular visits to Bangladesh, leading to the control of properties being shifted in favour of Bangladesh-based kin. Ongoing links between Britain and Bangladesh have also been kept for a long time through the institution of marriage, with men living in the UK traditionally going back to Bangladesh in order to get married to women residing there. Over the years, this tradition has however gradually been weakening, and an ever larger number of marriages are now arranged and celebrated in Britain. Gardner and Shukur attribute these changes to a number of reasons. Firstly, the evening out of the number of males and females among the UK-resident population has made it unnecessary for men to go to Bangladesh to find a spouse. The reinforcement of social solidarities within the UK, to which marriage contributes, is also coming to be seen as increasingly important compared to the establishment of relationships with Bangladesh-based families. A further reason is additionally found in the changing perspectives on love and marriage amongst the younger generations, which have led to a growing refusal of marriage partners they have no knowledge of, and who have been raised in a different culture. In accounting for these transformations, both Gardner and Shukur and Garbin highlight that although British-born Bangladeshis may still value Bangladesh as the place where their roots belong, their lives and meaningful relationships are mainly centred in Britain, and it is therefore to this context that they mainly direct their investments and commitments.

The issues so far considered point to the complex interplay of multiple attachments and belongings that shape the position of British-born individuals of Bangladeshi background in the British context, and to the array of structural and cultural influences affecting their understandings of and possibilities for integration and mobility. The idea of being caught 'in-between two cultures' (Watson 1977), defined on the one side by the 'traditional' values of the older generations and on the other by 'modern' Western values, is in this sense far too simplistic to describe their composite and evolving identities (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Mac an Ghail and Haywood 2005; Hussain 2007; DCLG 2009). As stressed by Hussain (2007, p. 198), cultures are not homogeneous wholes, but are 'complex, multiple, mobile and with porous borders'. British-born Bangladeshis appear to be more concerned with their future within the UK than with the retaining of cultural traditions and links with Bangladesh, and the more apparent behavioural aspects of identity such as ethnic clothing are becoming less important among younger generations (Modood 1997b; Eade and Garbin 2002; Mac an Ghail and Haywood 2005; DCLG 2009). Yet, this should not be interpreted as

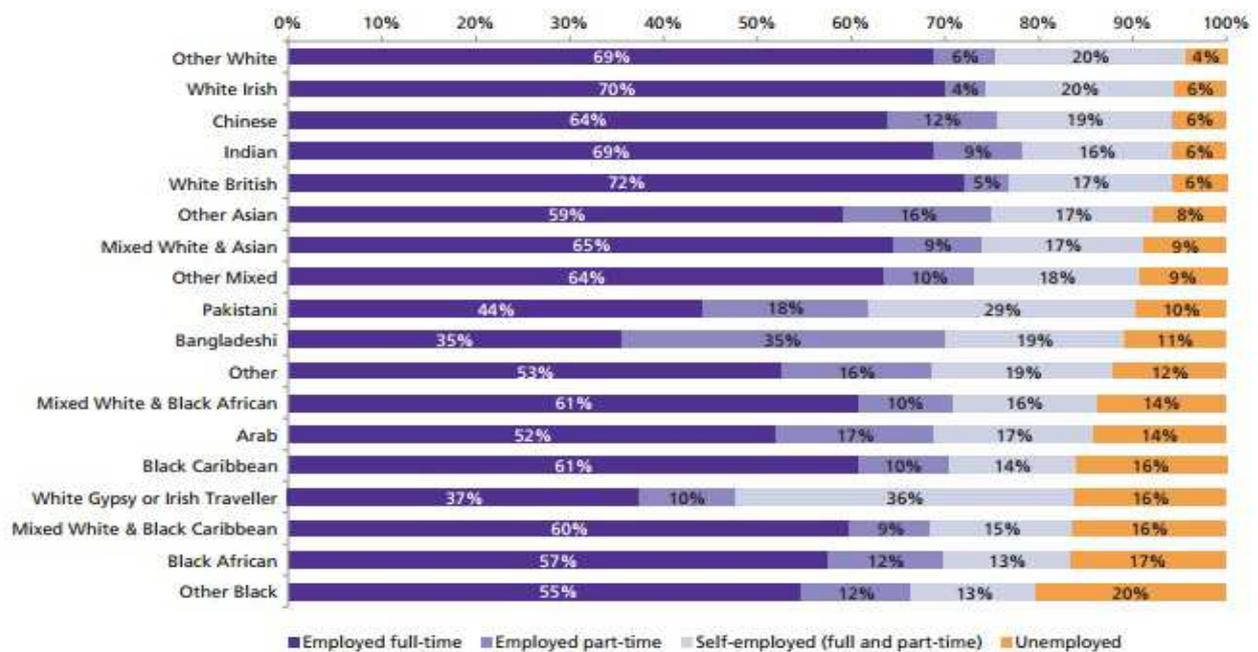
necessarily pointing to a gradual assimilation into an assumed 'British culture'. Rather, it has been noted that 'new' ethnic and religious identities are formed and strongly asserted, in a process which can be seen as marked by a constant re-interpretation and re-adaptation of cultures, values and lifestyles within new settings, as a way of making sense of current conditions and of dealing with the problems encountered, such as racism, Islamophobia and social exclusion (Modood 1997b; Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia 2004; Phillips 2006; Hoque 2015). Research by Nandi and Platt (2013, 2014; Platt 2014) additionally shows that, for both minority and majority ethnic 'groups', multiple dimensions of identity such as nationality, ethnicity and religion seem to be mutually reinforcing, rather than excluding, one another. For Bangladeshis in particular, and for Muslims in general, they find both significant and increasing levels of identification with 'being British' and high levels of ethnic and religious identification.

4.4. Employment and education

Compared to other ethnicities, men and women of Bangladeshi origins experience, as we have seen, especially high unemployment and inactivity rates, are disproportionately concentrated in routine and semi-routine occupations, and under-represented in professional and managerial positions (Clark and Drinkwater 2007; DCLG 2009; ONS 2012b; Nazroo and Kapadia 2013). A reading of the latest Census data shows that, in 2011, 87% of men of Bangladeshi background and 40% of women aged 25 to 49 were either in work or actively looking for jobs (Nazroo and Kapadia 2013). For women, this is one of the lowest levels of labour market participation among major ethnicities. As for women of Pakistani origins, this has been related to factors such as high fertility rates and consequent caring responsibilities, but also to the difficulties experienced in actually finding jobs (Nazroo and Kapadia 2013), which is apparent from the high percentage of economically active women who are unemployed (19%). Despite employment rates being affected by a complexity of factors among which structural inequalities figure prominently, common-sense discourses are however still rife with culturalist explanations referring to patriarchal gender norms (Brah 2001; Women and Equalities Committee 2016). Figures 1 and 2 show the relative proportions of economically active men and women in full-time employment, part-time employment, self-employment and not in employment for the different ethnic 'groups', according to 2011 Census data (Nazroo and Kapadia 2013, pp. 2-3). Besides the high unemployment rates among women, what appears to be most striking is the especially large number of men of Bangladeshi origins who are working part-time. Also, whilst levels of self-employment as such are not amongst the highest, a

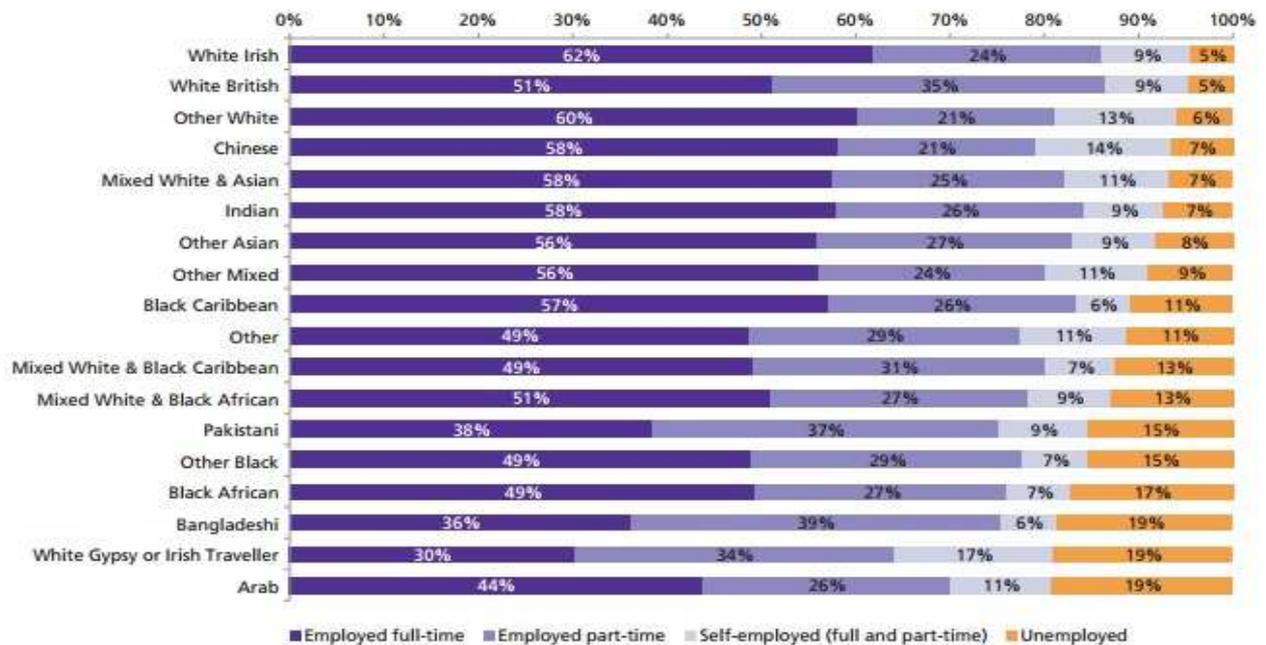
detailed breakdown of 2001 figures has revealed an overwhelming concentration in specific employment sectors, with 78% of self-employed men of Bangladeshi background working in either hotels and catering, transport, or distribution, and the vast majority of women in the manufacturing sector (Clark and Drinkwater 2007, pp. 22, 25).

Figure 1: Economically active men in full-time employment, part-time employment, self-employed and unemployed (%), by self-described ethnic group, 2011



Source: Nazroo and Kapadia (2013, p. 2)

Figure 2: Economically active women in full-time employment, part-time employment, self-employed and unemployed (%), by self-described ethnic group, 2011



Source: Nazroo and Kapadia (2013, p. 3)

Clark and Drinkwater (2007) have drawn on data from the 1991 and 2001 Censuses to test the marginal effects of religion and education on the employment levels of the major ethnic groups. As already noted in reviewing the literature on ethnic inequalities in the labour market, being Muslim was negatively correlated with employment levels for all ethnic categories but ‘Other Black’ (see also Platt 2005). This has led to advance the suggestion that the labour market disadvantage experienced by Bangladeshis and Pakistanis might be related to them being for the vast majority Muslim, and thus better understood as a ‘religious penalty’ (Platt 2005, pp. 19, 33). However, as 93% of Bangladeshis defined themselves as Muslim in the 2001 Census, it was not possible to draw any meaningful comparison between these and those who stated they had no religion. As Clark and Drinkwater (2007, p. 48) also note, for this ‘group’, as well as for Pakistanis, the high coincidence of ethnic origins with religious affiliation and, although gradually weakening, with social class background, makes it extremely difficult for quantitative analyses to discern the effects of each variable on employment prospects.

The role of educational credentials in improving employment opportunities and mobility has also been discussed in the literature review chapter, and is now well-established. For Bangladeshis too the possession of formal qualifications has a significant impact on the likelihood of being employed, which increases with qualifications level. The advantage associated with participation in higher education is particularly strong for women, with those of Bangladeshi background experiencing a 40% increase in employment chances when holding a graduate or postgraduate degree, compared to a 20% increase for white British women (Clark and Drinkwater 2007, p. 17). Findings from research carried out with Bangladeshi women in university show that this advantage might not only be due to academic qualifications substantially improving their competitiveness on the labour market, but also to the higher capacity conferred by education to negotiate their career aspirations against competing expectations (Dale et al. 2002a, 2002b). In particular, these women tended to establish a careful distinction between religion and tradition, in order to demonstrate the compatibility of paid employment and commitment to Islam. Whilst all gave importance to family, marriage, and child-rearing, moreover, they seemed more willing than those without academic credentials to combine family responsibilities with paid employment. The attainment of a higher education degree was also found to be one of the main factors, together with being born in the UK, affecting the probability for Bangladeshis of having a professional or managerial job (Clark and Drinkwater 2007, pp. 38-39).

Although still having the lowest proportion of university graduates compared to the other major ethnic 'groups', UK-born Bangladeshis are participating in higher education in growing numbers (Lymeropoulou and Parameshwaran 2014). The number of women attending university, in particular, has increased substantially in the last 20 years. While a break-down of data by gender is not available for the 1991 Census, statistics show that between 1991 and 2011 the proportion of Bangladeshis aged 16+ holding degree level qualifications has risen from 5% to 20%, with women accounting for around half of this latter percentage (ONS 2011a, 2011b; Lymeropoulou and Parameshwaran 2015).

Class origins appear to have an effect on the likelihood of students of Bangladeshi heritage attending a higher degree. However, as for minority groups more generally, this relationship has been found to be less strong than for the white majority (Dale et al. 2002b, p. 949; Modood 2004). It has been suggested that this might be related to a higher value being generally placed on education by minority ethnic parents, irrespective of their own education levels and social class, compared to the white British working-classes, and to the consequent support and encouragement they provide to their sons and daughters in achieving academic credentials (Ahmad 2001; Dale et al.

2002b; Modood 2004; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Basit 2012). In presenting the reasons advanced by young Bangladeshi women for deciding to go to university, Bagguley and Hussain highlight how the strong support provided by their parents was often motivated by wanting their daughters to take advantage of opportunities which they, as adult migrants, did not have. An additional factor which has been put forward to account for Bangladeshis' increasing commitment to higher education is represented by the prevailing expectation of labour market discrimination (Ahmad 2001; Dale et al. 2002b). As found in relation to other minority ethnicities, not only the possession of higher degrees is seen by these young people as essential to obtaining 'good jobs', but the expectation of being discriminated against in the competition with white candidates also produces an awareness of having to be more highly qualified in order to secure the same position.

On the other hand, research carried out with young Bangladeshi men and women also reveals variation in the extent of parental encouragement, and the presence of competing demands and expectations which limit their 'choices' on post-compulsory education. These constraints have a strong gendered dimension, and while for men they are generally related to their role as breadwinners and the demand to earn money for the family (Salway 2008), for women they have mainly to do with the respect of Islamic observance, the protection of family honour, and marriage expectations (Ahmad 2001; Dale et al. 2002a, 2002b; Bagguley and Hussain 2007). Family concerns about the possible consequences of going to university, especially if this required moving away from home, were found by Bagguley and Hussain not only to affect Bangladeshi women's decision of whether or not to participate in higher education, but also to limit their choices of institution, with potentially negative consequences in terms of employment opportunities. The authors also consider how marriage expectations substantially impact on Bangladeshi women's education and career progression, and are often a matter of negotiations within families. Both the young Bangladeshi women interviewed by Bagguley and Hussain and those interviewed by Dale and colleagues (2002b) point to the key role of family members who have gone through higher education in countering these pressures, and in facilitating the taking up of higher degrees by providing information and support.

While the role of academic qualifications in improving labour market prospects is ascertained, a lower proportion of graduates of Bangladeshi background are however employed in professional and managerial jobs compared to the white majority (Clark and Drinkwater 2007). As already mentioned, earning differentials also exist at every level of employment between individuals of majority and minority ethnic origins, even after accounting for differences in education, experience, region, and other potentially relevant characteristics (Clark and Drinkwater

2007; Zwysen and Longhi 2016). More generally, low rates of academic qualifications seem to only partially explain Bangladeshis' disproportionately low levels of employment and occupational mobility, which tend to persist despite controlling for education and concentration in specific sectors (Clark and Drinkwater 2007; Salway 2008; DCLG 2009). Additional factors are likely to be represented, as already noted, by the lower status of the institution that one is likely to attend and of the attained degree, the presence of racial discrimination in the labour market, and a lack of effective social networks (Clark and Drinkwater 2007; Salway 2008; Zwysen and Longhi 2016). Research conducted by Salway among young Bangladeshi men living in the East End of London points for example to the influence on employment prospects of mutually reinforcing processes of exclusion from the mainstream labour market and inclusion in intra-ethnic networks, which make certain options more readily available while excluding others from view.

Other studies suggests that discrimination is a major factor accounting for Muslims' difficulties in finding and progressing in employment, especially for women (Dale et al. 2002a; Botcherby 2006; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Women and Equalities Committee 2016). Compared to those of white British background, women of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origins were found for instance to be more likely to have experienced negative attitudes at work for wearing religious clothing, and to have been asked during job interviews about marriage and children aspirations, as well as what their family and partner thought of them working (Botcherby 2006; APPG on Race and Community 2012; Women and Equalities Committee 2016). Adding to this, there is evidence of name-based discrimination taking place during the process of selection for interview candidates, and affecting especially Muslims (APPG on Race and Community 2012; Women and Equalities Committee 2016; Adesina and Marocico 2017). The working of such stereotypes, which combine ethnic, religious, and gendered aspects, appears to play a key role in restricting opportunities for career entry and progression for Muslim women in general and for those of Bangladeshi heritage in particular.

4.5. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have provided a broad overview of major socio-economic features of the UK resident population of Bangladeshi origins, forming the backdrop to the experiences and perspectives of those who participated in this research. I have discussed, in particular, the history of migration and settlement in British society of post-war Bangladeshi immigrants, who now represent the majority of those who are generally referred to as 'first-

generation' immigrants. I have highlighted the significance of the characteristics of incorporation of these immigrants in the society of settlement in understanding the current social-structural positioning and disadvantage of individuals of Bangladeshi background. I have then outlined current demographic and residential profiles of the Bangladeshi population living in the UK, as well as briefly considering some major aspects pertaining to their changing ethnic and religious identities. Finally, I have looked at patterns and trends of participation in education and the labour market among the younger generations, and have pointed to the explanations that have so far been advanced to account for them. This contextualisation is especially important in enabling us to obtain a general picture of the multiple social-structural factors that contribute to informing the dispositions and access to economic, social and cultural resources of British-born young people of Bangladeshi heritage.

In the next chapter, I move on to present the empirical scope of this study, detailing participants' socio-economic backgrounds and some main characteristics of the institutions attended, and consider the significance of these aspects in terms of addressing my research questions. I then provide a rationale for the methodological framework adopted and assess some of the major strengths and limitations of the methods employed for data collection and analysis, before considering the implications for the research process of issues of positionality and ethics.

Chapter 5

Research design, methodology and ethics

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the design of this research and the methodology and methods adopted, as well as issues of researcher positionality and ethics. I firstly lay out the main questions driving the collection and analysis of data, and outline some key characteristics of setting and participants, especially in terms of residential distribution, profile of the institutions attended, and family background. I then consider the methodological underpinnings of this study and advance the reasons for employing qualitative methods. Methodologically, I rely on Bourdieu's ontology, epistemology and conceptual tools to analyse participants' narratives with the aim to untangle the mutual influence of intersecting dimensions of identity and inequality in structuring their experiences of higher education and identity construction. I move on to detail the methods adopted for gathering and analysing data. Finally, I draw some reflections on the ways in which my positionality and that of participants might have contributed to shaping the current work, and address the main ethical dilemmas encountered.

5.2. Research design, setting and participants

The current study focuses on the experiences and perspectives of British-born young women of Bangladeshi origins with the aim to enhance, through the exploration of a specific 'case', the understanding of the following two broad sets of questions:

- 1) How do social class and ethnicity intersect with one another to influence access to and experiences of higher education, and progression to the labour market?
- 2) How do immigrants' descendants construct their identities by drawing on different dimensions of identification, and how is this informed by participation in education?

In order to address these questions, two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 British-born female undergraduate students of Bangladeshi heritage attending

university in London. As mentioned in the previous chapter, London is home to around 58% of the UK Bangladeshi population, which is highly concentrated in specific areas (ONS 2011c). 19% of the total live in the Eastern borough of Tower Hamlets, where they account for 32% of residents (ONS 2011c). This borough, and especially certain parts, represents a traditional area of settlement for Bangladeshi immigrants, where concentration is likely to be a result of the combined effects of chain migration, housing policies, and racial harassment and hostility on the part of white British residents making certain zones 'unsafe' (Asghar 1997; Eade and Garbin 2002). Tower Hamlets is also one of the most deprived local authority areas in England, as measured through the index of multiple deprivation (DCLG 2009, 2010). Although unintentionally, this residential pattern was also manifested in my sample, where most participants originally came from Tower Hamlets. Some of them had then moved with their parents to Outer London boroughs, especially those of Redbridge and Barking & Dagenham, reflecting the tendency for upwardly mobile minority ethnic families to move from the inner city to the suburbs in search for better housing and schooling opportunities, and for a 'safer' neighbourhood environment (Butler & Hamnett 2011).

At the time of the interviews, these young women were studying for a variety of undergraduate degrees at a range of differently ranked universities in London, spanning across the humanities, social sciences and STEM subjects. The primary and secondary schooling received also included institutions as diverse as community schools, academies, faith schools, and grammar and private schools. Participants were purposefully recruited, in particular, so that the universities attended differed from one another in terms of ranking, educational curriculum and practices, student intake, social environment, and all of those elements which, as discussed in Chapter 2, can be seen as constituting their institutional habitus (Reay et al. 2009a). Such diversity afforded the opportunity to gather a range of perspectives on the 'fit' between individual and institutional habitus at different levels (social and academic), and to explore in this way the array of structural and cultural aspects that enter into play in shaping these perceptions. Recruitment took place both by directly approaching potential participants at university entrances and public spaces, and by establishing contacts through students' Bangladeshi and Islamic societies. While I deliberately restricted my focus to London, it was interesting to note that most interviewees had only applied to institutions within the city, reflecting what is already indicated by other studies in terms of minority ethnic students' tendency to attend universities that are close to the family home (Runnymede Trust 2010). The few exceptions were represented by applications to Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities outside of London. However, since those who applied to these universities had very high A-level grades and some of the most prestigious Russell Group universities are in London,

they finally ended up remaining there, as this allowed them to attend the ‘best’ institution they could access with those grades.

Blueville, High Valley, Western, Greenshore and Bayside (pseudonyms) are all Russell Group universities, Riverdale is an ‘old’ university but not part of the Russell Group, and Melrose, Woodgate and King George are all ex-polytechnics. High Valley, Western and Blueville, in particular, are among the country’s highest ranking institutions, while Melrose and Woodgate are amongst the lowest (The Complete University Guide 2016). All of the Russell Group universities, except for Bayside, have very high minimum A-levels entry standards, a sizeable international student body, and a UK-domiciled minority ethnic constituency which in the year 2013/14 accounted for about 20-25% of the total of those studying at undergraduate level (University of Oxford 2015; HESA 2016). Whilst also being part of the Russell Group of Universities, Bayside represents an exception in terms of both entry standards, which are somewhat more ‘relaxed’, and of UK-domiciled minority ethnic students’ intake. This institution is also ‘local’ to a considerable minority ethnic population, which is mirrored in the student composition. Here, in 2013/14, UK-domiciled minority ethnicities represented around 45% of undergraduate students, with a large proportion of South Asians (approximately 30% of UK-domiciled students and 20% of the total) (University of Oxford 2015; HESA 2016). Riverdale has similar entry standards to those of Bayside, and, according to the university’s statistics, UK-domiciled students of minority ethnic background accounted in 2013/14 for around 30% of the total number of undergraduates. At the other end of the spectrum, King George, Woodgate and Melrose all have a substantial percentage of UK-domiciled minority ethnic students, ranging from approximately 40 to 50% of the total in 2008/09, and not as many international students. Woodgate’s and King George’s student bodies, in particular, are among the most diverse in the UK, with some of the highest proportions of South Asians (21% and 28% respectively of the undergraduates total) (The Complete University Guide 2016). Table 1 (below) provides a summary of the institutions attended.

Table 1: Institutions attended by participants (pseudonym and type)

Institution (pseudonym)	Type
Blueville	Russell Group
High Valley	Russell Group
Western	Russell Group
Greenshore	Russell Group
Bayside	Russell Group
Riverdale	"Old", non-Russell Group
King George	Ex-polytechnic
Woodgate	Ex-polytechnic
Melrose	Ex-polytechnic

In terms of family background, almost all of these young women's parents, except two of the mothers who were born in Britain, came from Bangladesh at different points in their lives. In presenting findings, I broadly distinguish between working-class and middle-class origins on the grounds of the salary and status that are generally attached to parental occupation. It is however worth noting that there was in fact considerable within-class variation in terms of the overall amount and composition of economic, social and cultural capital that these young women could access. In those families I define as working-class (16 out of 21), fathers were employed in both blue collar and white collar jobs, requiring different sets of skills. For example, as construction and factory workers, mini-cab drivers, chefs, tailors, shopkeepers, mentors and tutors. Mothers were instead either housewives (13) or working in low-skilled positions in the social and education sectors (3). Middle-class parents also had jobs which ranged from owning small businesses, to the medical, legal, social and educational professions, and held different educational credentials. Apart from those parents who had middle-class jobs, none of them had a university degree, although they were mostly educated at least at GCSE level. Some of these young women also had older siblings and relatives who went to university before them. Differential access to capital was therefore not only provided by parents, but also importantly by other family members. The significance of these multiple sources, especially in relation to cultural and social capital, will be underscored throughout the analysis of participants' accounts. In retrospect, I realise that involving more participants of middle-class background would have enabled a better teasing out and 'testing' of some of the processes identified through analysis in relation to both experiences of higher education and multi-

dimensional identification. Due to its sensitivity, information indicative of social class background was only requested through a questionnaire to be filled in before the interview, rather than when first approaching potential interviewees. As most Bangladeshi students are of working-class origins, the ‘recruitment strategy’ adopted was likely to generate such a skewed sample. Yet, I recognise in hindsight that relying more heavily on snowballing techniques might have enabled me to access more middle-class students through those who were already taking part. This issue, as well as other major strengths and limitations pertaining to the design and conduction of this research will be reflected upon more extensively in the concluding chapter.

5.3. *Research methodology*

In conducting this research, I was interested in developing a more refined interpretation of the processes through which formations of class and ‘race’ / ethnicity contribute to shape higher education attitudes and experiences, and employment aspirations, of British-born Bangladeshi women, whose especially low rates of participation in education and the labour market have long marked them in public and policy discourses as ‘problematic’ (Women and Equalities Committee 2016). I also wanted to explore how these young women related to different dimensions of social identity, especially ethnicity, nationality and religion, the meanings they respectively attached to ‘being Bangladeshi’, ‘being British’ and ‘being Muslim’, the extent to which they identified as such, and how this was informed by participation in higher education. The decision to focus on these processes and my approach to unravelling them are grounded in the belief that while class, ‘race’, ethnicity, gender, national belonging, religious faith and so on are socially constructed categories, agents’ positionings within them are linked, and condition access, to specific configurations of material and symbolic resources reflected in interpersonal and institutionalised relations of power. What I needed was therefore a methodological framework that enabled to expose the varied and variable ways in which these multiple positionings inter-relate with one another to produce differential dispositions, experiences and self-understandings. This can be seen as an instance of intersectional analysis, concerned with investigating ‘how socially constructed differences and structures of power work at the level of individual experiences, social practices, institutional arrangements, symbolic representations and cultural imaginaries’ (Davis 2014, pp. 21-22) by paying attention to the ‘overlapping and co-construction of visible and – at first sight – invisible strands of inequality’ (Lutz 2014, p. 9).

According to Crenshaw (2000, cit. in Lutz 2014, p. 1), who coined the term,

‘intersectionality is a conceptualization of the problem that attempts to capture both the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more axes of subordination. It specifically addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create background inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes, and the like’.

Such a perspective was initially advanced as a call for the recognition of the specificity of Black women’s experiences, in contrast to the implicitly assumed normativity of whiteness and masculinity that respectively characterised contemporary analyses of gender and racial inequalities. Early adoptions were mainly directed towards the analysis of the ‘triple oppression’ suffered by Black women because of the discriminated positions they simultaneously occupied within intersecting dimensions of gender, ‘race’ and class (Yuval Davis 2006; Davis 2008, 2014; Lutz 2014). Yet, this particular approach has been criticised for building on and further contributing to an essentialising view of such dimensions of identity, which is what initial claims for the acknowledgement of Black women’s intersectional experiences originally challenged (Brah and Phoenix 2004, Yuval Davis 2006). As a perspective to be adopted in the analysis of inequalities and power relations, intersectionality has however endured considerable success, which it owes according to Davis (2008) to its ambiguity and open-endedness, and has come through subsequent uses and developments to encompass a range of approaches aiming to explore how multiple identities (e.g. as a woman, as Black, and as working-class) are ‘intertwined and mutually constitutive’ (Davis 2014, p. 22). The adoption of an intersectional perspective encourages in other words to look at how one’s attitudes, experiences and both externally and self-attributed images of self as, for example, a woman, are specifically informed by being of a certain ethnic background, or as a person of a given ethnicity by being of working-class rather than middle-class origins, and so on. This, as highlighted by Lutz (2014, p. 12), importantly enables us to see individuals ‘as not only dominated by oppression in all fields of life but also as people who – under certain circumstances – can make use of privileged aspects of identity’.

Doing intersectional analysis has rightly been deemed a difficult task to engage in, presenting several conceptual and methodological challenges (McCall 2005; Davis 2014; Lutz 2014). The current research can be considered as an example of what McCall (2005) defines as the ‘intercategorical approach to complexity’, which focuses on ‘groups’ occupying specific locations at the intersection of multiple dimensions of identity and uses personal narratives to detail the complexity of perspectives and experiences that ensue from that particular positioning. In working through this complexity, I have followed Matsuda’s (1991) suggestion of ‘asking the other

question', that is, of uncovering the role that is played for instance by social class in shaping ethnic inequalities and identities, and vice-versa. In the context of this work, Bourdieu's conceptual toolbox was deliberately employed as a methodological approach which helped to unpack intersectionality, by bringing relational structures of inequality to the foreground and providing the means to attend to the interplay of social class background, education, 'race' / ethnicity, religion and gender in mediating agency and informing stances and practices (Horvat 2002).

As pointed out in Chapter 3, Bourdieu's analytical framework is grounded in an ontology of the social universe that sees it as constituted of structures existing both in the distribution of capital among agents engaged in a given field ('objectivity of the first order'), and in agents' habitus, that is, in their schemata of perception, appreciation and action ('objectivity of the second order') (Wacquant 2007, p. 7). Bourdieu considers the relation between the two as being one of 'ontological complicity' (Wacquant 2007, p. 20), where the structures of fields and those of habitus are 'genetically linked' (Wacquant 2007, p. 13), in that the latter is produced by the internalisation of the former. Following from this understanding of the social, his epistemology is predicated upon a dialectical overcoming of both objectivism and subjectivism, which reconnects agents' relative positionings in social space with their interpretations of specific situations and related practices (Wacquant 2007, p. 11). This framework is characterised by a 'methodological relationalism' (Wacquant 2007, p. 15), where the emphasis is on the relations among agents possessing differential stocks of capital as well as between their habitus and the fields they are involved in. As such, as already discussed, it is especially apt at capturing intersecting and co-constituting processes of (re)production and transformation of material and symbolic power structures within multiple dimensions of inequality. It is also particularly well-suited to producing an intersectional analysis that remains faithful to a relational and anti-essentialist view of identity and experiences (Brah and Phoenix 2004).

In approaching the investigation of the aforementioned areas of interest, I opted for a qualitative methodology, which would allow for an in-depth exploration of the processes through which objective structures, as instantiated in interpersonal relations, institutional 'cultures' and dominant discourses, came to bear on participants' aspirations, expectations, practices, and constructions of self in relation to others. Qualitative research is particularly indicated when we want rich descriptions of participants' social worlds and points of view (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 2008; Flick 2002; Creswell 2007; Bryman 2012). In this case, engaging with participants' perspectives enabled me to move beyond statistical correlations between the aggregate of ethnicity, class and gender, and rates of participation and retention in specific higher education institutions,

attainment and employment prospects, to consider how these experiences are ‘created and given meaning’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, p. 8). For example, I could gain a more nuanced understanding of how one’s sense of ‘fitting in’ at specific institutional environments, social relations, and ‘easiness’ with certain educational practices, all of which are likely to affect their satisfaction with and capacity to benefit from university, are shaped by perceptions that are related to class and ethnicity in a variety of ways. Similarly, it was possible to note the constellation of influences that contributed to one’s awareness of, and interest for, given employment areas and pathways, and consequently to the definition of career aspirations. The adoption of a qualitative methodology was moreover particularly suited to the detailed exploration of the meanings and sentiments attached by participants to multiple dimensions of their social identity. In this respect, such a methodology importantly affords the capacity to throw into question stereotypical and essentialising views of ethnic, classed, gendered and religious identities, by bringing to light the influence on their construction of social structures and relations, their dynamic character, and the diversity that they subsume.

5.4. Methods

Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were carried out with participants to gather their views. The interview schedule was loosely structured, including a number of aspects to be covered rather than being restricted to pre-determined questions, which allowed for flexibility and exploration while still ensuring that specific topics were addressed by all interviewees (Bryman 2012). The first round was mainly exploratory in nature, and touched on a broad variety of issues, including family background and history of migration, current and childhood area of residence, primary and secondary schooling, ‘choices’ related to higher education, friendship networks, future hopes and expectations over career, marriage and children, and relation with Bangladesh and Bangladeshi ‘culture’ (e.g. music, movies, clothing). This gave me the opportunity to get to know more about participants’ lives and social worlds, thus enabling to put their experiences and perspectives into context. It also made it possible to go back during the second interview to aspects that needed further clarification, as well as to pick up and expand on additional elements of potential interest that were raised by participants other than those I had initially considered. In hindsight, conducting two rounds of interviews had the additional benefit of making participants more comfortable on the second occasion we met, which was especially visible with those who had initially been shy. Building on the first one, the second interview covered social and academic

experiences of higher education, support from parents and broader social networks, social class identification, and reflections on ethnic, national and religious identity elicited through pictures that were chosen by participants to represent what it meant for them to be Bangladeshi, British, and Muslim respectively. In conducting the interviews, I avoided following a script, remaining instead particularly attentive to participants' own narratives and following their lead (Esterberg 2002).

For the second interview, participants were asked to bring three pictures which would express the feelings and ideas they associated with being Bangladeshi, being Muslim, and being British, as a way of prompting a discussion over what each of these aspects of social identity meant for them. This focus was explicitly intended to allow for engagement with academic debates on, and public and policy interpretations of, the significance that is respectively attributed by immigrants' descendants to ethnicity, nationality and religious faith as sources of identity. There is a risk, in framing the investigation of interviewee's identities in terms of categories, that this might have encouraged them to think about these aspects in an essentialising and exclusionary way. Yet, the responses that were given suggest on the other hand that the open-ended nature of the questions offered in fact the possibility for exploring the mutual inter-relations among these categories rather than assuming their respective exclusivity. In this sense, they appear to support Croghan et al.'s (2008, p. 355) claim that 'combining verbal and visual forms of self-presentation allows individuals more scope for presenting complex, ambiguous and contradictory versions of the self'.

By asking participants to produce some pictures before we met for the second time, or to select them among those they already had, I hoped to encourage a deeper reflection than that which would have been possible had I simply questioned them during the interview (Drew et al. 2010). Given the high level of abstraction required by my question on the meanings they attributed to their ethnicity, religious faith and nationality, the use of pictures was additionally intended to provide a means to ground the discussion. Admittedly, the use of pictures was not without difficulties, as it was not always clear to participants what I meant by 'representing what it means for you to be Bangladeshi / Muslim / British', and some of them asked for further clarification on the kind of pictures I was looking for. Yet, after giving some general examples, almost all of them brought the three pictures, which proved very insightful. In particular, these images served as small 'windows' on participants' worlds, and helped to stimulate the conversation. Most of all, although in some cases more than others, they elicited exactly the kind of in-depth reflection that I had hoped for, with some participants noting that they had found the task especially challenging precisely because it required them to question usually taken for granted aspects of their identity, and to bring into focus and make explicit related feelings. The use of photo-elicitation made it possible therefore to

'break the frame' (Harper 2002, p. 20) of participants' 'normal views', as it encouraged them to take 'a reflective stance vis-à-vis [...] taken-for-granted aspects' of their identities.

Participants' narratives were analysed using a thematic approach. This did not follow neat, pre-defined steps and was on the converse rather 'messy', involving multiple mediums and different ways of handling, 'dissecting', and re-organising data, several stages of coding and sense-making, and an iterative process of moving back and forth between data, theory and various strands of literature. As stressed by Esterberg (2002, p. 152), analysis was a 'creative process' of 'making meaning', rather than a mechanical one. The way I approached the data was firstly by summarising in an Excel spreadsheet a number of relevant properties pertaining to participants, that is, their name, age, institution attended, degree subject, parents' place of birth, occupation and level of education, older siblings or relatives with HE education experiences, locality of origin and current residence, and primary and secondary school type and locality. This allowed me to easily retrieve this information and compare participants at a glance, as well as to check experiences and perspectives against potentially relevant characteristics. Interview transcripts were printed in hard copy, and coded by broad thematic and sub-thematic area, such as 'experiences of university' and within that 'social experiences'. While these mostly matched the areas around which the interviews were constructed, I still remained open to further themes and sub-themes that showed up recurrently, an example of this being 'aspiration'. I then used the NVivo software to collate and store under the relative 'nodes' and 'sub-nodes' all extracts from different people referring to each area, printed them out and went through another round of manual coding using highlighters and post-its, looking for specific issues or discourses that were raised by participants within each area. I also produced a brief synthesis per participant of the discourses articulated for the different themes and sub-themes. Finally, patterns were searched for in terms of recurrent discourses and how they linked together within participants' narratives, commonalities and differences among participants, and how these related to their characteristics and trajectories. This search for patterns was both guided by, as well as feeding back into, my theoretical framework and different bodies of relevant literature. As the threads connecting different elements to each other became increasingly apparent, I took specific decisions as to which of these elements to build my narrative around and which to discard, based mainly on the perceived relevance in answering my main research questions on ethnic inequalities in education and the labour market, and ethnic and religious identities.

5.5. Positionality and ethics

Social research can be seen as a process of knowledge co-production involving both researcher and participants, to which each brings dispositions that are rooted in their biographies (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 2008; Lawler 2002; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). While I consider this to be the case for quantitative and qualitative studies alike, the impact of the encounter and reciprocal perception between two ‘ways of being’ is especially evident in qualitative works like the one here presented. In these instances, as stressed by England (1994, p. 248), ‘the everyday lives of the researched are doubly mediated by our presence and their response to our presence’. How we rapport to participants and how they rapport to us, the questions we ask, the answers they might or might not give, and the meanings we attribute to the lives and stories we engage with, are all shaped by our respective and relative positionalities, that is, by the relation between ‘perspective[s] shaped by [...] unique mix[es] of race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality and other identifiers’ (Mullings 1999, p. 337). As such, the knowledge engendered is not only co-produced but also ‘situated’, as it is ‘produced from a specific social location and always aimed toward a specific audience’ (Maynes et al. 2008, p. 98). While the partial and contextual character of this knowledge can never be escaped, such recognition makes it all the more important to be open, honest and reflexive about the process gone through. In this section, I thus set forth to discuss some of the main ways in which my own positionality and that of participants, as well as considerations over a number of ethical issues, are likely to have affected the collection of data and the ‘story’ that was finally crafted.

One of the main difficulties I experienced was in getting access to participants, which is something that ended up shaping this study in ways I had not envisaged when I first started my ‘fieldwork’. Initially, I intended to explore the experiences of both men and women, and of those who had finished university and moved on to employment as well as of those who were currently in higher education. Yet, this proved much harder than expected, which eventually led me to shift to the current focus. Here, I briefly consider some of the main reasons for these difficulties. Firstly, having originally decided to focus on the East London borough of Tower Hamlets where most of the Bangladeshi population resides, I set out to find potential participants both by placing advertising leaflets in different places such as libraries, cafés, and community centres, and by establishing contacts with several community organisations who could act as ‘gatekeepers’. Not being familiar with not only the Bangladeshi ‘community’ but also with the locality and the network of organisations operating in the area, meant however that considerable time had to be spent on identifying possible ‘gatekeepers’ and on building rapports and trust with them. Even when significant effort had been put into building these relations, moreover, relying on ‘third

parties' to be introduced to potential participants also meant that I could never be sure of whether they would actually follow through with the introductions, nor could I directly make the case for taking part in my research. In one instance, for example, the manager of a community organisation where I had done volunteer work withdrew her willingness to ask the people she knew if they wanted to participate, as she stated that she had felt uncomfortable when doing so with one of them.

Secondly, a conversation I had with one of the young women interviewed made me realise in hindsight that there was a certain wariness among potential participants about the purpose of my research, which derived from feeling, as Muslims, frequently stigmatised and 'under surveillance'. As she pointed out, in a climate characterised by an increasing Islamophobia, and by the government's emphasis on targeting 'home grown terrorism' through strategies like 'Prevent' (Home Office 2011), it was no wonder that people of Bangladeshi background, most of whom are Muslim, would not be keen to meet and talk about their lives with some unknown researcher. Although when personally reaching out and talking face-to-face to potential participants I was able to explain the details of my research, and could offer a degree of reassurance, this wariness contributed to making recruitment through third parties and leafleting especially difficult. Indeed, there were some occasions where, after getting in touch with me through the number I had left on the leaflet, people decided to withdraw when a meeting was proposed. Finally, it proved more difficult for me to find male participants compared to females, which eventually brought me to the decision to only focus on the latter as the sample of men would have been too small. Some researchers have pointed in this respect to difficulties emerging from gender differences between the researcher and participants in the process of interviewing (Song and Parker 1995). However, I cannot ultimately be sure of the reasons why men seemed less willing to take part in the research.

While some elements functioned as barriers to reaching participants and gaining enough trust for them to be willing to share thoughts and experiences, other characteristics attached to my person seemed to work in the opposite direction, creating opportunities for shared understandings. In particular, me being a young (30 years old at the time of fieldwork), female doctoral student appeared to generate some form of 'identification' in the young women I approached outside of university, many of whom told me they agreed to be interviewed as they understood the difficulty of finding participants for research studies, which was something they would also soon be confronted with in carrying out their final year dissertations. Doing a PhD was also something they appeared to value highly.

Another aspect was represented by me not being British, which arguably enabled them to speak more freely about issues they might have otherwise refrained from making explicit, such as their concerns with the racism and Islamophobia existing in Britain, and ambiguous sentiments towards 'being British' and the British middle-classes. I cannot however be sure of whether it was actually my non-British background to make these responses possible as, for example, most of these young women did not seem to have any problem with voicing their concerns with white middle-class privilege despite me being white. Song and Parker (1995) have argued in this respect that different positionings do not per se produce 'good or bad' data in terms of richness and 'validity'. Nevertheless, I have highlighted those few instances where participants were more cautious in talking about the existence of discrimination when discussing the relative extracts, as

'recognizing and naming those uncertain moments when positional spaces may not have been shared, or when dialogue may not have been honest are not only important steps towards producing valid accounts [...] but also important strategies for displacing the indomitable authority of the author' (Mullings 1999, p. 349).

Something I had not anticipated to represent an 'asset' was not being Bangladeshi. This also seemed to allow for certain narratives to be presented, exposing for example some of these young women's stereotypical constructions of 'the standard Bengali', and more generally the tensions they felt in relation to 'being Bangladeshi'. Being non-British and non-Bangladeshi additionally meant that I was especially keen to ask for extensive explanations and details about certain aspects that came up during the interviews, as well as receiving unsolicited ones. This position of 'researcher-as-suppliant', together with me not being much older than participants and presenting myself very casually, might have contributed to redressing some of the power imbalances that pertain to the interviewer-interviewee relation (England 1994, p. 243).

It is however important not to forget that power inequalities are integral to the research situation, and while we can certainly try to limit their impact, we can never fully remove them (England 1994). In my case, this awareness was particularly emphasised by me being of white, middle-class background while participants were of minority ethnic, mostly working-class origins. I was also conscious that I was interested in exploring the experiences and identities of what is often constructed, in both policy and media discourse, as a 'problem population', both as mostly Muslim and as having especially low rates of participation in education and the labour market. In adopting this focus, I was afraid that I might be contributing to reinforcing such pathologising views, as well as participants' sense of being pathologised. As I drew on their experiences to write my PhD thesis and articles for publication, moreover, I often felt guilty of appropriating their stories for my benefit.

I was and still am, in other words, always at risk to be ‘colonising their voices’ (England 1994; Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 2008). While sensitive to these issues, I also believe like England (1994, pp. 249-250) that

‘appropriation (even if it is “only” textual appropriation) is an inevitable consequence of fieldwork [and] as researchers we cannot escape the contradictory position in which we find ourselves, in that the “lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data” (Stacey, 1988, 23)’.

As researchers, especially when in a position that is in many respects privileged compared to that of participants, but not just in these cases, appropriation of the voices of ‘others’ is thus never completely avoidable. Yet, what we can do is to be as respectful as possible of those we engage with as first and foremost people, which I attempted to do in different ways, from my relation with these young women both during and after the interviews, to how I presented their stories. I also paid particular attention to challenging essentialising and pathologising accounts of Bangladeshi Muslim women, by exposing the diversity of their experiences and perspectives, and by underscoring the role that is played in shaping them by structural inequalities.

In my relation with participants and in presenting findings, I have attained to the ethical guidelines published by a number of research organisations (BSA 2002; SRA 2003; ESRC 2012). Yet, the practical application of such principles is not so straightforward, and it is ultimately up to researchers to exert their judgment in specific situations. A fundamental principle of ethical practice is that participants should be safeguarded from potential harm, including psychological injury and loss of self-esteem (BSA 2002, p. 4; SRA 2003, pp.35-36; ESRC 2012, p. 3). As through the narration of stories people not only describe but come to construct their identities, it is however likely that such process will be for them a ‘significant transformative experience’ (Elliott 2005, p. 140). Lieblich (1996, cit. in Elliott 2005, p. 137) suggests in particular that engaging in narrative interviewing is similar to ‘opening a Pandora’s box’, as questions might bring out unexpected accounts of painful experiences. In the course of this research, this happened for example when one of the young women who took part told me that she had a terminal illness which did not leave her long to live, while another one mentioned her grandmother recently passing away. In these cases, I empathised with participants’ feelings, and made it clear to them that they did not have to talk about something if they felt uncomfortable. Rather than simply limiting potential harm, however, I wanted to ensure participants’ well-being, and tried to make it as much as possible an enjoyable experience. After the interviews, most of these women told me that they enjoyed the process as it encouraged them to think through and put into words things they do not usually consider, and to understand

more about themselves. This is akin to what Elliott (2005, pp. 137, 140) defines as the quasi-therapeutic potential of narrative interviews, which comes from the opportunity these provide for people to reflect on past events and talk about their experiences at length and with a good listener.

Even when no harm results from the interview process, moreover, participants might still feel wronged by how they have been treated or their stories been used. In order to prevent this, I made sure that the research purpose and procedure were clear to them before meeting for the first interview, and sought informed consent for voice recording and the use of quotes and pictures in my thesis, conference presentations and publications. All participants were granted anonymity through the use of pseudonyms for both their names and those of the institutions attended. To limit the likelihood of participants being recognised, I exclusively refer in my work to those identifying characteristics and fragments of narratives which are essential to convey my findings. It was also especially crucial for me that these young women did not feel exploited in the process. While not being so naïve as to think that I effectively managed to avoid these feelings from potentially arising, some of the ways I attempted to address this were, for example, by sending thank you notes and Costa Coffee vouchers to show them gratitude for the time and stories they had shared with me without expecting anything in return, by keeping in touch after the interviews, and by notifying them of online articles I wrote building on my research. Sharing one's analysis with participants, in particular, is advocated by many feminist researchers as a way of testing the validity of findings as well as of enhancing ethical practice (Esterberg 2002; Creswell 2007). For me, it is also part of a strive for a 'public sociology' (Burawoy 2005) that engages with 'audiences' beyond academia to stimulate dialogues and challenge dominant stereotypes. Yet, sharing what we write with participants and doing public sociology opens up a whole new set of ethical dilemmas. For example, to what extent should we, as researchers, seek the feedback and 'approval' of those we conduct research with? Also, in the quest for making my findings known beyond academia, am I not really colonising participants' voices and somehow 'stealing' their fights? Surely, I can pay attention to where and what I publish, and how I frame narratives so to avoid depicting participants as passive victims for instance. However, I am left with no easy answer to these questions, and no other solution but to exercise my judgement case by case and learn from the process. These issues will be taken up again in the concluding chapter of the thesis, where I will consider the reflections they prompted and how I addressed them.

5.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set out the main questions guiding my research and discussed decisions related to sampling, methodology, and methods of data collection and analysis. I have considered in particular how the diversity of degree subjects and of institutions attended, which ranged from Russell Group and ‘old’ civic universities to ex-polytechnics, made it possible to explore how experiences and perspectives were shaped by the relation between participants’ multiple social identities and different institutional characteristics. I have also provided an overview of these young women’s socio-economic backgrounds in terms of parents’ geographical provenance, educational levels and current occupation, which are especially relevant aspects in understanding their differential access to economic, social and cultural resources. In this respect, I have argued for the importance of involving participants of both working-class and middle-class background in enabling us to tease out the intersecting influence of social class and ‘race’ / ethnicity in shaping their experiences and identities. I have also called attention to the subtle yet significant differences that existed in terms of access to social, cultural and economic capital among families of the same social class. I have then moved on to discuss the methodology adopted and methods employed for data collection and analysis. I have shown in particular how Bourdieu’s conceptual tools and relational methodology are employed in this research with the intent to unpack the relation among agents’ classed, racialised and gendered positioning in the contexts where they engage, their outlooks and dispositions, and the reproduction or transformation of material and symbolic inequalities of class, ‘race’ / ethnicity, and gender. Finally, I have turned to consider a number of ways in which my own positioning with respect to participants is likely to have impacted on the overall research process. In particular, in terms of specific characteristics either hindering or facilitating access, and of how these might have contributed to shaping responses. The next chapter begins my discussion of findings, and is focused on the education and career aspirations of the young women who took part in this study.

Chapter 6

Aspirations and the capacity to realise them

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I embark in an in-depth exploration of participants' educational and career aspirations, with a particular view to demonstrating and illustrating their socially embedded character, and to drawing out some of the implications this carries in terms of future employment. I start by considering different discourses of aspiration and achievement put forward by these young women and their parents. In making sense of expressed understandings and practices, and building on previous research (Archer and Francis 2006, 2007; Reay et al. 2007; Baker and Brown 2008; Basit 2012, 2013), I conceptualise aspirations as an aspect of habitus. This, I suggest, can provide a useful analytical approach, which enables us to attend more fully to the structural and cultural components at play in the shaping, re-shaping and possible fading of aspirations, as well as to recognise and investigate the mutually informing influences of aspiration and capitals on practice. In this sense, Bangladeshis' and other minority ethnicities' valuing of education and social mobility (Modood 2004; Archer and Francis 2006, 2007; Reay et al. 2007; Shah et al. 2010) can be seen as integral to collective constructions of 'what people like us do', which are grounded in diasporic discourses. The focus of analysis shifts then on career aspirations and expected pathways. Here, I point to the importance of social and cultural capital in informing these young women's 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997) and their capacity to actualise them, and advance the notion of 'known routes' (Archer and Francis 2007) as a way to interpret aspirations, expectations and trajectories. Consequently, I stress the importance of schools, extracurricular activities and work experiences in creating possible futures, especially for working-class and minority ethnic students who are not being exposed to a range of professions within the family.

6.2. Valuing education and 'achievement'

Considering the relative recency of Bangladeshis' participation in higher education (CoDE 2014; Lymperopoulou and Parameshwaran 2014, 2015), it is striking to note how going to university was presented by all of the young women interviewed as both normal and as expected of

them. This was the case for those of working-class as well as of middle-class origins, irrespective of whether their parents or older relatives had themselves attained a higher education degree. Within their narratives, participating in higher education was not only referred to as ‘something they always wanted to do’ but also as ‘something they always *knew* they would do’ (Modood 2004, p. 94). It was, in other words, a course of action which was taken for granted rather than being the object of conscious deliberation and negotiations with parents. This expectation, moreover, was shared among the different networks that these young women inhabited, i.e. their families, the Bangladeshi ‘community’ and college, which contributed to its strength. This stands in contrast with what has been found by Crozier et al. (2008, p. 171) for white British working-class students, and is more akin to the attitudes expressed by those of middle-class background, for whom ‘getting a degree [was] part of the life plan’. Yet, as we will see in more detail in the following chapter, working-class participants’ perspectives and experiences differed from those of this latter ‘group’ in some important respects, as they were well aware of the challenges involved with being of the first generation to access higher education, and encountered a number of related difficulties which affected their capacity to ‘benefit’ from participation.

The following quotes, all of which are from women whose parents had no experience of higher education, highlight both the strong value attributed to education within their families, and how they perceived going to university as natural and expected:

I always thought I would go to university. It's one of the norms of our culture, you go to university. It's going to university, studying and learning, and getting a job. (Chandi, working-class)

For me at that point it felt like it was the next natural step from college. University was the next pathway that I had to kind of go on, because my sisters went to university, within college there was so much emphasis on going to university... (Sadia, working-class)

My decision to go to university, it was just kind of a rule. In my family specifically, all of my sisters were at university so it was just the next thing to do, after I finished college I go to university. [...] Because education is really, really, it's seen as a very big thing in my family. (Farhan, working-class)

In this respect, Chandi and Sadia respectively refer to participation in higher education being ‘one of the norms of our culture’ and being the object of ‘so much emphasis’ within college, thus showing how its normative power derives from the confluence of different though compatible

systems of value and habituses. While Sadia, Chandi and Farhan all had older siblings or relatives who had gone into university before them, it is worth noting that even those who did not did still emphasise the support they received from their parents who, according to their words, ‘have always pushed us with education’ (Pavi, working-class).

Even Sultana, the only girl who mentioned briefly considering not going, acknowledged the above described normality and normativity of participation in higher education within the Bangladeshi ‘community’. Returning to the above considerations on parental ‘push’, her story is particularly revealing of the thin line that exists between parents’ eagerness for their children to do well in education being experienced as either encouragement or pressure, which can bring about opposite effects (Archer and Francis 2007; Basit 2013). Furthermore, it illustrates very well how one’s social networks provide a multiplicity of influences that concur to their decision-making:

Since I was in about Year 9 I have wanted to go to uni, just because it is seen as, as normal I guess you would say, in my community. Just you know, after secondary school education you would go straight into uni, so it was kind of seen as the norm. And then at one point I didn't want to go because there were all these apprenticeships, and I just felt like I was doing really bad at school. [...] My mum, even though she pushed me as hard to get to a better place [she] would always put me down and say, you know like: ‘I'm telling you to do well at uni but you're not doing... you're this, you're that’. [...] My peers they were doing, like one or two of them they were doing really well, but the rest of them they were not doing so well, just like me. So I guess in a way that kind of influenced me to not doing well. [...] I think [my main teacher] is the only one who saw that I had potential. Even my head of year and everyone, they all lost faith in me, and this particular teacher she was the only one that had hope left for me. [...] Another person that's helped me a lot as well is, she's kind of my auntie, my mum's best friend. [...] She was really encouraging and I'm really grateful for having her. (Sultana, working-class)

In Sultana’s case, instead of acting as a drive to ‘do better’, her mother pointing out that she was not doing well enough at school functioned to deter her from attending university, which is telling of how thin the boundaries between ‘push’ and ‘pressure’ can be. Alongside family, moreover, Sultana indicates a number of people who she sees as having affected her trajectory, leading in sometimes differing directions, including her school mates, teachers, and family friends. In this respect, her narrative effectively captures how motivations and influences brought to bear by others on one’s ‘choices’ are usually not straightforward but multiple, and working in complex and intricate ways.

In particular it draws attention to the significance of other people's manifested expectations of what one can do in shaping their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), that is, what they see themselves as potentially doing. Additionally, it points to the tensions and ambivalences that derive from the different contexts that one inhabits being characterised by different habituses, as what was 'normal' among her peers ('the rest of them were not doing so well') contrasted with prevailing expectations within her 'community'.

The way in which aspiration and orientation towards education were recurrently identified by participants as substantially permeating the environment where they grew up, whether they came from working-class or middle-class families, is shown for example in the following accounts:

In our family it's always about trying to achieve higher. So even if you do need to study further to achieve higher, that's an option that you will take on. (Mita, working-class)

[My parents] have always been into education. Even when we were younger, they always encouraged us to work even at home, do extra work and stuff like that. So I think it was just one of those things we were going to go into anyway. (Fauzia, working-class)

In my house we all, we grew up kind of knowing that we were going to go to university. Because my dad, he studies a lot, and our parents always wanted us to go to university, and while we were growing up we realised that yes, it'd be a good opportunity. [...]

Berenice: What is your father studying?

He's currently doing a Master in Education. Because yeah, our family, we've always been into education and academics, so you just kind of grow up in that environment and then it rubs off on you and you realise that's what you want to do. (Leena, middle-class)

These observations attest to how the aforementioned establishment of social mobility and educationally oriented outlooks as natural and normative of their practices is grounded for these young women in an early and consistent socialisation to such values, which all of them stress as having 'always' been held by their families whatever their class background. Leena's father's undertaking of a Master's Degree in Education as a mature student is in this respect emblematic, and other instances were present of fathers taking up higher education in adulthood in order to either qualify or re-qualify after suffering from downward mobility due to migration.

As very well conveyed by Leena when she says that ‘it rubs off on you’, parental outlooks towards achievement and education appear to have been acquired and internalised by respondents, whose articulations of their aspirations and ways to achieve them reveal an across the board commitment to occupational mobility, and a view of higher education as both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable:

Like someone was saying they would push their kids into doing apprenticeships, whereas I thought: ‘no, the value of a degree, even if you don’t have no direct path that you want to choose, the value of it I think you just can’t undermine’. Because the things you learn, the people you meet, the experiences you have, it just changes the other person. (Jamila, working-class)

It starts you off on the rest of your life, isn’t it? Your career, which is a fundamental of your life, your livelihood, and it’s also, you discover a lot about yourself. [...] Like I feel school, high school, they’re just steps to adulthood, and then university is like the last step, which really does build you as an adult, and helps you to become like a part of society much more. (Rani, middle-class)

That’s a lot of debt, but it’s not off-putting because I know I’ll get a job out of it, I will pay it back one day. It’s going to be hard but it’s better than not taking that route, because what am I going to do if I don’t? It’s hard to work your way up, but I didn’t go to uni, the job I’d probably get wouldn’t have paid much and working my way up I wouldn’t get that far. (Chandi, working-class)

In this last excerpt, Chandi expresses a conception of higher education’s instrumental value and a discourse of ‘working one’s way up’ which resonated with those of all of the women interviewed. In this respect, their narratives also show a strong conformity to dominant public and policy discourses (Archer and Hutchings 2000). Despite acknowledging the disadvantages deriving from their working-class position, and from the related dearth of economic, social and cultural resources that could be drawn upon in this endeavour, these young women retained a strong faith in their chances to climb the social ladder. Key to this were the possibilities granted by a university degree, although it is worth noting that a few of them did also recognise apprenticeships and vocational training as equally valuable routes to social mobility.

6.3. Aspirations as an aspect of habitus

This attribution of value to education, especially as a way of attaining upward mobility, has been deemed characteristic of parents and students from different minority ethnic backgrounds regardless of class location (Reay et al. 2007; Butler and Hamnett 2011). In this sense, the attitudes that have been documented as prevalent among these minority ethnicities have been likened to those expressed by the white middle-classes (Reay et al. 2007). Various studies have referred to this as an ‘aspirational habitus’ (Archer and Francis 2007), ‘aspirational capital’ (Basit 2012), and as an aspect of ‘ethnic capital’ (Modood 2004; Shah et al 2010), with each of these definitions emphasising distinct features. Here, I build specifically on Archer’s and Francis’ notion of aspirational habitus, and bring to light some significant elements, which, I contend, can help to illuminate the nature of aspirations.

6.3.1. The interlacing of past, present and future, individual and collective

Firstly, the concept of habitus draws attention to the role of shared histories – e.g. of class, ‘race’, ethnicity, gender, migration – in structuring understandings and practices of those who belong to particular ‘groups’ (Bourdieu 1990a, 1990b; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Reay 2004a). This is especially evident throughout participants’ narrations, where a number of discourses were evoked in which past, present and future were woven together, linking the importance of education for young people to the difficulties experienced by parents through migration and settlement. These discourses are both ethnicised and classed, and appear to serve a double purpose. They function on the one hand as frameworks for the understanding and construction of one’s social identity, and on the other hand as generative of practices that are coherent with that construction. In particular, they act to establish an image of Bangladeshis as ‘always having been aspirational’, though not always having had the right opportunities. At the same time, they promote the take-up of higher education among the younger generations by presenting it both as a need, in order to secure a career, and as a responsibility.

One of the main arguments that were raised was that of parents not having enjoyed the same opportunities for formal education (Archer and Francis 2007; Shah et al 2010; Basit 2012, 2013):

Because [my parents] themselves are not as educated, they say how it hasn’t really, like they are always struggling, and they know that education is really important. They had like a lot of conflict which prevented them from going into school, so yeah in such terms they always

tell us how important education is and why you should always give education first priority.
(Pavi, working-class)

My mum does push me to do well in life just because she couldn't, she didn't have the same options as I do, you know when she was my age. She used to say: 'oh you know, we never had all these opportunities, we weren't allowed to go into school', just because of loads of factors, because of her parents, and because of how society used to be with racism and, you know, only white people would go into higher education and not any other coloured people.
(Sultana, working-class)

This construction of parents 'valuing education but not having had the possibilities to pursue it' (Archer and Francis 2007) was expressed by many among those who came from working-class families, and appeared to provide them with an understanding of their working-class origins as being compatible with an orientation towards education. Sultana's considerations, in addition, are especially illustrative of the gendered and racialised character of social class positionings and 'horizons for action', as she reports on the constraints experienced by her mother in relation to participation in higher education as a woman of minority ethnic background.

Another recurrent theme was that of parents having renounced to living an 'easier' life in Bangladesh, and having endured the hardships connected with moving to the UK in order to ensure a better education and life prospects for their children:

My mum always says: 'I came here for this, me and your dad came here for this, and then sometimes we would always think: "maybe we should just go back home, it is easier and we know how everything works", but then it requires a lot of perseverance', and I think I rate them for that. [...] You don't realise how much your parents have gone through to build this sort of life for you when it's just second nature to you. (Kanta, working-class)

Like my family are very keen on education because my parents came to this country for the sake of mine and my brothers' education. So if I didn't go to university, if I even mentioned that I didn't want to go, they would not be happy, because you know, they have sacrificed so much. Like in Bangladesh our life would be so much easier, but they had to struggle here for our education. (Shirina, middle-class)

As emerges from Kanta's and Shirina's extracts, this awareness, reinforced within the family through everyday discourses, engendered a sense of filial obligation, as children of immigrants, to follow in the path that was set for them by their parents through their 'struggle'.

Finally, parents' experiences highlighted the presence of racism and discrimination in the labour market, and the consequent necessity, as someone from an minority ethnic background, to be better qualified than white British candidates in order to secure a position:

Because my parents faced a lot of racism, they always said to me that you have to work hard, you have to do well, in order to do well in this country you have to do better than your English counterparts. (Flora, middle-class)

Sadia's and Zainab's statements, reported below, additionally show how some of these young women openly challenged the white male middle-class dominance of academia and employment that derives from more or less subtle forms of institutional and interpersonal racism by emphasising the importance of increasing the presence of minority ethnic women, and positioning themselves as both 'trend-breakers' and 'trend-setters':

I think also as part of like a broader narrative it's important to have like women of colour, as a Bengali kind of representative, within institutions. (Sadia, working-class)

Well ideally I'd like to go into the Engineering industry because I feel that women are like under represented anyway, and so I think as like a British like ethnic minority woman to go into that industry would be quite rare as well. (Zainab, middle-class)

The variety of discourses that have been presented can be seen as both drawing on a more or less coherent interpretative repertoire of the orientations towards education and work of Bangladeshis living in the UK, and as contributing to its (re)production. In this respect, it is interesting to notice how the narratives of parents are being taken up and employed by their daughters, informing their practices and becoming part of collective imaginaries that are transmitted inter-generationally. Like those exposed by Francis and Archer (2005; Archer and Francis 2006, 2007) in relation to Chinese pupils and their parents, these too are 'diasporic discourses', which draw on, and speak to, the experiences of immigrants and their offspring. Here, migration to the UK is generally described as providing potential opportunities for upward social mobility for the younger generations, although often at the cost of both working-class and especially middle-class parents putting at jeopardy their established socio-economic positions through downward mobility. These discourses convey therefore an idea of struggle for migration and settlement as part of a (gendered – as shown by the following accounts) long-term 'family project' for social mobility, which in the case of participants to this research appeared to encourage such pursuit.

For those young women who came from middle-class families, moreover, the experience of their parents suffering from downward socio-economic mobility, and re-training in the UK to improve their position, also served as an example that this was possible:

My dad, so he qualified from Bangladesh and he worked there and he got quite far up. [...] What happens here is they don't really recognise a medical Degree from Bangladesh, so he did odd jobs here, and then he got the opportunity really luckily to re-do his final year of medicine at Thornhill University. So he did that and that meant he got a Thornhill qualification, a Thornhill Medical degree and then he began his training from the beginning again. [...] So yeah, and like now we're fine, everything is good. (Flora, middle-class)

[My parents] were like university graduates, my mum did her Masters before she came [...] so she could have a high earning job in Bangladesh, but instead she decided to come to a country, let her job levels drop, and then start from the very beginning. [...] And then slowly my mum's job escalated, and she kept getting promoted, and then she became a social worker, now she's the manager, but she started from being a nursery worker. And my dad he studied law, he did his LLM, he started working at lawyers firms and now he has got his own firm. (Shirina, middle-class)

Similarly to the previously considered instance of Leena's father undertaking a Master's degree, these accounts are revealing of the gendered character of these families' projects for social mobility. In all of these cases, it was in fact the male partner who would (re-)train through formal education, with women either remaining at home or working 'their way up' in their jobs, all of which were in the social and healthcare sectors.

This shared construction of Bangladeshis living in the UK as being aspirational is well illustrated by the picture that was chosen by Shay to represent what it meant for her to be Bangladeshi, and by the description she provided of it:



I had to get the big buildings in the back, so the Gherkin and the Shard. Because obviously we are from a poor background, we are like not really privileged and stuff, but we can work our way up to the top. Like we can work, we are determined and we always like, we want to be at the top, so we always get pushed to the top so we can get ourselves there. [...] I guess because in our background Bengalis don't really have that opportunity to get a degree and to get a good career so coming over here to the UK where you have the opportunity to get a degree and stuff they want to take the full advantage of it. (Shay, working-class)

The following excerpts further illuminate the 'diasporic' character of such discourses by revealing their reference to an amalgam of Bangladeshi values, Islamic teachings (Franceschelli 2014) and opportunities provided by migration to Britain:

I agree with some of the values like the British hard work, that's Bengali values too I guess, hard-working value, I have this work ethic that I want to do well, I want to get a job here, it's a better life basically. (Chandi, working-class)

University and the desire to study and so on would probably be just as much a Bangladeshi thing as a Muslim thing as well as a British thing, you know, like studying and wanting to go to university and expanding your knowledge and so on. [...] Because you know, the desire to study and expand your knowledge and get somewhere is exactly what Bangladeshis were thinking when they came to London. It's exactly what Muslims are taught to do, like you need to always be expanding your knowledge, whether it's of Islam or the world, just to, you know, be the better version of yourself. So it's all so interlinked. (Jamila, working-class)

Although not explicitly linked to discourses of past experiences, most participants also mentioned the strong expectation for adult children to provide for their families and look after their parents as further promoting young generations' participation in higher education, and upholding

their strive for upward socio-economic mobility by embedding such practices in specific constructions of culture and religion:

You get educated to get a good job, and you get a good job to like, to provide for yourself, for family, or future family that you may have. [...] Like family is really important to us, to our culture, to our religion. (Leena, middle-class)

With Bengali parents, they're very much invested in their child's future because culturally, and for us is more like religiously, for my mother and our family, but I think generally culturally children are expected to look after their parents. So whatever they do they have to keep their parents in mind, and for me it's like I have a religious duty towards them as well. (Rani, middle-class)

Consistently with the idea of habitus as a 'matrix of perceptions' that engenders interpretations and responses to different situations in accordance with past experiences of 'people like us' (Bourdieu 1977, 1990b), these young women often referred to determination and resilience as crucial characteristics to have in order to 'achieve'. This emphasis on 'striving hard to get what you want', 'not letting things bring you down', and on the need to 'carry on and go for it', can be seen as congruent with the proposed conceptualisation of aspirations as an aspect of habitus, as it both stems from, as well as encouraging, persistence in the face of adversity. As well as to the range of discourses thus far considered, the women who took part in this research also called attention to the way in which the pursuit of education was sustained by their parents through various practices. These included substantial emotional and time commitment, engagement in forms of 'social competition' among family and community members, the investment of even very limited finances in private tuitions and schooling and in resources for study, and strategic residential 'choices' aimed at ensuring proximity to 'good' schools (Archer and Francis 2007; Shah et al. 2010; Butler and Hamnett 2011; Basit 2012, 2013). These practices suggest a strong 'capitalisation' on available resources directed towards children's education, which acts to facilitate their progression and access to university.

6.3.2. The dynamism of practices

In relation to participation in higher education being perceived as 'a norm' in the Bangladeshi 'community', participants' accounts further highlight how norms are in fact dynamic and subject to transformation, and point to the importance of older relatives in 'setting the trend'.

The following excerpts illuminate this process of change and establishment of new norms, where what was once seen as an exception becomes increasingly common and positively valued:

I have an older brother, he went to uni and he graduated, so he kind of influenced me and pushed me to it. And then before him the first graduate in my family was one of my uncles, so he kind of put his influence to my brother and then my brother's influence came to me, and slowly we just started becoming aware of what university was and why it's valued. (Megh, working-class)

Because I don't have any older siblings, I sort of look up to my aunts and uncles, and they have done it. And it's just seeing where they have gone, it was something I knew I would want to do, just to help me get a bit further I guess. (Jamila, working-class)

Reflecting a common trend, these quotations show how the presence of older siblings and / or broader family members such as cousins, uncles and aunts who have already gone to university bolsters the take-up of this same route in the younger generations. Directly available examples of social mobility through participation in higher education, to which one can closely relate, serve in this sense as a source of inspiration, as well as proving the value of this route to parents and elders. Furthermore, they provide a useful point of access to cultural capital, especially in the form of information and practical know-how in relation to institutional procedures (Crozier and Davies 2006; Shah et al 2010; Basit 2013).

The influence of social networks other than family, such as teachers, educational practitioners and friends, was also noted by several participants, who recognised them as important sources of information as well as motivation. As can be expected, this was especially the case for those of working-class origins, who had few highly educated relatives:

Like all my teachers, obviously they all went to university, and like the whole: 'if you want to achieve and go through life you have to go to uni, you've got to get a degree'. [...] And then there's this whole thing about medicine and we had like people coming into secondary school, they were like telling us about all these different careers. (Hamida, working-class)

All of my close friends we all went to university, and I think we've always had that passion. We've never thought twice about going to university, I think it's always been like: 'we are going to go, it's happening'. (Kanta, working-class)

As summarised by Chandi, moreover, as well as drawing from the experiences and teachings of what can be seen as ‘role models’, these young women mentioned learning from ‘bad examples’ what not to do:

I realised through other people’s failings, so I’m sort of learning through their mistakes that I don’t want to go through this path, I want to go through another path. [...] When people talk about how they got a first and they have an amazing job, I want that as well, so I just follow their lead I guess. (Chandi, working-class).

In conformity with the dynamics of habitus, in addition, orientations developed throughout one’s upbringing appear to be projected into the future through approaches and expectations around child rearing and marriage that point to an intergenerational transmission of aspiration:

I want [my children] to struggle for their education, [...] work hard to get into the school that they go to so they appreciate school more, go to school, and then maybe hopefully work hard to come to a good university like I did. (Shirina, middle-class)

And just, you know, wanting to do better I guess with your own future, so that your kids have something to look up to in a sense as well, so that they strive to be better than you are in a sense. (Jamila, working-class)

I would say [what I am looking for in a future husband is] a university degree definitely, and he has to be someone who has a career not someone who just does work, who has any odd job. I want him to have aspirations, only because when you go to uni, if you haven’t gone to uni there is a lot of difference in understanding things. (Farhan, working-class)

Farhan’s preference for a husband with higher education qualifications and a professional career resonates with that of almost all of the young women interviewed. Even though economic stability was mentioned by a few respondents, expressed motivations had mainly to do with ensuring a ‘similarity of mind-set and values’. Some referred in this respect to a shift compared to their parents’ standards for the selection of potential husbands, which instead privileged wealth and family status. These accounts shed light on the subtlety of the processes through which class position is secured and reproduced, as cultural capital comes to substitute and thereby disguise economic capital in attributing value and motivating preferences, which is referred to by Bourdieu (2007a, p. 46) as ‘transubstantiation’.

Finally, it is worth noting how aspirations appear to be strictly linked to the transformation of gender norms and expectations, as all participants stressed the intention to graduate from university and to have both a family and a career, and observed how this prospect for their future was shared by their parents. Such an agreement on the importance of ensuring a stable job also meant that this pursuit provided space for the re-negotiation of established norms, as for marriage being postponed to an older age, travelling abroad, and living on one's own:

Having a career, any career, is you know, it is kind of important because obviously there's the matter of livelihood and being independent, but there's also the fact that you want to do something that you are interested and you're passionate about. And even if you do choose to have a family, you would still want to have something that is your interest, you know, your particular interest. (Rani, middle-class)

I want to get married after I've, like after I've done my PGCE and after I've settled down in working as a teacher, only after that I want to get married. I don't want to get married before that, only because I want to be someone before I get married. [...] The way I want to do something before I get married, that's what my mum wants as well, she wants me to be settled in my career and then get married, not before. (Farhan, working-class)

I thought that if my parents, the only reason they would let me go is if I were to get married first and I was like: 'no way am I going to get married before I secure myself!'. [...] But then I asked them and they were like: 'yeah, go, go, go straightaway', and all of this and all of that, they are so happy for me to go. I think my dad knows there's a lot of money involved, so he's happy and he wants me to go secure myself. (Shay, working-class)

The intention and expectation to secure their independence before getting married was asserted by all of those who took part in this research, with this 'independence' being presented as involving the acquisition of a mix of economic ('secure myself'), cultural ('something that is your interest') and symbolic capital ('I want to be someone'), and was supported by their parents. In this sense, most of these women expected to assume gender roles that differed from those of their mothers, who were for the vast majority housewives. The following accounts show how these changes are embedded within specific structural opportunities and constraints, as while participating in higher education and having a career are seen as enabling more 'freedom' within gendered relations, they are also considered as necessary 'in order to survive':

I think guys have had freedom sort of to do what they want in a sense which girls might not have always had. [...] And so to gain that sort of freedom and to you know, go past all those restrictions, university would be the way to get ahead in terms of knowledge and education and then go on to get better and bigger jobs. (Aishah, working-class)

But also like within London, like in order to survive [...] you need two incomes. So therefore it's like not even a question of can she work, she has to work because it's like norm, everything else is going up, wages are still staying the same. So you need to you know, [...] you need to have that education background if you want to get the best jobs or even just you need to be working yourself. (Shabana, working-class)

6.4. Career aspirations and pathways

Career aspirations expressed by participants varied, as we shall see, both in terms of areas and roles of interest, as well as of the extent to which they were defined as opposed to vague. Despite such differences, the job characteristics that were cited as being most important for these young women were noticeably similar. Comprehensibly, almost all of them mentioned looking forward to a job that 'they enjoyed' and 'made them happy'. While this took a number of specific substantive meanings and connotations, it was often linked with 'helping others' / 'making a change', and 'being able to grow and develop', which appeared to prevail over considerations of profit. 'Helping others' emerged in particular as an especially prominent aspect within characterisations of aspired professions, even for those who were not undertaking studies in what might be seen as the 'typical' care and social fields, and was seen to confer purpose and value to one's occupation. The relevance attributed specifically by females to this element as a motivating factor for pursuing professional pathways in a wide range of sectors has already been noted by previous research, attesting to the gendered character of aspirations (Packard and Nguyen 2003; Wilson et al. 2004; Tang et al. 2008). Zainab's extract, reported below, shows how this was further constructed as being in line with the teachings and values promoted by Islam, thus pointing to the ways in which aspirations are also inflected by religious faith:

In terms of the Islamic perspective as well. [...] So you have to consider that as a Muslim woman, what would be beneficial to do, so is your job pleasing to you and pleasing to God as well? Are you helping people? Are you giving something back to society or is it just purely for material reasons that you're doing that job, just to make money? Obviously you

need money to survive but I think there are those elements as well that make people choose certain careers. (Zainab, middle-class)

Other respondents also mentioned how having a job which provided the opportunity to help others was viewed positively not only by them but also by their parents, and represented one of the reasons for them granting support to their daughters' career 'choices'.

Looking in more detail at the specific jobs and areas of employment that participants mentioned considering, it is worth noting in the first place how instances where one particular profession of interest had been identified early on and followed coherently throughout the school years were relatively rare. Like Sadia and Shay, whose reflections are reported below, most of these women had been and still were contemplating different options within one broad field, either because of changing perceptions of their own interests, or as they adapted to perceived opportunities and constraints to the actualisation of certain routes (Hart 2013):

So I always saw myself as a diplomat, as an ambassador, representing like a nation. [...] I pursued that at university, first year, and then I don't know, as you grow up you see the flaws, you see how competitive it is, you see how much you don't agree with it and yes, so I kind of stepped back from that. I also thought about doing a law conversion, but I realise that corporate is not for me, and then now I am really considering teaching. [...] So over the summer I went to Indonesia and I was teaching from primary students to secondary, and I realised that actually I enjoy it, and maybe it's not the fact that I'm falling into my back-up, it's something that I actually enjoy, so I'm really looking into teaching after my degree. (Sadia, working-class)

I'm trying to find work experience in my industry, the pharmaceutical industry and stuff, and impossible, absolutely impossible to get. And so my friend, she's from Bahrain so from the Middle East, and she was telling me how there's a lot of demand for chemistry students over there, in the petroleum industry, and there's a lot of money in there as well, so I was like: 'why not?'. [...] Sales, meeting new people all the time, I would love that, but it's so hard to get a job in that sector. (Shay, working-class)

Especially evident in Shay's account is the way in which social capital can function, through its presence or absence, to either create or curtail opportunities for taking up given paths. In her case, in particular, having a friend who informed her of opportunities available in the Middle East oil industry led to consider a different option from what she had initially aspired to. At the same time,

the inability to access the pharmaceutical industry made this initial aspiration increasingly seem as non-realistic. Interests themselves, moreover, can arguably be seen as largely being shaped by the set of opportunities and constraints that individuals face, especially in terms of access to cultural and social capital. Although these influences might not always be acknowledged at a conscious level, they appear in fact to impact considerably on both definition and pursuit of aspirations, as they contribute to structure one's 'horizons for action' and underlay practices of self-exclusion from careers that privilege a different endowment of capitals (Bourdieu 1984; Hart 2013). Sadia's narrative is particularly revealing of how these processes work in relation to cultural capital and habitus, as she comes to construct the corporate sector as 'not for her' in that it is seen as 'too competitive'. This resonates with research pointing to women's lower preference for competitive practices compared to men (Niederle and Vesterlund 2007, 2008, 2010), and is suggestive of the gendered, as well as racialised and classed, character of possible (mis-)matches between one's cultural capital and habitus, and certain areas of employment. Yet, other studies have also underscored the substantial role of socialisation in shaping these preferences (Gneezy et al. 2009; Booth and Nolen 2012), thus drawing attention to the importance of gendered relations in informing career aspirations and pathways by structuring habitus and access to cultural capital.

6.4.1. 'Known routes'

Once we adopt this perspective, it is easier to understand the popularity among these young women and their parents of what can be termed as 'known routes' (Archer and Francis 2007, p. 134), which mainly included occupations in the legal, medical, education and care sectors. Drawing and expanding on Archer's and Francis' definition, the term is employed here to refer to those professions about which there is an established knowledge within the family and 'community', where this knowledge can derive from either one or all of the following: 1. Experience transmitted by relatives and / or acquaintances; 2. Substantial contact as 'users'; 3. Well-defined pathway of steps into employment. Considering the relevance of social and cultural capital in shaping interests, these elements, illustrated in the following extracts, can be seen as important sources of access, which enhance awareness of the existence of certain jobs as well as of how to attain them:

I've always wanted to be a lawyer, because my dad is a lawyer and as I was growing up I used to help him with his cases, I used to draft letters and things like that, and I really enjoyed it. [...] My expectation is that hopefully I graduate with a 2:1 or a first, I do my law conversion, I do my LPC, get a training contract at a law firm and then become a lawyer properly. (Shirina, middle-class, BSc Classics)

[My eldest sister] did a qualification for youth work. [...] My second sister she went on to do her PGCE so she's been a teacher for a good ten, fifteen years now. [...] My third sister is on maternity leave now but she's also a teacher, she did her PGCE after her degree and... there are a lot of teachers in our family. And my brother he's just graduated and is working for a local council doing youth... working with young children. (Aniqa, working-class, BSc Education Studies)

Since I was a little girl, when I used to look at my teachers they used to inspire me, so since then I've been, that's been my only career choice since I was a little girl. So whatever I did, like in College whatever I chose, I chose according to that. [...] And then in uni I made sure I chose Education Studies which would directly put me into a field regarding education and school, and for my PGCE I also know to get directly into the career that I chose I am going to have to do Primary PGCE, primary school teaching. (Pavi, working-class, BSc Education Studies)

There is a tendency in policy and practitioners' discourses to frame working-class and minority ethnic students' aspirations as somehow dysfunctional (Archer and Francis 2007; Basit 2012). South Asians, in particular, are often blamed for holding a set of aspirations that is 'too limited' and not enough diversified, and stereotypes abound of South Asian parents pushing for their sons and daughters to become either doctors or lawyers. While the findings reported here might appear to partly confirm these stereotypes – although as we will see the range of professions indicated by participants was actually wider – the above observations urge in fact for a re-consideration of the substantial role that is played in this sense by structural and institutional inequalities. In particular, as they function to restrict 'horizons for action' by systematically curtailing access to important sources of capital and by structuring perceptions of what those of a certain ethnicity, class and gender (can) do.

Another important element that can help to explain parental preferences for certain careers is the relative connotation and attached socio-economic status. As suggested by Kanta, the high status and income that are generally ascribed to occupations such as being a doctor appear to acquire particular significance for Bangladeshi immigrant parents within their view of social mobility as a 'family project'. In this sense, adult children's achievement of highly regarded and well retributed jobs can be seen as the fulfilment of such a project:

I think it's something that it's become a stereotypical thing, but also I also see it in a lot of Asian parents. Like I think part of it is because it is a really accredited, like it's a fantastic

job to have, it's good money and there is an element of pride in it. [...] That's something that shows status. [...] Because [my sister] did not want to do medicine then it was me and it was like: 'why don't you do, why don't you become a doctor?', but I think I was always straight from the go ahead: 'I don't want to look at people's bodies, I'm sorry, I can't be a doctor'. [...] Especially because they've come from Bangladesh and they have emigrated here and they are trying to build their life here and I think they want the best. [...] They have worked hard to build their life, get a house, some even get a job, for their kids to be a doctor that would be like a cherry on top which is understandable, totally. (Kanta, working-class)

If you were to do something like science or law or maths in my family you would be doing something amazing but something like sociology or any other humanities subject, which it is vague to get a specific type of job in, they didn't really see it as a subject. So my mum had a hard time dealing with that. [...] But I just didn't want to, I do not like science.

Berenice: Why do you say that she would have liked you to choose more professionally oriented...?

[...] I don't think she understood that there is more options with sociology. [...] And from other people, what she heard was getting into social work is so easy anyone can do it, she didn't want me to have that sort of, I guess she didn't want me to be in that position where the job I had, anyone could get into it. She wants me to have a job where she can proudly say that my daughter does so and so, something no one else can get into. (Farhan, working-class)

Farhan's quote is moreover revealing of some of the above mentioned processes through which the orientation towards social mobility is sustained, and specifically of practices of 'social competition'. Additionally, her story is illustrative of the functioning of hierarchies of status among degree subjects and occupations, where higher value is accorded not only to degrees that are seen as providing better employability prospects, but also to those subjects and jobs that offer a higher degree of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) in that 'no one else can get into' them. Yet, in contrast to accounts of parents' 'push' for education, where going to university was constructed as we have seen as 'a must' / 'a rule', the excerpt reported above show how parents' hope for their children to follow certain career pathways did not amount to the same pressure nor preclude the possibility for negotiation, with these women being in fact able to advance their own aspirations.

Although ‘known routes’ were especially common among the aspirations expressed by participants and their parents, some of them also mentioned considering more unusual and less ‘tested’ trajectories. Rani was one of these women. Like all of those who were envisaging a career that no one else in their families had yet undertaken, her story underscores the key input provided by external sources of social and cultural capital:

I am very interested in [...] the journalism aspect of science as well, so more like the communication aspects. [...] It was only after I started to study it that I realised how very complex it is and how many, how statistics itself, if you think about it, in biology at least, statistics can be used in so many forms and ways. [...] I do know someone who was, she studied medicine [...] and now she’s doing a lot of work related to just being, you know, the journalism aspect of it. [...] So I thought, I mean by looking at her work I thought that, you know, that might be a field to get into. Even though, like before I used to think it would be a field that would be very difficult for at least a Muslim woman to get into because it involves you being so, you know, mobile and all of that, but I think seeing her, it was kind of encouraging. (Rani, middle-class)

In describing how she became interested and started seeing herself in a profession that focused on science communication, Rani refers in particular to what she had learned throughout university and to a friend of hers doing a similar job. The latter, especially, was crucial in making this possibility seem for Rani more concretely viable, as she represented an example of someone ‘like her’ who was able to succeed within that profession, acting therefore to build her confidence and serving as encouragement in the face of expected difficulties.

6.4.2. Aspirations and self-identification

The way in which the experiences of people ‘like us’ importantly functioned to frame ‘horizons for action’ by making certain routes look more or less within one’s reach came up throughout interviewees’ narrations as a recurrent and meaningful theme, which attests to the need to ensure a diversity of backgrounds in all sectors and at all levels of employment. Hamida’s and Zainab’s extracts, reported below, provide in this respect illuminating examples of how the lack of representation of social categories with which one identifies (i.e. in terms of gender, ‘race’ / ethnicity, class) can lead to construct given fields as ‘not for us’ and to anticipate discrimination, deterring therefore from the undertaking of related pathways. In this sense, they shed light on some of the ways in which dynamics of self-exclusion can operate at a psychological level, bringing one ‘to exclude oneself from the [...] places [...] from which one is excluded’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 174).

Their quotes are however additionally illustrative of how the experience of people with whom one identifies can work on the converse to animate interest, as they increase one's perceived capacity to succeed. As happened for Hamida, in those cases where these people were part of one's social network they also had the significant function of opening access to relevant information:

I didn't even know you get scholarships for PhDs. I thought like you got to be really wealthy to do one of them things. [...] I didn't even know people from like her [working-class] background, like our background, would be able to do that. And then, you know, for me I thought it would be harder for me because obviously I'm a person of colour and it's like difficult, more difficult for people, ethnic minorities to get in to that level of, yeah so it, you know, it would be a bigger fight. But then the way she spoke about it it's just made it more simpler and easier. Like, you know: 'you can do it, you can do it' sort of thing and it's like: 'you know what, maybe I can', [...] so I'm like: 'go for it'. (Hamida, working-class)

I was worried about what my career aspirations would be [going to King George], what am I going to do with this degree, but now that I've studied it and got into it I've grown to like it. For example, we went on a trip to [...] a big industrial company. [...] We didn't see any female employees, just one, and she was an ex King George alumni so it was quite nice it was like: 'oh actually people do well from this uni', and then I felt more optimistic about it and realized it's more down to the individual than the university that you go to as well. (Zainab, middle-class)

Interestingly, the concerns expressed by Zainab in this latter excerpt flag up a less obvious but still important dimension of self-identification, which has to do with the university attended and with its prestige. Here, it can be seen how symbolic violence constructing certain institutions (and, as we have seen earlier, degree subjects) as of lesser value takes its toll on students, as value judgements are internalised and become part of self-understandings. In observing how this induced self-image might have precluded Zainab from contemplating potential career options, had she not been reassured by the presence in the workplace of 'someone like her', we can recognise the concrete risk of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' that symbolic violence carries with it. As students of working-class origins and those from most minority ethnic backgrounds tend to be over-represented in 'new', generally less prestigious universities (Runnymede Trust 2012; Boliver 2013), they are especially vulnerable to such a risk. Exposing the socially constructed nature of discourses of value, and the structural inequalities in which they are grounded, becomes therefore imperative in order to counter these subtle mechanisms of hierarchical reproduction.

As highlighted by Jamila, the underrepresentation in certain employment sectors of people 'like us' can additionally generate substantial tensions between one's desire to work and progress in those sectors, and the wish to maintain their gendered, racialised and classed identities:

I'd like a place where you know, for me I guess it's being able to be myself in a sense. [...] Just feeling comfortable in an environment that I would guess would be predominantly white male middle-class, because some of those jobs that I mentioned will basically be those kind of people. And I just suppose it's where I can, it's a place where I would like to be able to grow and develop, but not have to change myself as a whole basically. [...] I think firstly just as a woman I suppose, you know some of these jobs are taken up mainly by men, so in that sense I would like to be able to, you know, not be, how do I explain, like, I'd like my position as a woman not to be undermined. But also as an 'ethnic minority', and I use inverted commas, I wouldn't also want to, like I wouldn't want to be put on a, not on a lower pedestal but just I wouldn't want to be undermined again just because there are, you know, white male middle-class people in the same jobs or something.

Berenice: And do you think that might be the case?

I don't think it would be the case. I guess if you let yourself be treated like that then, but if you go in sure of your own position, your own status, I guess then you will be absolutely fine because you are both capable of doing the same job which is why you got the position. And I don't think people are like that I suppose, I would like to think people aren't cheating, I'm sure, I don't know, I guess, you know, it depends. (Jamila, working-class)

The excerpt presented is profoundly revealing of the strains and contradictions with which career hopes and expectations of minority ethnic women and people are fraught. Jamila voices here her concern with finding a work environment which enables her to 'be herself', one where she does not have to 'change herself as a whole' in order to 'fit in' and be treated fairly. In explaining such concern, she refers to the potential discrimination that she feels she might face as a woman of minority ethnic - and I would add of working-class - origins in a predominantly white male middle-class environment. Yet, when prompted further on whether she thinks this might actually happen, she ends up downplaying the risk, and shifting the eventual responsibility on the individual for 'letting him/herself be treated like that'. While my own position as an interviewer of white middle-class background might be held as partly responsible for eliciting this response, its appraisal in the broader context of various discourses that I have come across seems to point to a different reading. Jamila appears in fact to be playing here into those same dynamics of power that she contests, in as

far as she contributes to obscure them by placing the onus for ‘not having one’s position undermined’ on the individual him/herself.

6.4.3. Actualising aspirations

The discussion so far conducted highlights how the ability to access and benefit from various sources of social and cultural capital fundamentally influences employment opportunities and outcomes. For those who are of the first generation in their family to enter higher education and the graduate job market, sources beyond one’s family networks, such as those that can be provided by schools, universities, extracurricular activities and work experiences, are therefore especially essential. Even for minority ethnic students coming from what can be considered as middle-class families, moreover, family networks appear to grant less exposure than those of their white British middle-class peers to social capital that can effectively aid the securement of a varied range of occupations. This can be related both to the recency of their becoming part of the ‘British middle-class’, which in the case of participants to this research only dated back to one generation, and to the relative position of different ethnic groups within the labour market field, with a still limited presence of middle-class minority ethnic professionals across different sectors of employment. As suggested by Zainab’s account, the limited opportunity to access work experience and the graduate labour market via one’s social networks might be seen as concurring to the tendency for minority ethnic university graduates to invest more time in postgraduate education and training than their white British peers (Connor et al. 2004):

I didn’t actually get the interview, I was told like there was a lot of applicants, [...] so I’m still like looking for another industry experience. [...] If I don’t get a placement next year I’m thinking of doing a Masters at Blueville in Biochemical Engineering just to like, instead of just like applying for jobs, to get an extra like Master’s degree so that’s something I’ve applied for. (Zainab, middle-class)

Institutions and practitioners involved with education and skills training appear therefore to have a substantial responsibility both in sustaining young people’s ‘capability to aspire’ and in increasing their ‘capability to realise aspirations’ (Hart 2013; Baillergeau et al. 2015). Raising awareness of possible career and study options, and promoting ‘experimentation’ so that students can actually see themselves as pursuing (or not pursuing) them, is an important first step in this direction. As well as ensuring that students of all backgrounds take advantage of these opportunities, however, it is also necessary to provide them with the tools for actualising aspirations. A sense of the difference that this can make in terms of outcomes can be grasped by confronting Kanta’s and

Farhan's stories, which highlight the positive impact that effective capacity building and concrete directions for the steps to follow can have in bettering the chances of securing a certain career:

So I did an internship in the charity sector last summer and that really kind of helped me to realise that that's the sort of work I want to do, where I'm actually engaging with the community. [...] I was an operations intern, I literally saw the awnings of the organisation. [...] The people at the place actually advised me: 'you don't seem to have an interest in funding but perhaps you should get some sort of experience in it'. [...] So I think it was very much that internship itself, being in the organisation and seeing the sort of struggles that they have to deal with first hand and also speaking to experts in the field essentially, and networking with people who have gone through that process themselves. (Kanta, working-class)

Well recently I just started a project which basically involves a lot of researching into just things, and also an earlier assessment I had which was researching as well. So I got into it and I really enjoyed myself doing it and I can see myself working as a researcher now.

Berenice: Would you know how to pursue that route?

I do and I don't. I know that you have to have good grades. You need to have, you know, a Sociology, a degree within the Humanities. Experience wise I don't have a clue but yeah. I am still in two minds [the other option being teaching], it's just another kind of stem of ideas which I have. (Farhan, working-class)

Like Farhan, other young women also mentioned considering teaching as a 'back up plan', which suggests that 'known routes', while not always being the preferred option, might still be pursued where adequate tools for realising aspirations have not been provided.

Still in relation to teaching, Sadia's and Jamila's quotations, reported below, highlight a further element that might contribute to making certain jobs more appealing than others, that is to say the way in which they are perceived as being more compatible with other valued 'life purposes' such as having a family alongside a career:

Like for me also having a family, being married, is something that I definitely look forward to. [...] That's why I think teaching would be a really good job but because I feel, like I have seen teachers who have that family, whereas I see people that went into like corporate and

that kind of line and it's like a lot later in life and I don't know, I feel as though you have to put your career first and then think about family. (Sadia, working-class)

My mum is like sort of encouraging me to take up teaching, just because it would be easier with the holidays and so on if I had to juggle motherhood with that. (Jamila, working-class)

Once again, these accounts testify to the gendered character of aspirations and career pathways, as they show how certain occupations are seen as more easily enabling one to manage valued tasks of gendered reproductive labour within the family.

6.5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of participants' narratives conducted in this chapter, I conceptualised expressed educational and career aspirations as located within the structural and cultural contexts inhabited. I have suggested that Bourdieu's concept of habitus might in this respect be usefully applied as an explanatory framework through which salient features of aspirations can be made visible, and have attempted to illustrate this through examples. In particular, the framing of aspirations as an aspect of habitus, and the discussion conducted through these lenses, have brought to attention and allowed light to be shed on the following elements: the links between individual and collective experiences, the interconnection of past, present and future in discourses and practices, and the ways in which the latter are affected by different endowments of economic, social and cultural capital. In this sense, this analysis strongly problematises individualistic understandings of aspirations and 'choice', while urging on the other hand to appreciate more fully their collocation within, and relations to, unequal social structures, as well as the implications of this for potential approaches to redressing inequalities.

The adoption of the above described approach prompted the exposure not only of the value that these young women attributed to education, and of the high aspirations expressed, but also of the ways in which these were grounded in, and supported by, specific interpretations of 'what people like us do', where the 'like us' took racialised / ethnicised, classed, religious and gendered connotations. Largely contributing to build these constructions were recollections of past and present experiences of more or less directly known people with whom they could somehow relate, and the examples that these experiences provided. The unveiling of these processes, I argue, shows how the fostering of positive images of the social identities with which young people identify, and

which they have reasons to value, might hold a high potential for improving their educational commitment and possibly achievement (Chavous et al 2016). In this respect, it seems especially crucial that these identities are being constructed at least as compatible with, if not as having capacities which can promote, ‘success’ within education and employment. The pursuit of a better ‘fit’ between individuals of various socio-economic origins and the education and employment fields, however, which is necessary for a more equitable participation, also requires that these fields become more open to, and start valuing more, different social identities and the multiple cultural capitals and competences they bring with them. This does not just apply to education and employment in general terms, but also to the specific institutions and areas where given genders, social classes and ethnicities are less represented (Reay et al 2005, 2009a; Hurtado et al 2009; Archer et al. 2012a, 2012b; Rodgers 2016).

Yet, findings show additionally that ‘widening participation’ in higher education, even in the most prestigious institutions, is still not enough to level the playing field in the competition for graduate employment. For minority ethnic students, of both middle-class and especially working-class origins, family networks do not provide the same access as those of their white British middle-class peers to the mainstream cultural and social capitals that enable effective navigation of the labour market, and which have been shown to be often more significant than educational qualifications in securing jobs (Burke 2015). While the adoption of adequate strategies for expanding young people’s ‘horizons for action’ and sustaining their capacity to aspire remains fundamental, in order to improve the prospects of those coming from working class and minority ethnic backgrounds it is therefore essential to ensure that they take full advantage of extracurricular activities and work experiences. These as well need to be meaningful and relevant, enabling not only to develop the ‘right’ set of skills, but also and especially to build confidence and valuable social networks. Taking into account the above observations on the importance of ‘role models’ with which one can identify, it can be argued that experiences which provide examples of, and contact with, ‘people like us’ might in this respect be particularly useful. Furthermore, more guidance on the actual pathways that can be followed for specific careers appears beneficial.

Chapter 7

Experiences of higher education

7.1. Introduction

This chapter looks at participants' experiences of participation in higher education, with the aim of bringing the influence of multiple dimensions of social identity such as 'race' / ethnicity, social class and gender into light, and of teasing out underlying processes. I firstly consider these women's discourses of more or less 'fitting in' at universities characterised by different institutional status and socio-economic profile of the student population, and show how these are related to their perceptions of the institution's environment and to feelings of similarity or difference compared to other students. In this respect, I draw attention to the ways in which minority ethnicity and 'working-classness' can compound one another in conveying one's sense of 'standing out' in high-ranking institutions. Yet, I also argue for the relevance of self-identification and past experiences of 'socio-economic mix' in shaping these perceptions. Additionally, I point to the functioning, and implications for students, of discourses that construct universities with a predominant white middle-class intake as having high standards and being for bright and ambitious students, while institutions having large numbers of minority ethnic and working-class students are being dismissed as of lower quality and for those who are not 'good enough'. I then move on to look at some of the most common issues confronted at both an academic and a social level, placing once again particular attention on the role that is played in this sense by different dimensions of identity and structures of inequality. Findings illustrate the substantial impact that is held by class, 'race' / ethnicity, religion and gender in affecting possibilities for educational attainment and social interaction, and highlight the significance of cultural capital and habitus in informing these dynamics.

7.2. Perceptions of 'fitting in'

7.2.1. The role of multiple dimensions of social identity and habitus

Perceptions of 'fitting in' at particular institutional settings emerged from the literature considered in Chapter 2 as a major aspect affecting participants' higher education experiences. As

pointed out by Ball et al. (2002b), such perceptions were largely related to the universities' 'ethnic mix'. Findings from this research, however, portray a slightly more complex picture of students' interpretations of the context, where class, religion and habitus also enter into play in characterising 'ethnic mix' and 'fitting in'. In this respect, it is evident that what is defined by participants as a 'multicultural' environment, in which they feel 'comfortable', can vary substantially depending on their socio-economic background and past experiences of 'ethnic mix' in primary and secondary school.

The relevance held by multiple layers of social identity (e.g. social class, ethnicity, gender, religion) in defining students' position within a given context, as well as their understanding of this same context and related sense of belonging, is apparent when comparing the accounts of two young women, Sadia and Flora, both attending top-ranking institutions, Greenshore and High Valley. Like most participants in this study, Sadia is Muslim, and comes from a working-class background. In the following quote, these elements can be seen as adding to her being of minority ethnic origins, and coming together to convey her sense of 'standing out':

At first, I will be honest, it was quite difficult because Greenshore is still a very white middle-class institution and that is reflected in my course. [...] And then international students like even though there is a mix but they still come from, I mean they all went to private schools, British or American colleges, so you will see the kind of calibre within the course. [...]

Berenice: Can you tell me more about how it has been challenging for you to be in such an environment?

[...] It's like I know people within my course who can afford to kind of, they'll have like tutors, they will have people helping, and I just thought that's where the privilege is and where the disadvantage comes on to it, and that was one thing. Some of the challenge... I don't know like at first it was just like: 'am I going to be able to fit in? Am I going to be able to enjoy my time?' [...]

Berenice: How is [your] group of friends different from the relations with your other course mates?

I just think like most of us are from like an ethnic or from like a, you know, working-class kind of background. Or even political views, I felt like they were more left or more... and that's what it is. [...] But then it's quite tragic the way I see it. Why should I be one of the

few, one of the only within a course of 160 you know, to be the only person wearing a scarf or you know, just to be of that background? (Sadia, working-class, Greenshore)

For Sadia, ethnicity, religion, and class all function to position her as ‘other’ with respect to the majority of students in her course. Therefore, even though there are other (international) students who come from different ethnic backgrounds, her being working-class and Muslim still acts to confer distance. Confirming the significance of formations of class and ethnicity in shaping interactions among students, is Sadia’s observation that her group of friends comprises of other students of minority ethnic and working-class origins. As I will discuss in more detail when considering participants’ academic and social experiences, her perception of similarity or difference in relation to other students’ class and ethnic background was framed in terms of both differential capacity to access forms of capital that are important for ‘succeeding’ and of mind-set and outlooks. This resonates with the experiences of most other working-class young women in top-ranking universities, and allows in some cases for the development of a reflexive stance, where they become aware of how important their presence in predominantly white, middle-class environments is in challenging such ‘exclusivity’. This is in fact what happened with Sadia, enabling her to become more resilient:

And then I realised like, when I felt like I shouldn't be here or anything like that, I thought it's actually really important for us to be in the institution in order to change the institution. So I felt as it was more of a responsibility. (Sadia, working-class, Greenshore)

Conversely, the description provided by Flora, who comes from a middle-class family and is the only non-Muslim in my sample, serves to illustrate how the obliteration of class and religious distinctions allows for an emphasis on common minority ethnic background. That is, shared cultural capital along the lines of class and religion, and a habitus in line with that of her institution and the majority of its student body, mean that Flora is not constantly reminded of her ‘being different’. Unlike Sadia, her self-awareness in terms of these dimensions is thus weakened, enabling her to focus solely on ethnicity:

It's really great, it's really a multicultural environment because there's so many international students so you never really feel, you probably, I think people who are from ethnic minorities or from abroad probably feel like they are more in the majority than the minority because there's so many of us at High Valley. (Flora, middle-class, High Valley)

Greenshore and High Valley have a very similar proportion of UK-domiciled minority ethnic students, accounting for around 25% of those studying at undergraduate level. Adding to this minority ethnic presence, is that of international students, who make up about 25% and 40% respectively of the total number of undergraduates (University of Oxford 2015; HESA 2016). The socio-economic profile of this latter group is quite distinctively upper- / middle-class (HEFCE 2010b). While Flora, who comes herself from a middle-class background, can thus largely identify with this presence, Sadia's possibility for identification is instead problematized by the markers of different socio-economic locations.

Another important element in producing different perceptions of the same environment are students' past experiences, as they become part of their habitus. Class and ethnicity undoubtedly play a major role in shaping habitus, as they substantially contribute to delineate the range of possible experiences. Findings from this study, however, show how even among students from similar ethnic and class backgrounds, exposure to different 'class and ethnic mixes', especially during secondary school, can have a considerable impact on attitudes. This is especially visible in Chandi's and Shay's narratives. In contrast to the former, who was brought up and schooled in Tower Hamlets, the latter had moved at a young age to an area with only a small number of South Asian Muslims, and had been attending a secondary school where she was one of the very few Bangladeshi pupils. Even though they both go to the same university, Bayside, their perceptions and descriptions of such context appear to be very different:

It's very multicultural so I like that. There's every sort of race, religion, culture all over and I mean, I like that. I'm learning more about other people, I'm learning more about me, there is so many languages and cultures to learn and I enjoy that. (Chandi, working-class, Bayside)

It's a bit dirty, yeah, not very diverse, yeah. It just felt like, because it's very Bengali centred around here so it wasn't, it was just like being at home, it wasn't something new. [...] I mean I'm not too fond of Bengali culture. So it gets a bit annoying when you are just surrounded by those cultures that you don't really fit into and I don't fit into the Bengali culture. (Shay, working-class, Bayside)

UK-domiciled minority ethnicities represent around 45% of Bayside's intake, with South Asians making up for approximately 20% of the total (University of Oxford 2015; HESA 2016). For Chandi, who has always attended schools where South Asian Muslims, and Bangladeshis in particular, were a large majority, this specific make-up is perceived as 'very multicultural'. Shay, on

the other hand, whose secondary school experience has been characterised by engagement with pupils from other ethnicities and progressive dis-identification with her own, considers this same environment as 'not very diverse'. Interestingly, it is with students from her same ethnic background that she feels like she does not 'fit in'. These dynamics of ethnic (dis)identification will be examined in more detail in the following chapter.

The four stories reported above are profoundly revealing of the role that is played by class and 'race' / ethnicity in shaping perceptions of 'fitting in' at given institutions. Firstly, they show how these young women's considerations over the aspects that make them feel more or less 'at ease' within their universities' environment have much to do with the institution - or, as attested by other accounts, degree subject - socio-economic intake. Furthermore, they testify to the weight that class and ethnic identifications, and past schooling experiences, hold in generating differential appraisals of similar settings. Flora's and Sadia's distinct class positions, for example, respectively support and undermine their sense of 'fitting in', despite both their universities being characterised by a large minority ethnic presence. Shay and Chandi demonstrate in addition how such perceptions are not only affected by social identities, but also, significantly, by self-identifications and acquired cultural capital. In this respect, the experiences to which one is exposed both at school and outside, particularly during childhood and adolescence but also later in life, can be seen as especially crucial, because of how they influence access to different types of cultural capital and ideas of self.

7.2.2. The impact of symbolic violence on 'choice' and self-perceptions

Participants' narratives also highlight the variety of preferences which can be expressed in terms of the university's ethnic composition, with some being more drawn to a setting characterised by a large number of minority ethnic students and 'familiarity', and others looking for 'something different' from what they are used to. Chandi and Kanta provide an example of this range of approaches:

It's quite local and I'm familiar with the area, so things like fitting in wouldn't be a problem for me and I can focus more on my studies. [...] So I thought if I got to Western it would be full of sort of stuck up posh people that I wouldn't be able to get along with. But over here [at Bayside] it's much more cultural, it's like you could get along with people, you could understand East London or London life so that's nice. (Chandi, working-class, Bayside)

I think it's because I've always been living in Tower Hamlets, I've always been in the same community surrounded by the same sort of people. So I think part of it was to have

University as an option to expose myself to a different, not even to a different lifestyle but to different types of people and to really experience university in a different way. [...] So I think that was part of the reason, just to widen my horizons I guess in that sense. (Kanta, working-class, Western)

As emerges from Chandi's account, prevailing class and ethnic composition almost appear to overlap in the understandings that some of these young women offer of the university climate, with middle- / upper- 'classness' ('it would be full of stuck up posh people') and whiteness ('over here it's much more cultural') being perceived as strictly entrenched. However, it must also be recognised that, despite anticipations of not 'fitting in' at the institution of their 'choice', almost all participants opted to apply for the most prestigious London universities they could access with their grades.

Chandi is the only one to talk about her decision not to apply to a more prestigious institution, despite having the grades to potentially do so, as an active 'choice'. As her further elaboration reveals, however, this 'choice' is in effect underlaid by the workings of symbolic violence, which constructs predominantly white middle-class universities as the domain of 'ambitious' students, and consequently dismisses minority ethnic and working-class students who do not fit into that environment as simply 'not ambitious enough':

This was my first choice. I didn't bother applying for Blueville or Western because even though I did get really good A-level results I feel like Blueville or Western wouldn't take me for some reason. I guess I wasn't ambitious enough. But I thought Bayside would take me so... (Chandi, working-class, Bayside)

While representing an exception rather than the norm in terms of the 'choices' expressed by those who took part in this research, Chandi's story is still a powerful reminder of how the white middle-class dominance of elite institutions can make them unthinkable spaces for minority ethnic and / or working-class students (Archer and Hutchings 2000). Additionally, it is indicative of the ways in which symbolic violence, manifesting itself through the aforementioned discourses on the differential 'quality' of students attending differently ranked universities, functions to 'legitimise' and perpetuate such dominance. This is evident for example as she attributes her anticipation of not 'fitting in' to a lack of ambition rather than to being different from the majority of students, and thus lacking the 'right' cultural capital to fit in, with respect to ethnicity and social class.

It is in this taken-for-grantedness that the symbolic power of dominant attributions of value relative to institutions and their intake asserts itself fully, by concealing the hierarchies of inequality that both sustain and result from them (Bourdieu 1984; Robbins 1991). The equation of locality and a large minority ethnic presence with low educational standards represents in this sense a relevant example (Reay et al. 2001b). The ambiguity expressed by Farhan in relation to Woodgate, where she is currently studying, testifies to the pervasiveness of this conception, and shows how unsettling it can be for students especially as they start university:

I didn't want to come to Woodgate only because it's no good for me, and when I started uni Woodgate didn't really have a great reputation. [...] I didn't really choose to come to Woodgate, but when I got into Woodgate, I got to settle down and everything, it was a lot more different. I didn't realize that it was better for me to come here than to have gone all the way to Oakley in terms of everything. [...] The atmosphere here is a lot more... I feel more comfortable than I think I would have in any other place [...].

Berenice: Right, in what sense do you feel like you would be more comfortable here rather than any other uni?

I would have to say because of the people. Because where I come from, whether it's been school, college, even where I live, it's always filled with ethnic minorities. So I can get a link, I can communicate or I gain an instant bond whereas I feel like if I had gone to Oakley, because there is not as many ethnic minorities there I wouldn't have felt that and I would have just been a bit like: 'oh', basically. [...] Not a lot of people like Woodgate, a lot of people have this image of Woodgate so it's like I'd rather not come in. [...] Because it's a local uni, everyone local goes there so therefore it's not as great because only local people come here. They're not very clever, they're not very intelligent, they just got here for the sake of getting here because they couldn't get anywhere else. Which I don't think that's the case, because during my time here, I have met a lot of other people who happen to be very intelligent and you would think: 'why are they here of all places?' (Farhan, working-class, Woodgate).

Throughout her reflection, Farhan brings up the dissonance between Woodgate's negative reputation and the positive experience she had of the university. This reputation informed her view of Woodgate and its students to the point that she 'didn't want to come'. Yet, when finally going, she found herself feeling 'more comfortable [here] than [she] would have in any other place'. This dilemma, of 'fitting in' at universities that are commonly considered of lesser value, was

experienced by many of those young women whose grades at A-levels prevented them from accessing higher ranking institutions. Where these stereotypes go unchallenged, they can have a detrimental impact on students' confidence, and on the images they hold of themselves as learners (Crozier et al. 2008). This is especially the case for students of working-class and / or minority ethnic origins, who tend to be more concentrated in post-'92 institutions, and is likely to impair their search for and progression in employment.

7.3. Academic experience

As we have seen, research focusing on the difficulties experienced by students from diverse minority ethnic backgrounds in relation to 'educational achievement' has revealed that main concerns have to do with the extra burden imposed by limited finances, and with a perceived lack of support from teaching staff (Tyers et al. 2004; Bagguley & Hussain 2007; Dhanda 2010). The widespread reference to the impact of restricted economic resources among minority ethnic students is strictly related to prevailing working-class background among this population (Clark & Drinkwater 2007). Previous studies have clarified the relation between financial constraints and lower academic attainment, showing how these considerably affect the amount and quality of time which can effectively be spent on studying, which also resonates with my participants' accounts (Reay et al. 2009a; Bradley & Ingram 2012). In this respect, most of them mentioned taking up part-time work in order to be able to sustain personal expenses, and not having the same possibilities as others to pay for private tuition. Some of these women pointed moreover to the ways in which these difficulties are compounded by universities' failure to make course material easily available to all students, as this required an additional economic investment on their part:

There's not many books in Bayside, as in my course books, they get the wrong books and stuff and I have to buy a lot of books, it has cost me a lot of money. [...] Sometimes like you're suggested during lecture or for reading and stuff, that you would be able find... yeah I buy it all, because my course there's around 250 maybe above plus people, the books run out like that. [...] And each book is like £50 and like I've so far bought, I've spent over £300 on books, £300 - £400, for my work. (Chandi, working-class, Bayside)

Perceived lack of academic support is another issue which tends to be reported more by students of minority ethnic origins than by their white British peers (Dhanda 2010). Habitus is especially helpful in making sense of this, as it allows to place the attention on the links between

one's past and current learning environments, and to interpret students' 'easiness' with certain approaches as structured by previous exposure to similar expectations. In the following excerpts, Labiba and Kanta, two working-class young women who have attended secondary school together, and are studying at the top-ranking university Western, reflect over the teaching and assistance received now and back then, providing an example of these links. Kanta additionally makes explicit the lower likelihood for her as a Bangladeshi of being exposed to challenging modes of learning, because of living in a borough like Tower Hamlets where schools have a predominantly working-class, minority ethnic intake.

I think it's really, I mean it's a big jump between school and university, a big jump. [...] Because obviously your first term, there is this kind of, you know, just throw you in so they don't kind of, there's no support available to help you settle in if that makes sense. I think they just kind of like expect you to do all these essays, all these like so many readings, and just expect you to know things rather than supporting you, understanding, helping you.'
(Labiba, working-class, Western)

First of all there's not very much contact time with our teachers. [...] I think they have always assumed knowledge that we would have. [...] Because of being a Bengali in Britain also means living in a very low economic area, automatically means you have certain disadvantages. [...] So for instance being Bengali meant living in Tower Hamlets in a way, and that meant going to school in Tower Hamlets and that also meant the sort of learning that you get at your school was slightly different. I think the learning I got at my school was fantastic but I think compared to some other schools in Tower Hamlets, but even then I would say there was an element of spoon feeding for instance and lack of critical thinking at my school which I perhaps would have got, if I wasn't a Bengali, which would have meant I would probably live somewhere else and I would have received a certain type of education.
(Kanta, working-class, Western)

Such connection is even more evident when we compare the above accounts with that of Flora, who has been privately schooled throughout her life and is now enrolled at another prestigious university:

So I went, I was at private school throughout life. [...] It was a really good school, they had a lot of resources. [...] So our school did exams every year rather than just SATs, so it means I was really used to doing exams. Also, because it was a private school, you were always expected to perform well. We were used to working hard, like what to us was

working normally to someone else would be working hard. So I'm used to kind of working, and I was used to my level of knowledge being at quite a high standard even without me realising just because of the school. [...] Because in a state school, to kind of achieve those kind of grades and things you have to work for them yourself and try really hard, whereas in a private school usually that's just conditioned that is what is expected of the majority of students. (Flora, middle-class, High Valley)

Once we take this perspective, it can be seen how difficulties with the considerable workload and mainly individual mode of learning which is expected of students at university, and feelings of 'not being supported enough', can be traced back to dispositions acquired throughout primary and secondary school. Where we consider that a higher proportion of minority ethnic students live in fairly deprived areas compared to white British, which as noted by Kanta in the above quotation also means receiving a different type of education, it is therefore not so surprising that they tend to report these problems more often. This 'mismatch' between acquired dispositions and institutional environment, or between individuals' learner and institutional habitus (Reay et al. 2001a, 2009a, 2009b), is especially evident in high-ranking and elite universities, where the majority of students traditionally come from middle and upper-class backgrounds and will most likely have had different schooling standards. While some interviewees had developed a reflexive viewpoint, which allowed them to recognise this nexus, for some this appeared to generate feelings of pressure and insecurity.

A further issue that was brought up during interviews was that of a lack of diversity in the teaching body with respect to ethnicity and gender. Sadia's observations significantly highlight the impact that this has in terms of the discourses and ideas that are being transmitted to students:

I think one thing about Greenshore, like one thing that I realise now, within our lecturers it's still white male dominated you know. And despite challenges in reality their kind of background is still reflected in their dialogue and in what they're trying to teach, and I think that is really sad because the fact that I haven't... I think it's only this year that I've experienced being taught by a person from a minority ethnic background, or you can count of the number of women who taught me. And you still see within an institution how as much as we like to think that we're so developed or advanced we are not and it's again quite tragic. (Sadia, working-class, Greenshore)

Where lecturers and professors are predominantly white, male and / or middle-class, that is, if they come for the vast majority from privileged racialised, gendered and class locations, there is in this

sense a risk that what is being taught and the approaches that are being taken might more likely contribute to the reproduction rather to the challenging of current hierarchies and inequalities. This can be put in relation to the considerations made in Chapter 6 on the importance of people from a diversity of backgrounds being employed at all levels within academic institutions. This, I have argued, appears fundamental both in enabling a greater variety of experiences and perspectives to be taken into account, and therefore of gendered, racialised and classed habituses to be valued, and in informing students' perceptions of what people of a given gender, class, and 'race' / ethnicity can do.

7.4. Social experience

For the young women who took part in this research, class, 'race' / ethnicity, gender, and importantly religion, also appeared to substantially shape their experiences of university in terms of relations with other students, friendship networks and social activities they got involved in. This happened in more or less obvious ways, as these dimensions of social identity interacted with one another to produce different outcomes, with cultural capital and habitus being especially important elements in defining social identity in the first place. In particular, as will emerge more clearly from the following accounts, the environment where one has been living throughout their life, and previous schooling, seem to have a crucial influence on the degree to which they are accustomed to relating with people from different socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, findings suggest that it is mainly through cultural capital that class and ethnic distinctions take place, especially with regards to lifestyles, beliefs and values.

When asked about their relationships with people from different ethnicities, all participants stated that neither ethnicity nor religion were important to them. Yet, for most of them, their actual friendship networks did not include anyone from a white British background, and close friendships were mainly formed with other Muslims. Leena's and Jamila's observations, reported below, show how even 'ethnically mixed' institutions like Bayside can have low levels of 'ethnic mixing' (Hollingworth & Mansaray 2012). Rather than this being an active 'choice', it appears to be linked to different lifestyles and opportunities for socialising, as well as to processes of 'othering', of which these young women are very aware:

We have never been able to actually mix with the other people and we have found that our groups are predominantly you know, the ethnic minorities. So I have friends that are from

Uganda, Somalia, Bangladesh and Pakistan but not, you know, white friends if that makes sense. And you know that might be, you know it's not something we all actively went out to look for or didn't look for, or kept ourselves away from. It just sort of happened. [...] But I mean it would be nice, definitely, if people were able to mix.

Berenice: Do you have any thoughts on why this might be?

[...] There's so many white people that don't drink and don't party and so on but you know, there are a group of them that would I guess, during Fresher's week and you know the other parties that there are on campus and so they tend to... and also most of them live out of, they live on campus so outside, so they have that kind of friendship where they are seeing each other and they party or they are living together, and so you know it's a different experience for them. Whereas most of, well actually all of my friends, we live at home, and we don't really party like that or drink so we don't have that kind of exposure in that sense. (Jamila, working-class, Bayside)

Even though Bayside's quite diverse, similar groups tend to hang around together so that was kind of disappointing, like all the Bengalis stay together, all the Asians, all the Chinese people, all the whites, all the black, so I haven't seen much actual integration so that was a bit like, disappointing.

Berenice: What about your friendship groups, can you tell me more about the friendship groups that you have?

It's mostly girls from my course, they are all like Asian, they are all Bengalis. Actually not all, like there's two of us, three of us are Bengalis and the rest are like Somalis. So it's like Asians and Somalis, because they tend to hang around together but yeah it's not very much diverse.

Berenice: And do you have any idea about why this might be the case?

I think people tend to gravitate towards that they feel comfortable with. [...] So I think, like, Bengalis would look at me and be like: 'she's similar, I should like maybe talk to her', but then like any other race would look at me and say: 'oh, she's too different', like I know that especially wearing the headscarf like you come across like: 'oh she's practicing, she's religious, she might not be like us'. There's that whole divide thing, so I think that might affect my uni life. (Leena, working-class, Bayside)

Throughout these quotes, being Muslim stands out as an especially relevant aspect in characterising social experiences. In this respect, Leena comments for example that students of Asian and Somali origins, many of whom are Muslim, ‘tend to hang around together’. Similarly, Jamila reports her group of friends to comprise of people of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Somalian and Ugandan descent, who are also largely Muslim. Their accounts are revealing of the ways in which religious faith plays out in shaping, in conjuncture with class, ‘race’ / ethnicity and gender, one’s cultural capital and habitus, and in so doing significantly informs perceptions of difference and similarity and social interactions. In particular, Jamila points to differences in lifestyle compared to the non-Muslim majority of students that are related to participation in activities involving the consumption of alcohol. Especially for Muslim women, moreover, Leena’s reflections indicate that the wearing of Islamic clothing functions as a visible marker of difference. Adding to this, Jamila’s narrative flags up another aspect of ‘university life’ that contributes to define different classed and racialised lifestyles and spaces for interaction among students, which is whether one lives or not on campus, with minority ethnic and working-class students being more likely than their white and / or middle-class peers to live at home.

Those participants who came from a middle-class background, on the other hand, seemed more confident than others in forming friendships with white British students. This appears to be best attributable to habitus as a whole, including the ‘imprinting’ of past experiences, as both Shirina and Flora have been schooled in a non-Bengali Muslim environment, with a large number of white British pupils. Rani, instead, who also comes from a middle-class background but has been living in Bangladesh for most of her schooling years, and was home-schooled when in UK, has mainly made friends with international students:

I think most people in my group of friends, each person is from a different place originally, like there is someone who is from Slovakia, someone from Romania, and then there’s also someone from Nepal, China and I think Pakistan, yes there is a girl from Pakistan. Like it’s so interesting meeting people from so many different types of places. (Rani, middle-class, Blueville)

Similarly to the middle-class students interviewed by Crozier et al. (2008), and in contrast to working-class respondents, these women also spoke about having several groups of friends, with whom they engage in different activities:

I think I have made loads of different friendship groups. So I’ve got my Bangla Society friends who are my closest friends, and then I’ve got my Islamic Society who are like my

backup, so whenever I need some support like moral support or like my religious aspect is going a bit down I can turn to them, and then I've got all my non-Asian friends who are classicists in my degree and they have the same interest as me in my subject so I click with them as well. (Shirina, middle-class, Blueville)

Even though quite a few of my friends are Asian, it's people who do loads of different kinds of things like drama or whatever. We might go to the odd cultural Asian event but we do other things as well. But I have quite a few English friends, I have some oriental friends yeah, so... [...] So there's one group of friends where most of the things we do are things like you know, going to lunch together or watching a film together and things like that. And then another group of friends, one of the things we like doing is just going to the pub, relaxing, talking, things like that or going to one of our houses and playing board games. (Flora, middle-class, High Valley)

Nevertheless, it is significant that even Shirina and Flora's closest friends are mostly Asian. As Shirina herself was keen to tell me, this provides her with a sense of 'community', with which she can relate in terms of common issues:

I love Bangla Society because it's basically people that I can relate to. Because at my school there wasn't as many Bengalis, so like I didn't have anyone in my culture who had the same issues like curfew, staying in London, not going out late. Like it's things like that that I didn't get at my old school because of my friends weren't Muslims, all my friends weren't Bengalis so they wouldn't understand. So at Bangla Society I have a whole family of friends that can relate to me, so if we do socials we ensure that it ends at 9, not like at 12, so that everyone can get home on time because everyone is in the same boat, so we'd finish things early. And yeah, I love it. (Shirina, middle-class, Blueville)

One of the main ways in which social class intersected with ethnicity in qualifying interviewees' social experiences was therefore by affecting the diversity, extensiveness, and ethnic and class composition of their social networks. In particular, as it either facilitated or hindered the formation of friendships with white British middle-class students. For the young women interviewed, in specific, it seemed to be the case that friendships were either formed with other minority ethnic students from different class backgrounds, or, for middle-class students, with others from the same class background including white British. As they involved distinct friendship groups, middle-class participants' social networks were additionally more varied. These dynamics are especially important to note where we consider the resulting differential in the capacity to

access dominant social and cultural capital, which puts working-class minority ethnic students at a disadvantage in the higher education and labour market field (Crozier and Davies 2006; Crozier et al. 2008). Yet, findings from this research also draw attention to how this access can be facilitated by ethnic and faith-based university societies, as they function as spaces of socialisation across classes as well as of involvement in extracurricular and political activities. In this sense, participation can be seen to provide opportunities not only for the acquisition of skills to be spent in accessing the labour market and of useful contacts, but also, as we will see in more detail in Chapter 8, for the development of a more confident minority ethnic identity.

As argued earlier, moreover, participants' narratives often referred to perceptions of (not) 'fitting in' at particular institutional environments, which was strongly related to the predominant class and ethnic composition of the university and course of studies attended, and mainly found expression in feelings of difference or similarity of mind-set. This is illustrated for instance in the following quotes from Sadia and Labiba, respectively studying Geography at Greenshore and Sociology at Western, where they reflect on the social environment of the course they are enrolled at:

It's not even just the privileges, it's the mind-set, I wouldn't necessarily agree with them. Like I don't know, I know someone who would be very like: 'colonialism was okay, it was right', that's not something that I personally agree with. Or like they wouldn't think white supremacy exists when people of colour definitely know it exists. Those kind of differences, especially in mind-set and political views. Or like you know, they're only in it for the money and you know, that kind of lifestyle or... which all of [my friends] you know, because a lot of us want to work because we want to make a difference, we want to make a change. Or you know, the way in which you go about it is very different. (Sadia, working-class, Greenshore)

I think something like our Sociology Department for this year only 7% are from private school. [...] Whereas if you look into another... talking about Economics, I think 47% that have been privately educated, so there's a big difference and I think there is a big divide. But I mean in terms of my degree I think we are all pretty much the same, and even if we're not we are all pretty much like on the same wavelength I guess if that makes sense, and it's more comfortable I guess, whereas other people when you meet people you can tell they are a lot more different. [...] Because we're pretty much split between quantitative and qualitative subjects. [...] Like social science type subjects, there's a lot more people like me, who have like very radical thoughts so it, the class system and left / right politics is very much, people

who think like me. And they will talk to you like idiots, on the other side, but tend to be like white male, who tend to have very, like, right-wing attitudes and from, you know, privileged backgrounds I guess. (Labiba, working-class, Western)

In this last extract, Labiba offers an interesting perspective on the differences that exist in her institution ‘between quantitative and qualitative subjects’ in terms of prevailing political attitudes, linking these to students’ ethnicity, gender and social class. In particular, she notes that those in more privileged racialised, gendered and class positions tend to express more conservative, ‘right-wing’ attitudes. Both of these young women accounts additionally show how especially relevant in shaping their perceptions of (not) ‘fitting in’ is the way in which other students approach issues of class and ‘race’ / ethnicity. Sadia’s further elaboration provides in this respect an illuminating example:

Sometimes I wish I went to another university which is Riverdale. [...] I don't know it seems like a lot more... like you can be intellectually and academically still there but you don't have to have that kind of like snobbish pretentiousness which is not so much there, which I think would have made all the difference. [...] I have a lot of friends who study in both Greenshore and Riverdale, part of their kind of degree. And like they always mention how like Riverdale they'll only be questioned intellectually and people only look at your kind of the way in which you think. Whereas in Greenshore people look at the way in which you are, the social group that you come from, where you live, how you, you know, what your parents do and whatnot. (Sadia, working-class, Greenshore)

The discussion so far conducted serves to highlight how, while there is scope for attachments and belongings to be structured around either class or ‘race’ / ethnicity while cutting across the other, a strong influence is carried by the ‘culture’ which is dominant within certain institutions and subject areas, and by the type of capital which is mostly valued (Crozier et al. 2008). This, in fact, can function to exacerbate social distinctions, hampering the establishment of relations across class and ‘race’ and contributing to mark not only certain universities but also certain degrees and areas of study as ‘not for us’. For working-class and minority ethnic students, this means feeling excluded – and thus as attested by Sadia potentially being led to excluding oneself – from important fields of knowledge, experience and interaction, which tend to remain a privilege of the white middle-classes (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Crozier et al. 2008). In this sense, the under-representation of minority ethnicities and the working-classes is both a symptom and a cause of a lack of inclusivity towards different lifestyles and systems of value.

7.5. Conclusion

Throughout the above discussion, I have considered some of the overarching issues faced in higher education by the young British-born women of Bangladeshi heritage who participated in this study. Especially recurrent in their narratives of university experiences, both social and educational, were references to feelings of ‘fitting in’ or ‘standing out’ in particular settings, more or less positive comments on the support received from teaching staff, and concerns over a lack of ‘ethnic mixing’. These findings are therefore broadly in line with those reported in previous research on minority ethnic university students (Osler 1999; Tyers et al. 2004; Tyrer & Ahmad 2006; Bagguley & Hussain 2007; Dhanda 2010), as well as further qualifying them. In presenting such findings, I have especially drawn on Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and habitus. I have done so with the intention of bringing multiple dimensions of social identity and the structures within which these are embedded to the foreground, and to unravel the processes through which their interplay confers a distinctive character to experiences of university, which the individual stories of the young women interviewed can help to illuminate. In particular, this approach has allowed us to cast light on the dynamics underlying multiple (mis)alignments between students and the social and educational environment they find themselves in.

Most of those I spoke with had applied for the ‘best’ possible universities in London they could hope to be accepted at, depending on the grades they had achieved during GCSEs and A-levels. They did so despite expecting a challenging environment, where they might not have easily ‘fitted in’, with some expressing the deliberate will to tackle the white middle-class dominance of top-ranking institutions. However, it also needs to be recognised that symbolic violence constructing universities with a large number of minority ethnic students as holding lower standards, and predominantly white middle-class institutions as for the ‘bright and talented’ still takes its toll on students’ self-perception and experiences. As we have seen, one of these young women decided not to apply for a more prestigious university despite having the grades to potentially do so because she felt ‘she wasn’t ambitious enough’. While it was her anticipation of feeling excluded from that world rather than lack of ambition that made her opt for a more ‘ethnically mixed’ university, therefore, she had internalised a specific (dominant) discourse, which functioned to conceal underlying structures of exclusion whilst placing the blame on the individual. In addition, the majority of them either did not have the grades to apply to ‘better’ universities, or had the application for their ‘first choice’ rejected. For these students, symbolic violence meant they had to come to terms with the lower status attributed to their university and, consequently, to them as learners.

Finally, those that managed to access prestigious institutions encountered a number of issues relating to both social and educational aspects of 'fitting in'. In making sense of these issues, it is useful to think about the mis-match between students', institutions' and subject areas' habitus and valued cultural capital (Reay et al. 2009a). In this light, the influence of class, gender, 'race' / ethnicity and religion in shaping experiences can be seen as especially revealing itself through the ways in which these dimensions of social identity, in their various manifestations, are perceived and received in 'dominant' settings. With respect to academic attainment, participants' accounts show for example how social class background is likely to impact on one's 'easiness' with the mode and standards of learning that are required of students at university, as it affects their probability of having been exposed to similar expectations in secondary school. In this sense, middle-class students are more likely than their working-class peers to have attended schools with especially high standards, and to feel therefore more confident in dealing with considerable workloads and mainly individual approaches to learning. Classed, gendered and racialised habitus and cultural capital, especially as they are expressed through different lifestyles, values, and familiarity with people from different backgrounds, also underpin processes of inclusion within / exclusion from friendship networks and social activities. For the young women who took part in this study, being Muslim emerged as especially relevant in positioning them as 'other', with friendships often being formed with students of different minority ethnic backgrounds but same religious faith. Even where this was not the case, moreover, the dynamics shaping these networks were such that they tended to result, for students of minority ethnic and working-class origins, in lower opportunities for accessing dominant cultural and social capital.

Chapter 8

Minority ethnic identities, social class and participation in higher education

8.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I turn to consider some of the ways in which participants' Bangladeshi ethnicity, and their social class origins and trajectory through participation in higher education, interacted with one another to inform how they positioned themselves in relation to these two dimensions of social identity. The first three sections focus on different discourses of (de-)attachment and (non-)belonging to a Bangladeshi identity that were expressed by these women, and illustrate the underlying dynamics by drawing on a few exemplifying stories. These constructions are not to be seen as exhausting the range of positions expressed by respondents, which were varied and nuanced, but are especially illuminating of how ethnic identification can be shaped by socio-economic resources and trajectories. Findings underscore the dynamic, experientially-informed and relational character of the meanings and value that are being attached to ethnic categories, and point to the crucial role of economic, social and cultural capital in affecting the capacity to shape these meanings. In this respect, it is suggested that upward social mobility can not only coexist with the retention of a strong identification with one's ethnicity, but also promote a re-evaluation and 're-claiming' of one's ethnic identity. The last section is instead dedicated to discussing the meanings and significance that those who took part in this research attributed to social class categories, and how they defined themselves in this respect. As for ethnic identities, these women's narratives highlight the relational character of class constructs and (dis)identification, and show how cultural features are especially central to their understandings of class locations. The analysis conducted also reveals some of the processes through which minority ethnicity can problematise identification with 'middle-classness' as this is sometimes associated with 'white privilege' and thus considered as never fully attainable.

8.2. *How middle-class status can help sustaining ethnic identity*

While differences existed in the extent to which these aspects were embedded in family practices, participants to this research generally constructed what it meant for them to be Bangladeshi by referring to aspects of family life such as talking Bengali with parents and older relatives, the food they ate at home, the occasional wearing of traditional clothes, and the customs maintained through family gatherings and social events:



So I think first of all that part of my identity comes out when I'm in my language, and second of all the reason why I chose this picture was simply because in my family weddings are a massive thing. [...] So I think it's just the sort of clothes that we wear, the general culture like sort of food and the parties for instance. [...] My familial relationships, as opposed to my just general day to day stuff. [...] Whereas when I'm at university for instance, unless I'm talking to my Bengali friends, it's not really there. (Kanta, working-class)



Something very colourful, like our clothes that we wear, which if I was to wear normal Western clothes I'd probably stick to something simple and black but if I was to wear something Asian for example it would be bright pink or yellow. [...]

Berenice: In what context are you surrounded more by one particular culture than another, to which one do you feel that you relate more also?

I don't know, I think I would say they are both even. When I'm with family I would be cultural, I will wear Bengali clothes and stuff, but when I'm with my friends, university, work,

obviously it's normal clothes. So I would say yeah it's even, depends on the atmosphere.
(Pavi, working-class)

Reflecting a common remark, Kanta's and Pavi's extracts highlight variation in the degree to which these young women expressed their ethnic identity in different settings, such as family, school, work and friendship networks. Whether this was conscious or not, it appeared to depend especially on the value that was given within each context to the related markers of identity, and how these were perceived and received by others. For most of those interviewed, this 'code switching' generally took place between family oriented situations and university / work, as reflected in the examples above. This, however, is not to be intended as a neat swap, but more as a dismissal, depending on context, of those markers that were not accorded symbolic value. In this sense, language and clothes can be seen as cultural features the symbolic value of which shifts in relation to the context where one is engaged. Interestingly, Pavi's use of the term 'normal' to refer to 'Western' clothing additionally suggests that the main frame of reference for her to assess the normality of practices is the dominant majority culture.

Parents, who represented in this respect the primary source of socialization, were more or less substantially involved in the maintenance and transmission of Bengali language, history and customs, depending on a number of factors. In particular, more recent experiences of migration and the presence of family members and / or economic interests in Bangladesh contributed to a stronger engagement, as did intensive relationships with the extended family and community. Also important were parental decisions regarding children's education and the language spoken at home. Here, a focus on 'integration' often meant that parents would give up on the transmission of Bengali language and history, as this tended to be considered irrelevant for formal educational and socio-economic advancement, and even 'an extra burden' given the effort already involved in learning English. Therefore, even in those families where mothers could only speak Bengali (in its Sylheti dialect), these girls communicated with their parents in a mix of informal Bengali and English which they call 'Banglish' (Hoque 2015), while mostly using English with family members who knew the language.

What is particularly interesting to note, is how these practices were related to the availability of financial, cultural, and social capital, and how the presence of these resources could facilitate the development of a strong Bangladeshi identity. This is well illustrated by Flora's example:

I was brought up very close to my roots. So I would want [my children] to know how to

... speak Bengali, have an appreciation for our culture, I would want to take them back to Bangladesh so that they could experience it the way I've experienced it. I would really want them to spend time with my parents because I've learned so much from them, I've enjoyed listening to so many stories, music that they enjoy, and I want my children to be able to experience that as well. [...] So when I was younger I wasn't allowed to speak any English at home apart from for homework because my dad's logic was: 'she is going to be speaking English at school all day so she will definitely learn that well, but if we don't teach her Bengali at home she will never learn it'. [...] I was encouraged to perform, you know at the culture functions, so I would sing songs, I would perform Bengali poetry, I did some dancing. Going back to Bangladesh, that culture, and picking up the culture and understanding the culture, the big thing is performing an attachment to it. (Flora, middle-class)

Flora is from Leeds, and came to London to study at a prestigious university. Her parents, who both held degrees attained in Bangladesh as well as in the UK, were amongst the highest educated in my sample. Both were employed in solidly middle-class occupations, in the medical and social sectors. Flora's account reveals how they had always been very determined in fostering their daughter's take-up of Bengali language and culture, and how they were aided in this endeavour by their socio-economic position. Financial availability meant for instance that the whole family could travel to Bangladesh, which gave her a better opportunity for 'picking up the culture and understanding the culture'. Furthermore, parents' connections with Bangladeshi cultural groups in Leeds contributed to Flora's involvement in cultural functions, where she was encouraged to perform Bengali poetry, sing and dance. Contrary to most of the young women interviewed, moreover, her parents would actively promote her acquisition of Bengali language by not allowing any English to be spoken at home if not for homework. In Flora's case, therefore, economic, social, and cultural resources enabled her parents to invest in the construction of her Bengali identity, which she intended to pass on to her children. This is especially worth noting as it stands in contrast with commonly held views, and some academic literature, that expect minority ethnic identification to be weaker in those who have established themselves as part of the middle-classes (Warner and Srole 1945; Gans 1992; Rumbaut 1994; Waters 1994; Slooman 2014).

In making sense of how middle-class status and upward mobility can facilitate identification with, and the performance of, one's ethnicity, it is crucial to consider the entrenchment of ethnicity and class in attributions of value. That is to say, the way in which certain minority ethnicities are often associated in dominant imageries with working-class attributes, which contributes to their

pathologisation. Normative middle-classness, on the other hand, is generally conflated with whiteness (Neckerman et al. 1999; Archer 2011, 2012). In this respect, access to economic, social and cultural capital appears to enable a disassociation of ethnicity from its working-class markers, and a re-elaboration and affirmation of ethnic identities where these come to assume a 'positive' connotation. Considerably relevant here is the role of co-ethnic social capital, and the way in which this provides exposure to different interpretative repertoires related to one's ethnicity – i.e. to different constructions of 'what it means to be Bangladeshi'. Engaging with other Bengalis who provide 'positive models' (e.g. are seen as highly achieving in education and / or employment, or more generally express valued personality traits) seemed to be a key way through which participants developed and asserted a more confident ethnic identity (Slootman 2014).

One of the discursive strategies adopted by interviewees to present their ethnic identity in a favourable light was that of referring to the existence of 'different types of Bengalis', which typically involved a mix of ethnic and class attributes. This was evident, for example, in the narrative of Shirina, another young woman of middle-class background. Similarly to Flora's, Shirina's parents had both attended university in Bangladesh, but had to work their way up to establish themselves professionally in the UK after suffering from post-migration downward mobility. Her father had attained a UK degree, and set up his own firm as a solicitor, while her mother had progressed in her career to reach a managerial position. The excerpt reported highlights how the possibility for a 'positive' Bangladeshi identity is being created by stressing substantially classed distinctions within the ethnic 'group', whereby a contraposition is drawn between 'hard-working families' and those 'living on benefits':

I think what Tower Hamlets is most associated with, for me, is that's where all the typical Bengalis are. Because a lot of Bengalis, especially from Sylhet, they came from Sylhet here and then they settled, they either became restaurant owners or like sit at home and take benefits. [...] I felt really sad that so many people took advantage of the UK system and they just sat there and their houses smell of curry and like they don't dress well and they can't speak English, and it just frustrated me that most of the UK was getting that impression of Bangladeshis because of the fact that Tower Hamlets is full of them. So it really upsets me that like you know, I'm from this area and I'm from this country and there's this stigma associated with them and I don't want to be a part of that. [...] But I always knew that like, I was different from them, and my parents always taught me like not to take advantage of what this country gives us, and they said that no matter what, you need to struggle for what you want. Whereas a lot of people in Tower Hamlets don't do that, they sit at home, have 8

kids, get all the child benefits, sit at home with sky TV like satellites and enjoy their lives. Whereas with me like my parents have always worked, like my dad was a student when he first came here, my mum worked to support my dad and then when he started working they both worked, and so we didn't have sky TV until I was like 12. (Shirina, middle-class)

Throughout her account, Shirina waves together common ethnic and classed stereotypes in the construction of 'the typical Bengali' from Tower Hamlets, whom she then presents herself and her family in contraposition to. In doing so, she concurs however to legitimize and perpetuate prevailing stereotypical depictions of Bangladeshis as welfare scroungers and unwilling to integrate, which draws attention to how, in the attempt to build for themselves a positive image, middle-class individuals of minority ethnic origins can become themselves perpetrators of symbolic violence against those from their same ethnic group.

8.3. Hierarchies of value and processes of 'self-distancing'

For some of the respondents, the lack of value and at times explicitly negative connotations that were attached to 'being Bengali / Asian' in the environment where they grew up, had led them to distance themselves from their ethnic identity altogether. Here, I look at the experiences of two young women, Shay and Sultana, which illuminate this process of 'self-distancing'. While the majority of participants in this study went to secondary schools and colleges with a high presence of Bangladeshi pupils, and South Asian Muslims more generally, Shay and Sultana were the only ones from working-class families who had attended institutions where they were among the very few, and the only ones in their school year. Having moved to a suburban area at around age 11, Shay went from being in a primary school with an almost completely Bangladeshi, working-class student intake, to a secondary school where pupils were largely white and middle-class. Likewise, Sultana found herself in a very different high school environment compared to her primary years, as her mother had decided to place her in a Catholic institute with mostly Black African and Afro-Caribbean girls. In their accounts, they describe the difficulties encountered in 'fitting in', and how, in order to do so, they adapted their language, look, tastes, and generally their 'way of being' to the new setting. In the attempt to 'fit in', that is, these young women adapted their cultural capital and habitus to those that were dominant, and thus affording status, within the institution attended. As is evident from the extracts below, this involved both racialised and classed cultural features:

It was scary going to a place where there were barely any Bengalis, it was completely different. Like the culture was completely different, because obviously over here it's like the Bengali culture, it's the standard Bengali culture, I don't remember but you could just be Bengali and not worry about it, while there it was just so different. [...] I did have to change a lot, I didn't fit in. [...]

Berenice: In what sense did you have to change?

[...] I guess talking in Bengali I think that probably was it, or maybe it was just having that comfort of seeing so many Bengalis and then not, that's probably why I had to change. [...] I guess personality wise I changed a lot but I can't think in specific. [...] Over here they were like: 'innit?', and all of this, and I remember when I moved over there I used to say 'innit' a lot and they were like: 'innit? Really? Seriously?', so I had to change my language as well, the way I spoke, because over there they are a lot more posh than they are over here at school. I had to change that, so when I was talking on the phone with them they were: 'oh my God you sound so posh', and I remember thinking: 'oh my God you sound like a chav, I can't believe I used to sound like that, and that's so scary'. (Shay, working-class)

I think from the experience we had in primary school, my mum particularly, she doesn't like Bengalis because they are very... the way she would describe them, they are very nosy and they gossip a lot. [...] So there was my secondary school and another secondary school right next to each other, but my mum preferred that we went to the Catholic school rather than to that obvious Bengali based school. [...] I had no one to speak to because I didn't know who to talk to or, you know I just felt really out of place. But I did get there in the end.

Berenice: And how did that work out?

[...] Like what they used to speak about, like in terms of their social life and what kind of music they listened to, I think I kind of taught myself their entertainment and such and I think that's kind of how I fitted in. [...] And then the next thing you know I just fitted in really well, like even like how we used to do our hair. And I think from that, from my experience in secondary school to like the kind of girl I am today, I get along more with black people than I do with any other Asian people. [...] When people meet me they expect me to be like this typical Asian girl but because I think I've grown up with loads of black girls I've kind of got their attitude, their views, values etc., and it is just really different. (Sultana, working-class)

In this process of change and adaptation, both Sultana and Shay came to develop a

negative conception of what they referred to as ‘the standard Bengali’ / ‘the typical Asian’. This stereotypical vision broadly considered Bangladeshis as ‘close minded’, ‘restrictive’, ‘controlling’, ‘nosy’ and ‘gossipy’, and was mainly built on an elaboration of personal experiences abstracted from context and generalized. Structural factors contributing to certain behaviours and attitudes, such as residential segregation and concentration, and discrimination, were easily overlooked, and these attitudes and behaviours were assumed to be characteristic of the ‘Bengali culture’. A further devaluation of their Asian identity also came from other people ‘making fun’, and sometimes providing an explicitly negative image, of associated cultural aspects. Sultana’s quote, reported below, testifies to the distress and internal struggle caused by the stereotypes imposed on her as a Bangladeshi by her friends and schoolmates:

So I mean obviously being Bengali you are treated differently to other ethnicities and I think that's one thing I used to struggle with, I used to find it hard. I used to like, not like being Bengali, because I felt I was different and I didn't like... you know, like in secondary school I felt like I didn't fit in or whatever. [...] And one of the other things that I'm not really fond it's just because of all the negative stereotypes that are associated with Bengali people, and you know like some of the stereotypes I guess are true in some cases, to an extent. I used to see it as such a bad thing. [...]

Berenice: And when you are saying there were negative stereotypes about Asian or Bengalis that you didn't like and you didn't want to associate yourself with, what type of things...?

Like oh, you know, Asian people smell of curry, they just eat rice and curry... or like a lot of people used to get Asian people and Indian people mixed up, you know with the red bindi on their head, and you know at secondary school people like, as a joke, they did use to kind of say: ‘oh’, you know, ‘you bindi’, you this, you that, call me names. You know, they use to say Bengali people are stingy with money. And it is like, even though I knew they were joking it kind of got to me for some reason. (Sultana, working-class)

As Shay and Sultana made these stereotypes their own, they constructed and presented their identity as being in contrast with the ‘way of being’ they considered as ‘typical’ of their ethnic ‘group’, and were keen to distance themselves, both figuratively and physically, from other Bengalis:

I think if I would have stayed here [in Tower Hamlets] it would have been horrible, I would have turned into, I don't know, the standard Bengali, you know. [...]

Berenice: You said that if you had stayed here you would have probably become the standard Bengali, what is your idea of the standard Bengali?

[...] I don't know but I find them really restrictive and like very controlling, like they only hang around Bengalis. [...] So I would have become just that person, just hang around with a group of Asians, not talking to anyone else, and it would have been horrible I would have hated it. Like now I have barely any Bengalis friends, barely any. Because I can't stand them to be honest, because they are so restrictive [...] they just talk Bengali stuff. I guess, I don't know, I guess it's cultural, like their culture is just a bit restrictive.

Berenice: You said that when you moved there were not a lot of Bengalis in your school...

[...] Before I never used to hear anybody speaking in Bengali but now there is more and more people so it's, yeah, I kind of like want to move again, I want to run away from them again. (Shay, working-class)

Like a typical Bengali teenager with the headscarf, she is expected to be like kind of religious, very quiet, shy, like she is kind of expected to hang around with other Asian girls. Whereas me, I don't have any Asian friends apart from my cousins, but yeah I don't have any Asian friends and I'm not shy and I'm not quiet. [...] I mean personally I don't think I would find myself a Bengali or Asian person, you know I think he will be far from being Asian. [...]

Berenice: And why do you think that it wouldn't be a Bengali person?

Just because of the way I think I am, you know, like I said before I don't particularly see myself with Asian people. Personally I'm not attracted to them either and I just wouldn't associate myself with them really. (Sultana, working-class)

In bringing to light the considerable impact that external perceptions of given ethnicities can have on those who belong to the ethnic 'group', these two young women's stories contribute to expose the dynamic and relationally defined character of identities, and make the hierarchies of value and status that enter into play in such construction especially manifest (Phinney 1990; Nagel 1994). Within the context of the secondary schools they attended, and I would suggest in reflection of widespread stereotypes, their (Bengali, and Asian) ethnic identities did not provide a source of status, but rather the opposite (Warikoo 2011). For Shay in particular, whose school had a predominantly middle-class intake, the lack of value attributed by others and herself to 'being Bangladeshi' was further linked to the ascription to such an identity of working-class

embodied expressions, as in the case of her cockney (East London working-class) accent, which she eventually dropped. The difficulties encountered in ‘fitting in’, and the identity conflict that this generated, eventually led these women to adopt the cultural features of the groups that were dominant in their school setting, and to distance themselves from their own ethnic ‘group’.

8.4. Participation in higher education and the ‘re-claiming’ of ethnic identities

As more working-class minority ethnic students are entering higher education, this seems to provide them with increased opportunities to meet and interact with like-minded co-ethnic peers from varied class backgrounds, and to re-define in this way their understanding of their own ethnic identity (Slootman 2014; Chavous et al. 2016). For those who took part in this study, the intellectual and political engagement and the social networks that came with university also prompted an increased awareness of, and interest in, issues of social justice and ‘race’ relations, which represented an additional element contributing to the re-evaluation and ‘re-claiming’ of one’s ‘roots’. Kanta, a young woman of working-class origins attending a top ranking university, told me:

I think perhaps now when I get more involved in sort of like social activism and like issues of like social justice for instance, I always remember the sort of colonial parts of Bangladesh and I think when I remember it, I always feel like, you know, that’s something I can’t let go of and I have to keep hold of that part of my identity. [...] I still feel like there’s maybe a responsibility or duty on me to kind of continue that part of my identity to ensure that it’s kind of... it’s preserved in a way. (Kanta, working-class)

Although to varying degrees, this process of re-evaluation of one’s ethnic identity, aided by the accretion of social and cultural capital through higher education, was common to many of the respondents. In the extract below, Sadia, who also came from a working-class background and was attending another prestigious institution, talks for example about proudly re-claiming her Bangladeshi heritage after a period of dismissal and detachment during secondary school. Within her narration, multiple influences are evident which either favoured or deterred the formation of a positive sense of self as Bengali. Especially visible are the subtle ways in which symbolic violence deprives such an identity of value within institutional settings, and how critical racial awareness can on the other hand have a liberating and empowering potential:



When I was young I used to really like [henna] and I would always want to wear it, and then I don't know during like my teenage years I was kind of embarrassed by it when I used to get henna, and then now again, now I really like, any opportunity, I really like putting henna on and I think that also reflects my kind of attitude towards the Bengali culture. [...] I think in secondary school mainly like you just become more, I was like in terms of clothing as well, more Westernised, at any opportunity I would want to wear English clothing or no longer wearing like the traditional Bengali clothing. Even like the food that I ate. [...]

Berenice: And would you be able to explain me why that happened?

I thought like, when I was in like school I used to be picked to like represent our school. So I was in an environment where, I think the teachers as well, and it was like you would have to kind of transform yourself, be more essentially white or less Bengali and I think that's where it stems from. [...] So that kind of peer pressure and so it just seemed the norm and it wasn't like anything dramatic, like I suffered from like racial abuse or anything like that. [...] Like for me it's even more important now, like I really want to reclaim my culture. I think just learning about it in terms of society that we're in, where you have like cultural appropriation, so in terms of you know, you have other people stealing your culture and like here I am trying not to... here I am, I have it but I'm not accepting it. And you know just reading, you know, [...] you just have all these people of colour just embracing their culture, and it's actually more liberating when you own it, if anything. (Sadia, working-class)

Similarly to those discussed in the previous section, Sadia's account draws attention to the relational nature of identity construction, pointing in this sense to the working of context-dependent hierarchies within which racialised, classed and gendered identities are accorded different symbolic

value. In contrast to Shay and Sultana, Sadia attended a secondary school with a predominantly working-class South Asian intake. Yet, like them she was made to feel that, in the settings where she engaged as she was selected to represent her school, her 'Bengali cultural features', which again encompassed both racialised and classed elements, were of lesser value than 'more essentially white' ones. For Sadia, going to university represented however in this respect a transformative experience, as she started learning about the structural inequalities that produced these differential value judgements and about other minority ethnicities' struggles for the symbolic re-evaluation of their racialised identities.

Jamila is another working-class woman whose story is illustrative of this process of ethnic identity 're-claiming'. In the following quote, she reports how by learning more about Bangladesh and its history she developed a growing interest which finally led her to go to Bangladesh after 10 years. This increasing awareness eventually changed her perception of the country and its people, and made her more appreciative of her own ethnic background, which had until then been 'pushed down'. Her narrative exemplifies in this respect parents' general lack of investment in the transmission of knowledge about Bengali language and history, and highlights the role that peer networks can have in promoting a re-evaluation of these aspects:

I guess it gets to an age when we sort of accept it that we're from Bangladesh I think. Because we grow up sort of pushing that identity down. [...] I think that is common to a lot of people in the area. So only recently I guess in this past three years, I have started learning more about the Bangladeshi history, its culture, and sort of accepting that I am Bangladeshi and being proud about it. [...] Because if you are not growing up hearing about your culture and hearing about your history you would never think to actually look into it. [...] And I guess that's because [our parents] think we're not interested, either because we have grown up in a society where we are very much sort of westernised I guess. [...] And so they don't think to explain that kind of stuff and we have to push for it and that is something that I want to do with the Bangladeshi Society as well, so really push for the cultural and historical side of it. (Jamila, working-class)

The following picture was chosen by Jamila to represent her Bangladeshi identity. As she explains in the description below, it symbolises the attachment she developed for the country and this part of her identity, and the beauty she now sees in it. Importantly emerging from her account is the role played by externally imposed images of Bangladesh (e.g. in the media) in shaping

perceptions, and how symbolic violence operating through negative representations can influence one's sense of identity:



That picture for me represents sort of home in a sense and just not forgetting our ties with it because that is what life is like for them. [...] You think of all the things you see on TV and all the poverty that you see and all the... you know the floods and the natural disasters and you don't see it in that really beautiful light, and when I went to Bangladesh I saw it is a completely different light. (Jamila, working-class)

In light of the aforementioned reflections on the context-dependent, relational and hierarchical character of processes of identity construction, we can see how Jamila's considerations are more broadly suggestive of the ways in which a re-evaluation of 'Bengali culture' can be favoured by this being experienced in a setting where British dominant judgements, constructing it as of lesser value, do not enter into play.

Many girls also expressed a tension between a perception of increasing 'westernisation', with younger generations losing their capacity to communicate in Bengali and their attachment to the country and history, and the willingness to 'hold on to their roots' and transmit this sense of identity to their children, as mentioned in this quote from Hamida:

I would want them to go, take them to Bangladesh and make them live there for a year, learn the language, because I think it's so important, like my nephew's losing the language. [...] Something that's your mother tongue, that's from your roots, you should know it. [...] I would love to go back to Bangladesh with that mind-set, where I've been... like you know I want to go see my family. [...] I would love to travel that region, like just generally, like finding out about the stuff that Bengali women discovered and what not. I would love to do stuff like that and learn the language better. (Hamida, working-class)

Even Sultana, who tended as we have seen to dis-associate herself from her ethnicity, expressed a desire to get more in touch with this aspect of her identity, and especially to enable this attachment for her future children. Once again, engagement with other Bangladeshis whom she valued positively appeared to facilitate this kind of transition:

I think if I did have kids I would go, just to kind of introduce them to the family and, yeah, I would introduce them to like, you know, this is your background, this is where you come from. Because even though to some extent I don't particularly enjoy being Bengali but I still would like to embrace my background if that makes sense. [...] And I don't... I wouldn't want my children to think: 'oh', you know, like: 'mum doesn't care about Bangladesh so why should I?' [...] I met a Bengali, one of the student ambassadors, he is Bengali and he started a Bengali Society and he was like: 'oh', you know, 'do you want to join?', I was like: 'no I'm fine, thank you', and he kept asking me why. The same thing I'm telling you now I told him and he was like: 'oh', you know, 'you shouldn't be like that, you should be happy (duh duh duh)', he was giving me this long talk and I kind of like took it all in and I was like: 'okay', you know, 'maybe I should', so I ended up joining the society. (Sultana, working-class)

Involvement in higher education and engagement with people from different backgrounds could also lead these young women to adopt a more reflexive stance towards their Bangladeshi identity, where they expressed critique for certain aspects of culture while appreciating others. Many of them criticized for instance some of their parents' views regarding requirements for the selection of potential husbands and excessive gossiping, while valuing other aspects of 'Bengali culture' such as the respect attributed to family and the elders. As I will consider in more detail in Chapter 9, this process of re-elaboration and re-interpretation of one's 'culture', where the content and meaning of practices is critically assessed and re-negotiated by those within the 'group' boundaries, was also visible in relation to Islam. Here as well, higher education represented an important arena of experiences and interactions that were key in shaping interviewees' understandings of Islam, and in engendering a heightened sense of ownership of its principles and teachings. Attesting to the experientially-informed character of ethnic and religious identities, and reflecting a common reasoning, Kanta noted how going to university had enabled her to reflect on her upbringing and on what she had learned 'as both a Muslim and a Bengali', allowing her to 'build upon it, understand it and value it':

There are some things which I'm a bit like... I find a bit unnecessary, like, I don't know you, there is like a lot of cultural things in the Bengali culture where you have to, like in terms of

marriage and stuff, that you have to marry people from your village and that sort of stuff. There's a lot of things I find unnecessary and don't agree with, but then when I think about my culture I think there's so many things that are so amazing. [...] So I'm glad I've had that bringing up and I've been in touch with my Bengali culture in that sense and really value the things that Bengali culture values which is like family and respect, and that's something I don't think I'll ever let go of. (Kanta, working-class)

8.5. Social class understandings and identifications

The issue of social class was touched upon by some of those who took part in this research during the first exploratory interview, especially in relation to its implications for educational experiences, and was further explored in the second interview through a set of more focused questions. Social class was mainly understood by these women in terms of parents' occupation and income, and of the resources that this gave access to, with area of residence and school attended figuring significantly as indicators. Some also made reference to an array of elements which can be broadly defined as cultural capital, such as education, lifestyle, values, mind-set and political views. Both economic and cultural resources in the form of 'information capital' and 'academically valued cultural capital' were importantly recognised by participants as shaping differential access and experiences of education among students from different class backgrounds, including themselves. While social class as understood in terms of resources was not linked to any specific attribution of value, however, the opposite was true when social classes were seen to encompass certain values and mind-sets. As appears in the following excerpt, it is in fact around these aspects that discourses of (dis)identification from, and opposition to, particular class locations, were mainly constructed:

Because I am working-class, but I don't feel like I have working-class attitudes and values I guess. Because I feel like working-class values and attitudes are money and success but I'm not focusing on money, I'm focusing on my education. [...]

Berenice: In what ways would you describe yourself as working-class and in what ways not?

Income maybe and money-wise. But value-wise, I feel like working-class there is a negative sort of label to working-class people. But I feel we are just normal, we're human beings too, we want to get out of this position, we actually do want to move up in life, definitely get more money than what my parents are earning, help my parents. [...] Also I am not ignorant

and I don't like to stereotype races. Because they say that working-class people lack education but I feel that middle-class people also lack education, like in terms of knowing about other people, they get the news from the media so that they put negative labels on us. I don't like to do that, I like to go out and find out for myself. (Chandi, working-class)

In the above quotation, Chandi describes, and at the same time constructs, her class identity in relation to 'what she is not'. In particular, she distinguishes herself from 'middle-class people', to whom she attributes a racist mind-set. This can be seen as a stereotypical view of the middle-classes, where, as already highlighted with respect to the stereotyping of Bengali identities, social class and 'race' / ethnicity overlap with one another. Much like in those cases ethnicity was classed, in this case social class becomes racialised. This racialisation of class identities, and specifically the entrenchment of 'middle-classness' with whiteness, can lead to a perceived tension between becoming middle-class while simultaneously maintaining a minority ethnic identity:

I do want to make it easier for them [my children] but only in terms of income, I guess that would make me middle-class. But my values, my Bengali cultural and religious values will still stay the same I guess. I don't want to completely lose myself. (Chandi, working-class)

In discussing how she sees education as the best way to secure a professional job and attain in this way the desired socio-economic mobility, it is moreover interesting to note how Chandi distances herself from what she perceives as being 'working-class values'. Her further elaboration shows however the tensions and contradictions with which this perception is fraught, and uncovers the underlying workings of symbolic violence by bringing to light the dominant attributions of value and negative stereotyping of 'working-class people' of which it is imbued. In this sense, her account is especially revealing of the weight that external representations of social categories such as class can have in shaping processes of identification. As we have seen in relation to 'race' and ethnicity, symbolic violence underpins the normalisation of certain discourses of working-class identities as pathological and charged with negative connotations, and in so doing it problematises identification. One of these widespread discourses, which is mentioned by Chandi, constructs working-class people as not valuing education. The way in which she presents her class identity shows the tensions deriving from such a characterisation, which she at first seems to subscribe to, by asserting her distance, but then contests. For these young women, the widely adopted discourse of 'Bangladeshis valuing education and striving to achieve a better life' / 'Islam encouraging a search for knowledge and self-improvement', considered in Chapters 6 and 9, can serve therefore as

a counter-narrative to this construction of 'working-classness', and aid in this way the adoption of an 'educationally / social mobility oriented' sense of self.

For some of these women this sense of self as educationally achieving and socially mobile was further supported by a genuine belief in the existence of increased opportunities for social mobility and a more fluid class structure. Whilst acknowledging the favourable impact that a higher class background can have on life chances, for example, Jamila considered social class as being of declining importance as a marker of identity, and was confident in her possibilities of achieving 'a good job' irrespective of her parents' position. Her faith in higher education as a promoter of socio-economic advancement resonates, as we have seen, with the views expressed by all of those interviewed, although variation existed in the degree to which they thought this was possible and in strength of their class identities.

For me, I am sure I am going to be employed, but right now I'd probably say working-class and maybe in the future middle-class but I don't think it has any relevance or importance anymore. I mean I'd say that you know there is the middle-class and there's the upper class and they might have better, you know... so I am contradicting myself. So in the sense that... I just, I don't know now. I feel like it's a lot more fluid than before so you can very easily move up the class structure in a sense, but I don't know if that's something we should continue to define ourselves by. Like if someone asked me about my identity or someone asked me to talk about myself I wouldn't say I'm a working-class British Bangladeshi blah blah or a middle-class British Bangladeshi. (Jamila, working-class)

This trust in the potential for social mobility was not, however, without cautions and critiques. Some of these young women's reflections reveal in fact how for people of working-class, minority ethnic origins, middle-class identification can be fraught with tensions and contradictions. While some of these, as highlighted by other studies, pertain to processes of social mobility in general (Lawler 1999; Reay et al. 2009; Ingram 2011a, 2011b; Friedman 2013), others appear as we have seen to be more specifically related to the experiences of minority ethnicities, and have mainly to do with the ways in which class is racialised and 'race' / ethnicity is classed. Still, other accounts show that these co-constructed dimensions of identity are not simply reducible to one another. Rather, they draw attention to how the structures of inequality within which classed, racialised and gendered identities are embedded cut across one another, thus producing a layering of multiple hierarchical spaces representing and structuring relations of power among different 'groups'. This is visible for example in the following extract, where Hamida refers to aspects of both her racialised

and classed identity to explain why she considers identification with the middle-class as never completely attainable. In doing so, she points to the difficulties experienced as a young woman of working-class background in becoming 'fully middle-class', that is, in attaining the 'right' stock of capital characterising middle-class position, which comprises of a complexity of social and cultural resources that go beyond what is attainable through participation in higher education. On the other hand, she additionally points to 'skin colour' as compounding these difficulties, as it structures status and material inequalities operating within and across classes:

I know I'm getting a degree but for me I still consider myself working-class, even after that, because I still feel as if I have to fight for everything to get what I want. [...] I don't... I think the class system is more, more to do with white British people, rather than ethnic minorities. Because I think people try and put both of them together and I do not think they mix. I think there's totally two different separate issues. The class thing is a big deal, but it's... I've got a bigger issue to deal with than the class issue, if you get what I mean. [...] And you can go up the ladder in terms of the class system but even actually saying that, even when you're in, within that whole class, however much you educate yourself, you still have that accent of being from a working-class background, you won't have every single network, you will still have to fight for things, so in that sense you're always going to be working-class. I don't feel you can climb it, it's not so easy to climb. [...]

Berenice: What about your children? What do you think in terms of your children and like in case...

Well my nephews, you know what, it's... they are going to get a lot more better advice. [...] Pushing them to do like things that will help them on the CV once they start, you know, thinking about going to uni and what they want to do. [...]

Berenice: Why do you say that it's still going to be different than for the white British middle-class?

After getting all that advice?

Berenice: Yeah.

Because of their skin colour. (Hamida, working-class)

8.6. Conclusion

The discussion so far conducted has offered an exploration of the ways in which participants to this research expressed how they positioned themselves in relation to their Bangladeshi background and to different class locations, focusing especially on the processes that appear to promote (dis)identification. This has brought to attention some interesting inter-relations between social class and ethnicity as cross-cutting dimensions of identity. In these dimensions identities are fundamentally relational, as both of them entail hierarchies of value and status, among classes in one and ‘races’ / ethnicities in the other. Thus, for ethnicity as well as for class there will be positions that have higher or lower stocks of the ‘right’ kind of economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources to be spent in different contexts of interaction. The subordinated material and symbolic position of Bangladeshi ethnicity in different settings where these young women engage, and especially in dominant spaces, contributes to problematise their identification as Bangladeshi, as this has scarce symbolic currency. Furthermore, it undermines identification with ‘middle-classness’, which is often constructed as also involving racial privilege. In this sense, it can be seen in addition how social class and ethnicity are often co-constructed, in these women’s as well as in broader imaginaries. In particular, understandings of what it means to be middle-class tend to include cultural aspects that pertain to whiteness, while discourses of what it means to be Bangladeshi encompass working-class cultural features. This co-construction is one of the main ways in which processes of (dis)identification and re-appropriation of ethnic and class identities are played out. In particular, as this inhibits identification as middle-class for non-whites, and underpins dominant discourses of ethnicity as well as the possibility to subvert them through classed performances.

With respect to ethnic identities, in particular, I have illustrated through exemplifying narratives three different ways of feeling about one’s ethnicity, and have attempted to unpack their interconnections with financial, social and cultural resources provided by class position and participation in higher education. A central aspect, which appears to either facilitate identification or to make it more problematic, is represented by the differences existing in these young women’s understandings and constructions of the ethnic category they belong to, and in the respective degree of ‘stigma’ or ‘advantage’ attached (Nagel 1994). As stressed by Song (2011, p. 59): ‘minority group’s images and identities form *in interaction* between *assignment*, which is imposed by others, and *assertion*, which is a claim to ethnicity made by groups themselves’. Here, I argue that access to different types of capital shapes this assertion in some key ways. Firstly, the availability of economic, social and cultural capital allows for a more substantial investment in the construction of ethnic identities. Furthermore, and most importantly, it

grants the capacity to dis-associate ethnicity from its classed markers and embodied expressions, thus challenging dominant classed stereotypes of ethnic 'groups' and constructing the possibility for a 'positive' image. In this process, however, it has been noted how the adoption of discursive strategies that stress classed distinctions within a 'group' can contribute to the fixing of social inequalities. Acquisition of social and cultural capital through higher education additionally seems to encourage a 're-claiming' of ethnic identities, both by raising awareness of structural inequalities contributing to place one's ethnicity in a subordinate material and symbolic position, and by favouring symbolic re-signification through exposure to new and valued conceptions of 'what it means to be Bengali'.

Chapter 9

Muslim identities

9.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on participants' discursive constructions of Islam as a source of identity, with the intent of providing a better understanding of the meanings and significance it is attributed, and of how these are related to these women's multiple positionings within broader social structures. In particular, I look at the ways in which, through discussions of what it means for them to be Muslim, interviewees engaged with other dimensions of social identity such as ethnicity, nationality and gender, and negotiated relations of power within and across these spaces. Findings highlight how integral Islamic faith is to their conceptions of who they are, with its appeal resting on the capacity to enable a positive and coherent sense of self as Bangladeshi young women living in Britain. It does so in particular by providing support and guidance, and by allowing, through the values it is seen to promote and the discourses it makes available, to transcend the partiality of and tensions between identification in terms of ethnicity and nationality. Additionally, it provides them with a space from which to contest and negotiate competing gender expectations expressed by 'mainstream British society' on the one hand and by their 'Bangladeshi community' on the other, while affirming valued gender roles. By revealing how Islamic values do not only provide tools for these young women to interpret their situations, but are themselves being interpreted in the light of experiences and interactions such as those that take place through participation in higher education, the analysis conducted draws moreover attention to the diverse, dynamic and experientially-informed character of Muslim identities.

9.2. 'Being Muslim' as transcending and encompassing ethnicity and nationality

Except for the only young woman who was brought up in a 'mixed-religion' family where the mother was Muslim and the father was Hindu, and did not consider herself as religious, 'Being Muslim' was put forward by all participants as what mostly defined them, above and beyond both ethnicity and nationality (Archer 2002; Tyrer and Ahmad 2006). Contrary to the latter dimensions of identification, which were generally constructed as contingent upon 'external sources' and

specific contexts such as the family or the country they lived in, and as we have seen for ethnicity were subject to problematisation, Islam tended to be presented as integral to what these young women were. This is well illustrated in Shay's extract, reported below, where she reflects on the picture she chose to represent her Muslim identity:



I wanted to take a picture of a shadow or of my back because it's just me but it's just in the background. It's just who I am, it is wherever I go. [...] I mean I'm not, I'm not that religious, it's just I'm Muslim and every part of me Muslim. [...] I was just Muslim, grew up Muslim, just, Muslim it's just who I am. It's just Muslim has been the thing that's been constant throughout my life, that's the only thing. Yeah, yeah it's the only thing that has been constant throughout my life. So yeah without it I don't know, I don't know what, what I would be. (Shay, working-class)

Shay comes, as we have seen in Chapter 8, from an upwardly mobile though still working-class family, who had moved from the inner city to the suburbs. In discussing how she related to her ethnic identity, I have highlighted the difficulties experienced when being transferred from primary to secondary school, where she was among the very few South Asian Muslim and working-class students. In adapting to this new environment, where the cultural capital and habitus acquired through socialisation within the family and among her primary school friends had no currency but was instead singled out for criticism (e.g. another pupil telling her: 'innit, really?', to remark the inappropriateness of her East London working-class slang), Shay mentioned having changed 'a lot' in order to fit in. This eventually led her to dis-associate from what she defined as 'the standard Bengali', which she constructed in both racialised and classed terms. From the above quotation, we can see how being Muslim is presented instead, and arguably precisely because of these tensions

and fractures within habitus, as being ‘the only constant throughout my life’, to the point where she states that ‘without it, I don’t know what I would be’. As I will show throughout this chapter, this understanding of Islamic faith as being integral to one’s identity was common to all of the young women interviewed apart from the one I mentioned earlier, and seemed to relate to its capacity to offer interpretative tools and discourses that allowed them to establish a confident and coherent sense of self, by simultaneously reconciling and challenging multiple social distinctions.

In discussing how religious faith specifically compared to ethnic and national dimensions of identity, participants drew on a range of discourses. The following quotes are illustrative of these constructions. Sadia and Rani distinguish in particular between Islam as a ‘belief’ encompassing a fundamental set of values, and ‘culture’, which is instead associated with ethnicity and nationality. Islamic values and teachings are then presented as being independent of, and thus ‘neutral from’, specific cultural traditions:

Before I am either British or Bangladeshi I would say I’m Muslim first. Because within Islam there shouldn’t be a notion of culture, it’s not built on a construction of cultural traditions or anything like that, so it’s meant to be neutral from any of such factors. And I guess because it’s more like of a belief, and it kind of reflects my everyday understandings and it constructs who I am. Because whether you know, Moroccan or Turkish or white, being Muslim shouldn’t be affected by any of those factors. (Sadia, working-class)

I think the values that a Muslim should have, they apply to any culture, anyone, you know. Whether you’re British or Bengali, you should have some values and some characteristics as a person, and I get those from being a Muslim, from Islam, so that is probably why I wouldn’t label it with any culture particularly. (Rani, middle-class)

As emerges from Rani’s excerpt, because of their fundamental character, the values one holds as a Muslim are additionally seen as being applicable to all cultures. As such, they come to be constitutive of these young women’s identity ‘as a person’, whether British or Bangladeshi, and to qualify what it means for them to be either of the two:

I think it shapes everything else. [...] So the way I am as a person, my characteristics as a person, as a Muslim, would shape my British, like what it means to be a British citizen, so being a good person, you know helping the community, doing this and that. [...] And when it comes to Bengali I think, when it comes to something like a culture where you’re Muslim anyway, your religion is like shaped around it. (Labiba, working-class)

This understanding of Islam as integral to, and defining of, her identity stands in contrast to how Labiba talks in the extract below about nationality and ethnic ‘culture’, which are constructed on the converse as contingent and having no significance. As I will discuss in more detail in the following sections, Labiba’s account also reveal an opposition between the inclusivity of religious faith, which ‘shapes everything else’, and the divisiveness of citizenship, which ‘decides how we all live in different nations’:

I think stuff like your, you know, your citizenship or your culture is something that’s just completely, like it means nothing to me personally. It’s just something that, oh, I have British citizenship, or I just call my parents Bengali, it happens to be like that. [...] I just think it’s just something that’s been socially constructed anyway, and decides how we all live in different nations and we have all these different countries. It’s just something that, I don’t know, it just doesn’t mean anything to me anyway. (Labiba, working-class)

Like Shay, therefore, Sadia, Rani and Labiba also present Islam as being inherent to one’s sense of self, by asserting that it ‘constructs who I am’ (Sadia) and defines ‘my characteristics as a person’ (Rani and Labiba).

This sense by which Islam shapes one’s life more profoundly than their ethnicity or nationality is strengthened moreover by its embeddedness in everyday practices taking place in different contexts of engagement. This is conveyed for example by Pavi through her emphasis on how, contrary to either ‘Britishness’ or ‘Bengaliness’ which more or less enter into play in informing practices depending on the setting, being Muslim ‘is always there’:

Even though Britishness is a part and Bengaliness is another part Muslim is always there, while I am being Bengali and while I’m being British. Because even when I’m at home I am praying to represent my religion, when I’m outside I have my hijab to present it my religion. So it is always there whereas Britishness and Bengali culture they are just bits and bobs. [...] Home or outside that is always there whereas the other stuff just depending on where I am but my religion is always there. (Pavi, working-class)

Thus, we can see from these accounts how religious faith functions for those who took part in this research as a source of identity and self-identification that enables them to overcome the perceived partiality of nationality and ethnicity, and to integrate them within a unitary and coherent framework of understanding of the self. This possibility is afforded by Islam being constructed as promoting fundamental values that transcend and encompass both ethnicity and nationality, as they

do not derive from any particular ethnic or national ‘culture’ and are applicable to all of them. Additionally, the integration of religious practice in the different settings where these young women engage further contributes to the perceived strength and ‘wholeness’ of Islam as a source of identity.

9.3. Islam as offering guidance and enabling resilience

Further elaborating on the significance of Islamic faith, participants’ accounts drew attention to its relevance as an ethic that guides one’s life by offering indications as to how specific circumstances are to be perceived and acted upon. Zainab’s and Sadia’s reflections, reported below, exemplify this understanding of Islam, which resonated with that of all participants but the only non-Muslim:

[Islam is] more important because it helps you in your way of life. Ethics and morals. [...] Just trying to be like a good person, and then like, it’s basically the guidelines of how to have good morals and things. Like, it’s already like written down and been told to us, so it’s just an easy way of following and everything is like quite clear and all the matters have been discussed by someone else beforehand. (Zainab, middle-class)

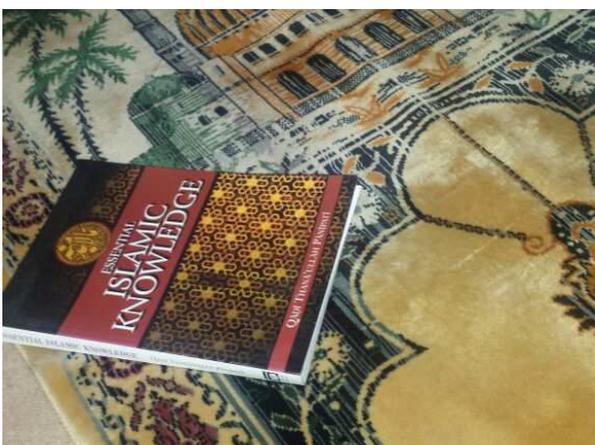
I guess it is because it’s something that I put forward in what I want to achieve or do or think about, therefore I hold on to it more because I feel as though Islam is what’s going to take me through this life and the next. (Sadia, working-class)

Crucially, as noted by Sadia, the authority of this ethic is reinforced by the prospect of an after-life where one’s efforts, commitment and observance of prescribed values will be rewarded. The following picture is one of the two that were chosen by Labiba to express the meanings and feelings that she attached to being Muslim. In describing it, she draws a contrast between, on the one side, the ‘temporality’ and ‘materiality’ of this world, and on the other, the ‘greater creational force’ and ‘greater life purpose’ that religious faith makes it possible to conceive of and encourages to direct one’s attention to:



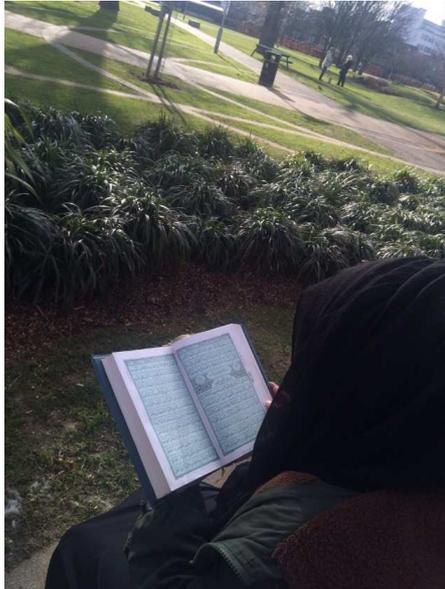
Watching the sunset on most days reminds me of the beauty that was created by a much greater force. [...] It is a constant reminder that this world is temporary and to appreciate and stay humble whilst we are here. In addition, it reminds me of the greater purpose of why I am here. Also, watching the sunset after I pray makes me feel the presence of Allah and all the favours He has bestowed upon me and how I should strive for Him not the materialistic world. (Labiba, working-class)

The important role of Islamic teachings as a guide that helps to make sense of one's situation and provides appropriate directions to be followed was especially stressed by Leena and Pavi, who both chose a picture of the Quran. In explaining the reasons for choosing this particular image, they drew attention to how this sacred text contains indications that are relevant and applicable to a number of issues they were likely to confront in their daily lives, and could thus be relied upon to know what to do whenever they 'had a problem' and felt 'stuck'. Leena's extract, in particular, chimes with the narratives reported in the previous section in highlighting the extent and the depth to which these teachings permeate Muslims' lives:



The Quran because that is like, that is the holy book. That is what every Muslim follows. When they have a problem that is what they turn to. [...] It has everything a Muslim really

needs to know, like from family, to law, to relationships, to everything. [...] Being Muslim literally affects everything you do, like how you live your life, like you always have God on your mind, and when you make decisions you would think 'is this right? Would God want me to, and is this the right Muslim way?'. And then that is always on a Muslim's mind and then you would live your life like that. (Leena, working-class)



I've obviously sent a picture of the Quran which is the book that we follow as our guide and our guide light. [...] Muslims believe that, let's just say that is our teacher in a way. Whatever God's message it is in the Quran so that's pretty much whatever we need. When we are stuck, this is what we go to. (Pavi, working-class)

The above quotations show how Islam functions for these young women as a framework that profoundly structures thought and action. Participants' considerations emphasise its relevance and capacity to 'speak' to their lives and problems, and to offer the comfort that derives from clear solutions and the prospect of an after-life, thus contributing to lessen their worries. This guidance, as we have seen, was considered to be especially valuable in moments of difficulty and doubt. In the following extracts, Fauzia and Hamida elaborate specifically on the importance of Islam in offering comfort and enabling resilience in the face of adversity:

Having belief is like, you feel better. Like even if something bad is happening you always think something good is going to happen because that's the way life is. Obviously you believe that everything happens for a reason, so if it does happen you shouldn't stress about it, worry about it that much. (Fauzia, working-class)

Like when you're really worried about certain things and you're anxious about things and you think, you know what, that faith of like, you know, whatever God said, like destined for me, will happen. Like I should, you know, I'll try my best but then I'll leave the rest on to him, like my studies, so I don't get so worried about things. [...] Like you can't keep kicking yourself, so it's like, you know what, whatever will happen is destined. And you know, out of everything bad, I strongly believe this, there's always something good that you can learn from it and there's always something good that will come out of it. (Hamida, working-class)

Both of these narratives are centred on two main arguments. Firstly, that 'everything happens for a reason' which is part of a broader 'destiny' willed by a God, and therefore that the difficulties one encounters have an explanation that is beyond human comprehension and are at least to a certain extent independent of their responsibility. Secondly, the idea that even the worst moments in one's life will eventually lead to 'something good'. By making these discourses available, religious faith can thus be seen as enabling these young women to more easily come to terms with the problems they might face.

9.4. Inclusivity of Islam VS exclusivity of nationality and ethnicity

As well as stressing the ways in which Islamic teachings and values transcend ethnic and national boundaries, their embeddedness in everyday practices, and their relevance to making sense of one's life, the women I interviewed adopted discourses of Islam which specifically emphasised its inclusivity of differences and promotion of equality. These discourses contrasted with those relating to ethnicity and nationality, which were perceived on the converse as generating exclusion and discrimination, and involved a critique of social divisions and inequalities, both as they are experienced at a personal level and as attaining to global dynamics. Here, I present the tensions expressed by participants throughout their discussion of ethnic and national dimensions of identification, and compare them with the values that Islam was seen to encompass.

9.4.1. Tensions generated by ethnic and national dimension of identification

Hamida, Sadia and Kanta all spoke about the tensions they perceived to exist between their ethnic, religious and national identities. It is however interesting to note that these oppositions were not constructed in terms of an essential mutual exclusivity between ethnicity and nationality per se. They derived instead from the ways in which these women were positioned because of their

ethnicity and religion within British society, and because of their nationality by other Bangladeshis. Additionally, they were engendered by specific conceptions of what it meant to be British or Bangladeshi. These understandings appear to be dynamic, contextual and relational, and linked to particular configurations of material and symbolic power among minority and majority ethnicities. For example, in the excerpt reported below, Hamida notes the ‘double exclusion’ she experiences, as Bangladeshis living in Bangladesh mark her as different because of her British nationality while in Britain she is considered as a ‘foreigner’ because of her minority ethnicity:

It's like conflicted. But even when I go to like, well not go to, but I have like cousins from Bangladesh that come over and we're communicating, but they class us as like Brits. But when Brits look as us they'll class us as foreigners, Bangladeshis or you know, you think... yeah. (Hamida, working-class)

This perception of being considered as not fully belonging to mainstream British society because of her minority ethnicity leads to a particular, racialised construction of nationality (‘Brits’) where this is conflated with whiteness.

The following quote is especially illustrative of some of the processes that led in her case to the formation of such a perception, and of the ways in which this comes to problematise identification in terms of nationality. In particular, Hamida mentions growing up in an environment where she mostly engaged with people ‘like her’ in terms of ethnicity, and where she was therefore not made aware of the subordinated position occupied by this ethnicity within dominant structures of power. This changed however as she went on to university, where she learned about racial and religious discrimination as well as experiencing it herself. Increasing awareness of inequality structures centred on ethnicity and religion, and existing at both an interpersonal and an institutional level, made it difficult for her to identify herself as British:

What makes me feel British is... I don't know. It's just, I'm confused. I feel closer to like being here than there. When I was younger if you were to ask me that question I'd be like: 'no, I'm British, end of'. There was no like: 'oh yeah, there's problems, there's issues of like racism'. Because I grew up in Tower Hamlets and obviously I didn't understand. [...] Because I was in a school with the majority of Bengali students, so I never had that feeling of: 'I'm not British'. [...] I always used to think it's about tolerance and things like that, and what not, but after doing a lot of anti-racism work and things like that, it's like: 'oh shit'. [...] It makes you think, like: 'whoa', it's like, we need to change loads of different things. Like even with like British gymnastics was an example of like, not allowing a woman to

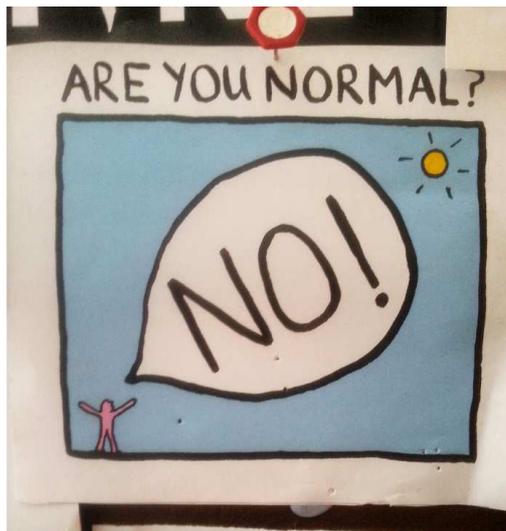
compete with her scarf on. [...] It's just, I don't want to be British, it's embarrassing sometimes. It's like I'm being, like I'm glad I've got that choice I can make. (Hamida, working-class)

Sadia also highlights the internal conflict that stems from the perception of not being fully accepted within mainstream British society, despite her nationality, because of her Bangladeshi origins. Similarly to Hamida, this leads her to present ethnic and national dimensions of identification as in opposition to each other ('it can be quite conflicting [...] to embrace both your Bangladeshi side *but also* your British side'). Her account is additionally indicative of how identification in terms of ethnicity is itself problematic, as although it entails a critique of assimilation ('if you don't you're then like a coconut') it lacks however of symbolic currency among the younger generations of British-born Bangladeshis ('you're like a fasci (fascist), you're backwards'):

I think like my friend recently she put up this statement, like if you embrace your Bangladeshi culture there's that stigma that you're like a fasci, you're backwards, or you know it's not good or what not, you know it has that. But if you don't you're then like a coconut. So it's very hard to find that balance within trying to... because a lot of us are now British-Bengalis so we have been born and brought up here. So it can be quite conflicting at the same time to embrace both your Bangladeshi side but also your British side. [...] So my Bengali culture is inherited, it's something that, you know, I've accepted and it's always going to be there. But British it's a bit more hostile in terms of sometimes it's not that accepting, sometimes, you know, I have to change in order to follow suit. (Sadia, working-class)

In pointing to the need to 'change in order to follow suit' for her to be accepted by 'British culture', Sadia's narrative draws attention to how 'either – or' discourses, where 'being British' is constructed as presupposing assimilation and thus the distancing from one's ethnic identity, make identification with 'Britishness' more difficult and fraught with emotional strain.

In a similar vein, the image chosen by Kanta to represent what it meant for her to be British is expressive of the conflict she felt in relation to her British identity. She discusses in this respect how this was due to constantly being put, as a Muslim, in the position of having to justify herself and prove her allegiance to Britain and British values, as if these were incompatible with Islamic faith:



Like maybe because of the climate now, and when I think about being British I can't not think about being Muslim at the same time, and there's that sort of constant conflict of having to justify myself and say I am British. [...] And I think the reason why I chose that [picture] was partly to show the confusion that I'm going through and also again sort of resistance to that question in a way, like you know, 'are you British?', and I can essentially say 'no' back to their face and be like 'no, what do you want me to say', that sort of thing. [...] Like when David Cameron was talking about the values and you'd think supposedly British values of free speech, I thought that's very much a Muslim value as well, so why can't it be together? (Kanta, working-class)

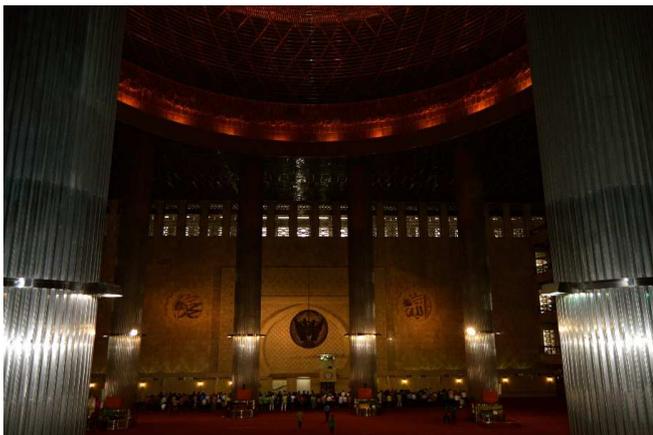
Like the other accounts reported in this section, the one presented here is illustrative of the tensions produced by the perception of not being seen within mainstream society as fully belonging because of certain valued aspects of one's identity, whether ethnicity or religious faith.

We have seen how for Hamida the perception of being classed as foreigner because of her ethnicity, as well as rising awareness and experiences of racism and Islamophobia, generated a rejection of nationality as a source of identification. For Sadia, the feeling that she had to abandon some of the cultural markers of her ethnic identity in order to be fully accepted as British made it difficult for her to identify herself as both Bangladeshi and British. Similarly, Kanta spoke about the 'resistance' brought about by other people continuously questioning the possibility for her to be truly British given her Muslim beliefs. As mentioned, therefore, none of these young women's narratives suggests a fundamental incompatibility between British nationality and Bangladeshi ethnicity or Islamic faith as such. Rather, it seems to be the pervasiveness of discourses and practices that contribute to the (re)production of material and symbolic structures of power where

their Bangladeshi ethnicity and Muslim religion are situated in a dominated position compared to the white non-Muslim majority that contributes to undermine their identification as British.

9.4.2. Unity and equality within Islam

In contrast to accounts of ethnic and national dimensions of identification as functioning to produce discrimination and exclusion, participants' elaborations of what it meant for them to be Muslim largely stressed Islam's promotion of values of unity and equality among people from different walks of life, and its orientation towards social justice. Jamila's and Labiba's pictures, and the descriptions reported below, illustrate the feelings of unity, solidarity and kindness that belief in Islam was seen to engender. In articulating these discourses, these women both draw on the idea of a global 'brotherhood' of believers, the Ummah, which unites all Muslims as part of a single community irrespective of where they are and where they are from (Hoque 2015). Labiba takes moreover the argument further by presenting this profession of solidarity and kindness as extending beyond the Muslim community to include all people:



This is a picture in Indonesia, it's one of the largest Mosques I think in the world. [...] The picture I wanted to give was one of, it was me and my friends who had gone to Indonesia and there was like a group of school kids when we went there, they were from another island, so they came from Java I think, and they came to visit this Mosque. So we just took a picture with this group of kids and for me, it just sort of, it just represented this sort of idea of togetherness and solidarity I think, and unity. So wherever you go, whatever part of the world and whatever part of the country, you know, wherever you go, there will always be like Muslims who you automatically have a connection with. And you know there's always a sense of unity and solidarity I find, and this kindness, and that's kind of what I wanted to show. (Jamila, working-class)



That circle represented like unity. [...] Like the brotherhood. It's like, I guess like one of the foundations of being a Muslim, being close to your Muslim brothers and sisters. Not just Muslim but being close to your community as well, so your neighbours and everyone, you know. Not just people who you're related to by blood or not just your friends, but everyone, and like not just Muslims. It's like that's one of the things that, you know, you see at, when you go to things like university, it's like, you're, I guess, unified as all these different, you know, people, like different cultures, different religions and I guess, yeah, so it's like unity is one of them. (Labiba, working-class)

In reflecting over the meanings she attached to being Muslim, Labiba especially emphasised how this involved 'being close' not only 'to your Muslim brothers and sisters' but to 'everyone'. Her narrative shows how the construction of Islam that she presents had been shaped by participation in higher education, thus testifying once again to the dynamic and experientially-informed character of the meanings that are being attached to different categories of social identity such as one's religion, nationality and ethnicity.

The way in which the experience of university could prompt a re-elaboration of one's understanding of their faith and ethnicity, also noted in Chapter 8, was explicitly mentioned by Kanta. More generally, her account is illustrative of how interpretations of religion and ethnic 'culture' are affected by one's positioning and interactions within multiple contexts. In the following extract, she highlights the difference between, on the one hand, her father's 'very traditional' understanding of faith and what she had learned growing up in a predominantly 'British Bengali Muslim' environment, and on the other her current interpretation of Islam. In this sense, she considers how engagement with other Muslims holding different beliefs from hers as well as with

people of different faiths has made her more reflexive, leading to a critical re-appraisal and an increased sense of ownership of Islamic teachings (Ahmad 2001; Tyrer and Ahmad 2006):

Growing up in East London surrounded by British Bengali Muslims I think we all have a very, very certain understanding of faith. So like my father has a very traditional understanding which is fine, you know, acceptable in its own way. But I guess now having gone to university and met different, not just people but different sorts of Muslims, I've grown to be, it's enabled me to reflect on how I've been brought up and what I've learned as both a Muslim and both as Bengali. [...] Like I've learnt all the basics when I was a kid but now I can really build upon it and really understand it and really value everything I've learned, and I think that's a lot because of the people I've met and the experiences I've managed to have and opportunities. (Kanta, working-class)

As well as drawing on discourses of Islam as promoting unity and solidarity among diverse people and across geographical boundaries, participants also presented its teachings as involving a critique of global inequalities. Kanta, for example, asserted that being Muslim 'is about learning how the economy works and what are the cultural issues that we have to face, [and] about social justice'. This view was also expressed by Rani, who discussed how 'treating everyone as equal' and being respectful of others, of oneself and of the environment represent the 'essential aspects' of being Muslim:

Like treating everyone as equal and having, you know, respect for other people, for yourself, all of that, it comes from Islam. [...] Islam does change a lot, with time, but the essential aspects of being good to other people, being good to yourself and being good to your environment, the three basic concepts, they will stay there. (Rani, middle-class)

She then went on to talk about the picture she had chosen to represent what it meant for her to be Muslim, which showed her family sat together at a table and enjoying food for Eid, a holiday celebrated by Muslims to mark the end of Ramadan. I decided not to include the picture in presenting my analysis, as I felt that it portrayed a quite intimate situation, the display of which would not have added anything more than what is already being conveyed through the description reported below. Here, Rani talks about the sense of gratefulness that she associates with celebrating Eid, as she is reminded of how privileged she is to be close to her family and have food to eat. She explains how the experience of fasting, which is required of Muslims during Ramadan, encourages one to be more aware of their own privilege and more empathic towards those who suffer from hunger and thirst, and thus more willing to 'give more':

You feel a certain sense of gratefulness on Eid's day, because you're all together and you all have food and you have, you know, you have the basic things that people need, more than that actually. [...] [During Ramadan] we don't eat, we don't eat for a certain time of the day and we don't drink water either, so it's a whole month that basically, it teaches you about hunger and thirst, and you do kind of get a very small idea of it. [...] Obviously you know that there is a meal at the end of the day, but still that experience itself, it does cause you to have empathy, and it also makes you realise that you need to give more. (Rani, middle-class)

9.5. Negotiating gender roles and expectations

Islam is often represented in media, public, and policy discourses as inherently oppressive of women. Participants to this research offered however a completely different understanding of gendered prescriptions within Islam, to which they referred in order to assert specific images of themselves as women, and to negotiate the competing expectations they perceived to derive from their 'Bangladeshi community' on one side and from 'British society' on the other. In particular, gender roles and expectations were discussed in relation to the connotations and meanings associated with the wearing of the Islamic veil, and to what were felt to be the constraints imposed by Bangladeshi 'culture' in terms of participation in education and employment, living arrangements and marriage practices. In all of these respects, the interpretations that these women presented of Islamic values and practices enabled them to carve for themselves spaces from which they could simultaneously challenge what they saw as overly sexualised performances of gender, linked to Western expectations, and the excessively restrictive impositions of their 'ethnic culture'. In this way, they managed to construct for themselves an image that was at the same time modest, feminine and 'progressive'.

9.5.1. Islam, clothing and representations of femininity

All of the young women interviewed wore the hijab, apart from the only non-Muslim one, which they displayed in different guises. They all presented this as a personal choice, on which their parents did not intervene and that for some contrasted with the practices adopted by their mothers who did not wear the veil. Some of these women explicitly mentioned the influence on this decision of others who embodied an image of what it meant to be a Muslim woman which was of value to them. Zainab is one of those who reflected on this process. Her account also shows how the

connotations that are attached to the hijab are shaped by the material and symbolic position of those who wear it. For example, she talks here about the ‘older girls’ she used to see at the Mosque, and who inspired her to wear the hijab, being ‘medics and dentists’. She then notes how in Dubai, where she had recently been on holiday, the abaya (Islamic dress) is ‘like a high fashion symbol’ on which women spend large sums of money, which contributed to shift its connotation from being viewed as ‘a sad thing to wear’ to ‘a classy thing’:

So my mum takes us to the Mosque and I used to see the older girls, they were medics and dentists, and they were wearing scarfs, and you end up looking up to them as role models and thinking: ‘oh I want to be like that’. And then I remember one girl, she was a really good speaker and she did a talk on the hijab and I started thinking: ‘why don’t I wear one? I’m supposed to be a Muslim’. So then after thinking about it I decided I wanted to wear it but my mum never said I had to, it was a personal choice. [...] Since then I’ve never regretted it or anything. [...] Then in Dubai as well it’s the norm to wear it there, they make the abaya look so nice. [...] It’s like a high fashion symbol, the amount of money they spend on their abaya I didn’t even see it as a sad thing to wear, and it was like a classy thing.
(Zainab, middle-class)

The association of Islamic headscarf and clothing with a particular kind of femininity was common to many of these women’s accounts. As for Zainab, participants’ narratives show how in taking up and sustaining the decision of wearing the hijab they engaged in processes of construction and projection of images of themselves they had reason to value. Sultana’s quote, reported below, is especially illustrative of these dynamics. Sultana told me about how she took the decision to wear the hijab during the summer that preceded her entrance in higher education. She explained how this had been influenced by the recent passing of her grandmother, who would have always wanted her to wear a scarf, and by the perception that university would represent ‘a new chapter’ in her life, where she could start afresh and construct a different self. In recounting of this transition, she presented her change in appearance as producing a change in how she was seen by others as a person:

To be honest I’m finding it so much better than how I used to dress you know. I used to dress like your typical white girl you know, showing skin for any occasion or whatever. I used to colour my hair constantly, have a bit of blonde, have a bit of blue, have a bit of this and that. [...] I do prefer wearing the headscarf a lot more just because I am respected a lot more, like as well as by my family but by strangers on the street you know. People just look at me,

like other Muslim men and women they just look at me, even non-Muslim men and women, they just look at me and think: 'oh my God, God bless you'. [...] I always used to have my nails done, my make-up so much, everything. [...] I cleaned out my whole cupboard, I chucked all my clothes. All I have is like abayas in there now, all my headscarves and that's it. [...] The way I dress I think that's how I see myself, that's how I would like to perceive myself you know, as a warm hearted woman that... and I would like to be respected, and I am respected you know by any other people who walks down the street. (Sultana, working-class)

Here, Sultana compares the way in which she dresses now, with hijab and abaya, with how she used to dress before, 'showing skin for any occasion', colouring her hair, and always having her nails and make-up done. She explicitly associates her previous look with a specifically racialised construction of femininity ('like your typical white girl'), to which the image of herself that is enabled by Islamic clothing is presented as being in contrast. This latter image is that of a woman who is respectable and respected, by her family as well as by 'strangers on the street', by men and women, and both Muslims and non-Muslims. The following extract additionally shows how, while allowing her to assert an image of modesty and respectability, Islamic clothing still makes it possible for her to 'look the best' by wearing expensive abayas, which resonates with Zainab's above noticed considerations about the abaya being 'a classy thing':

I think we just kind of want to fit into society and just look really good doing it as well. That was my main thing, I just wanted to look the best. [...] But now it's like, like I can still have all the expensive stuff that I want, just wear it differently and look more modest wearing it. You know all my abayas are all really expensive ones. (Sultana, working-class)

This understanding of 'being Muslim' as entailing a particular kind of femininity characterised by modesty, as opposed to what is seen as the prevailing norm of 'going around showing everything', was expressed by many among participants. In the following excerpt, Labiba provides another example of this discourse. Her account also reveals how the processes of identity negotiation in which these young women engage are not only oriented towards mainstream gendered expectations, but rather towards competing demands expressed by both British society and the Bangladeshi 'community':

So for me [being Muslim is] like being, like the dressing the way I want to dress up, rather than like if someone tells me: 'oh you need to cover up', stuff like that, or someone tells me: 'you're covered up too much'. [...] Because then some people who say that, oh, feminists,

feminism has, you know, how they fought for our rights and for us to go around covered up it's going against feminism, and stuff like that. And I just think that is, I just think like, okay, like that doesn't make any sense. It's like saying they have fought for the right for women to go out naked, that's what they're trying to say. So if we go out like covered up it's, I feel like that's showing my Muslim identity, and that like is defying the status quo of going around, you know, showing everything. [...] Like modesty is my Muslim identity. [...] Rather than like, on the one hand having your own community saying you're not covered up enough, and then on the other hand they are telling you you're covered up too much. (Labiba, working-class)

In the discussion reported above, Labiba presents modesty as being a defining characteristic of what it means for her to be Muslim. This is affirmed through a particular 'choice' of clothing, which is defended against, and enables her to challenge, both excessively restrictive 'Bangladeshi cultural' and overly sexualised 'western' gendered expectations. Her account also draws attention to the ways in which the wearing of the hijab, and more generally Islamic clothing, can become a symbol through which to express resistance against negative representations of Muslims:

If someone was to come up to me and suddenly say: 'oh you're a terrorist', or something like that, or: 'take that off', I wouldn't. I'd just, I'd stand for what I believe in. I do feel proud, like I'm proud to represent my religion when I'm walking around and I'm like, I'm determined to show that like, I'm a good person, because of my religion. (Labiba, working-class)

Labiba's and Sultana's discourses of Islam as being associated with modesty and self-respect reflected the views of many of those who were interviewed. Chandi spoke for instance more generally about how the observance of Islamic values and prescriptions would ensure the preservation of her dignity:

I'm not just doing it because it's written down, I believe in it that's why I'm following it, and I know it's there to protect me and others. It's to help me not lower my self-respect and my dignity. That's very important values that I have to keep hold of. (Chandi, working-class)

While this is not made explicit in this quote, in other passages she presented an understanding of 'British' youth behaviour and practices as overly sexualised and involving an abuse of alcohol and drugs. In this sense, it can be seen how by drawing on Islamic values it becomes possible for her to counter some of the expectations that she perceives to be placed on her as a young British woman.

9.5.2. Contesting Bangladeshi ‘cultural’ gender norms

In their narratives, participants often established a contrast between Islamic precepts and the restrictiveness of Bangladeshi ‘culture’ (Williams and Vashi 2007). Limitations regarding education, employment, and living and marriage arrangements were presented as specifically ‘cultural’, while the teachings and principles of Islam were seen as not only enabling greater freedom but also as encouraging autonomous and emancipated gender roles. The following extracts provide some examples of these discursive constructions. In the first one, Pavi reflects on what it means for her to be British, highlighting how this grants her the possibility to participate in higher education and to have a career. This is opposed to what she would be doing as a young woman of her age if she were living in Bangladesh, that is, being committed in a marriage and having childcare duties. As she makes these considerations, she stresses however that this would be due to the ‘Bangladeshi culture’ rather than to religion, as in Islam women are in fact allowed to work:

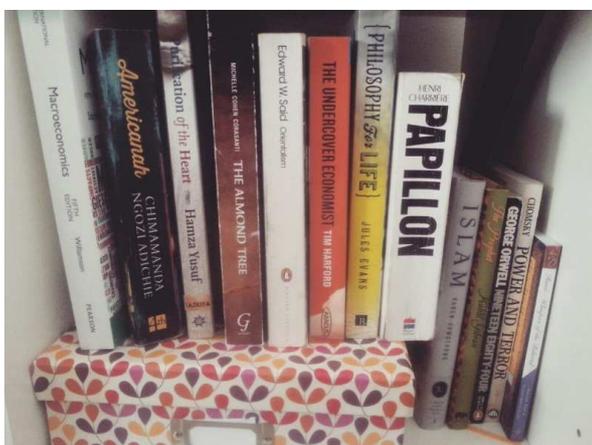


The reason why [I chose this picture] is because even though, even though in Islam, in our religion, we are... us girls are allowed to work, but the Bengali culture deprives us from it. So say for example I was born in Bangladesh, the age I am right now they would probably have given me, they would have thought I would have to get married by this age because I am 22 right now. So if I was back in my country I would probably be married with kids right now. But the British, being British allowed me to still study and still be single and think about my career rather than getting married and settling and all of that. (Pavi, working-class)

A similar argument is expressed by Rani in the following quotation, where she speaks about the constraints she might face in case she decided to pursue a career in science communication that involved working in Bangladesh, which she was considering as an option after university. In discussing these issues, she notes the difficulties that might arise for her as a woman in relating with men, as ‘they might not take her seriously’. Implicit in this account is the idea that in Bangladesh working is not seen as something that women do. Yet, she contests the validity of this view by drawing on discourses of Islam as encouraging women to ‘increase their education and careers’, and on examples of Muslim women who have been working in important fields, while arguing for the compatibility of her career aspirations with religious precepts:

Limitations would have been probably the whole travelling thing. [...] I mean [my friend] covers like I do but she’s still been able to go around in different places in Bangladesh and do whatever she wants to do and it hasn’t proved as problem. You know usually there is a bit of, how do I put it? A woman working in that sense isn’t necessarily... it’s not easy for her, especially when she has to interact with men, it’s not exactly easy. Like they might not take her seriously for one thing. [...] I mean Muslim women have always, I mean at least in history, they’ve always been encouraged to learn and to teach and you know, to increase their education and their careers as well. Like there was a lady who, I think she used to make astronomical equipment, like there were various examples of merchants, lawyers, judges, so I don’t see why that should be a problem. (Rani, middle-class)

This understanding of Islam as promoting the acquisition of knowledge and upholding aspirations has been already mentioned in Chapter 6, as part of a broader discussion looking at Bangladeshis’ diasporic discourses of aspiration. The image chosen by Kanta to represent what it meant for her to be Muslim, and the description she provides of it, are in this respect especially emblematic:



A part of being Muslim for me has always been this journey of seeking knowledge and it's something like, the first word to be revealed in the Quran for instance was the word 'read' and I think that's something that runs throughout the entire religion, so it's always been about seeking knowledge and finding ways and opportunities to grow. (Kanta, working-class)

As Islamic teachings and values are seen by these young women as upholding women's emancipation from subordinate positions within gendered relations, the primacy of Islam over 'culture' is invoked to challenge gendered prescriptions that are common among their Bangladeshi 'community'. Hamida's account illustrates these processes, as she emphasises the 'Asian cultural' nature of norms according to which women should not be living away from the family home nor autonomously choose their prospective husband, while stressing instead the appropriateness of these practices according to religion. She also considers how her parents referred to the superiority of Islam over 'culture' in justifying, as they engaged with other Bangladeshis, the possibility for her to live on her own while going to university:

So culturally she might be doing something wrong like she's not living with her family and what not, but Islamically it's absolutely fine. [...] So that's why I'm glad like my parents are like, like bring that in to shut people up, because obviously for them it should be also Islam that is higher than their cultural stuff. [...] Like okay, another example about culture, say it's acceptable for a girl to be, so it's acceptable for a girl to have an arranged marriage but it's not for her to find someone herself. But in Islam it's acceptable to have both. So I'd say I prefer what my parents believe in, because they don't mind. [...] But in the culture thing, I feel it's so suppressed. [...] Like it's so cultural, because it's like the Hindus do the same, so it's not, it's not a religious thing, it's a cultural thing. (Hamida, working-class)

9.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the ways in which the young British-born women of Bangladeshi heritage who took part in this study articulated their understandings of Islam and the significance it held for them as a source of identity. In line with previous research conducted with minority ethnic young people of Islamic faith, findings indicate a tendency among participants to define 'being Muslim' as being especially important to their sense of 'self', more than their ethnicity or nationality (Archer 2001; Tyrer and Ahmad 2006). The narratives adopted show how

Islam owes much of its appeal to the capacity to offer interpretative tools and discourses that enable these women to construct for themselves and present to others a coherent and valued identity, and in so doing to manage some of the tensions they experience in relation to their racialised and gendered positionings. This is made possible, in particular, by Islam being seen as a fundamental ethic promoting universal values and beliefs, which are associated with no particular national or ethnic 'culture' and are thus applicable to all. This appears to allow interviewees to retain a sense of self as British nationals which is inclusive and respectful of their minority ethnic identity. In this sense, Islam can be seen as allowing to reconcile the tensions that are likely to arise from the encounter of a habitus developed in a Bangladeshi family and 'community' environment encountering fields characterised by a pathologisation of the 'culture' of socialisation. More than any notion of Bangladeshi or British 'culture', moreover, the principles and teachings of Islam speak closely to these young women's social worlds, encouraging resilience in the face of adversity, and providing them with the means to interpret their situations and with guidance as to how to act upon them.

Furthermore, Islam significantly functions as a symbolic framework through which multiple inequalities can be contested and challenged. In particular, Islamic faith is presented by participants as promoting social justice, unity and equality among people, and stands in this sense in opposition to the divisions and discrimination that ethnicity and nationality are seen to engender. Being Muslim provides a source of identity that is alternative to, and critical of, identification as British where this is perceived to entail racialised hierarchies of power. Contrary to Bangladeshi 'culture', Islam is however also seen as progressive, and has for these young women a strong symbolic currency among both Bangladeshi peers and elders. This latter aspect is especially important, as it makes it possible for them to draw on its principles to assert gender roles that are defiant of 'mainstream British' as well as 'Bangladeshi cultural' expectations, with the first being perceived as excessively sexualised while the second as too restrictive. Contrary to popular stereotypes, I argue therefore that Islam can enable a re-elaboration of gender norms and the advancement of agency, by providing a space for these women to negotiate among competing expectations expressed by their families, communities and the broader society. In relation to higher education, this plays out for example in terms of decisions regarding living on one's own, or the prioritisation of education over marriage commitments. The discussion conducted additionally challenges stereotypical depictions of Islamic faith as monolithic and static by showing how the meanings that are attached to it, like those that are attributed to British nationality and Bangladeshi ethnicity, are in fact dynamic, contextual and relational, as they are shaped through experiences taking place from specific gendered, classed and racialised social positionings.

Chapter 10

Conclusions

10.1. Introduction

This chapter brings together the main threads of this study, and discusses the issues it has addressed as well as those that were raised. The first section briefly retraces the research process. I start by outlining the aims of this study and the rationale for conducting it, and reflect over the benefits, challenges and limitations of the theoretical framework, methodology and methods adopted to guide the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. I also consider some of the ways in which my positionality with respect to participants is likely to have shaped the narratives expressed by these women as well as my own, and the opportunities and dilemmas that this presented. I then move on to detailing the major theoretical and empirical contributions that this research brings to current knowledge. Finally, I draw some of the implications that findings have for current policy and practice approaches to minority ethnic ‘integration’ and to redressing ethnic and class inequalities in education and employment, and suggest some potentially interesting research avenues opened up by the questions that this study poses.

10.2. Research overview

This research has aimed to address two broad sets of questions, as they pertain in particular to the experiences of young British-born women of Bangladeshi background in higher education:

1. How do social class and ethnicity intersect with one another to influence access to and experiences of higher education, and progression to the labour market?
2. How do Bangladeshi immigrants’ female descendants construct their identities by drawing on different dimensions of identification, and how is this informed by participation in education?

The especially low rates of participation in British higher education and labour market of women of Bangladeshi origins have long been the object of academic and policy concerns. Yet, their presence

in universities has increased considerably since the turn of the century, at higher rates than that of white British students. Through this study, I intended to develop a fine grained, theoretically grounded understanding of the processes through which education attitudes and experiences, and employment aspirations and pathways, are shaped by formations of class and 'race' / ethnicity. Additionally, I was interested in exploring how these young women understood and presented their social identities, especially in terms of ethnicity, nationality and religion, and the role that was played in this sense by participation in education.

In tackling these questions, I have adopted a Bourdieusian lens of analysis as a way of 'unpacking' intersectionality among multiple dimensions of social identity. That is, by drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical framework and key concepts, I was able to investigate how participants' relative positionings in terms of class, 'race', ethnicity, gender, religion and so on, compared to those of others who engaged in the same field, interacted with one another to define their preferences, experiences, and self-understandings. Practice is broadly conceptualised by Bourdieu as being generated by the interplay among agents' classed dispositions (*habitus*), their relative stock of economic, social, and cultural capital, and the logics of the field where they are engaged in competition over valued resources. *Habitus* is built primarily through the incorporation of the conditionings entailed by early conditions of socialisation, and integrates subsequent experiences. A *habitus* which is more attuned to the field, and access to the 'right' capital, confer a competitive advantage over others. While Bourdieu's main research focus has been on instances of reproduction of class inequalities, I have argued that there is nothing inherently deterministic in his conceptualisation of practice, nor is its explanatory potential exclusively limited to structures centred on class. In particular, the possibility for *habitus* to be restructured as it finds itself in 'new' fields or objective conditions, and for changes in the field's logics and specific capital being valued, also allow to account for transformation.

The discussion conducted in Chapter 3 and throughout the empirical chapters has additionally shown how socialisation involves exposure to, and thereby the internalisation of, relations of power that are racialised and gendered as well as classed. Thus, *habitus*, cultural and social capital can be seen as also being shaped by these other dimensions of social identity. I have contended that the strength of Bourdieu's framework lies in its relational understanding of practice, where the emphasis is both on the differential stocks of capital possessed by agents and on the encounter between their *habitus* and the fields where they engage. This allows us to recognise individuals' respective locations within multiple dimensions of social identity as being attached, and conditioning access, to specific configurations of material and symbolic resources reflected in

interpersonal and institutionalised relations of power. With respect to my study, this has especially enabled light to be shed on: 1) what was distinctive (in terms of experience, perspective, and externally and self-attributed images of one's social identity) about being working-class as opposed to middle-class and vice-versa, Bangladeshi, female, and Muslim; 2) underlying processes, and how these were either constrained or enabled by specific relational configurations of resources within the field.

Analysis has drawn on qualitative data gathered through two rounds of semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation conducted with 21 undergraduate female students. The recruitment of participants from a range of institutions characterised by different status, socio-economic profiles of the student body, and academic expectations has turned out to be very fruitful in exploring the interplay between these aspects and interviewees' socio-economic background in shaping differential experiences. What I hadn't anticipated to be so important in obtaining a more accurate and nuanced picture, however, was interviewing students attending a variety of degrees. This has enabled me to appreciate the relevance of different subject 'subcultures' in informing 'choices', experiences and perceptions of 'fitting in', which represents an interesting area for further investigation. On the other hand, while the class composition of my sample reflected broader patterns, with Bangladeshi students being largely of working-class background and those of middle-class origins being mostly concentrated in top-ranking institutions, I realise in hindsight that involving more middle-class participants from a variety of universities would have afforded the opportunity for a more detailed exploration of what was specific to ethnicity in structuring experiences of higher education, and of how 'middle-classness' and ethnicity intersected in shaping social identification. Given the higher likelihood for students of Bangladeshi heritage to be of working-class origins, relying more on snowballing techniques whereby the middle-class students in my sample might have helped securing access to others from their same ethnic and class background, rather than mostly approaching potential participants directly, might have aided such recruitment.

In terms of methods that were used for the gathering of participants' views, carrying out two rounds of interviews allowed me to acquire much richer data than would have been possible with just one round. Firstly, I was able to ask less narrowly-defined and more exploratory questions during the first interview, and therefore to remain more open to the investigation of aspects I had not initially considered but which emerged as relevant from these young women's narratives, such as identification in terms of social class. Additionally, I could prompt more extensive elaborations or ask for clarification in relation to answers that had been previously given. Conducting two

interviews also meant that more time could be spent on gaining information about the background and history of migration of participants' parents, and on their siblings and broader family members, which proved essential not only to contextualising their answers but also to identifying important characteristics and processes shaping their experiences. Finally, this ensured that interviewees felt more comfortable when talking to me on the second occasion, 'opening up' and offering more detailed reflections.

The use of images to encourage thinking about, and to ground the discussion of, the meanings and significance that were respectively attributed to being Bangladeshi, British and Muslim, presented both advantages and challenges. In particular, by focusing on these three categories of social identity, I might have unwittingly led respondents to think about them as fixed, homogeneous and mutually exclusive 'wholes'. Furthermore, it was not immediately clear to all participants what kind of pictures and reflections I was looking for, with some of them asking for concrete examples. Yet, this focus and method turned out in fact to be conducive to very insightful discussions. As well as helping to stimulate the conversation and to learn more about their lives, having these young women take their own pictures, or to select them among those they already had, seems to have favoured in-depth and elaborate thinking about usually taken for granted aspects of one's identity. According to their own words, the very difficulty they experienced in identifying what it meant for them to be British, Bangladeshi and Muslim, was due to these multiple belonging and identity categories not generally being questioned. Giving respondents some time to consider these elements outside of the interview situation afforded therefore the necessary space for related sentiments to be brought into conscious perspective. The open-ended nature of the questions enabled moreover the articulation of complex, shifting and often conflicting feeling and views, thus allowing for processes informing identification and for the mutual inter-relations among these categories to be brought into light. In retrospect, while I would still have adopted this method and focus, I recognise that it would have been helpful to provide participants with a more detailed explanation of the task from the onset.

Of course, several of my characteristics as well as those of my participants, also entered into play in shaping the whole research process. The ways in which these appear to have informed interviewees' 'reaction' to me as a researcher and the responses that I was given, in particular, are complex and could not have been easily nor entirely anticipated. How our respective positionalities worked to either constrain or enable specific narratives to be produced especially challenges the assumption that an identity of gender, ethnicity, or class between interviewer and interviewees does necessarily lead to 'better' data and analysis as it allows for the emergence of 'shared

understandings'. Especially worth noting is, for example, how my identification as neither British nor of Bangladeshi origins might in fact have enabled certain views and discourses to be expressed. Considering the answers that were given, it is possible for this to have made interviewees feel more comfortable about disclosing mixed to downright negative views of Britons / 'Britishness' and of Bangladeshis / 'Bengaliness', and in voicing their concerns with the racism and Islamophobia existing in Britain. It might also have helped to redress some of the power imbalance inherent in the researcher – interviewee relation, as it made me more reliant on their explanations for contextual knowledge. In this sense, me being not much older than the women I interviewed, and the casual way in which I presented myself might have further contributed to them feeling more at ease and inclined to share potentially controversial perspectives.

Other aspects of our respective positionalities are however more troubling, as they bring in the relation between myself and participants power differentials reflective of hierarchies ingrained in society, with the consequent risk of these being reproduced and reinforced through the research process. In particular, this applies to me being of white, middle-class background and doing research 'on' young women of minority ethnic, mostly working-class origins. This is additionally compounded by these women belonging to what is often constructed in both policy and public discourse as a 'problem population', both because of its Muslim majority and because of the especially low rates of participation in education and the labour market. My use of the word 'on' underscores in this sense the need to acknowledge that as much as we like to think as critical scholars that we are doing research 'with' participants, the reality is that unless they are also involved at a more substantial level throughout the process it is us researchers who have most of the power in deciding what 'stories' to tell and how. One of the main dangers I incurred was therefore of potentially contributing to consolidating pathologising views of both South Asian women and of Muslims, which already circulate in dominant common-sense discourses, as well as interviewees' perception of being pathologised. To avoid this, I have paid particular attention throughout my analysis and in presenting findings to different audiences, to challenging stereotypical assumptions by emphasising the role that is played in shaping outlooks, experiences and identification by structural inequalities, and the variety and complexity of perspectives that these young women expressed.

Despite being careful not to perpetuate through my narrative stigmatising discourses, the feeling that I was appropriating their experiences for my benefit still came up while writing my thesis and articles for publication. As a white, middle-class PhD student, it is also thanks to my privileged position compared to that of participants that I could engage in this research, and it is by

drawing on their stories that I am somehow increasing my own privilege by achieving a PhD and acquiring capital in the academic field. Yet, as researchers with an interest in social justice, this problematic position is often inescapable. For me, the intent to avoid the ‘exploitation’ of participants as much as possible fed into the drive to make this study relevant for them, and involved ongoing questioning over what to do with my findings. It is often advocated by feminist researchers that one’s analysis should be shared with participants, as a way of both testing the validity of findings and of strengthening ethical practice. What I have decided to do, is to share my thesis with those I have interviewed so that they can engage with a work they gave fundamental input to and of which they are at the centre. I also intend to make some of the findings available to audiences beyond academia as well as to the women who took part in this study, in the hope to challenge dominant stereotypes and to stimulate dialogues to which research participants can contribute with their views. In this sense, while still working to expose the ways in which people’s differential experiences are affected by structural inequalities, it is important that we as researchers make sure that our voices and perspectives can add to those of disadvantaged ‘groups’ rather than coming to substitute them.

10.3. Contributions to knowledge

10.3.1. Theoretical contributions

Theoretically, this study demonstrates the usefulness of a Bourdieusian analytical approach in interpreting how multiple and intersecting dimensions of social identity (e.g. class, ‘race’, ethnicity, religious faith and gender) inform individuals’ experiences of higher education and social mobility. It also shows that this framework can help us to understand how individuals’ positioning and trajectory in terms of each of these dimensions contributes to qualify the meanings and value that they attach to other identity categories. For example, with respect to how middle-class status can influence the construction and presentation of ethnic identities, how minority ethnicity can affect one’s self-understanding in terms of social class, or how religious faith can shape gendered constructions and presentations of ‘the self’. As a particular instance of these processes, it is maintained that Bourdieu’s theoretical framework can especially aid the investigation of how individuals’ classed, racialised, ethnicised, religious and gendered identities are informed in turn by participation in the education and labour market fields.

In Chapters 3 and 5, I have pointed to the ways in which Bourdieu's relational method and conceptualisation of practice enables us to make sense of both social reproduction and transformation, as it pertains to material as well as symbolic structures of power and inequality. In this respect, I have indicated that:

- 1) Not only class but also other dimensions of social identity, such as ethnicity, 'race' and gender, can be conceptualised, in line with Bourdieu's framework, as 'lived social relations'. 'Group' and individual positionings and trajectories in terms of these dimensions produce dispositions (habitus), and give access to economic, social and cultural resources, which are valued hierarchically. These classed, ethnicised, racialised and gendered dispositions and resources derive their specific value (as forms of capital) from the structure and logics of the fields where agents engage.
- 2) Possibilities for the reproduction or transformation of both objective and internalised (classed, ethnicised, racialised and gendered) structures can be seen as emerging from particular configurations among agents' (classed, ethnicised, racialised and gendered) dispositions, the 'stock' of capital that they can access, and the structures and logics of different fields of engagement.

Given these analytical insights, I have argued for the value of this framework in exploring the intersectional experiences and identities of individuals who move across multiple fields of social relations.

My analysis of participants' aspirations, experiences and identities has illustrated the nuance, richness and complexity of the picture that ensues from such a Bourdieusian perspective. In particular, as it encourages us to pay attention to the dynamics (e.g. tensions, resistances, assertions and reflexivity) generated by multiple alignments and mis-alignments between individuals' (classed, ethnicised, racialised and gendered) dispositions and resources and those that are privileged in the various contexts where they are involved.

10.3.2. Empirical contributions

Empirically, this research contributes to current literature on minority ethnic students' experiences of higher education and social mobility. It does so by showing how these processes entail for young people movements across multiple and intersecting spaces (e.g. family, school, peer networks, higher education, the labour market, the 'ethnic community' and 'mainstream British society') where their dispositions and resources are differentially valued. This differential

value does not only derive from the classed character of these dispositions and capital, but also from the ways in which they are inflected by 'race', ethnicity, religious faith and gender, among other dimensions of identity.

With respect to the experiences and identities of British-born young women of Bangladeshi origins in higher education, in particular, this perspective has enabled us to shed light on a number of aspects.

Firstly, I have shown how ethnicity intersected with social class in shaping the attitudes that the women who took part in this study expressed towards higher education. In this respect, their aspirations were not only classed but also ethnicised, as they were supported through Bangladeshi diasporic discourses of value for education and social mobility. The compatibility of these dispositions with the dominant rhetoric of social mobility and value accorded to higher education appeared to favour these young women's take-up of university irrespective of their class origins.

I have also illustrated how class, ethnicity, religious faith and gender all intersected with one another in informing these women's career aspirations. This happened in two main ways. Firstly, as their positioning in these respects functioned to either enable or curtail access to specific capital that could be 'utilised' in the labour market field. For example, in terms of access to social networks which could aid the securement of work experience. Secondly, as it contributed to producing anticipations of certain employment areas and environments as 'for us' / 'not for us', which had to do with the expected 'fit' between one's classed, gendered, ethnicised, racialised and religious identities and dispositions and those that are valued in that field.

I have additionally drawn attention to the multiple and complex ways in which social class intersected with ethnicity to shape differential experiences of given institutional environments. Social class and ethnicity have been shown to produce differential perceptions of 'fitting in' as opposed to 'standing out' at given institutions, depending on how related dispositions and cultural capital are perceived and received by others. For working-class young women at elite institutions, in particular, class, ethnicity and religious faith all appeared to compound each other to convey a sense of 'standing out' compared to the majority of students. These cases of mis-alignment between students' dispositions and capitals and those that are privileged in the field of engagement, I have argued, can both generate tensions and feelings of insecurity, and open up possibilities for reflexivity.

This study has further illuminated some of the processes through which middle-class status and participation in education can contribute to shaping these women's ethnic identity construction and presentation, and the meanings and value that they attach to these identities. In particular, I have shown that for some participants in this study middle-class status favoured the assertion of 'confident' ethnic identities. Firstly, as it provided access to resources that could be invested in the development of such an identity. Secondly, as it made it possible for them to present to others a particular version of themselves as Bangladeshis. This version, in particular, was devoid of the stigma that is generally attached to this minority ethnic 'group' because of the working-class cultural markers that dominant stereotypes attribute to it. I have also argued that, for some interviewees, participation in higher education opened up possibilities for the 're-claiming' of ethnic identities. As they engaged intellectually and politically through courses of study and minority ethnic societies, for example, these young women acquired an increasing awareness of structural inequalities contributing to place their ethnicity in a subordinate material and symbolic position. This awareness, and engagement with other 'highly achieving' British-born young people of Bangladeshi heritage appeared to favour symbolic re-signification through exposure to new, and valued, conceptions of 'what it means to be Bangladeshi'.

Finally, this research has contributed to the understanding of the profound value that Islam has for these young women as a source of identity. I have maintained that this value derives from its capacity to offer interpretative tools and discourses through which these young women can construct and present coherent and valued images of 'the self'. In particular, as reference to Islam allows them to manage some of the tensions that they experience in relation to their positionings in terms of ethnicity, nationality and gender. In this respect, I have shown that while the discourses of what it means to 'be British / Bangladeshi' to which they are exposed can generate for these young women a sense of exclusion, discourses of 'being Muslim' allow instead for the assertion of multiple valued identities. Additionally, I argue that the symbolic value accorded to Islam among the Bangladeshi 'community' can enable for these young women a re-elaboration of gender norms and the advancement of agency, by providing a space for them to negotiate among competing expectations expressed by their families, communities and the broader society.

10.4. Implications for policy and practice

Since the turn of the century, young people's aspirations have taken centre stage in a broad range of policy initiatives aimed at bridging the 'achievement gap' among students from different

socio-economic backgrounds, ‘widening participation’ in higher education, and improving employment outcomes (DfES 2003; HEFCE 2010a; BIS 2014, 2015). Underlying these initiatives, which have been enacted by Labour, Coalition, and most recently Conservative governments alike, is the premise that raising the aspirations of students from ‘non-traditional backgrounds’ would eventually increase their access to university, which would then advance their career prospects. Despite the worthy intention of ensuring more equitable participation in the education and labour markets, this approach has arguably contributed to the establishment of pathologising views of working-class and minority ethnic students’ aspirations as being ‘too low’, ‘too narrow’, or ‘too high’ / ‘unrealistic’, and requiring therefore being ‘raised’, ‘stretched’ or directed towards ‘more realistic’ goals (Basit 1997, 2012; Crozier and Davies 2006; Gorard et al. 2006; Archer and Francis 2007; Hart 2013; Morrin 2015). In line with the indications provided by a number of reports (Halliday and Wymer 2011; Alexander and Arday 2015), recent policies acknowledge the need to go beyond a focus on ‘raising aspirations’, and state the intention to work towards ‘the provision of effective information, advice and guidance through schools and further education sectors and into and beyond higher education’ (BIS 2014, p. 10). Yet, in ascribing this to the purpose of allowing students ‘to make informed and appropriate choices’ they reveal how traditional conceptions of individual choice still tend to dominate frameworks for the understanding of education and job pathways.

The findings so far discussed challenge these understandings of ‘choice’ as substantially attaining to the domain of individual agency, and of working-class and minority ethnic young people’s aspirations as being in some way defective. Drawing on Bourdieu’s conceptual insights, they reveal instead the socially located character of education and employment aspirations and paths, highlighting in particular the inseparability of preferences and practices from unequal social structures. As such, they demonstrate the importance of adopting strategies that are relevant and meaningful to young people’s lived experiences, which always take place from specific structural and cultural positions, and point to possible ways for doing this. Promoting congruence and connection between people’s multiple social identities and varied institutional contexts, rather than demanding that they abandon these identities in order to ‘fit in’ and ‘succeed’, appears in this sense crucial in avoiding expectations of not ‘fitting in’ as well as in fostering psychological well-being and the development of a less conflicted self. Increasing working-class and minority ethnic young people’s awareness of the legacies of unequal social structures, without falling into hopeless determinism, might also help them to move away from ideas of individual failure and to appreciate better the successes that those ‘like them’ have achieved despite the odds. This seems even more

critical where we consider how the systematic encounter of more difficulties in education and the labour market can lead those who share a given background to see themselves as incapable of achieving within that field, and to dismiss it as 'not for them'. In this respect, we have seen that when structural and cultural processes at work in generating exclusion from certain social environments are not explicitly recognised, they can in fact be easily overlooked and internalised as a sense of self, generating in turn further practices of self-exclusion. Increasing the presence of people from a diversity of backgrounds at all levels of employment within work places, including universities, is therefore not only an end to itself, but also the means through which further opening can be brought about, by providing examples of 'people like us' and by taking on board the experiences and perspectives they make available. While these suggestions address some of the obstacles to greater inclusivity in education and employment, it is still important not to forget that young people's 'horizons for actions' are shaped by a multiplicity of factors, of which those mentioned here are only a part.

With the UK minority ethnic population in continuous growth, the cultural incorporation of immigrants' descendants has also come to assume increasing salience. The overarching policy framework has seen in this respect a substantial shift from the promotion of 'multiculturalism', as encompassing discourses and practices that favour the retention of minority ethnic 'cultural specificities', to a preoccupation with 'community cohesion' and a 'shared British identity' (Home Office 2001; Kundnani 2002; McGhee 2003). Policy initiatives such as the institution of a compulsory test on 'life in the UK' for immigrants intending to apply for citizenship or settlement (UK Parliament 2002) and the Communities secretary's recent proposal of introducing a mandatory oath to British values for all immigrants (The Guardian 2016) reveal an ongoing concern with ensuring the allegiance of individuals of minority ethnic origins to Britain. Religious faith, and especially Islam, has been gaining rising visibility since the late '90s as 'a major social signifier' in discourses about racialised minorities (Abbas 2004, p. 27), in the UK as well as in other 'Western' countries (Hoque 2015). The widespread identification of British residents of South Asian background as Muslims has been subject in both public and policy discourses to problematisation, as their 'lack of integration' tends to be framed in terms of 'cultural difference', of which Islamic faith is characterised as a fundamental marker, rather than of structural inequality. The latest review into 'opportunity and integration' commissioned by the government (Casey 2016) specifically focuses on the attitudes and practices of Muslims as a group, comparing and contrasting them with those of the whole population. This framing of the issue arguably contributes to consolidate a view of Islam as a

monolithic entity that is especially at risk of being at odds with 'liberal British values', and of hampering therefore possibilities for 'integration'.

Findings from this research importantly show, however, that neither minority ethnicity nor Islamic faith appear as such to inhibit identification with nationality. In this sense, they are in line with, and contribute to further qualify, multi-dimensional models of identification according to which minority ethnic people's sense of belonging with respect to different majority and minority 'groups' can vary independently of one another rather than being mutually exclusive (Nandi and Platt 2013, 2014; Platt 2014). In particular, they reveal how identification in terms of nationality is in fact undermined by institutional and interpersonal racism, as well as by widespread 'either / or' discourses of belonging where the norms, values and behaviours of minority ethnicities and religions are essentialised and constructed as antithetic to a 'British way of life'. As these discourses require those who belong to these 'groups' to distance themselves from valued ethnic and religious identities, they make identification with 'Britishness' fraught with emotional strain and thus more difficult. Starting from these reflections, it is suggested that a shared sense of national belonging might be better fostered by policies and practices aimed at combating discrimination against minority ethnicities and religions, and by the adoption of discourses underscoring, rather than problematising, the compatibility of identification in terms of ethnicity, religious faith and nationality.

Ethnic identity has been deemed fundamental to the definition of one's self-concept and well-being (Phinney 1990; Yip 2016). For individuals of minority ethnic origins, it has been noted that they often face dilemmas due to their 'group's' 'culture' and characteristics being essentialised and attributed low value within dominant constructions (Phinney 1990; Song 2001). The stories presented in this study further reveal how these stereotypes are substantially classed, and show how they can become internalized and shared by those within the 'group's' boundaries, with a considerable impact on self-understandings. These considerations point to the potential value, for minority ethnic individuals' well-being, of initiatives directed on the one hand at exposing the structural factors underlying individuals' and 'groups'' differential socio-economic positionings, and on the other at getting those within as well as outside the ethnic 'group' to engage with 'positive' interpretative repertoires of minority ethnicities and religions. Activities taking place on campuses such as involvement in minority ethnic university societies and critical race education can in this sense promote for students of minority ethnic background a re-evaluation of one's ethnic identity, and have therefore an empowering potential. Findings additionally indicate that the embedding of these objectives in educational and recreational activities provided

at a younger age, and their extension to those who do not belong to the ethnic 'group', could be especially effective in tackling stereotypes and in lessening the strains related with the development of the self.

10.5. Further research suggestions

Insights from this study point to a number of potentially fruitful avenues for further research. In terms of producing a better understanding of educational and employment inequalities, in particular, they indicate that the investigation of the ways in which racialised, classed and gendered habitus and social and cultural capital contribute to the definition of processes of inclusion in / exclusion from specific areas of study and employment is likely to be especially promising. Building on the research conducted, for example, while participants all affirmed the intention to have a career and referred to some possible options, findings from Chapters 6 and 7 show however that their classed, gendered and racialised positionings constrained in significant ways the social and cultural resources they could draw on in this endeavour. To more adequately explain employment pathways, it would therefore be useful to explore how these aspects concur to further defining their 'horizons for actions' and actual routes undertaken as they leave university and enter the labour market. Also interesting is in this respect research that is aimed at elucidating the gendered, classed and racialised character of various institutional and subject cultures, the factors that contribute to this, and the ways in which it functions to undermine / favour inclusivity of people from different 'groups' (see for e.g. De Witt et al. 2011, 2013; Archer et al. 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014). Studies of this type could focus for example on environments where people from a given background are under-represented, which seems all the more crucial given the relevance that examples of people 'like us' appeared to have in informing young people's expectations of what they themselves could do. Social capital is additionally known to be especially significant for employment outcomes. As findings from this study show that social networks and interactions among university students are substantially structured along the lines of 'race' / ethnicity and class, there is an ongoing need to understand how and the aspects that contribute to shaping these processes.

With respect to multiple social identities, the acknowledgement of their importance for both one's well-being and for their participation in education and employment calls for the examination of how images of how certain 'groups' 'are' and of what they 'do' are produced and circulate among both in- and out-'group members'. The discussion conducted in Chapter 8 has in this sense

drawn attention to primary and secondary school years as being critical in informing these perceptions, thus suggesting that further research should be directed at interrogating how related processes are differentially shaped for instance by socio-economic composition of the student body, curriculum, and teachers' expectations and practices. The theses advanced here on the interplay between social class and ethnic identification, and particularly the finding that social mobility achieved through participation in higher education could be linked to the 'reassertion and reinvention' of minority ethnic identity, have been given some support by recent research (Slootman 2014). To more credibly put to the test the relation between socio-economic integration and ethnic identification, however, such question should be posed at a larger scale, and involving generations that go beyond the second and third. Given the significance that available interpretative repertoires of one's ethnicity were found to have in shaping ethnic identities and identifications, factors informing the characteristics of these images, and differential access to them, assume in this respect particular interest as objects of study. More generally, further research seems needed, both qualitative and quantitative, which examines the connection between one's image of their ethnic 'group', self-identification, and well-being, as well as the ways in which social class affects these processes. The development and employment of a multi-dimensional concept of self-identification, which allows to discern its various aspects (e.g. involvement in co-ethnic networks, use of language, attachment to traditions, and ethnic regard), would be in this sense especially desirable.

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