
PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Ethnic identity and wellbeing in the lives of third-generation British Bangladeshi adults: Finding a ‘sense of belonging’

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated third generation Bangladeshi adults’ experiences of ethnic identity (EI) and sense of wellbeing. British citizens from racially minoritised backgrounds, such as British Bangladeshis, face numerous challenges related to cultural adjustment, discrimination, and exclusion that can impact wellbeing. Strong EI has been shown to increase psychological wellbeing in minority ethnic populations. Fifteen participants who identified as third-generation British Bangladeshi adults were engaged in semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences of EI and wellbeing. Thematic analysis of the data conceptualised three main themes, namely, ‘*Oh my God, I’m different*’: *Being made to feel like an outsider in Britain*; ‘*You’re a coconut*’: *Being made to feel like an outsider within the British Bangladeshi community*; and ‘*A proper sense of belonging*’ through ethnic identity. The findings point towards the role that EI can play in later generation immigrants’ sense of self and wellbeing. Implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS: British Bangladeshi; ethnic identity; culture; mental health and wellbeing; discrimination; Islamophobia

INTRODUCTION

The 2011 United Kingdom (UK) Census documented nearly half a million citizens of Bangladeshi origin living in the UK, with 50 percent living in London (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Bangladeshis were reported to have migrated to Britain from as early as the end of the 18th century, as seamen on merchant ships, encouraged to do so under the rule of the East India Trading Company and the British Empire. Ninety-five percent of the British Bangladeshi population originate from a region in the north-east of what is now Bangladesh, called Sylhet (Ullah & Eversley, 2010). The vast majority identify as Muslim, although there are also Christian, Hindu, and atheist Bangladeshis, among others. Given that the majority of settlers arrived during the 1960s and 1970s, the current adult population can be thought of as the 'third generation'.

In recent years, the British citizenship of immigrants and their British-born children has come under renewed threat. Specific government policies have contributed to a more hostile context for immigrants. The *Immigration Act*, passed by the UK parliament in 2014, has been criticised for creating two tiers of British citizenship: those who are unavoidably British through birth and heritage; and those who can be lawfully targeted for their non-British ancestry (Galey, 2019), reinforcing insecurity regarding British identity. Furthermore, the UK counter-terrorism strategy, titled Prevent (Home Office, 2018), which gives public sector organisations like schools and the National Health Service (NHS) a statutory duty to identify and stop radicalisation and terrorism, has been widely criticised and has left the British Muslim community feeling marginalised, targeted, stereotyped, and treated unfairly (Goodfellow, 2018).

Beyond these policy level developments, wider societal factors also impact on immigrant groups. In particular, within the UK context, 'integration' and 'acculturation' have been idealised as both socially and psychologically desirable and beneficial, providing the underlying assumption that responsibility for taking on the host culture lies solely with the migrant community, and removing 'responsibility for multicultural relations from wider, collectively driven, socio-political forces' (Bowskill et al., 2007, p. 795). Furthermore, a move towards far-right nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the UK, as in many Western countries, has intensified in recent years and at times become a particularly toxic discourse (Galey, 2019). A specific concern impacting the British Bangladeshi community is Islamophobia, given the connections between Bangladeshi and Islamic identities (Hoque, 2018). The monitoring group Tell MAMA (2017) reported a 26 percent year-on-year rise in the number of anti-Muslim attacks and incidents of abuse reported, with women disproportionately targeted. Williams (2017) described Black Muslim women as particularly vulnerable to a 'triple threat' due to intersections of being female, from an ethnic minority, and visibly Muslim. Research has continuously highlighted the serious negative effects of discrimination on wellbeing across generations and cultural groups (e.g., Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Cheng et al., 2015).

Therefore, developing ethnic minority populations, such as British Bangladeshis, are at risk from a complex, largely undocumented negotiation of identities and stressors related to cultural adjustment in Britain, which significantly impact these groups and can potentially impact wellbeing and lead to mental health concerns, both for new immigrants and later generations (e.g., Kulis et al., 2007; Ying & Han, 2007). A number of specific challenges have been identified in the literature. Firstly, these groups encounter challenges related to their ethnic identity in relation to acculturation and belonging (Hoque, 2018). Secondly, many Muslims in Britain regularly experience forms of discrimination, and Islamophobia in particular, which can have an impact on their psychological wellbeing (Jasperse et al., 2012) and self-esteem (Every & Perry, 2014); and can lead to depressive symptoms and negative affect (Nadal et al., 2014), and a damaging increased vigilance and anxiety (Rippy & Newman, 2006; Willen, 2007). Thirdly, despite potentially experiencing mental health challenges in relation to experiences of migration and adjustment, this population are reported to be underserved by current mental health services in the UK (Bowl, 2007).

Research has also identified that ethnic identity (EI) could mitigate and protect against some of these negative factors. EI refers to the extent to which an individual identifies with their cultural group (Phinney, 2000), incorporating 'race', histories of migration, and cultural practices. The term 'ethnic' has evolved from purely biological and genetic characteristics to more socially constructed meanings (Helms & Talleyrand, 1997), which include aspects such as shared language, national origin, heritage, and a sense of belonging (Singh, 1977; Ting-Toomey, 1981). Phinney (1992) argues that EI is a personal and relational experience that can grow and fluctuate in response to contextual factors.

Numerous research studies, predominantly based within the United States, have repeatedly pointed to a positive association between high EI and positive wellbeing across ethnic groups, including positive psychological and socio-cultural adjustment, (e.g., Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2013; Smith & Silva, 2011; Umaña-Taylor, 2011), the development of positive self-perceptions (French et al., 2006), and increased self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor, 2004). Furthermore, a growing body of research has demonstrated that strong EI can be a buffer against the negative effects of racism and discrimination (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). One explanation for this might be that a positive shared social identity can provide a sense of belonging and social support, in line with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), which holds that individuals' self-concepts are enhanced through group membership.

However, some studies have pointed to the potential negative effects of increased EI and discussed its double-edged implications. It has been argued that the development of EI can be distressing and unsettling, especially for immigrant children, because ethnic, religious, and national identities often result in conflicting values and behaviours (Birman, 1998). EI has been shown to also increase vulnerability to discrimination as people may become more sensitive to threats to their aligned groups (Greene et al., 2006). A meta-analysis investigating the impact of EI, discrimination, and impact on wellbeing demonstrated both the advantages

and disadvantages of EI (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). These diverse findings may be related to the differences in study design and participant groups between studies (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, measures, and social context). A limitation of this body of research was that researchers often used narrow definitions of EI (e.g., choice of clothing or ethnicity of friends) and of wellbeing (often referring to specific mental health diagnoses only).

A challenge for considering the literature on EI in relation to the British Bangladeshi population in particular is that this community have traditionally been grouped together with others in categories such as 'Asian', and more recently 'South Asian', within research studies. This is problematic, as there is significant religious, cultural, and other diversity within those described as 'Asian'/'South Asian'. At the time of our research, we found only seven studies that explicitly investigated the experiences of EI in relation to the British Bangladeshi population (Bhui et al., 2008; Eade, 1994; Franceschelli & O'Brien, 2015; Hoque, 2018; Kibria, 2008; Martin, 2010; Mand, 2010). The only study focusing on third-generation British Bangladeshi people was a qualitative study investigating the experiences of adolescents (Hoque, 2018) and no existing research was found relating to third-generation British Bangladeshis who were in their adulthood.

This small body of research highlighted the various ways in which individuals developed and maintained their Bangladeshi identity and the impact this potentially had on their wellbeing. For example, Eade (1994) described the British Bangladeshi population as continuously 'heart-searching' (p. 390), as they search for belonging within the British, Bangladeshi, and Islamic communities. Furthermore, the ways in which individuals from the British Bangladeshi population attempted to live in line with both their Bangladeshi, British, and Islamic identities, and the challenges this could pose to their wellbeing, was highlighted. There was also consensus across the studies that the British Bangladeshi population experience discrimination and marginalisation. In contrast, investing in strengthening an Islamic identity, mostly by later generations, was described as potentially facilitating a sense of belonging and acceptance (Franceschelli & O'Brien, 2015; Hoque, 2018).

METHOD

This study aimed to answer the following two main research questions, namely, how does a group of third-generation British Bangladeshis experience EI and how do they experience this to relate to their wellbeing? Ethical approval for the study was obtained from University of Hertfordshire Ethics Committee (aLMS/PGR/UH/03444(1)).

Prior to recruitment, research materials and the interview schedule were developed through consideration of the literature, followed by five pilot interviews (not included in the data), with each interviewee engaged in a reflective consultation about the study, design, materials, and interview questions and processes. Adjustments were made and debrief

materials were developed as the consultants highlighted the potential challenges of discussing racism and micro-aggressions.

Recruitment was through community connections of the first author with the London Bangladeshi community and through snowball sampling. Inclusion and exclusion criteria included that participants needed to: be 18 years or older; be born in the UK with at least one parent born in the UK or who came to the UK during childhood; have a family heritage from Bangladesh on both sides of the family; and identify as Sylheti British Bangladeshi. Participants were not included if they were experiencing significant mental health concerns at the time of recruitment. Fifteen participants, seven men and eight women, were recruited. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 (mean = 24). All participants were either currently in higher education or educated to university level, with four having completed postgraduate studies. Professions included one teaching assistant, two teachers, two retail workers, two university students, three lawyers, a business owner, and two civil servants. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out, either face-to-face at a community centre in Central London or over the telephone, based on participant choice. The interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. Interview questions included: 'What do you remember from being a child that you wouldn't have had if you weren't Bangladeshi?'; 'Which part of yourself if any would you say is Bangladeshi?'; 'What part of yourself is not Bangladeshi if any, or is something else?'; 'Do you remember any moments when you felt like you were different or treated differently because of your heritage?'; 'What helps you to feel good about yourself or is good for your wellbeing?'

Thematic analysis (TA) was employed to analyse the data following the six stages of analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding was mainly completed by the first author, while other authors either independently coded a section of the data, or reviewed identified themes. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) was used as a quality framework for the study.

Throughout all stages of the research, it has been important for the research team to adopt a reflexive researcher position. The team consisted of British Bangladeshi, white British, and white immigrant researchers, with the primary researcher identifying as a Muslim British Bangladeshi woman. Sharing a racial identity with the study participants and showing racial awareness with participants has been shown to be potentially helpful and valuable in research (Vass, 2017). It has been suggested that 'coded' (Kanuha, 2000) communication can be enhanced due to the 'feelings of empathy and emotions which insiders share from knowing their subjects on a deep, subtle level' (Hayano, 1979, p. 101), helping to create a trusting relationship with the participants where their stories can be met with respect, validation, and understanding (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Bringing together insider and outsider researcher perspectives in reflective conversations supported the identification of biases, assumptions,

contradictions, and complexities. The primary researcher also made use of a reflective research diary.

RESULTS

Three main themes were constructed from the data. The first theme—*'Oh my God, I'm different': Being made to feel like an outsider in Britain*—described participant experiences of feeling alienated from and rejected by the dominant British culture into which they were born. The second theme—*'You're a coconut': Being made to feel like an outsider within the British Bangladeshi community*—described an experience of a lack of acceptance and belonging within their ethno-cultural communities. The third theme—*'A proper sense of belonging' through ethnic identity*—described how EI was formed for participants through connections with family and peers, and through learning about their cultural and religious heritage. These themes will now be discussed in more detail.

Theme 1: 'Oh my God, I'm different': Being made to feel like an outsider in Britain

Within this theme, nearly all participants described their experiences of feeling like an outsider while navigating public and professional spaces. For example, Haroon reported:

The first question they ask is, 'Where are you from?' And I'd say, 'I'm from London.' And then you can see them looking at you, like you haven't answered the question, it's not enough.

This started early in their lives, with a common experience reported by participants about their childhood being a sense of 'shame', 'embarrassment', and judgement about the Bangladeshi culture, which led to a strategy where 'you're one person at home and you're one person at school' (Bilal).

Furthermore, most participants, especially women observing hijab, provided vivid descriptions of experiences of overt racist abuse in public places. Although these experiences appeared common amongst participants, this did not seem to lessen the impact on participants' emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging. For example, Kolpona described an experience of asking for directions in Central London:

I asked about eight people in the space of an hour and four people shooed me physically with their hands... and two people racially abused me... called me effing terrorist... And that was the first time in ages, I was like, 'Oh my god, I'm different'... and it was just like a massive knock...

Whilst talking through an experience of being racially abused by a member of the public, Zahreen also highlighted the lack of response from others, and this seemed to add to her sense of isolation in this public place:

I was on a train... then this white man came, sat next to me... and then he was like, 'Oh, you should be ashamed of yourself, you're disgusting, you need to go hell...' Everyone was staring, no one on the train said anything. They were letting this man just abuse me.

At other times, being defined as different was more subtle, through assumptions, omissions, or misrepresentations. The overt stereotypes and assumptions seen in public discourse appeared in descriptions of professional environments. Roxana discussed her experience of having her religious beliefs addressed and linked to terrorism during a job interview:

So, for example, did an internship for two weeks, the partners loved me, they sent messages to HR, everything. And then when it came to my interview, they asked me questions like, 'So what do you think the issue with terrorism is? Do you think racism still exists? What's the solution to terrorism?'... I think it's very much because they saw me with a hijab, and they wanted to see if I'd be offended.

Some participants reported that they had withdrawn from spaces and activities because of discomfort. A sense of heightened consciousness and a lack of playfulness was experienced when they did choose to take part. Participants felt that these experiences impacted their sense of identity and belonging and had emotional consequences, leaving them feeling unwanted, homeless, and rootless.

Aayana: I actually had conversation with [a friend] the other day, like if anything happens and we get kicked out this country, where am I going to actually go? I need to make sure I have enough money to buy a villa in Spain or something [laughs].

Participants discussed times when they had responded to such experiences by 'pretending to be something I wasn't' (Kadeer) and discussed some of the emotional consequences of using this as a strategy. Many participants discussed experiences of pretending or performing as a survival strategy whilst navigating predominantly white spaces. This appears to be triggered by their beliefs about the negative societal narrative around being brown and lead to constant vigilance.

Salman: When I'm moving around white people, 100% I give the pressure a lot to myself too... So, I sort of feel like I have to give the right impression sometimes.

Kadeer: I am an outsider... I am brown. But I have to pretend to be white as much as I can... It was me pretending I'm white in order to get myself ahead. And I didn't realise how bad it was to do that... I spent a lot of time thinking about a lot of things in terms of trying to prove myself.

Some reported emotional struggles in response to these experiences. Kolpona talked about the anxiety of always watching one's behaviour and feeling worried about how being herself would be perceived:

I think, it felt a little bit like having some kind of split personality, where, at home, I can be relaxed and can completely be myself. But there are times, where I feel bit embarrassed ... Then being outside of the house just generally, it was just exhausting, pretending to be something

that I wasn't actually. Like, just constantly feeling alienated or probably even anxious being caught out, if I slipped up at all in try to keep up this façade.

Many participants discussed negative consequences of seeking approval from white people.

Haroon: Yeah, when you think of other people's approval (all) the time, so you never really truly going to be happy, never going to be confident with yourself, unless you accept yourself as a whole.

Some participants reported that they had considered accessing mental health services, but felt that clinicians' views may be unfairly shaped by stereotypes associated with the Bangladeshi and Muslim cultures, and were therefore deterred. Three participants did access mental health services, and all described having negative experiences. Clinicians having limited knowledge of the Bangladeshi culture appeared to be a significant barrier. For example, Kolpona shared her experience as a Muslim British Bangladeshi woman during an assessment with a white male psychiatrist. She appeared to refer to government policies such as the 'Prevent' initiative, stating:

He kept telling me to speak quite freely... I was sharing some of the things for the first time in like four years. And I was finding it very difficult to articulate and catch my breath because I was crying... I don't know if what I'm going to tell you is going to be used against me. I don't know if you're going to refer me on to some kind of counter-terrorism program... and to not share what's happened to me in fear of you referring me and me ending up in prison or worse... I'm suffering and I have been suffering for many, many years, but I suffered in silence...

All the participants who accessed support described feelings of rejection and perceived misunderstandings from the therapists that they had been working with over a period of time.

Madeeha: ...she was trying to reject some of the things that I was saying and was quite resistant to accept my reading of my experience, instead she was trying to call it something else, for example I would call it 'racism', and she would call it 'bullying'.

To summarise, within this theme many participants described their experiences of being positioned as different, including overt and covert racist abuse, unfair treatment, lack of access to opportunities and services, and lack of representation in both public and professional settings. This was felt to contribute to making them feel like an outsider in Britain. Many participants seemed to feel that they were being understood through the lens of problematic societal narratives that were associated with being non-white and Muslim, leading to increased vigilance and distress in social spaces. Although participants seemed to identify Britain as home, there was also an apparent feeling of being isolated, unwanted by Britain, and fearful of seeking professional help for mental health difficulties.

Theme 2: 'You're a coconut': Being made to feel like an outsider within the British Bangladeshi community

Within this theme, for many participants, there was a discussion about moments when it had felt difficult to find a sense of belonging within the British Bangladeshi community.

Madeeha: You're supposed to fit in, and these are like your people... But then the same for like when I hung out with family, I was the coconut, the too-white kid... I was seen as not as connected to brown... I was seen as the outsider... It is not nice; it is like you have less of a right to that heritage. You have less of a claim to it...

A term that many participants often came into contact with was 'coconut', which implied they looked Bangladeshi, but thought and behaved like their white counterparts.

Kolpona: The first thing I accomplished was being able to somewhat reduce the frequency of being called a coconut [laughs] which is what I've been called since I was back in primary school by my Bengali friends. They'd be like, 'You don't know Bangla, you're a coconut'.

Many participants described the challenges of moving between British Bangladeshi and majority white spaces.

Salman: I'm the only one [out of British Bangladeshi friends] that went to college and university, and I'm sort of the only one that's working like in a professional environment... my friends call me a white bird, because they think I speak so posh...

Some participants identified a specific inter-generational challenge, where the difficulties encountered during their day-to-day lives did not seem to be understood by the older generation: 'you try to explain and [they] can't relate' (Kolpona).

Whilst negotiating their multiple identities (the British, the Bangladeshi, and the Muslim), many participants described a sense of judgement from members of their community when engaging with perceived non-Muslim practices.

Roxana: [British Bangladeshi friends would say] 'Why would you do that? Why are you doing Christmas presents?'... like it's really difficult. I think we [the British Bangladeshi community... can be] very toxic as well. I've seen it, like I've had to cut people out of my life because they're just being so judgmental about what I'm doing.

Many participants described being made to feel like an outsider within the Bangladeshi community through conflicts between Bangladeshi and Islamic values and practices, especially where they felt more aligned with Islam.

Jasmin: In our culture, we [are] encouraged to marry a Bengali guy, but I wouldn't go for that, so I would say actually no, there's a massive spectrum of Muslims, we should be accepting anyone and everyone...

Fear of judgement or misunderstanding was sometimes linked to feelings of anxiety when meeting or communicating with members of the British Bangladeshi community.

Noor: They're [members of an online British Bangladeshi groups] level 10, they're level 20 and I'm level zero point one, level one [laughs]... I feel anxious fitting in with them, same way I feel anxious fitting in with the English people after work going to a pub.

Other challenges identified by a few participants include colourism, discriminating by skin-tone:

Haroon: I'm quite dark compared to other people I'd say and I was made to feel that I wasn't as attractive or desirable because of it...

Because of the judgement from within the British Bangladeshi community, some participants who had not previously accessed mental health services reported that they would prefer to be seen by someone outside of the Bangladeshi community. A common rationale appeared to be due to experiencing judgement:

Haroon: I think it's more difficult to talk to someone who's Bangladeshi. I feel like people judge within the culture more. So, it's easier to talk to strangers about your problems sometimes, like a therapist or someone. And the further away they are from you, the easier it would be.

In summary, in this theme many participants described their difficult experiences whilst trying to fit in with other British Bangladeshis. Some reflected on being stigmatised within the community for not being 'Bangladeshi enough'. Participants described experiences of racism within the community, usually from older generations, particularly in relation to colourism. Often, aligning with Islamic knowledge was used to create new norms and challenge the Bangladeshi cultural status quo. Prioritising Islamic values over Bangladeshi values appears to have been an important decision for many of the participants.

Theme 3: 'A proper sense of belonging' through ethnic identity

This theme captures participants' evolving sense of EI, reported as constantly moving and changing in response to many factors, and the connection many participants described between this and fostering a sense of belonging. This appears to be a way of responding to the many challenges (though not all) raised in the previous two themes. Participants described what seems to be a developmental experience where a desire to invest in the Bangladeshi identity seemed to be formed over time through experiences and milestones such as age, early education, university, marriage, family gatherings, and experiences of racism.

An understanding of Bangladeshi and Islamic heritages seemed to be a strategy for managing and challenging feelings of discrimination and negative stereotyping associated with the British Bangladeshi identity.

Madeeha: ...learning gave me the importance to like un-reject my culture and re-learn and reconnect with my family. Be more open to spending more time with people who look like me. And yeah, I might have felt rejected by them, but actually there is a lot I learnt from them...

The more they described feeling as though they must respond to dominant narratives, the more participants seemed to draw on their EI. This, in turn, appeared to improve their level of confidence when questioned about their culture.

Haroon: Like, the Western culture always sees themselves as the moral arbiter of everything... the scientific developments also say that eating with your hand is better for your immune system... But, before that, I had no argument for it, but they would say, 'Oh, you eat with your hands? Oh, that's disgusting'. And I would try to make excuses, or I wouldn't mention it, or I would shy away from it... it's made me more confident about who I am.

When it came to learning about the history of Bangladesh and Bangladeshi migration, many participants appeared to experience an extra layer of commitment towards their Bangladeshi identity through engagement, discussion, and a reconnection to their Bangladeshi culture.

Ebrahim: My paternal granddad came here, he was one of the first working in the factories and stuff like, rebuilding Britain. And my granddad was directly involved in building Bangladesh... So, I've got two histories right there and stories to tell to my grandkids... I come from a lot of history, that's why history, like knowing my roots... played a huge part in grasping my identity.

Some participants talked about drawing on the stories of their ancestors when they are experiencing difficulties too.

Chadiya: So, being able to persevere through a genocide, I still can't imagine, I don't think I'll ever be able to imagine, how that must have felt like, must have been much worse than any horrible situations that I've been put in. So, just having that constant reminder that, 'Oh, my ancestors have gone through a genocide and what am I doing here', is like sulking about something that's much smaller than genocide. I guess that would encourage me and motivate me to actually persevere through those struggles.

For some participants, the desire to invest in Islam could be viewed as an act of resistance against the societal perspectives Muslim women and communities are faced with. In understanding the value of her Islamic practice, it appeared that Madeeha had come to be empowered in her responses to Islamophobia. She affirmed its beauty and appeared confident in it despite negative stereotypes about the religion.

Madeeha: I think in white feminism, displaying as much flesh as possible... is one way of being liberated. My mum found liberation in the way that she chooses how to dress (observing hijab) that is an act of resistance and act of holding on. And that is what a lot of women have done, they have re-fashioned modern attire into these modest outfits, and they made it so beautiful. That is an act of resistance, that is an act of feminism, and that came from my own culture...

Many described finding role models that helped them imagine how to balance oneself between the West and the Bangladeshi culture. Online forums and social media also played a large role in building this cultural awareness and forming a community of British Bangladeshis.

Noor: Wow-we, you're like me, but you have so much love for it now. Like, you're already reading these history books... So, I'm just drawing off them.

In response to feeling like an outsider in public and professional spaces, participants reported that this generation of British Bangladeshi communities created and accessed learning spaces at universities and through social media groups. The majority of participants then discussed experimentation with identity at university, which has helped them to establish long-term commitments towards their EI:

Bilal: It just felt like a proper sense of belonging, where I didn't feel like I was kind of trying to lie to myself or trying to get myself to be someone that I wasn't. It was the first time I was in a friend circle and I was like, oh, I can just be me, they're all like me I think, they're British South Asians, so am I.

Many participants discussed the ways in which their families had attempted to preserve cultural practices through the generations, which made it easier for them to access skills such as the Bangla language. Most participants also described their sense of pride and commitment to speaking in Bangla and many mentioned its historic significance and described how it enabled them to build meaningful relationships with older generations:

Roxana: Everyone fought for language... I really want to preserve that.

Attachments to the language and culture drew together points of reference from childhood, adolescence, and the turn to adulthood while at social events, which appeared at times to sustain a sense of comfort and familiarity in constancy.

Kolpona: I come across things that like loads of... phrases, that in Bangla, I think of in like certain situations. That kind of gives me comfort, because they're so funny, that, I don't think could be translated to any other language.

While participants described increased engagement with their Bangladeshi identity as a way to help them feel more able to respond to experiences of being made to feel like an outsider in Britain, as well as within the British Bangladeshi community, a few participants talked about the potential negative emotional consequence of identifying with the Bangladeshi identity, especially when faced with discrimination.

Bilal: Where you are around non-Bangladeshis and British friends and stuff like that and they're making fun of you for a particular stereotype... you make more jokes about your particular territory or group of people to try and integrate... But now, it's like if someone makes fun of my culture... I take offence to it.

For some, the period of transition and exploration of EI was associated with emotional distress at this time of their life.

Kadeer: At University, I was depressed. I had depression for a few years. And it's still about, like it was because you just have to think about who you are as a person constantly and just sort of break down a sense of self

However, once participants eventually built up a sense of confidence about sharing parts of their Bangladeshi culture in outside spaces, many reported feeling empowered. A few participants acknowledged the journey towards safety in environments that previously appeared threatening. Having a strong sense of identity that came from exposure and experimentation appeared to have strengthened many participants' levels of confidence whilst navigating spaces in which they are a minority.

Kolpona: I feel a lot more comfortable outside of my bubble as well.

To summarise, in this theme movement towards a Bangladeshi EI seems to have been triggered by a number of factors, including maturing and moving to university, and for some in direct response to being made to feel like an outsider, as well as being seen as a 'coconut' from within the Bangladeshi community. For many, this strengthening EI was reported to foster a stronger sense of self and confidence in cultural practices. Exposure to the Bangladeshi heritage, through family and the wider community appeared to be inspiring for many participants, who stated that they gained a sense of pride and passion. While a positive development for almost all participants, one participant discussed how identifying with their EI could also be detrimental, since it makes one more aware of negative societal discourses. Research into the cultures and histories of Bangladesh and Islam was an avenue of resistance for some participants against stereotypes, biases, and assumptions in wider society, and many seemed to gain confidence in finding reasons to be proud of their Bangladeshi and Muslim communities. Although issues such as colourism, racism, and religious judgement still existed in participants' lives, they reported that a movement towards EI has supported them to create a stronger sense of self and connection to others when navigating these issues. Relationships to EI consistently seem to evolve depending on contextual circumstances.

DISCUSSION

This study has highlighted that third generation British Bangladeshis face ongoing negative societal constructions of people seen as Muslim and/or South Asian. Most participants in the study reported that expressing one's EI could lead to negative and often oppressive consequences, leaving participants with a sense of not being wanted. In line with previous research, the Muslim British Bangladeshi background also appeared to increase the likelihood of being a target of Islamophobia and hate crimes, both in public and professional spaces in the UK (Abbas, 2009; Franceschelli & O'Brien, 2015; Hoque, 2018), with more overt

experiences of hate crime coming from women who wear hijab (Reynolds & Birdwell, 2015). Many participants described experiences of a pressure to demonstrate whiteness and more assimilative behaviours in professional settings as a strategy to excel professionally and avoid further discrimination. As suggested by Berry (2006), experiences of racism and discrimination appear to have led participants to experience difficulties in developing a secure sense of identity.

Participants in this study also disclosed the negative impact that ‘pretending to be white’ had on their levels of confidence and how they viewed themselves. This appears to be in line with previous evidence demonstrating that despite a correlation between assimilation and positive life satisfaction, assimilation and marginalisation also appeared to be negatively correlated with mental health and wellbeing (Berry & Hou, 2016). As a result of these experiences, British Bangladeshi people may experience ‘damaging increased vigilance’ as described by Rippy and Newman (2006), and become wary of expressing their EI, potentially leading to anxieties about openness in public and professional spaces. Previous evidence has suggested that identifying more with the dominant culture can increase economic gains, while separation and marginalisation appear to decrease earnings (Drydakis, 2012).

A third of participants also described instances of being viewed within the British Bangladeshi community as being too aligned with the British national identity as ‘a coconut’, implying one has brown skin on the outside with culturally white values and behaviours inside. Participants described this as an alienating experience that acts as a barrier from within even their own generation when trying to connect to their EI. Adopting whiteness has at times been seen as undesirable within the Bangladeshi community in the UK and creates a division between individuals and their other British Bangladeshi counterparts. This finding brings new perspectives to our understanding of third-generation British Bangladeshi people.

Another important finding was that a number of participants had wished to access mental health services, but were deterred by fears that negative societal stereotypes associated with the Bangladeshi and Islamic culture would influence their care. Furthermore, the three participants who had accessed mental health services all described negative experiences, where practitioners failed to understand the unique cultural nuances that contribute to mental health difficulties.

Belonging through developing EI

Relationship to EI was reported as being strengthened over time through an exposure within different contexts. In line with Phinney’s model of EI development (1992), participants appeared to go through a process of exploration before committing to their EI. During childhood and into early adulthood, participants described attempting to fit in and belong by pretending to adopt the dominant white culture. However, many participants described that

at later stages of development, they were exposed to safer spaces in which they willingly moved to a place of wishing to embrace their EI.

A number of contexts appeared to also facilitate the development of a stronger EI over time for participants. Families played a significant role in the formation of a number of participants' EI. For many participants, stepping into culture-specific spaces (e.g., British South Asian, Muslim) helped them make sense of their experiences living as British Bangladeshis, and empowered them to get a better sense of themselves. Online movements in forums and on social media also appeared to give participants a safe entry into their heritage. British Bangladeshi spaces at university were also important to some.

Developing a Bangladeshi identity appeared to foster a sense of belonging for many participants in educational and professional settings. In contrast to the discomfort during adoptions of white culture, the Bangladeshi identity appeared to help some individuals experience more authentic versions of themselves. Many described a sense of pride in the significance of their history and language, and the connection to Islam and Bangladeshi identity further provided a source of strength for them.

Although individual experiences differed, a sense of safety appeared to arise in community spaces of shared EI. Experiences of racism also triggered a need for participants to connect to their EI, seeking a greater sense of safety within their communities. Moreover, the stronger sense of EI through connecting with others helped them engage better with the outside community. Having a strong sense of community then helped them feel more comfortable while negotiating public and professional spaces.

The findings of this study appear to be in line with strong existing evidence suggesting that EI can be helpful for wellbeing (Smith & Silva, 2011). In this instance, it has been described as positively impacting confidence, and relationships. However, through an intersectional lens, some unresolved issues remain which may impact negatively on some individuals more than others and relate to participants stating they felt judged negatively within their Bangladeshi community, for instance, due to gender, racism, colourism, or matters of prioritisation between Bangladeshi and Islamic identities. The situational dynamism in these negotiations of layered identities evidenced participants' fluid relationships with EI, while suggesting that strengthened EI provided greater safety than assimilation into whiteness had done.

IMPLICATIONS

This study does not imply that a solution to discrimination and racism is to equip those on the receiving end of abuse with strategies to manage societal subjugation and oppression. Responsibility should lie with those who discriminate, both personally and institutionally. Our roles as clinicians and researchers should be used to strive to eliminate systemic

discrimination and racism in all its forms, since we are equipped with the skills and power to advocate for the rights of the people that we serve (Reynolds, 2011). Nevertheless, the current research points towards the potentially protective role of EI, which for this generation of British Bangladeshis appears to be a combination of Islamic and Bangladeshi heritage. This research supports the notion that a stronger relationship to EI in later generation immigrants' sense of self and wellbeing can protect them in the process of navigating complex identity construction and dealing with racism, discrimination, and marginalisation.

This study has highlighted how experiences during childhood and adolescence can be extremely influential. Clinicians, educators, and researchers could advocate for an educational model that honours and seeks to understand and value the narratives and everyday social worlds of ethnic minority pupils. Weaving this complex negotiation of identities into the curriculum can make learning relevant, rewarding, and more meaningful (Hoque, 2018). Niche groups (e.g., British Bangladeshi, Muslim, and South Asian performing arts and literature groups) within university spaces and social media appeared to play a pivotal role in helping participants to connect with their heritage and to others. We believe that more can be done to work alongside such community groups, to develop and promote these spaces through mainstream educational and wellbeing services.

As reported by participants in this study, British Bangladeshi and Muslim people are at risk of experiences of hate crimes and other forms of discrimination. Addressing this should be a priority. One example of how this has been tackled is from Australia, where the Bystander Project (Dulwich Centre, 2019) has been developed. The local community decided to take action by starting a project that equips bystanders with the tools to respond in hostile situations. This kind of approach can be both therapeutic for those being targeted whilst also creating more community cohesion and addressing Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination.

The current research also points towards the central role that EI potentially has in later generation immigrants' sense of self and wellbeing. Despite this, EI does not seem to be regularly considered within the therapy context. Williams (2018) encourages using EI models to help create more conversations with clients about their multiple identities, some of which may feel dominant and others that may not be as developed, as this can create pathways for more helpful conversations with clients. Therapists would be able to use these models to help them gain more of an understanding of how clients may be experiencing their EI.

When looking particularly at therapeutic interventions related to working alongside marginalised communities, one approach that has a limited but growing evidence-base is narrative therapy (Monk et al., 1997). For example, in East London, clinicians worked alongside the Imams at a local Muslim Centre (in a predominately British Bangladeshi area), working in partnership with Black and minority ethnic voluntary sector groups to shape psychological interventions to the 'needs and strengths of communities' (Byrne et al., 2017,

p. 396). This approach was seen as more holistic and ‘acceptable and relevant to community members’ (p. 396), as it took into account a breadth of identities both communal and personal, including ethnicity and faith among other threads of belonging.

Similarly, the Tree of Life narrative practice has been adapted for a group of young Muslim women living in Australia. The approach allowed them to uncover the survival skills that the young women drew on to resist encounters of daily struggles. In their project, ‘We try not to take people’s hate into our hearts’, young women from the Muslim Women Association of South Australia and members of the Afgan youth of South Australia utilised narrative collective documentation as a way to try to not ‘take people’s hate into (their) hearts’ when ‘dealing with weird experiences like being stared at, being yelled at by random strangers driving by in their cars, or other strange stuff that happens here and other places’ (Muslim Women’s Association of South Australia, & Afgan Youth of South Australia, 2019, para. 1). They also created a video designed to raise awareness and influence bystander action projects to address Islamophobia.

It may also be useful for therapists to reflect on their own relationship with their EI. Williams (2018) discussed how a therapist from an ethnic minority group may be in an early stage of racial identity development and therefore experience hostility towards a client of the same racial background, which can create distancing and difficulties within the therapeutic relationship. Similarly, she suggested that a therapist from the dominant background, who is also in an early stage of EI development, is at risk of being defensive or upset when exposed to racially charged material from ethnic minority clients. Williams encourages using EI models to help create more conversations with clients about their multiple identities, some of which may feel dominant and others that may not be as developed, as this can create pathways for more helpful conversations with clients.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One limitation of the study relates to the demographic of participants. The study focused on the British Sylheti Bangladeshi population and the experiences of the wider Bangladeshi population might be different. Similarly, the London environment is very specific and experiences from Bangladeshi people living elsewhere in Britain might be different. Notably, all participants were educated to a tertiary level. While these participants potentially share many experiences with the wider community, the impact of education and social class on their experiences should not be underestimated. Disengaged, disaffected, or unemployed Bangladeshi adults’ voices are not captured in this study and could potentially include some notable differences. This would be an important area for future research, where a more foundationally intersectional approach could further detail the nuanced experiences of this growing community.

CONCLUSION

While this was a small exploratory study and findings cannot be generalised, it brings new richness to our understanding of the experiences of third-generation British Bangladeshi adults (including women, whose voices are often absent from research) and explored important issues such as Islamophobia and the climate of 'Prevent'. The study contributes to the growing literature about the effects of racism, discrimination, and exclusion on identity, mental health, and wellbeing.

The Muslim British Bangladeshi population are at risk of acculturative stressors as their families adapt to living in Britain. A strong sense of EI has the potential to foster a sense of identity and belonging that can counter some of the challenging experiences reported in this study. However, these findings should be approached with care as some research suggests the opposite effect, namely, that high levels of EI may potentially increase vulnerability to distress when faced with discrimination, especially when considering populations that face intersectional disadvantages. The findings from this study can usefully be considered within education, mental health services, and by Muslim British Bangladeshi community leaders.

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