

Reflections of young British-Pakistani men from Bradford

Muslims are the largest single religious minority in the UK. UK Muslims are the object of analysis and concern within various policy arenas and popular debates, including immigration, marriage and partner selection, social cohesion and integration. This study, by Yunis Alam and Charles Husband, gathered insights, experiences and narratives from 25 men aged 16-38 that shed light on being a Bradfordian man of Pakistani and Muslim heritage. While there was some generational continuity of cultural values and norms, significant changes also appeared to be taking place. The study found that:

- Most of the men considered themselves British, and were consciously connected to their city and locale. Despite perceived racism, poverty and other structural inequalities, they had a positive outlook on living in a viable and valuable multicultural city.
- The men saw Bradford as a city of opportunity, reinforced by close and established support networks through family, friendship and local community links. The 'comfort zone' offered by the city was an integral, positive aspect of social and economic life, though some were highly critical of local structures of governance, politics and leadership.
- A few expressed uncertainty and anxiety about what they perceived to be raised levels of Islamophobia following '9/11' and '7/7'.
- For interviewees, Islam was an important facet of spiritual, economic, moral and political life. All the men defined themselves as Muslim, but followed varying religious practices.
- Although there was some sense of affinity and linkage with Pakistan, it remains the country of heritage, not a present or future homeland. With contact widely decreasing, remittances to family and community members in Pakistan may decline in the future.
- Arranged marriages were not universally viewed as the preferred way of choosing a partner. For many, ways of finding a partner were changing. Transnational marriages were seen as potentially problematic for various reasons; forced marriages were considered un-Islamic and seemed likely to continue declining with future generations.
- The concept of '*biradari*' (literally 'brotherhood' – extended clan/tribal networks and allegiance systems), though understood, was not entirely meaningful in day-to-day life. Some, however, anticipated that as they grew older, *biradari* networks might become more relevant.



Background

Although the Government's social integration and cohesion agenda extends beyond minority ethnic communities, there has been a significant focus on British Muslims for some time. Recent events and issues, including the disturbances of 2001 in northern towns and the events of '9/11' and '7/7', have given commentators, politicians and academics cause to explore and analyse notions of citizenship, segregation and disadvantage.

This project's aim was to tap into and present the experiences and perceptions of young Bradfordian men of Pakistani and Muslim heritage. The materials gathered, using interviews with 25 men aged 16-38, feed directly into a still-growing and fertile policy arena exploring multiculturalism and cohesion in urban spaces. The themes drawn out from the narratives were sometimes closely linked. For example, perceptions and experiences of Pakistan were connected to the topics of work and income, family and partner selection, and had general salience with the notion of 'identity'.

Bradford: the local city

The men had a highly positive attitude towards the city and, in particular, the area where they lived. A plethora of infrastructures has developed to support, maintain and develop facets of social and economic life such as employment, entrepreneurship and sense of community. Many of the men enjoyed this 'comfort zone'.

"The benefit of Bradford is that everything's at hand. You've lived here all your life, you know people, you feel comfortable." (AS)

They acknowledged also that, for some, Bradford's poor economic standing sparked a desire to leave for greener pastures. Despite the city's relatively depressed economic profile, however, some interviewees expressed considerable faith and loyalty.

"Some people support a footy team, I support what's around me. Bradford's my city, Undercliffe is my own backyard. I can't see myself leaving here for anywhere else. A lot of people do move out, though. White people – rich white people and rich Asians – they escape to nice, posher places." (RAZ)

Education

While all the men had been through the local education system, not many had flourished academically. The perception was that the majority of Bradford schools continue to perform inadequately. However, fathers in the sample had a grounded familiarity with the educational system to draw on when considering the options for the next generation of children.

"I can't see things getting better for my son and for schools, that's the only reason [I would consider moving], really. I want him to do well. Even a crap school will do its best, but I don't want to take that chance. With me it's too late, but my son, he's still got time." (YAS)

Crime

Criminality, especially illegal drugs activity, was perhaps one of the most distressing facets of life in some areas. Drug-dealing is not ubiquitous in Bradford, but the men's accounts indicated the extent to which it was nevertheless seen as a career choice for a few younger men. For some, the greater problem with the drugs trade was that it is not being tackled effectively, an experience compounded in the context of encounters with authority, particularly the police.

"One even swore at me once just while he was talking to me; just like in normal sort of conversation: 'Where are you coming from?' And I said, 'From school,' because I was. Then he gives it to me: 'Oh yeah? What's a black bastard like you doing in school? How come you're not out dealing?'" (SJA)

In some cases, attitudes appeared casually to facilitate and condone the permeation of a seemingly incessant trend in drug-dealing. Perceptions of policing fed into a very particular viewpoint.

"A lot of people make out that the guy who's selling drugs is not doing wrong. It's got to such a stage that they say it's the police who are doing wrong for locking them up. That's the mentality now: a drug-dealer is right for selling drugs, but the police are wrong for setting him up. You sit there and they're talking and they say, 'Oh, did you hear what happened to Imran? It was bad news when the police set him up and he got caught with heroin and £50,000. Look how bad it was, man. He's got locked up for nine years. I hate the police, Imran never did anything. Imran's a good guy.'" (MET)

Faith

Islam was an integral aspect of spiritual and personal-political life, even for those who did not profess to be practising Muslims. Islam was a key marker of identity, but was not an aspect of life that conflicted with British culture or a sense of Britishness. For some, there were tensions, but managing these on a day-to-day or longer-term basis appeared to be relatively straightforward. Mosques and extra-curricular religious facilities were appreciated and used, but practices were changing to connect with people whose needs have developed in Britain.

“I did go to the mosque until I was fourteen. My kids don’t go to a mosque, they go to a madrassah. They believe in Islam, they treat Islam with love, there’s nowt forced. They tell them values, how to respect your elders, this is good, this is bad, this is how you do this. They tell them all the ways of life as well. In our case it wasn’t like that. Go in with your hat, a Qur’an in your hand: didn’t have a clue what it meant. It’s a lot of progress.” (CB)

Loosely speaking, a form of Islam is rapidly becoming established which relates directly to Britain rather than Pakistan. Becoming religious or more religious, working towards enhancing a Muslim identity, was a relatively common ideal or aspiration for participants. The men all identified themselves as Muslims, but some were more conscious of what this means in real terms than others. Religious practice was also guided by a belief that Islam welcomes intellectualism, freedom and equality. For many, there was little or no conflict regarding questions that juxtapose Britishness with Muslimness; the two were not seen as mutually exclusive.

Work and income

Most of the men worked for themselves or for employers across various sectors, including office and administration, housing, retail, catering, transport, mechanical engineering and others. Economic activity was seen as an extension of family and community responsibility. Making money was not necessarily done for its own sake, or to conspicuously consume, but the mindset of these men has shifted from that of their fathers and grandfathers. Interviewees were more likely to spend than save, and much less likely to send money to Pakistan.

Pakistan

Pakistan did not hold the same connection for these men as for their parents or grandparents. Many of the men grew up in a community where a significant portion of household income was, and in some cases still is, sent to Pakistan, either for financial support or to develop properties and homes. For some, this attention to “those back home” verged on neglecting “us over here”. For others, the commitment, loyalty and sense of duty were more nuanced.

Despite these variations, overall there has been an overwhelming shift in perspective. Whereas for some parents, Pakistan continued to hold the idea of ‘return’, their sons were more likely to see it as a place of roots and occasional place to visit.

“My dad’s still got it in his head that he’s gonna go back or we’re gonna go back at some stage. When he says that or goes on about the houses he’s built in Pakistan, I think, ‘Yeah, Dad. Sure – keep dreaming’.” (YAS)

Biradari, family and routes to marriage

The family unit, though by no means homogeneous in form or structure, continued to be a key facet of social life. The extended family, as a single household, was felt to have its merits, but for many was no longer practical. However, there were benefits of living close to family members. While the majority of the married men in this study lived in their own ‘nuclear’ family homes, ‘clustering’ (the same family buying more than one house in the same street) was still valued.

“Leeds Road, it’s more traditional, like back home, like Pakistan. If you live in a village, everyone knows everyone else. They come up to your house, you go to theirs, they have time for you.”

By contrast, *biradari* (‘clan’) networks no longer had the centrality they once enjoyed, as there were now other ways to gain support, understanding and group identification. For some of the men, friendship networks were much more viable, because they had their own sense of context and purpose.

“I have relatives but I don’t know them like I know my mates. *Biradari* to me means nothing. I know what it is but it’s not important to me, doesn’t make any difference because I don’t see the world that way. People like my dad, for them it’s important because it’s about who you are. Who you are is who you know and a lot of the ones you know are in your *biradari*.” (KES)

A few indicated that the utility and sense of group identity that *biradari* fosters may surface in later life, the thinking being that the older you get, the more you want to cling on to your roots. For the majority of the men, however, other kinds of social relations currently superseded the value of *biradari*. It was not that there was absolutely no affinity or connection with *biradari*, but its influence, usefulness and relevance were certainly in flux.

Generally, the same could be said of routes to marriage and partnering. Rather than universally heading towards adopting a 'romantic love' model, other strategies were socially acceptable, personally compatible and therefore seen as unproblematic. These included traditional arranged marriages, both transnational and intranational. In between was the notion of a 'negotiated marriage', involving the potential bride or groom selecting a partner and the respective families then arranging the marriage. Two key factors in discussions about marriage involved the notion of consent and religious compatibility.

Identities

Experiences and perceptions of identity are woven into the themes covered already. The project found that far from feeling disempowered, disengaged, excluded or otherwise victimised, the men were connected to their city, faith and heritage. Identity – including personal political viewpoints – was strong. Discussions about how Islam relates to a series of political issues revealed a need to contextualise their own place in the world.

“Somebody asked me – one of the passengers in the cab: ‘What do you think of the bombings?’. I went ballistic on him. I said, ‘What do you mean what do I think of the bombings? What do you think of the bombings?’

“He says, ‘You know, they were wrong – this, that and the other – but you know, what do you think?’

“I said, ‘What do you want me to think? What do you want me to say to you? You idiot, I think exactly the same way as what you do.’” (SB)

Although identity markers were fluid and interconnected, combined they give a picture of individuals who, by and large, see themselves as Muslim and British and of Pakistani heritage. For some, aspects of British life conflicted with their own values and needs, but not to the extent that they sought to withdraw or chose to live as a segregated group. Knowledge born of experience grounded their viewpoints. They were 'integrated' in ways that reflected their experience of being British. Muslim, Pakistani and British identities were maintained alongside each other. While it was possible to feel more British than Pakistani in a given situation (such as being referred to as 'Walaythee' [British] in Pakistan), identity was nevertheless a hybrid experience allowing flexibility in dealing with life's challenges.

Conclusion

From the standpoint of these young men, the material and social resources that have been developed in Bradford are valued and necessary components in their construction of a viable life. The social cohesion – of feeling, identification and networks – found within their communities counterbalances the economic forces of social exclusion generated by the men's location in the wider labour market. The viability of their urban, specific area-based communities is the platform that enables these young men to maintain active, positive participation as Bradfordian and British citizens.

About the project

The research took place between January 2004 and September 2005. The 25 participants were aged between 16 and 38. All were living and working in various neighbourhoods across Bradford. After spending considerable time establishing connections and trust, the researcher formally interviewed the men using unstructured and semi-structured techniques.

For further information

The full report, **British-Pakistani men from Bradford: Linking narratives to policy** by M Y Alam and Charles Husband, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 978 1 85935 527 5, price £14.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk. For a fuller account of the participants' narratives see **Made in Bradford** by M Y Alam, Route Books, Pontefract; this is being published in 2007.

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