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Negotiating Mobility: South Asian women and higher education

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ABSTRACT

Using qualitative and quantitative data this article explains how South Asian women's attendance at university in Britain went from being exceptional in the 1970s to routine in the present century. Focusing upon the reflexivity of young South Asian women around issues of education, subject choice, marriage and careers in relation to their parents and their communities offers a better understanding than currently dominant social capital explanations of South Asian educational success. We show that conceptualising reflexivity in a variety of forms following Archer better accounts for the different educational trajectories at the intersection of relations of ethnicity, class, gender and religion. The educational and career outcomes and transformations entail complex forms of resistance, negotiation and compromise across intersecting identities. These developments are transforming class and gender relations within South Asian ethnicities.

Keywords: Class, Gender, Mobility, Reflexivity, South Asian, Universities, Women

Introduction

This paper outlines and seeks to explain the increase in participation of British South Asian women in higher education. This increase challenged prevailing perceptions of young South Asian women as docile, uninterested in education and destined for arranged marriages (Ahmad, 2001; Bhopal, 1997; Dale et al, 2002). Recent accounts of South Asian women's

education often highlight social capital or ethnic capital as a key explanation (Crozier and Davies, 2006; Mellor, 2011; Modood, 2004; Thapar-Bjorket and Sanghera, 2010; Shah et al, 2010). In contrast we suggest that these accounts cannot explain the uneven transformation of South Asian women's participation in higher education.

Building on previous research (Ahmad, 2001; Bhopal, 1997) we highlight how educational decision making is negotiated. Drawing upon Archer's (2007) analysis of the different forms of reflexivity involved in the process of education and career decisions we suggest that this can explain both the increased participation of South Asian women from working class backgrounds in higher education through a meta-reflexivity that challenges the constraints they face, and a communicative reflexivity that explains the reproduction of the South Asian middle class. Our study included women from Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani backgrounds and from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religions. This enables us to examine the commonalities and differences between them in ways that move beyond previous studies which tended to only consider women from particular religions e.g. Muslims (Ahmad, 2001; Mellor, 2011), or ethnic groups (Thapar-Bjorket and Sanghera, 2010). Our analysis seeks to highlight the contrasts and similarities between and within these identities.

Through a secondary analysis of quantitative data we establish how South Asian women's participation in HE increased from the late 1970s onwards, although significant differences between South Asian ethnic groups remain. We demonstrate how this increase built upon a continuous improvement in performance at GCSE and A level providing a larger pool of candidates for university. The quantitative data also show a wider range of subjects being applied for. Finally, we show how South Asian female university students are more likely to come from working class origins than white female students.

The qualitative interviews were designed to reveal the processes that give rise to the trends and patterns that our quantitative analysis has identified. Through a comparison of

different forms of reflexivity we show how South Asian women from different ethnic and religious groups face different combinations of constraints and enablements with respect to inter-related decisions about going to university, where to study, what subject to study and the timing of marriage. These outcomes cannot be seen as simply springing from class background, ethnicity, religion or gender, but are produced by different combinations of these which young South Asian women negotiate to produce a complex array of potential outcomes.

The Limits of Social Capital

The concepts of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997) and social capital (Zhou, 2005) currently dominate interpretations of inequalities in higher education. Those highlighting social capital (Shah et. al., 2010) see ethnicity as a form of social capital facilitating access to university. South Asian ethnic groups are seen as having the social capital required for educational success (Crozier and Davies, 2006; Modood, 2004; Thapar-Bjorkert and Sanghera, 2010). Modood sees the extension of the capital metaphor as useful, preferring the North American conception that elides Bourdieu's distinction between social and cultural capital. We feel that this is unfortunate as it ignores the neo-classical economic origins of the North American conceptualisation (Fine, 2001). Discussions of ethnicity as social capital present a picture of parents socialising children in the importance of education and ensuring that their children act in ways consistent with these beliefs (Modood, 2004; Shah et. al., 2010; Zhou, 2005). What Modood (2004: 100) refers to as '...relationships, norms and norms enforcement...' However, others have seen these as a potential source of constraint (Mellor, 2011; Shah, 2007). If first generation migrant South Asian parents hold such views and are able to enforce them as the theory suggests, why did they not do so for their female children twenty or more years ago when participation rates were so low? It seems that the social capital perspective cannot adequately explain this. In addition it

overlooks the processes of decision making about higher education. 'Choices' also involve negotiation and sometimes conflict over complex interrelated issues and motivations for South Asian women, including subject choice, location and when to get married (Ahmad, 2001; Bhopal, 1997; Dale et al, 2002; Hussain and Bagguley, 2007; Mellor, 2011).

Social capital approaches risk treating young people as 'empty vessels' without their own agency, motivations and strategies. Highlighting the social capital of the family or ethnic group could treat educational outcomes as solely the result of the social capital of parents neglecting the agency of young people. The focus on shared norms is problematic at a more concrete level. Even if one were to accept that such norms were shared, their interpretation and implementation might still be subject to debate, discussion and contestation between parents and young people.

Whilst some focus on the search for explanations of success in education (Shah et. al., 2010) what is also required is an analysis of the *transformation* from low levels of participation in higher education in the 1970s to the relatively high levels currently seen amongst South Asian women. Social capital explanations might be too static and ahistorical in overlooking how ethnic difference is continually reconstructed in interaction with a range of social and political forces over longer periods of time, such as changes in the labour market, and the changing availability and cost of university places (Bhachu, 1991). Educational outcomes are often treated as an effect of social capital rather than as the outcome of a complex process of interaction between individuals and wider structural circumstances.

Drawing on debates about cultural hybridity and the concept of cultural navigation (Ballard, 1994) we suggest that South Asian women are able to navigate their social mobility in part because of their ambiguous and marginal position. Their social marginality as women within their communities, as South Asians, some as Muslims and some from working class families one would not expect them to attend university. However, their marginality means

they have skills of cultural navigation enabling them to move between these various positionings. This cultural navigation has given them the skills and abilities to navigate not just between different ethnic worlds but also different class worlds.

Social capital theory might provide strong explanations of the reproduction of educational inequalities, but we suggest that it provides weak explanations of changes in educational outcomes. Using social capital theory it is difficult to account for significant *changes* in educational outcomes. The second generation of migrants who are educationally successful are seen as benefiting from the social capital of their migrant parents (Crozier and Davies, 2006, Shah et. al., 2010). However, this overlooks the fact that the second generation have not always been educationally successful. The question is how to explain change not just between generations, but within communities. Modood (2004) suggests ethnic capital as the motor, but this does not fully explain the transition.

It is important to recognise that the social networks that constitute social capital are gendered and are not just class or ethnic phenomena. South Asian women's female contacts and role models within and between ethnic groups are seen by some as one aspect enabling their progression to university (Bhopal, 2010; Hussain and Bagguley, 2007). Ethnic social capital lacks a fully rounded account of the gendered features of South Asian women's access to university. The rapid growth in Bangladeshi and Pakistani women going to university implies not just a transformation of their positioning in terms of their ethnicity, but also in terms of gender relations and practices within their communities. This is a question not just of social capital, of social networks changing, but also of the transformation of cultural norms and expectations. However, the problem remains of how to explain this development.

Social capital is assumed to emerge with the process of settlement (Crozier and Davies, 2006). However this lacks an account of the 'primitive accumulation' of social capital. What is important is the ability of a community to build upon individual experiences of higher education

in a positive way. Previous studies reported that Sikh, Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents were strongly opposed to their daughters staying in education beyond the age of 16 (Bhachu, 1991; Joly, 1995; Kalra, 1980; Wade and Souter, 1992). If that were so one could equally well argue that social capital was mobilised to prevent South Asian women realising their aspirations to go to university.

In the context of our reservations about conceptualising social capital as networks plus norms, the revealing suggestion that it consists of ‘... processes of social interaction leading to positive outcomes’ (Bankston and Zhou, 2002: 286) points in important new theoretical directions. Is this really social capital at all in the manner in which it has been conceptualised by many sociologists? For those (including Zhou) who see ethnicity as social capital this leaves ethnicity meaning little more than processes of social interaction. Rather a focus on process and context (which Bankston and Zhou recognise) properly conceptualised and analysed enables us to move beyond using social capital as an explanation. As one amongst many critics of Bourdieu has recognised: ‘What is missing from this scheme is the *interactive-situational* dimension’ (Mouzelis, 2000: 751).

The challenge is how to analyse these processes of strategic interaction of South Asian women in relation to their educational desires. The social capital approach seems quite narrow in terms of both what it seeks to explain (educational success) and how it explains it (networks and norms). We seek a broader perspective by recognising the agency of South Asian women, those they are interacting with and their structural contexts by drawing upon Archer’s recent work (2007). She suggests that reflexivity is characteristic of all individuals who hold internal dialogues mediating between their social circumstances and their actions. This explains how structural constraints and enablements operate through human agency. People’s courses of action are products of their reflexive deliberations and their subjectively determined personal projects in relation to the social and cultural circumstances objectively confronting them. Some

of these objective circumstances will be known, but others will be unacknowledged conditions of action. It is enough to know that unacknowledged conditions are there, but not the details of their operation, nor do they have to be 'internalised'.

This conception of reflexivity enables us to better understand the changes in educational inequality and mobility chances than social capital theory. This approach also echoes Ballard's (1994) insight that young South Asian people are skilled cultural navigators between their parental culture and wider society. It is precisely such skills that we see displayed in many young South Asian women's strategies towards entry into higher education, illustrating Clegg's (2011) suggestion that students from non-elite backgrounds bring unique resources and reflexivity to university.

Young British South Asian women are we suggest cultural navigators between the world of the migrant first generation raised in a largely oral agricultural context, and the urban world of Britain, formally educated until the age of 16 and pursuing the opportunities of education, a university education and the middle class labour market. In their pursuit of the opportunities of higher education they 'reflexively select, suppress and supplement' (Archer, 2007, 48) aspects of their parental cultures and religion. For example in this new context they are able to suppress or at least defer expectations about marriage or plans for arranged marriages. They demonstrate a reflexive ability to assert some degree of control over their circumstances. They have translated and adapted their parents' cultural and religious expectations to the very different world of urban Britain. They maintain continuities with the past, whilst being successful in their personal projects in the present.

Archer focuses on three modes of reflexivity entailing different ways in which individuals may interact with their wider circumstances. Firstly, communicative reflexivity is where a person's deliberations and significant actions requires the confirmation of others who are close to them and who they trust. It thus tends to result in actions congruent with the norms

and interests of others close to that person (Archer, 2007: 159). Secondly, autonomous reflexivity leads directly to action without discussion with others. Typically they are self-reliant, encountering situations for which their background and social context provide them with little support or guidelines (Archer, 2007: 193-4). Meta-reflexivity therefore entails being critically self-reflexive about oneself and one's circumstances. What guides this critical self-reflexivity is a commitment to living up to an ideal (Archer, 2007: 230).

We focus on communicative reflexivity and meta-reflexivity in our discussion of the qualitative data that follows as these fitted with the majority of the data. We found no clear cases of autonomous reflexivity where the young women were engaged in self-contained internal conversations without reference to others that led directly to action (Archer, 2007: 93). What is of interest is that the young women occupied a similar range of social positions which varied by ethnicity (Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani), religion (Hindu, Muslim and Sikh) and social class, but that within each of these categorisations different reflexivities are discernable. Hence the actual outcomes, how their different social structural and cultural positionings actually influenced them depended upon their reflexivity and the flow of action.

Methodology

Two research sites, in the North of England and the Midlands, were chosen after an examination of data from the 2001 Census of Population. Both regions have 'Russell Group' universities as well as large 'new' universities. The Northern area was the principal research location, and the Midlands' data were used to validate that from the Northern locality. We found no noticeable differences in the data between the two sites, and we have drawn upon data from both locations in our analysis. However to preserve anonymity we have referred to universities with capital letters – B, X, etc We interviewed young South Asian women from Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani backgrounds in order to analyse the ethnic and religious

differences within and between them, including sixth formers, current undergraduates and recent graduates to get a picture of the whole process of deciding to go to university through to post-graduate experiences.

Data for 114 young women was collected, of whom 37 were Indian, 51 Pakistani and 26 were Bangladeshi. Around a third of them were still in the sixth form (39), around a third of them were at University (43) and a third of them were recent graduates (32). Interviews were carried out by three South Asian female researchers, one of the co-authors of this paper, and two recent graduates of similar age to many of the interviewees who were trained for the purpose. Two interviewers were of Pakistani heritage and one of Bangladeshi heritage. Interviewees were asked to choose their own pseudonyms to secure anonymity, and we have used these when quoting from interviews. Interviewees were selected in a variety of ways. Undergraduates and current sixth formers were largely approached in the public social areas of their institutions. Some current postgraduates were also contacted in this way. In addition some students and many of the recent graduates were contacted through local community centres. The samples were further boosted through snow ball sampling.

This sampling strategy enabled us to compare the experiences of women from different South Asian ethnic groups at different stages of their educational careers. The size and diversity of the samples enables meaningful comparisons between women of different religious backgrounds, and overcome some of the difficulties arising from a focus on a particular ethnic or religious group.

The semi-structured interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes and one and half hours and were characterised by a relatively informal style whilst retaining a thematic, topic-centred approach. The interviews explored a number of inter-related themes including: personal views and experiences of education, the impact of the young women's education on their family lives; interactions with parents, siblings and the wider family; their definitions of their identity;

peer networks; the role of gender, age, religion and ethnicity in relation to their experiences in education and their aspirations and plans for the future. The semi-structured format of the interviews ensured that the specific aims of the research project were addressed whilst facilitating the emergence of new themes during the interview process. They were conducted at times and in places of each woman's choosing, recorded with the respondents' agreement, and fully transcribed. In the analysis we have reconstructed the key themes from these texts through a thematic analysis of the young women's views and experiences. In particular when these have emerged as relevant similarities and differences with respect to ethnic origins and religion have been highlighted and discussed in more detail.

We firstly set the context of in terms of the growth the numbers and proportions of young South Asian women attending university and their pre-university education. We do this through an examination of quantitative data up to the point at which the interviews were conducted. Data from HESA, UCAS and the Census of Population are used and comparisons made with previous studies using similar data sets, all of which sets limits to the years used.

Background and context: transformations of class, ethnic and gender inequalities

The proportionate increase in the numbers of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women over the ten year period immediately prior to our interviewing (see table 1) far exceeds that for white women attending university. Even without examining the data this development cannot simply be explained by demographic change or increases in the numbers of university places. Something new and significant was clearly happening in Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities during this period.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows how performance at GCSE level (five GCSE passes at grade C or above) has improved between 1988 and 2001 for white and South Asian pupils. As the sources for this data (Connolly, 2006; Demack et al, 2000) noted many ethnic inequalities remain, but our concern is to demonstrate the increasing attainment of South Asian women at this level enabling them to continue into A level and meet the general requirements for university entry. White female pupils obtaining five or more GCES increased from 28% in 1988 to 56% in 2001, Bangladeshis from 10% to 46%, Indians from 19% to 68% and Pakistani women from 19% to 42%.

Table 3 presents data on level 2 (five or more GCSE passes at A*-C) and level 3 attainment (at least two A level passes or their equivalent) for 19 year olds in 2006 by gender for White and South Asian ethnicities. By 2006 there was a significant pool of potential applicants for university amongst South Asian women as large as or larger than that of White women. Of particular note are the large differences in attainment at level 3 between Indian women and Bangladeshi and Pakistani women highlighting the need to examine the differences as well as similarities amongst South Asians.

Jackson's (2012) analysis of ethnic and class inequalities in educational transitions at ages 16 and 18 throws further light on this issue. She shows that class inequalities only partly explain the ethnic differences in the probability of young people staying on in education beyond age 16 and move on to university after age 18. Furthermore, the lower levels of attainment of South Asian pupils are largely attributable to primary structural effects, but after controlling for this they have a higher likelihood than White pupils of transition into further and higher education. Arguing that 'aspirations' would produce both 'primary' and 'secondary' effects she suggests that it is structural constraints and how decisions about education are made that are important.

Table 3 about here

Table 4 about here

Table 5 about here

Table 6 about here

Table 3 shows how the increase in the proportion of young South Asian women attending university between 1979 and 2000 has closed the gender gap between South Asian women and South Asian men. This may indicate a transformation of gender relations within South Asian communities since the 1970s. There is also a smaller difference in the rates of participation in higher education as compared with White women. Within the broad category of South Asian the data also reveal reduced differences between Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women. This period also saw a certain de-concentration of applications from ‘traditional professional degrees’ such as medicine and law towards a wider range of subject areas as demonstrated in table 4.

South Asian women are also much more likely to have working class origins than white women going to university as shown in table 5. However, robust and confident claims on the basis of this data are difficult to the large percentage reporting their parents’ socio-economic group as unknown. The high proportion of South Asian women reporting this might be due to the large proportion of such women having deceased or retired fathers, which was reported by half of our Bangladeshi interviewees. When we unpack the broad trends what is uncovered are a series of simultaneous and inter-connected transformations of inequalities of ethnicity, class and gender. The challenge is how to explain these quite dramatic changes, and it is a challenge that social and cultural capital theories are not quite up to. To analyse the reasons for these developments we now turn to the interview data with young South Asian women.

Communicative reflexivity leads to doing what parents expect...

We suggest that communicative reflexivity provides a more convincing explanation than theories of cultural or social capital of the routine expectation of entry into university that is found in some families. Archer writes of communicative reflexivity as being concerned with ‘staying put’ (Archer, 2007: 158). This is the equivalent of the reproduction of the parents’ class position as young people trust significant others, such as parents and other family members in relation to educational decisions. This approach thus encompasses much of what some have conceptualised as social capital – networks, trust, norms and values. In these situations going to university is constantly talked about as a normal expectation:

In my case everybody, all of my siblings had all gone to university..., there was an assumption that everybody was going to go to university. I never saw it as an option it was just something that was going to happen ...’ (Jeevan Mudan, Indian graduate, father a deceased accountant, mother a retired catering assistant)

The way Jeevan spoke of this was almost with an air of resignation illustrating Archer’s contention that communicative reflexives do not realistically contemplate alternatives remaining deeply embedded in their natal context (Archer, 2007: 98). Both of her parents supported her education but her mother always told her: ‘you’re only going to get married anyway’. Going to university was not really something that they planned. In this way they often end up at university or in occupational milieux with people very much like themselves. We found this type of pattern largely amongst women of middle class Indian backgrounds – often (though not exclusively) Hindu. In general fathers had the most significant role in negotiations over education regardless of ethnic or religious background. Mothers only did so if they were divorced or widowed, or were themselves graduates and/or in professional occupations. For example Jasmin’s mother was an educational professional with her local council and: ‘I was going to do an advanced GNVQ in IT but mum was like:

“you don’t want to be doing that you want to do A levels”’. Such mothers were more like the middle class mothers in Reay et. al.’s (2005) study.

Being a meta-reflexive was very different leading to resistance, negotiation and change. Communicative reflexivity entails an acceptance of structural enablements and constraints, but meta-reflexivity entails working with and challenging them. The meta-reflexivity of young South Asian women in relation to negotiations around attending university involves a number of ethnicised and gendered issues. Of these, subject choice, geographical mobility, marriage and social mobility were most frequently raised by our interviewees. Archer notes how meta-reflexivity involves ‘living up to an ideal’ (Archer, 2007: 230). For our interviewees there were often conflicting ideals. They were negotiating their own ideals with commitments to their parents and communities rather like the white working class women in Evans’ (2009) study. Complex inter-weavings of collective ethnic identifications, religion and gendered expectations were the result.

Religion was important for many as a source of identity, but it seemed to be secondary as a factor influencing educational decisions. Mellor (2011) has suggested that religion is a source of agency for South Asian Muslim women to pursue higher education. In contrast our Muslim interviewees tended to treat Islamic views of the education of women in a communicatively reflexive way, rather than a meta-reflexive manner. They just took it for granted that Islam encourages the education of women. For example Alpa, a Bangladeshi daughter of a waiter whose mother was a ‘housewife’ told us: ‘It preaches that men and women are equal and since men are to go out and get an education, then women should go out and get an education’. For a minority of Muslim women religion guided their choice of subject. Here they were being meta-reflexive about their futures. For instance Fahana a Pakistani midwifery student whose father had retired and whose mother was a ‘housewife’ said: ‘... me personally

as a Muslim about to have a baby I'd be happy knowing there is another Muslim sister helping me give birth.'

Those employing meta-reflexivity actively scrutinise their own aspirations, opportunities and the views of families and community to make a way forward for themselves. Rather than having parental norms inculcated into them (Zhou, 2005), they critically select from them making some their own (Archer, 2007: 90). The emergence and success of meta-reflexivity amongst young South Asian women in the UK is we believe one of key factors behind the explanation of their increased participation in higher education, and can incorporate the factors covered in theories of social and ethnic capital.

Meta-reflexivity and arguing for what you want to do

Subject choice at A level is critical as it affects which degree programmes can be applied for. Perhaps surprisingly it is largely ignored in more general studies of university entrance (e.g. Reay et. al., 2005). The women had sometimes protracted discussions with their parents over the choice of A level subjects. For instance Kalpana (Indian, father a retired engineer and mother a factory operative) talked about her father having the most influence choosing her A levels in science subjects which she felt were impossible to pass:

My dad said why don't you try doing these and then you can become a doctor or pharmacist, the typical Asian subjects but I don't know why I didn't do those in A levels because they weren't my stronger subjects.

She was studying Information Communication Management, and her choice had infuriated her father. There is little evidence here of the shared values being enforced by parents as suggested in those explanations in terms of ethnic or social capital (Modood, 2004; Shah et. al , 2010; Zhou, 2005). These conversations between parents and daughters about subject choice illustrate the significance of what Mouzelis (2000: 751) refers to as the 'interactive-situational

dimension' where structural constraints and actors' differing goals and strategies are played out. These negotiations continue beyond A level to which degree subjects to study. Shahida an Indian Muslim (father a retired newsagent and mother a housewife) who was studying Broadcasting said: 'you always get that pressure from family you should do engineer, doctor or lawyer, but I've just kind of ignored that cos I've been quite independent'. In those social capital arguments highlighting the role of parental pressure (Zhou, 2005), this kind of process and outcome is difficult to explain. Quite often these interactions and negotiations involved parents highlighting the future career consequences of degree subjects. For instance the parents of Shazia a Pakistani undergraduate (father a retired factory worker and mother a housewife) had always wanted her to study subjects leading to one of the traditional professions instead of her preference for childhood studies: 'My mum wanted me to become a doctor or a solicitor 'typical' but I didn't want to be that because everybody was doing that.' In these instances young women were not just successfully challenging their parents' aspirations for them, but were also resisting wider community expectations. They were transforming what was seen as commensurate with their ethnicity, and how that ethnicity should be performed and reproduced through certain choices of future careers. Archer notes (2005: 155-7) how being a meta-reflexive involves a passionate commitment to personal values, which may conflict with parental values or the wider social context. A commitment to an academic discipline or vocation can also be the source of young women's resistance to parental preferences regardless of the longer term career consequences as the following illustrates:

... I didn't think about jobs when I was applying to uni and stuff. I just did it 'cause I enjoyed it. I love sitting at the computer and doing these sort of things. I never thought of a job, I was never worried about it. Whereas last year I was thinking about it, and mum and dad said to me: "what's going on?" Like: "you're doing multi media", and my brothers they were really annoyed at me as well. They are like "why didn't you do something like business studies or something?"

I said ‘cause I didn’t want to do that, they were “you’re not going to get a job with it?”. (Beenish Kaur, Indian undergraduate, father unemployed, mother school cook)

Commitment to a subject that is not valued by parents or the wider community posed a major challenge for many of our interviewees. Yet as illustrated in table 3 above South Asian women have increasingly entered a wider range of academic subjects at university. This is an issue upon which ethnic and social capital theories are silent, yet is a major question for parents and children. For many women the challenge is not whether to go to university, but what to study and what their future career might be.

Negotiating location

Whether South Asian women study at university whilst staying in the parental home or leaving was the second major issue around which there was negotiation with parents. Although the role of *izzat* influencing such decisions has been commented upon previously (Dale et. al. 2002; Hussain and Bagguley, 2007; Shaw, 2000), it is largely overlooked in social capital approaches. Those who attended university away from home were largely middle class Indian Hindu women. Nina Patel an undergraduate (father a professional chemist, mother an administrator) told us that she chose the best universities for the courses that interested her when she applied. That was her driving factor, not locality but the course itself and her judgement about the quality of the university: ‘X is the best uni in the north, I like it here it’s very multicultural here.’ For many Indian students it was simply assumed that they would leave home when they went to university:

Meena my sister moved when she was in college. And then I moved out after college I think they kind of expected it. They did kind of say ‘why don’t you do a course in Leicester?’ but I said that ‘no I don’t really want to’. (Anisha, Indian undergraduate, father an engineer, mother an administrator)

Here communicative reflexivity operated to reproduce middle class assumptions about leaving home for university. Alternatives are not really contemplated, and when they are suggested they are dismissed without much contemplation or thought. Reay et al (2005: 109-37) highlighted how ethnic minorities chose local universities on grounds of affordability. Meta-reflexivity challenges this and enables us to unpick the complexity of these decisions. Davinder had to challenge her parents' preference for her to study near home:

My dad said 'don't they do that course in Y?' I said, 'yes dad, but I want to move away'. It was hard for them, but my parents know how determined I am, so they knew I wanted to do it. So they were just so happy that I was going to university, so they said do it for the course then, if you like the course somewhere else better then do that. (Davinder, Indian undergraduate, father software engineer, mother care worker)

Many Sikh and Muslim women had to compromise around where to study. By no means did all the Muslim and Sikh women remain at home but most did and it was not for reasons of affordability. These cases illustrate the uncertainty of the outcomes of the strategic interactions engaged in by meta-reflexives:

... initially I wanted to go to A university in Y I always wanted to do Law [...] I got my grades worked hard for them but my parents were quite reluctant to let me go to A university so then B was my insurance choice [...] I wasn't keen on it but at that moment in time I think I was pressurised into *either stay local or not go at all* so I went to B and did business management. (Saima, Pakistani graduate, father unemployed, mother housewife)

I applied to loads of universities within X because my parents weren't wanting me to go away from home so I applied at X Met., X university, B, C, D and that's about it really. I applied at M as well got a place at M but my parents weren't happy about me going away. I didn't get a place at X university I got my place

here which is the closest to home. (Kamaljeet Kaur, Indian graduate, father van driver, mother packer)

Both of these cases are of women who clearly engaged in complex negotiations with their parents, and for both there was a compromise solution of staying living at home whilst attending university. What remains unsaid in the above quotes is most likely the role of ideas of *izzat* influencing the views the women's parents. In some cases women discussed these issues in terms of concerns about the 'wrong crowd' at university:

I had the option from H, B and X and my parents and my older brother they don't like H culture students there and in B and X Met. so they were the only university you're going to you can't stay away it has to be X uni H and B too many Asian people there you get mixed in with the wrong crowd and everything and they don't like that they actually limited it down for me that's the only place you're going to. (Azra, Pakistani undergraduate, father mosque teacher, mother housewife)

The third principal issue that was the subject of reflexivity, strategizing and compromise between some daughters and parents was around marriage. This has featured in other studies (e.g. Bhopal, 1997; Dale et. al., 2002; Hussain and Bagguley, 2007), but is noticeably absent from social capital theory. Again we find a contrast between communicative reflexives and meta-reflexives. For instance Taslima illustrates the acceptance of her future typical of a communicative reflexive. Close to graduation she began to hear her parents discussing 'getting me married':

I'm fine with it, but obviously I don't want to do anything else, so its OK – and you come to a certain age and stage in your life when you think it's fine to get married now – and if you have the Islamic knowledge in you as well, you think that marriage is an obligation, and we want to get married as well. (Taslima, Bangladeshi undergraduate, father retired factory worker, mother housewife)

In contrast women with a meta-reflexive approach were more challenging towards their parents.

Whilst they often accepted that their parents might have a major role in the selection of a husband, they entered into detailed negotiation of the process of finding a partner:

... I have told them I want somebody who is good with their religion, personally that is my first option. Education I'm not too bothered about as long as he is a good guy, family orientated and hard working; they know what I'm like, they know I don't like lazy people and I'm not too keen on big families so my dad says I'll find you an orphan! (Shameem, Pakistani undergraduate, father retired factory worker, mother housewife)

Some of the meta-reflexive women were partly using higher education as a strategy for delaying marriage, agreeing with their parents that they would begin to look for a suitable partner after their education was complete. However, this was not uniformly the case:

... when I was in university other Asian girls were saying that we are buying time because at the end of the day we know that if we don't go to university we are going to get married off and I was like am doing this cause I want to do it am not buying time. (Farrah, Pakistani Graduate, father retired factory worker, mother housewife)

We have seen that being a meta-reflexive leads to negotiation and change in relation to going to university, subject choice, where to study and marriage. Furthermore, meta-reflexivity is important as a means of social mobility, especially amongst Bangladeshi and Pakistani women for themselves, their families and their wider communities. Social mobility is not an individualised phenomenon, but is seen as a collective enterprise to which the young women saw themselves contributing:

... I believe that in this day and age you have to have some kind of education otherwise we will be stuck in clerical or admin jobs and that hasn't got a lot of money or anything like that so really its about at the end of the day, whatever we

do, it's always about money, you know so if you've got a good education and you've got good knowledge and everything you can educate your children then and the community. (Jabeen, undergraduate, Bangladeshi, father deceased, mother housewife)

This commitment is not just to personal mobility, but also to that of the wider community. This can be seen as a form of wider collective ethnic identification. For some a central part of this was acting as a role model and advisor to other young women from their communities:

I feel that I am benefiting and the community is benefiting from my experience and my knowledge – since I've been in this job I think that I'm seeing at least ten young girls that I've helped going to university who otherwise would have not gone to university. (Ayesha, Bangladeshi, father retired factory worker, mother housewife)

Meta-reflexives then are not being purely individualistic, Westernised and rejecting their ethnicity. Rather they are transforming their communities and themselves. They have achieved this by engaging in complex strategies around fundamental life choices around education, marriage and careers.

Conclusions

Since the late 1970s attendance at university amongst British South Asian women went from being exceptional to routine. Explanations of their educational success using theories of social capital have been found to be unable to explain this. We suggest that focusing on their reflexivity in relation to their parents around issues of education, marriage, subject choice and careers offers a more persuasive explanation. They are challenging parental and community pressure and expectations about which subjects to study. Their desire for occupational mobility for themselves, their children and their communities are linked to collective ethnic

identifications. The conceptualisation of reflexivity found in the work of Archer enables us to analyse how collective ethnic identifications are enacted and/or resisted and transformed.

The changing educational fortunes of British-Bangladeshi and British-Pakistani women reflect incredibly significant changes in both the gender and class relations within these communities. It has been a major aim of this paper to point to these significant transformations. These developments are feeding into these communities producing social mobility for some, one that also intersects in complex ways with gender relations and family and household formation.

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TABLE 1

Percentage change in numbers of first year UK domiciled full-time first degree female students and ethnicity 1994-95 to 2004-05

	White	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi
Percentage increase				
1994-5/2004-5	43.3	84.8	158.7	273.7
Number in				
1994-5	98,125	3,817	1,527	388
Number in				
2004-5	140,645	7,055	3,950	1,450

Source: Calculated from HESA table 10b.

TABLE 2

Percentage of Boys and Girls of White and South Asian Ethnicities obtaining five or more GCSEs, 1988, 1995 and 2001

	1988			1995			2001		
	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
White	24	28	26	37	47	42	46	56	51
Bangladeshi	15	10	12	23	24	23	34	46	40
Indian	28	19	23	39	49	44	51	68	59
Pakistani	21	19	20	16	28	22	34	42	38

Sources: 1988 and 1995 data Demack et. al., 2000: 129; 2001 data Connolly, 2006: 10. All data from the Youth Cohort Survey of England and Wales. Percentages for 2001 have been rounded, cell counts for Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are below 100 in 1988 and 1995.

TABLE 3

Level 2 (five GCSE passes at A*-C) and Level 3 (2 A-level passes or equivalent) Attainment by Age 19 in England: percentage of Males and Females of White and South Asian Ethnicities, 2006 cohort.

	Level 2		Level 3	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
White British	63.5	73.4	37.6	47.6
Bangladeshi	60.4	75.0	36.6	48.9
Indian	81.0	88.0	64.2	73.2
Pakistani	59.9	72.3	38.8	49.6

Source: Department for Education 2007.

TABLE 4

Estimated Percentages of selected ethnic groups by gender aged 18-19 entering university in 1979 and 2000

1979			2000		
Birthplace	Male	Female	Ethnic Origin	Male	Female
UK	11.0	7.6	White	16.5	17.0
India	12.2	4.2	Indian	26.6	28.5
Pakistan	7.0	1.7	Pakistani	14.7	14.5
Bangladesh	1.8	1.6	Bangladeshi	13.0	12.5

Source: 1979 data Ballard and Vellins, 1985; 2000 data authors' calculations from Census of Population and UCAS data.

TABLE 5

Subject distribution of female applicants, 1990-2005 (column percentages)

JACS Subject Group	Ethnic Origin					
	Bangladeshi		Indian		Pakistani	
	1990	2005	1990	2005	1990	2005
A Medicine & Dentistry	18.9	7.0	15.2	11.4	17.8	10.2
B Subjects allied to Medicine	5.6	10.9	9.5	14.4	9.7	14.7
C Biological Sciences	12.2	8.0	7.4	7.7	9.2	6.1
G Mathematical & Comp Sci	2.7	4.2	4.5	3.9	3.7	4.7
H to K Engineering etc.	3.7	1.1	2.0	1.5	2.1	0.9
L/M Social Studies and Law	24.9	21.5	23.7	15.7	24.0	19.7
N Business & Admin studies	2.7	13.0	10.7	16.6	6.9	14.2

Source: 1990 data from Taylor (1993); 2005 data authors' analysis of UCAS data

TABLE 6

Female Degree Acceptances, by selected ethnic groups and Socio-economic group of parents, 2005 (column percentages).

Socio-Economic Group	Ethnic Origin			
	Bangladeshi	Indian	Pakistani	White
1. Higher managerial and professional	3.2	12.2	6.5	17.9
2. Lower managerial and professional	9.9	17.2	12.6	26.7
3. Intermediate occupations	3.4	10.5	5.7	13.1
4. Small employers and own account	9.2	7.3	12.7	5.9
5. Lower supervisory and technical	0.3	3.4	2.3	4.1
6. Semi-routine occupations	20.2	14.4	11.0	10.8
7. Routine occupations	7.2	7.8	7.7	4.4
8. Unknown	46.7	27.3	41.5	17.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N	1419	7019	4135	150537

Source: UCAS, authors' analysis