Article

Young British Pakistani Muslim women's involvement in higher education

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Abstract

This article explores the implications for identity through presenting a detailed analysis of how three British Pakistani women narrated their involvement in higher education. The increased participation of British South Asian women in higher education has been hailed a major success story and is said to have enabled them to forge alternative, more empowering gender identities in comparison to previous generations. Drawing on generative narrative interviews conducted with three young women, we explore the under-researched area of Pakistani Muslim women in higher education. The central plotlines for their stories are respectively *higher education as an escape from conforming to the 'good Muslim woman'; becoming an educated mother;* and *Muslim women can 'have it all'.* Although the women narrated freedom to choose, their stories were complex. Through analysis of personal 'I' and social 'We' self-narration, we discuss the different ways in which they drew on agency and fashioned it within social and structural constraints of gender, class and religion. Thus higher education is a context that both enables and constrains negotiations of identity.

Key words

Gender, religion, ethnicity, identity, narrative analysis, agency

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"I don't just want to be known as someone's wife or as someone's mother. I didn't come to university for that."

The rise in participation of ethnic minority groups in higher education in the UK has been hailed as a major success story, with most of these groups increasing their share of admissions since ethnic monitoring began in 1990 (Modood, 2014). Though concerns had been raised about low rates of engagement of young South Asian Muslim women[1] in post-compulsory education (Rattansi, 1992; Shain, 2002), Bagguley and Hussain (2007) note a dramatic rise in their participation since 1994, with a 158.7% increase in young Pakistani women starting full-time degrees between 1994-95 and 2004-05 compared to a 43.3% increase in young white women. British South Asian women's participation in higher education is, therefore, now seen as routine compared to being exceptional in the 1970s (Bagguley & Hussain, 2014). Indeed, young Pakistani women are slightly more likely to be offered a place at university than their male counterparts (Modood, 2014). However, being viewed as highly motivated to achieve in higher education (Ahmad Modood & Lissenburgh, 2003), is offset by essentialised portrayals of young British Muslim and South Asian females as highly regulated, repressed, submissive and passive objects (Phillips, 2009), docile (Ramji, 2007), uninterested in education and destined for marriage (see Bagguley & Hussain, 2014) or allowed to participate in higher education to a lesser extent than males (Modood, 2014).

The literature suggests a number of complex and interrelated reasons for young South Asian Muslim women's involvement in higher education. Reasons range from enhancing social mobility to self-fulfilment and personal development (for further discussion, see Bagguley & Hussain, 2007; Mellor, 2011; Mohee, 2011). Pursuing higher education is transformative inasmuch as young British Muslim women can forge alternative, more empowering gender identities, particularly in terms of careers, financial independence, postponement of marriage and being educated mothers in comparison to their mothers/women in previous generations (Dwyer & Shah, 2009; Mohee, 2011).

The specific educational context of the study reported here is the University of Bradford, UK. The large-scale settlement of immigrant Muslims, beginning in Britain in the mid-twentieth century, saw many move to major manufacturing towns and cities in Northwest England, Yorkshire and the Midlands (Lewis, 2007). These areas, as well as London, contain sizeable Muslim communities (Hamid, 2011). It is estimated that 25 percent of those living in the Bradford Metropolitan District (situated in Yorkshire) identify as Muslim (ONS, 2011). Most of these Muslims are of Pakistani origin (Lewis, 2007). Many Pakistani Muslims came to Bradford to work in the textile industry: when this collapsed between 1960 and 1990, substantial numbers of first-generation migrants were affected, though many remained in Bradford (Lewis, 2007). Since this collapse, Bradford has struggled to develop a robust economy. The Pakistani Muslim population is clustered in the poorer central areas of the city, which have high levels of deprivation and unemployment (Darlow et al., 2005; Philips, 2006).

Bradford came to prominence in the national press due to a number of political issues surrounding faith and ethnicity, most notably, the 2001 riots, which

perpetuated a perception of 'self-segregation'. According to the official reports (e.g. Ouseley, 2001; Denham, 2002), the riots were a result of cultural differences, self-segregation and long-term marginalization for both the South Asian and white communities. However, Philips (2006) examined discourses surrounding Bradford Muslims' isolation and self-segregation, arguing that many had no desire to live segregated lives but rather ethnic clustering was linked to structural disadvantages, such as poverty and social capital. Fear also acted as a constraint on spatial mobility, with many families, including middle-class households choosing to remain in the inner-city clusters for defensive reasons (to avoid harassment and victimisation). In addition, literature suggests retaining traditional cultural values, especially those relating to obligations towards extended family, is important (see Bagguley & Hussain, 2007; Gilliat-Ray, 2010). Many young women involved in higher education in cities such as Bradford continue to live at home and those who move away are usually expected to return and get married once they graduate (Phillips, 2009).

Against this backdrop, a recurring vantage point in explaining the increase in certain ethnic minority groups' participation in higher education draws on the sociological notions of social and ethnic capital (e.g. Bagguley & Hussain, 2014; Modood; 2014; Mellor, 2011; Shah, Dwyer & Modood, 2010). Ethnicity is theorised to be a form of social capital, with South Asian, specifically Pakistani, parents depicted as socialising their children about the importance of education and encouraging participation (Modood, 2014; Shah et al., 2010). However, social capital explanations have yet to encompass gender (Thapar-Bjorkert & Sanghera, 2010; Shah et al., 2010). For instance, first generation Sikh, Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants prioritised their sons' rather than their daughters' participation; thus ethnic social

capital does not explain this gender discrepancy (see Bagguley & Hussain, 2014). Social ethnic capital is also seen as deterministic in that young people are treated as 'empty vessels' lacking in agency, rather than providing a way of analysing what are conceptualised as complex processes of interaction between individuals and society (Bagguley & Hussain, 2014).

Feminist psychologists have been at the forefront of theorising the relationship between subjectivity and the social (see Day, Johnson, Milnes & Rickett, 2010). While a key theme in feminist scholarship has rightly been on the oppressive and constraining nature of constructions of femininity and women's roles, more recently, poststructural feminists have placed emphasis on reproduction, conformity and also resistance and agency. Resonant with poststructural feminism, and contrary to essentialised, deterministic views, some recent literature attempts to theorise conformity alongside fluidity, resistance and agency in the active construction of young British Muslim women's identities (e.g. Phillips, 2009; Ramji; 2007; Siraj, 2012). Phillips (2009) highlights the complexities of identification for Muslim women, while for Mohammad (2005, p.180), identity is not just rooted in religion but produced across 'a matrix of discourses'. While there is literature exploring how young South Asian Muslim women negotiate identities, there is less on how identity is negotiated and created in relation to higher education (Mohee, 2011). This article contributes to this literature.

The relationship between the individual and social context has been developed in relation to young British South Asian women by drawing on Archer's (2007) conceptualisations of communicative and meta-reflexivity (Bagguley & Hussain, 2014). Communicative reflexivity requires the confirmation of deliberations and actions by those who are close to a person, thus actions are congruent with

others. Meta-reflexivity involves being critically self-reflexive in relation to oneself and one's situation (Archer, 2007). Bagguley and Hussain (2014) demonstrate how young British South Asian women engage with these forms of reflexivity to resist, negotiate and compromise across identities. Others have drawn on Butler's (1990) theory of performativity to explain how South Asian Muslim women's identities are constituted (e.g. Mohee, 2011; Siraj, 2012). Rather than a fixed property of the self, Butler theorises gender as performativity that needs to be enacted over time to produce the impression of substance. Mohee (2011) draws on Brah's (1996) concept of culture as a 'reiterative performance', combining it with Butler's view of identity as performance to theorise performativity in relation to how the young British South Asian Muslim women in her study reworked gendered identity through involvement in higher education.

Despite complexity and heterogeneity being acknowledged in the literature, the ways in which young South Asian women's experience has been theorised still runs the risk of focusing on binary distinctions between the 'traditional' and 'modern' woman (Majundar, 2007). As such, there is a danger that these generalisations essentialise and reify young women's identities. Indeed, as Brah (1993) and Dwyer and Shah (2009) suggest, in researching Muslim women, there is a risk of treating them as a category of discourse rather than historical subjects with differing social and personal biographies. The subtleties of how lives are lived and identity constructed within social, cultural and discursive contexts may be missed in generalisations made about the forging of new gender identities.

One way of dealing with 'the death of the subject' and theorisation of agency in feminist research is through the 'narrated subject' approach (see Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). That is, we come to make sense of the social world and what

constitute our identities through narratives and narrativity (Somers & Gibson, 1994). Narrative approaches have the potential to combine 'inside-out' and 'outside-in' forms of analysis, with identity conceptualised as a product of subjective self-narrating combined with culturally implicit ways in which selfhood should, might and shouldn't be (Bruner, 2002). Such an approach has the potential to explore, in a detailed, less thematic way (than is often the case in the literature on South Asian women) how identity is fashioned. Though some have employed biographical approaches to investigate how young South Asian Muslim women negotiate identity in higher education (e.g. Brah, 1993; Dwyer & Shah, 2009), a narrative approach has not been used. As such, our analysis offers a novel, more substantial psychologically-focused consideration of how individuals negotiate the social milieu in the under-researched area of Pakistani Muslim women in higher education. This article presents a detailed analysis of how three British Pakistani women narrated their involvement in higher education and explores the implications this had for the construction of their identities.

About the study

The analysis presented is part of a larger study exploring the experiences of young British Muslim students at the University of Bradford, UK. Two methods of data collection were employed in the larger study, which was conducted by the first author who is a young British Pakistani Muslim woman. Participant observation took place over four months in two key communal areas at the City Campus of the university, thereby Ifsa Hussain gaining familiarity with what young Muslim students were doing and what was important to them. As well as generating data, this phase identified diversity of experience and was used to select five participants (two male and three female) for narrative interviews lasting between 60-90 minutes. The stories

of the three female interviewees are reported here. All three participants were second generation Pakistani migrants, living with their families in Bradford and aged either 20 or 21. While social class was not explicitly explored, we highlight aspects of their stories that indicate its salience.

Interviews were conducted with the participants. Aims and ethical rights were reiterated and participants asked to sign a consent form at the beginning of interviews; participants were debriefed at the end, and reminded of their right to withdraw their data without explanation. Interviews were digitally voice recorded and later transcribed, with pseudonyms used throughout. Ethical approval was granted by the Humanities, Social and Health Sciences Research Ethics Panel of the University of Bradford.

Though feminists have discussed the potential for asymmetrical power relationships in interviews (e.g. Stanley & Wise, 1983), a narrative approach can be effective in redressing imbalance: the researcher assumes the role of a 'good listener' and interviewee 'a story-teller rather than a respondent' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000. P. 31). As such, interviews were loosely guided drawing on the 'generative narrative question' approach (Riemann & Schütze, 1991). The initial 'question' contained a reminder of the topic and a prompt to begin with the time participants first started thinking about attending university. They were asked to take their time, give as much detail as they wanted and told that the researcher was interested in anything that was important to them. The stories elicited were followed by 'narrative probing' in which fragments of the story that were not thoroughly detailed were clarified (Flick, 2009).

Analytical approach

According to Polkinghorne (1991), narrative helps build a sense of self by providing temporal organization through emplotment, producing coherent self-understanding. Instead of treating the self as identical through time and events, the self is revealed as the subject of many experiences in the form of a story-like account (Sparrowe, 2005). Through sharing these stories, people we make sense of their actions and construct their lives, though stories are rooted within available cultural discourse (Bruner, 1990). Thus this approach is compatible with a constructionist epistemology.

Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2013) remind us that despite several, sometimes conflicting approaches to narrative research, it can offer useful insights into different, and sometimes contradictory, layers of meaning. Therefore a number of 'levels' of analysis were undertaken based on elements of the Listening Guide, a 'multi-layered interpretative approach' outlined by Douchet and Mauthner (2008, p. 404). The first 'reading' focused on tracing the central plotline, the sequence, the main characters, key words and events. The second focused on how the narrated subject was constructed: how the women spoke about themselves and the parameters of their social world. As Davis (2015) does, we interrogate two self voices, an individual 'I' and a social 'We' facilitating investigation of the interrelationships between individual and social identity. The interrogation of the 'We'/'They' voice also related to the third 'reading', which focused on relational aspects, such as how social networks and close relationships were narrated. The fourth 'reading' focused on dominant ideological and power relations that framed the narratives. This 'level' enabled links between micro- and macro-level narratives allowing a more theoretical account to be developed. It involved determining how,

and to what extent, meta-narratives were drawn upon, conformed to or resisted, and implications for identity.

The stories

Ayesha's story: Higher education as an escape from conforming to the 'good Muslim woman'

Ayesha was in the second year of her degree. Her mother worked as a seamstress. She didn't mention her father's occupation but that he had recently died. It is possible he had not worked or was in low paid work as she spoke of pressure on her mother to provide for the family before he died. She talked about being from a *'conservative, traditional, Pakistani Muslim family, living in terrace houses'.* Ayesha's overarching plotline was of higher education being a vehicle to facilitate her escape from restrictive traditional homogenising cultural and gendered narratives of Muslim identity. By emphasising differences from, and resistance to, her community of origin through the use of an 'I' self voice, Ayesha attempted to create distance. This distancing began with a not uncommon Western alignment of the 'I' self voice with a mainstream meta-narrative of self-determining young adulthood:

> I came to university because I wanted to get out of the house, I couldn't do anything without asking my mother's permission. She always wanted to know what I was doing... I was an adult and I wanted to have a little more control over my life.

However, her mother was assigned the role of 'antagonist' because of incongruity in aspiration between them. This difference was between traditional Pakistani Muslim ideologies and more liberal ways of being, made available through

higher education. She spoke about her mother as not understanding the path she wanted to take – of them being from *'different worlds',* implying a clash of cultures and ideologies and characterised her mother as adamantly insisting Ayesha conform to religious, cultural and gender appropriate scripts and be 'a good Muslim girl':

> My cousin is a year older than me and she got married at 18 and she now has two kids. She cooks, cleans and runs a household and my mum is always like, she's such a good girl, why can't you be like her? Basically saying, get married and behave like a woman.

Siraj (2012) reviews constructions of British Muslim women's identities and identifies that the 'good Muslim woman' is associated with caring qualities, being a mother, domestic roles, religious honour (*izzat*) and appropriate appearance. Indeed, in her study she found that young Muslim women were still aligning their identities with this version of femininity. Ayesha stories her mother as drawing on aspects of this dominant ideology, positioning herself as meta-reflexive and agentic in resisting these values:

> …my mother wanted me to get married. She tried marrying me off when I was 18 to some relative in Pakistan and I was not going to give in like my brother and sister. I stood my ground and made sure they weren't able to control every aspect of my life.

> For Ayesha, attending university represented resistance to what she viewed as restrictive culturally prescribed scripts of good Muslim womanhood:

> When my parents wanted me to get married, it was as if they believed it'll validate my existence on this planet and being married with a kid by the time

I'm 30 will encompass everything it means to be a decent Muslim woman. You

see, I don't just want to be known as someone's wife or as someone's mother.

I didn't come to university for that.

She contrasted herself to those in her social network, further reinforcing her

divergence from a 'cultural norm' in which young Muslim female students were

depicted as following a normative developmental path, progressing from higher

education to potentially having a career while prioritising marriage and motherhood:

…the girls at our university still prioritise marriage after they get a

degree…even when they want a career, they want to be a professional

working woman but they still place value upon getting married and having kids

by the time they are 25 or 30.

In contrast, Ayesha, through the agentic use of an 'I' self voice distances herself from

this version of Muslim womanhood, rejecting marriage (and then motherhood) as the

next viable option after gaining a degree.

However, somewhat contradictorily, Ayesha also aligned her social self to her

family. Using a 'We' self voice, she narrated a shared working class identity,

emphasising working hard rather than education as a way to support the family:

We have always been encouraged to support ourselves financially and

contribute to the family income once a month and university was seen as

more of a hindrance than an advantage.

This is at odds with her own narration and much literature on the value of higher

education to South Asian Muslim families, regardless of class (Bagguley & Hussain,

2007; Mohee, 2011; Shah et al, 2010). The tension in Ayesha's story between the

agentic first person storying of her choice to be involved in higher education, her family's economic needs and lack of value placed on higher education as a means of social mobility complicates the meaning of ethnic social capital.

The lack of value placed on education is further emphasised in Ayesha's story in that being at university did not mean academic success was important to her. Instead, in a meta-reflexive way, she distances herself form normative Western developmental meta-narratives: attending school, getting a degree and moving on to a stable job with a regular income. She storied resistance to such a normative path, by emphasising that she wished to explore her potential which went against the grain of being a 'good Muslim woman' and a 'good citizen':

> I want to leave home and even if I fail, I don't care. I don't care because at least I've attempted it. There is the South Asian mentality and the British mentality and I think failure is frowned upon in both and you can't be seen wasting your time. You aren't encouraged to grow as an individual and make mistakes. You're told to follow a system, grow up, go to university and get a job. For the world that's tangible proof that you're living and being a productive individual. We are not told to take risks. We are not told that it's OK to fail and it is OK to take a chance on ourselves. Especially if you're a woman, a Pakistani Muslim living in Bradford, you're definitely not taught to live on the edge.

Her narrative can be read as a contrast between the agentic first person which she uses to resist a collective culturally restrictive script evident through the use of 'You' and 'We'. Rather than education simply leading to a qualification and productivity, it is a liberating route to independence, freedom and exploration (conveyed more

substantially than enabling a *certain* amount of freedom and independence reported in the literature).

Though Ayesha distanced herself from normative developmental and culturally restrictive gendered meta-narratives, she indicated social identification with the Muslim community and Islam through the narration of 'We'/'Our' self voices, using terms such as *'our community', 'our faith', 'since 9/11 we feel threatened'*. However, higher education was narrated as facilitating the identification with different communities leading to a different way to practice Islam:

> And also you can get involved with ISoc [The Islamic Society] although I was never involved but I attended events, making friends with the ISoc Sisters and that kind of stuff…the environment was really healthy, you pray more often, you're going to the Islamic talks and learning from all these different things…The teaching here is different compared to at home…where it was more like 'do as you're told or you'll go to hell', like 'look here are the steps and follow them'.

Therefore being a 'good Muslim' was still narrated as central to her personal and social identity. In relation to identifying as Muslim, however, Ayesha narrated a desire to distance herself (by using an 'I' self voice) from potential hostility towards Muslims following terrorist attacks:

> If you look at the hostility towards Muslims since the attacks in the US and here, in London, you do realise that we are treated differently by society…I think if I were to dress like you [referring to the researcher wearing the hijab] I would definitely be treated different and that is why I am hesitant to doing it.

She shored up this point further by reflecting on previously attending a predominantly white, non-Muslim college class wearing the hijab and jilbab, saying, *'they [the other students] wouldn't talk to me…or initiate conversation'*. Thus while identifying as Muslim, she did not wish to be visibly different because of negative associations with Islam. Similarly, higher education was narrated as enabling the mitigation of potentially detrimental homogenising views associated with British Pakistani Muslims living in Bradford. She was adamant that her future life would involve leaving Bradford, characterising her community as being *'stuck in their ways', 'with our cliques' and 'highly ghettoised neighbourhoods'*.

Although Ayesha foregrounds an 'I' agentic self-narration shored up by a meta-reflexive tone as a means to create distance, 'We' social self-narration aligns her with certain versions of Muslim personhood. Specifically, this simultaneous separation and alignment is achieved through narrating attending university as a vehicle to distance herself from her *'conservative'* upbringing, contaminated aspects of Muslim identity, as well as both traditional and more recent versions of the 'good Muslim woman' (Siraj, 2012), while allowing her to practice Islam in a more enlightened, liberal way and thus still be a 'good Muslim'. However, the strong agentic first person voice creates silences around potential structural constraints of her background.

Sara's story: Becoming an educated mother

Sara, in the first year of her degree, also crafted her story in an agentic 'I' self voice when talking about choice. However, this was combined with a more social self-narration as her current and anticipated future family were central to her involvement in higher education with an 'education-as-asset' plotline used to justify

higher education. Her father had worked in the mills before being made redundant and being out of work. She said he had difficulty finding work because he had no qualifications. Her mother was described as a housewife.

Beginning her story, she simultaneously employed first person narration with a more social 'We' voice, therefore, aligning herself with her family's wishes:

> I'm not career oriented but I feel that I should get a degree because everyone in my family got a degree and I'm the last one left...My older brother really influences my choices, I respect his opinions and I think he understands because he's been through it. My parents also played a big part in my choices, especially when it came to university choices. For my parents, university was something…everything, they really wanted me to attend.

Here Sara narrated a tension between family expectations that she '*should'* gain a degree and making her own choices. However, juxtaposing personal and social selves suggests that agency is a negotiation, rather than a possession, as in a communicative reflexive fashion, she positioned herself as someone who wanted to comply with expectations. To shore up this negotiated agency, Sara storied her family as drawing on the meta-narrative of the benefits of a 'good education', an account more akin to the ideology of ethnic aspirational capital (Bagguley & Hussain, 2007; Mohee, 2011; Shah et al, 2010).

> I think my parents, especially my dad, felt it was their duty to make sure I had a good education because they didn't get the chance and they really believed it'll help me get a better job than the ones they had.

This storying of the familial transmission of ethnic aspirational capital amongst Pakistani parents contrast to white working-class parents who may be less ambitious for their children (Shah et al. 2010); the latter being a position more compatible with Ayesha's story as her family were narrated as not valuing higher education.

The negotiation of agency continued through her alignment of personal and social identity as a practicing Muslim within a collective Islamic identity. This alignment is evident through Sara use of terms such as *'our religion'* and her description of her reasons for joining the Islamic society: *'because my family encouraged me to…because they said that university is where you find yourself and religion is something you don't want to lose'*. However, like Ayesha, she didn't wear the hijab and potentially distanced herself from contaminating markers of Islam:

> …you become associated with a religion that is so often associated with terrorism…it is harder to get a job if you are more visible as Muslim, you know what I mean, the beard, the hijab.

Sara expanded on reasons why higher education was important for her future, including it enabling her to become an educated mother, increasing marriage prospects and as insurance in case marriage failed. Though she anticipated working before getting married and having children, Sara narrated her future as one of 'choosing' domesticity over work or a career, by becoming a *'full-time'*, stay-at-home mother:

> Yeah…I think about my future, like I want to work after my degree but before I'm married. Like…when I look to the future, I mostly think about my own family, you know being a wife and having children, and being a mother.

Combining 'I' with a more relational self-narration again conveyed agency as negotiated, which continued as her own mother is brought into the story to support her case:

> My mum was there for me, she was always present, every occasion and I liked that and I'd want that for my children. My mum took pride in looking after us, we were her job.

However, Sara narrated these domestic aspirations as not compatible with the dominant Western meta-narrative that women can, and should, 'have it all' (Choi, Henshaw, Baker & Tree, 2005; Jacques & Radtke, 2012):

> I don't tell people what I want in life because people judge and say 'what's the point of a degree?'

In anticipating motherhood, and perhaps as a means of justifying her participation in higher education in relation to being 'judged' for 'choosing' motherhood, Sara emplotted gaining a degree as a future 'asset':

> It's the mother who educates her children and if I get married and have children, I want to be able to help them with their homework or have more of an input in their education at school. My mum's from Pakistan and growing up, I could always see that my mum was seen as someone uneducated because she didn't take part in the things I got up to at school, or my brother would be stood next to her, translating what the shopkeeper was saying and I don't want that. I don't want people to see me as someone uneducated.

Education is depicted as a way for second generation Pakistani migrant women to be better 'educated' mothers (Mohee, 2011) in the British context, thereby subverting

a negative immigrant identity. However, education does not necessarily need to be higher education. Thereby Sara is perhaps drawing on this storyline to shore up her involvement. To reinforce this distancing, she storied educating (as well as caring for) her children as an important responsibility of mothering:

> …I feel it is my duty as a mother to look after and educate my children, like they say the mother is the first one to educate the child.

'Like they say' implies a doctrine that mothers have a role to play, which she narrates as her *'duty'*, thus again aligning personal with social identity. This alignment could be argued to reflect women's place in the Islamic home as strongly bound up with mothering and the capacity to nurture (Mohammad, 2005), with these attributes reflecting Islamic notions of 'complementarity'. Siraj (2012) argues that marriage is represented in Islam as the coupling of men and women so as to complement each other's skills and 'natural' capacities. Though Muslim feminists have challenged the notion that the Qur'an approves particular roles for men and women (Wadud, 1999), Sara draws on a more traditional social identity of mothers possessing complementary nurturing qualities.

The storyline of degree-as-a-future-asset was emplotted not only in terms of being an 'educated mother', but also an 'educated wife', which was seen as having the potential to improve marriage prospects:

> I think men are looking for a more educated woman to marry, especially our generation. They want women who have a degree, even if they don't necessarily want her to work.

The social self voice of 'our generation' aligns Sara with other young second generation Muslim migrants. Similarly, Ahmad et al. (2003) argue that an educated daughter is considered an asset to the family in terms of marriage potential. The

value of education in the marriage stakes (in the frame of social capital) is strengthened by the statement *'even if they don't want her to work'* as this negates a degree as purely for improving socio-economic standing.

Sara's education-as-a-future-asset plotline includes gaining a degree as 'insurance' in case her anticipated marriage broke down (Dwyer & Shah, 2009; Mohee, 2011; Shah et al, 2010). Fashioned out of a relational storyline about her Aunt who had recently divorced (and was *'struggling'* because she didn't have an education *'to fall back on'*) Sara narrated her 'choice' by saying:

> It isn't about working once you're married but I think my main purpose for doing a degree is to have something to fall back on. I might never work when I am married but at least it's there in case something goes wrong.

Again, education is not presented as leading to socio-economic advantage within marriage, with the relational voice of 'you' anchoring Sara socially to this perspective.

Through the dynamic combination of an agentic first person voice with social self-narration, Sara's story reflects negotiated agency. Sara narrates higher education as not her choice; in a communicative reflexive fashion, she aligns herself with her family's wishes and the notion of education facilitating ethnic aspirational capital. Similarly, the alignment of herself with Islam and involvement in ISoc reflects her family's wishes, though like Ayesha, she distances herself from contaminated aspects of Islamic identity. As her future storyline involves the somewhat subverted identity of domesticity and motherhood, she shores up the silencing of this identity through alignment with notions of complementarity and an education-as-potential-future-asset storyline.

Fatima's story: *Muslim women can 'have it all'*

Fatima was in the second year of a degree in Pharmacy. She had attended an all-girl, predominantly white, private school. Her parents divorced when she was young, her mother bringing up the family on a part-time job in social care with little support from her family or ex-husband. Drawing on an emancipatory meta-narrative, Fatima narrated a key plotline that Muslim women can 'have it all': a successful professional career, financial independence, observe Islam *and* be a wife and mother. In support of this vision, she aligned 'I'/'We' self-narration to convey the inseparability of her visible identity as a Muslim woman pursuing professional education with a strong political adversarial voice for Muslim women: thereby, for Fatima, agency *is* social:

> I want to be known as an educated Muslim woman, that we can do it and we are doing it…I want to make it my mission that as a Muslim woman, wearing the hijab, I am able to forge a respectable career.

Like Ayesha and Sara, Fatima aligned herself with being a practicing Muslim, though in contrast, she depicted the hijab as a form of resistance to potential contaminating (*'ignorance'*, *'discrimination'*) aspects of Muslim identity:

> My religious identity is really important to me and I'm not going to be victim of people's ignorance or discrimination…like my hijab makes me a visible Muslim and sometimes I want to use that as a way to address misconceptions.

'I wanted to use that as a way to address misconceptions' implies wearing the hijab is a form of political resistance to a meta-narrative of Islamic homogeneity (the view that Muslims are a unified group associated with, for example, with the oppression and regulation of women and terrorism). Thereby Fatima's narration signals agency

through a sense of ownership and control of her social identity rather than victimhood or passivity.

The 'have it all' meta-narrative is grounded in Fatima's school background. She said that although she had been encouraged that she could become a doctor, certain teachers were less supportive:

I'm quite certain my teachers thought I'd get married after I finished my A-Levels. It probably didn't help when Asian girls came into school announcing their engagement at 18. I remember telling my English teacher I wanted to become a pharmacist, maybe even do further research within the pharmaceutical industry and she just looked at me, as if to say 'like that'll ever happen'.

Similarly, others have noted that some teachers convey gender stereotypical views of young Pakistani females as destined for marriage and motherhood on leaving school, despite their parents seeing higher education as a 'natural progression' (e.g. Bagguley & Hussain, 2007). By aligning an agentic first person voice with social identity *'as a Muslim woman'*, Fatima storied this stereotypical view of young Muslim women as a driver for resisting homogeneity:

It was frustrating and I wanted to show that as a Muslim woman, I am more than capable of fulfilling my ambitions and getting a respectable degree.

As with Ayesha and Sara, Fatima's mother featured as a key character, being similarly depicted as someone who influenced her aspirations. In Fatima's case, however, she aligned herself with her mother's perseverance as a single working mother, storying her as a role model for being able to 'have it all':

My parents got divorced when I was two years old. My mum didn't get as much support from her family when she decided she no longer wanted to be with my dad. My mum had to sort her life out; she didn't have a degree so got a part-time job in social care and was able to look after us. Her parents, my grandparents, thought she was neglecting us by working but it never felt like that. She was always there when we left for school and would be at home when we got back and sometimes we'd go to our grandparents until she got home and that was fine, she was doing it for us. She inspires me and has shown me it can be done.

Fatima constructs a story that her mother could work *and* be a 'good mother'. Thus her identity is aligned in a communicative reflexive fashion with her mother's. This alignment allows her to strengthen the position of having a professional career *as well as* marriage and a family:

I want a family, the whole thing…you know a husband, a couple of kids running around, being a mum, working at a pharmacy.

In 'wanting it all', again Fatima interweaves personal and social identity, which serves to strengthen her political voice in terms of a meta-narrative of equality and financial independence, challenging traditional cultural notions that Muslim women's roles are defined by domesticity and dependence:

As a Muslim woman, we are encouraged to get an education and I don't want any old job. I want one that has prospects and I am able to support my mum and when I'm married, support my family. It shouldn't be that men are the ones who get to go out and work. We should both have a hand in maintaining the

household and I want earn my own money… I shouldn't be told that I can't do it because I'm a Muslim woman…this isn't what we are taught in Islam.

More than just being *'encouraged to get an education',* in the language of ethnic aspirational capital, she asserts a position of Muslim women being able to be equal to men. For Fatima, practising Islam was not a barrier to this. Rather, she draws on Islam to justify equal rights with men, in contrast to Sara, apparently rejecting traditional notions of complementarity. This echoes Ramji (2007) who identifies how young British Muslim women are redefining perceptions of good Islamic practice, which affords them agency. Nonetheless, and in contradiction to the strong emancipatory tone, there was a sense of tempering her ambitions to fit with the anticipated demands of a family and thereby giving the nod to complementarity:

I wanted to be a doctor, I know people who went down that route and it requires a lot of work. I'm not afraid of working hard, it's just late nights and long days, things like that needed to be taken into consideration. With pharmacy, I can go part-time or locum, so if I get married and have children, I can work around my family.

Like the young women in Ayesha's story who are depicted as 'wanting it all', the neoliberal tone of Fatima's story masks constraints on choice in that she has compromised her choices in anticipation of the demands of motherhood. Though there may be similar constraints on choice for other young female university students (see Jacques & Radtke, 2012), there is the implication that there might not be support from previous generations (as also conveyed in Sara's story) for Pakistani Muslim women who divorce or 'choose' to 'have it all', thereby tempering choice. It is

also worth noting that in using *'if'* as in *'if I get married and have children'* Fatima is seemingly narrating the possibility that she might not 'have it all'.

Conclusions

In showcasing these three stories, we highlight how identity is fashioned by people's narratives, challenging the homogeneity of the predominantly sociologically-focused literature in this area to date. By adopting a narrative approach, we emphasise a more psychological focus, foregrounding processes of acceptance, resistance, silencing, contradiction and negotiation and thus the steering of a path between the personal and the social which complicates monolithic sociological constructs and more thematic analyses. As such our approach addresses concerns raised by feminist psychologists about reaching conclusions that reinforce binary distinctions between 'modern' and 'traditional' women often implied in the literature on South Asian women (Majumdar, 2007).

Through a combination 'I'/'We' self-narration, the stories foreground a juxtaposing of a 'matrix of discourses' including, gender, class, normative development, social capital and religious identity, with personal identity, specifically through the storying of agency. For Ayesha the predominant agentic first person voice was employed as a *device* to narrate higher education as a way to create meta-reflexive distance from homogenising and contaminating versions of Muslim personhood, and more specifically womanhood, in the Bradford context, whilst allowing her to practice Islam in a more liberal way and thus still be a 'good Muslim'. This agentic narrative tone silenced structural socio-economic constraints inherent in her background and might be hard to sustain. Sara fashioned her story by more closely aligning the agentic first-person voice with a social self/relational narration,

reflecting *negotiated* agency. In a communicative reflexive fashion, involvement in higher education was a way of complying with her family's wishes of ethnic aspirational capital and maintaining a 'good Muslim' identity. However, the meta-narrative of ethnic capital subverted her anticipated identity as a wife and mother. She managed this contradiction through alignment with gender complementarity and 'education-as-future-asset' within an immigrant Muslim context. Similarly, Fatima aligned 'I'/'We' self voices, though in her story these were inseparable and used as a way to create a political identity as an advocate for the ideology that 'Muslim women can have it all', thus for her, agency *was social*. However, her story is undermined by gendered constraints on the 'have it all' meta-narrative. Thus in line with theorisation of performativity, it could be argued that these women were reworking their identities (Butler, 1990; Brah, 1996; Mohee, 2011).

The narration of agency in the three stories is consistent with neoliberal and post-feminist discourses of choice (see Jacques & Radtke, 2012) and suggests the cultural assimilation of the young British Muslim women into mainstream Western versions of selfhood (Majumdar, 2007). Nonetheless, social and structural constrains inherent in gender, class and Muslim identities were also evident. Therefore, the implications for identity are that rather than higher education straightforwardly offering new, more empowering gender identities, as Muslim identities remain central to varying extents, these young women had to do identity work not only to justify themselves but also to make sense of their identities within complex cultural contexts.

In this regard, as Riessman and Quinney (2005) state, when we consider the storying of identity, we need to take into account the purpose of the narrative, and for whom it was constructed. In the collection of data the women spoke to the first

author who was of a similar age, had been an undergraduate student, was conducting research for her PhD at the time, and who was a local Pakistani Muslim. They also knew they were involved in research in which their stories were intended to be heard by others. Thus, they might assert particular aspects of their identity, for instance, to assuage stereotypes of Muslim Pakistani women; this would entail further identity work they felt compelled to engage with. In addition, data were collected early in their academic studies when their aspirations might be more idealistic. It would be interesting to conduct further research as women move through and out of higher education.

The topic of Pakistani Muslim women in higher education has largely been overlooked in the UK. This paper makes a unique contribution to feminist psychological understandings by highlighting that rather than unproblematically forging new gender, ethnic and religious identities, higher education is a context which necessitates the negotiation of identities that have the potential to both enable and constrain.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

1. South Asian Women are referred to by some authors as women of Bangladesh, Indian and Pakistani heritage (e.g. Bagguley & Hussain, 2007). Though some literature makes distinctions between these groups of women and other such as Sri Lankan, Nepalese, Bhutanese or Maldivian women, other literature does not.

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