Evaluating Generations in a Transnational Social Field

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Using research on the British Bangladeshi community in London that from my Dphil research, I will examine the notion of a 'second and third generation' of British Bangladeshis and the extent to which young British Bangladeshis continue to engage in transnational behaviour.

A British Bangladeshi transnational community is now well established both in the UK and in Sylhet. Transnational practices maintain links between the two locations. British Bangladeshi patterns of marriage, for example, interrupt the idea of a neat progression of gradually 'more British' generations. Transnational practices are fuelled by communication and travel which are now cheaper and easier than ever. However we define a British Bangladeshi community, there is still a stark divide between the two principal locations in this community. How these issues and practices translate into beliefs and a sense of belonging is variable and unpredictable.

I will engage with debates from the US about transnationalism, assimilation and the 'second generation'. Specifically, the transnational social fields approach used by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) and Glick Schiller and Fouron (2002) to British Bangladeshis in order to critique the idea of immigrant generations.

Debates on the 'Second Generation' and Transnationalism in the US

Levitt and Waters (2002) outline debates in the US about whether the 'second generation' of new migrations to the US will integrate into society or maintain strong ties with their 'homeland' and be 'transnational'. Levitt and Waters insist that the two are not mutually exclusive. Transnationalism can exist beside integration into society and both have multiple dimensions that do not rule each other out (Levitt and Waters, 2002:3).

Their book interrogates both the meaning of transnationalism and that of the 'second generation'. Levitt (2002) and Jones Correa (2002) show how transnational engagement waxes and wanes over the course of a lifetime. Jones Correa speculates that 'second generation' transnationalism peaks in a persons' teens and twenties, falls off with the pressures of work, marriage and children and re-emerges when some of these pressures have decreased (Jones Correa, 2002:227).

Engaging with debates about the meaning and limits of the concept of transnationalism, and strongly influenced by the idea of social fields, Fouron and Glick Schiller have a broad and all encompassing idea of what constitutes transnational migration and the 'second generation' (Fouron and Glick Schiller, 2002:171). They believe that the idea of transnational migration offers a critique to the way earlier migrations were understood. It offers an alternative to the dominant model of 'immigrant incorporation' as a linear process of acculturation and assimilation that takes place over several generations. The notion of 'second' and subsequent 'generations' points to the step like, inevitable way the incorporation of immigrants has been conceived. In this model, children of immigrants are socialised only by influences from within the country of their birth (ibid:175).

An imagined sense of belonging and constructing social fields which stretch beyond national boundaries is crucial to the idea of transnationalism and social fields proposed by Fouron and Glick

Schiller. They draw upon Anderson's (1991) notion of 'imagined communities' and talk of an 'imagined generation'.

Transnational migration patterns have been dismissed as a 'phenomenon of the first generation' by some scholars. Fouron and Glick Schiller point out that raising children is often a transnational process. Some Haitian children are born in Haiti and brought to the US when they are in their teens, others, born in the US are sent back to Haiti to be raised there while some are raised with their parents in the US (ibid:177).

Fouron and Glick Schiller make a case, using the idea of a social field which links the 'homeland' and 'new land' for including children born in the 'homeland' in what we describe as a 'second generation'. Using the case of Haiti and the United States, they show how many young people in Haiti are also the children of migrant families, just as children born to Haitian families in the US (ibid:169).

These children, born and raised in Haiti and often with several members of their families living in the United States, are influenced by transnational forces. If we consider households in the 'homeland' formed by and benefiting from economic and social capital from abroad as 'transnational', Fouron and Glick Schiller argue, then shouldn't we consider the children of these households part of the 'second generation' (ibid:194)?

Responding to a wide range of findings and the multiplicity of ways in which 'second generations' of immigrants to the US has been theorised, sometimes based on contradictory findings, Eckstein makes a case for understanding the political and material context within which these identities are formed. The variety of historical conditions of different 'first' and 'second generations' of immigrants are the reason why the experiences of some are characterised by 'assimilation' and some by transnationalism (Eckstein, 2002:212). The historical conditions of early migrations to the United States were very different to more recent migrations and technological advances have made transnationalism more accessible and possible (Eckstein, 2002:213).

Thompson and Crul (2007) point out that many US scholars have not compared conditions in the US, the national context, with other immigrant receiving countries. In Europe, by contrast, different nations' regimes and policies are regularly compared (Thompson and Crul, 2007:1031).

Fouron and Glick Schiller show how Haitian nationalism has been maintained among Haitians in the US. Not everyone in Haiti is connected to networks which link them to transnational activities, but according to Fouron and Glick Schiller, those who are must be considered part of the 'second generation'. They maintain that influences on identity within the US should be placed alongside influences from Haiti (Fouron and Glick Schiller, 2002:193-194).

Fouron and Glick Schiller go further and argue that all children born within a field of social relations which links 'home' and 'host' countries of their parents through economic, social and religious networks and transnational media should also be included in this transnational second generation. This is the generation born into a transnational social field which did not exist a generation before their birth. This social field will then be influential on their upbringing and subjectivities, regardless of whether they were born or ever migrate to the country of emigration (ibid:195).

Perlman (2002:217) and Jones-Correa (2002) find Fouron and Glick Schiller's ideas about the 'second generation' and transnationalism too broad, rendering an already vague concept meaningless. Jones Correa worries that current fascination with transnationalism risks ignoring integration of 'second generations', reversing the mistake made by a previous generation of scholars of immigration in the United States who focussed only on integration and not on transnationalism (Jones-Correa, 2002:223).

Jones Correa uses evidence from other studies of 'second generation transnationalism' to show that in fact the majority of the 'second generation' do not engage in much 'transnational' behaviour. Then, citing a wide range of studies of 'second generations' in the United States, he makes a case for the idea of the linear assimilation of the generations of immigrants into the 'host' society. They are just as likely to stay in the United States as to return to their 'ancestral homeland', and are increasingly integrated into the social and political life of the country (Jones Correa, 2002:226).

British Bangladeshis
If we compare the literature reviewed above to the case of British Bangladeshis we can evaluate the use of the notion of terms like 'second generation' and transnationalism for use in the UK.

British Bangladeshi marriage practices mean that the very idea of generations, of gradually more integrated immigrants breaks down. Among the children in my study, nearly all had one parent who had been born in the UK or had come to the UK as a child and one who had come to the UK as an adult to marry a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin. It was common for migrants from Bangladesh to the UK in the 1950s and 60s, lone men who wanted to work and then return to Sylhet, to marry in Bangladesh and come back to the UK alone (Adams, 1987:66, Gardner, 2006:378). Some men moved with brothers, cousins or in the case of one of my research subjects a father and son came together. Are both father and son members of the 'first generation'?

Eventually many of them brought their wives to the UK along with any children they had, who may have been two years old or seventeen years old (Eade, 1997:149). What age they moved at has had an enormous impact on their subsequent schooling, socialisation and integration into British society. What generation are these people? And what generation are their children? This points us towards the idea of transnational social space rather than an isolated community gradually integrating into the UK.

Many British Bangladeshis are very 'well-integrated' in different ways into aspects of 'British' society. A significant number of British born Bangladeshis maintain transnational links with Bangladesh and these two phenomena are not mutually exclusive. Many British Bangladeshis go through peaks and troughs of transnational behaviour. Certain times in the life course may see a heightened sense of belonging to a transnational community and periods of more transnational activity.

Many of my research subjects had occasional intense periods of transnational activity during and around visits to Bangladesh. Parents said that they maintained closer links before they had children and hoped to have more contact after their children were grown up as the cost of taking children to Sylhet was prohibitive and the demands of school terms made it difficult for them to take extended holidays in Sylhet. Young Bangladeshis reported enjoying Bangladesh more as

teenagers than they had as children. All these findings correspond with Jones Correas's (2002) analysis.

A comparison between Fouron and Glick Schiller's (2002) Haitians and British Bangladeshis is problematic for several reasons. One is distance. Bangladeshis must travel further to visit Bangladesh and therefore there is perhaps less contact with their 'homeland'. Secondly there has not been the kind of concerted government effort to encourage 'long distance nationalism' among British Bangladeshis as there has been for Haitians. Indeed, many British 'Bangladeshis'' parents or grandparents came to the UK long before the country Bangladesh even existed.

The extreme disparity in wealth between Bangladesh and the UK, particularly in the area of publicly provided health and education coupled with the distance and the effects of long stays in the UK mean that British Bangladeshis grow up very different from their kin in Bangladesh. The welfare state does not exist to such an extent in the US. Haitian families with parts in the US are closer together and can more easily maintain contacts and a similar way of life than British Bangladeshis and their Bangladeshi kin.

This distance and differences between the locations of the British Bangladeshi social field lead to divisions between those who inhabit the social field and those who come into contact with it and would perhaps like to join. The differences in the realm of the possible, in wealth and subjectivities are too great for Bangladeshis growing up in Sylhet in migrant families to be truly considered part of the British Bangladeshi transnational social field, as Fouron and Glick Schiller (2002) argue in their case study.

As Friedmann (2002) explains, changes in the built environment influence the dispositions and behaviour or 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977:72) of groups such as British Bangladeshis. The urban flat in London leads to a different socialisation that the rural homestead in Sylhet. This, along with other influences, excludes Bangladeshis in Sylhet from being truly part of the British Bangladeshi social field as they do not have the correct habitus.

Conclusions
The notion of first, second and subsequent generations of 'immigrants' is not helpful for the analysis of British Bangladeshis and most probably many other minority groups. It does not accurately portray groups of people or provide any descriptive utility. The variety of situations and contexts within a small British Bangladeshi sample show that few if any families correspond to a neat model of immigrant integration.

Intermarriage and the practice of bringing families up in Bangladesh before bringing children and wives over to the UK for family reunification has disrupted this neat model. Peaks and troughs of transnational activity and variation between individuals and families mean that it is hard to predict of measure the extent of transnational activity of a whole group of people. The idea of the 'second generation' as a coherent group does not hold up.

The idea that this 'second generation' includes children of families in Bangladesh who receive remittances from the UK does not stand up to scrutiny either. Such are the material and social differences between life in urban London and rural Sylhet that the socialisation of children in London gives them a different habitus than their kin in Bangladesh.

As Gardner (2008) explains, young Bangladeshi men may try to gain access to the British Bangladeshi social field by demonstrating what they perceive to be the correct forms of social and symbolic capital. However it is hard for them to achieve the right tone as they do not possess all the correct forms of capital and subtle tastes and dispositions of their peers brought up in London. It is always possible for people in Sylhet to spot a *Londoni* (British Bangladeshi) because of the many tiny differences in the way he or she behaves compared to the locals. Similarly, British Bangladeshis can tell if someone is a *freshi* (recently arrived migrant) even if they try to behave like a *Londoni*.

There are significant differences between those brought up 'here' and those brought up 'there'. However it is not useful to talk about 'second' or 'third generations', rather the evidence points towards a transnational social field with various forms of capital, exchanges, flows and power unevenly distributed within it.

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