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The racialisation of class and the racialisation of the nation: ethnic minority identity formation across the british south asian middle classes

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Abstract

This paper considers negotiations of social identity across British-born Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani professionals who experience racial / ethno-religious marginality alongside relative socioeconomic privilege. Drawing on 20 semi-structured interviews, it finds that beneath the generalised salience of British identity to their sense of self, the racialised limits of national belonging are implicit in discussions of social identity. The ways in which class is brought to bear in identity work which often seeks to subvert and/or align with British middle class norms underscores the relationship between the racialisation of class and the racialisation of the nation. This paper also identifies different modes of identity construction around the racialised idea of the nation across dimensions of religion and gender, and thus also stresses the need to consider the heterogeneity of the British South Asian middle classes when analysing the material and symbolic dimensions of their group belongings.

Keywords

Social identity; middle class; Britishness; racialisation; whiteness

Introduction

The majority versus minority group belonging debate is fixed at the heart of conservative socio-political discourses in the UK. ‘Brexit’ exemplified the nostalgic desire for a unified, unilateral and bounded political, social and cultural entity (Stratton 2019) driven by a xenophobia stoked by Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Contemporary xenophobic discourse and policy builds on that of previous prime ministers David Cameron and Theresa May, the latter’s infamous ‘Go Home’ vans intended to deter illegal immigrants a clear case in point (Jones et al. 2017). Nationalist discourse that has flourished since the EU Referendum in 2016 and the burgeoning hostile environment for immigrants has shown the persistence of race as a problematic – although rarely plainly articulated - political question (Bhambra 2017).

In a postcolonial context, contemporary notions of the ‘British’ are historically bound up with empire. Gilroy (2003, 31–32) stated that ‘nationalism and racism continue to be

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articulated together,' attributing much of this to the 'postcolonial melancholia' precipitated by Britain's loss of imperial power. This racialised history of immigration rooted in colonial and imperial history (Kapoor and Narkowicz 2019; Bhabra 2015; Gilroy 1987) complicates 'British' identity for ethnic minorities. National belonging is racialised (Valluvan 2019) in both a structural and symbolic sense so that 'even those who technically do belong to the nation can find themselves under suspicion as 'other', an experience sadly familiar to many ethnic and religious minorities, such as British Asians' (May et al. 2020, 1059). The genesis and scope of racism and xenophobia in contemporary society is, however, rarely openly articulated and even reproduced in a 'post-racial' sense by White and non-Whites alike given the embeddedness of racial logics in discourses around the nation (Goldberg 2009).

Despite increasing social integration and economic prosperity (Storm and Sobolewska 2017), enduring yet unchallenged racism problematises the identification of UK ethnic minority groups with 'Britishness'.¹ This is rooted in the co-constitution of 'Britishness' and 'whiteness'² (Garner 2012) and the subsequent racialisation of the idea of the 'nation'. Racialisation occurs as characteristics and cultural values aligned with the dominant racial group become embedded within the idea of what it is to 'British' (Garner 2012, 3) resulting in racial gatekeeping of the nation (Elgenius and Garner 2021). This paper considers the contingent role of class in the racialisation of the nation. Class - defined materially in relation to occupation and other socio-economic material dimensions such as income and wealth (Goldthorpe 1987) as well as symbolically in relation to status groups with similar lifestyles and dispositions (Lamont and Molnar 2002) - plays a seminal role in the hegemony of whiteness, which bears on ethnic minority middle class³ formation. This is because middle class norms and practices, such as access to superior education and the professions through the legitimisation of elite cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987), have served to reproduce class and race privilege for the White middle classes (Meghji 2016, 2017; Wallace 2018). This has necessary implications for identity formation across the ethnic minority middle classes, particularly national identity as Britishness becomes imbued with exclusionary classed as well as racialised norms.

Theoretical framework

To understand identity formation amongst the British South Asian middle classes, we must understand the values, norms and beliefs associated with White British middle classness. Whiteness works through both the material dimensions of South Asian middle class formation, and, as this paper argues, its symbolic dimensions. Research has identified a racialised 'second existence' of class for ethnic minorities (Saini 2022) which mediates the ways middle class British South Asians negotiate, conceptualise and re-conceptualise their relationship to 'Britishness'. It thus argues that the racialisation of the nation is contingent on the racialisation of class in middle class ethnic minority social identity formation. This is exemplified through the social identity work of British South Asian professionals - namely British-born Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis - who having 'achieved' socio-economic prosperity may be positioned as 'model minorities' but continue to occupy a liminal space of privilege and prejudice with their experiences of social mobility, their classed identities and their experiences in predominantly White, middle class spaces marked by ethnoracial marginality.

Much sociological and socio-psychological research has been carried out on British South Asian identity, amongst hyper-racialised groups such as British Muslims (Ahmad and Evergeti 2010; Maxwell 2006; Jacobson 1997, 2004), groups in identity transition such as young adults and their parents (Jaspal and Cinirella 2012; Archer 2011; Vadher and Barrett 2009; Phinney 1990), with the role of intergenerational cultural transmission (Jaspal 2010) and gendering (Bagguley and Hussain 2016; Dwyer 2000; Dwyer, Shah, and Sanghera 2008; Hussain 2005) in ethnic minority identity formation fleshed out. However, little research has emphasised the racialisation of class alongside the racialisation of the nation in processes of second generation (referring to the first generation of South Asian migrants to be British born) ethnic minority identity formation, particularly for those in middle class social locations. This paper goes further in filling this research gap to draw on the particularities of this amongst across a heterogeneous British South Asian sample, by drawing on specificities of religion and gender.

Focusing on the dual and interrelated mechanisms of racialisation and whiteness to do this allows us to wield both ‘ethnicity’, in reference to the specific heritages (encompassing language, religion, tradition) of the groups and individuals in question, as well as the broader concept of ‘race’, an historical and ideological form of classification that encompasses shifting notions of difference – cultural, intellectual, emotional as well as biological – across groups (Hall 1997). Whereas a focus on ethnicity avoids the biological determinism inherent in ideas of race and appeals, in part, to the self-definitions of members (Mason 2000, 104), it is important to understand how racial meanings underlie identities (Gilroy 1987), particularly when it comes to social exclusion and othering. In retaining the concept of race, we must consider the intersectional dimensions of racialisation (Garner and Selod 2015) - in the case of this paper dimensions of religion and gender – and primarily the centrality of class to racial formation.

The next two sections give an overview of the divergent social mobility⁴ trajectories of the British South Asian groups under discussion, and the subsequent socio-cultural positioning of some as ‘good’ for the nation and others as ‘bad’. Following this is an evaluation of the literature on the racialisation of the nation, spotlighting religion (Islam primarily) and gender. The research gap in relation to the co-constitution of Britishness, whiteness and middle classness, and the salience of classed as well as racialised identities and experiences to further understanding ethnic minority national identity amongst middle class groups, will then be underscored.

British South Asian mobility

Much research has found persistent intergenerational disadvantage amongst British South Asian diasporic groups – particularly Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups (Heath and Li 2017; Khattab et al. 2011; Modood 2004) - which has a distinct religious (Heath and Martin 2013; Longhi, Nicoletti, and Platt 2013) as well as ethnic effect. Most Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants arrived in the UK from the 1950s, 60s and 70s with poor adaptive resources, unlike many Indian immigrants from Punjab or East Africa (Ballard 2003), and suffered from economic and social marginalisation given racist and anti-Muslim discrimination in immigration, housing and employment. Even though each wave of post-war immigration has been posited as a potential threat to

the cohesion and character of the British national community (Burkett 2013), Muslim cultures have been particularly targeted as culturally and socio-economically backwards and antithetical to a British way of life (Garner 2012). Despite the growing prosperity of these groups today, they still suffer from significant and disproportionate ethno-religious penalties in the education system and labour market (Heath and Li 2017). There is also an intersectional gender effect (Heath and Martin 2013; Clark and Drinkwater 2007). Karlsen, Nazroo, and Smith (2020) found that the pattern of economic disadvantage for South Asian women over time was more consistent than for men. Effects by ethnicity, religion and gender are not only felt by the immigrant but the British-born generation, suggesting that there is a distinct ethnic penalty at play in the labour market (Karlsen, Nazroo, and Smith 2020, 899).

Mobility and the 'model minority' framing

Although British Bangladeshis and Pakistanis have been gaining traction in education and the labour market, these ethnic discrepancies are notable at the level of occupation. In 2019, 33.2% of workers from the Indian ethnic group were in professional jobs, in comparison to 18.8% of Pakistani / Bangladeshis, and in relation to approximately 21.9% of Black, 22.2% of Mixed, and 20.7% of White British (ONS 2020). There are also implications of this for the sociocultural perceptions of different ethnic groups. The 'model minority' framing of some groups in the UK sets out socio-economically successful and socially integrated groups like the British Indian community (Gillborn 2008) as 'deserving' immigrants against others that are less deserving, due to their relatively slower social mobility trajectories, and in the case of Muslim groups as a function of their ethnoreligious 'otherness' (Alexander 2000). Modern nation states like Britain position values and behaviours like hard work - rooted in the Weberian Protestant work ethic - financial stability and social respectability in proximity to being a 'deserving' citizen (Anderson 2013). These are institutionalised within bordering practices and sometimes reproduced by ethnic minorities themselves, not only in relation to immigration and citizenship (Kapoor and Narkowicz 2019) but the informal and formal 'everyday bordering' in which citizens are tasked with judging who has a legitimate claim to national belonging (Yuval-Davis and 2011) by classed and racialised moral criteria. Given that 'Britishness' has traditionally been reified as a system of values, attitudes and behaviours linked to legacies of Empire and White British exceptionalism (Garner 2012), these attributes are harnessed to determine the racialised and classed boundaries of Britishness (Clarke 2021; Keddie 2014; Garner 2012), both in relationship to formal citizenship and belonging to an imagined national community.

The racialisation of national identity

National identification is, against the aforementioned complex ethnic and socio-political backdrop, an often inscrutable phenomenon. Individuals will draw on values, beliefs, practices and public discourses to frame their national identity, often in relation to other group memberships. Burton, Nandi, and Platt (2008), Berry et al. (2006), Modood, Beishon, and Virdee (1994) and Vertovec (1999) note the diversity of ways

in which ethnic minorities self-define in relation to their group memberships, including the hyphenation of identities such as ‘Pakistani-British’. South Asians forge imaginative cultural links to their heritage as well as reimagine Britishness within a complex multicultural context (Alexander and Kim 2013), often wielding British national identity in an inclusive way to accommodate multiple, hybridised identities (Karlsen and Nazroo 2015; Bagguley and Hussain 2016). We cannot suggest that the racialised nature of Britishness thus precludes a sense of national belonging (Nandi and Platt 2015) for ethnic and particularly hyper-racialised Muslims (Redclift 2014; Sian, Law, and Sayyid 2012; Pitcher 2009). Indeed, Karlsen and Nazroo (2015) have found that the overwhelming majority of British South Asian ethno-religious minority groups felt a part of Britain.

Nonetheless, notions of Britishness and national belonging, are intricately and inextricably tied up with ideas of race, ethnicity and religion (Yuval-Davis and 2011). Some research on British South Asian identity has documented the effects of this, research which this paper will directly draw and build on. Vadher and Barrett (2009) identified six ‘boundaries of Britishness’, one of them racial. The racial boundary is an exclusionary boundary drawn by those who are unwilling to identify with a nation ‘whose officially sanctioned and codified history ignores the contributions [of] other peoples’ (2007: 451). Jaspal and Ferozali (2021) similarly identified an exclusionary racial representation of Britishness amongst British South Asian gay men. And for religious minorities in particular, common experiences of Islamophobia bolster an assertive Muslim identity politics (Birt 2013; Sian, Law, and Sayyid 2012) in response to the pitting of ‘Britishness’ against ‘Muslimness’⁵, forging a need to construct a distinctive sense of group identity that provides a sense of psychological coherence as well as self-esteem (Jaspal and Cinirella 2012; Jaspal 2013), and a locus for both social and political belonging above and beyond national identity.

Gender, race and the nation

For women negotiating diasporic identities, gender is both a modality and a lens through which national identity may be negotiated, constructed and internalised (Brah 1996; Dwyer 2000; Dwyer, Shah, and Sanghera 2008). All of the respondents in Dwyer’s (2000) study on identity constructions among young British South Asian Muslim women asserted hybrid British *and* Asian identity, expressing a desire for belonging – and potentially acceptance – amongst multiple communities of belonging. This is against a backdrop of hyper-racialisation where Muslim women are construed as victims of a backwards culture (Razack 2004). South Asian women have to manage not only these negative socio-political stereotypes but the often highly gendered cultural and community norms of the ‘fields’ they inhabit. They thus adopt and translate – rather than wholesale reject – cultural norms and identities to maintain ‘continuities with the past, whilst being successful in their personal projects in their present’ (Bagguley and Hussain 2016, 7). As per Puwar (2004), however, exposure to heavily gendered as well as classed and racialised spaces such as predominantly White, elite corporate environments affects how minority women professionals perceive, internalise, and ‘act’ upon their social identities within a situated context of hegemonic whiteness, elitism and masculinity.

British middle classness

The role of class, both in relation to classed experiences, the status conferred by class, and the mediation of middle class privilege by race, ethnicity and religion is not yet sufficiently foregrounded in the literature on British South Asian national identification. Daye (1994), Song (2003) and Rollock et al. (2013; 2014) among others explore the identities and lived experiences of the racialised middle classes. Middle class ethnic minorities continue to hold positions of exceptionality in middle class spaces, and are not immune to scrutiny, ‘othering’ and hyper-racialisation on a daily basis (Song 2003, 31). Signs of working classness must also be internalised to adapt to the classed as well as racialised norms of the middle class professional environment, where race is read onto working classness (Archer 2011). An important question which has not been explored in the literature on ethnic minority identity is thus the extent to which their sense of belonging to Britain is contingent may be how well they ‘fit’ – culturally, racially and otherwise – a British *middle class* norm. Thus, to understand national identification in the context of the racialisation of ‘Britishness’, class is highly contingent.

Method

The findings in this paper draw from a qualitative study from 2014 to 2018 of the socio-political identity frameworks of twenty British-born Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Participants were chosen to fit one of two sub-major professional groups in the ISCO-08 (The International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008) structure – Science and Engineering, and Legal. Professionals, high-grade technicians, administrators, and managers (of large and small firms) often represent occupational middle classness (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993), and the fields of Law and Engineering can be construed as ‘established’ professions characterised by social closure (Weber 1978) along the lines of class background, gender, and race (SRA 2017; RAE 2015). The aim was not to engage in comparison between the two fields, but to construct a sensible definition of ‘middle class’ – applicable to a British South Asian context – given that occupation is ‘generally a good and economical indicator of position in social space’ (Bourdieu 1987, 4).

The recruitment process began by contacting engineering and law firms featured at the top of key online trade publication league tables such as the *Legal 500*. It then branched off into identifying and directly contacting (i) smaller firms and (ii) organisational bodies such as the *Law Society*. The final sample was drawn from a broad set of organisations, from small ethnic minority firms to large, international firms. The age range of the qualitative sample is 25–60 years to capture those fully qualified but at different stages of their career, nonetheless all attached to a firm and thus to the profession. Those who have been resident in the UK all or most of their lives i.e. emigrated as infants or born here were recruited to consider British South Asian more so than immigrant identity, the latter of which harbours its own specific field and focus of research in relation to nationality and citizenship. Although equal numbers of Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis as well as a gender balance was sought, the final sample was slightly weighted towards Indian females and male Bangladeshis (see Figure 1 for demographic information of each research participant). Participants were drawn from London,

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender identity</i>	<i>Age range</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Class background (parents' occupation(s))</i>	<i>Self-defined ethno-religious identity</i>
Anita	Female	50-55	West London	Senior management role in corporate law firm	Middle-class	Indian Bengali Hindu
Priya	Female	30-35	West London	Energy manager in a large corporate firm	Working-class	Indian Gujarati Hindu
Rakhi	Female	25-30	North London	Associate solicitor in corporate law firm	Middle-class	Indian Gujarati Hindu
Sunil	Male	30-35	London (area unspecified)	Technology lead for government organisation	Working-class	Indian Gujarati Hindu
Hasan	Male	40-45	South East London	Solicitor's firm owner and practitioner	Working-class	Bangladeshi Sylheti Muslim
Mohan	Male	50-55	Warwickshire	Engineering entrepreneur with own firm	Working-class	Indian Punjabi Sikh
Deepak	Male	35-40	East London	Associate lawyer in corporate law firm	Working-class	Indian Gujarati Hindu
Zain	Male	50-55	Birmingham	Social housing lawyer and community leader	Working-class	Pakistani Punjabi Muslim
Farhan	Male	35-40	East London	Solicitor-advocate in small local law firm	Working-class	Bangladeshi Sylheti Muslim
Neha	Female	25-30	West London	Junior engineer	Working-class	Indian Punjabi Hindu
Nadya	Female	35-40	East London	Criminal lawyer	Working-class	Bangladeshi Muslim
Hussain	Male	40-45	Birmingham	Solicitor-advocate within own firm	Working-class	Bangladeshi Sylheti
Baljit	Male	50-55	Birmingham	Solicitor- advocate and founding partner of firm	Working-class	Indian Punjabi Sikh
Aisha	Female	35-40	Manchester	Prison solicitor	Working-class	Pakistani Muslim
Tariq	Male	30-35	London (area unspecified)	Network manager for engineering firm	Working-class	Pakistani Muslim
Karim	Male	40-45	East London	Legal aid lawyer	Working-class	Bangladeshi Sylheti
Ali	Male	35-40	London (area unspecified)	Architectural engineer in large firm	Middle -class	Bangladeshi
Bisma	Female	30-35	East London	Legal aid lawyer	Working-class	Bangladeshi Muslim
Dinesh	Male	50-55	Leicester	Immigration lawyer and law firm director and co-owner	Working-class	Indian Gujarati Hindu
Nabeela	Female	45-50	Manchester	Employment lawyer	Working-class	Pakistani Punjabi Muslim

Figure 1 . Demographic information of research participants

Birmingham, Leicester and Manchester, cities that are super-diverse (Pemberton 2017) with large South Asian populations (ONS 2020). 2.3% of the UK population consisted of Indians in 2011, with most residing in London, and the East and West Midlands. Pakistanis comprised 2% of the UK population, and most live in London, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the West Midlands. Bangladeshis form a much smaller 0.8% of the total population, although 2019 estimates by the ONS suggest that this population has exceeded the one percent mark (ONS 2021). There were, due to the smaller size of the Bangladeshi group and particularly Bangladeshi professionals as aforementioned, issues with securing participants with this ethnic heritage, despite their concentration within East London. However, ethnic-specific professional networking groups on *LinkedIn* were a useful way in to recruitment here.

Data collection and analysis

Ethical approval was received from a departmental ethics committee prior to interviews being undertaken. Informed consent was obtained from each individual. Each conversation was built up incrementally around different dimensions of social identity, lasting between 45 minutes and 2 hours each in total. Discussing identity from the standpoint

of their own subjectivities allowed for extensive discussion of how they self-identify as well as how they feel they are perceived by others, the latter more marked in discussions of national identity by Jaspal and Ferozali's (2021) respondents. Each interview was transcribed and coded separately and sequentially via qualitative analysis software (NVivo), in line with an inductive (Blumer 1969; Glaser and Strauss 1967) and abductive (Charmaz 2008) approach designed to understand emergent findings. Many of these were complex and unexpected. For example, the gender distinction in identity work arose through the coding process but was less anticipated than the religious distinction given the wealth of literature on the latter. Initial broad codes were delineated into cross-cutting sub-themes through re-readings. The second and third round of coding identified more specific mechanisms of identity negotiations across transcripts, which were contextualised against case classifications (relevant demographic information about each participant including gender, ethnicity and religion). The analysis threw up the need for theoretical reflection beyond the sociological / socio-psychological sub-field of identity to broader literature on race, racialisation and whiteness. These reflections formed the basis of the theoretical argument of this paper.

The aim of the analysis was not to draw generalisable conclusions, but to (i) understand individual narratives situated within specific racial and cultural contexts (Archer 2012) and (ii) draw out nascent group patterns and discursive movements specific to conversations around British identity. Karlsen and Nazroo (2015, 885) highlight the problems of carrying out quantitative analysis of South Asian groups, due to small sample sizes when delineating ethnic groups by religion and gender, and also the issue of survey non-response amongst ethnic minority groups in particular. Qualitative methods are thus often best placed to analyse, on a deliberately small sample level, the identity frameworks of 'heterogeneous individuals who will relate to their ethnicities, religions, genders, economic activity and other aspects of their lives in different ways' (Karlsen, Nazroo, and Smith 2020, 900).

The following section will outline key modalities of national identification that highlight the salience of the racialisation of nation to conceptualisations of and identifications with 'Britishness', and their contingency on the racialisation of class. The analysis section draws on excerpts from a selection of participants throughout, that best exemplify three core themes: (i) the racialised limits to national identification, even when incorporated within a hybridised social identity framework, (ii) the subversion and deconstruction of the implicit superiority of (White) Britishness by the assertion of South Asian socio-economic exceptionality or the overarching salience of Muslim identity and (iii) the reproduction of ethnic othering to place oneself in proximity to dominant norms, values and behaviours associated with British middle classness. Specificities of gender and religion will be highlighted where relevant.

The limits of majority/minority identity hybridisation

The women in the sample tended to engage in largely constructive rather than deconstructive identity work. They hybridised or juxtaposed their various social identities by their respective contributions to their social identity frameworks. Jaspal and Cinirella (2012) might attribute this to the need for psychological coherence in one's broader sense of self through the reproduction of a multicultural and inclusive sense of

Britishness (Vadher and Barrett 2009; Jaspal and Ferozali 2021). In this sample, however, this was notably gendered, aligning with Dwyer (2000) and Brah's (1996) research on young Asian women's negotiation and transformation of binary identities. Rakhi, an Indian Hindu lawyer from a self-identified middle class background, associated aspects of cultural capital with her British (national) identity. She feels she has thrived professionally and attributed this in part to her British birth. Opportunity, therefore, is the cornerstone of her British, middle class experience (Vadher and Barrett 2009; Jaspal and Ferozali 2021). Unlike most of the other interviewees, both of Rakhi's parents are professionals and she self-identified as middle class. When she talks about the benefits she has gleaned from being British, therefore, much of this is arguably a function of her middle class upbringing in British society and the cultural capital she has gleaned as a result of this, mediated as it may be by race (Rollock et al. 2013, 2014; Meghji 2016, 2017; Wallace 2018). The less tangible, more affective sense of who she is as an individual is rooted in her Indian identity, much like Bangladeshi Muslim lawyer Nadya in her assertion '*I am Bangladeshi*' and Indian Hindu lawyer Anita when she states '*I am Indian*'. Nonetheless, they all identified as British Asian, British Indian or British Bangladeshi, with Priya (an Indian Hindu engineer) going further in conflating these identities under the term '*Brindian*':

'I am British in the sense that I was born in this country, I was brought up here, I've benefited from all of its institutions and opportunities, but who I am as an individual and where I've come from is very firmly rooted in my Indian roots' (Rakhi)

'I call myself Brindian!' (Priya)

'I'm a British Asian but, you know, I still have a lot of affiliation, you know, my culture and my tradition and everything, whichever way you look at it. I am Bangladeshi' (Nadya)

'I feel very Indian, you know, I am Indian [...] I'd say British Indian [...] I've grown up in- this is my home. I know more about British culture, British life' (Anita)

This form of majority/minority identity negotiation which is well documented in the 'cultural hybridity' (Dwyer 2000) literature on ethnic minority and specifically South Asian identity formation (Burton, Nandi, and Platt 2008; Berry et al. 2006; Modood, Beishon, and Virdee 1994) didn't preclude some of these same participants expressing their unease with identifying as British. Despite referring to herself as British Asian, Nadya framed the possibility of hybridising her majority and minority social identities as, ultimately, an impossible compromise of conflicting loyalties. This was in response to a perpetual sense of outsidership she expressed throughout her interview, alluding to the racialised exclusions to 'Britishness' which root national identity in conflict rather than reconciliation (Valluvan 2019):

'You do feel like it's somebody else's country that you're imposing on, erm, sometimes I find it really difficult to call myself a British Bangladeshi or a British Asian [...] it's very difficult to kind of say oh well where do your loyalties lie, it's not, it's not so clear cut' (Nadya)

The salience of class to feelings of unbelonging was best explicated by Bisma, a Bangladeshi Muslim legal aid lawyer, in her account of othering within a largely White and middle class place of work:

'I remember falling out with a barrister once where, you know, I found the questioning of a Bangladeshi grandmother who was seeking guardianship of her mixed race child, her daughter was half English half Bangladeshi, and she was asked questions like 'how would you communicate with her' and 'how many non-Bangladeshi friends do you have', I thought it sounded like the Norman Tebbit test, how British are you' (Bisma)

Her 'in-betweenness' - affiliated ethnically with the individual being racialised but professionally with the individual negatively racialising - underscores the contingency of the racialisation of the nation on the racialisation of class. Racial gatekeeping around what it is to be British (Elgenius and Garner 2021) are not only felt abstractly but directly experienced in White, middle class spaces by ethnic minority professionals, where to be ethnic minority is to be undereducated (Archer 2011) and self-segregating from majority (White) society (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006). The everyday bordering practices (Yuval-Davis and 2011) here, with this particular barrister drawing on racialised stereotypes to interrogate the 'Britishness' of the individual in question, signify the limits to which minority and majority identities can be unproblematically hybridised when British identity is so hyper-politicised. Bisma and Priya also noted the conspicuity associated with 'being brown' which further problematises recognition as British given the co-constitution of Britishness and whiteness (Garner 2012). This can be linked to the innateness of ethnic identity discussed earlier. Although these participants didn't necessarily suggest that being visibly non-White disrupts their identification with a (racialised) British identity, there was nonetheless an alignment with Vadher and Barrett's (2009) 'racial' framing of Britishness / Jaspal and Ferozali's (2021) 'racial representation' in which 'to be British is to be White' (Vadher and Barrett 2009, 450):

'I'm British Asian, there's no hiding that, the colour on my skin is brown' (Priya)

'At the end of the day your brown skin gives it away according to them, so, you know, I think, I mean, do I still feel this need to say I'm Bangladeshi but I was born here' (Bisma)

Problematising White, British middle classness

Amongst many of the male respondents, the problematisation of British identity went further in the (i) destabilisation of the normative associations between whiteness, Britishness and middle classness (Wallace 2018) and / or (ii) the assertion of the salience of a strong religious identity (Birt 2013; Sian, Law, and Sayyid 2012) and its compatibility with middle classness. With regard to the former, they placed British culture in a hierarchy of value below their own ethnic minority culture, drawing on the culturally exceptional phenomenon of rapid South Asian social mobility. This is exemplified by Indian Sikh lawyer Baljit's disparaging comments on the British class system and 'British culture':

'We talk about caste systems in our, er, country but the divides between the upper class, middle class and lower class in England is severe [...] I look around at our own family and the number of professionals, how have they jumped so quickly, whereas that would never have happened in the British culture' (Baljit)

With regard to the latter, the role of religion – specifically Muslim identity - was conceptualised as having a complex relationship with British identity (Saini 2022), often

operating as a source of overarching identity salience. Unlike Priya, who reconciled her majority and minority identities to an arguable extreme by conflating ‘British’ and ‘Indian’ to describe herself as ‘*Brindian*’, neither Bangladeshi lawyer Karim nor Pakistani engineer Tariq expressed clear hybrid identities, instead asserting: ‘*Muslim first, the religion defines, you know, comes first and defines who you are, and then, you know, you happen to be a Muslim who is English*’ (Karim). Bangladeshi Muslim lawyer Hasan goes further to note a longstanding conflict between Britishness and Muslimness: ‘*It’s the age-old of question about are you British first or are you Muslim first*’. He noted at many times during his interview that the British establishment has a problem understanding the ‘*strong identity*’ religion imparts on Muslim immigrants and why social mobility does not de facto lead to secularisation: ‘*Why is it that Asian erm educated intelligent middle class Muslims, why is it that they are so religious?*’ The co-constitution of Britishness not just with whiteness (Jaspal and Ferozali 2021) but with middle classness means national identity has a radically different meaning for middle class ethnic minorities, particularly those with hyper-racialised Muslim identity (Redclift 2014; Sian, Law, and Sayyid 2012; Pitcher 2009). This is not necessarily one of hyper-victimisation (Jaspal and Ferozali 2021) but in some cases of self-awareness and self-assuredness.

The reflexivity these interviewees engage in to address the cultural preconceptions they believe flourish about British Muslims is indicative of (i) a sense of not only strong but informed religiosity that has been moulded in part by the hyper-racial discourse surrounding British Muslims, framed as an internal threat not only to the security of the nation (Redclift 2014; Pitcher 2009) but to a sense of national cohesion (Meer 2014; Birt 2013), and (ii) a willingness to – unlike the female respondents earlier – frame identities hierarchically rather than in a hybridised way. This is not necessarily in response to an internal conflict between minority and majority identity, but an awareness of the objective framing of minority and majority identity as conflictual and incompatible, theorised by Valluvan (2019) among others.

Proximity to White British middle class culture

Some respondents, however, sought to align themselves with dominant British norms, values and behaviours. Bangladeshi Muslim lawyer Farhan stated that he’s closer (culturally at least) to ‘*the British culture*’, and not at all to his Bangladeshi identity. He operationalised this with vague reference to ‘*good attributes*’ of British society (he implies later on that drinking alcohol constitutes a bad attribute), reflective of the bad immigrant/good immigrant dichotomy noted by Anderson (2013) and Kapoor and Narkowicz (2019) in which moral classed and racialised judgements form the basis of criteria for national inclusion. Indian Sikh engineer Mohan, like Farhan, suggests he is closer culturally to ‘*the English*’⁶, pointing more specifically to work-life balance. This is an implicit critique, perhaps, of the immigrant work ethic rather than a veneration of it, as per Baljit in his celebration of South Asian social mobility. Although British South Asians may have ‘achieved’ middle classness, they still – for Mohan – struggle with assimilating to British middle class lifestyles:

'Culturally I wouldn't describe myself as Bengali [...] I would probably identify myself culturally as more, probably more close to the British culture- [...] when I say British culture I'm referring to some of the sort of good attributes that one expects and sees in society' (Farhan)

'... everything that my English mates do, I do exactly the same thing. Holidays, families, you know, taking the children away, that kind of thing. You know, we, I, I'm not, we, it's very much more what the English than what the Indians do' (Mohan)

Whereas the immigrant work ethic has long been a means for certain minority ethnic groups to position themselves, or be positioned, as hard-working model minorities and thus deserving citizens (Anderson 2013), Mohan's rejection of the work ethic brings him symbolically closer to his White middle class friends. However, both Baljit and Mohan, whether asserting cultural superiority/exceptionality or engaging in cultural critique, set British or English culture apart from South Asian culture. Integration into the British middle classes is an ongoing aspiration, as much moral and cultural as socio-economic, but both still place themselves outside its symbolic boundaries, which they in part construct. They may place themselves in proximity to Britishness through alignment with its perceived norms, values and behaviours, therefore, but do not necessarily see themselves as intrinsically and authentically British.

Conclusion

Whereas some sociological literature has asserted the co-constitution of whiteness, Britishness and middle classness – namely Garner (2012) - most have stressed the intersection of race and class (Wallace 2018; Meghji 2016, 2017) or race and the nation (Garner 2012; Valluvan 2019). This paper fills a lacuna of sociological identity research on class, race and nation in relation to middle class ethnic minority identity formation. It has established the co-constituted hegemonies of whiteness, Britishness and middle classness that underpin middle class British South Asian identity formation. The racialisation of the nation has deep-seated implications for belonging for racialised minorities which are both explicitly and implicitly discernible in the ways they express and rationalise their social identities, however, this is highly contingent on class as a racialised phenomenon itself (Saini 2022). All the British-born South Asian professionals interviewed in this study expressed – in one way or another - a sense of 'outsiderness' or 'otherness' that is both racialised and classed, indicating that the South Asian middle classes are perpetually situated within the boundaries of (socio-economic) privilege and socio-cultural exclusion (Archer 2011).

This study firstly found that the hybridisation or juxtaposition of majority and minority identifications adopted by many of the interview respondents - particularly the women - exemplifies the process of identity work ethnic minorities engage in. They do this to make sense of, as well as to embed themselves within, the different communities of belonging that define their world, and to reconcile othering and exclusion with gratitude to a nation that has facilitated their socio-economic success. To draw on but disrupt the typologies of British boundary-making by Jaspal and Ferozali (2021) and Vadher and Barrett (2009), the 'instrumental' affiliation to British identity often intersected with the 'racial' understandings of Britishness as an exclusionary identity. It secondly found that many of the (largely male) respondents subverted the perceived superiority of Britishness by seeking to place themselves and their ethnic or ethno-religious culture – one

that has defied working class reproduction - in a hierarchy of value above it. The introspection of what it means to be British was more pronounced for the Muslim respondents, which supports much of the research on the hyper-racialisation of Muslim identity (Ahmad and Evergeti 2010; Garner and Selod 2015). Thirdly, some respondents constructed a classed notion of Britishness with which they could identify with and pseudo-assimilate to, but then in turn 'othered' Britishness, despite being born and brought up in Britain.

There are both academic and practical implications of these findings. Academic, in underscoring the contemporary importance of class formation and transformation to the sociological and socio-psychological research on ethnic minority identification. Practical, in understanding the potential outcomes for ethnic minorities' inclusion within a national community with increasingly racialised borders in a post-Brexit world. The racialised and classed boundaries of Britishness reinforces how national identity construction and negotiation is an inherently socio-political project. Given the situated nature of identity, however, an analysis like this may benefit from a mixed methods perspective incorporating ethnographic as well as interview-based methods. This is something noted by Jaspal and Ferozali (2021, 9) specifically in relation to national identity who state: 'it is noteworthy that representations of Britishness also operated in a context-specific manner'. This would impart an understanding of how situated identities are framed and re-framed in predominantly White, middle class, professional workplaces, where the salience of ethnoracial, religious and gender marginality is amplified and of immediate importance.

Notes

1. 'Britishness' is a contested and multi-faceted concept which encompasses notions of citizenship, identity, culture, values, lifestyles and beliefs (Jacobson 2004). These dimensions will be explored in the analysis section in relation to respondents' own negotiations, constructions and deconstructions of national identity. The terms 'British identity', 'national identity' and 'majority identity' will be conflated throughout the course of this paper.
2. Owen (2007) defines whiteness not as a social identity but a structuring property of the social world, a racial colonial legacy embedded within all systems, reproducing White racial privilege both covertly and overtly.
3. Defining the 'middle class' is sociologically complex but operationalised as professional occupation in this study (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993). A middle class socio-economic location can also be contingent on business ownership, elite education, high income, property ownership and / or other wealth. In an ethnic minority first generation context, middle classness has not usually been reproduced intergenerationally as the majority of South Asian immigrants, particularly Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, occupied working class jobs on arrival to the UK.
4. Social mobility in this context describes an upwards socio-economic trajectory between the immigrant (predominantly working class) and British born (increasingly middle class) generations.
5. There is extensive literature on Sikh identity politics (Ahluwalia 2019; Jaspal 2013) and the role of caste in Sikh diasporic identification (Judge and Bal 2008; Shani 2002). However, in-depth consideration of this is beyond the scope of this paper.
6. Although Mohan didn't specifically discuss race - referring to the 'English' in lieu of 'White British' - the racial connotations are clear. Further research around the construction of 'Englishness' in relation to but increasingly in opposition to 'Britishness' as an even more

racially exclusive identity is discussed by Garner (2012) on White identity construction, but bears further research.

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