Race and ethnicity: the relationship to identity

' Race'and/or ethnicity both play an important role in defining who we are, how we seeourselves and how we are treated by others'. Discuss.

In order to critique the above statement, we need to explore what we mean by ' *defining who we are, how we see ourselves and how we are treated by others'* – Identity. The themes of' race' and ethnicitywill be discussed as they are central to the debate. These issues will be explored in reference to South Asian Muslims in Britain and how they see themselves, how they are treated by others and whether ' race' and ethnicity are the defining factors in shaping their identities.

Identityis ' *people's concepts of who they are, ofwhat sort of people they are, and how they relate to others'* (Hogg andAbrams 1988, p2).

> ' *Identity is a work in progress, a negotiated space between ourselves and others; constantly being reappraised and very much linked to the circulation of cultural meanings in society.'* (Taylor and Spencer 2004p. 4)

Identity is a much debated subject wheresociologists differ on what influences the formation of identities. However arecurring theme of structure and/or agency influencing how identities areformed can be observed. Functionalist and traditional Marxist ideology isconstructed on the basis that identity is a product of socialization; anacceptance of the culture of society and class that one is born into. Postmodernists on the other hand argue that identities are fluid and multiple, therefore not constrained to an acceptance of a position into which a person isborn in society (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008p. 709).

Equally important to theconcept of identityis ' social identity'. According to the social identity theorists Tajfel &Turner(1979) social identity was a definition of a person's self-concept according to social group membership and personal identity is ' *that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his (or her) knowledge of his(or her) membership of a social group'* (Tajfel, 1978p. 63). Jenkins(1996), argues that social identity is negotiable- it is a process of establishing similarities and differences between self and others and in turn those that are similar share an ' identity'. Jenkins believes that by establishing different identity groups creates an awareness of a groups traits and equips you with knowledge on how to interact with them, regardless of whether the knowledge and understanding of these groups maybe limited or even wrong.

Thereis a general consensus that a person's identity is multifarious and fluid, aperson's alignment with different social groups is constructed of many factorswhich include, national origin, class, gender, race, ethnicity, and so on. Bradley(1997) argues that in the postmodern approach to identity, class is becomingless important as a source of identity and that ' race', ethnicity, nationality, culture and religion are being stressed upon more as markers of identity. Bradley goes further to say factors of identities are grounded in inequality, social division and differences. For the purpose of this assignment I will befocusing on whether ' race' and ethnicity are defining factors in shapingpeoples identities concentrating on the lives of South Asian British Muslims.

' Race'is a complex and contested issue. The term ' race' is used to categorise peopleinto groups according to biological attributes; mainly the

colour of one'sskin. However the concept of ' race has been manipulated to breed ideas ofsuperiority and inferiority, which can be illustrated throughout history; colonization, British imperialism and apartheid in South Africa are to mentionjust a few, resulting in exploitation around the world being justified becauseof the colour of a person's skin. Social scientists are divided on the use ofthe term ' race', some believing that it is ' nothing more than an ideologicalconstruct', while others disagree believing that ' race' is still held as adefining factor for some groups, resulting in the term ' race' being used ininverted commas by some sociologists (Giddens, 2008p. 632).

Ethnicityis interconnected with the term ' race', both using the process of racializationto define groups; however ethnicity has been embraced by some sociologistsbelieving it to be a positive construct relying on individuals ascribingmembership to a group where they see themselves as culturally distinct fromothers. Giddens states that ' ethnicity is central to individual and groupidentity, but its significance does vary amongst individuals' (Giddens, 2008p. 633).

Inmulticultural Britain today, cultural hybridity adds to the confusion of aperson's identity. A multicultural society with a cultural diversity is the productof immigration, creating rise to issues of discrimination, adjustment andassimilation for not only those who immigrate to a new land but also for thegenerations to come. South Asian British Muslims are a group that is constantlyin a state of flux, adapting and adopting cultures to form a hybrid identitywhich consists of elements of a nation which has been left behind and a newnation whose culture is in conflict of that of their forefathers. Although a sharedgroundwork of religion, culture and migrant status are the

foundations to help BritishSouth Asian Muslims construct their identities, there is vast disparity infactors of economic circumstances, nation of origin and education.

Unfortunatelyethnicity along with race have become markers of inequality for South AsianBritish Muslims in British society today, affecting all component of theirsocial life i. e. education, employment, class etc. In addition to this, theMuslim identity of this group is also seen as incompatible with British societyand the loyalty and affiliation of British Muslims coming under scrutiny. This is further exasperated by BritishMuslims being portrayed as ' disconnected from and even antagonistic to Britishidentity' (Thomas, 2009p. 1). It is largely portrayed that events of 9/11 andmore so 7/7 have produced a group in British society that is viewed withsuspicion and animosity. However, British Muslims were in fact becoming the targets for social unrest beforethese events. The nights of summer 2001were disturbed by violent unrest in the North of England. The British National Party (BNP) hadsuccessfully fuelled a fire of suspicion, animosity and distrust between Muslimand White communities of Bradford, Oldham and Burnley. A clash between Muslimsof mainly South Asian descent, white extremists and the police resulted in someof the worst race riots in Britain.

Ifanything, the 'riots' and events of 7/7 highlight the need to look at faith andreligion as well as race as constructs of ethnicity. The example of the SouthAsian Muslim community in the North of England cannot be seen as purely basedon faith and religion, as Muslim from other regions (such as Europe and the MiddleEast) do not share the same ' identity'. Similarly purely race cannot be seen as markers of identity andethnicity, as others of

the same race, the Punjabi Sikhs or the Indian Hindus, are ethnically similar, yet were not part of this phenomenon. If anything, atleast for the south Asian Muslim community, religion plays an important part indefining their ethnicity. This perception however may not be universallyapplicable to other groups of Muslims or indeed south Asians, or at least maynot have as much of an impact in defining other group identities.

Acceptingreligion is embodied in ethnicity; the rise of ' Islamophobia' resulted in manyBritish Muslims questioning their identities. Many have been on the ' brunt of suspicionaccompanied by hostility, and have had doubts cast on them regarding theirloyalty as British citizens' (Abbas, 2005). Furthermore ' Islamophobia' hasbecome recognised as the leading force of racial intolerance in recent years(Marsh & Keating, 2006), in spite of this young British South Asian Muslimsstill regard as the most important factor of their identity, however theybelieve that this ' Islamic identity isnotincompatible with British national identity' (Thomas, 2009p. 5). BritishMuslims are torn between loyalties to their religion and culture and intoadopting and assimilating into ' British' culture, which arises in conflict andidentity crisis. Young British Muslims are, more and more, encompassing acultural hybridity of identity, picking and choosing between values of theirforefathers and the norms of British society (Akhtar , 2011).

Aspart of maintaining the cultural norms and values of the previous generations, the institution of marriage and the role of family are seen as an essentialpart of their identity. As such thepractice of arranged marriage, partly to ensure that these values aremaintained in a ' controlled' sense is common. In some South Asian families, cousin-marriages are also the norm.

Young British South Asian Muslims are findingthemselves torn between traditional values of arranged marriage and westernconcepts of relationships resulting in intergenerational conflict andre-evaluation of certain aspects of their cultural identity, these conflictingideologies were to give rise to the phenomenon of ' forced marriages', whereparents would manipulate their offspring with emotional and physical coercionto achieve their desired outcome of a culturally befitting union, it must bestressed however that ' forced marriage is not a religious issue but a culturalone..

Samad(2004p. 20-21) looks at how South Asian British Muslim females have adoptedtextual Islam to contest traditional cultural approaches to arranged marriages, a minority rejected the practice however most manipulated it to suit their nowmore western values of choice but with their parents cultural approval. Samadalso looked at how The South Asian Muslim women contested their parent'spressure of wearing traditional ' *ShalwarKameez'* in favour of western modest clothing, again aligning themselveswith British values and customs. Ansari's(2002p. 15-16.) report supports thesefinding but further adds to it the adoption of the ' hijab' by Muslim women toempower them and ' symbolized this assertion of female Muslim identity'. Howeverthe western view of ' hijabs' as being a form of oppression and ignorancecontradict the notion of empowerment and a positive identity, creating afurther rift in the process of assimilation of Muslims in Britain.

In South Asian communities premaritalrelationships and especially premarital sex is frowned upon and discouraged. Young Muslims are finding themselves caught between a secular society that hasa liberal view on sexual relationships and a traditional community which viewssex as taboo, both

failing to provide appropriate support therefore impactingnegatively on their identity. Alyas karmani (2012) provides a detailed analysisof how cultural constraints on sex and relationships affect south Asian maleswhich in turn lead to deviant sexual behaviour which cannot be attributed toeither culture. Inappropriate sexual ' relationships' with young white girls whoare often vulnerable, termed as ' grooming' is the new moral panic of Britishsociety. Medias over amplification of South Asian men involvement in thesephenomena has further alienated booth cultures and created a wedge of distrustbetween them. While karmani acknowledges that this phenomenon exists in thesouth Asian community he stresses that it is a very small minority. However hegoes on to say that the younger generation need to be better educated inattitudes toward women.

Inconclusion research suggests that British South Asian Muslims are at acrossroads with their identities, negotiating between an ethnic cultureencompassing values and beliefs which contradict with ' Britishness'. On the surface this may paint a gloomypicture however questioning of archaic cultural beliefs has enabled the newgeneration of South Asian Muslims to acquire an identity constructed fromagency, assimilating into certain aspects of the host countries culture but retainingmarkers of their cultural ethnicity which they deem as pivotal in defining whothey are and where they come from.

AlthoughSouth Asian Muslims have come a long way in carving out an identity for themselves, it is apparent that their ' ethnicity' is significant in laying the foundationsto construct these identities. Young south Asian Muslims have not completelyabandoned their cultural roots, but rather have

chosen to manipulate and mouldthe values of their ancestors to manufacture an identity which encompassBritish norms while being specifically unique to them. It is needless to sayfactors like education, social class, gender are also significant in definingwho they are, but ethnicity is by far the most important in asserting theiridentity.

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