Intersectionality is personal: Narratives of two South-Asian Muslim migrant young women

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Abstract (600)

The objective of this paper is to study the personal narratives of two South-Asian Muslim migrant young women; encompassing the ways they shape power relationships between their ‘extensional intersectional powers’ and their ‘intentional agentic core’. Both these young women are keen to access science careers. We seek to shed light on the multiplicity of their relationships with powers and inequality, discrimination and privilege within their lived social settings, and how these relationships shape their science identities and their ambitions to become future scientists.

Our participants are Muslim Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants: research on Pakistani and Bangladeshi women’s science education is very limited. The Social Mobility Commission (2016), for example, has noted that, while there is evidence of black-Caribbean boys’ disengagement in science, ‘there is less evidence to explain differences in STEM uptake across ethnicities [...] Therefore a clear need to deepen the evidence base on these differences is required’ (p. 39). Working class girls of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage are least likely to see themselves as a ‘sciencey person’, in contrast to boys from high-income families (mainly from Chinese and Indian backgrounds), who are most likely to choose science after the compulsory age of science education (2011; Gill & Bell, 2013; Homer, Ryder & Banner, 2014; Royal Society, 2008). Recently, Archer (2018) advanced the use of intersectionality and reported that the majority of the working-class girls position themselves as shy and quiet in the classrooms and, even when some of the girls try to participate, science teachers tend to ignore them. Still, insufficient attention, then, has been focused on the intersectionality of South-Asian female students’ race or ethnicity, gender, and ability affecting their educational outcomes in schools. This is a gap we hope to fill.
Davis (2008) states, ‘‘Intersectionality’ addresses the most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: namely, the acknowledgement of differences among women ... This is because it touches on the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism – the long and painful legacy of its exclusions’ (p. 70). We argue, however, that such struggles can be identified at an individual level, that social structures and institutions form part of the ‘master narratives’ of personal identity. As Wells, Gill, and McDonald (2015) point out, intersectionality analysis at the micro-level can reveal rich and complex identity negotiations - as well as how these identities can interact, nest, and shift. In addition, McCall (2005) notes, intersectionality has the value of bringing into focus lived experience. Moreover, because experience is intersected, a study of its intersectionality is vital.

At the micro-level an intersectionality analysis revealing complicated identity negotiations— in the cases here - of being a school student, a Muslim, and a daughter, as well as how these identities might interact, nest, and shift (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Wells, Gill, & McDonald, 2015). Our context lies within formal educational systems, and we look to illuminate the multiplicity of demands made on migrant Muslim girls in the UK. We trace the ways that ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, multi-nationality and ability all shape the structural dynamics of power and inequality in social spaces and individual identities (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays & Tomlinson, 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Our particular interests lie in the ways in which young women approach the study of science in schools and we use this as a vehicle to explore their ‘personal intersectionality’. For us, then, intersectionality is the study of individuals’ (science) identity; encompassing the ways they shape power relationships between their ‘extensional intersectional powers’ and their ‘intentional agentic core’ (self-identity, science Identity) (Salehjee & Watts, 2020).

Method (400)

In an initial study in 2015 (Salehjee, 2017) we employed face-to-face audio-recorded narrative styled conversations with a sample of British Muslim female students. We used the same techniques again for this paper as a 2019 follow-up study, when we returned to talk to the same girls to gather fresh data on their ‘science intentions’. Along the lines with Cole (2009) we believe personal narratives fits best with this study on intersectionality. As Cole suggested
that the use of personal narratives is a necessary – and vital - facet of intersectional approaches, because narratives demonstrate nuance, layers, and complexity alluding to the subjugation of power relations, subordination, and social context. Focussing down from social intersections to personal situations allowed us to consider how historical processes affect individual responses: gender, age, socio-economic status and numerous other discriminatory factors shape individual actions and reactions.

Our sample comprises girls aged sixteen from a Muslim single-sex independent school in West London. We have chosen just two of the girls here - Ayesha and Hanya - to allow us to highlight their science education and professional choices in some detail, and their responses are intended as illustrative rather than an exhaustive analysis of all the responses we gathered from two studies. We describe our data-gathering approach as ‘conversational interviews’. We assured our participant school and girls of full confidentiality and they were happy with the pseudonyms we assigned them. They were interviewed individually, discussions lasting between forty and fifty minutes. Interview conversations took place within the school, in quiet, private areas, at times convenient to the girls.

Beyond gender, the chosen girls are similar in age (sixteen), heritage (South-Asian - Pakistani and Bangladeshi), migrant status (one-point-five migrant), religion (Muslim), class (working-class), high science achievers (ability), and possessing self-determination to continue with sciences studies. In the analysis, we focused on the ways they shape their science identities based on the intersectionality apparent in their lives. For this paper, we have chosen to share sections of the second stage (2019) interviews, while at the same time featuring the girls’ recollections of previous conversations. We introduce Ayesha and Hanya through short cameos, initially using third-person voices to present snapshots of their past and present science lives, followed by some of their own words.

Conclusion (300)

The intersectional conceptualisation of multiplicity resembled Crenshaw’s (1989) ideas of multiple grounds of identity formation, such as:

- While both of our participants, see themselves as British, they understand the possibilities of being viewed as outsiders because of being immigrants (Ayesha), their working-class status (Hanya) and being Muslim girls - through wearing hijabs (both).
• They want to find ways to challenge ideological stereotyping of Muslims by grasping opportunities as young Muslim women and not waiting for a ‘push’ from others

• While both seemed intent on re-paying the struggles endured by their parents’ migration to the UK, they were also willing to counter their South-Asian parental wishes that align with gender-based professional choices. For both, being multinational migrants provides an opportunity to achieve better science-based careers than was available to their parents

• Both will seek ways to meet the financial struggles of university studies despite Islamic prohibitions on bank interest (Ayesha), and any overt discrimination through wearing a hijab.

This multiplicity in science identity development influences the ways young women experience inequality, discrimination and privilege and their ambitions to become future scientists. The findings acknowledge that intersectional approaches to science identity development of these young women are exclusive despite them being quite similar in many ways and yet very different. Being Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrant working-class young women, they tend to take these social obstacles as opportunities and/or as a challenge rather than multiple-jeopardies; to shape them according to their intentional agency. That said, their responses to external forces differ, as well as the way they negotiate their intersections with these forces as they develop their science identity.

References (400)


