

The Hostile Environment, Brexit, and ‘Reactive’ or ‘Protective Transnationalism’.

Abstract - 149 words

The ‘reactive transnationalism hypothesis’ posits a relationship between discrimination and transnational practice. The concept has generally been studied using quantitative methods but a qualitative lens augments our understanding of two context-specific dimensions: the *nature* of the discrimination involved, and the *types* of transnational behaviour that might be affected. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Bangladesh-origin Muslims in London, Luton and Birmingham, in the UK, we demonstrate how anti-Asian and anti-Muslim racism have been conflated with intensified anti-migrant racism in the context of ‘hostile environment’ immigration policies and the EU Referendum (‘Brexit’), producing an amplification of racist discourses associated with purging the body politic of its non-white bodies. The insecurity generated is altering some people’s relationships to Bangladesh, incentivising investment in land and property ‘back home’. While this represents an example of ‘reactive transnationalism’, we argue that ‘protective transnationalism’ might be a more appropriate way of describing the processes at work.

Keywords: Hostile Environment, Brexit, ‘Reactive Transnationalism’, Islamophobia, Bengali Diaspora, Qualitative Methods

Word count: 8483

Introductionⁱ

In the context of the on-going 'War on Terror' and the current political conflicts in the Middle East, concerns about the transnational practices of British Muslims have received significant media attention. Such concerns have fed into a range of policy proposals with respect to the treatment of people who engage in transnational activities the British government does not support. These include the power to revoke citizenship rights altogether in some cases, as well as deportation, detention, and increased surveillance (Kapoor, 2018; Mills, 2016, Ragazzi, 2016). This interest in the transnational activity of Muslim populations draws on questions of loyalty and legitimacy to distinguish 'suspect citizens' from putatively natural ones (Zamindar, 2007). In doing so, it has brought the constitutionally protected activities of a large number of people under increasing scrutiny (Kundnani, 2014).

The transnational activity of Muslim populations has also been subjected to scrutiny because it has been represented as an impediment to the formation of national and local identifications; a danger to integration in countries of settlement (Snel et al., 2006). Literature on the relationship between transnationalism and integration has, therefore, proliferated. However, within the transnationalism-integration scholarship, the importance of the national political context is somewhat marginalized (Akesson, 2011). This has a tendency to abstract migrant actions and activities from the policy agenda in which they are positioned (Kundnani, 2007). Instead, transnational practice is explained as a function of either the migration process, or the cultural characteristics of the particular migrant group, rather than the context of the receiving society. In relation to the integration of Muslim migrants this is particularly striking. The focus is very often on the characteristics of Muslim migrants, or Islamic culture, in a way that ignores "the role of social and political circumstances in shaping how people make sense of the world and then act upon it" (Kundnani, 2014, 10).

One exception in the literature, however, is in relation to the concept of ‘reactive transnationalism’ (Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002; 2005) which attempts to better understand the local context in which transnational practices take place and, in particular, the impact of discrimination in a country of settlement on transnational identities and relations. The concept is based originally on research in Social Psychology, and has generally been studied using quantitative methods, focussing on the effect of ‘perceived prejudice’ at the individual level. This work has produced important findings, but we argue that a qualitative lens augments our understanding of the processes involved, providing the context and depth that Snel et al (2016) and Herda (2018) suggest has been lacking. The *nature* of the discrimination involved and the *types* of transnational behaviour that might come into play are areas of study that qualitative work can help uncover. Drawing on in-depth interviews with first, second, third and fourth generation Bangladesh-origin Muslims in London, Luton and Birmingham, in the United Kingdom, this article examines ‘reactive transnationalism’ in a particular time and place. On the basis of this data, we introduce the concept of ‘protective transnationalism’ as a specification of ‘reactive transnationalism’. We begin by outlining the literature, the research site and the methodology, before discussing the data.

Discrimination and transnationalism

Until recently, the literature in this area has concentrated on the relationship between the *integration* of Muslim populations in majority non-Muslim nation-states and their *transnational practices* because the prevailing political view has for many years suggested that the two are incompatible (Snel et al., 2006). Erdal and Oeppen (2013) call this ‘the alarmist view’; a position which focuses on the fear of dual loyalty challenging integration. Others argue instead that the question is less about loyalty or trust than about dependency, time and resources: either that participation in transnational activities prevents people from

learning the linguistic and socio-cultural skills that create independence, or that such participation makes demands on time and resources in a way that competes with the civic society of the host community (Kivisto 2001, Ley 2013). Questions of loyalty and trust have, however, been the most prominent; framed by concerns linking cultural separatism with transnational activity, and transnational activity with terrorism (Husband and Alam, 2011, Guillaume and Huysmans, 2013). As a result, security discourses have become the drivers of an anxiety over Muslim integration (Hussain and Meer, 2017) and ‘integration talk’ has become central to the policy fate of Muslim populations (Meer, 2015). Smith and Bakker (2008, 9) argue not only that this discourse permeates the literature on transnational migration but that it “has too often been deployed at a theoretical, if not polemical, level, detached from empirical research into the political practices of transnational migrants”.

Most of the empirical research actually suggests that, despite public and political concerns, transnationalism and integration do not represent a zero sum game (Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2005, Levitt and Waters, 2002, Vertovec, 2009). Some scholars have even argued that transnationalism is best understood as a variant of integration or assimilation, as migrants build and maintain transnational ties at the same time as they are involved in processes of acculturation (Kivisto, 2001). Within the integration-transnationalism scholarship, however, integration is often defined on the basis of the social and economic position of the individual migrant as well as through particular cultural markers and/or networks, bolstering the trope in which immigrant integration is the responsibility of the immigrant household rather than the society in which they live (Ley, 2013). One exception is in relation to the concept of ‘reactive transnationalism’ (Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002; 2005). The focus here is on the impact of discrimination in a country of settlement on transnational identities and relations, helping to move us away from a focus on cultural difference; bringing the structural context of the receiving society more clearly into view.

‘Reactive transnationalism’ draws on Portes’ and Rumbaut’s notion of ‘reactive ethnicity’, defining the process in which experiences of discrimination have the effect of ‘thickening’ ethnic identities (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, Rumbaut, 2008). ‘Reactive ethnicity’ refers to heightened group consciousness, ethnic group solidarity and political mobilization as a result of prejudice, discrimination or social exclusion in a country of residence (Herda, 2018; Snel et al., 2016). Studies have demonstrated the occurrence of ‘reactive ethnicity’ among Mexicans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans in the US (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2001), among Turkish minorities in Western Europe (Schiffauer, 1999; Celik, 2015) and young American Muslims in New York (Sirin and Fine, 2007). Building on this work, several studies have considered how a similar process might work for a religious rather than an ethnic identity and have shown how perceived discrimination could potentially reinforce young Muslims’ religious identifications and affiliations (Nagra, 2011; Voas and Fleischman, 2012). Itzigsohn and Saucedo (2002, 2005) were the first to consider how this process might relate to transnationalism, coining the ‘reactive transnationalism hypothesis’ which found the positive effect of perceived discrimination on participation in both economic and sociocultural transnational activities. Snel et al (2016) expanded this investigation to include political transnational activities and also transnational identifications, finding that respondents who experienced more discrimination were more engaged in transnational activities, and had stronger transnational identifications.

We argue that a qualitative lens augments our understanding of the relationship between discrimination and transnationalism in two significant ways. First, qualitative work can help provide a clearer understanding of the *nature* of the discrimination involved as well as the complex ways in which forms of discrimination may overlap or change over time. Second, types of transnational behaviour are often restricted to ‘economic’ (remittances and charity donations), ‘political’ (participation in homeland political organisations, voting etc)

and ‘sociocultural’ (visits to the country of origin or close contact with family and friends there). Qualitative inquiry opens the door to a broader range of transnational practices, and a clearer picture of how this may relate to discriminatory experience.

Field sites and methodological approach

The research focussed on the experience of Bangladesh-origin Muslims in three urban settings – Tower Hamlets in London, Luton in Bedfordshire, and Aston in Birmingham. Research on transnationalism has very often been polarised between the country of origin and of settlement (Redclift, 2017), when a translocal dimension, such as a town or city of residence, may be more important in people’s everyday lives (Vathi, 2013). Moreover, urban localities are increasingly considered the best spatial units to illustrate the contrast between transnational and translocal dynamics (Sassen, 2000).

In the UK, the Bengali community is well established. The earliest settlers arrived in the nineteenth century, as seamen on Britain's mercantile fleet. By the 1960s there were approximately 6,000 Bengali men scattered across different urban centres (Gardner, 2002), and by 2011 this number had grown to 447,200 men, women and children (ONS, 2011). The vast majority originated from one region of Bangladesh, Sylhet, and much of the migration flow has resulted from family sponsorship (Kibria, 2011). These two factors have produced significant geographic concentration in London, especially ‘Inner London’ and the borough of Tower Hamlets in particular, where almost half of the Bangladeshi population is located (222,127). Here the community has a history of active engagement in local politics and continues to occupy a pivotal role in local administration. Elsewhere, however, partnerships between Bangladeshi groups and local authorities have been less significant (Eade and Garbin, 2006) and the research therefore sought to examine a range of issues outside the unique Tower Hamlets context.

Luton was chosen as an ‘outer London’ suburb because it represents an interesting comparator to Tower Hamlets in relation to differences associated with ethnic concentration. It has a much smaller Bengali population than Tower Hamlets (13,744 in 2011) living alongside a large Pakistani population of 24,279 (Mayhew, 2011). Luton is also the ‘home’ of the English Defence League (EDL) a far right anti-Muslim organisation and a town which has received significant media attention in relation to local multicultural politics.

After London, the region with the highest concentration of Bangladesh-origin Muslims in the UK is the West Midlands with a population of 52,477 (ONS, 2011). The vast majority live in the city of Birmingham (32,532) where one of the largest concentrations is in the ward of Aston. Since Rex and Moore’s 1967 study of ‘Race, Community and Conflict’ in Birmingham, the city has played a vital role in shaping the politics of race in British society (Solomos and Back, 1995). In the last twenty years, as religion has become a key theme in contemporary political debates, the city has continued to feature in public commentary and concern (Miah, 2017). Birmingham therefore represents not only the second-city in terms of Bangladeshi population density; it is also a key site of contestation for some of the issues around transnational relations and experiences of discrimination which this article explores. **There is insufficient space here to discuss the differences and similarities between these field-sites but this is explored in detail in forthcoming related work (Redclift and Rajina, forthcoming).**

In total 120 Bangladesh-origin Muslims were interviewed in 75 interviews across the field sites in the form of semi-structured dyadic interviews with parents and children (45 interviews), narrative interviews with participants over 60 years of age (14 interviews), and semi-structured interviews with members of civil society (16 interviews). In Tower Hamlets 15 parent-child dyads were selected, alongside 5 narrative interviews and 5 interviews with members of Civil Society. In Aston, 20 parent-child dyads were chosen, alongside 6 narrative

interviews and 8 interviews with members of Civil Society. In Luton 10 parent-child dyads were selected, alongside 3 narrative interviews and 3 interviews with members of Civil Society. Discussions of ‘protective transnationalism’ came out in all three interview types but were a little more common in the dyad interviews, which may be because the form of ‘protective transnationalism’ invoked (transnational property ownership) relates to generational issues around inheritance and family security.

The parent-child dyads took the form of semi-structured interviews and reflected a mix of mothers, fathers, daughters and sons, in order to capture the ways in which the ability of people to act as transnational citizens is mediated not only by ‘race’ and ethnicity but also by gender and generation. A generational approach has been much less usual in Britain than America (Waters, 2014) but the impact of generational change has been of growing interest (Heath, 2014), partly in response to a history of homogenizing ethnic groups in research and policy. The interviews sought to examine socio-political in/exclusion in relation to experiences of citizenship; and to consider these local experiences of citizenship alongside transnational social, political and religious engagement. This included questions about transnational marriage practices, and ‘roots visits’ to Bangladesh; participation in homeland politics, as well as membership in religious organisations, mosque affiliation and pilgrimage participation etc.

Narrative interviews were also conducted in each research site, in order to get a sense of migration as a process which unfolds throughout the life course, and to better capture continuity and change over time. These interviewees were all over 60 years of age, both men and women, and as great a socio-economic spread as possible was sought. They included consideration of the way in which histories of settlement have influenced a changing relationship between transnational activity and local belonging, and they further illuminated the generational dimensions. The Civil Society interviews were conducted with activists and

volunteers from a range of Governmental and Non-Governmental backgrounds, all engaged with providing services to the Bangladesh-origin community at the local level. More of these interviews were conducted with men than women, although wherever possible a representative gender balance was sought. **These interviews investigated the role of civil society in relation particularly to access to education, employment, housing and healthcare. They assessed how Government agencies and civil society organisations worked with participants to support or constrain transnational activity – and the positive/negative impact of this work in terms of local experiences of citizenship.**

In Tower Hamlets and Luton initial access to interviewees was gained with the help of the Swadhinata Trust, and in Aston access to interviewees was gained with the help of the Community Connect Foundation. In all field sites a sample was drawn using purposive sampling methods. **Interviewees were selected in discussion with these organisations and the criteria for the inclusion of cases was a spread of socio-economic backgrounds and an even spread of mothers, fathers, daughters and sons. After the initial interviews were conducted, snowball sampling began. Alongside the snowball sample the researchers contacted a broader range of relevant organisations and drew on personal networks to try to ensure sample selectivity was minimized, but it was not completely eradicated.** The fieldwork took place between January 2016 and December 2018.

Interviews were conducted in English or Bengali depending on the preferences of interviewees. The majority took place in interviewees' homes, as well as in local community centres, to ensure participants were as relaxed and comfortable as possible, and to minimize any power asymmetry between researchers and participants. The majority of interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes, and some of the narrative and Civil Society interviews were as long as three hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and names have been replaced with pseudonyms in all cases.

A. Discrimination in time and space

Previous research on ‘reactive transnationalism’ has largely drawn on surveys to assess the presence or absence of discrimination; measuring discrimination on the basis of whether survey respondents had experienced discrimination (never, sometimes, regularly, often, for example) and sometimes also on what grounds (gender, origin, religion, skin colour for example – see Snel et al, 2016). Qualitative research is able to expand upon this analysis by viewing ‘reactive transnationalism’ in light of a more nuanced picture of discrimination, in which anti-Asian, anti-Muslim and anti-migrant racism intersect, forms of discrimination change over time, and the local political environment directly impacts experiences.

B. Anti-Asian and Anti-Muslim racism

When interviewees talked about the past they almost immediately talked about anti-Asian racism; a racism that was depicted as very different from the racism experienced today, often extremely violent and fought daily on the street. However, when talking about the present, interviewees referred more often to Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism, and a more subtle sense of being treated with suspicion (Ewing, 2008; Ragazzi, 2016):

(Bodrul, 39, Tower Hamlets)

I think race is still a distinguishing factor, but it transcends race because it becomes about whether you’re a Muslim or not and particularly a visible looking Muslim...I do feel it (Islamophobia) is the new form of racism and it feels like it’s more, what’s the word, acceptable, so the whole dinner table thing that Baroness Warsi said once, I do think there’s a lot of accuracy in what she said.

From the 1980s onwards, notably following the ‘Rushdie Affair’ in 1989ⁱⁱ, Muslims in the UK came to be framed as a civilizational threat. This framing of Muslims is, of course, centuries old, but it re-emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century in new and toxic ways (Elahi and Khan, 2017). In line with Bodrul’s comments above, it has been suggested that perhaps the most worrying aspect of this ‘new Islamophobia’ has been the “*acceptable suspicion towards Muslims generally*” (Elahi and Khan, 2017, p.5). Bodrul refers here to Baroness Sayeeda Warsi’s reflections on liberal ‘dinner-table’ Islamophobia (BBC News 2011). The idea of Islamophobia as an ‘acceptable suspicion’ - banal, often unspoken, but palpably manifested in public space, came out in a number of interviews:

(Faghira, 31 and Naba, 53, Tower Hamlets)

Faghira: So that (racism) used to happen to us because obviously we were of a different colour. And obviously they used to call us Pakis and stuff like that...But what I have seen growing up now, it’s different culture...they target you if you’re wearing a hijab, you know...when we were growing up the racism you faced according to your colour was from certain individuals...it was just the ones that really didn’t understand...But now it almost feels as if because you’re a Muslim, it almost feels as if everybody hates you....And obviously I’ve had comments on the bus... You ignore those things, dirty looks, people not wanting to even like sit near you....So that’s one of the biggest things I find, when I’m on the train or when I’m anywhere now, whether it’s the GP surgery, wherever, people don’t want to come to sit next to me... (It’s a) collective thing...And the saddest thing is, it’s almost...as if the silent abuse in a way is worse because you feel like you’ve got lurgiesⁱⁱⁱ or something; like you’re sitting in the doctor’s GP, right, a person would rather stand than come and sit next to you.

Interviewees suggested that this anti-Muslim racism, the ‘silent abuse’ as Faghira calls it, was perhaps subtler than the anti-Asian racism they experienced in the past, but that it also represented more of a ‘collective’ feeling of suspicion or mistrust. They spoke of what Anoop Nayak (2017) refers to as an ‘amplification’ of individual encounters, transformed into more mundane and routine patterns of collective behaviour. When interviewees discussed the way new forms of anti-Muslim racism related to older forms of anti-Asian racism, they often referred to ideas of ‘cultural racism’, ‘new racism’ (Barker, 1981) or ‘neo racism’ (Balibar, 1991) in which discourses of biological racism have been substituted with a focus on cultural identity. This focus on cultural identity as a key component of current forms of racism towards Muslims has enabled commentators from the left to the right to deny that anti-Muslimism is racism at all, while parasitically building on long established racist discourses (Alexander, 2017). It was at the *intersection* between biological and cultural racism that many depictions of the discrimination experienced actually lay:

(Huma, 20 and Jeba, 53, Birmingham)

I: Do you think you have ever experienced any form of discrimination in your life Huma?

Huma: I feel like I have, just a little bit...For example, at uni, because I wear a head scarf and stuff I feel like there is a difference between the way they...For example, some groups, they get more help than us guys.

I: Who is “us guys”?

Huma: We are brown and wear a head scarf and stuff. I feel like it is just a bit different there. Some of the teachers are okay.

As Claire Alexander (1998) reminds us, Muslims in post-war Britain were configured as ‘coloured’, then ‘black’, then ‘Asian’, then ‘Pakistani’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ before they appeared as ‘Muslims’. The discrimination associated with each of these labels has changed over the years, but today the legacy of this long history is that one form of racism cannot be neatly disentangled from the other. Many interviewees suggested that their experiences of anti-Muslim racism were not only marked by anti-Asian racism in this way, but they were also marked by a very particular conjuncture of political events; a political conjuncture which interviewees suggested has produced a form of discrimination that has never felt more pronounced.

B. The ‘hostile environment’, ‘Brexit’ and the anti-migrant/anti-Muslim conflation

Anti-Muslim and anti-Asian racism were both discussed in the context of intensified anti-immigrant sentiment which was the cause and consequence of what has become known as the ‘hostile environment’ immigration policy in the UK; a set of administrative and legislative measures designed to make staying in the UK as difficult as possible for ‘illegal’ immigrants. One early example was the 2013 Home Office immigration publicity campaign ‘Operation Vaken’ which included controversial advertising vans with slogans telling illegal immigrants to ‘Go Home or Face Arrest’. As Jones et al (2017) argue, the fact that government-sponsored advertising had begun using the same hate speech as far right racists signalled a turning point in the climate of immigration debates. Initial objections to the ‘hostile environment’ immigration policy, focussed on the fact that it would not just target illegal immigrants; the effects would be much wider and it would incentivise discrimination against ethnic minorities (Holloway, 2018). Indeed, the High Court recently found that one of the key planks of the hostile environment, the ‘right to rent’ policy^{iv}, caused landlords to discriminate against ethnic minority tenants when they otherwise would not (Yeo, 2019).

In addition, anti-immigrant rhetoric escalated in the run up to, and immediately following, the UK's European Union Referendum ('Brexit') in June 2016. Racial and religious hate crime rose by a startling 31 attacks a day following the vote to leave the EU (Devine, 2018) or, according to the Home Office's own figures, by 41% when compared to the same month the previous year (BBC News, 2016). According to numbers produced by the police, this increase was sustained almost a year after the vote (Bulman, 2017). As Burrell and Hopkins (2019, p.4) argue, "race is implicated through the colonial invocations and nostalgias of Brexit discourses, and most fundamentally played out in people's lives through steep rises in recorded hate crime and the creation of new racially stratified vulnerabilities." This discrimination was not just directed towards migrants but very often minorities as well, and very often Muslim minorities. Anti-Muslim hate crime in particular spiked according to the Islamophobia hate crime reporting service Tell Mama (Isakjee and Lorne, 2019). Interviewees argued that the Brexit vote brought anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment together:

(Shabed, 48, Birmingham)

I don't think Islamophobia's going to go away, I think it will probably get worse, especially with, you know, the sentiment of the country following Brexit, because...people voted to say, "Look, let's stop immigrants from coming in" ...there is a lot of anti-immigrant feeling, anti-Muslim sentiment, and I think it's across the country.

Shabed blurs anti-immigrant feeling and anti-Muslim sentiment, mirroring much of the public commentary of the time. As Burrell and Hopkins (2019) argue, fears of Muslims arriving in Britain were routinely used as racist justification for Brexit (Etehad, 2016; Rogaly,

2019). Much has been written about how the state's counter-terrorism focus on Muslim communities has fostered anti-Muslim racism (see for example Cohen and Tufail, 2017) but less has been written about the effect of the state's 'hostile environment' immigration policy, and the anti-immigrant sentiment that resulted in the EU Referendum, on Muslim communities. Following the vote, countless reports circulated across the press and social media of British Muslims being threatened and told they must 'go home now' (Jones et al, 2017). Many interviewees suggested that, in this way, Brexit discourse was not disconnected from wider racialized tropes but instead capitalized upon older, broader racial anxieties (Burrell and Hopkins, 2019). Interviewees argued that the Referendum legitimised previously held anti-immigrant sentiments.

(Anas, 33, Luton)

And obviously, I think racism exists in our society, it's not very open...But with the EU referendum, I think a lot of closet people...kind of actually proved that they have got an issue. And especially with the referendum...I think a lot of people...have got an issue with immigration, but have never freely spoken. And the referendum was a way of saying: actually, we want out.

Most strikingly of all perhaps what had been legitimised was not only a feeling that 'we want out' of the EU, but that 'we want migrants out', and with them Muslims:

(Rothon, 43, Birmingham)

Rothon: It (Islamophobia) is a big problem now here. It is a big problem. After the Brexit, somebody went to my restaurant and decided to go into the kitchen, just opened the door, it was about ten o'clock, and he was saying what are you guys doing here?

We voted for Brexit...and then he started talking about the religion and all that...He started talking about the Muslims and this and that...

I: So, this gentleman thought his vote for Brexit meant that anyone who wasn't, I'm assuming White British, had to leave the country?

R: That's what it was, yes. This is what he's thinking, you know...He thinks what are you guys doing here? I said we belong here...So we're not going anywhere.

Nayak (2017) argues that the micro-politics of race hate that occurs in everyday encounters at a local scale can perform as a means of exerting white territoriality, marking Muslims as 'out of place', and in doing so 'purging the nation'. We argue that what was specific to this particular conjuncture was a sense in which the performative 'purge' of race hate might no longer be simply performative. 'What are you guys doing here? We voted for Brexit' speaks to what some people believed Brexit would actually achieve. Consequently, not everyone felt as sure as Rotheron that 'we're not going anywhere'. One interviewee explained that her 13-year-old son, who was British by birth, had decided in the lead up to the Referendum that he was going to vote Remain (he was not eligible of course) because he "didn't want to leave Luton". The little boy was not alone in expressing a concern that, following Brexit, he might be forced to leave.

(Javed, 44, Birmingham)

Brexit highlighted Islamophobia, (it is) more highlighted now. All of a sudden, the people of this country think we're out of Europe; we don't need anybody else from any other country, they all need to go out.

Anti-Muslim racism was clearly present in the campaigns surrounding the Referendum, though appeals to it were often indirect (Rogaly, 2019). As Virdee and McGeever (2018, p.6) argue “it was clear to many...that breaking with the EU and ‘taking back control of our borders’ also represented an important opportunity to limit the numbers of Muslims entering Britain”. As interviewees suggested this was about an opportunity to turn back the clock, to cast people out of the nation-state, to cleanse the body politic (Nayak, 2017):

(Alamin, 24, Luton)

I definitely think it (Islamophobia) is growing, especially after Brexit as well. The people felt that with the immigration situation, that now Muslims need to get out as well...I think it is only going to get worse.

Anti-Muslim and anti-Asian racism were not created by Brexit; clearly this cannot be interpreted as something entirely new, especially in the light of the inherently colonial positioning that Brexit inhabits (Burrell and Hopkins, 2019; Bhabra, 2017; Emejulu, 2016). And, of course, UK Immigration policy was racialized long before the implementation of the ‘hostile environment’ (Spencer, 2002). But there was a specificity to the concern expressed here which was about, in Alamin’s words, Muslims needing to ‘get out as well’. Interviewees were extremely worried that, following Brexit, the ‘acceptable suspicion’ towards Muslims had been legitimised to the extent that they would no longer have anyone to represent them in the political sphere:

(Faatina, 45, Mariyana, 23, Faridha, 18, Luton)

Mariyana: I can’t even talk about it that’s how angry it makes me feel, but at same time, now I feel really scared to see what’s going to happen in about five years’ time. It

gives these like UKIP and Britain First, it gives them all a platform...so many people voted Leave just because of immigration and because they hated Muslims...

Faridha: It is really, really scary.

Mariyana: And now it gives them all a platform to stand for and we don't even know who's going to represent us now...

First, second, third and even fourth generation British Bangladeshis had been made to feel that their ability to stay in the UK might suddenly be under threat in a way it was not before. This very particular moment of discrimination had implications for transnational practice.

A. 'Protective transnationalism' – land, property and security

'Reactive transnationalism' relates specifically to the relationship between experiences of discrimination in countries of settlement and 'homeland' involvement (Snel et al., 2016). For Shamea and Anisa, the suspicion they confronted in the current moment, and its discriminatory effects in the context of employment etc, were so significant that they considered the home they own in Bangladesh as a possible source of future security:

(Shamea and Anisa, 42 and 21, Birmingham)

I: What do you think is the future for British Bangladeshis...?

Shamea (42): It's not good.... It's going to get worse but we're just going to get on with it. It's not going to get any better, it's going to be life ... probably will be harder for us. Maybe even getting job-wise, even going out...

Anisa (21): Sometimes you feel like on the inside people are thinking that ... they'll never say it but on the inside.

Shamea: So, we'll never be comfortable but...

I: Thinking what?

Anisa: Feeling kind of wary of you... 'Cause obviously you look different...and no one will say it to you...but people who do feel uncomfortable by you won't ever go to you and ...

Shamea: I'll just go to Bangladesh...we've got a home there, if anything gets worse

At different points in the interview Anisa references her skin colour and the fact that she wears a headscarf; both together producing a 'difference' that makes people 'feel kind of wary' of her. In this context, Shamea considers the land her family owns in Bangladesh as a possible escape from the discrimination they are subject to. She was not alone. We found an increasingly prominent conversation about investing in land and property in Bangladesh because of concerns that interviewees might actually be forced to move back there:

(Shoyeed and Altab, 52 and 20, Birmingham)

Altab (52): We just did back home (built a house in Sylhet) for the future in case anything goes wrong or whatever for our children...It does happen. It does happen in Syria immigration, the people say you have to leave your country, you have to go, immigration and migrant, but still I am a migrant, I am British, but I am born in Bangladesh. Actually, I'm just making a safe path from Bangladesh.

I: So how do you feel about that, Shoyeed, that your dad has a plan B just in case you are deported or asked to leave Britain?

Shoyeed (20): I think that's a good idea, just a back-up, it's nice to have a back-up.

Altab's reference to being born in Bangladesh is suggestive of relatively recent changes to citizenship deprivation powers, legitimated through terrorism cases, which posit the citizenship of migrants as something to be proven and policed (Kapoor, 2018). The deprivation of citizenship power has only ever been used in cases of dual or multiple citizenship because of statelessness provisions. Now, through a 2014 amendment to the 1981 British Nationality Act, this power can also be directed towards naturalized citizens. Moreover, the recent case of Shamima Begum^y, illustrates the way in which the birthplace of *your parents* may also make it easier for the state to use citizenship deprivation powers against you, on the assumption that through your parents you may be able to access citizenship elsewhere (even if this is not the case). As a migrant, Altab feels that his citizenship will not have the same value as it does for someone born in the UK, or for someone not racialized as Asian and Muslim. In Luton, Alamin also situates his investment in land and property in Bangladesh as a 'back up plan':

(Alamin, 24, Luton)

I: Why do you think your dad built the house (in Bangladesh)?

Alamin: When I was young, they always used to say to us, my mom and dad...there might come a time when we get kicked out of this country, so...you need a place to live. So, maybe that is one of the reasons why he built it...There is definitely a possibility, because as we have seen...I don't think they will explicitly do that, like say 'get out of the country'. I think it will be more of an implicit thing, or more of a thing that is developed from the fear that the people are giving the South Asian community, and maybe they feel unwelcome. I think that would be the thing that takes us to another country or they will make it so difficult for us to lead our lives...in that sense...it is

important to invest purely because at any point in time that we did decide maybe we want to go back home...it is good to obviously have something there to go back to.

Like many of his generation, Alamin didn't take seriously his parents' suggestion that "there might come a time when we get kicked out of this country", until now. His words echo the premise of the 'hostile environment' when he talks of being made to feel 'unwelcome', or life having become so difficult, that returning to Bangladesh is the only option. This relationship could certainly be described as 'reactive transnationalism' but we argue that, in this example, it might be better understood as 'protective transnationalism'; also a product of discrimination, but borne out of a particular desire to protect oneself and one's future security in the face of it. In that sense, we see 'protective transnationalism' as a specification of 'reactive transnationalism' rather than an alternative to it. Seemu in Tower Hamlets explains that 'if you're brown and you are Bangladeshi' you may need somewhere to go back to:

(Seemu and Jayed, 40 and 20, Tower Hamlets)

I: How important do you think it is to retain that link with Bangladesh...?

Seemu (40, Tower Hamlets): End of the day...you know, you are brown and you are Bangladeshi...and, umm, if...ever anything happened you would need to go to your...back to your country...where your land is, so unless you're connected...you're not gonna be able to do that ...he (her son Jayed) could be born here, bred here and everything, but in the end of the day...(tails off).

As Seemu puts it "your country...where your land is". In the UK, it was not until 1928 that the link between property ownership and political identity was finally severed. In

South Asia too, through the colonial period in India and the events of Partition, and later the Liberation in Bangladesh, property ownership became a tool in the construction of citizenship (Daiya, 2008; Redclift, 2013a). It is not surprising, therefore, that belonging is still in certain ways constituted in its terms. Investing in, and possibly escaping to, land and property in Bangladesh was central to depictions of ‘protective transnationalism’. While a range of different transnational practices were discussed in the interviews, it was only in relation to land and property that ‘protective transnationalism’ was invoked. This may be partly because other forms of transnationalism such as business investments, ‘roots visits’, transnational marriage, or charitable ventures (the most common forms of transnational activities raised by interviewees) do not offer the same protection from insecurity in the UK as a physical ‘home’ does. Or it may be because alternative forms of transnationalism such as transnational marriage have become more difficult to engage in in recent years due to changes to British immigration legislation. Questions of ‘protective transnationalism’ were not directly asked of interviewees but emerged through conversations unexpectedly and therefore whether or not they can be seen in a broader range of practices would need to be investigated through further research. Moreover, discussions of transnational relocation did not appear to be classed, as we might have expected (due to the financial resources required, see DeSipio et al., 2003). Instead, purchasing or maintaining property in Bangladesh was a product of priorities in terms of spending, and some participants on very low incomes had either worked longer hours, or saved in other areas, in order to ensure they could buy land ‘back home’.

In a sense the historical ‘myth of return’ (Anwar, 1979; Bolognani, 2007) was always a form of ‘protective transnationalism’. The current moment is not a paradigm shift in terms of the relationship between discrimination and transnationalism but rather a contemporary reconfiguration. In the post-Brexit landscape, the continuous reminder of one’s ambiguous status within British society opens up the possibility for young British Bangladeshis to

recover the 'myth of return'. Considered a first-generation phenomenon, abandoned by later generations as permanent roots were made, conditions of hostility and precarious citizenship bring new urgency to questions of future security. As a result, young British Bangladeshis have returned to this 'myth' as a back-up plan should they be forced to leave the UK. The large private homes in rural Sylhet that the first generation had been able to build as they prospered in the UK (Gardner, 1995), provide a means for the diaspora to (re)consider their resources, options and opportunities, in the face of what they see as increasing threats to their rights and livelihoods in the UK. Put another way, the myth of return has returned as a primary mode of discourse vis-à-vis notions of belonging. Whether the myth of return becomes an actual return or not, 'protective transnationalism', in the form of investment in land and property in Bangladesh, keeps the myth alive.

Conclusion

Drawing on qualitative research with first, second, third and fourth generation Bangladesh-origin Muslims in London, Luton and Birmingham, in the United Kingdom, this article examines the relationship between experiences of discrimination and transnational practice in a particular place at a particular moment in time. The research highlighted the impact of the contemporary political conjuncture in the UK on *the nature* of discrimination experienced and the insecurity produced. Anti-Muslim and anti-Asian racism were brought together in the context of intensified anti-immigrant sentiment which was the cause and consequence of what has become known as the 'hostile environment' immigration policy, and which spiked in relation to the European Union 'Brexit' Referendum in 2016. Through the Brexit imaginary, the idea of 'taking back control' became associated with an opportunity to limit the numbers of Muslims entering Britain; an opportunity to purge the body politic of its non-white bodies.

Transnational ties are also clearly not linear. They can expand or contract over time (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2001). In the UK, interviewees of all ages and generations contemplated increased transnational activity as an escape from the suspicion or hostility they experienced. Some thought this suspicion or hostility might begin to affect their ability to work or their ability to carry out day to day activities. Others thought they might just be made to feel so uncomfortable that staying in the UK was no longer an option. As a result, the transnational practice that people discussed most often was investment in land or property in Bangladesh, and very often in the form of a ‘back-up plan’ in case they were no longer able to stay.

In depth qualitative research into the relationship between discrimination and transnational practice helps to uncover the shifting racisms, which have been neglected within the field of transnationalism more generally (James, 2016). In the UK, the racism of the current conjuncture has led to such a deep-seated insecurity as the political landscape has changed that, in some circumstances, it has been accompanied by a desire to protect oneself through external connections and other sites of belonging. There is little research on transnational practices that function as forms of protection for immigrants and minorities experiencing racism. ‘Protective transnationalism’ may have increased in line with political upheavals and nationalist or populist politics across the globe, something further research should examine. It recognizes the formal and informal discrimination that may impede ‘effective citizenship’ to create a weak citizenship status in practice, if not in law. And it draws our attention to the way in which uneven experiences of ‘political space’ (Redclift, 2013b) in countries of settlement can impact upon transnational activity in stark and revealing ways.

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ⁱ The data discussed here is funded by the _____ and the _____ (left blank for anonymity).

ⁱⁱ 'The Rushdie Affair' refers to the reaction of some Muslims to the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, the 'fatwa' issued against Rushdie in 1989, and condemnation on the part of Western Governments.

ⁱⁱⁱ A colloquial term for an indeterminate illness

^{iv} A policy contained within the UK Immigration Bill 2015 whereby landlords are required to check the immigration status of tenants they rent property to.

^v A British Bangladeshi woman who joined Daesh/IS in Syria in 2015 and who was stripped of her citizenship in 2019.