Abstract:

Investigated the career hopes of, and the career guidance provided to, 24 adolescent (aged 15–16 yrs) British Muslim girls in England in the final year of compulsory schooling at 3 schools. Ss' parents and 18 of their teachers were also interviewed. Findings indicate the girls' desire for upward social mobility through the routes of education and careers, point to the role of negotiation and persuasion in career choices, and caution against stereotyping ethnic-minority groups. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2016 APA, all rights reserved)

'I'D HATE TO BE JUST A HOUSEWIFE': CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF BRITISH MUSLIM GIRLS

ABSTRACT

The career hopes of, and the career guidance provided to, a group of adolescent Muslim girls are analysed. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 British Asian Muslim girls in the final year of compulsory schooling at three schools, with theft parents and with 18 of their teachers. The findings indicate British Muslims' ardent desire for upward social mobility through the routes of education and careers, point to the role of negotiation and persuasion in career choices, and caution against stereotyping ethnic-minority groups.

Introduction

The conventional opinion regarding the roles of men and women is that the man goes out to work and the woman gets married and stays at home (cf. Delamont, 1980). This view assumes that once married, a woman and a man will adopt fundamentally different roles: the woman will forfeit her right to financial independence and a job and will always subsume her interests to those of her husband and children (Beale, 1986). However, technology and the subsequent access to labour-saving devices have eroded the need for full-time home-based housewives and have allowed women to pursue hobbies and careers outside the home. Recent research (e.g. Wilkinson, 1994) accordingly points to a historic shift away from the old division of labour between domestic work undertaken by women and predominantly full-time paid work undertaken by men. Nevertheless, Leonard & Speakman (1986) argue that career choices are still made within a situation which is not of women's own choosing, but is sexist, racist, class-based and age-based. Moreover, the material circumstances of a family can influence a woman's decision to work (Brah & Shaw, 1992).

A professional woman, therefore, assumes two burdens: brought up to view housework as a feminine domain and a career as a privilege, she is ill-equipped to escape the stereotyped sex role (Minai, 1981). Such women experience a major socially-constructed conflict between marriage, child-rearing and family on the one hand and career on the other (cf. Marshall & Wetherell, 1989). In most societies, detached women are not unduly constrained regarding the choice of a career, if they have the aptitude and the impetus. However, working wives have much less free time than their husbands, spending far more time on essentials such as looking after the children, cleaning, cooking and shopping (Central Statistical Office, 1993). But despite all the constraints, many married women with children now choose to resume their careers, not to have a career break at all, or to switch to part-time work.

Research also indicates that girls are almost never downwardly mobile in aspiration (Douvan & Adelson, 1966). It is often assumed that girls choose the traditional caring professions because they are an extension of their socialisation as carers for their families and communities (Fogelman, 1983; Wallace, 1987). However, girls' occupational aspirations have been found to express a general desire for upward mobility and a middle-class way of life rather than a specific desire to achieve eminence or outstanding skill in a profession: that is, the status rewards of the job are more crucial than intrinsic work satisfactions, as far as both ethnic-majority and ethnic-minority women are concerned (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Mirza, 1992; Siann & Knox, 1992).

The present research aims to investigate the career aspirations of a group of British Muslim girls in the context of their present experiences. It represents the first in-depth empirical study of the aspirations of British Muslim girls to investigate the issue from three different perspectives: those of the pupils, their parents and their teachers. The study was conducted in three schools in the East of England. The sample schools comprised an 11-16 all-girls' school, an 11-16 coeducational school and an 11-18 coeducational school. Twenty-four British Muslim girls (eight from each school), their parents (mother and/or father) and 18 teachers involved in teaching these girls (six from each school) were interviewed in depth, using semi-structured interview schedules (see Basit, 1995, pp. 346-359).

The girls in the sample were aged 15-16 years, were in the final year of compulsory schooling, and were of varied ability. They were chosen by 'randomised selection' (see Basit, 1995, pp. 37-38). The girls originated from Pakistan, Bangladesh or East Africa. All had been born and/or brought up in Britain and were from a seemingly working-class background. The teachers chosen for the sample had volunteered to be interviewed. They included science and humanities teachers, heads of careers, and senior managers at each of the schools.

The qualitative data were analysed by selecting themes and categories, emerging from the data, which illuminated the issues under investigation. These themes, chosen from the interview transcripts, were then linked with one another [1]. The use of triangulation ensured the reliability of the data, enabling the views of the girls, their parents and their teachers to be compared and verified. Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that the sample is small and area-specific, so the findings cannot be generalised.

Ethnic minorities and career choices

Migrants, in general, are more ambitious than their counterparts from similar social and cultural backgrounds in their country of origin. In most cases, this is the fundamental reason why people emigrate. Once in their adopted country, they strive for upward social mobility, but many face disappointment, partly due to the lack of appropriate qualifications and training. Consequently, they endeavour to attain their goal by adopting high educational and career aspirations for their children. This phenomenon is referred to by Mirza (1992) as the 'migrant effect'.

Whatever hopes and aspirations ethnic-minority parents may have for their children, research shows that the future facing young British people of Asian and African-Caribbean origin (the largest ethnic-minority groups in the United Kingdom) does not appear to be much brighter than the situation their parents had to contend with. This applies even to those born and brought up in Britain. There is extensive discrimination against them, such that even when they have equivalent or better qualifications than their indigenous counterparts, their search for jobs is less successful (Brookes & Singh, 1978; Hubbuck & Carter, 1980; Troyna & Smith, 1983; Drew et al., 1991). The Labour Force Survey (Department of Employment, 1991) shows that unemployment rates for ethnic-minority groups are substantially higher than for the ethnic-majority group. The highest unemployment rates are among the Pakistani, Bangladeshi and West Indian communities, and among 16-24 year olds in each of the main ethnic-minority groups. Even ethnic-minority people with medical qualifications face difficulties in finding jobs (Anwar & Ali, 1987; McKeigue et al., 1990; Esmail & Everington, 1993).

In the case of young women, discrimination is compounded by the dual effect of race and gender inequality (Brookes & Singh, 1978; Beechey, 1986; Brah & Shaw, 1992). Despite this depressing scenario, ethnic-minority women have particularly high expectations of the labour market (Fuller, 1982; Dex, 1983; Eggleston et al., 1986; Mirza, 1992) and tend to be unaware of the racism they will encounter in the workplace (Ullah, 1985). This was very much the case with the adolescent girls in the present study. They appeared to be totally incognisant of the discrimination they were likely to face in the labour market. None of them even mentioned it during the interviews.

Similarly, ethnic minorities appear to have a firm belief in upward social mobility through education and careers. However, once in employment, they become acutely aware of racism, mostly in the form of structural and institutional racism (Brah & Shaw, 1992). Likewise, due to their own experience of the labour market and the fact that some of their older children were in employment, the parents in the present study were aware of discrimination in the workplace. They therefore encouraged their younger

children to achieve a good education in the belief that it would help them to evade or overcome such prejudice.

In the study reported here, the British Asian Muslim girls and their parents were particularly averse to manual and factory work and to the Youth Training Scheme (cf. Penn & Scattergood, 1992). None of the girls envisaged going into the Youth Training Scheme or working in a factory. The parents, too, were amenable to their daughters' desire to work only if they were able to attain a good education and go into a career perceived as safe and respectable: one which would not jeopardise the girls' safety and reputation in any way. Thus:

'She wants to be a doctor; and of course she would work if she was a doctor. I wouldn't mind if she couldn't become a doctor, but then she need not work. We can easily support her until she gets married' (Tabassam's father).

Many parents also perceived a good education and the ability to work in a respectable occupation as an insurance against hard times:

'Who knows what life has in store for them--good or bad. If they have education, they can stand on their own feet, if the need arises, by finding some decent work' (Nusrat's mother).

Most girls believed the same:

'I know I'll enjoy it (work). I know I'll have learnt something. I can always have it with me and can always fall back on it' (Arifa).

Many teachers, too, recognised this:

'I think some of the (Muslim) families are just beginning to think that a career might be just as important for the woman because she may well have to support the family should any emergencies arise' (Head of careers).

At the time of the fieldwork, almost half of the fathers in the sample were unemployed. Those who had jobs were in semi-skilled or unskilled occupations, or had a shop, or a small business. The majority of mothers were full-time housewives. But regardless of the occupational status of the parents and despite the apparently working-class background of the families, almost all the gifts in the sample in the present study had high career ambitions (cf. Miles, 1984; Kallie, 1986; Mirza, 1992). They aspired to occupations which were unambiguously middle-class. It appeared that they did not want to go through the struggles their parents had experienced. Furthermore, they seemed to have internalised the ethos of their parents that education and career was the key to upward social mobility.

However, attitudes to women's employment vary not only from one social group to another, but also from family to family and even within families. This is evident from the following discourse:

'We are not educating our daughters in order to make them go out and work' (Shahida's mother).

'But sometimes it is important that women work. For example, it is better for women to have female doctors and nurses. If our daughters can find good jobs, if they have the capability to do such jobs, it will be beneficial for their future too' (Shahida's father).

'Well, there is no harm in working, but it should be done in purdah' (Shahida 's mother).

Thus not all parents feel the same way about allowing their daughters to go into employment. Moreover, not all mothers are in favour of letting their daughters work, and not all fathers are against it. Similar discrepancy between the views of the father and the mother, as regards their daughter's education and/or future career, was noted in a number of other interviews: in some cases the father opposing a career for

his daughter and the mother favouring it (see Basit, 1995, p. 306). However, it appears that the spouse favouring the employment of women is usually able to convince her/his husband/wife regarding the merits of a career. This points to the important function of negotiation and persuasion within these families and warns against stereotyping.

The vast majority of adolescent girls in the sample hoped to work after completing their education and to continue working after their marriage. None of the parents wanted their daughters to have the same job as themselves (cf. Kallie, 1986), thus expressing their desire for a better future for their children. Correspondingly, no girl wanted to do the same job as her father or mother (cf. Taylor & Hegarty, 1985; Mirza, 1992). This, however, does not imply that they do not respect their parents for working in those occupations, or are ashamed of them. Rather, it indicates that they aspire to a better life than that of their parents:

'I don't want to do the same job as my parents. My mum is a housewife and my dad is a taxi-driver. I think a housewife is like a slave, because she is always working, looking after the children and the home. And I think taxi-driving is hard work and you don't make such a good living. There are other better jobs that you can do' (Rahat).

As is clear from this statement, the ideology of the male breadwinner and the supposedly non-working housewife has undermined the status of housework as work and has placed a negative value on being 'just a housewife' (cf. Maynard, 1985; Leonard & Speakman, 1986; Wetherell et al., 1986; Marshall & Wetherell, 1989).

The adolescent Muslim gifts in the sample aspired to a wide range of lucrative careers with high status. Some mentioned the jobs of doctors, lawyers, accountants and pharmacists; others named the caring professions, such as teaching and nursing. Still others referred to white-collar occupations, such as working in a bank or as a secretary. A few girls wanted to start their own business, and one girl wished to be a pilot. However, some parents, while keen on their daughter to have a career, had reservations about certain fields of study:

'When I decided that I wanted to do nursing, my dad didn't like it at all. He said, "You know, you'll have to be really patient". But he is really happy now that I want to be a teacher' (Khalida).

Apparently, this family perceived nursing as an occupation of low status and low emolument, in which one had to work hard in predominantly male company. Conversely, though, another parent readily acquiesced to her daughter's choice of this career:

'I would like her to be a teacher, but she wants to be a nurse. So, I have left it to her to decide what she likes and what she wants to do' (Parveen's mother).

Again, this diversity of views cautions against assumptions and stereotypes regarding ethnic-minority parents' attitudes to career choices.

Whatever careers they choose, ethnic-minority young people encounter racism in the labour market as well as sexism. Brown (1984) contends that the expectations of ethnic-minority workers are affected by the fact that some types of jobs are more open to them than are others. However, when they want to improve this situation by motivating their children to attain education and go into high-status careers, they are perceived as aiming too high and having unrealistic ambitions.

The myth of unrealistic aspirations
The notion that ethnic minorities hold unrealistic aspirations has been widely discussed in the literature (see e.g. Taylor, 1976; Gupta, 1977; Kallie, 1986; Bryan et al., 1987; Kelly, 1989; Mirza, 1992; Brah & Shaw, 1992). Studies of young Asian men and women show that their aspirations are high. They stay on longer in full-time further education compared to their indigenous peers, yet find it much more difficult to find jobs (see, for example, Anwar, 1982; Brookes, 1983; Brah & Golding, 1983; Taylor & Hegarty, 1985;

Brah, 1986; Griffin, 1986). But such disadvantage does not appear to have abated the career aspirations of ethnic-minority adolescents.

The development of career choices is a complex process. Roberts (1971, 1977) argues that neither school leavers nor adults typically choose occupations in a meaningful sense. They simply take what is available within narrowly-spaced, horizontal social-class barriers. Nevertheless, Gottfredson's (1981) developmental paradigm of occupational aspirations encompasses both structural and individual factors. It implies that occupational choices are gender/sex-based, class/status-based and ability/aptitude-based. These phenomena were manifest in the career choices of the adolescent girls in the present study. Nevertheless, there was evidence of additional dynamics of career preferences which were religion/culture-based, as can be seen from the following comment:

'Religion is a big factor. I want to be independent. I want to stand on my own feet even when I am married. And if I became a pharmacist, I'd be working inside (in the background) and no one would see me and there would be a good pay too' (Samina).

Thus career choice is not a straightforward matter. Ethnic-minority young people appear to consider a variety of factors when making occupational choices, but Brookes (1983) notes that despite ample evidence to the contrary, the debate over the job aspirations of young Asians continues to be dominated by the 'unrealistic aspirations' thesis. This was manifest in the remarks of some teachers in the present study:

'The aspirations of the parents are phenomenal. They don't seem to have any idea of what the children can actually do. There seems to be this idea that they have to do certain types of jobs. I can understand the desire to be there in terms of, perhaps, financial reward and also to establish themselves, but the parents don't seem to be aware of the capabilities of their own children and they almost bully them into it' (Head of computing).

Far from bullying their children into working towards narrowly-defined educational and career goals, the interviews with the parents and girls showed that the parents were a constant source of motivation and encouragement. Further, contrary to what some teachers implied, many parents appreciated the significance of ability and qualifications:

'If she got a good education, as she intends to, then she would have a good job. But if she didn't have education, then she'd probably have to do something like factory-work or packing or sewing. She aims to study law and it would be excellent if she could succeed' (Seema's mother).

The parents unequivocally wanted their daughters to succeed in securing a decent career and were cognisant of the role of education in realising this aim. The girls showed a remarkable degree of perseverance in their endeavour to realise this goal:

'I hope to do A-levels and then train to be a teacher. If my GCSE grades are not good, I'll go to college for 3 years. I'll do retakes for i year and A-levels for the next 2' (Raheela).

Despite such sentiments from gifts of average ability, some teachers appeared to believe that only the bright Muslim girls were interested in a career while the others only looked forward to marriage:

'It's a minority--the bright ones--that would think a career is important, and they would be allowed to have a career. But if you talk to Muslim girls, maybe of average ability, they still think marriage is very important, no matter what we say' (Child development teacher).

Similar views were expressed by some other teachers:

'It depends on what career they feel they have got mapped out for them. I mean, some of them are far-reaching and they know they want to go from here to a sixth form college and maybe to university and

they know what career they are going to follow. But for others, if they feel may be they'll have an arranged marriage, then a lot of them are quite happy to settle for that' (Head of year 11).

It seems that some teachers view marriage and a career to be mutually exclusive, yet the majority of teachers whom I interviewed were themselves married. Further, the interviews showed that Muslim girls of varied abilities aspired to a career as well as marriage. Evidently, the overt importance given to marriage by the girls and parents appears strange to the teachers, and they interpret it as if a career does not have a significant role in the lives of these girls.

Research evidence regarding ethnic-minority women does not suggest that Muslim girls have any lower aspirations than other groups of British Asian gifts (see, for example, Brah & Minhas, 1985; Afshar, 1989; Penn & Scattergood, 1992). Islam obligates the husband to provide for his wife, yet allows Muslim women equal access to education and careers, provided they fulfil their primary role as mothers and homemakers. It is therefore up to the women to decide whether they can cope with these two careers simultaneously. The prospect of dual income, leading to an enhanced standard of living and economic independence, seemed attractive to the adolescent girls in the sample, and a career appeared to pave the route to attaining these goals:

'I'd hate to be just a housewife. They just stay at home and do nothing. Well, they obviously work, but they don't get paid for it and I don't think it's right. You always have to ask your husband for money' (Fehmida).

This does not indicate, however, that these girls want to go against the teachings of their religion. All of them want to combine a career with marriage and family life. Recent research (e.g. Pascall, 1994) shows that increasingly girls are deciding to take higher educational qualifications: with these in hand, young women are reluctant to give up the advantages attached to the labour market.

Many of these adolescent Muslim girls were impressed with people around them whose lives were instrumental in helping them to contrive their career plans. The majority of the girls had role models who were invariably career-oriented male or female members of their extended family. None of the girls mentioned their father, mother or siblings as their role models. This, however, does not imply that they disparaged their nuclear family, but rather shows their determination to accomplish more in the future than anyone else in their immediate family had managed. Neither did any of the girls have any of their teachers as their role models. While they respected their teachers and sought their guidance in matters pertaining to education, they did not want to emulate them, as they knew they could not lead their lives entirely like the teachers. Contrary to the stereotype, the girls hoped to go into a diverse range of occupations:

'I want to go to college and do this 2 years' course. After 2 years, I'll know how to cut, design and sew. Then I'll start my own business. My dad has got this place on top of his shop. All I've got to do is to work hard' (Zubaida).

As regards the notion of Muslim parents wanting their children to become doctors, the present research showed that out of a sample of 24, the parents of only three girls wanted their daughters to study medicine. However, two of these girls had successfully persuaded their parents to let them pursue other courses of study:

'I did want to be a doctor once, but that does not attract me any more. There is so much work involved when you are a junior doctor and the medical school is so hard. I'd like to do something like politics, economics or international relations and work at the UN. That would be interesting' (Nasreen).

Nasreen's parents, who initially had encouraged their daughter to go into medicine, were soon able to see things from her perspective. It was later found that they allowed her to study subjects of her choice for A-levels, which led to a degree course. It appears that the parents want their children to become doctors primarily because they perceive medicine as the ultimate profession, offering quintessential respectability. Furthermore, they have limited knowledge of other options with similar social status and monetary gain.

Still, while many parents encouraged their daughters to choose diverse careers, albeit of high status, they were also amenable to the girls' viewpoint. This points to the vital role of negotiation in the interaction between these adolescent girls and their parents (cf. Brah & Shaw, 1992).

The girls in the sample were unmistakably sensitive to their parents' reservations, and comprehended the importance of negotiation:

'I've always wanted to be a policewoman, but I don't think my mum would agree, so I am going to be a nurse' (Parveen).

Far from being bitter about not being able to pursue their desired career, the girls were willing to choose alternative careers which would meet their parents' approval. The girls were optimistic about their chances of working and all but one expected to have a career before they were married. Even this girl's mother envisaged that her daughter would work before she got married:

'How can she get married? She is only 16. She'll work for a while, may be two years, and then get married' (Zareena's mother).

This scenario is in sharp contrast with what some other research studies appear to suggest. Wade & Souter (1992) maintain that the British Asian girls in their study perceived their chances of working either before or after marriage as very slim. Their ambitions expressed what they would like to do, but a number of them did not expect to realise their ambitions.

The girls in the present study want to have a full life, but are they being unrealistic? Research (e.g. Brah & Shaw, 1992; Siann & Knox, 1992) indicates that, compared to their peers, the choices of Muslim girls are not over-aspirational or unrealistic. Similarly, the aspirations of the adolescent Muslim girls in the present study are high, but not unrealistic. When they were contacted 1 year after the fieldwork, 23 out of 24 girls had gone into further education. The qualifications that they pursued ranged from GCSE retakes to A-levels and vocational courses. Only one girl, Zareena, stayed at home and was looking for a job, without any success. None of the girls in the sample had yet got married.

The nature of career advice and guidance

Career guidance is an attempt to mediate between individual aspirations, talents and values on the one hand, and social structures, demands and opportunities on the other (Watts et al., 1981). Ethnic-minority girls often complain that the career advice given to ethnic minorities in British schools is not the same as that given to pupils from the ethnic-majority population. Research shows that girls of Asian and African-Caribbean origin feel that less is expected of them because of their race (Brah & Minhas, 1985; Riley, 1985; Mirza, 1992; Brah & Shaw, 1992).

In the present study, each of the three schools in the sample had a careers department managed by a careers coordinator. The department had a careers library which contained books, brochures, audio-tapes and video-tapes about various occupations. The pupils were at liberty to visit the library and peruse the material in their free time. Information from various employers and colleges was pinned on notice-boards displayed at various locations in the schools, such as the careers library, the careers coordinator's office and/or the year 11 form rooms. During years 10 and 11, a number of outside speakers from colleges and industry came to talk to the pupils.

As part of careers guidance, the three sample schools in the study arranged 2 to 3 weeks of work experience in the first term of year 11. Ostensibly, the pupils were allowed to choose where to go. However, not all pupils managed to acquire work experience at their chosen place. Moreover, every year disproportionate numbers of pupils failed to go on work experience for various reasons: for example, because a placement could not be found for them; or because they were not allowed by their parents to work in the place assigned to them by the school.

The girls who went on work experience found it enjoyable and enlightening. Nevertheless, work experience appeared to have the effect of excluding career options rather than selecting them. Only two girls in the sample chose jobs related to their work experience. It seems that they had chosen, or had been assigned, a limited range of placements, without much thought to the kind of work they actually wanted to experience. The parents and the gifts were largely blamed for this narrow experience, as can be seen from the remarks of a Muslim teacher:

'When they go into the work environment for 3 weeks for work experience, that is the first time for the Muslim girls to get the taste of what it is like going into the outside world. But they tend to pick Asian shops or schools with lots of Asians. I think the parents want them to stay in a safe environment and not to go too far from home' (Science teacher).

The girls, however, maintained that they never specifically asked to go to these places. It appears that these adolescent Muslim gifts were given their placements because the careers teachers believed that they would be happier working in a predominantly Asian environment, that the parents would not object to such a placement, and that the employers would not be biased (cf. Dom, 1985). This stance effectively limited the gifts' experience of the world of work, as they were unable to attain first-hand information about occupations they aspired to go into. Consequently, very few chose to go into careers pertaining to their work experience.

Although a few girls believed that they received gender-stereotyped career advice, the majority of them did not feel that they received specific career advice because of their gender, race or religion. The only time some of the girls got the impression that the advice they received was influenced by their race or religion was when they were notified about the kind of attire they would be required to wear if they went to work in a certain store:

'They tell you the same things that they tell the others, but the careers teacher does warn you. Like, there was this Saturday job at Cobblers--the shoe shop, you know--and I was thinking of applying, but when I talked to the careers teacher, she said, "You'll have to wear a skirt". Well, you drop it straight away' (Nusrat).

Each school also had a county careers officer at their disposal who visited the schools regularly to interview the year 11 pupils individually. Contrary to what many girls in Mirza's (1992) research reported, the majority of adolescent girls in the present study did not find the careers officers of any help. I was present during some of these individual career interviews conducted in the schools by the careers officers. It was manifest during all such interviews that their primary role was to depress the aspirations of the adolescent Muslim girls they interviewed by channelling them towards more realistic careers. They appeared to do so without giving any concrete advice as to how these girls could realise their existent aspirations and without explaining to them why they could not do so.

The careers officers seemed to believe that it was not their job to encourage the girls or offer them advice regarding jobs they were interested in. Career guidance was thus apparently operating as an agency of social control (cf. Watts & Herr, 1976), adapting individuals to the manpower requirements of the economy. This required restricting the range of occupations presented to each individual and emphasising 'realism' (see also Cross et al., 1990).

The majority of girls were also offered some career guidance by their teachers. Form teachers and careers teachers were perceived to be the most obliging in this respect, but some of the girls added that advice was only given when the girls asked for it. Since very few girls had the confidence to initiate a meeting with the careers teacher, they consulted their form teachers who appeared to offer informal advice during the form period. Only the careers tutor at one school interviewed every year 11 gift individually, thus eliminating the need for these adolescent girls to approach her. The careers teachers appeared to have their own preconceived ideas about the kind of guidance the girls required:

'The careers teacher splits us up into groups. Like, the clever girls--the ones she thinks are going to need career advice--she separates them from the girls who are just going to go home and cook dinner' (Nasreen).

Furthermore, the quality and quantity of career advice in the three schools can be determined by the fact that, during the interviews, a number of girls and parents asked me about college courses and the subjects which should be studied to go into certain occupations (cf. Mirza, 1992): questions that they had been hesitant to ask the teachers for fear of being perceived as ignorant, or questions that had been left unanswered.

The parents seemed grateful for whatever information the school transmitted to them. As a result, almost all the parents were convinced that their daughter's school provided adequate career guidance. In most cases, though, career advice was dependent on the teacher's expectations of the pupil and comprised informing the girls and the parents what subjects the girls could study and what careers they could go into:

'They asked me to come in and told me that if she studies such and such subjects, she could go into such and such occupations' (Shabnarn's father).

As far as parental advice was concerned, the majority of girls maintained that their parents wanted them to attain qualifications, and allowed them to choose any career, within reason, that they were interested in. This does not necessarily imply apathy or a lack of interest on the part of the parents, but rather shows that though the parents were not able to offer tangible guidance to their daughters, they nevertheless discussed educational and career options with the girls and encouraged them to choose occupations that interested them provided they did not clash with their religio-cultural mores:

'Islam doesn't prohibit or restrict unnecessarily: it only tells us to abstain from wrongdoing. I tell them (my children) they can do any kind of work as long as it is not against the religion' (Raheela's father).

However, some of the girls disclosed that their parents and siblings and members of their extended family offered useful direct advice and help on the choice of a career. On the whole, it seemed that the girls were offered as much advice by their families as could potentially be given. Furthermore, the effect of limited advice was counterpoised by motivation, high expectations and faith in the benefits of education. Evidently, the parents' own experience of education and work, or lack of it, had made them more appreciative of the benefits of educational credentials and their value in finding a respectable job. This is manifest from the following comments of a girl and her father:

'My mum goes, "When you get married, what are you going to do? Sit around like me all day"! Mum has always been at home and she gets fed up, while I am educated and I can easily go out and find a job or stay at home. I've got two choices' (Nuzhat).

'My brother is an accountant; my son also wants to be an accountant, and so does my daughter. They think my brother, who has his own firm in Sheffield, will be able to guide them. I personally supported my brother during his period of study. I worked as a bus driver. My father used to tell me to study, but I never listened to him. Now I am in tears when I pass a college or university. I wouldn't have been a bus driver, if I had listened to my father, but would have had a better job. With this thing in mind, I helped my brother to receive education and want my children to receive education too' (Nuzhat's father).

It is clear that the schools and the county careers service are fulfilling their role of imparting information. Nevertheless, the career advice and guidance provided by them appears to omit the essential ingredient of motivation. On the other hand, parental attitude, despite reservations regarding the suitability of certain fields of study and careers, provides encouragement, and is instrumental in helping the girls to realise their aspirations. Research evidence regarding young Asians (e.g. Taylor, 1976; Gupta, 1977; Brah & Shaw, 1992; Siann & Knox, 1992; Penn & Scattergood, 1992) also explains their high aspirations and achievement in terms of parental support.

Conclusions and implications

Contrary to what some other researchers (e.g. Afshar, 1989) contend, the present research points to British Muslim's phenomenal aspirations to upward social mobility through the route of education and careers. However, career aspirations are contingent on religious and cultural values too. Thus while the chosen job has to be of a high socio-economic status, it should be respectable and not involve them in un-Islamic activities. This indicates British Muslims' desire to better themselves, but not to the detriment of their religious identity. Despite the fact that the three schools in the sample differed slightly in their intake, the aspirations of the girls in these schools do not appear to be dissimilar. However, the sample is area-specific and time-specific and the study makes no claims of generalisabiliry.

Nevertheless, these girls are not unthinkingly following their parents. They have been socialised to hold certain occupations in high esteem. At the same time, they have developed their own aptitudes and interests. If any of them have chosen the traditionally female occupations, it is because they perceive these careers as a pragmatic route to upward mobility, not only in accordance with their religio-cultural norms, but also in a racist and sexist labour market. While there are certain jobs about which the parents have serious reservations, there are others which they can be persuaded to allow the girls to go into. This points to the role of negotiation and persuasion in the career development of these adolescent girls.

The parents and the girls, many of whom can be loosely termed as belonging to the working class, have middle-class aspirations. These aspirations seem unrealistic to some of the teachers and do not fit their stereotype of children of minimally-educated, working-class and unemployed parents. While some teachers are sensitive to their pupils' religio-cultural values, aptitudes and aspirations, some others appear to perceive people's ability through the lens of their own experiences, which in most cases are Anglo-Saxon and/or middle-class, and to make assumptions accordingly.

It is too easily assumed that ability and potential are static and permanent. Pupils may be encouraged to work, but if they are not motivated to work harder, they are unlikely to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. It will be advantageous if it is continually pointed out to them, as early as year 7, what kinds of grades are required to go into certain occupations. The correlation between present effort and ultimate career needs to be constantly emphasised. Careers teachers appear to require more time for career guidance outside their teaching commitments, so that they can guide the pupils even before they choose their options.

The support and encouragement provided by the Muslim parents in the present study indicate their interest in their children's future; their adolescent daughters appear to be receptive to their parents' concern. The schools could exploit parental interest in order to help the girls to attain their full potential (cf. Kelly, 1989; Meijers & Piggott, 1995). There is also a need to improve training for teachers delivering careers work in schools (cf. Cleaton, 1993; Meijers & Piggott, 1995).

Effective home-school liaison is crucial not only for ethnic-minority families, but also for those indigenous parents who do not come into school. More resources need to be put into this service. It will be beneficial for the schools if they pay greater attention to the minority ethnic and religious communities and exploit whatever resources these communities can offer. Some of the younger members of such communities, who formerly studied at the schools, can come in and talk about their option and career choices and the satisfaction or disenchantment they felt with their chosen options or career paths. Likewise, since many girls in the present study had people of their own background as role models, successful role models from these communities can be provided in the shape of teachers, school governors and other professionals who can be invited to talk to the pupils about their careers.

British Muslims and other religious minorities are here to stay, and are a potentially important part of the work-force of the future. Their employment potential can not only be exploited, but also can be enhanced with proper guidance and motivation. The people who can do this most effectively in schools are careers personnel. They need to receive appropriate training to achieve this aim, for the benefit of the national economy.

Acknowledgements

Note

[1] For a detailed discussion of the methodology, the sample, the interview schedules, and the data analyses, see Basit (1995, pp. 24-51).

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