Book review of Identity and upbringing in South Asian Muslim families: insights from young people and their parents in Britain

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Additional Information:


Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/27922

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: Taylor & Francis © Jo Hickman Dunne

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Please cite the published version.
Identity and upbringing in South Asian Muslim families: insights from young people and their parents in Britain

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Michela Franceschelli’s Identity and Upbringing in South Asian Muslim Families draws upon extensive empirical research to explore Muslim upbringings in a British context. The monologue successfully reflects a range of key social markers which narrate young people’s transitions to adulthood, focussing on those specific to the ethnic and religious backgrounds of the families involved in the study. As the author points out, issues of identity, family and upbringing are ‘questions of our times’. The book therefore also contests a timely scholarly discourse pertaining to understanding identity formation in an era of multiculturalism. Franceschelli lays out the social context of the book, which includes the current political situation and stigmatism around South Asian cultures and islamophobia, as well as the broader socio-economic climate facing young people in the UK. Following this, the book addresses these challenges through the lens of the everyday lives, values and relationships of South Asian Muslim teenagers and their parents. Franceschelli draws extensively on the work of Bourdieu, focusing primarily on his notions of habitus, social field and cultural capital to understand their negotiations of identity and upbringing.

The construction of ‘multiple’ identities is challenged in Chapter 2, in favour of a unitary sense of identity influenced by multiple social fields. The interplay between religious and cultural discourses is evidenced through intergenerational differences. Young Muslims show how they navigate this complex relationship through a personalisation of religion, for example, through choosing to wear a hijab with modern western clothes. Although this points toward personal agency in making sense of religious and cultural identity, Franceschelli recognises that this agency is always constrained by the conditions of individual life trajectories. In considering what it means to be British and Muslim, the book mirrors contemporary discussions around notions of citizenship and belonging, and further engagement with these debates would be welcomed. Chapter 3 focuses more closely on identity as an understanding of religious affiliation and national self-identification. As young Muslims seek to align their ‘modest’ religious identities with more ‘modern’ British culture, the intersectionality between ethnicity, religion, class, and gender is examined at length. The author critically reflects on the concepts of intersectionality and assimilation, and successfully demonstrates the differing impacts of both gender and class on young Muslim’s strategies to reconcile conflicting elements of their identities. The spatial and temporal complexities involved in negotiating being both modern and modest are a consistent theme. However, this is only considered briefly by the author and these geographical inflections are worthy of further consideration.

The processes of negotiating and combining cultural traditions, Islam and British identities are further explored in Chapter 4 which considers attitudes to love and marriage in South Asian families. Again the book evidences intergenerational differences, as well as classed and gendered attitudes to relationships. Bourdieu’s theorisation of family as an important social institution is drawn upon to further illustrate the bounded agency that young Muslim’s experience in relation to marriage. In this context, compliance with religious and cultural norms means that freedom and choice become ideals rather than realities. As in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 incorporates the voices of both teenagers and their parents in exploring religion in the context of micro family dynamics. Franceschelli differentiates between this as specific Islamic capital, and more general cultural, ethnic or religious capital. British parenting is understood to be more ‘modern and open minded’, and South Asian parents express a desire to maintain cultural continuity whilst moving away from certain South Asian
cultural norms towards a more British outlook on raising their children. Again, class plays a determining role in discourses and approaches to upbringing; impacting on employment opportunities, language skills and traditional parenting roles. This chapter concentrates significantly on the complexity of gender roles in South Asian culture, and the impact of varied migration paths on parenting strategies. Ultimately, the author shows that through class and gender differences, Islamic capital is mobilised in multiple ways to pass on values and beliefs.

Chapter 6 relates to the wider social context of youth and the pursuit of social mobility, capturing the cultural aspects of these aspirational desires. Franceschelli considers the importance of education as an aspirational driver in South Asian cultures, which transcends class divisions. This is seen in the context of the ‘migrant effect’ as a key method of intergenerational transmission. However, the spatial and temporal significance could, as in Chapter 3, be privileged further. Education is considered an opportunity for prosperity and social mobility, although this is set against structural constraints such as rising university tuition fees and the cost of maintenance loans. The book also provides an insight into the emotional consequences of this emphasis on aspiration in South Asian cultures, for the young people in the research. Franceschelli concludes in Chapter 7 by challenging some common assumptions around ethnicity, religion and cultural assimilation. The book shows how a declining attachment to South Asian culture has made way for British Muslim identities. Through the stories of the young people, a ‘religious revival’ is seen to be mobilised as a means of inclusion, not social isolation or segregation. Processes of assimilation are complex and nuanced, with embodied strategies and a search for meaningful alternatives leading to active assimilation. For some of the voices in this book, this research was an opportunity to express themselves; providing a space for critical reflections on their religion and South Asian culture, and a chance to delineate between misconceived cultural traditions and the Islamic faith. Overall, this book provides a compassionate narrative of young Muslims’ everyday lives. It privileges accounts of tolerance, modesty and cultural tradition over the often-mediatized stories of radicalisation and islamophobia. It is a welcome addition to understanding key topics of identity, upbringing and youth transitions in the social sciences, albeit in the specific context of Islam and British society.