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Time, Space and Presences: Bangladeshi Girls' Friendships in an English Primary School

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Abstract:

The study reported here examined what it is like to be and have friends and how developing conceptions of friendships become embedded in children's peer cultures. It took place in two mixed Year 5 and Year 6 classes in a Church of England Local Education Authority Aided (C of E 'A') primary school in a working-class neighbourhood in a university town in East Anglia, England. A conceptually-split core theme emerged. The core theme is children's enabling and constraining negotiation of friendships and ethnicity within their own tacitly agreed upon boundaries of absences and presences, space and time, and locale. Implications for research and practice are raised.

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Introduction

Standing in the shadow of the spires and turrets of the university, I could see the latticed-rows of Crimea, Viceroy, Churchill, Spicer, and Shuttleworth Streets. Smoke curled feintly here and there from the tightly-stacked 'sameness' in the row of red-brick Victorian houses. Keeping an eye on the Lollipop Lady's sign with its motif of silhouetted children holding hands made me mindful of the significance of reading the empty sign. One sign pointed to the conceit of 'sameness' that veiled the houses from each other. The other sign caught the shadowy light on the other side of Shuttleworth Street. Like the streets in the great paintings that Pallasma (1994), the Finnish architect described, "[Crimea, Viceroy, Churchill, Shuttleworth, and Spicer Street] continue around corners and past the edges of the picture frame into the invisible with all the intricacies of life" (p. 4 8).

The long history of research on children's friendships provides valuable insights into the ways that children negotiate social participation, conflict, and adult rules and authority in primary and secondary schools in England (Ball, 1981; Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Pollard, 1985). Paradoxically, we know little, with few notable exceptions (for example, Mac an Ghaill, 1989; Troyna & Hatcher, 1992; Woods, 1990), of what it is like to be or have friends or how developing conceptions of friendships become embedded in children's social lives in increasingly culturally diverse primary schools.

Speaking to the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups of South Asian origin in

Britain, Professor B. C. Parehk, maintained that "the whole debate on problems of the education of ethnic minority children in Britain is vitiated by a series of defects" (cited in Taylor and Hegarty, 1995, foreword). The research on Bangladeshi children's social lives in primary schools is an acute defect. Two salient aspects of the current debate are addressed here.

One aspect of the debate is the near-absence of research on Bangladeshi children's social lives in English primary schools. Shortcomings in the extant research on Bangladeshi children's friendships include the following: 1) "conspicuous absence" of empirical research on race and ethnicity, generally, in children's social lives, (Troyna & Hatcher, 1992); 2) overrepresentation of data on educational achievement as opposed to social processes (Troyna & Hatcher, 1992); 3) 'mixed' sociometric findings with evidence of own-group friendships grounded in early ethnic awareness and equally compelling data of out-group friendships in free-choice activities (Denscombe et al., 1986); 4) little research on Bangladeshi children's friendships outside of the East London borough of Tower Hamlets (Tomlinson & Hutchinson, 1990); 5) little research on South Asian children's social lives "on the doorstep of Oxbridge," with the notable exception of Shaw's (1988) social anthropology of the Oxford Pakistani community; and 6) overrepresentation of aggregate analyses of stereotypical processes in South Asian children's social lives to the neglect of individual and small group differences (Taylor & Hegarty, 1985).

A second aspect of the debate is the absence of Bangladeshi girls' voices in the discourse on race and ethnicity. Broad-based cultural interpretations of belonging in terms of the structural features of nation-states, however, and the constraints of

freedom of identity formation and expression exist (see, for a summary of the literature, Ranger, Samad, and Stuart, 1996) exist. Eade (1992) challenged the orthodoxy of social identities as bounded by imagined communities and called for flexible, negotiable, and ambivalent reinterpretations of Black, Bangladeshi, Sylheti, and Muslim "otherness." His research, however, follows the pattern of the dominant discourse and marginalises women and by extension children's perspectives on their own ethnicity. Bhabha's (1990) interpretation of "otherness" in terms of the "the heimlich pleasures of the hearth" and "the unheimlich terror of the space and race of the other" (p. 2) is raised here. The analysis includes children's perspectives on the comforts of social belonging and friendship across school and home domains.

I will argue following Gidden's (1984) that "structure [is] the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organises; [and] that the structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of the action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction" (p. 374). Structures are, therefore, conceptualised as constraining and enabling. The extent to which they are one or the other is often nonsynchronous or contradictory. To paraphrase Outhwaite (1996), 'toxic structures do not a heimlich make.' Through human agency we negotiate the duality of structures in terms of toxin and antitoxin structural properties. Put simply, children refashion the "elaborated ideology" of ethnicity in nonsynchronous and contradictory ways in their own everyday lives.

One of the salient challenges facing those who investigate children's friendships is not to succumb to the twinfold pitfall of homogenising friendships within children's broader social

participation experiences and marginalising friendships within the implicit binarism of classic socialisation theory. The binary approach often fails to recognise friendships as autonomous, robust, and recursive, contrasting with the dominant developmental discourse that situates the child in a perpetual state of becoming an adult. One critical weakness in the diversity of definitions that spans a range of sociometric indices (for example, reciprocated /reciprocated choices, equal/unequal statuses, voluntary/involuntary, and friendship/popularity) is the failure to conceptualise the potential of social categories in the overlap of terms.

In his study of Little League baseball and preadolescent culture, Fine (1981) used a threefold conceptualisation of friendship derived from mainstream sociological accounts of Mead's (1934) theory of self, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical variant, and, McCall's (1970) ideas on friendships as benign cultural institutions. Fine's definition, with modifications, serves as the one for the present work: 1) *Friendship-as-a staging-area-for-interaction* (where the presence of friends activates a social context for the performance of actions), 2) *Friendship-as-a-shaper-of-the-self* (where a nexus of self and role flexibility can potentially occur), and 3) *Friendship-as-a-cultural-institution* (where children learn the processes by which social meanings are constructed, ways of knowing the expectations of others, and methods of determining their likely actions) (p. 47). This definition cuts to the polyvalence of friendships in children's everyday lives and attempts to situate children in pivotal positions in the construction of their own friendships.

Four responses frame the organisation of the paper. First, I will discuss emergent research on friendships and ethnicity. Next, I will discuss a loosely organised clutch of concepts on space and

time (see Giddens, 1984). Then, I will discuss findings from a study of Bangladeshi children's friendships in an English primary school. Finally, I will raise implications for research and practice. The following set of interrogatives are explored in light of the extant research on children of South Asian origin, broadly, and, specifically, children's social lives in noninstructional settings:

1) What is it like to be and have Bangladeshi girls' friendships in two mixed Year 5 and Year 6 classes in a Church of England Local Education Authority (LEA) Aided (C of E 'A') neighbourhood primary school in England?
2) Why, and under what circumstances do Bangladeshi girls' friendships emerge as appealing and plausible modes of reasoning in the local setting?
3) What conditions prompt Bangladeshi girls to operationalise friendships as explanatory frameworks in their day-to-day social actions?
4) Why, and under what circumstances are Bangladeshi girls' friendships affected by particular temporal, spatial, and attitudinal factors.

Explanatory Frameworks for Ethnicity and Friendships

In their study of racism in children's social lives in majority-White primary schools in England, Troyna and Hatcher (1992) called for a theory of social relationships that must "be able to explain both the dynamic towards equality and harmony and dominance and conflict" (p. 48). One of the critical features of their theory focuses on how children bridge the gap between

structure and agency through a layered model of social structures, ideologies, common-sense understandings, individual identities, and friendships. The authors noted that "children draw boundaries that define the micro-social structures of personal relationships that they create" (p. 48). Specifically, they argued that all children have their own model of social network that derives from a unique and contingent 'mix' of "elaborated ideologies." Examples include ethnicity "refashioned into common-sense through practical experience" (p. 49), and "the implications of friendship for dominance and equality" (p. 49).

Closely allied to Troyna and Hatcher's (1992) social network model is McCarthy's (1990) contradictory or nonsynchronous position on race and ethnicity and schooling in the US. McCarthy (1990) argued against the limitations of Apple and Weiss's (1983) parallelist position when applied to institutional settings. Apple and Weiss (1983) argued that "the unequal processes and outcomes of teaching and learning and of schooling in general are produced by constant interactions among three dynamics (race, gender, and class) and in three spheres (economic, political, and cultural) (p. 25). McCarthy argued that the dynamics of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and community have interactive outcomes and are systematically contradictory or nonsynchronous. These outcomes can potentially lead to an increase or decrease in the effects of race or any other sociocultural variable in local school settings.

In searching for ways to inform the discourse on ethnicity, identity, and nationalism in South Africa, Wilmsen, Dubow and Sharp (1994) wrote that we need "to find a vocabulary that recognises possibly-celebrates-forms of ethnic identification that

are flexible and polyvalent rather than those that are exclusive and chauvinistic" (p. 354). In similar vein, Werber (1996) trenchantly argued against efforts that attempt to essentialise [ethnicity], "to obscure the relational aspects of identity, experience or collective representations, to valorise, as it were the thing in itself, as being autonomous and separate, cut off from ongoing relationships" (p. 71). Flexible, relational, and polyvalent conceptualisations of children's friendships and ethnicity are integral to the present work.

Social Organisation of Time and Space

What is particularly missing from attempts to bridge structure and agency and schooling is a flexible conceptualisation of the integrative boundaries that help to explain how the unique and contingent 'mix' of concerns, needs, abilities, and capacities are socially constructed in the locale of a neighbourhood primary school. One of the common elements in the schemas used in the structurationist school (see Thrift, 1995) for bridging structure and agency is mediating concepts (Bhaskar, 1979). In line with a distinct strand in the writings of structurationists, Bhaskar (1979) wrote that:

> We need a system of mediating concepts ...designating the 'slots,' as it were, in the social structure into which active subjects must slip in order to reproduce it; that is, a system of concepts designating the 'point contact' between human agency and social structures (p. 51).

A hybrid clutch of Gidden's (1984) concepts on social systems as time-space constituted and binding are foregrounded in the

discussion. Integrally, these concepts include Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of bodily experience, Goffman's symbolic-interactionist notions of encounters, and Heidegger's philosophy of presencing,' and Pred's (1990) capsule definitions of 'co-presence' and 'locale.'

1) Co-presence

> the simultaneous physical presence of others at specific locations, or 'settings of interactions, is seen as fundamental to the conduct of social life, the implementation of institutional activities (Pred, 1990, p. 123)

> no particular context of co-presence is entered into **de novo**, but exists in conjunction with other [now materially absent] contexts influencing current interaction (Giddens, 1987, p. 146)

2) Locale

> ...a physically bounded area which provides a setting for institutionally embedded social encounters and practices (Pred, 1990, p. 123)

> [not] 'a mere stopping point' but a site-specific combination of presences and absences . . . and [they] need not be local, for they may range from a room in a house, a street-corner, the shop floor of a factory (Giddens, 1985, pp. 271-271, 285)

A series of site-specific 'settings of interaction,' most notably, 'the street' are examined in terms of how Bangladeshi girls and other children are present and absent for each other in their everyday encounters and social practices.

Ethnographic Context and Data Collection Procedures

The scene is moving with the slow procession of parents walking their juniors to reception class, children dragging school bags, and Ms. Holloway taking deference and a hard left-locking turn through the narrow school gate with two more signs. One sign reads St. Alban's Local Education Authority Church of England Aided Primary School (C of E 'A'). The other is daubed in bright red poster paint and reads "Harvest Apples for Sale." A number of Bangladeshi girls tidy, sort, polish, share, and lift apples in boxes from classroom to classroom for the annual school fund raising project.

Ethnographic observations and interviews took place in a "bellwether" (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984) or highly developed instance of Bangladeshi presence in two mixed Year 5 and Year 6 classes with immigrant and first-generation children from Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Tanzania, and the UK. A Local Education Authority Church of England Aided School (C of E 'A'), "St. Alban's" is situated in a working class neighbourhood in a university town in East Anglia. The sample included forty-nine 9-, 10-, and 11-year old pupils; 25 English/White (11 male; 14 female), 21 Bangladeshi (10 male; 11 female), 1 Tanzanian (female), 1 Malaysian (male), and 1 Hong Kong (female). The school is majority White. St. Alban's

is a modern school building in an increasingly 'gentrified' neighbourhood. The overwhelming majority of fathers of the Bangladeshi girls worked in what were described as the local 'Indian' restaurants, with the notable exception of Runi's father who was a civil engineer. St. Alban's has a multifaith and multilingual curriculum and has the services of a Section 11 teacher who provides specialist support in culturally responsive teaching and learning. The present paper focuses on the Bangladeshi girls in the broader sample.

Observations took place during half-day observation periods (alternating between morning periods defined as 9:00A.M. to 12:00 A. M., afternoons defined as 12:00 A. M. to 3:00 P.M.), thrice-weekly on varied days of the week, between September and November, and twice-weekly in December). These observations covered normal school and classroom activities and noninstructional periods in the school corridors, cloakrooms, cafeteria, playground, school crossing, and bicycle shed. An observational component also tracked the children's toing and froing patterns between Churchill and Spicer Streets and St. Alban's on Shuttleworth Street. Data analysis involved searching for key and recurrent events and activities that became categories of focus for further observation and interviewing. Instances of the categories were collected to determine the diversity of dimensions under the category and were, in turn, continually analyzed for an emerging model to discover basic social processes (Spradley, 1979; 1980).

Informal interviews and interview guide approaches were used (Patton, 1980). Informal interviews were conducted throughout the study. They varied from momentary exchanges to brief conversational interludes, often occurring during transition

times. Successive rounds of interviews, which usually extended 10, 15, or 20 minutes, were conducted in late September, late November, and early December. Interview topics were derived from focus topics grounded in the emerging theory. Strategies for enhancing a nonthreatening interview situation included joking about the size of the microcassette recorder, playing tapes at various speeds, and a guarantee that interviewees would have an opportunity to listen to and respond to the views that they had expressed during their interviews. Interviews took place in a corner of the assembly room, a quiet spot in the library, or a bench in, the playground with both interviewer and interviewee at the adult and children's level. They were audio recorded using a voice-activated microcassettee recorder, and later transcribed.

The majority of the children had difficulty in articulating their feelings on such a complex interpersonal and sociocultural construct as friendship. In this regard Selman's (1980) study of the parallels that exist between children's awareness of friendship and their general cognitive development proved useful. Using a modified version of Selman's approach, interviews included three phases: (1) initial interviews to tap the children's reflective thoughts on their friendships, (2) further interviews to dimensionalise or "tease out" emergent features of friendships, and (3) final interviews to examine how children negotiated the parameters of their friendships. The children's interview data were characterised by terse responses and difficulty in providing applied examples of the expressive dimensions of their friendships. As a consequence, the majority of data sources were one- and two-word utterances, clausal statements, and single sentences; only a few examples of sentence clusters were recorded.

Whither the 'Heimlich' Terror of Time and Space and the Other

Putting a foot down to bring my bike to a temporary halt for the Lollipop Lady at the top of Shuttleworth Street, I felt like Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball (1940) stopping on some byway at milking time in rural Co. Clare Ireland in the 1930s to watch all sorts and manner of people pass by. Untangling the web of perception and memory is skewed and skewered by the timing and spacing of the children passing, passing, passed. This morning I could see the turrets and spires of the local university on the horizon of houses beneath. Rutna, Roksana, Ratna, Runi, Shanaz, and Shahara, who had just come up the lane behind the houses in Churchill and Spicer Streets, moved across at the Lollipop Lady's signal. The scene was neither strange nor familiar. The universals rather than the particulars touched me. Throughout the school day, the week, and the autumn and winter months that followed the particularistic would transcend the universalistic. One image was forming then but it would take time to become visible. It was the floating rush of Rutna, Shahara, Runi, Roksana, and Ratna, hands reaching, voices bobbing, as one rhythmic body passing before me.

The core theme is children's enabling and constraining negotiation of friendships within their own tacitly agreed upon boundaries of space and time in the locale. As the analysis unfolds, it will emerge that the conceptually-split theme of enabling and constraining boundaries are the obverse of each other. Friendships emerged as nonsynchronous and contradictory variants of ethnic-based action (Royce, 1982).

According to the majority of the White children, Bangladeshi girls were elusive and ephemeral. They were a 'kinaesthetic phenomenon,' always moving, not lingering at a mere stopping point, in the street. Gordon, a White boy, from Viceroy Street explained, "they're always going somewhere," but where they were going was somewhat of a mystery for him. Jill, a White girl from the flats at the end of the street near "The Tatler and Finch" on Crimea Street seemed less mystified but no less aware of the private lives of the Bangladeshi children in her class:

Example 1: *Jill*

I do not really get a chance to play with Shanaz, Runi, and Roksana because they are always inside or going out somewhere. They're going somewhere when they're outside. Always if they're outside they just walk across the road to their friends house or something.

The daily routine of Islamic and Bangla language lessons took place in one of the classrooms in St. Alban's. It doubled as a prayer room in the evenings for Bangladeshi children. The chameleon nature of the classroom is evident in Ratna's explanation of what she did with her friends after school. It also helps explain the fullness of time and space in the children's daily routines, rituals, and activities:

Example 2: *Ratna*

Well, I went to Arabic reading with my friends and teacher on Saturday, then the boys go on Sunday, as well as all times on Tuesdays and Thursdays girls go to Arabic

reading. And we used to go to Bangla class on Saturday and Sunday and Friday and Monday.

Tanya, a White girl, who lived closer to Ratna, than Jill, on Spicer Street suggested that even if the Bangladeshi girls were out playing in their front and back gardens, they might not always be welcome in the homes and gardens of White girls.

Example 3: *Tanya*

I do not play with girls from Bangladeshi like Shahara, Runi, and Ratna. But I do play with them at school. Because most of the time my Mom has friends, or relatives, or something like that. I've only been in one of their actual houses once. I can't invite them now. We're decorating at the moment so they can't come around.

A few White children attempted to make sense of the importance of religion and race for the Bangladeshi children. Susie, a White girl, from Spicer Street included religion directly in her understanding of why Bangladeshi girls had special challenges in making friendships.

Example 4: *Susie*

It is sometimes hard to make friends with children from Bangladesh I don't really know any people from there because sometimes they like to keep themselves to themselves, probably because of their religion. Their religion will affect them because sometimes they might

have to be friends with the people that come from Bangladesh.

Although not the focus of the present paper, the encounters and social practices of Bangladeshi boys are worthy of brief discussion. As with the girls, the strongest grouping criteria for the Bangladeshi boys was their fervour in being and acting like a Muslim. Whereas, boys and girls observed the same strict routines of Islamic and Bangla lessons after school on weekdays and weekends, they experienced different parental expectations. In response to a question on how he would describe an ideal friend, Shofiqur, a Bangladeshi boy, stated the irreducibility of religion, race, and friendships for all children, "He's Black and he's friendly. He's a Muslim." Shofiqur's response to the follow-up question: Are your friends always Black and Muslim was met with a voluntary rehearsal of the five pillages in Islam.

In contrast to the Bangladeshi girls, boys were minimally affected by parental prohibitions. While they experienced similar race-gender homogeneity in terms of sharing, helping, and togetherness in their friendships, they also experienced significantly greater freedom of choice and movement in toing and froing from home and school, playing on the street, and playing competitive games. Indeed, Bangladeshi boys achieved respect and leadership among their peers and White friends because of their prowess in the boys status sports of soccer on the pitch attached to the school. These ties were generally seized by almost all Bangladeshi boys but they were not uniformly successful in creating meaningful cross-cultural friendships in out-of-school activities.

I observed and listened to stories about Bangladeshi girls playing in their own front and back gardens or in the gardens of other Bangladeshi girls' houses. I asked Shahara, a Bangladeshi girl from Spicer Street, if she had opportunities to meet classmates like Tanya, Jill, and Susie, from her own street and and other streets after school. Her response illustrated unequivocal acceptance of the naivete of the question, as she explained, "Well girls aren't supposed to go out that much and that's why." Among the many typical domestic chores cited by the Bangladeshi girls as routine were:"washing clothes," "preparing rice for meals," "bathing younger brothers and sisters," "tidying the house" "doing the laundry," "dusting," and "watering the plants," among other household duties and responsibilities.

Bangladeshi girls' friendships were situated in domestic and inter-domestic domains. Their friendships were essentially voluntary acts with a clear 'trace of resemblance' (Levinas, 1987), identification, and proximity. Friendship, as Werber (1996) reminds us, "isn't a given . . . it is the creation of a trace which endures" (p. 68). The locale of Crimea, Viceroy, Churchill, Spicer, and Shuttleworth Streets was a setting for the daily quotidian of children's play and games. The street was a place where play and games were appropriated in terms of presences and absences and everyday ethnic-based occurrences. The movement of Bangladeshi girls from house to house or back and forth to St. Alban's on Shuttleworth Street for Islamic lessons in the prayer room created a set of oppositional elements where space, time, encounter, and lived identity fuelled ethnic-based friendships.

Implications for Research and Practice

Given "current tendencies in reformist curriculum and educational discourses to treat minorities as homogeneous or undifferentiated groups" (McCarthy, 1990), we need to be wary of making unwarranted generalisations about what we perceive as examples of antisocial behaviour rooted in race, ethnicity, gender, class, or any other sociocultural variable. By drawing attention to the enabling and constraining features of Bangladeshi girl's friendships existing theoretical frameworks can be refined in terms of what is really going in neighbourhood primary schools. If our understanding is to accurately reflect how children construct their own friendships unencumbered by school polices and practices, then the whispered voices of Bangladeshi girls need to be raised in current educational discourse. The paradoxical challenges of Bangladeshi children struggling to get along illustrates that dissonant contexts can have consonant aspects (Rosenberg, 1975. A number of resonances exist in the present paper.

After Cole's.(1993) notions on the 'responsibility to respond' and Noddings (1992) starting points for organising education around salient themes of 'caring,' I argue that we should actively develop the following mutually interconnected stances: 1) firmness in our resolve about the importance of friendships, 2) development of motivational contexts for friendships, 3) relaxation of the impulse to control friendships, 4) encouragement of ways for embedding friendships in action-based classroom conversations, and 5) promotion of the idea that friendships demonstrate moral strength and courage (Deegan, 1996). Simply, the 'outward and upward' trajectory of reformist approaches such as anti-bias curriculum, personal and social education, and culturally responsive pedagogy (see, for a summary of the literature, Deegan, 1996), needs to be continually renewed and developed for what matters most for children in culturally diverse classrooms and schools.

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