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### Original Article

# Indian mothers' perceptions of their roles in their daughters' university course choices

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## Abstract

This paper presents new findings on the experiences of Indian mothers in the roles they play in their daughters' higher education (HE) subject choices. Whilst there are existing studies on White British mothers and parents more generally in terms of parental involvement in education, and a growing number of papers presenting results on Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents, evidence on Indian parents (and students) is relatively sparse. In particular, there is a lack of research where Indian parents are given space to voice their own narratives in their own words. In the main, existing studies focus on parents from the viewpoint of their children as students. This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with nine Indian mothers from different areas in England. Commonalities and disparities between the experiences of Indian mothers presented here and accounts of White mothers of similar class and educational backgrounds presented in existing

literature are analysed using an intersectional lens. Results show that working class Indian mothers could be making up some of their disadvantage in terms of social and cultural capital through family and community networks. Furthermore, mothers regard younger relatives as potential sources of important knowledge and resources that could help them and their daughters navigate the HE landscape. This has not been found in studies on White mothers where the emphasis instead has been on the exchange of knowledge from adults to the younger generation. This article arises out of an ESRC funded doctoral study of choice at university for British South Asian women.

## Enhanced Article Feedback

## Introduction

Many women currently entering higher education (HE) from the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic groups are 'pioneers'. That is, they are the first females within their families or even local communities to go on to participate in HE. There is great encouragement from parents, as well as a certain level of expectation for their daughters to enter HE. Research has shown that there were five subject areas to which South Asian female applicants disproportionately applied and gained acceptance to, compared to White women. These include medicine and dentistry, subjects allied to medicine, mathematical and computer sciences, law and business and administrative studies (Bagguley & Hussain, 2007).

Siann *et al.* (1990) found that for many young South Asians in Britain the choice of subject and career is likely to be made within the framework of reference of family aspirations and interests. This is reiterated in more recent work by Davis and Pampaka (2008). They found disparities between the articulation of White and Asian students with regard to university subject choice. Asian students often articulated familial, cultural and social rules in relation to their educational decisions where as White British students in contrast tended to present themselves as autonomous and independent individuals with regards to their decisions.

This paper contributes to the little existing research on Indian or Asian mothers more generally in terms of what they perceive their roles to be in their children's educational choices. The research presented in this paper is an investigation of Indian mothers' attitudes towards the subject and career choices made by their daughters. What role do these women play in their daughters' decisions and how does this compare with existing findings on White British mothers? The research was conducted within an intersectionality theoretical framework. Data were gathered through semi-structured qualitative interviews.

## Indian mothers and educational decisions – what is already known?

The involvement in children's education by White parents, and specifically mothers, is a developed

research area. Studies have been conducted on the different stages of education from early year's right through to HE. Vincent and Ball ( 2001 ) investigated a sample of predominantly White middle class working mothers and their perceptions and understanding of childcare markets in two areas of London. The authors were interested in how the mothers made decisions concerning the right care for their children. Mothers made a heavier investment in the process of choosing pre-school childcare than fathers even in cases where both parents were in paid work. The authors suggest that this increased involvement is strongly in line with a construction of motherhood that places primary responsibility for the child with their mother. Fathers played minor roles compared to the mothers and the children, with whom the decisions really lay.

Duncan *et al.* ( 2003 ) found in their intensive qualitative research that over half of all their respondents thought that mothers with children of pre-school age should not be in employment at all. This greater commitment and investment from mothers continues when children are older. Both David *et al.* ( 1994 ) and Reay and Ball ( 1998 ) focus on the process of secondary school choice. Across a sample of both middle and working class families, there was evidence of a strong perception that the process of secondary school choice is mainly a mother's job. Mothers are responsible for talking to children, collecting essential information and organizing and making visits to prospective schools.

Duncan *et al.* ( 2003 ) examined the gendered moral rationalities of particular class and ethnic groups of partnered mothers about how mothering is combined with paid work. They studied the allocation between partners of time and labour as well as different approaches to understanding change and decision-making in families. There were no Asian mothers in the sample. The views of White mothers overall were found mostly along a primarily mother (primacy given to the benefits of physically caring for children themselves on the basis of held gendered rationalities)—primarily worker (paid work for themselves understood as separate identities as mothers) continuum. There was found to be an emphasis on the primarily worker continuum. Jobs for mothers with children under 16 predominantly meant part time work around school hours. In heterosexual partnerships the 'trading' between mothers and male partners of hours spent at work, domestic tasks and childcare became rather unequal. It was only in cases where this type of negotiation proceeded through a more overt political position with a greater emphasis on gender equality was there more likely to be the practice of shared allocation. This was evident most commonly amongst White middle class respondents.

Similarly, Reay ( 1998 , 2003 ) also highlights mothering differences between White middle and working class mothers. This is specifically with regards to their involvement in their children's schooling. Reay's interview data suggested that working class mothers can find it more difficult than their middle class counterparts to generate similar levels of academic confidence and enthusiasm among their children. It is particularly difficult to generate confidence and enthusiasm for those with a personal history of academic failure. Working class women also found it more difficult than middle class mothers to give their children emotional support. This is because of other problems that they had in coping with poverty, insufficient educational knowledge and lack of confidence. Whether this is also a distinction between middle and working class Asian parents, specifically mothers, is not yet known due to the sparse research that exists in this sub-area.

Little empirical or theoretical attention has been paid to differentiation of the middle classes by 'race' or ethnicity (Archer, 2011 ). The research that does exist shows that middle class ethnic minority individuals and families in the UK have achieved success and social mobility by overcoming structural

inequalities. They are able to enjoy some of the privileges that middle class social positions afford them. However, the feelings of exclusion, and the racialised dimension of this exclusion, point to some important social justice issues. Furthermore, middle-classness is mostly regarded as inaccessible due to its association with 'Whiteness'. Many ethnic minority participants complained that due to racist readings of ethnic minority identities, they were not being acknowledged as being middle class (Archer, 2011). Rollock *et al.*'s (2011) work shows how, in response to these feelings of exclusion felt by Black minority middle classes highlighted by Archer (2011), middle class Black people make sense of incidents of racism and manage and negotiate survival in a society marked by race and class discrimination. Experiences of racism during early formative years (e.g., at school) and class transition facilitate the development of a complex set of capitals making use of a range of resources such as accent, language and conduct to signal their class status to White others. Middle class Black people are able to draw upon these in order to signal their class identity to White others thus minimizing the prospect of racial discrimination.

In terms of research on Asian parents, there has been a focus on Muslim parents (see, for example, Aston *et al.*, 1997; Osler & Hussain, 1995). Furthermore, in the main, there has been an emphasis on understanding the role parents' play and their views through their children, the students, and not in terms of the parents' own narratives. Tyrer and Ahmed (2006) conducted a qualitative study on Muslim women's HE experiences. The sample included 105 women that were either recent undergraduates or postgraduates entrants to the labour market. Interviewees were of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Arab, African and African-Caribbean ethnicities. Obstacles to careers services and issues around employability were explored within the study. Some women discussed the role their parents had played in their paths into and beyond HE.

In the main the interviewees felt that their parents shared their educational and career aspirations. There were however instances of disagreement where parents did not support their daughters' university subject choices. Mothers and fathers both had preferences for subjects that lead to prestigious professions and offered greater opportunities for self-employment.

One of the more recent studies on Asian parents that involved the investigation of parents' own narratives around their attitudes towards education was conducted by Ijaz and Abbas (2010). The authors used ethnographic and in-depth interview research methods to explore intergenerational change in parental attitudes towards the education of British Muslim women. The sample included men and women from communities that originated from the Mirpur district of Kashmir and were now resident in Oldbury, West Midlands. Research results showed that both generations understood the importance of education for their daughters. However there were differences between the two generations.

First generation parents were concerned about their daughters attending a western European school and being 'corrupted by western values' (p. 319). However, these parents were not concerned about their sons' attendance at schools and male children were given unlimited freedom. In contrast, second generation parents did not make this gender distinction and resented the double standards held by their parents' generation. They were equally worried about their sons becoming 'morally corrupted' (p. 320). All parents in the sample regardless of age, sex and educational background stated that they would be happy to support their daughters to study as much as they wanted if they were attending a Muslim school. No particular differentiation between the attitudes of mothers and fathers were reported

in this study. Furthermore, the role of mothers in particular was not focussed on in any way.

Siann *et al.* ( 1990 ) investigated the influences of career choice for Muslim women by way of qualitative interview methods and found some important results on parents. The sample for the study was drawn from the Bradford and Glasgow areas. These authors were especially interested in pupils' perceptions of their parents' views about themselves in relation to their careers. Issues addressed included whether or not the degree subject they aimed to study was an area of conflict within the home. Perceived differences between mothers and fathers were also explored. Findings suggested that there was little disparity between Muslim parents and pupils with regards to issues relevant to their careers.

Parallels can be drawn between Siann *et al.*'s ( 1990 ) now dated study and Bannerman's ( 2001 ) relatively more recent study. Bannerman's ( 2001 ) qualitative study however focused on language careers in particular as opposed to a wide spectrum of careers as Siann *et al.* ( 1990 ) did. Bannerman ( 2001 ) interviewed undergraduates and graduates to understand Asian girls' educational expectations and professional ambitions with a specific emphasis on their attitudes towards language learning. Findings suggested that a strong tradition of studying sciences and maths, subjects that can lead to the professions, was a significant obstacle for many students. This is in line with Shah *et al.*'s ( 2010 ) findings that showed how both Pakistani parents and children can expect high status from their community members if their children do well in higher education and gain professional qualifications.

Parental concerns were cited as a major barrier in Bannerman's study. Parents were not supportive towards their daughters studying language subjects as that they were apprehensive about their moving abroad. This is an element incorporated into most language degree courses and is often compulsory. In some cases this led to students deliberately avoiding mention of this part of the course to their families until the first two years of their course had been completed.

It is clear that the authors that have conducted work on the Asian communities have focussed on an understanding of parents' roles and thoughts from the viewpoint of the student and not the parents themselves. Of the studies that have been conducted, the literature has not specifically focused on the accounts of Indian mothers. As this research is sparse, we do not know what overlaps there might be between Indian and White mothers in terms of the role they play in their children's education more generally, or subject and career choices more specifically. Indian mothers in particular have not yet been included in existing studies as research participants in order to explore the subject choices of their children. It is this gap in the research that is being addressed here. The findings presented in this paper go some way to address this gap in the research.

## Theoretical framework

Studies conducted on Indian mothers, particularly the early pre 2000 empirical work (e.g., Bhachu, 1991 ), had sometimes been generalised in its interpretation to be representative of the accounts of all Asian women. The summary of evidence shows that there are both differences and similarities in the experiences of mothers from different ethnic and class backgrounds. David *et al.* ( 1994 ) and Reay and Ball ( 1998 ) highlight an overlap in perceptions around secondary school choice between working and middle class mothers. However, in terms of involvement in schooling, Reay ( 1998 ,

**2003** ) outlines key distinctions in the approaches of women from different class backgrounds. On the basis of these similarities and differences in experiences, and in keeping with the research goal of comparing White and Indian mothers, this analysis is theorised within an intersectionality framework.

As a theoretical term intersectionality encapsulates the multi-layered and crosscutting nature of disadvantage (Nash, **2008** ). Recent research has suggested the importance of exploring intersectionality when examining educational opportunities, achievement and attainment (Bhopal & Preston, **2011** ). The notion of intersectionality has gained some ground for some time as a way of both conceptualising and analysing multiple positioning. The effects of race, ethnicity, class and gender need not be recognised as isolated but instead as operating simultaneously and as intersecting. Social class can have a bearing on young people from all ethnic groups both in terms of the parenting provided to them and their experiences and outcomes. Hard and fast ethnic divisions are unsatisfactory not only when considering ethnic minority groups but also when examining disadvantage amongst the White groups (Phoenix & Husain, **2007** ). Certain White British working class children and young people feel that they are discriminated against (Nayak, **2002** , cited in Phoenix and Husain, **2007** ). Furthermore, many experience educational disadvantage, especially boys (Younger *et al.*, **2004** , cited in Phoenix and Husain, **2007** ).

Within the context of this study, intersectionality involved relating the data back to key questions throughout the analysis. The first question is: Are Indian and White women from similar education and socio-economic backgrounds equally as disadvantaged when facing challenges in terms of playing the roles they want to in their daughters' education? Crozier and Davies ( **2007** ) in their study on involvement in schools draw parallels with the experiences of Bangladeshi parents and White working class families in terms of their limited contact with schools. Can any such parallels be drawn with Indian mothers in this study? Do cultural norms for Indian mothers exacerbate the disadvantages they face or even help alleviate them?

Lower income economically inactive mothers may be reluctant to play a strong role in their daughter's educational choices. This is not due to a lack of motivation or emphasis on educational success. On the contrary, seemingly unlimited educational desire is illustrated through a consistent increase in Black women's participation over time. Mirza ( **2009** , p. 8) highlights that: 'Black women's educational desire for themselves and their children embodies a feminised prospectus for a successful multicultural future'.

Central to the Black female motivation is the strong role model of the mother figure. The suggestion around the academic notion of the strong Black mother is that these women possess internal strengths and cultural resources that account for their ability to overcome racism and sexism both within the home and the workplace. In reality though it is abilities and attributes to work and education that have resulted in positive female orientation to work and education (Mirza, **2009** ). We will see early on in the findings section of the paper that this educational desire is very much alive in the Indian mothers interviewed here.

Instead, a reluctance to play a strong role in their daughter's educational choices may be due to a lack of confidence amongst these women on the basis of their weak educational backgrounds. However, the concept of intersectionality highlights the cross-cutting nature of barriers and this relationship between low income and educational involvement becomes more problematic as we consider the importance of ethnicity and culture. Therefore, the constraints in terms of lack of access to knowledge



around available choices and routes faced by parents from lower-socioeconomic groups may be exacerbated by religio-cultural constraints for low income, Indian mothers. This could be because their lack of experience with the UK education system, in particular higher education system, further limits the roles they are able to play in their daughter's educational choices. Furthermore, family obligations and objections for some Indian and other Asian women may serve as a reason for opting to study certain subjects and courses (Bagguley & Hussain, 2007 ; Bannerman, 2001 ; Shah *et al.*, 2010 ). These constraints might not have any bearing for White British mothers in the roles they play and advice or guidance they give in terms of subjects and courses. It is also possible that cultural resources coupled with educational desire highlighted by Mirza ( 2009 ) can work in favour of these women and help in coping with barriers faced.

## Sample

This study focuses on Indian mothers of Indian daughters. 'Indian' in this case refers to any mother that identifies herself as being of Indian ethnicity and/or origin regardless of country of birth or faith group. This is why there are women in the sample that were born in the UK, India and East Africa. It is not surprising that the sample is made up mainly of mothers from East African Indian backgrounds as the first few mothers were found through personal networks that were of this background, and the remaining mothers were found through snowballing. Furthermore, East African-born Asians in both England and Wales numbered 193,000 in 2001 and make-up a sizeable portion of the Indian community in Britain. When taking their British-born children into account, they made up around one-third of the Indian ethnic population (Peach, 2006 ).

Despite there being evidence to suggest fathers are more central to decision-making in an Asian family, as highlighted by Ghuman ( 1999 ) and Warriar ( 1994 ), this does not imply that gaining an understanding of mothers' attitudes would not be insightful. More second and third generation Indian mothers are economically active and gaining independence and personal autonomy through paid work and this has affected the way that they perceive their daughter's education (Bhachu, 1991 ). Indian women are playing an increasingly involved role in terms of the way in which a family operates.

In terms of Indian female students, there is little existing research as there has been more focus on the education of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women. The reasons for this include lower attainment and lower levels of participation in HE amongst these two groups (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2003 ). The work done on the education of Indian female students is relatively little in comparison and as such it is these women that are the focus of this analysis. The aim was to achieve a sample made up of a minimum of 12 Indian mothers of daughters. The issue of how many people to include in a sample is a recurrent discussion point in methods debates. There is no formula as such to calculate how many interviews are enough and indeed it has been debated whether this question is appropriate for qualitative research. The aim was to include a minimum of 12 women in the sample. There are three key reasons for settling on this number. First of all there were practical limitations. This research was conducted as part of a doctoral study structured as a three-paper thesis. It made up one of three research components of the study and only a certain amount of time was scheduled for recruitment. Secondly, the group of mothers being studied can be considered as 'hard to reach' and so there was an acceptance that to find this many women willing to participate was in itself optimistic. This is not to say

that recruitment would not have continued to 15 or 20 mothers if participants were readily available and that there was a need to continue in order to be confident of having a range of responses (Baker & Edwards, 2012 ).

The sampling method that was deemed most appropriate involved the use of sixth form students to recruit mothers. Discussions were held with sixth form students at two schools in the London Boroughs of Croydon and Sutton and also Surrey County border areas but there was no success in terms of recruiting interviewees. Finally, a snowball sample of nine mothers was achieved through personal contacts in the community.

The snowball sampling method takes advantage of the social networks of identified respondents in a way that it provides a researcher with an ever-expanding set of potential participants. Snowball sampling is often used in research where participants are particularly hard to reach. It is useful for recruiting participants that are members of more excluded groups. The method is regarded as a highly valuable method for obtaining respondents where they are few in number or where a certain degree of trust is required to initiate contact (Atkinson & Flint, 2001 ). Initial participants were reached through personal contacts, and they in turn provided contact details of other prospective participants that had the key characteristics required to take part in the study.

The key background information on interviewees is presented in Table 1. The names provided are not the interviewees' real names but pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Participants were asked for information on their highest educational qualification and occupation. It was considered inappropriate and intrusive to ask participants for their income. Class was defined by the author primarily in reference to the women's educational status and occupation. For example, a mother such as Simran who is educated to degree level and is working in a professional occupation as a pharmacist was considered as being middle class. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted on a one-off basis with each of the nine mothers in their own homes. Interviews were between 45 minutes to an hour and a half in duration. They were recorded and later transcribed. Two of the participants requested that the interviews be conducted in Gujarati. These were transcribed and translated into English.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of mothers interviewed

Interviewee name	Number of children	Daughter's position (youngest, eldest)	Area	Age	Highest educational qualification
Seema	2	Eldest	London Borough of Sutton	44	GCSE
Meera	2	Eldest	London Borough of Croydon	53	Primary school completion
Maya	1	N/A	Milton Keynes	45	GCSE
Naina	1	N/A	London Borough of Harrow	52	CSE



Deepa	2	Youngest	London Borough of Harrow	53	O level
Keya	2	Eldest	Leicester City	47	O level equivalent
Simran	3	Middle	London Borough of Havering	45	BSc (hons) pharm
Malveen	1	N/A	London Borough of Redbridge	45	BA social science/banking de
Tina	3	Middle	Leicester City	44	CSE

## Findings

Every mother in the sample described the high value they placed on educational success. This is true for mothers that did not go to university themselves as well as those that did. They have passed this value on to their daughters. That all the women in the sample hold success in education overall, and progression to HE more specifically, in such high regard irrespective of social class and educational background, is a feature that other authors have commented on both in relation to Asian parents as well as other minority groups. In his study of British South Asians and selective schooling, Abbas (2007) highlighted that many of the working class parents that were interviewed had strong middle class attitudes towards many aspects of education. These attitudes refer to high levels of motivation, a high value placed on selective education and an emphasis on consistently achieving the 'best'. Although there were high aspirations amongst all the interviewees, not all were able to play as strong a role in their daughter's decisions. All of the interviewees that did not go to university said that they did not feel especially qualified to give advice regarding what courses to apply for or what universities to attend. This lack of confidence was a common sentiment amongst the mothers that did not attend university.

Deepa was one of the mothers that thought she could not offer much to her daughter by way of guidance. She knew very little about her daughter's education. She only had a very vague idea of what courses her daughter was on and what she was intending to study at university. Clarification had to be sought from her daughter after the interview to check which courses she had applied to study at university. Here Deepa points out that both she and her husband have little confidence in giving advice and talking to their daughter about her work:

**Interviewer:**

But it sounds like if he's [Deepa's husband] asking you certain things then... he probably won't have that much discussion with your daughter yeah?

**Deepa:**

Because he didn't study here [in the UK] and you know he doesn't, he's not like a... I might not be a very confident about it but he has even worse confidence about it.

**Interviewer:**

Even less confidence?

**Deepa:**

Even less confidence about it yeah. (Deepa, 53, administrative clerk)

Similarly, Tina talks here about how her daughter did not think that there was much help that she could give and how this was a frustrating experience:

**Tina:**

She did say Mum I'm not sure but she didn't say Mum I need a hand 'cause she made it clear, you've not gone to uni so you wouldn't help me! So [interviewee laughs]...

**Interviewer:**

Yeah...

**Tina:**

But that's my daughter.

**Interviewer:**

Oh OK. So she just didn't think that it would be useful for her to come and speak to you about it?

**Tina:**

Hmmm. But I have quite often said to her if you get stuck or anything there's always your Mum or other kids with experiences or whatever and ask them for help and advice... which she has done.

**Interviewer:**

OK, so did that sort of make you feel...?

**Tina:**

I felt as if I was like just you know put down thinking you know oh God! And you want to help her obviously but you sort of think how do you help her? If you don't know then how do you help her? Like an example, what they study at school...

**Interviewer:**

Yeah...

**Tina:**

Like my son, sometimes he gets stuck and I'm thinking well I don't know, but why don't I know? Because the way they're taught today and the way we were taught is completely different. (Tina, 44, retail assistant)

In this instance, Tina's daughter communicates a lack of confidence in her mother that further exaggerates Tina's feelings of incompetence. Tina and Deepa's stories echo some of Reay's ( 1998 , 2003 ) findings that due to their personal histories of academic failure compounded by a lack of familiarity with the British education system and current curriculum, working class mothers can find it especially difficult to generate academic confidence among their children if they themselves have weak educational backgrounds.

Tina's quote is important for another reason—it demonstrates that mothers see younger members of the extended family as potential sources of important knowledge and resources that could help them and their daughters navigate the HE landscape. Extended family members, in particular nieces and nephews, were referred to on many occasions by other interviewees in the sample as well. Mothers described their families as close-knit and discussed how their daughters were close to their cousins and enjoyed spending time with them. Older cousins that were on undergraduate courses, or already had finished university acted as role models for the students. Naina is the one mother that elaborated the most on the role that they played. This may be because her daughter found deciding upon a degree subject especially stressful, and she looked to her cousins for guidance and empathy. Even before that when making a decision to go to university, there was a great deal of influence from the paths that her cousins took before her:

So how did the decision that your daughter's going to go to university come about?

Actually, there was no mind making or anything she just always wanted to go to uni like I said that our, all our sisters, brothers and sisters, our children, have always studied and gone far and you know my daughter being the youngest on my husband's side of the family, because my husband is the youngest out of his siblings, and so she is the youngest out of, the other children have all studied, have all got jobs and everything [Interviewee laughs] and she is just going to start at the Uni, so she's always had this influence of her cousins that you know that is the normal thing to do. There wasn't kind of mind making up or anything like that. (Naina, 52, administrative clerk)

This quote also illustrates 'non-decision-making' in line with studies conducted on White middle class parents. Non-decision-making about participation in HE can be embedded within family, friendship and peer networks. This can relate to the extent to which future participation in HE might be conceived as

being within the realms of possibility amongst members within these networks. These networks can be understood as sites of varying forms of capital (social, cultural and economic), providing a critical context within which individuals' thinking and understanding about HE is embedded (Heath *et al.*, 2008). As Naina's daughter was close to her cousins and they had all been to university, there was no deliberation given to the initial act of applying to study at university and committing to time in HE. Instead the decisions that did have to be made were around which route to take in terms of subject of study and institution, for example. Both Naina and her daughter were able to, by way of social and cultural capital, draw on key contacts and information as well as experiences through their family networks.

In contrast to Deepa and Tina, better educated mothers were far more confident in the support they gave their daughters. They displayed awareness of some particular issues that are considered when deciding what makes a university or course reputable that the others did not. One example of this is when the parents visited open days at the universities. The majority of parents accompanied their daughters to open days and thought that this was an important display of support. Malveen was one of the mothers that had been to university and she held a degree in social science. Malveen appeared to pay a lot of attention to teaching staff and existing students. This was something that was missing from the discussions with the other mothers.

We'd been to a couple of open days at one university, one open day at another university, we went to three open days at this other university, and I think it had endorsed the fact that at that university, on each, each open day, and each seminar they did you could see the experience. You could see how interested they were in their students and how it was important to them in their reputation that their students performed, and when you looked at the equipment and even the students themselves, because the last, the last umm visit we did to that university umm we were impressed by the knowledge of the students. They were absolutely fantastic. Two Indian girls, and we'd been to the other university and they were OK, you know, when we asked them questions it was this, and this was the equipment.

These two girls at this university umm, one was first year, one was second year, but their knowledge was absolutely fantastic, it was... and you got to play around with things, you know, they showed you the equipment they use and how you could use it, they let you use it, the way they talked about the entire curriculum, the courses, the support, the after, what I call the after sales, but the after care and these girls I think sold that university, absolutely fantastically. (Malveen, 45, commercial director)

This quote shows the detail with which Malveen observed characteristics about all aspects of the department including staff, facilities, course structure and students amongst other things. She was the only mother that spoke about visiting a university more than once and this is a very thorough and active display of support. All of the details she took note of were relayed back to her daughter when she was deciding which university to place as her first choice. Malveen's daughter originally wanted a career as a climatologist. However, although Malveen was not necessarily very enthusiastic about the

choice, she was sympathetic to her daughter's wishes. When they were researching the courses that were available it became apparent that the most reputed courses in this area were predominantly only available to study abroad. Malveen and her husband's support for their daughter to study a course that she enjoyed and was enthusiastic about was so great that they were willing to relocate to another country in order for her to pursue this:

**Malveen:**

We'd started looking at all the different universities and a lot of them were in the States and India and everywhere and so we'd started looking at places and areas that we would be, have to move to if we had to. 'Cause [my husband's] got a business so we have to think of all of that as well. And I had to be able to be transferred within my organisation to wherever she decided to go to university.

**Interviewer:**

So you were willing to do all of that?

**Malveen:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

If that's what she wanted to do?

**Malveen:**

Yeah if that's what she wanted to do, yeah, we were willing to do that, yeah, 'cause I'd made inquiries at my work and said look this is the case, where do I stand? They said yeah we could transfer you. It was just my husband and the business. But we could have arranged that if it had come to that.

This quote illustrates a few important points. First of all, Malveen and her husband are willing to go to great lengths to facilitate their daughter's degree subject and career preferences. Secondly, they are able to act and display this support in a way that other parents with similar commitments are not able to. Massey ( 1995 ) points out that the middle classes are more spatially mobile than the working classes and therefore have more spatial power. Moving to the same place that has the courses their daughter would like to study is not something that some parents would regard as essential. However, Malveen is able and willing to move so that her daughter is able to attend the best universities for her course.

Malveen shares similarities with the middle class skilled parent choosers that Gewirtz *et al.* ( 1995 ) describe. These parents think in the long-term where by choice of primary school is the first of numerous strategic decisions involved in the careful construction of their children's school careers. This strategic decision-making can be seen here with Malveen and her husband in the HE context as they believe moving abroad to study on these courses will benefit her future career.

This element of strategy was also evident when Naina provided support by enquiring about work experience. When her daughter was considering medicine as a career option she was aware of how her job in the medical field might provide her resources that could help her daughter. Work experience would give her daughter the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of her prospective field and understand the inner workings of the industry. These are important insights to gain. Work experience can strengthen a student's application, especially for a competitive course like medicine. That Naina wished to pass her social networks down to her daughter and use them to her daughter's advantage in this way is a demonstration of social capital.

Students without access to these types of networks might be at a disadvantage and face inequalities in the application process. Similarly, Malveen's daughter was planning on going to Africa to get involved with a charity project where she would be able to assist as part of an eye camp. A friend of the family was a registered Optometrist active in the running of the camp. The fact that Malveen's daughter was able to access the knowledge and experience of a seasoned professional related to her chosen course and career through her parents is a clear example of social capital. The fact that the student was planning to go on this trip is something that would potentially add strength to her application. This is in terms of showing commitment to the course as well as gaining essential background knowledge on the profession.

Both mother and daughter were involved in the student using a member of their social network as a resource to further their educational career. This is an example of middle class South Asian parents acquiring important knowledge to become more informed of educational opportunities through their contacts. Malveen's case lends itself to an intersectional analysis as these types of family and community network resources might not be available to White mothers of a similar economically stable and degree-level educated profile. Malveen may be even better positioned than her White middle class counterparts as a result, or at least (when considering disadvantage in terms of racial discrimination) be on a more level playing field. Abbas ( 2007 ) found similar examples in his study on selective schooling where parents used their social networks as key resources for important information rather than relying on resources provided by the schools. Malveen's daughter also had access to financial resources that made it feasible to go on a work experience related trip abroad before starting university, and this may have strengthened her university applications. Gap year opportunities such as this may not have been available to students from families with more limited financial resources. This notion of taking time out to increase work experience, especially abroad, is an attractive option for students wanting to improve their employability. A gap year can be used to take part in un/paid work experience that improves soft skills like communication and generally increase confidence.

However, this opportunity is not open to all students and as such the increasing popularity of gap years can 'serve to widen the gap between different groups of students as part of an on-going process of positional competition' in the graduate labour market as those that have the opportunity to take time out may be more attractive to employers (Heath, 2007 , p. 101). In line with the findings of authors



such as Reay ( 1998 , 2003 ) in relation to White mothers, it was mothers that were more engaged than fathers when it came to helping make decisions and providing support. Interviewees made efforts to keep up to date with the various stages of the decision-making process, and often spoke about having discussions with teachers and careers advisors. In contrast, the interviewees discussed how in some cases fathers' involvement was loose and distant. There was one case where a father knew very little about what his daughter's intentions were about studying, and this was mainly due to a lack of confidence on his part. He had never attended school in the UK and held no formal qualifications. These were two factors that made him question how useful his advice might be. In this sense, there was a similarity between the mothers and fathers that had not been to university. Some of the fathers would attend university open days and parents' evenings along with their daughters and wives. Only two of the nine fathers were especially involved and figured more prominently in the decision-making than their partners. Fathers would try to be as up to date as possible on what their daughters were studying and how their thoughts were developing about potential courses. However, daughters ultimately depended more on their mothers for support. There was some three-way dialogue including both parents and daughter. However, there was more mother–daughter discussion during decision-making than father–daughter discussion and dialogue between only the parents was rare.

## How do class and ethnicity intersect for Indian mothers?

Lesser-educated working class mothers did not have access to a wide range of advice and information through their social networks. This does not appear to be simply a class issue but an education issue. Women with little economic capital can attempt to gain other forms of social and cultural capital through education (Ali, 2003 ). Where mothers did not have experience of HE, they faced a struggle to access important resources. This finding echoes results found by other authors in relation to both White and Indian working class mothers. Both experience inequality of access to resources and differences in social and cultural capital. Even where women have some kind of economic comfort, the type of class identity held by them cannot necessarily counter the effects of working class cultural capital as working-classness is inherent and its trace can be felt as a source of discomfort to these women. This is because it is not recognised by those with the power to validate it (Ali, 2003 ).

In terms of commonalities, both working and middle class Indian mothers turn to their extended family members, including younger relatives, and use them as sources for the knowledge that they think will help their daughters to advance. This has not been found in studies on either working or middle class White mothers who, based on the existing literature, tend to focus on the exchange of knowledge from adults to the younger generation. This may be due to the differences in family structure between the two groups. Staying in closer contact with the extended family is not uncommon for Asian families. Large family households are also not unusual. These types of cultural mores are an important aspect of their ethnicity (Basit, 2012 ). These cultural mores are helping lesser-educated Indian mothers make up some of their disadvantage from resources available to them from their wider family and community networks. What is important here in terms of intersectionality, is that these resources are not available to White mothers through their family and community networks, and Indian mothers may

be better positioned than their White counterparts as a result.

It is important however to remember that this greater reliance on extended family and community members may only have limited impact. As Faist ( 2000 ) argues, there is a danger that close-knit communities recycle information which does not necessarily get updated and may even be inaccurate or inadequate in the first instance. Furthermore, whilst community members may be supportive of each other, if that group remains insular then the educational capital remains limited (Crozier & Davies, 2006 ). The findings presented here point to another commonality between White and Indian mothers. Previous studies of White parents suggest that mothers play a more active role than fathers in the education of their children. The evidence presented in this study echoes this. However, even here a distinction can be made. For example, in Reay and Ball's ( 1998 ) study, the women interviewed perceived their involvement in their children's' education to be within their wider roles of being mothers. This is not something that emerged in these interviews. Where it did it was more in relation to their wider conceptualisation of parenthood rather than of motherhood specifically.

## Conclusion

This paper is an important step forward in addressing various gaps in the relevant research areas. Firstly, it is one of the few studies focused on the Indian group. Most previous studies that have looked at the Asian groups have been confined to Bangladeshi and Pakistani students and beyond this most studies have focused on the White group. Secondly, it has involved understanding parents' views, not through their children as is the case in other studies, but directly from the parents themselves. Thirdly, it is one of the few studies where mothers' views are investigated in such great detail. This research highlights some important similarities and differences between White and Indian mothers. In terms of similarities, it is not only in the White ethnic group where mothers generally play a more active role than fathers in the education of their children. The evidence in this paper suggests this is also true of Indian mothers. This research also shows that the inequality of access to resources and differences in social and cultural capital applies to both White and Indian mothers with little or no previous experience of HE.

Being of a working class background is limiting in terms of social and cultural capital for mothers from both ethnic groups. However, in terms of differences, between the two groups, the intersection of class and ethnicity changes the picture for Indian women as this social and cultural capital is found and utilised elsewhere. Both working and middle class Indian mothers turn to their extended family members and use them as sources for knowledge that will assist their daughters. In the main they turn to younger relatives including nieces and nephews. This has not been found in studies on White mothers where the emphasis instead has been on the exchange of knowledge from adults to the younger generation.

## References

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