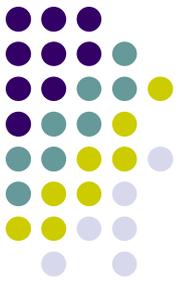# Placing Ethnicity at the Centre of Studies in Later Life: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Challenges
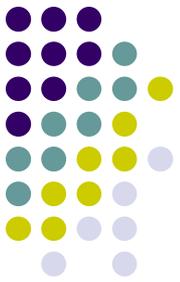
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AREAS COVERED

- DEFINITIONS
- CONTEXT
- ISSUES
- DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH ON ETHNICITY IN UK SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY
- EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH
- THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY ABOUT ETHNICITY AND AGEING

Definition

- Ethnicity is a 'multi-faceted and changing phenomenon' that may reflect a combination of a number of features including country of birth, nationality, language spoken at home, ancestral country of birth, skin color, national or geographical origin, racial group or religion'.

  (ONS, 2003)

CONTEXT

- The number of people from ethnic minority groups aged 50 & over projected to increase from **1.3** million in 2001, **2.4** million in 2026, **3.8** million by 2016, and **7.4** million by 2051.

- For those 65 and over, increase goes from **500,000** in 2001, **0.81** million by 2016, **1.3** million by 2026 and **3.8** million by 2051.

- Increase especially important for certain groups: Indian ethnic minority group 50 plus rises from **200,000** in 2001, **625,000** by 2026 and **1, 150,000** by 2051 (Lievesley, 2010)
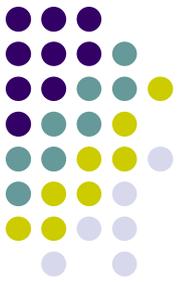
ISSUES

- DEMOGRAPHIC COMPLEXITY

- **VARIETY OF LIFE HISTORIES**

- COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND VULNERABILITIES

- **RANGE OF ATTITUDES TO AGEING**
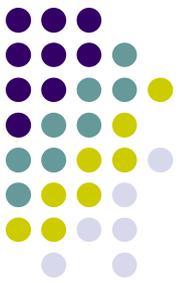
STUDIES IN UK CONTEXT

- 1970s/1980s – local surveys e.g. Midlands, London, Manchester (e.g. Blakemore & Bhalla, '81).

- Discussion of 'triple jeopardy' (Norman, 1985)

- Expansion of research on health and social care inequalities in 1990s and 2000s (CPA, 2009)

- Quality of life studies (Nazroo et al., 2004)

- Large data sets (e.g. HSE, FNSEM)
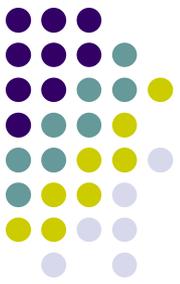
STUDIES IN UK CONTEXT

- Studies funded under GO and NDA

- More detailed work on specific ethnic groups (e.g. Bangladeshis – Victor/Burholt)

- Widening out of themes e.g. loneliness, social capital, nutrition, pensions.

- Continuing focus on poor up-take of specific services for people with dementia, visual impairment and linked areas.

Sociological issues and ethnicity

- **Globalisation and family life: the case of Bangladeshi women (with Nilufar Ahmed).**

- **Experiences of place and community (with Tine Buffel/Tom Scharf).**

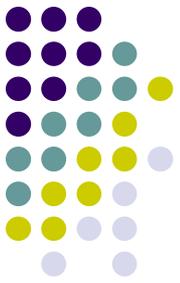# Tower Hamlets Study of First Generation migrant women.

- Built on previous research in Bethnal Green – study of family and community life in old age
- **The Family and Community Life of Older People: Social Networks and Social Support in Three Urban Areas** (2000)
- Revealed distinctiveness of Bangladeshi households.

# Case Study from Family and Community Life of Older People

- 'Mr Miah is 69 and lives with his wife and 7 of his 8 children (all at school) in a ground-floor flat with 5 bedrooms. He arrived in London from Bangladesh in 1957 and has since been living in various parts of the East End. Their other child [a daughter] lives in a flat above them with her family. Mr. Miah's flat is a converted laundry which once served the housing estate. He has 3 brothers who live in Leeds, Bradford and Birmingham'.

Development of new study

- Most studies had focused on young Bangladeshis
- Study set out to examine roles and responsibilities of first generation migrant women aged 35-55
- This group had been identified as one squeezed between care for young and older people in previous study.
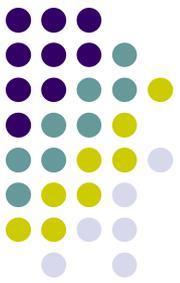
Conceptual model: Transnational migration

- Transnational migration is concerned with: '…how ordinary people are incorporated into the countries that receive them while remaining active in the places they come from' (Levitt, P **The Transnational Villagers**)

- 'Many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders' (Basch et al. **Nations Unbound**)

Study Methodology

- Survey of 100 women 35-55 chosen on random basis from GP practices (65% response rate)
- 96 interviews conducted in Sylheti, dialect form of Bengali: Bengali/Sylheti second largest language spoken after English in London.
- Focus groups with younger generation (late teens/ early 20s)
- Challenging interviews
- Presence of husbands complicated interviews in some cases

The sample
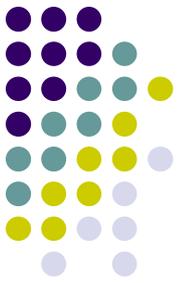
- 76% married; 17% widowed; 7% divorced or single
- Average household size 6.6; 7% of households with 10 plus
- Average number of children 5.2
- Combination of nuclear families with complex multi-family households
- 33% of those married husbands 60 or over
- Women had been married for an average of nearly 25 years

Household examples

- Roshon (40) came to UK when she was 30; married in Bangladesh in 1980 when she was 19; subsequently came to UK with her four children. Lives in Local Authority flat. Husband died a few months prior to the interview. Nine people in household including 8 children – 20, 17, 15, 11, 7, 5, 18 and 6 months.

- Beena (45) came to UK when 34; married in Bangladeshi in '74 (18); came to UK with husband and 3 children. 8 people in household: spouse (74); 5 children aged 23, 18, 17, 10 and 7 plus daughter-in-law.

EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE
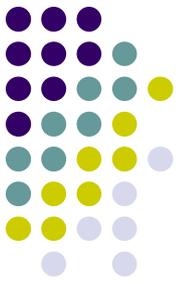
- 'My sister arranged the marriage. She thought he was a good man. But I couldn't stay with him. He used to beat mean and he was very greedy. He was a gambler and drinker and he took drugs. He didn't want to work. He always sent me to my brothers and sisters to get money from them, and if I didn't get money he would beat me. Then I couldn't take it any more we got separated'. (Halima, first married at 17; widowed at 28; re-married in UK at 36; separated at 41)

Daily life

- 'I am doing a course from this September. It's a three month course. It should help me pass the time too when the children are in school and I am alone in the house'. (Saika, married with 5 children)

- 'Two days a week I go the gym for exercise and two days a week I go to language classes' (Habiba, four children)

- 'I get up in the morning and then I pray. Then I wake the children up, get them ready and take them to school. When I come home I cook..if I need to I go out and do some shopping. Then I pick up the children from school. When I bring them home it is a bit of a rush to feed them and get them ready for their Arabic classes. They can all go together by themselves but I pick them up because it gets late'. (Nazia, separated, 7 children)

Thoughts about Bangladesh

It would have been harder in Bangladesh. There would be more worries. There is more work to do there. In this country you don't have to worry about harvests and crops, in Bangladesh you do. There is a lot of outdoor work. Here it is all indoors." (Sadika, married with six children)

"If I was in Bangladesh then it would have been comfortable because I would have had people to help me. What I'm doing now is more than I can manage because there's only one of me in the house looking after six children. My husband is ill and I have to look after him too. It's too much for me. But if I was in Bangladesh, I would have had a helper. I wouldn't have had to work so hard. Everyone wants a bit of a rest for themselves."

(Feroza, married with six children).

Hopes for the future
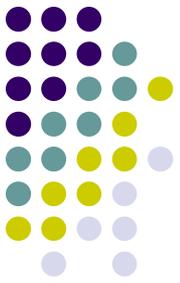
- 'I don't have any hopes for myself. I just want to be able to raise the children well and educate them and make them into decent people' (Shaira)

- 'That our children don't spend their lives on benefit like us' (Ranu)

- My children's hopes are now my hopes. As long as they are happy, I'm happy' (Shipa)

- 'I measure my life by how my children are doing. Their future is the most important thing for me' (Rohima)

- **Experiences of place and community (with Tine Buffel and Tom Scharf)**

  Re-analysis of qualitative interviews from study of social exclusion among older migrants in three cities in England and interviews carried out among Turkish migrants in Brussels.
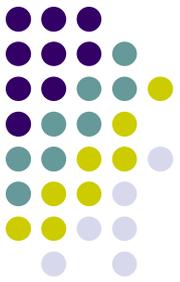
Neighbourhood characteristics England and Belgium

- Above-average rates of unemployment and low income households
- Relatively poor housing conditions
- Visible decay and area abandonment
- Loss of family, friends and neighbours
- Vulnerability to forms of anti-social behaviour and crime
- Loss of services and amenities

Sample characteristics

	Brussels	Liverpool/Manchester
AGE	Between 60-73 (av.age 65)	Majority of participants in their 60s (exact birth dates uncertain)
SEX	18 men 25 women	21 men 18 women
LENGTH OF RESIDENCE	*On av. 18 yrs* in current neighbourhood	*On av. 24 yrs* in current neighbourhood
RELIGION	Predominantly Muslim	
HOUSING	Majority rented accommodation with the exception of Turkish elders in Brussels nearly half owned flat.	

Sense of home
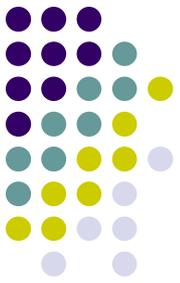
- "I like this neighbourhood. My children have grown up here, and I know everyone here; they are like family. All my dreams lie here" (Moroccan woman, Brussels).

- 'It's a good area... because everywhere is pretty close, you know, especially the community and the mosque and that's the important thing' (Somali woman, Liverpool).

Sense of home

"This is the only other place I've known as home other than Pakistan. So I would say that I feel very at home in this neighbourhood. Your home is what you make not what people think it to be"

(Pakistani woman, Manchester).

Sense of home

The idea of '*making*' your home and neighbourhood reflects the active role played by migrants in constructing urban space - an important element in the development of individual and group identity:

'Twenty years back we hired the halls and then we prayed there…I said why are we hiring this hall? Why don't we make our own place? So…you gave according to your pocket…I gave according to my pocket. We were all people who were praying there; everybody contributed something to that kitty you know…We bought that place where this mosque is now' (Pakistani man, Manchester).
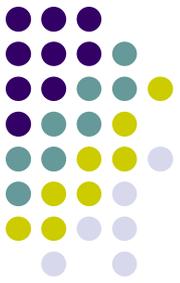
Gendered use of space

'*Male spaces'* in mosques, cafés and teahouses:

'I only go in the shop at the corner; I don't go to the supermarket because I have to pass that square where all the men are' (Turkish woman)

Gendered use of space

'*Female spaces*' – more private but also semi-public such as community centres. Women commented on the lack of such spaces:

'We need somewhere for the men to get together and a place for the women to get together'. (Pakistani woman)

Multiple place attachments

- "This [neighbourhood in Manchester] is my home now. I don't think of it as anything else. But there is nothing like your home in Pakistan, which I miss. But this is my home"

  (Pakistani man, Manchester).

- "I feel very much attached to my neighbourhood. Whenever I go to Turkey I miss my friends and children [who live in Belgium]. But when I'm here, I miss my family in Turkey"

  (Turkish man, Brussels).

TRANSNATIONAL TIES

- Forms of identification that cut across fixed notions of belonging (de-territorialisation of attachment)

- Sustaining transnational ties: important for wellbeing and quality of life of many older migrants

- Differences between older migrants in Belgium and England in the extent to which they were able to sustain transnational relationships
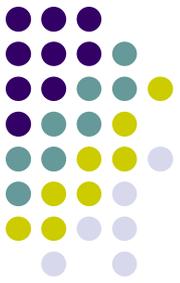
ISSUES FOR THEORY AND ANALYSIS
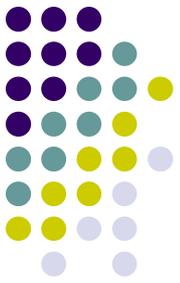
- **CHALLENGE PERSPECTIVES ON MINORITY ETHNIC GROUPS**

- **NEED FOR GREATER EMPHASIS ON THEORY TO EXPLAIN IMPLICATIONS FOR AGEING**

- **LIFE COURSE ISSUES**

CHANGE PERSPECTIVES

- 'We know a lot from descriptive studies about the disadvantages faced by older members of some racial and ethnic groups in later life, especially in terms of the social that correlate with health etc….In contrast, the potential benefits associated with ethnic group membership are poorly documented'. (Muchler & Burr, 2011)

BENEFITS ETHNIC OF GROUP MEMBERSHIP
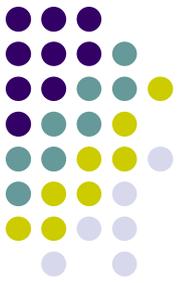
- Beneficial effects of ethnic density? (Nazroo et al).
- Bonding ties/Social capital?
- Resilience?
- New social relationships/characteristics of transnational ties

NEED FOR THEORY
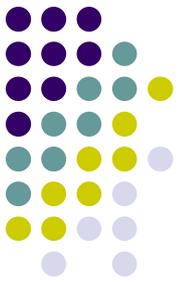
'….. research literature…focuses on describing differences among socially defined groups rather than developing theories and garnering evidence to help explain diverse outcomes in the aging context….' (Jackson in Mutchler & Barr, 2011).

LIFE COURSE ISSUES

- **LINK TO CUMULATIVE ADVANTAGE/DISADVANTAGE MODELS**

  - Moves away from simplistic 'triple-jeopardy' thesis

  - Importance of 'within-group differentiation' as well as differences between ethnic groups.

  - Impact of devaluing of human capital over course and inflated value attached to human capital of dominant groups.
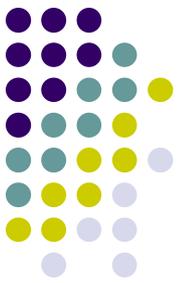
LIFE COURSE ISSUES

- IMPORTANCE OF 'DISCONTINUITY' IN LIFE COURSE TRANSITIONS – THE 'TURBULENCE OF MIGRATION'.

- ASSIMILATE 'DISRUPTION' AND 'DISORDER' INTO THEORETICAL MODELS WHICH ASSUME 'STABILITY' AND 'DEVELOPMENT'.

- VARIATIONS IN DEFINITIONS OF AGEING.
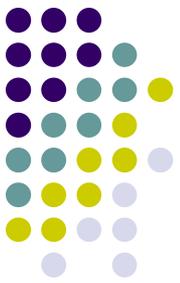
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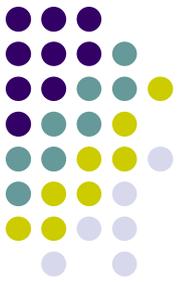
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