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Acculturation of Bangladeshi Migrants in Australia: Role of Bridging Capital

ABSTRACT

Migrants' acculturation refers to the process of cultural and psychological adaptation that occurs when there is a direct contact between two or more social groups with different cultural backgrounds. This study examines the acculturation of Bangladeshi immigrants in Australia, who are one of the fastest growing communities in that country. At the same time, it focuses on migrants' bridging social capital to map the degree of acculturation. Based on primary data collected through questionnaire survey from 210 respondents and 52 interviews conducted among the Bangladeshi migrants living in three major states of Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, this study reveals that acculturation pattern of Bangladeshi migrants in Australia is diverse. The findings indicate that the bridging capital of the Bangladeshi migrants with the host society is relatively weak. Misperception about Australian culture create a detachment with the people of the host society, on the one hand, while on the other anxious that their children retain connections with Bangladeshi culture, some of the participants in this study found themselves becoming more religious on moving to Australia.

Key words: Acculturation, Migrants' Bridging capital, Migration, Bangladeshi immigrants

Introduction

Bangladeshi community is an emerging migrant cohort in Australia. According to the latest census of Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2016 the number of Bangladesh-born people in Australia is 41,237, an increase of 48.3 per cent from the 2011 Census.¹ It is also noted that Bangladeshi migrants in Australia are highly educated and mostly skilled. Therefore, they are likely to settle successfully in the host country compared to the unskilled or humanitarian migrants (Ip 2001). Yet, they face significant challenges in settling to the new lives, because Bangladeshi migrants in Australia find significant differences between the host and home culture.

Therefore, it is important to be familiar with how the Bangladeshi migrants, irrespective of their religious belief settle in this different socio- cultural environment, and what problems they face in their process of acculturation. Against this backdrop the study examines the patterns of acculturation of Bangladeshi immigrants in Australia. The study, critically reviews theoretical approaches to migrant settlement with particular attention to Berry's (1980) influential framework for understanding migrant acculturation. According to Berry's model, acculturation occurs in two dimensions: one refers to the maintenance of heritage culture, and the other refers to the nature of engagement with a host culture. Based on this model, Berry introduces four potential outcomes of acculturation: assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation. This paper tests this model with respect to Bangladeshi skilled migrants in Australia; particular reference is given to the attachment with the host society. In so doing migrants' social capital, in particular the nature of bridging capital among Bangladeshi immigrants in Australia is mapped on the basis of data.

It is noted that research on migration predominantly emphasizes onto the humanitarian migrants, because their experiences, such as the nature and process of migration, transition, settlement and acculturation magnetize the

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¹ The average growth rate of Bangladesh-born people in Australia was 18.5% per annum since the 1990s (ABS 2011)

scholars to explore their stories. Therefore, far less attention is given to the settlement experiences of skilled migrants. While it is sometimes taken for granted that skilled migrants settle successfully on their own merits (Easson 2013), research by Ip (2001) demonstrates that skilled and educated migrants can face significant settlement stress. Furthermore, there are good reasons to believe that settlement experience differs across individuals and groups (Khoo 1994). Therefore, settlement and acculturation of skilled migrants require scholarly attention.

Furthermore, it is observed that the nature of settlement by Bangladeshi long-term migrants is quite distinct in different countries, partly due to historical reasons, and partly due to host countries' immigration policies (Shafiq 2016). Therefore, an inclusive research is required on this particular community. This is simultaneously important for the migrants, as well as the policy makers of the host country, because understanding of the vital issues that facilitate or hinder successful settlement and acculturation may help the migrants mitigate the stress, and learn to ease the settlement process, and policy makers may be able to rearrange the policies, so immigrants would adjust easily and would not turn out as burden to the host society. However, this concern is largely ignored in scholarly arena. This paper, therefore, addresses these gaps by examining the acculturation of Bangladeshi skilled migrants with particular references to the role of bridging capital.

This empirical study is based on primary data collected from 210 Bangladesh migrants through a questionnaire survey and 52 semi-structured interviews conducted on Bangladeshi migrants in Australia. A *mixed-method* is used to analyze the data collected through surveys and interviews.² The study focuses on Bangladeshi permanent migrants, either permanent residents or citizens of Australia, living in three states – New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland – where according to ABS (2016) about 87% of these migrants have settled.

Participants were recruited by using a range of networks. In order to attain some contact details as primary samples, various Bangladeshi community organizations in New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland were contacted initially. An open invitation to join the project, containing brief aims and objectives of the research, was delivered to potential participants through family, friends, community business (ethnic grocery shops, restaurants), mosques, community gatherings such as birthday parties, Eid reunions, literary and cultural programs, and the *Boishakhi Mela* (Bengali New Year's Day fair). Snowball technique was also employed in this research, where the participants had been requested to recommend other community members to be included in the project. Furthermore, field notes and observation were important research tools in this study.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section two reviews relevant theories and empirical literature related to the acculturation of migrants. Findings of the study are discussed and interpreted in section three. The final section concludes the paper by summarizing the main findings of the research.

Literature Review:

This section encompasses with the debate over migrants' settlement and acculturation, model of acculturation and social capital in order to present a background research and theoretical approach about the migrants' acculturation and bridging capital in a host country. Multidimensional nature of migration reflects that settlement of migrants is a highly complex process, and debate over the settlement has been highly researched area. 'Assimilation' was considered as the earliest approach to settlement as adopted by the most immigrant receiving countries. It asserts that successful settlement would be measured by how well migrants were assimilated in the host country (Khoo 2012). Another school of thoughts in the name of 'classical assimilation theory' delineated that assimilation occur once the migrants give up their own culture, and accept everything from the host culture in order to adjust in the mainstream (Bohon& Conley 2015). In this context Jupp (2002) focuses on the invisibility of any feature that differentiates one person from another. In his opinion assimilation is complete when migrants would not be noticed or received extra attention in the place of destination.

This classical theory of assimilation was feasible to put into practice until the post-war period in most of the immigrant-receiving Western countries, such as the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand (Fletcher 1999), because during the early-20th-century migrants were largely homogenous- mainly white European, settling in other countries populated by the Europeans (Greenman & Xie 2008). However, after the Second World War, migrants were largely from Latin America and Asia who originated from a wider variety of socio-economic

² Data for this study were collected during 2012 and 2013 while the author was conducting PhD research in Australia.

backgrounds. Therefore, any single uniform model of immigrants’ incorporation may not be applicable for all the migrant cohorts.

Model of Acculturation:

The term acculturation was incorporated by a group of scholars in 1936, who defined acculturation as a state of situation and subsequent changes in the original culture patterns due to first hand contact between two diverse groups of individuals (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits 1936). Cultural change that takes place as a result of interaction between two distinct cultures, and psychological adaptation into a plural society is also termed as acculturation (SSRS 1954, Graves 1967). Similarly, Berry et al. (1992) consider acculturation as the process of cultural and psychological adaptation that occurs where there is direct contact between two or more social groups with different cultural backgrounds. Therefore acculturation is an important part of settlement, and immigrants are to go through both processes.

This section now focuses on the models of acculturation which is primarily developed with the basis of Berry’s (1980) theoretical framework. What Berry did was blended the above mentioned classical definitions in his theory. According to him, “acculturation is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry 2005). That is, Berry emphasizes both cultural and psychological changes as a consequence of contact between distinct cultural groups.

Berry (1980) suggests that individual or groups may encounter two issues during the process; ‘cultural maintenance’ and ‘contact and participation’. On the basis of these two issues, Berry proposes four acculturation outcomes; integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. The table below demonstrates Berry’s model of acculturation through a bio-dimensional framework.

Table 1: Acculturation Framework

		Attitude towards keeping Heritage culture and identity	
		<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Attitude towards learning and interacting with new culture	<i>Positive</i>	Integration	Assimilation
	<i>Negative</i>	Separation	Marginalisation

Source: Berry (1980)

As seen on the table, it breaks down the acculturation model into two categories; attitude towards keeping heritage culture and identity and attitude towards learning and interacting with new culture. The model shows that integration exposes positive relationship with both cultures, while marginalization shows negative attitude to both cultures. Separation occurs when only the home culture is maintained, and the attachment with the host culture is totally ignored. The final upshot is assimilation where only the host culture is uphold, while no sign of connection with the home culture is visible. Any migrants are likely to fall upon any of these four criterions.

It is observed that among the four categories integration seems better than any other mode of acculturation, and marginalization is least adaptive, because integration involves the lowest level of stress for migrants while marginalization is the most stressful (Ince at al. 2014). Although integration sounds a more preferred mode of acculturation compared to the others, it largely depends on the situation of the host society. For example, attitude of the people and the policy in the host society are important factors in this context. If they are welcoming to the newcomers, which is likely to be seen in a multicultural society, immigrants feel free to incorporate with the host society easily (Berry 2005).

However, Berry’s theory has not been taken for granted by many because acculturation cannot be simplified in such a unique calculation, rather it is far more complex issue. Yet, the model remains a useful starting point for the study of migrant acculturation due to the usefulness for comprehending the responses of individuals exposed to a new culture (Organista, Marin & Chun 2010).

Social capital:

A significant aspect in regards to migrants’ acculturation is social capital, which is defined as ‘a set of interpersonal ties that connects migrants, former migrants, and people living in the host country through bonds of kinship, friendship, and a shared community of origin’ (Hagan 1998). Research shows that better connected people are likely to do better (Hagan 1998; Burt 2000). It is noted that social capital is available from two sources: the home community, and the host community. Relationship with the home community is largely defined as bonding capital and association or networking with the host community people is identified as bridging capital (Lancee 2010). Both bonding and bridging capital improve one’s personal feelings of well-being and satisfaction; therefore, both forms enhance acculturation (Cox & Orman 2009).

However, bonding capital is more likely to provide emotional and instrumental support compared to the bridging capital because bonding capital is based on a ‘thick trust’(Lancee 2010), while on the other it limits the broader network and excludes the others who belong to different communities (Hunter 2012). It is therefore, apparent that a strong bridging capital helps migrants to engage with the host society or mainstream level more efficiently in compared with bonding capital. In that case proficiency in the language as well as awareness about the culture of the host country is very significant to deal with the people of the host society. It is observed that most of the research on migrants’ settlement and acculturation focus on the maintenance of heritage culture and to what extent they pass or fail in maintaining the culture of their country of origin. This is particularly true about the Bangladeshi immigrants living in different parts of the world. For example, maintenance of heritage culture among the Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada and Australia has been examined by Subhan (2007) and Rashid (2019) respectively. However, the pattern of relationship with the host culture that is the degree of bonding capital among the Bangladeshi migrants in Australia has not received scholarly attention. Based on the information collected through surveys and in-depth interviews, the following section maps the degree of attachment with the host society among the Bangladeshi migrants in Australia.

Findings and discussion

A significant number of the respondents point out positive and immigrant friendly customer care services and Australian multiculturalism, which ease their acculturation. However, a striking feature that emerges from survey data is that about 60% of the respondents have never participated in any local community events. This participation can take place through attending working bees or school fetes, doing voluntary work, or taking up membership in local clubs. It is observed that working bees are totally unfamiliar to them since parents are not called upon to do manual work as part of any extracurricular activities at schools in Bangladesh. In order to map the extent of bridging capital this research primarily focuses on three aspects; social engagement with the host society, personal interaction with the people of the host society and attitude to the host society.

Social engagement with the host society:

Interaction with the host society can occur through participation in local community events. In Australian context this participation can take place through attending working bees or school fetes, doing voluntary works in opportunity shops or fund raising events or taking up membership in local clubs (Richardson et al 2004). Both quantitative and qualitative information of the study shows that Bangladeshi migrants in Australia have less social engagement in the host society compared to their engagement in the home community events. For example, table 2 portrays that about 60% of the respondents never participate in any local community events. Rest of them takes part to the local events to some extent, though that is not very remarkable.

Table 2: Respondents’ participation in local community events

	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
More than once a week	-	-	-
Once a week	5.1	8.3	-
2 or 3 times a month	9.2	9.2	9.2
Once a month	7.1	6.7	7.9
Once every few months	18.9	21.7	14.5
Never	59.7	54.2	68.4
N	196	120	76

This is, therefore evident that Bangladeshi migrants in Australia prefer to maintain a significant detachment with the host society.

Information obtained through interviews further reveals that a few Bangladeshi migrants can be found working as (unpaid) volunteers in this country. Of the 52 interview respondents, only nine admit that they take part in working bees at their children’s school. Four of them also help out at the school fete. Most interviewees maintain that, before coming to Australia, they were not familiar with these kinds of activities. One of the interviewees maintains,

When I received the first letter from my child’s school [stating] that on the weekend I was to go to school in the morning and do some manual jobs I was very surprised. I couldn’t believe I was asked to do jobs what needed to be done by the builders, carpenters, painters, or cleaners.

Despite being puzzled upon receiving the weird letter he went to his child’s school in order to see what was going on there, and at the end he started to like the concept. According to him,

I saw lots of parents came to help out, and they were enjoying the work. People were divided into different groups and started working, such as cleaning windows, painting, raking leaves from the playground, cleaning the play equipments and so on. It was – like a community work. Yes, it was. I started to feel good after joining in.

Another parent mentions,

On the very first day of kinder, my daughter’s teacher requested me very politely if I would like to broom the foyer, rake over leaves from the playground. I was a little embarrassed. How dare she asks me to do such things! Is it because I look different, my skin is brown? But soon I realized it went for each parent. I continued to help out and still I do, as long as I have some free time.

The experience of two parents mentioned above is almost the same as with most of the interviewees though many of them did not willingly participate in community services. This is obviously due to the unfamiliarity with the social system and cultural norms in the Australian society.

Personal interaction with the people of the host society:

As like as social engagement interaction in personal level is very weak among the Bangladeshi migrants in Australia. Table 3 shows that 39% of the respondents share the company of people from another community at least once a week, while 26% never spend time with people from other communities.

Table 3: Respondents’ level of engagement with people from other community

	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
More than once a week	14.3	12.7	18.8
Once a week	24.2	17.8	33.7
2 or 3 times a month	10.1	10.2	10.0
Once a month	9.9	8.5	10.0
Once every few months	15.7	21.2	7.5
Never	25.8	29.6	20.0
N	198	118	80

Interestingly, women seem to spend more time mixing with people from other communities than men do. This may be due to mothers’ greater involvement in children’s school activities which affords them more opportunity to interact with people from other communities (Ryan 2007)

Similarly most of the interviewees confirm that they have few dealings with the members of the host society. For example, *Reema* maintains,

I know a few people from other communities. But I don't have their contact numbers. When we meet we exchange smile and say 'hi', 'hello', or talk about something like weather – and that's all. They are very good and friendly, but I don't feel like involving with them emotionally.

Reema's statement shows that she has a very formal relationship with the people of the host society. *Reema's* voice is echoed by many of the respondents. Attitude of the people of the host society, for example their ceremonial behavior often creates a wall between them, as indicated by many of the respondents. Furthermore, busy life as well as much engagement with the home community does not make them engage with someone who is not part of them.

Yet, some of the participants affirm that they have warm relationship with their Australian neighbors, and co-workers. For example, *Shabnam*, explains that she has been with her Australian neighbours for years. They would not drop into each other's home as often as Bangladeshi people do but they sometimes eat together. They often strike up a conversation while working in the gardens. As *Shabnam* put in:

If we go for a holiday we request our next door neighbours to water in our garden, have [eat] the veggies and keep an eye on the house. In the same way when they are away we look after their garden and home.

Shabnam's comment shows that harmony between neighbors, based on pleasant cooperation, is possible. Some of the interviewees further maintain that Australian elderly people are friendlier compared with the young folks. This may be because of their loneliness. *Bonna* provides a heart-warming example of such friendship flourishing:

The lady in next door is very old. She lives on her own and likes to talk with me. I often meet her and give her food. She appreciates that, and she also gives presents to my son on his birthday and Christmas.

Sara spoke of a similar experience. Her next-door neighbour is an old Australian man who lives by himself. His children come to see him occasionally. *Sara* says she has a lot of time for him. She gives him food, and the man treats her like his daughter. But both *Bonna* and *Sara* cautioned that they were not particularly close to other neighbours. Their observations demonstrate that they are happy to help elderly neighbours, offering them company or sharing a meal, and while doing so feeling that they are in some manner honouring their parents. However, this relationship does not indicate that they are connected to the host society, because they are motivated by a deep sympathy towards the elderly neighbors. It rather indicates the socio-cultural background of Bangladeshi people where elderly are not usually left alone, and treated with much care.

Furthermore, most of the survey respondents and interviewees' comments and observation clearly demonstrate that relationship with the co-workers among the Bangladeshi migrants in Australia is not that warm. This is particularly true for those who belong to the host society; that is the local (white) Australian.

Attitude to the host society:

It has been observed previously that respondents' interaction with the host society people in personal level is very limited. Finding of this research also reveals that Bangladeshi people in Australia commonly hold onto a misperception about the people of the host culture. Interviewees argued that reservations about religious and cultural values adopted by Australians are likely to create a barrier in making close relations with the local Australians. The lifestyle and dietary habits of host society people are completely different from those of Bangladeshis. *Fatema*, a mother of two school-age children, asserts:

I know a few mums who I meet with in my kids' school. We have little chat in drop off and pick up time. Mums' group gets together for morning tea in each term, but I don't join them since they have alcohol.

Fatema's testimony reflects the misgivings many Bangladeshi migrants have about their host society's religious and cultural values, the most significant of these being the acceptance of alcohol consumption in public. This fact alone can create a cultural no-go zone for Bangladeshis who might otherwise have attended social get-togethers with members of the host society. Yet *Fatema's* opposition to the presence of "alcohol at morning tea" may be

misconceived because alcohol is not generally served at morning tea in Australia.³ So it seems that on this occasion *Fatema*, and many more made an uninformed judgment based on the ethnic stereotype that ‘Anglos are always drinking’.

This misperception can also be named as cultural misunderstanding which is very common in most of the multicultural countries, especially when the newcomers are Muslims (Haghighat 2013). Cultural misunderstanding is therefore, likely to foster a sense of exclusion among migrants which may threaten their chances to integrate in the host society.

Another interesting finding of this research is that many of the respondents prefer to keep distance with the people of the host society in order to make sure their children would not be deeply connected with the host culture; rather they retain and cherish the heritage culture. It is also observed that Bangladeshi migrants belong to this particular group are usually Muslims, and due to the affiliation with broader Muslim community originated from the Muslim worlds they become accustomed with the strict Islamic rituals which may not be observed with that much enthusiasm even in Bangladesh which may require further research.

On the other hand, a small but significant number of the respondents maintain that despite maintaining religious visibility through the appearances, e.g. traditional Islamic outfits and facial hair (for men) they do not experience any kind of encounter from the local Australian. Since Australia is a multicultural country and the Australians in general are aware of diversity and many are familiar with the lifestyle of practicing Muslims, they are likely to welcome and accept them. One of the interviewees, *Shahid*, whose religious conviction are visible in his growing facial hair as well as his Islamic clothing, had this to say:

My next-door neighbour is an Australian man who often says I have a nice smile. We often chat and exchange our opinion about so many things happening in the world. He doesn't seem to be furious about Muslims.

Shahid further states,

Islam is no longer a prehistoric concept among the Australians. Most of the local people have minimum knowledge about us, the Muslims: such as we eat halal, we wear modest clothes, and we do fast in the month of Ramadan. In general, people show respect to the Muslims. I have never experienced any encounter because of my long beard and knee-length outfits.

Despite the fact that many Muslims remain aloof from the host culture, *Shahid* has shown that he possesses a positive attitude towards local people in general. In his opinion, Western media is often biased and hostile to the Muslims. Kabir (2005) discovers similar attitude of Australian Muslims about media's biasness that often creates misunderstanding between Muslim immigrants and local Australians.

Therefore, if we look closely to the theory of acculturation formulated by Berry (1980) it is perceived that Bangladeshi immigrants in Australia are trying to integrate with the host society though they prefer to maintain a significant distance from the local people due to the differences between two cultures.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to determine the acculturation outcome of Bangladeshi migrants in Australia, on the basis of Berry's (1980) model. In so doing this paper has particularly focused on migrants' bridging social capital which refers to the cultural attachment with the host culture. Findings of the research demonstrate that the degree of bridging capital is not that strong among Bangladeshis in Australia, and Bangladeshi migrants have a very low level of involvement with the host society. This is particularly true in relation to local Anglo-Australian people. Misconceptions about Australian culture and people seem to be a significant barrier to engagement with the host

³Morning and afternoon tea includes light refreshments such as tea, coffee, fruit drinks, cakes and biscuits, etc., but not alcohol(ATO): Australian Taxation Office database
<http://law.ato.gov.au/atolaw/view.htm?docid=ITR/IT2675/NAT/ATO/00001>

society. Very few of the respondents participate in community endeavors such as working bees, school fetes and other voluntary activities. Unfamiliarity on the part of respondents with the social system and cultural norms in the host society tended to inhibit participation in social activities with the host community.

Similarly, engagement with the host society at a personal level is also seen as very weak. In spite of living here for more than 20 years, many migrants lack any emotional tie with the people of their host society. Some respondents ascribe their aloofness from the mainstream to factors such as cultural boundaries, the strength of ethnic networks and robust family ties. Others point to the unwillingness of the host society members to extend the hand of friendship to migrants. Cultural boundaries aside, migrants' own misperception of host society culture is found to be an important obstacle to migrants' social and cultural integration.

Therefore, based on Berry's theory and the nature of bridging social capital among the Bangladeshi migrants in Australia this paper concludes that many Bangladeshis maintain a significant distance with the host society in community and personal level, which is partly due to a misperception about the Australian culture. They seem to be placed in 'separation' criteria. Anxious that their children retain connections with Bangladeshi culture, some of the participants, particularly from the Muslim community are becoming more religious on moving to Australia. Their acculturation can be identified as marginalization. Finally, assimilation does not seem that significant among the Bangladeshi migrants in Australia.

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