

**Social Psychological Mechanisms of Transnational Collective Action: A
Secondary Analysis of the Bengali Diaspora in the UK During the 1971
Bangladesh Liberation War**

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Abstract

Research on collective action has predominantly focused on contemporary Western movements, with less attention given to transnational collective action aimed at separatist goals. The present study examined the social psychological mechanisms of transnational collective action among the Bengali diaspora in the UK during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Secondary oral history interview data from eleven participants were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis generated two themes. First, participants constructed a clear ingroup of Bengalis as the oppressed and an outgroup of West Pakistan as the oppressor. Second, shared grievances were transformed into mobilisation through the development of a politicised Bengali identity. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on collective action by extending existing social psychological mechanisms to transnational, historical contexts aimed at radical social change, particularly in the form of separatism.

Keywords: Transnational collective action, Bengali diaspora, Liberation Movement, separatism, politicised identity, shared grievances

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1. Introduction

Collective action is defined as action enacted by group members who seek to improve the conditions of their disadvantaged group (Wright et al., 1990). Understanding the mechanisms of collective action is important for explaining how social change occurs (van Zomeren et al., 2018). So far, research has predominantly focused on reformist collective action, whilst neglecting the mechanisms of collective action aimed at radical social change. One example is separatism, aimed at political separation from a larger governing body (Sweetman et al., 2013). Specifically, there is less research surrounding mechanisms of transnational collective action within a historical context. In transnational contexts, such action occurs across national boundaries and involves diaspora populations engaging in social movements related to their country of origin (Tarrow, 2005). Influential theories within collective action literature have largely focused on contemporary social movements within WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) contexts (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008). However, less is known about whether social psychological mechanisms of collective action operate similarly within transnational historical contexts situated in collectivist cultures.

Therefore, the present study examines the mechanisms of transnational collective action during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War among the Bengali diaspora in the UK. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War was a nine-month conflict that resulted in East Pakistan's secession from Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh as an independent nation (Akmal, 2002). Prior to the war, Bengalis in East Pakistan experienced political underrepresentation, economic inequality and cultural suppression under the West Pakistan government (Ranjan, 2016). Tensions escalated following attempts to impose Urdu as the sole national language, despite the majority in East Pakistan speaking Bangla. This led to the Language Movement (1948-1956), during which Bengalis opposed the linguistic dominance of Urdu as they perceived it to threaten Bengali culture and identity (Islam, 1978).

Importantly, the Language Movement extended internationally through migrant Bengali communities, particularly within the UK. As tensions between East and West Pakistan intensified, members of the Bengali diaspora became increasingly involved in political activism (Eade & Garbin, 2013). During the war, the diaspora played an important role in raising international awareness of atrocities committed by the West Pakistani government and mobilising support for the independence of Bangladesh, a campaign that became known as the Liberation Movement (Eade & Garbin, 2013; Raju, 2024). The movement included

demonstrations demanding independence from Pakistan, lobbying the British government, fundraising for refugees and freedom fighters, and protesting against support that was provided to West Pakistan.

Rather than being solely of historical interest, the Bangladesh Liberation War provides a valuable case study for examining whether established theoretical mechanisms of collective action generalise across collectivist cultures and within historical, transnational contexts aimed at radical social change.

The next part of this section will delve into literature surrounding perceived injustice, social identity, politicised identity, separatism and resource mobilisation.

1.1 Perceived Injustice and Social Identity

Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT) explains how group members interpret group disadvantage as injustice (van Zomeren et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2002). More specifically, Collective Relative Deprivation (CRD) refers to the cognitive and emotional perception that one's ingroup is unfairly disadvantaged relative to a relevant outgroup (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Pettigrew, 2015). Such perceptions are often accompanied by group-based anger, which may motivate collective action aimed at addressing perceived unfairness (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Pettigrew, 2015).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) proposes that individuals are more likely to engage in collective action on behalf of groups with which they identify (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Since group memberships form part of the self-concept and carry emotional significance (Kawakami & Dion, 1995), disadvantaged group members who perceive intergroup inequalities are more likely to identify strongly with their ingroup and mobilise for social change (Ellemers et al., 1993). Negative intergroup contact may further increase the salience of ingroup identification, whereas positive contact may reduce it (Paolini et al., 2010). However, mobilisation is more likely when individuals perceive cognitive alternatives to the status quo (Mummendey et al., 1999).

Supporting these theories, a meta-analysis conducted by van Zomeren et al (2008) found that both social identification and affective injustice, through group-based anger, positively predicted collective action. However, collective action intentions were stronger when identities became politicised demonstrating how social identities may transform into more politically orientated identities (Drury & Reicher, 1999). Nevertheless, much of this research has focused on WEIRD contexts examining reformist forms of collective action

(Sweetman et al., 2013). While some research has examined these processes among disadvantaged ethnic minority groups (Thomas et al., 2020), less is known about whether such mechanisms operate similarly within transnational diaspora populations relating to their homeland politics. Therefore, the present study explores the social psychological mechanisms of transnational collective action among the Bengali diaspora in the UK during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

1.2 Politicised Identity and Separatism

The politicisation of identity creates an inner obligation to act in line with what the group stands for and motivates engagement in collective action (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Sturmer & Simon, 2004; Van Stekelenburg, 2013). Simon and Klandermans (2001) propose three key antecedents of a politicised identity: shared grievances, adversarial attributions and involvement of wider society. First, group-based grievances, particularly those perceived as illegitimate, are necessary precursors for collective action (Klandermans, 1997). Second, these grievances must be attributed to a clear outgroup held responsible for the group's disadvantage (Ferre & Miller, 1985), fostering group-based anger towards 'them' for what they are doing to 'us' (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Finally, politicisation is strengthened when the conflict becomes recognised beyond the intergroup relationship and gains wider societal involvement (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). A politicised identity is, therefore, more inclusive of individuals who belong to powerful or third-party groups (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Together, these processes transform shared grievances into a politicised collective identity.

Building on these processes, later integrative models sought to explain support for radical social change such as separatism. For instance, Abrams and Grant (2012) developed the Social Identity-Relative Deprivation (SIRD) model to explain how social identity and relative deprivation contribute to support for political separatism. Examining voting intentions for the Scottish National Party among Scottish youth, they found the relationship between group identification and intentions to support separatism was mediated by social change beliefs. This suggests that stronger identification with a disadvantaged ingroup may increase perceptions of injustice and, consequently, support for separatist goals. However, the SIRD model was examined within a domestic political context, with less attention given to separatist movements within transnational diaspora communities.

1.3 Resource Mobilisation

Whilst grievances are a necessary precursor for collective action, resource mobilisation scholars sought to understand how marginalised groups mobilise effectively to pursue social change goals (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). They argued that collective action reflects rational responses to the perceived costs and benefits of different forms of action (Jenkins, 1983). Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) identifies mechanisms through which movements gain access to resources, including self-production and aggregation (Edwards & Gillham, 2013). Self-production refers to movements generating resources internally through organisational networks and coalition building, whereas aggregation involves converting individual resources into collective resources that are allocated towards movement goals (Edwards & Gillham, 2013). Such mechanisms may be particularly relevant within diaspora communities, where transnational social networks and pooled resources can facilitate mobilisation.

Supporting this, research by Sturmer & Simon (2004) examined both cost-benefit calculations and collective identification processes as predictors of participation in collective action. Their findings suggested that collective action was explained through two pathways: politicised collective identification and cost-benefit calculations via instrumental motives and resources.

1.4 The Present Study

The aim of the present study is to address a gap in the literature on transnational collective action for radical social change, specifically in the context of separatist movements among the Bengali diaspora in the UK. This study will answer the question: what are the social psychological mechanisms of transnational collective action in the context of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The present study employed a qualitative secondary analysis of interview transcripts. A qualitative approach enables the exploration of subjective meanings and lived experiences (Clarke & Braun, 2017) attached to transnational activism. Secondary data allows access to

rich accounts that would otherwise be difficult to collect firsthand due to time constraints and limited access to individuals involved in transnational collective action during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Secondary data also enables engagement with historical narratives that may no longer be accessible through primary data collection (Drury et al., 2025).

2.2 Data Source

Oral history interview transcripts were used for the present study, accessible through the Swadhinata Trust website. The Swadhinata Trust is a London based Bengali community group that works to promote Bengali history and heritage. An oral history and socio-cultural heritage project was conducted, named ‘Tales of three generations of Bengalis in Britain.’ This project, completed in 2006 and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, was a partnership between Swadhinata Trust and academic centers at the University of Surrey and University of Roehampton, UK. The project was aimed to offer an opportunity for young Bengali people to research, document and celebrate Bengali history, by voicing the experience of three generations of Bengalis in the UK.

I contacted the project lead via email to understand the interview procedure. The interviews were semi-structured, with key questions asked to all participants. This included questions such as, “What was the independence movement of Bangladesh like in the UK?” and “What was your attitude towards the Pakistani people during that time?” Other questions varied but they all focused on themes such as, personal contributions during the independence movement, how they came to know about what was happening in Bangladesh, and the support they received from external groups. The interviews lasted 2-3 hours each, with some interviews professionally translated from Bangla to English.

2.3 Data Selection

The present study draws on interview transcripts from strand 1 (dialogue between first and third generation on the history of Bangladesh and the 1971 War of Independence), which consists of interviews with members of the Bengali community in the UK surrounding their memories of East Pakistan and events leading to the liberation war. The dataset offers valuable insight into diaspora experiences during the Liberation War, making it suitable for

analysing the underlying social psychological processes with mobilisation into collective action.

Within the original strand, there are 22 interview transcripts. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants of Bangladeshi origin who were residing in the UK before the Liberation War began in 1971 to ensure the data is drawn from transnational activists at the time. Three White British participants were excluded, since the study focuses on Bengali perspectives. Nine other Bengali participants were excluded as they were not in the UK prior to the 1971 Liberation War and were therefore not transnational activists at the time. The final sample consists of 11 interview transcripts from 8 male and 3 female participants. The participants were all transnational political activists involved with the Liberation Movement in the UK.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The data were originally collected by Swadhinata Trust and University of Surrey as part of an ethically approved project, which included providing informed consent for archiving the interviews in a publicly accessible domain.

Although identifiable participant information was included within the original dataset, such information has been pseudonymised to protect participants' privacy.

2.5 Analytical Procedure

I examined the data using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) using NVivo 15.4 as a tool to organise and manage the transcripts. Firstly, a deductive approach guided the initial stages of coding, where I went through each transcript to take notes of potential analytic interest. Given the breadth of the dataset, I selected extracts most relevant to the research question as majority of the transcripts also detailed responses focused on the aftermath of the war, which does not correspond to the research aim of understanding the mechanisms of collective action during the 1971 Liberation War. After familiarising myself with the transcripts, I developed memos that contained key reflections of each interview transcript. The initial coding process produced 38 codes. However, after a recursive process of reframing and merging codes together under a broad code name, I ended up with 12 codes. Clusters of codes were formed based on patterns that were united by a shared concept, known

as sub-themes and themes. The analysis led me to identify two themes and nine sub-themes. My analytical claims are supported by extracts from multiple participants who provide detail supporting each sub-theme. Any text that has been omitted to ease readability is indicated by the symbol [...].

Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise the active role of the researcher in the analytic process. My engagement with the data was shaped by my positionality as a second-generation British Bengali. I grew up hearing stories about my grandparents' experiences during the war period, which developed my interest in this topic. Additionally, my insider perspective facilitated a deeper contextual understanding of the cultural meanings attached to participants' accounts. To reflect on how my positionality shaped the analytic process, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practice throughout the study. Analytic memos were maintained as a reflexive journal to document coding decisions, theme development and interpretations of the data.

3. Analysis

I constructed two independent but related themes that capture the mechanisms of transnational collective action during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

The themes presented are: 1) Ingroup of Bengalis as the oppressed and outgroup of West Pakistan as the oppressor and 2) Transformation of shared grievances into mobilisation: developing a politicized identity. A summary of the themes and their sub-themes is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Table of themes and subthemes identified in the dataset

Theme 1: Ingroup of Bengalis as the Oppressed and Outgroup of West Pakistan as the Oppressor

Subthemes: *Feeling Relatively Deprived Compared to the Outgroup*
Systemic Discrimination Reinforces Bengali Identity
Extension of Conflictual Relationships in the UK Diaspora
Feeling Excluded from their Ingroup based on their Transnational Identity

Theme 2: Transformation of Shared Grievances into Mobilisation: Developing a Politicized Identity

Subthemes: *The Significance of Inspirational Leadership in the Struggle*
The Development of a Unified Group Response
Transformation of Personal Resources into Collective Resources in the Service of the Struggle
The Moralisation of the Struggle
Allyship with Non-Bengali People Who Advocated for the Liberation Movement

3.1 Ingroup of Bengalis as the Oppressed and Outgroup of West Pakistan as the Oppressor

Participants narrate experiences of deprivation and oppression that cultivated their perception of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ framing. The subthemes presented are: 1) feeling relatively deprived compared to the outgroup, systemic discrimination reinforces Bengali identity, 3) extension of conflictual relationships in the UK diaspora, and 4) feeling excluded from their ingroup based on their transnational identity.

3.1.1 Feeling Relatively Deprived Compared to the Out-group

Before participants migrated to the UK, they highlight a power imbalance created from regional domination in which all power was concentrated in West Pakistan with resources distributed unevenly to East Pakistan. For example, Abdul speaks about the power imbalance, resource deprivation and feeling like a ‘second class citizen’:

“They used to treat us badly and they had some sort of superiority complex. We were deprived from all the facilities, in business, in job in service, in teaching, in education, and in everywhere. And I personally thought, we were second class citizen at that time.” – Abdul

These grievances were shared between the ingroup of Bengalis as Abdul does not just consider his own personal struggles, but the use of the pronoun “We” suggests common experiences of Bengalis in East Pakistan. The ingroup of Bengalis were deprived from opportunities across different economic and social institutions, which led to them feeling like a “second class citizen at that time.”

Furthermore, Rohaan explains the emotion of anger that was felt when experiencing unfair distribution of opportunities and resources by West Pakistan:

“We had bitter experience about Pakistan, because it was dominating us, they were suppressing us by using the army and economically they had all the businesses in their ownership. We were very angry with all this.” – Rohaan

3.1.2 Systemic Discrimination Reinforces Bengali Identity

Systemic discrimination enhanced the salience of Bengali ingroup identity by heightening awareness of shared disadvantage. Abdul describes the Language Movement, which was triggered by the imposition of Urdu as the state language, leading political activists in East Pakistan to demand the recognition of Bangla as an official language. He highlights West Pakistan’s violent repression during this period. However, this failed to silence the voices of the Bengali people; rather, the repression reinforced their ingroup identity:

“I think I should start from 1952, when I was a student, there was the language movement in 21st of February, few of the Bengali people were killed by the police, with the order of the Pakistani government at that time. From that time we had a feeling, that some sort of Bengali nationalism arisen in my mind; that we are Bengali” – Abdul

Abdul felt Bengali national identity rising in the face of repression, which ultimately would have intensified the divide, providing a necessary step towards mobilisation. These trigger points seem to be key mechanisms in the development of a separatist mindset.

Alternatively, Hasan explained that they “*were not in favour of breaking the country*” because of the consequences in doing so. However, he then highlights the violence that was initiated by West Pakistan, after which he experiences a turning point:

“At the beginning of the war of independence, we were not in favour of breaking the country, because it will make the country smaller and weaker. Some of us were against the division, [...] It will be harmful for both West Pakistan and East Pakistan. But as the (West) Pakistanis started looting and killing, and we were seeing all these on television, we changed our mind” – Hasan

3.1.3 Extension of Conflictual Relationships in the UK Diaspora

While experiences of oppression and violence against Bengalis were primarily rooted in East Pakistan, these tensions between the ingroup and outgroup continued in the UK following migration. For instance, Tariq describes how local Pakistanis in the UK treated Bengalis:

“Especially in this country UK, the Pakistanis treated us very bad, they played like the kings, and thought that we were slaves. They are good, they are learned, they are good Muslims also, and the Bengalis are a nation of slaves, they are not good Muslims.[...] They talked (spoke) with (to) us without any respect, even when we were talking to them with due respect.” – Tariq

Not only was the West Pakistan government exercising dominance over Bengalis, but some Pakistanis adopted a proclaimed ‘superiority’ of their identity, where they treated Bengalis as inferior. Even when Bengalis spoke to them with respect, this was not reciprocated. Such anti-Bengali sentiment further legitimised the struggle for independence.

However, whilst most participants describe similar experiences of discrimination from local Pakistanis in the UK, Sabina says “*some [...] were quite friendly with us*’ and that they ‘*had a quite good bunch of Pakistani friends.*” This suggests not all relationships between Bengalis and Pakistanis were tainted, as there were local Pakistani friends who were seen as exceptions to the oppressive outgroup.

3.1.5 Feeling Excluded from their Ingroup based on their Transnational Identity

Although there is a clear ‘us and them’ in relation to the Bengali - Pakistani conflict, the ingroup identity remains complicated by their transnational positioning. For example, Ahmad said:

“As migrants living away, thousands of miles from home, we always felt excluded [from Bangladesh]. Visiting Bangladesh occasionally, you feel you are not trusted; you are looked at as a source of income [only]” – Ahmad

There appeared to be a fragmentation of his ingroup identity which came from feeling ‘excluded’ because of his diaspora positioning. It seems his sense of belonging in Bangladesh is conditional based upon monetary contributions, which further undermines his sense of inclusion within the ingroup. Tariq extends this by not feeling like he belongs to either Bangladesh or the UK: *“We the Bengalis in UK, in the true sense are not finally settled anywhere, not in Bangladesh, not in UK.”* This shows the complexity that comes from having a diaspora identity, in feeling like they do not belong anywhere.

However, Ahmad also says: *“I think of Bangladesh every moment of my life when I am awake”* which complicates this narrative, as he also expresses a strong emotional attachment to Bangladesh. This tension reflects a sense of in-betweenness, where, for Ahmad, attachment and exclusion co-exist.

3.2 Transformation of Shared Grievances into Mobilisation: Developing a Politicised Identity

The second theme focuses on the transformation of shared grievances into mobilisation, marking the development of a politicised identity through greater unity and direction, moral commitment to the cause, building solidarity and developing organisational resources, with the following subthemes: 1) the significance of inspirational leadership in the struggle, 2) the development of a unified group response, 3) transformation of personal resources into collective resources in the service of the struggle, 4) the moralisation of the struggle, and 5) allyship with non-Bengali people who advocated for the Liberation Movement.

3.2.1 The Significance of Inspirational Leadership in the Struggle

Participants frequently referenced the role of Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh, who had a significant role to play in energising the mass to unite as a collective to defy the West Pakistan government.

Abdul says that Mujibur Rahman's declaration for independence of Bangladesh escalated the fight for independence in the UK. One thing to note that Abdul uses the word 'Bangabandhu' to refer to Mujibur Rahman – this translates to 'friend of Bengal.'

"Bangabandhu called for the Independence movement. We took it that way in the UK and following that day according to the call of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that, "you build up forts in every houses" throughout UK and many action groups were being formed and they started the movement. And they clearly declared about the independence of Bangladesh from the Pakistani rule. So we participated, there were so many groups been formed" – Abdul

Abdul makes clear the call for independence was initiated by Mujibur Rahman, to which the Bengali diaspora united as a community, developing action committees to push for the liberation of Bangladesh. This highlights the significance of leadership in strategizing collective action.

3.2.2 The Development of a Unified Group Response

Most participants speak on how they came together as a community to strategically organise their response through the formation of action committees, which demanded the liberation of Bangladesh.

Rohaam acknowledges the growth of the liberation movement in the UK was a key step in garnering world support for the independence of Bangladesh, which was achieved through the act of uniting as a community:

"We the Bengalis living in UK were so united and so strong that our movement was very successful to bring the World sentiment in favour of Bangladesh soon" – Rohaan

Mohammad recounts his experience of many action committees being formed to help sustain the liberation movement and how the community came together to grow the movement:

“[...] the movement continued and it gained strength. In about 3 weeks time we had about 50 to 60 Action Committees all over United Kingdom. Anywhere there were 10 or 15 people, or even 5 people in any area, we asked them to form an Action Committee in that area. So we enlisted everybody to work together” – Mohammad

The response following the call for independence involved immediate mobilisation within the community. Their unified group response reflects a coordinated effort to support the Liberation Movement.

3.2.4 Transformation of Personal Resources into Collective Resources in the Service of the Struggle

Various participants described how the Bengali diaspora would frequently provide their own shops, restaurants and houses as a meeting place to discuss strategies for collective action:

“When I found so many of my friends in my house, I was rather amazed. Then I came to know that [...] other people were in my house for a meeting on the issue of Bangladesh. The leaders decided to have a meeting in an independent place, and they proposed my husband to provide the place and my husband agreed. So they were having a meeting in our house. [...] They asked me if I do mind or if I am upset. I said, “No, I am not, you all have the right to come to our house and try to feel comfortable and whatever we can do, we will do” – Sabina

This demonstrates the extent of personal investment in the Liberation Movement, as Sabina offered her own home as a space for political organisation. Sabina's response reflects a willingness to place her personal resource at the service of the struggle, which highlights her shared responsibility within the community.

3.2.3 The Moralisation of the Struggle

Several participants felt a strong moral obligation to participate in the struggle, which moved them to maintain collective action even when faced with violent repression. For instance,

Sabina describes an experience she faced when they were at a large meeting discussing how to attract attention and support for the Liberation Movement, when suddenly they were attacked by the outgroup:

“The fight was between the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis. They attacked us with knife. [...] The people were running away from the meeting [...] I went to the microphone and addressed the people, “Don’t go, we have just started the independence movement. Think about our brothers and sisters in Bangladesh, think of your mother, think of yourself, if you were in the same position, what could you have done? This is what we need to get free from, so let us start the fight. [...] We have to help them.” - Sabina

Whilst many attendees were running away, fearful of the knife attack, Sabina stood her ground and called people back to the meeting. She does this by invoking a shared sense of identity through the phrase “our brothers and sisters in Bangladesh,” which reminds those running away that they belong to the same group. The statement “we have to help them,” expresses moral obligation in taking part in collective action, which frames support for Bangladesh as a necessity rather than a choice.

3.2.5 Allyship with Non-Bengali People Who Advocated for the Liberation Movement

Most participants referenced the important role of allies from different groups, including some Pakistanis who were exceptions to the outgroup and White British people who had fought alongside them in the Liberation Movement. For instance, Abdul remembers that:

“People used to be very much encouraged, when the people see that the White people are supporting the movement, they were very much pleased, and they used to help, they made lot of contribution towards the organisation [...] So nobody can claim that he did something solely for Bangladesh, it was a collective support, it was a collective movement. People from each and every corner helped” – Abdul

The diaspora felt encouraged by their allies and this support helped sustain engagement. Their involvement boosted morale among Bengalis, and Abdul considers them as part of a collective effort in striving for the liberation of Bangladesh.

4. Discussion

This study examined the social psychological mechanisms of transnational collective action among the Bengali diaspora in the UK during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Findings contribute to the growing body of literature on collective action by extending across transnational contexts aimed at achieving radical social change, particularly in the form of separatism. The underlying mechanisms for participants' transnational activism were organised into two themes. First, participants constructed a clear ingroup of Bengalis as the oppressed and an outgroup of West Pakistan as the oppressor. Second, shared grievances were transformed into mobilisation through the development of a politicised Bengali identity. The following sections will delve into how each theme and its subthemes correspond or extend existing literature.

The first theme includes participants' narratives of perceived injustice, which stem from experiences of living in Bangladesh prior to the 1971 Liberation War. After migrating to the UK, they would have carried these memories of discrimination in their homeland. Participants mentioned feeling angry that they were collectively deprived across different economic and social institutions, which contributed to growing divisions between Bengalis and West Pakistanis. This aligns with CRD theory, where perceived inequalities between one's own group and the position of a 'referent other' on an evaluative dimension, can intensify feelings of anger at the perceived gap, which in turn increases the likelihood of collective action (Kawakami & Dion, 1995).

Furthermore, the SIRD model specifies a pathway through which social identity and relative deprivation shape social change beliefs, which can include support for separatism (Abrams & Grant, 2012). This suggests that perceived injustice, intensified by violent repression, strengthened ingroup identification, which in turn likely contributed to the legitimisation of separatism as a response to oppression. This fits with Sweetman et al.'s (2013) typology of social change goals, which distinguishes between reformist and radical aims of collective action.

Another factor contributing to the legitimisation of independence was the continuation of conflictual relationships following migration to the UK. Negative intergroup contact with local Pakistanis likely facilitated the perception of discrimination among Bengalis and encouraged collective action (Reimer et al., 2017). Furthermore, such negative contact may have increased the salience of Bengali ingroup identification (Paolini et al., 2010),

encouraging them to think as a group with shared experiences of oppression (Reimer et al., 2017). However, few participants described having friendships with Pakistanis, which did not reduce their engagement in transnational collective action; rather, these individuals were viewed as exceptions to the otherwise oppressive outgroup. This contrasts with existing research suggesting positive intergroup contact is associated with reduced engagement in collective action among the disadvantaged group (Wright & Lubensky, 2009).

Participants' transnational collective action is further nuanced by accounts of ingroup identity fragmentation, with some describing feelings of exclusion. However, despite these experiences, participants expressed a continued attachment to their homeland, which aligns with existing literature on diaspora experiences of connection to their country of origin (Ghorashi, 2004; Huang et al., 2018). This suggests that affective ties to Bangladesh may have acted as a motivating factor for transnational collective action, supporting the idea that attachment to the homeland can translate into political engagement (Steinhilper, 2018).

Linking the themes together, the significance of inspirational leadership, particularly through Mujibur Rahman, was critical in transforming shared grievances into mobilisation. Participants mentioned engaging in collective action in the UK, following Mujibur Rahman's call for independence. This process can be explained through the Identity Leadership model where leadership effectiveness occurs through a shared sense of 'us' between a leader and their followers (Khumalo et al., 2022; Reicher et al., 2018). In this context, Mujibur Rahman may have been perceived as embodying the aspirations of Bengalis, allowing his call for independence to resonate strongly among members of the ingroup and facilitate mobilisation through a shared politicised identity.

Transnational mobilisation was sustained through the formation of action committees, collective spaces and allyship with non-Bengali supporters. Participants described building organised networks, through action committees, which helped to unite and strengthen the cause for independence. Indeed, creation of a grassroots organisation helped create a web of relationships for people to come together to share their resources (Pilisuk et al., 1996). This aligns with RMT, which proposes one of the ways in which collective action can be sustained is through interpersonal resources (Sturmer & Simon, 2004). This extends current RMT by demonstrating the importance of organisational networks in sustaining transnational mobilisation.

Moreover, literature regarding spaces where empathetic social ties can be developed in preparation for protest, has been found to empower marginalised communities (Mitchell & Sparke, 2020), which may explain how participants sustained engagement in the Liberation

Movement. These spaces were often provided by participants who pooled their own personal resources into collective resources, to allocate towards movement goals (Edwards & Gillham, 2013).

In the context of the Bengali diaspora in the UK, research on mobilisation of marginalised communities stresses the importance of establishing social ties with powerful pro-beneficiaries (Chabanet & Royall, 2014). Whilst non-Bengali allies came from different backgrounds, the most common allyship was formed with White British people. However, during the Liberation War, the British government declared neutrality and non-interference, stating both sides were committing hideous atrocities (Debnath, 2012). This meant that support from White British allies may have provided the Bengali diaspora with access to influential networks within the UK. Specifically, White British allies boosted morale within the Bengali diaspora which strengthened visibility and support for the Independence of Bangladesh. In essence, increased support from White British allies helped expand mobilisation efforts (Steinhilper, 2018).

A few participants emphasised the necessity to act in the face of repression which aligns with current research on moral obligation being defined as a belief that collective action is necessary (Vilas & Sabucedo, 2012). Participants displayed continued engagement in the face of repression, despite the elevated costs their actions could involve (Sabucedo et al., 2018). This shows the important role of moral obligation in motivating participants to continue striving for what they believe to be necessary.

Overall, the findings extend existing literature on collective action, specifically in the context of transnational mobilisation for a radical social change goal of separatism during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The mechanisms of transnational collective action occur through shared grievances, politicisation of identity, significance of inspirational leadership, organised networks, collective resources, allyship with non-Bengalis and moral obligation. While much collective action research has focused on domestic protest movements within WEIRD societies, the present study highlights how the Bengali diaspora in the UK was able to engage in and sustain collective action across national boundaries.

4.1 Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study

This study integrates a multidisciplinary approach to analyse the social psychological mechanisms of transnational collective action, drawing on disciplines such as diaspora

studies, history and social movement studies. This approach helps provide a comprehensive understanding of a complex social phenomenon (Khan, 2024), such as transnational collective action. This study also addresses a gap by extending existing theories of collective action into historical contexts. Furthermore, research on radical social change goals has received comparatively less attention than the predominant focus on reformist forms of social change (Sweetman et al., 2013).

Whilst secondary data provided me with the benefit of conducting this project within a time-sensitive framework, the use of secondary interview transcripts limited my role as a researcher, particularly in my ability to ask follow-up questions that aligned with the social psychological mechanisms being explored in greater depth. Additionally, the sample consisted more male than female participants; therefore, this study may reflect male perspectives more strongly than women's experiences of transnational collective action.

4.2 Future Research Directions

An important direction for future research is examining transnational collective action in other historical separatist movements, to assess similar social psychological mechanisms of collective action across contexts.

As the sample consisted of more male participants compared to female participants, future work could address this imbalance by further exploring social psychological mechanisms of Bengali women's transnational activism. Existing qualitative research drawing on oral history interviews highlights Bengali women's significant contributions during the Liberation Movement in the UK, particularly their sustained efforts to mobilise support for the cause (Jahanshahi, 2025). Building on this, future research could examine how gender shapes engagement in transnational collective action.

4.3 Conclusion

This study examined the social psychological mechanisms of transnational collective action among the Bengali diaspora in the UK during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The findings suggest transnational collective action was shaped by strong ingroup identification among the UK Bengali diaspora and the construction of West Pakistan as an oppressive outgroup. This culminated in a politicised identity that initiated and sustained mobilisation

within the Liberation Movement. This research contributes to existing collective action literature by extending established social psychological frameworks within historical narratives of a social movement aimed at separatism. In doing so, it demonstrates that core social psychological mechanisms remain relevant beyond contemporary, WEIRD contexts. The study highlights the importance of considering transnational dynamics in collective action research, particularly the role of diaspora communities in sustaining homeland political struggles from abroad. Future research could explore how these mechanisms operate across different separatist movements and within more diverse groups.

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