

# Ethnic residential segregation in Britain: « white flight » versus « ethnic comfort zones »

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### Abstract

Ethnic residential segregation has been a major feature of ethnic minorities' experience in contemporary Britain. Importantly, this urban phenomenon is so complex and complicated that so many explanations have been offered to explain and understand its manifestations, triggers, and potential outcomes. Noticeably, the concern about the urban patterns of the white Britons is somewhat a novel endeavor. Possibly, this concern has been an effect of what came to be called "White Studies" which made British white ethnicity a legitimate sub-field of the British ethnic studies. In this context, the pressing question is: who is to blame for promoting such ethnic residential patterns (whites included)? Our scrutiny of this urban phenomenon in some British cities such as Birmingham, Bradford, and Oldham yielded some interesting results. Ethnic residential patterns are both a choice (self-segregation) and a constraint (concentration). In this paper, we mainly examine and study the constraint factors that generated and sustained such residential patterns. Among other factors, the phenomenon of "white flight" is highlighted as a white strategy of avoidance of newcomers which creates boundaries and hampers any genuine inter-ethnic communication in contemporary Britain. Thus, the strategy of "flight" that the British white majority seemed to opt for is considerably responsible for the lack of genuine cultural diversity and social cohesion in Britain. Yet, arguably, the same strategy and technique are used by ethnic minorities themselves to settle and rest in their socio-cultural "comfort zones". Thus, the flight is a shared tool that does not seem to solve inter-ethnic conflicts but rather postpones them. This paper hypothesizes that encounter rather than flight is the catalyst to authentic cultural diversity and cultural communication within an increasingly multicultural British

society. Methodologically, this study is a case study based on a representative corpus extracted from different official reports and websites, especially the Office of National Statistics (ONS), and websites of local councils of the cities of London and Bradford. The research method employed is the quantitative survey one, used to treat the relevant statistics on the ethnic residential distribution of the cities of Bradford and London which yielded several interesting results.

**Keywords:** residential segregation, ethnicity, whiteness, flight, comfort zones.

## 1- Introduction

Ethnic residential segregation has been a major feature of ethnic minorities' experience in contemporary Britain. Importantly, this urban phenomenon is so complex and complicated that so many explanations have been offered to explain and understand its manifestations, triggers, and potential outcomes. One pressing question is what causes and factors promoted such ethnic residential patterns. Our scrutiny of this urban phenomenon in some British cities such as Birmingham, Bradford, Oldham, and London yielded some interesting results. Ethnic residential patterns are both a choice (self-segregation) and a constraint (concentration). In this paper, we mainly examine and study the different factors that generated and sustained such residential patterns. Among other factors, the phenomenon of "white flight" is highlighted as a white strategy of avoidance of newcomers which creates boundaries and hampers any genuine inter-ethnic communication in contemporary Britain. Thus, the strategy of "flight" that the British white majority seemed to opt for is considerably responsible for the lack of genuine cultural diversity and social cohesion in Britain. Yet, arguably, the same strategy and technique are used by ethnic minorities themselves to settle and rest in their socio-cultural "comfort zones". This process of mutual avoidance resulted in the emergence of what came to be called "color-coded British society."

Flight is a shared tool that does not seem to solve inter-ethnic conflicts but rather postpones them. Yet, the flight is not the pure outcome of racial and ethnic thesis. This paper hypothesizes that encounter rather than flight is the catalyst to authentic

cultural diversity and cultural communication within an increasingly multicultural British society.

The paper is organized around four main axes. We first introduce the methodology followed in this article. Second, we investigate the current residential patterns or maps of ethnic minorities. Third, we briefly explain the two concepts of “white flight” and “comfort zones”. Finally, we scrutinize the case study of the process of inter-ethnic avoidance in the city of London.

## 2- Literature review

In this section, I investigate the relevant literature on the nature and aspects of race-related residential patterns with a special focus on the newly emerging “White Studies”. Moreover, the two basic concepts of “white flight” and “ethnic comfort zones”, upon which the arguments of this article are based, are examined and critically analyzed.

### 2-1- Current race-related residential patterns and the advent of the “whiteness factor”

“If you want a nigger for a neighbor vote Labour”, was one slogan raised by Conservative candidate Peter Griffiths during the 1964 General Election. Importantly, he won the election, which signaled the centrality of the issue of ethnic residence in Britain. The increasing number of immigrants during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s represented a challenge to British governments and mainstream white society. The increasing number of immigrants meant increasing ethnic demands of housing. There was an evident process of clustering in what the British sociologist John Rex called “twilight zones” or “zones of transition”. However, the experience of early immigrants differed considerably. While African Caribbean minorities resorted to renting from private landlords, the South Asian minorities tended to buy cheap and run-down inner-city houses that lacked many facilities and were situated in deprived locations. South Asian communities were accumulating funds from their already well-established relatives to buy those houses. This mechanism helped the emergence of a kind of ethnic residential concentration in certain inner-city districts. Yet, this type of cheap low-quality housing generates a chain of social and economic problems.

The urban sociologist Valerie Karn showed how ethnic minorities become socially and geographically immobile because of this type of housing (unsaleability of those properties). This residential pattern is justified by both subjective and objective reasons. There is considerable evidence that discriminatory practices of local housing departments, whether direct or indirect, contributed to this ethnic residential geography. Thus, to quote David Mason “minority ethnic clients were more likely to be housed in older properties with fewer amenities, frequently on less popular estates (Mason, 2000, 83). Another racist strategy was dispersing ethnic clients in different estates in order to minimize their concentration in a given area (Simpson, 1981 and Smith; 1990).

So, ethnic residential concentration has often been considered as a problem that needed urgent solution. For large sections of white British citizens, the very presence of ethnic minorities was regarded, according to David Owen (1993), as an index of deprivation. Urban disturbances result because of what is generally conceived as inter-ethnic tensions. For instance, the Brixton events of 1981 and Bradford race riots in 2001 were seen as justifications for more inter-ethnic fragmentation and a trigger to “white flight”. White residential mobility has often been called “white flight” from those ethnically dominated districts. That was a solution and an option taken by considerable sections of the white population. In this context, increasing research on ethnicity in contemporary Britain shed light on the white Britons as an integral part of the British ethnic populations. For instance, Stuart Hall’s concept of “new ethnicities” (1996) reconfigured the subject positions of the white majority in the British ethnic structure; like other ethnic minorities, the British white constituted an ethnic group, but one that holds the advantageous position of the majority both in number and socio-cultural political power. Thus, there was a systematic deconstruction of the meanings of whiteness to understand the mechanisms and dynamics of the inter-ethnic relations between the ethnic majority (white Britons) and the ethnic minorities (British ethnic populations). The politics whiteness represented a major shift of focus in the sociological consideration of ethnic relations in Britain. The American novelist Toni Morrison argued that ethnic studies needed to focus on the perpetrators of

racism and discrimination, not just the victims. Commenting on her intellectual mission, Morrison wrote:

“My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; the serving to the served.” (1992: 90)

This kind of discourse meant that whiteness was decentered and its homogenous character was proven to be a myth; and artifact of uneven power distribution. From this perspective, I think, that the “white flight” is another version of ethnic residential and socio-cultural segregation. Hence, the “white flight” is another “comfort zone” with a different colour, not different from any other ethnicized segregation. Arguably, one can mention other ethnic flights like “South Asian flight”, “African-Caribbean flight” or even religious flights such as “Christian flight”, “Muslim flight” or “Hindu flight”.

## 2-2- Concepts of “white flight” and “comfort zones”

The term “white flight” first originated in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s to describe and explain the large-scale migration of the American white population from ethnically dominated regions to more white-dominated homogenous ones. The concept was problematized by some intellectuals who thought that it was misleading. According to historian Amanda Seligman, the phrase suggested that white fled as soon as blacks moved in which was not the fact. White followed different strategies of discrimination, dispersal, and avoidance in the defense of their spaces. Their flight was then a late tactic of resistance. However, as shown above, white flight was not exclusively the outcome of racism, but also promoted by economic reasons. The overcrowding and physical deterioration of the ethnically dominated districts obliged the economically able white population to move out.

The phenomenon could also be noticed in the residential behavior of ethnic minorities themselves and as such we could speak about non-white or ethnic flight. A more prosperous ethnic population left the deprived inner-city spaces to reside in more comfortable and economically active suburbs. It seems that economic and class theses have their say in the physical and geographical mobility/flight of both white British and ethnic British as well. Arguably, the concept of “flight” has been

linked in some respects to that of “comfort zone”. After all, those who opt for leaving/flight are looking for a “comfort zone”, in the positive meaning of the concept.

The concept of the comfort zone is a space of the familiar and the routine. It has low risk and stress and has little or no challenge. In this zone, the status quo is maintained and institutionalized. Paradoxically, the comfort zone is not necessarily a comfortable space. What is comfortable is the fact of being unchallenged and taken for granted. Thus, those addicted to or tapped in such zones become familiar with misery, pain, suffering, financial stress, loneliness, and deprivation in its various dimensions. Those comfort zones can be mental and behavioural states that concretize in physical and residential separation and concentration. In general, a comfort zone is a type of mental conditioning that causes a person or a social and ethnic group to create and operate mental or residential boundaries which originate an unfounded sense of security. The sense of security is the outcome of people’s feeling of belonging to a certain cultural identity within familiar and assuring socio-cultural spaces. Within ethnic and migration studies, comfort zones represent a crucial space for ethnic minorities and new immigrants, at least as a starting experience. The concept is not just limited to mental or personal behavior; it can also affect the different relations of power between those living within and without comfort zones.

Yet, comfort zones are not produced in a vacuum. They are often the outcome of complex social and cultural relations. They can be choices or obligations. Ethnic residential maps can be comfort zones and offer the security that ethnic minorities needed within a generally perceived hostile mainstream society. Equally, they are likely to generate cultural fragmentation and lack of social cohesion.

### **3- Statement of the problem**

White flight is considered as an index of the lack of genuine cultural diversity in Britain. This can be checked comparatively by studying the nature of the residential distribution of both immigrant ethnic and host white communities in some multi-ethnic cities in Britain, notably Bradford and London. This article argues that the encounter

rather than the flight is the catalyst to authentic cultural diversity and cultural communication within an increasingly multicultural British society.

#### 4- Research objectives

1. To find out the reasons behind ethnic residential segregation in the localities of Bradford and London?
2. To examine and explore the credibility of the concept of “white flight” in contemporary British cities.
3. To determine the extent to which ethnic and religious belonging explain residential patterns.
4. To check out the extent of the “ethnicization” of urban residential patterns in Bradford and London in particular and Britain in general.

#### 5- Research Questions

The arguments of this article are guided by the following five research questions:

5. How do levels of ethnic segregation compare in London and Bradford?
6. How far do these patterns vary by the considered ethnic group?
7. What is the role of ethnic and religious belonging in explaining these patterns?
8. Is residential segregation an ethnic exclusivity?
9. To what extent is “white flight” a fact in the considered British cities?

#### 6- Methodology

##### 6-1- Research Design

The present study aimed to investigate the ethnicization/racialization of residential patterns in contemporary Britain. A case study was conducted in two British cities (Bradford and London). The rationale behind the choice of those two cities is that they are considered as “super-diverse” British cities; also they were the context of two major race-related events: the 2001 race riots in Bradford and the 2005 bombings in London. It is assumed that the comparative study would yield crucial insights into the causes, aspects, and credibility of the concept of “white flight” and

ethnic “comfort zone”. Thus, using and comparing data from 2001/2011 censuses of the two cities represent the major corpus of this study.

## **6-2- Data Analysis Procedure**

Regarding the research instrument of this study, a survey of the relevant statistics on the ethnic residential distribution of the cities of Bradford and London was done. The corpus was collected personally by the researcher and later analyzed based on descriptive statistics and frequency distribution.

## **7- Research Findings and Discussion**

Comparing the data of ethnic segregation of the cities of Bradford and London underpinned the major hypotheses of this article. The concept of segregation itself is a complex and contingent one. It is also multidimensional in that segregation entails different aspects and levels; there are multiple types of segregation the most important, perhaps the most popularized, is residential segregation. Though other forms of segregation (economic, educational, social, and cultural) are crucial mechanisms in the movement of both mainstream white Britons and ethnic minorities, residential segregation remains the most obvious index of either the “white flight” or “ethnic comfort zones”. I proceed by investigating the urban distribution of the British whites and the ethnic populations in the cities of London and Bradford. The employed comparative approach is two-fold: it compares levels and aspects of segregation in each city’s populations and then compares the two cities. It is a case of intra-ethnic comparison in the first and inter-ethnic comparison in the second.

### **7-1- White versus “colored” flights of the city of London**

There seems to be a process of inter-ethnic avoidance in the city of London. 2001 and 2011 censuses indicate gradual but important changes in the white population. In London, the white British population was 58% of the general population of London in 2001. In 2011 it became just 45%. In the 2001 census, some districts of London such as Newman and Brent were discovered to be the first areas with non-white majorities. The following census (2011 census) found that, for the first time, less than 50% of London's population was white British. Equally, some districts of London were

almost evacuated of the British white population that makes up less than 20% of the general population. A further study (2005) showed that about 600.000 white British people left London to other more ethnically homogenous parts of the nation. However, importantly, the same study (British Demos Think Tank Research Institute) revealed that about 100.000 ethnic minority people left London. A plethora of explanations were offered to understand the nature of this demographic dynamism. One influential classical reading was that “white flight” was on the rise. But, it was also an ethnic flight as well. This reality urged analysts like Trevor Phillips, the chair of the Mapping Integration project at Demos to suggest that Britain as a whole and London, in particular, is becoming a “color-coded society”. He stated: “This research reveals that we have yet to face up to the risk that we are drifting into a color-coded society,” (in Hope, 2013). Ethnicity, it was believed, played a vital role in such ethnic/white flight. However, the sociologist Eric Kauffman suggested that economic factors and cultural tastes had their impact on residential choices of both white British and ethnic British. Kauffman denied that white mobility is an absolute example of “white flight”. He argued that “This is not exactly ‘white flight’ – it seems as though they’re influenced by friends and family as well as the neighborhood ideals of their age group,” (Seligman, 2005). Paul Simpson, an expert on Asian communities, argued that Britain is experiencing more racial mixing - and that “white flight” was a myth. According to him, the non-white population is growing naturally, which makes their number increases vis-à-vis the white population. He urged that “We need to be looking at poor housing or poor life changes - the colour of an area does not tell you very much. We accept that colour does not tell us much about people - we should accept it for areas too.” (2002).

## 7-2- Index of ethnic segregation in Bradford

The same urban patterns are noticed in the city of Bradford. There are noticeable processes of urban concentrations based on ethnic and cultural affinities. However, there are symptoms of desegregation and inter-ethnic mixing in the city. A study done by Ludi Simpson in 2002 indicated that gradual desegregation is underway in Bradford, slowly but steadily.

	2001
Index of segregation: 30 electoral wards	0.59
Index of segregation: 927 EDs (100-250)	0.74
<b>Wards</b>	
75% and higher South Asian residents	0
25%-75% mixed South Asians and Other	6
75%-95% Other	9
95% or more Other	15
<b>EDs (100-250 households)</b>	
95% and higher South Asians	1
75%-95% South Asians	43
25%-75% mixed South Asians and Other	154
75%-95% Other	136
95% or more Other	593

Table 1: Aspects of inter-ethnic desegregation in Bradford (2001 statistics)<sup>1</sup>

Relying on the data presented in the table above, Simpson could argue that segregation indices are not as high as was generally claimed in the official and media discourse. He also showed that segregation becomes more remarkable when the measuring unit is smaller, thus segregation is more noticeable at street level than at ward or neighborhood level. Equally important was his finding that segregation has not increased over the 1990s whether large or small measure units were used. The number of more mixed areas increased during the decade. Thus, what was increasing was residential mixing not “polarisation in residential patterns” (Ibid: 3).

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Simpson, L. (2002). “The legend of self-segregation: what *are* they talking about?” Bradford: Bradford 1 Resource Centre Rasalah, <http://www.brc-net.org.uk/articles/>, retrieved in 22/05/2016.

Such a centrifugal move of ethnic minorities from the core of the community demographic cluster was mainly enhanced by the amelioration of the ethnic minorities' economic fortunes.

I state below a comparative table that contrasts the 2001 data with the more recent one of 2011. Remarkably, there are no considerable differences in the nature and extent of ethnic and white urban choices in the different wards of the city of Bradford which can confirm Simpson's claims of ethnic desegregation in Bradford. This desegregation can be explained by the combination of a set of factors, notably economic and cultural ones.

	2001	2011
Index of segregation: 30 electoral wards	0.59	0.59
Index of segregation: 927 EDs (100-250)	0.74	0.74
<b>Wards</b>		
75% and higher South Asian residents	0	0
25%-75% mixed South Asians and Other	6	9
75%-95% Other	9	6
95% or more Other	15	15
<b>EDs (100-250 households)</b>		
95% and higher South Asians	1	0
75%-95% South Asians	43	77
25%-75% mixed South Asians and Other	154	163
75%-95% Other	136	134
95% or more Other	593	553

Table 2: Comparison between Simpson's findings of 2002 and more recent ones (2011)

A basic misunderstanding of South Asian residential patterns explains the official failure to distinguish between the increasing natural demographic growth of the South

Asian communities and their residential cluster. The increase in the number of the Pakistani community in Bradford because of natural growth outnumbers the steady out-migration to outer areas of Bradford. Also, continuous immigration from the Indian Sub-continent, coupled with lower white fertility and demographic growth, led to the ever-increasing demographic disequilibrium between the two groups. The youthful structure of the South Asian population, compared to the white majority, sustains such a demographic disequilibrium.

## 8- Conclusion

To conclude, the goal of this study is to compare levels of ethnic segregation in two British cities (Bradford and London) and examine the effect of ethnic and cultural belonging on these patterns. Hence, the concepts of white flight and that of “comfort zones” seem to fail to capture the dynamism of demographic changes in contemporary Britain. In many respects, they tend to oversimplify the complex mechanisms of cultural, social, and economic motilities that the British population-ethnic or mainstream white- seems to experience. The levels of ethnic segregation in London and Bradford are quite similar; there are wards in each city that are composed of clear ethnic majorities and tend to “exclude” people of a different ethnic character. However, other wards are ethnically mixed and a desegregation process is underway. So, there are two parallel systems of segregation and desegregation which can be explained by different factors such as cultural, religious, social, and mainly economic. Here, it is crucial to highlight that the social class variable plays a crucial role in determining the residential patterns and choices of both the white mainstream ethnic majority and other ethnic minorities. The concept of “underclass”, introduced by the sociologist Charles Murray (2001) shows how class played a more visible role than ethnicity in the residential distribution of the British populations in all the British cities, and notably in Bradford and London. Hence, socio-economic factors are detrimental; people who have the same economic and professional occupations usually reside in the same area regardless of ethnic and cultural differences. This does not mean that ethnicity and culture are not important, but compared to economic status, they are relegated to a secondary position. Both in Bradford and

London, some wards are perfectly ethnically mixed such as Tower Hamlets in London and Odsal in Bradford. Essentially, there are no such things as “no go” areas in Britain, neither for the ethnic majority nor minorities. There is no US-style of segregation, and of course, not South African Apartheid in contemporary Britain. Censuses and figures do not lie, but they did not tell the entire truth. What seems the pure outcome of discriminatory and racist behaviors of British whites against other ethnic minorities is, at best, a partial picture of what goes on. Urban and demographic changes are the end product of a cluster of complex factors that, among others, include ethnic belonging, class position, age group, gender differences, or simply individual lifestyle choices.



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