A study of Bangladeshi women’s entrepreneurship in east London: developing a gender-sensitive and culturally-appropriate notion of personhood

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Abstract

The doctoral study sets out to explore the narratives of Bangladeshi women in inner-city London, setting up in business. It is interested in how, through their stories, the women make sense of becoming business women. It is interested in what they mean by business success. How do they experience the process of becoming business women, as followers of Islam, as women, and as members of ethnic communities? Do their stories incorporate resistance to the discourse of mainstream business policy and business advice? What are the emergent theories of creativity / agency that emerge from their stories?

As a critical study, Alvesson & Deetz’s critical approach was adopted as a methodological starting point, at the point of PhD registration, albeit with significant reservations – because of the challenges inherent in critical poststructuralist methodologies.

This paper highlights one particular challenge – the weak sense of agency inherent in critical methodologies. This nominalist notion of agency emanates from the mind-body dualism embedded in Western approaches to self. It is especially problematic for this study, because of its interest in resistance and creativity. The paper suggests tentative beginnings for the development of a new theory of personhood that avoids the mind-body bifurcation. It draws upon germinal thinkers, such as, Simone de Beauvoir and Teresa de Lauretis, and contemporary authors, such as Linda Alcoff and Sonia Kruks to develop the tentative beginnings for a gender-sensitive and culturally-appropriate notion of personhood.
Agency is a much debated concept within the western Academy and centres around notions of selfhood. Modernist essentialist notions of self are contested by social constructionist approaches. Within the critical research approaches purported by Alvesson and Deetz (2000), essentialist notions of a unified and stable selfhood are superseded by poststructuralist notions of discursively oppressed subjectivities and multiple and ‘fractured’ selves (Foucault 1986). In such approaches the notion of agency is reduced to marginal resistance to dominant discourses – what Linda Alcoff (2006) refers to as ‘nominalist’ conceptualisations of agency. This paper discusses the notion of agency in relation to the methodological starting point of a PhD study. The aim of the study is to critique UK discourse of business and to examine its relevance for Bangladeshi women setting up businesses in east London. This aspect of the study lends itself well to critical approaches.

However, the study is also interested in the entrepreneurial identities of the women. It is interested in their stories, in their experiences of setting up in business - in their meanings of business, business success and entrepreneurship. Exploration of their complex identities requires a notion of self that can accommodate emotions, spirituality and creativity, typically associated with essentialist methodologies, and less commonly with hermeneutic approaches. Such perspectives are not possible within critical methodologies. However, both essentialist and nominalist conceptualisations of self are embedded in the mind/body bifurcation (Alcoff 2006). This mind-body bifurcation has androcentric and ethnocentric underpinnings inherent in Anglo-American philosophies (Harding 1993). This mind-body split is thus problematic for my research, which has gender and ethnicity at its heart.

The paper outlines the challenges raised by such mind-body demarcation within selfhood and discusses the tentative beginnings for the development of a new methodological approach. To achieve this, it draws upon modernist theorists, such as Mead and Merleau-Ponty, as well as contemporary theorists, such as Linda Alcoff and Sonia Kruks in exploring such an alternative methodology. The paper suggests the beginnings of an alternative
methodology that can incorporate a notion of self that is historically and culturally constructed, yet is also able to accommodate less nominalistic notions of agency, without resorting to hyper-subjectivity. It seeks to develop a notion of self that has what Alcoff (2006) calls a degree of ‘fixity’ without being essentialist; a notion of self that accommodates creativity without resorting to absolute free will.

Background to Research

My research seeks to critique UK discourse of business and entrepreneurship and explore its relevance for Bangladeshi women involved in establishing businesses in the London borough of Tower Hamlets. Tower Hamlets is ranked as one of the poorest boroughs in England – positioned fourth on the deprivation rankings, with over 70% of its neighbourhoods situated in top 1% wards (Indices of Multiple Deprivation for England 2004). The borough is home to one-third of the total UK Bangladeshi population (National census 2001). Within a regeneration context business creation is viewed by governments worldwide as a means of alleviating poverty, particularly for marginalised groups, such as black and minority ethnic women (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2004). However, the number of Bangladeshi women setting up in business in the UK is small (London Development Agency 2006).

Governments worldwide are encouraging the development of women-owned businesses (Department of Trade & Industry 2003b). The UK is no exception (Harding 2004). Since its inception, the Blair government has been concerned about the UK’s productivity lagging behind other major industrial countries (Department of Trade & Industry 2001). In 2000, the British government set itself the goal of making the UK “the best place in the world to start and grow a business” by 2005 (Department of Trade & Industry 2003a). From 2002 the UK government acknowledged the gender-gap evident in the small business sector (Griffith 2005), making comparisons with the US economy. US and UK levels of male-owned enterprises per capita are not dissimilar; however, there is a significant difference in the number of female-owned businesses; in the US women-owned enterprises continue to grow.
at twice the rate of male-owned businesses (Griffith 2005). In contrast, UK women’s start-up rates have remained significantly lower than men’s – relatively stable at an estimated 25% of UK total (Griffith 2005). Thus the government has come to regard women-owned businesses as a significant untapped economic resource (Department of Trade & Industry 2003a).

The statistics on women’s enterprise are typically confusing, primarily because business data collected is not disaggregated by gender and/or ethnicity. However, despite such difficulties, certain trends in women’s entrepreneurship, in the UK, are apparent. Some trends can be established from the 2001 census data and the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor data (Harding 2004). For example, an evaluation of an SBS analysis of 2001 census data on self-employment of ethnic groups, undertaken by Mascarenhas-Keynes (2006), showed that self-employment for ethnic minority women was 3.5% compared to 4.5% for their white counterparts; for Bangladeshi women it was 0.9% compared to Pakistani women (1.9%).

In order to attain the government’s vision, the Women’s Enterprise Strategic Framework (Harding 2003) established some ambitious targets to increase the number of women-owned businesses to 18-20% of UK total; to ensure women constitute 40% of customer base of government business support services; and to ensure that the number of women from ethnic minority communities receiving mainstream business support is representative of the relevant population (locally/regionally/nationally).

One of the key barriers for ethnic minority women is accessing appropriate business support (Nelson 2004). For example, a study by Omar et al (2001) highlighted the perceived cultural sensitivity and inappropriate stereotyping of business advisors towards particular ethnic groups. Other studies have focused upon the style of business advice provided (Mills et al, 2004; Palmer, 2005). Few studies have focused upon the relevance of business discourse for those setting up in business. However, recent analyses from researchers, such as Ahl (2002), Bird and Brush (2002) and Lewis (2006) have developed feminist analyses of
women's entrepreneurship, whereby entrepreneurship is seen as an inherently masculine construction (de Bruin and Dupuis 2003). What little research has been undertaken on women's ethnic entrepreneurship in the UK has also indicated that ethnic minority women have a distinctive experience of business and entrepreneurship (Omar et al 2001).

There is evidence to suggest that a dominant and gendered set of ideas and beliefs permeates much management and organisational studies (Bird and Brush 2002), underpinning business support. There is also growing evidence to suggest that the study of entrepreneurship is gendered (Bruni et al 2004). Bruni et al (2004) argue that such a discourse that is both individualistic and psychologically framed has been used to underpin contemporary entrepreneurship theory. Entrepreneurship is typically seen as a series of traits – risk-taking, competitiveness, innovation. It is likely that such discourse is also ethnocentrically-biased.

Rationality is embedded within systems theory, trait theory, exchange theory, scientific management and cognitive approaches to individual behaviour. (Thompson 1993) Rationality and masculinity as espoused within theories of the organisation (including the theories of the firm) have been further developed by sociologists, such as Weber, who has been in the forefront of influencing contemporary organisational theory. (Clegg and Dunkerley 1980) This discourse of rationality and empiricism can be traced back to 17th century Enlightenment thinking (Lyotard 2003). During this period rationality and gender became closely entwined. (Ross-Smith and Kornberger 2004). Men came to be associated with reason and the mind. (Lloyd 1984) Abstract thinking, objectivity and logic came to be regarded as masculine. Subjectivity, emotions and physical reality became the realm of the feminine. (Nagel-Decimal 1999). I refer to this as ‘Rational Man’ discourse. My study challenges such discourse.
Within business and entrepreneurship this discourse is typically encapsulated within rational economic decision making. Ogbor (2000) describes how various economic theorists have influenced the analysis of entrepreneurship, most notably Schumpeter. According to Ogbor (2000) entrepreneurial activity is seen largely in terms of individual attributes and intrinsic qualities, purporting a ‘heroic’ notion of the entrepreneur. Schumpeterian thinking permeates much of contemporary discussion on entrepreneurship embracing the notion of innovation, in terms of new ways of dealing with the economy, such as the introduction of new products, or markets, or production methods (Ogbor 2000). Collins and Moore (1964) argue that the image of the white male European colonizing new lands – the mythical hero permeates much of the literature. Ogbor (2000: 617) suggests that this heroic representation embodies much of the stereotypical American male (aggressive, assertive – conquering “Mother Nature”. This is a gendered and ethnocentric discourse. Bruni et al (2004) suggest that entrepreneurship theory draws significantly on Schumpeterian theories, the theories of “enterprise creation” and ‘The Enterprising Man’ purported by Collins and Moore (1964), and Knight’s (1921) theory of risk, deriving mainly from the early, classic studies of the twentieth century. These theories are also embedded in rationality and masculinity and embrace a notion of self that is universal. Emotion, intuition, spirituality are excluded. I call this the Rational Economic Man discourse. Judged against such assumed universalist standards, women can be deemed as ‘lacking’ in skills, confidence, and abilities to run a business, whilst their businesses can be deemed as lacking – as not ‘real’ businesses, or not growing quickly enough.

**Development of the Initial Research Methodology**

Unlike much of the research to date on business and entrepreneurship, which is based upon positivist or neo-positivist methodologies (Jennings et al 2005), this study challenges the discourses of rationality and objectivity that underpin such approaches. It rejects the possibility of achieving ‘objective’ knowledge and the goal of neutral representation (Alvesson and Deetz). It regards language as a location of power relations and, to some
degree, the construction of people and social reality, as espoused in critical approaches. Poststructuralist notions of discourse, alternative discourse’ and hegemony are key, in order to challenge assumptions behind ordinary ways of thinking about business and entrepreneurship, and to imagine and explore unorthodox, alternative beliefs and behaviours that may disrupt established practices (Yanchar et al 2005) of supporting Bangladeshi women into business. In this way the process of setting up a business can be de-familiarised and viewed through ‘fresh eyes’. The study asks: What is the dominant discourse of business and entrepreneurship? How is business and business success conceptualised? To what extent do the women participating in the study resist such discourse?

There is some evidence to suggest that women do reject the aforementioned rational discourse. For instance, Bruni et al (2004) undertook a study of small businesses in Italy. In one business, the women entrepreneurs refused to define their behaviour as ‘entrepreneurial’ – referring to themselves as “dis-entrepreneurs” (Bruni et al 2004 p.426. Another alternative to the masculinist discourse is proffered by Fenwick (2002). Fenwick found that Canadian women often placed ‘desire’ at the heart of their businesses, resisting the dominant philosophy of economic competitiveness, productivity and performance. Some sought ‘service’ through relationships with customers - “long-term caring bonds with people” (Fenwick 2002 p.714), resisting the traditional values of competition for market share and the norms of business development driven by economic rationality and rejecting the systematic approach to setting up a business, with pre-determined goals and standard models of business planning.

In contrast this study challenges the assumptions behind ordinary ways of thinking about business and entrepreneurship. It acknowledges the existence of difference, irregularity and de-construction of normalisation vis-à-vis discourse, favoured by poststructuralist methodologies (Addelson 1993). My approach favours approaches that question the status quo - revisionist methodologies, such as those espoused by Foucault and Rorty (Morris
At first glance, such approaches are appealing because of their sceptical roots. They incorporate the possibility of asking questions, such as: ‘What would happen if business were about…..?’ (Rorty 1982). Such methodologies are able to facilitate a critique of discourse(s) embedded in UK enterprise policy and practice. A well-regarded example of such a methodology is that advocated by Alvesson and Deetz (2000). This is a seductive approach because of its capacity to explore the worldviews of marginalised groups, such as Bangladeshi women entrepreneurs. It has the capacity to bring forward such “silent voices”, reinforcing them with “critical considerations”, (Alvesson and Deetz 2000, p.134) and incorporate the possibility of identifying alternative business discourse. At registration, this methodological approach was adopted with significant reservations.

Despite its initial seductiveness, however, Alvesson and Deetz’s, approach raises significant methodological challenges for how I am approaching my research. These challenges are: elimination of values, theory seen as argument construction, elimination of ontological ‘reality’ and a weak sense of agency. This paper focuses upon the latter.

Critical methodologies are inherently de-constructive, focusing upon societal oppression and typically lack strong notions of agency. My research sets out to develop a methodological approach that is both critical and agentic – an approach that can synchronise societal power dynamics with the experiences of the women setting up in business. It is interested in capturing creativity, spirituality, empowerment, within the analysis of social power dynamics. There is an upsurge in interest by academics in spirituality and business (Drucker 1993; Renesch and Defoore 1996; Cavanagh 1999), as people increasingly seek meaning, personal values, principles and spiritual growth in their work. In my practitioner role, I found that women frequently conceptualised their businesses in terms of emotion, spirituality and creativity. I require a methodology that is capable of capturing such aspects of entrepreneurship – a methodology that has the capacity to explore the entrepreneurial
identities of the women, as Diaspora, as members of British-Bangladeshi culture, as followers of Islam, living in a deprived area of east London.

**Agency and selfhood in Anglo-American science**

To explore the notion of agency requires an examination of theories of selfhood. In adopting a critical stance, this paper rejects the notion of the essential fixed subject. It contests essentialist notions of self, because of their innate belief in epistemological objectivity, absolute Truth / universality, the inherent gender bias (Alcoff and Potter 1993; Butler 1990) and ethnocentricity. For instance, rather than the aforementioned male entrepreneurial attributes being viewed as social / cultural norms (as a dominant discourse), they come to be regarded as prescriptive entrepreneurial characteristics or behaviours – an entrepreneurial personality (Chell 1991). Entrepreneurship comes to prescribe fixed, universal, entrepreneurial qualities / attributes, such as risk-taking, competitiveness, the pursuit of high growth business and profit maximisation. (Mukhtar 1998).

However, this paper also challenges the notion of the poststructuralist subject, with its associated transient, fractured sense of self. Sonia Kruks (2001, p.14) suggests the latter is remarkably like the Cartesian subject: “…. pitifully thin” – lacking "sentience, affects, feelings and emotions" with a lack of ‘interiority’. Like Kruks (2001, p.59) I am challenging the notion of the poststructuralist subject that “bypasses consciousness” - what Alcoff refers to as “the postmodern erasure of the subject” (Nelson 1993, p.129). I am challenging the notion of identities are seen as multiple and disparate, with self not existing as a metaphysical entity. I am challenging the notion that subjectivity is solely discursive, such that different discursive performances produce different realities, different discursive identities (Alvesson and Deetz 2000).

This view of self is often incorporated into feminist poststructuralist approaches. Judith Butler regards self as a synthetic construction projected through a lens of illusionary difference
Self for Butler (1997) is an imagined second person invocation, rather than a first person experience (Alcoff 2006), with selfhood regarded as a ‘doing’ manifested at the point of doing. Butler (1990) is understood as a ‘performative act’ - the self being constructed through the deed. Butler (1997) achieves this through her conceptualisation of identity construction as a process of social naming – a process of ‘othering’. This notion of social ‘naming’ draws on the Althusserian idea of interpellation, developed in his perception of subjectivity. According to Althusser (1974 p174), subjects are called “Hey you there!” Butler (1997) attempts to incorporate a notion of agency by drawing upon the psychic aspect of selfhood - borrowing heavily from the notion of the Freudian self. However, as Alcoff (2006) suggests, such a combination of the Freudian psychological self with the Foucauldian historically contingent self, results in a psychic process of subjugation that cannot be overcome. Thus, according to Butler (1997, p28), “the desire to persist in one’s own being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one’s own.” Acceptance of identities for Butler is thus tantamount to accepting dominant discourse, giving rise to a form of discursive essentialism (Alcoff 2006) - to a form of universalist subjectivity – the very notion that poststructuralism sets out to counter. I contest this weak notion of agency – what Alcoff (2006) refers to as ‘nominalist’. More importantly, I contest the underpinning of both essentialist and poststructuralist notion of self – the bifurcation of mind and body.

Although poststructuralism attempts to avoid the mind body split, it does so with a resultant disregard of the corporeal. Foucault saw bodies as extremely malleable phenomena (Shilling 1993) and was not concerned with the phenomenology of the body; he was not interested in its ‘lived experiences’ and regarded them as no basis for our being (Hey 1999). Within poststructuralist approaches the material body receives scant attention and becomes an effect of discourse. In Butler’s (1997) writings this notion of Foucauldian body as a product is evident. The notion of embodiment adopted by Butler is also a discursive one -
the material body is annihilated. As argued by Alcoff 2006), this is a form of mind-body bifurcation.

Within Western thought, mind and body dualism, is deeply ingrained. From ancient philosophers, such as Plato to Descartes, to contemporary thinkers, such as Rorty, Western mainstream philosophy has viewed the body as something that keeps human beings apart from knowledge (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Knowledge is regarded as having its origins in the mind: the source of knowledge is regarded as reason.

Descartes is frequently attributed with the bifurcation of mind and body. However, Elizabeth Groz (1994) argues that this dichotomy was already in place within Greek philosophy, with Aristotle. However, Spelman (1982) suggests that the soul/ body dichotomy arises from Plato, who distinguished between soul and body – or, alternatively between the rational and the irrational. For Plato, if the body gains the upper hand, knowledge is impossible; he draws on various metaphors to describe the soul and the body or relations between parts of the soul. For example, the body's relation to the soul is such that we are to think of the body vis-à-vis the soul as a grave or a prison. However, for Spelman (1982) Descartes can be seen to be responsible for the separation of the soul from nature. Through Descartes consciousness was separated and a gap was opened between the mind and the world. The mind/body split, and more importantly, the soul/body split has consequences for the notion of agency in this study.

**Developing an alternative methodological approach**

Alcoff (1993), in her endeavour to develop a normative feminist philosophy, has proposed a notion of self that seeks to avoid mind/ body duality. I empathise with her desire to formulate a new notion of ‘self’ that is gendered / cultured, yet does not entail a commitment to multiple selves that are unable to communicate effectively with one another (Alcoff and
Potter 1993). To achieve this, like Alcoff (2006) I am drawing on hermeneutics and phenomenology as well as Mead’s notion of the social relational self.

Mead offers a relational notion of selfhood via a community concept (Mead 1903). Mead suggests that reflective thinking is grounded in collective relations, which he considered more enduring than social relations, because the former tend to reflect what people consider most important (Alboulafia 1991). This collective reflectivity was incorporated into the Meadian notion of the ‘generalised other’ (Miller 1903). It is through this ‘generalized other’ than individuals understand the world and constitute an individual’s experience of self. The Meadian self develops through a reality constructed and maintained via a collective process (Mead 1982). Selves can be regarded as affected by other selves’. The notion of ‘me’ and ‘other’ are not separated. However, although the Meadian model of selfhood recognises the multiplicity of relationships that an individual is part of, it fails to incorporate social power dynamics; it presumes that individuals function in a “coherent monocultural” situation (Alcoff 2006 p124). Yet, this is far from the case. Rather, practices and meanings are ontologically grounded in political, economic and wider social settings.

Alcoff (2006, p92) develops a compelling argument for a relational notion of self, delineating between how we are located publically and a lived subjectivity that is “not always perfectly mapped onto our socially perceived self”. This publicly located self appears more akin to the Meadian ‘me’ or the Foucauldian normalized self; the lived subjectivity appears more akin to the hermeneutic self. In western science the two are often delineated as exterior and interior aspects of self. However, Alcoff insists that these two aspects of self are not ontologically separate entities, rather they are inter-related. The other, is in - is part of - self. Alcoff combines this notion of relational self with the notion of ‘positioning’. To do this she relies heavily on Teresa de Lauretis’s conceptualization of subjectivity. For de Lauretis (1984) subjectivity is about our specific engagement with the world – with discourse, with practice that constitutes meaning. It is a ‘situated knowledge (Haraway 1991). Self is thus contingent
regarded as relative to a constantly shifting context; it is thus a positioning – a process whereby we interpret our history within horizons of meaningful knowledge. Alcoff draws on this metaphor of interpretive horizons, of situated reasoning, sometimes called ‘cultural scripts’, framing assumptions that acknowledge the importance of the individual’s embeddedness in their world, to ‘position’ meaning. (Alcoff 2006, p95). Like Alcoff (2006) I suggest that interpretive horizons are not merely tools – a lens through which individuals perceive the world, but that they actually constitute self – representing what is experienced from that frame of reference.

It is through hermeneutics that Alcoff incorporates the notion of agency - by embracing the hermeneutic notion of ‘interpretive horizons’. This accommodates the idea of substantive context within which an individual and / or group is able to develop their understanding of the world – their “situated reasoning” (Alcoff, 2006, p102). Drawing upon Gadamer, Alcoff regards subjectivity as important but not the absolute authority with regards the attribution of meaning – avoiding the “epistemic mastery” associated with hermeneutic approaches (Alcoff 2006, p102).

The notion of embodiment, a la Merleau-Ponty (1962), provides the materiality – the non-discursive – the means of avoiding the mind-body split endemic in Western philosophies and methodologies. Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist phenomenology provides the means of developing the notion of a materially-based ‘positionality’. For Merleau-Ponty (1962) it is not that merely that the individual has a perspective – more that she is in it. Mind and body are not seen as separate metaphysical entities; experience is regarded as embodied. Interpretive horizons are embodied. Merleau-Ponty’s account account of ‘embodiment’ is incorporated not only by Alcoff (1993; 1996) but by other feminists authors, such as Sonia Kruks (2001). Kruks (2001, p.13) draws on Simone de Beavior’s notion of ‘lived experience’ and Faron’s (1963) notion of ‘black embodiment’, embracing the importance of a ‘sentient subject’, whereby the individual can “exceeds the boundaries of the discursive.” This notion of
embodiment grounds knowledge in a non deterministic, non transparent account of experience. Knowledge is always seen as historically and culturally contingent. Most importantly this notion of embodiment grounds subjectivity in the material, thereby avoiding the separation of mind and body and the consequent separation of the subjective and the objective. It accommodates the structural / social as well as the capacity for intentionality, so lacking in poststructuralist approaches. In order to develop a methodological starting point for my research vis-à-vis agency, I am drawing upon Alcoff's (2006) understanding of identities.

However, there are elements of Alcoff’s theory I find problematic, and seek to develop further in my research. These include her notions of materiality and the mind-body bifurcation integral to her model of self. It is the latter I intend to focus upon here. Alcoff's model reaffirms the somatic and unites it with the cognitive. However it does not appear to address the aforementioned negation of the soul from self, inherent in Western methodologies; it thus cannot address the spiritual aspects of the self. Yet, the women in my study are Islamic women. According to Yacoob (2003), any understanding of the self from Islamic perspectives requires a study of the spiritual aspects of self. Hence I am seeking to develop a culturally appropriate notion of personhood.

According to Mauss (1985) the cultural construction of the person can be considered in two distinctive ways - as 'personhood' and 'selfhood' – with 'personhood' referring to an individual's social role as a member of a collective and 'selfhood' to the mental and physical awareness that humans have of their own individuality. Although the Meadian self embraces collective reflectivity, it does so from western liberalist notions of individualism. In Islam, human beings are viewed as part of a larger cosmos, with which they are seen to share fundamental properties. The macrocosm of the universe is regarded as symbolically linked with a perfectly reflected microcosm, the human being (Good and Good, 1992), providing a unity of all creation. The explanation of this unity resides in the notion of Nafs - the self. The
‘seat’ of the Nafs is the heart - the point of merger between body, mind and spirit. The heart is seen to distinguish human beings from other entities, whilst also symbolising the human being in relation to the world. The heart is considered to be the location of the mind and the reservoir for emotional processes (Obeyesekere, 1976) - the medium for the interpretation of reality. This notion of Nafs is to be accommodated within my methodological positioning.

This paper has contested the postmodernist notion of selfhood, with its inherent ‘nominalist’ sense of agency. It has proposed a tentative starting point for the development of an alternative embodied notion of self, drawing upon Mead’s notion of the relational self, Merleau-Ponty’s ‘situated knowledge’ and Alcoff’s notions of embodied hermeneutic horizons. It has suggested that the notion of embodied selfhood needs to be integrated with Eastern notions of personhood, to ensure the model is culturally appropriate for the Bangladeshi women setting up businesses in east London. This notion of personhood will be further explored via the empirical study.

References


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