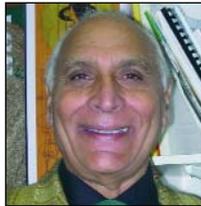


Daughters of traditions

Meera Syal describes her life as schizophrenic, acknowledging that much of the creative impetus for her writing and performing comes from the clash of two cultures she has grown up with... 'a lot of women of my generation see the qualities in both cultures and find them perplexing but amusing not desperate...' (The Guardian, 14 May 1991)



PAUL SINGH GHUMAN on Asian girls in the West.

ASIAN women of all ages face this clash of cultures on a daily basis – a French ban on the wearing of the hijab at school being just one recent controversial example. Many second- and third-generation Asian girls, especially those whose parents emigrated from rural areas of the Indian subcontinent, are finding it difficult to reconcile the values and traditions of their home with the differing (and in many areas contrasting) ones of the wider Western societies.

A quote from an interview with Sikh girls in Australia that I carried out in 1998 highlights some of these conflicts:

We want to be able to have more freedom; we want to be able to go out together, to do things. We want to be trusted more...we want our lifestyles, but we don't want bad reputation and we don't want to shame our mothers and fathers...it's just too much pressure; it's hard because you can't be you... Also at school teachers should be aware of different languages and cultures and what we do at home and how do we feel about things. (Ghuman, 2003, p.168)

It seems to me that the root cause of the conflict between home and school values is

the fact that the Asian family encourages 'interdependence and collectivity', whereas school in the West emphasises individualism and personal autonomy (see Triandis, 1991). Zhou and Bankston (1998), who carried out research with Vietnamese young people in the US, make this point emphatically. In a similar vein, Parekh argues (1986, p.2): 'Indian society is not a bourgeoisie-liberal society, for not the individual but the family is its basic unit.' An in-depth study of the second-generation in Geneva (Sapru, 1999) reported:

Care for the grandparents and the extended family in addition to learning the importance of money were the values that were stressed at home by the Singh's. Ms. Singh also felt the need to reinforce other Indian values every now and then, particularly concerning relations between boys and girls (pre-marital sex was not a permissible family norm), and protect Anjali from the over permissive values of the West.

Similar findings emerge in Vancouver, Canada, (reported by Ghosh, 1986; Tirone & Pedlar, 2000), and Birmingham, England (Stopes-Roe & Cochrane, 1990).

This chasm in values affects girls more deeply than boys, because of the traditional views held by many Asian parents on the 'different' gender-role expectations (Anwar, 1998). Many Asian parents feel strongly that their daughters carry the *izzat* (honour) and traditions of the family and that they need protection and 'extra care' in their schooling and socialisation.

Perhaps inevitably then, young Asian girls raise issues of autonomy (Bhopal, 1997; Shaw, 2000), dating, dress codes,

and favouritism of boys over girls (Ghuman, 2003; Ostberg, 2003; Sapru, 1999), along with racial prejudice and negative stereotyping by teachers (Anwar, 1998; Bhatti, 1999). How do these concerns arise, and what impact do they have?

Racial prejudice and discrimination

It is well documented in the UK by Modood and his colleagues (1997), and in the US by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) and Suarez-Orozco (2001), that Asian and black people face racial discrimination in employment, housing, health services and

A. JABEEN

WEBLINKS

ICESY (International Comparative Studies of Ethnocultural Youth):

www.ceifo.su.se/eng/icesy/icesy.html

South Asian Women's Network: www.sawnet.org

other walks of life. Despite some 30 years of public education and awareness, there are some teachers who are eurocentric in their world views and consider the cultural values of others as inferior or at best exotic. Tehmina Basit (1997) vividly describes the predicament of a group of Muslim girls in a London school. She found that many teachers are unintentionally prejudiced and show inadvertent racism in that many of the Muslim values of home are misinterpreted. For instance: 'Respectfulness is seen as shyness or submissiveness, protectiveness is viewed as oppression and modesty is construed as traditionalism.' Likewise, in Oslo schools Ostberg (2003) notes the disapproving attitudes of teachers towards their Muslim students' religious practices and beliefs.

Misunderstanding between parents and teachers

There are many areas of misunderstanding on the function and role of education between Asian parents and their children's teachers. Tehmina Basit's notion of education is that 'the teachers' job is to impart knowledge, not to anglicize the girls'. My own experience of interviewing Asian parents in Australia, Canada, California and England confirms this to be the objective of schooling held by many

parents (Ghuman, 2003). School teachers in the West, on the other hand, view such an aim of education as too narrow and instrumental. Deriving their inspiration and knowledge from such philosophers as Rousseau and Dewey, teachers aim to educate the 'whole' child. Furthermore, many Muslim and some Sikh parents tend to worry that their daughters are being taught in mixed classes, especially in swimming, dancing and gymnasium lessons and having to take 'communal' showers. There is a vast corpus of literature highlighting the concerns of Asian parents (e.g. Tomlinson, 1984; Verma & Ashworth, 1986).

Psychological and mental health problems of Asian girls

The discontinuity (and even mismatch) of values, customs and practices between home and school in many social and cultural domains places psychological strains on Asian children and young people, especially girls, over and above those experienced by their white counterparts. This can lead to worry, tension and anxiety. Research evidence to support this contention from literature in the UK is equivocal (see Bhugra, 2004; Biswas, 1990; Merrill & Owens, 1986; Soni-Raleigh, 1996). However, Portes and Hao (2002) report higher levels of depression amongst girls compared with boys, in a large sample of second-generation immigrants in Florida and California.

Most Asian girls learn to cope reasonably successfully with the demands of 'two cultures', but a few (some studies suggest higher proportions than their white counterparts: see e.g. Biswas, 1990; Glover *et al*, 1989; Soni-Raleigh, 1996) suffer from psychosomatic illnesses, severe anxiety, and depression. Bhardwaj (2001) concludes in a review of research findings that Asian girls and women are 'three times more vulnerable to suicide and self-harm than their non-Asian counterparts'. According to Bhardwaj, cultural beliefs (*izzat* – honour, *sharm* – shame) act as double-edged swords in that they 'persistently legitimise gender violence and oppression and further silence women from being able to discuss...as bringing further shame and dishonour to the family'. Her own research in Newham, east London, revealed many disturbing cases of self-harm.

Bhardwaj attributes this situation to the

demands and pressures of the community on Asian girls and women as well as the 'encountered' racism of British society. To ease the predicament of Asian girls, she suggests that social and health education in England and Wales should include a combined approach to gender issues, mental health and self-harm. She recommends: 'Education services need to provide ongoing training for staff to raise awareness on issues pertinent to young Asian women's mental health, abuse and self-harm.' Bhardwaj is well aware of the danger of stereotyping Asian girls and women as 'victims', but argues that it is only 'just' to seek help and support where it is badly needed.

A recent comparative study by Bhugra and Bhui (2003) in east London, with a sample of 266 13-year-olds, sheds further light on the eating disorders of Asians. The research found:

Asians had the highest BITE (Bulimia Investigation Test, Edinburgh) raw scores compared with the other three groups (white; black; other non-Asians). This coupled with more likelihood of a delayed menstrual period indicates that there is an element of pathology which veers towards eating disorders.

Kingsbury (1994) undertook a comparative study of young people (aged 12 to 18 years) who attended the West Middlesex University Hospital due to 'overdoses of prescribed drugs'. In the Asian subsample, the vast majority who took overdoses were girls, the ratio of females to males being 12:1, as opposed to 3:1 for whites. Kingsbury concludes: 'Although Asians were not found in the high suicidal intent group, the rates of depressive disorder, hopelessness, long predication time (greater than three hours) were all higher in Asian adolescents.' Merrill and Owens (1986) conducted a comparative study on self-poisoning by Asians and whites from a Birmingham hospital. The authors suggest that the relative excess of marital problems in Asian females – which were attributed to the unwanted arranged marriages by the patients – may be a factor in explaining their mental ill health.

It must be stressed, however, that there have been no large-scale studies which demonstrate conclusively that Asian girls are more prone to suffer from psychiatric and psychological ailments than their white

counterparts. A longitudinal study with a viable sample is needed to establish the validity or otherwise of these small-scale studies. Nevertheless, we should take note of the trends and offer counselling and other forms of support to help Asian girls deal with their anxieties and personal worries. Also, we should take heed of the Parekh Report (2000, p.151), which recommended that 'issues of race equality and cultural diversity be properly covered in initial teacher training, and that they be mandatory in all major programmes of management development for head teachers and deputy heads'. Furthermore, Tomlinson argues in the Parekh Report that: 'generally, schools and authorities need to attend more closely to the perceptions, experiences and outlooks of Asian and black communities'.

Not all bad news

Despite these difficulties, it is important to note that Asian girls are achieving higher school grades (GCSE at 16) than Asian boys, and that Indian girls are among the best achievers – just below that of Chinese-origin girls (Youth Cohort Study 2003, see www.dfes.gov.uk; Mirza & Gillborn, 2002). In Wales, a report on this subject was published in August 2003 by EALAW (English as an Additional Language Association of Wales). It confirms the emerging pattern found by the researchers in England – that girls in general outperform boys and that Indian girls achieve significantly better than both their white counterparts and other Asians. Thus we can build on this success story.

There is a substantial corpus of research on Asian and other ethnic-minority young people sufficient to formulate informed and enlightened policies for schooling and

education. A major project (ICESY: see weblinks) based at Stockholm University covering the second generation in Western European countries was launched in 1994. It has contributed many scholarly papers on the subject that have relevance for the socialisation and education of Asian and other ethnic minority boys and girls in the UK.

Several areas of concern for both researchers and applied psychologists emerge from this short review. Themes/concepts of culture conflict, acculturation and dual socialisation, formation of personal and social identities, self-image and coping strategies; all need further exploration to work out their associations with psychosomatic illnesses.

Furthermore, it is important to mention an unexplored area of research, namely the psychological concerns, and perceptions of girls (and boys) of dual cultural heritage (of mixed race), as they could be bridge-builders between the host society and new citizens/immigrants. At an applied level we cannot overstate the importance of the cultural awareness and understanding needed (without stereotyping) when counselling young people of Asian ancestry, and indeed other minority groups.

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DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Are eurocentric techniques used by psychologists and healthcare professionals with young Asian girls likely to be counterproductive?

Is there a case for employing healthcare professionals solely on the basis of their ethnicity or gender?

In what ways can Asian communities bridge the gap of 'values' between home and school and the wider society?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. Write to our Letters page on psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute to our online forum via www.thepsychologist.org.uk.