

Young People of Pakistani Origin and their Families

A Summary of Findings for Professionals

A Good Practice Guide

Introduction

The Pakistani population is one of the most deprived among the UK's minority ethnic populations. According to recent census data over sixty *per cent* of Pakistani families have low incomes. Pakistani households also have a greater proportion of families with young children as well as a greater number of households looking after older relatives than the general population.

Family based support is, therefore, a vital aspect of welfare provision among Pakistani families. Particularly since limited access to social, economic and political resources often necessitate a greater reliance on family and kin. Such support, however, may not always be forthcoming, and some families who live across continents or lack effective kin networks are likely to feel more vulnerable and isolated than others.

Responding to diversity is a core issue for the welfare state. We know that professionals providing health and social care can sometimes feel overwhelmed by the prospect of dealing with people from increasingly diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds.

At the same time, professional assumptions and popular stereotypes about the culture and family lives of Pakistani communities (and other ethnic minority communities) can lead to inadequate and inappropriate referrals to community and specialist support services. Such stereotypes reduce people to homogenous communities, defined by their ethnicity or culture, without any reflection on differences within and similarities across communities. Further, a focus on culture can deflect attention away from the more structural issues of inequality and the forms of institutional racism that sustain these inequalities.

To take an example, we are familiar with the much enduring myth of the 'Asian family' as a large, extended family who 'take care of their own'. This longstanding idea, once more evident in our own work, glosses over variations in family forms as well as the process of social change that is part of family life. The myth often results in the invisibility of the health and social care needs of people from these communities. It ignores conflict, socio-economic pressures and other legitimate excuses for not fulfilling family responsibilities. Further, the myth fails to take in account the extent to which the wider family and community might be involved in unhelpful moral policing of caring or parenting.

The Findings

This is a summary of the findings from a three-year research project looking at the changes occurring in Pakistani family life. The purpose of our work was to explore values among families of Pakistani origin and to offer suggestions on how to develop good policy and practice. During our study, we talked to health and social care professionals, young people (aged between 11-18 years) and their siblings, parents and grandparents across West Yorkshire. The Community Fund supported the project, which was carried out by the Centre for Research in Primary Care, University of Leeds and Barnardo's.

Family values, culture and religion

Young people of Pakistani origin, in general, are often perceived as a 'problem', estranged from traditional family and parental values. Our findings provide little support for this. Instead we explain how family values and practices, religion, culture and ethnicity are central to how young people define themselves and are defined by others within the community. Rather than appearing as cultural rebels or passive subjects of socialisation, inheriting the cherished values and practices of the previous generations, young people make sense of these values and practices within the context of their own lives.

To take one example, the importance of wearing Asian/Pakistani clothes is usually mediated by the context of social interaction. Although seen as more appropriate in some settings rather than others, the importance of wearing such clothes is accepted by young people. Similarly, many young people and parents believed that speaking their 'mother tongue' or regional language was important in retaining their cultural and religious identity.

Continuity and change are at the heart of these young people's lives. While gender and socio-economic position play a role in this process, religion provides legitimacy and a worldview for defining and negotiating rules.

We found that ideas about family and family values were central in marking boundaries between ethnic groups. Young people, their parents and grandparents expressed various ideas about White families. These were not based on any direct experience. The typical White family was perceived as being individualistic and permissive; representing values that could potentially corrupt the minds of young people and encourage them to defy their parents and values of the wider community.

The perceptions of a permissive White family were perceived to be in conflict with Islamic values of family obligations and relationships. This conflict of values makes the world outside home seem dangerous and morally unsafe, especially for parents living in inner city areas. This often results in particular forms of moral policing over the activities and social life of young people, particularly young women.

Strict rules about what they can do, where they can go and with whom they can socialise was seen to ensure young people's safety. Young women and young men in some families might appear to lead restricted lives. There is, however, no particular formula or a set of rules that can predefine how parents and young people might engage with the world outside home and school.

A majority of parents, irrespective of their own educational background, placed a high premium on education of their children, particularly since they realised that their offspring would have to strive harder to compete with their White counterparts, who were believed to have better

life opportunities, educational and career prospects.

Salience of Pakistani origin

Perhaps not surprisingly, the symbolic meaning of Pakistani origin for parents, grandparents and young people is different. For many parents and grandparents the link with Pakistan is through lived memories of past, kinship and friendship.

Nonetheless, young people born and brought up here still feel they need to seek the meaning of their roots and engage with their parents' and grandparents' past. The importance of Pakistani origin for them depends on actual kin, material and symbolic links with Pakistan. These links vary across families. Wider perceptions of Pakistani origin and Islam also play a role in how young people see these links. As part of this process, adopting a particular definition of Islam or ethnicity by the young people is often used as an important strategy for dealing with racism.

The relationship with professionals

Health and social care practices often reflect Western, ethnocentric views. These ignore alternate views of childhood, youth and parenting. Consequently, the health and social care problems of ethnic minority families are often blamed on deviant cultural practices and lifestyles. At the same time, stereotypes of Pakistani/Asian family as 'taking care of their own' often mean that their needs are not recognised.

A lack of familiarity with the welfare system and service support, a mistrust of service practitioners and an inability to speak English can also result in poor or inappropriate support for young people and their families.

We found that the legitimacy of professional intervention depended on its purpose. A majority of parents, grandparents and young people believed that professional intervention in situations involving potential conflict between young people and their parents was inappropriate. Both parental authority and the obligation of young people to follow their parents is perceived as a religious duty. While this may not guarantee good parenting, State intervention is perceived as an infringement of the moral and symbolic values embodied within family. Hence the common observation among families that,

‘social services are the ones who break up families.’ The breach of boundaries between home, community and State has wider ramifications for the moral identity of the young person and his or her family within the community.

Health and health related needs of young people and their family, however, operate at a different level. While parents reiterated their duty to take care of disabled young people at home, rather than send them into residential care, this reflects a wider filial sentiment and a notion of parental responsibility shared across communities. Notions of respite care might vary between families and communities, and be influenced by the gender of the young person and the professional carer. Underemployment, unemployment, poor housing and having more than one disabled child can exacerbate the condition for families living on the edge of poverty, irrespective of the ethnic background of the family.

However, ideas of family obligations and expectations of caring, in light of moral policing and wider negative attitudes associated with disability operating within the community, can further isolate Pakistani and other Asian parents who might be reluctant to seek professional help.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our findings suggest that partnerships between different sectors of the community and professional services are crucial to enhancing trust and mutual respect. This is an important step towards recognising and addressing the issues raised by our report. Rather than a prescriptive list typical of a good practice guide, we recommend a need for a way of thinking that challenges ethnocentric values underlying current practice and engages with the complexity of family life. Otherwise we are reduced to providing simplistic and unsophisticated responses by encouraging ill-advised policy and practice developments.

Challenging myths and stereotypes about the family life of young people from ethnic minority backgrounds is an important step towards introducing such reflexivity in practice and policy. This, in turn, can empower professionals to address the issues and needs of ethnic minority families by encouraging them to ask meaningful

questions and seek relevant answers by focusing on how young people perceive themselves and are perceived by significant others within and outside the family.

What we would, therefore, like to recommend are some thoughts for reflective practice that can form the basis of leadership, training and professional development, as well as empower professionals to engage with the complexity of family life of young people from ethnic minority communities. In doing so, professionals by recognising similarities and differences across communities, will be better able to address the needs of Pakistani families and plan support according to context.

Central to this process, is the re-conceptualisation of several key themes. These include young people’s relationship with their parents and significant others; intergenerational notions of rights; responsibilities and filial duty; how ethnicity and culture are negotiated as lived experiences; and the role of gender, class and socio-economic position of the family in how family values and practices are negotiated. Within this broad context, our specific recommendations are:

- Professionals from schools, education, health and social services need to understand how ideas of parenting, childhood and ‘youth’ might differ not only between ethnic groups but also within each ethnic group.
- Professionals need to recognise the diversity of family forms within the Pakistani community.
- Professionals need to ask sensible questions to be able to address often complex problems within their context rather than rely on a ‘fact files’ of culture.
- Professionals need to recognise that kinship obligations operate across continents and that the life circumstances, such as serious illness or death of a parent or sibling, sometimes necessitate unplanned travel and overseas stays.
- Professionals need to recognise how gender, socio-economic background and family history within ethnic groups lead to diversity in the experience of Pakistani families.

- At the same time, however, young people from Pakistani families, share much in common with their white counterparts. Negotiations with parents about acceptable behaviour, re-interpretation of their parents' values in the context of their own biographical experience and asserting their own sense of identity, which both challenge and preserve family values, occur irrespective of a person's ethnic background.
- Similarly, young people from Pakistani families share the same worries, anxieties as their White peers, which suggest there are generic aspects of 'growing up' that occur across cultures, although their expression might take different forms. A person's ethnic background is not the only aspect of their identity and its relevance to policy and practice depends on context and circumstances.
- The idea of cultural conflict and estrangement among South Asian young people needs to be challenged. It does not reflect the realities of family life. Young people engage with and re-interpret their parents' values and norms, within the context of their own experience. This can raise tensions between young people and their parents, but our findings also suggest considerable continuity in the values of young people and their families.
- Families of Pakistani origin need better access to information regarding support services and their potential benefits.
- We need to address racism at various levels. Tackling discrimination and racism demands more than a 'tick box' approach to diversity training. Rather it involves cultural change at a broader institutional level.
- Schools, in particular, need to address ethnocentrism and racism, promote better understanding of different cultures, including White cultures, and celebrate difference as constitutive of a multiethnic society rather than treat difference as a problem.
- There is a need to open up debate on disability and negative attitudes towards disability within Pakistani and other Asian cultures. Addressing wider

attitudes to disability and gender will empower service providers to understand the family context, address appropriate issues and provide appropriate support.

Finally, it is perhaps worth remembering that there is a good deal of evidence outlining the process and outcomes of racism, disadvantage and inequalities in the UK. Policy and practice has, however, been less successful in translating these insights into improvements in service delivery. Focusing on the needs of minority ethnic populations is not the same as responding to these needs. Often there is a gap between our understanding of the issues and our willingness to act on their implications to improve service delivery. A commitment to change is, therefore, essential. Otherwise findings such as ours become meaningless. Without such a commitment, service initiatives are not only in danger of wasting valuable public resources, but are also in jeopardy of becoming little more than token gestures, leading to increasing disillusionment and estrangement among minority ethnic communities.

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