
Ethnic Identity and Parenting Stress in South Asian Families: Implications for Culturally Sensitive Counselling

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ABSTRACT

The South Asian culture is one in which family obligation and loyalty, as well as self-sacrifice and obedience toward one's elders, are paramount. These values can be different from those of the more individualistically oriented Euro-Canadian dominant culture, and can prompt challenges of cultural adjustment among Canadian-born South Asian youth and their immigrant parents. This article describes adolescent ethnic identity formation and parenting stress as two common issues for South Asian families in counselling. The article also presents culturally informed recommendations for addressing these issues, ending with a case illustration to highlight the use of these interventions in practice.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans la culture de l'Asie du Sud, les obligations et la loyauté envers la famille de même que le sacrifice de soi et l'obéissance à ses aînés sont d'une importance capitale. Ces valeurs peuvent être différentes de celles de la culture euro-canadienne dominante, plus axée sur l'individu, et peuvent présenter des défis d'adaptation chez les jeunes d'Asie du Sud nés au Canada et leurs parents immigrants. Cet article décrit la formation de l'identité ethnique à l'adolescence et le stress dans les rapports parents-enfants comme étant deux problèmes courants dans le counseling de familles d'Asie du Sud. L'article présente aussi des recommandations renseignées par la culture sur la façon de résoudre ces problèmes et se termine sur un cas illustrant l'utilisation de ces interventions dans la pratique.

INTRODUCTION

Canada is characterized by richness in cultural diversity, with 18.40% of the population reporting themselves as being foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2001a). South Asians are currently the second largest visible minority group in the nation and the fastest growing immigrant group, increasing 36.80% from 1996 to 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2001b). The term "South Asian" is used to describe people of various religions and nationalities who trace their cultural origins to the Indian subcontinent (Assanand, Dias, Richardson, & Waxler-Morrison, 1990; Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997). South Asian countries of origin consist primarily of Pakistan, India, Nepal, Kashmir, Burma, Sri Lanka, and Fiji (Assanand et al.; Ibrahim et al.). The majority of South Asians residing in these countries practice Hinduism, but there are also large Muslim and Sikh populations, as well as small numbers of Zoroastrians, Jains, and Christians (Ibrahim et al.). In addition to differences in regional languages, differences can be found between South Asian subcultures with traditional practices that are characteristic of a specific geographic locale (Ibrahim et al.).

Despite variability in geographic origins, religion, and language, South Asians have a shared system of cultural values and traditions. This unifying core culture among South Asian peoples predates the modern geographical borders of South Asian countries, and has been in existence since 7000 B.C. (Ibrahim et al., 1997). A long history of a common way of life among the peoples inhabiting the Indian subcontinent explains why a shared underlying culture continues to exist and cut across nationalities, religions, and geographical borders.

The purpose of this article is to discuss common acculturation-related challenges that may arise among South Asian families with first-generation immigrant parents and their second-generation Canadian-born adolescents, and to discuss implications for counselling with these families. The potential for intergenerational cultural conflict is typically strongest between first-generation immigrant parents and second-generation children, who have been raised in different cultural contexts (Abouguendia & Noels, 2001). When South Asian families do seek out counselling, it is most often for challenges related to ethnic identity development and parenting stress. These issues may underlie a variety of presenting issues, such as depression, anxiety, academic difficulties, relationship issues, career choice, stress management, disordered eating, substance abuse, delinquency, and so on (Almeida, 1996; Juthani, 2001; Segal, 1991; Sharma, 2000). Very little has been written on how counsellors can use culturally responsive interventions that apply specifically to the parenting stress and adolescent identity development concerns that South Asian clients commonly struggle with during the acculturation process. Both of these issues, along with suggestions for culturally informed interventions for addressing them, will be described within the context of existing theoretical literature and research findings on South Asian families, concluding with a case illustration. This article will be of particular interest to counsellors who work in cross-cultural settings and see South Asian clients in their professional practice.

As a cautionary note, it is important to remember that the South Asian community, like other cultural groups, is not homogeneous: beliefs, values, and behaviours will vary based on religion, language, country of origin, social context in the host country, and individual experiences (Ibrahim et al., 1997). However, research has demonstrated that South Asian clients tend to be reluctant to seek out counselling due to cultural stigma and an emphasis on keeping family matters private (Almeida, 1996; Segal, 1991; Sharma, 2000). Furthermore, extensive research by S. Sue (1998) has shown that ethnic minority clients have a substantially higher drop-out rate in counselling than Caucasians, with 50% of minority clients terminating after a single session. One reason cited to explain this troubling trend is a lack of multicultural competence among counsellors, which includes (a) counsellor self-awareness of his/her own beliefs, assumptions, and values; (b) culture-specific knowledge of the client's heritage cultural beliefs, values, and practices; and (c) culturally appropriate helping skills (D.W. Sue, 2001). When counsellors lack awareness of culturally based presenting problems and sensitive ways of intervening, South Asian clients may feel culturally invalidated, terminate prematurely, and develop a negative view of the counselling process, thereby preventing a future

approach to counselling (S. Sue). According to D. W. Sue's guidelines for multicultural competence, counsellors should first cultivate self-awareness to identify their own cultural blind spots, biases, values, and world views to avoid imposing them on clients. Following this, culture-specific knowledge should be used to understand culturally based issues underlying various presenting problems and for formulating appropriate interventions.

KEY CULTURAL VALUES OF SOUTH ASIANS

The collectivist orientation of the South Asian culture promotes the primary importance of the welfare of the family, which usually includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Individuals are expected to sacrifice their personal desires to ensure the well-being of their families when individual and group goals conflict (Almeida, 1996; Ibrahim, et al., 1997; Segal, 1991). Furthermore, one's self-concept exists in relation to others, and pursuing personal goals and desires that conflict with family goals is perceived to be selfish (Segal). The emphasis on collectivism fosters familial interdependence throughout the lifespan; children are socialized to remain emotionally dependent on their parents well into adulthood (Almeida; Segal). As a result, parents and grandparents exert significant amounts of influence in all aspects of life, with elders being respected and revered as wise authority figures (Ibrahim et al.; Segal). Since South Asian parents often perceive their children's individuation as a loss of control, encouraging adolescent autonomy is not considered desirable (Dosanjh & Ghuman, 1998).

These differences in key values and ways of life may make the cultural transition process challenging for South Asian immigrant families in Canada, especially for second-generation youth who are exposed to the values and norms of the dominant Euro-Canadian culture through their school experiences and media exposure (Baptiste, 1993; Berry, 2001). In adjusting to the dominant Euro-Canadian culture, Berry (2001, 2003) maintains that first- and second-generation immigrants must make two critical choices related to their cultural preferences: (a) how much of their heritage cultural beliefs and practices to retain, and (b) how much they wish to interact with and adopt the values and practices of the dominant Canadian culture. In Berry's model, the four possible outcomes of making these two decisions are: *assimilation* (complete adoption of the host culture's values and beliefs), *separation* (full identification with the heritage culture and detachment from the dominant culture), *integration* (selectively incorporating aspects of each culture), and *marginalization* (rejection of both the heritage and dominant cultures) (Berry, 2001). South Asian parents and adolescents have been found to adopt different acculturation preferences, with parents emphasizing separation and youth favouring integration (Segal, 1991; Talbani & Hasanali, 2000; Wakil, Siddique, & Wakil, 1981). Differing cultural perspectives among South Asian parents and youth may affect adolescents' achievement of a consolidated bicultural identity.

Family conflicts often arise when South Asian adolescents wish to pursue an unconventional career path that is perceived by parents as being of lower prestige,

to begin dating, or to adopt behaviours typical of youth in the dominant Euro-Canadian culture (Almeida, 1996; Segal, 1991). Since these behaviours can be foreign to South Asian parents, they typically interpret their child's actions as a sign of "cultural corruption," and respond by applying increased pressure on the child to conform to their expectations (Sharma, 2000; Wakil et al., 1981). South Asian youth are socialized from birth to believe that family loyalty and a sense of duty toward one's parents and relatives are paramount, so parents traditionally use guilt, shame, and moral obligation to regulate their children's behaviour (Segal).

When South Asian parents' efforts to regulate their children's behaviour fail or backfire, parents may experience increased stress. They may attribute adolescents' attempts to assert their autonomy as arrogance on the part of the child (Kurian & Ghosh, 1983; Wakil et al., 1981). In other cases, parents may interpret their adolescents' preferences for the dominant culture as a sign of their own inability to parent effectively (Almeida, 1996).

The discrepancies between some of the values of the collectively oriented South Asian culture and those of the more individualistic dominant society in Canada draw attention to the heightened potential for family conflict and difficulties in cultural identity formation among first- and second-generation South Asian immigrants. An exploration of two specific acculturation-related issues, ethnic identity formation and parenting stress, is presented next.

ETHNIC IDENTITY FORMATION

For second-generation immigrant adolescents, establishing a consolidated bicultural identity involves conscious reflection about and resolution of their attitudes toward both their own cultural group and the majority group in the host country (Berry, 2001; Phinney, 2003). Ethnic identity is a dynamic and multifaceted concept; it is defined as one's sense of belonging and commitment to one's ethnic group (Phinney). This process requires exploration of one's cultural background, values, and behaviours and eventually making a commitment to a chosen cultural way of life, which is a salient task for adolescents (Erikson, 1968; Phinney). Exposure to the dominant culture's values and beliefs may make the ethnic identity development process more challenging for ethnic minority adolescents, especially when parents and peers exert opposing cultural pressures (Phinney).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the ethnic identity formation process can be particularly problematic for South Asian adolescents due to their parents' enforcement of traditional South Asian values and behaviours (Kurian & Ghosh, 1983; Segal, 1991; Talbani & Hasanali, 2000; Wakil et al., 1981). These authors have found that South Asian adolescents have reported having to behave differently inside and outside of the home, due to their parents' rejection of Western influences on their beliefs and behaviours. Interference with the identity formation process may occur when South Asian adolescents are forced into a compartmentalization of self, particularly when they feel a stronger connection to the dominant Canadian culture. South Asian youths facing these identity conflicts

have reported delinquent behaviour, alienation from family members, stress, and depression (Shams, 2001; Talbani & Hasanali; Wakil et al.).

Gender differences in the ethnic identification process have also been noted among South Asian adolescents. Girls have reported higher levels of identity conflicts compared to boys, and have more family restrictions placed on their freedom because they are viewed as eventual mothers who will pass on cultural beliefs and practices to the next generation (Almeida, 1996; Dion & Dion, 2001). Since South Asian gender role socialization results in differential parenting practices for sons and daughters, girls face more intense pressure from parents, resulting in stress, depression, and anxiety related to interruption in the ethnic identity development process (Dion & Dion; Talbani & Hasanali, 2000).

Counselling Interventions

Based on my experiences in working with the South Asian community, counsellors can facilitate adolescent ethnic identity development by helping clients to explore their internal cultural views to form a healthy sense of self as an ethnic individual. Sue and Sue (2003) suggest that counsellors facilitate discussions with ethnic minority youth about the aspects of the values, beliefs, and behaviours characteristic of their own culture and the host culture that fit for them, those they disidentify with, and those about which they are ambivalent. Counsellors can also conduct cognitive-behavioural cost benefit analyses with youth to help uncover the short- and long-term advantages and disadvantages of adopting ambivalent aspects of either culture, as well as facilitate adolescents' explorations of the emotional consequences that are associated with each option. Through this type of dialogue, South Asian clients may gain increased clarity about their own cultural stance and views on which aspects of each culture are consistent with their overall sense of self and future directions in life. Additionally, solution-focused techniques such as looking for exceptions to the rule can also be implemented with the goal of expanding adolescents' perceptions of their parents and family interactions and facilitating problem solving by inquiring about situations in which family conflict is absent or lessened. Counsellors can then follow up by asking clients for specific things that are different during these times (e.g., being engaged in an enjoyable activity with family members, mood, having parents focused on a sibling). Looking for exceptions to the rule would draw clients' attention to the more positive aspects of their family interactions, increase their awareness of times when family conflict is lessened, and pave the way for effective problem solving by increasing the frequency of these situations when attempting to communicate with family members. Gestalt two-chair interventions can also be a helpful way to facilitate the resolution of adolescents' identity conflicts. Counsellors can assist clients to resolve internal ambivalence about balancing the opposing demands of multiple cultural beliefs by giving voice to each side with the goal of integrating the internal split into a more consolidated bicultural identity.

Counsellors can also be instrumental in assisting South Asian clients to make decisions about how their ethnic identities will impact their family life and per-

sonal well-being, if their cultural stance differs from that of their parents. As part of this process, counsellors should also facilitate an exploration of whether youth might consider a compromise regarding certain cultural behaviours in order to maintain positive familial relationships, given the collective orientation of their culture (Segal, 1991). In relation to some aspects of ethnic identity and behaviour, such as marriage and mate selection, South Asian youth may decide to diverge from parental pressure and expectations despite the repercussions. Counsellors can work with these clients to explore the pros and cons of diverging from cultural expectations to pursue their personal happiness at the expense of their parents' wishes or demands (Segal; Sharma, 2000). South Asian children are socialized to perceive their own actions as reflecting on their entire families. It is therefore imperative for counsellors to facilitate a discussion with clients surrounding the impact of these decisions on other members of their family as well, so that clients can make fully informed decisions.

PARENTING STRESS

Due to the collectivist nature of the South Asian culture, acculturation and identity development in youth are central to family functioning (Almeida, 1996; Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002; Segal, 1991). As South Asian adolescents are exposed to the values and practices of the dominant culture in Canada through their school experiences, they may begin to question their traditional South Asian beliefs and customs. Doing so is a normal part of the age-appropriate task of identity formation during adolescence, but South Asian parents may react to this exploration as a sign that their children are being "corrupted" by negative Western influences (Segal; Wakil et al., 1981).

Parenting stress can be conceptualized broadly as tension experienced by a parent in various areas of parent-child interactions (Swearer, 2001). From the immigrant perspective, when youth become immersed in the culture of the host country to a greater extent than their parents, the parents may believe that they are losing control over their children, contributing to heightened levels of parenting stress (Dosanjh & Ghuman, 1998; Farver et al., 2002). Parents may perceive these acculturation influences as an interference in their attempts to transmit their cultural value system to their children (Dosanjh & Ghuman). Particularly in the South Asian culture, parents evaluate their efficacy in child-rearing in terms of the degree to which they believe they have been able to guide their children effectively to make wise life decisions (Almeida, 1996). When South Asian parents perceive their children's autonomy negatively, they may interpret this as a failure in their parental duties, thereby eliciting experiences of parenting stress. They may then react to their children's divergent cultural preferences with anger, increased levels of monitoring, and psychological control (i.e., instilling feelings of guilt and shame) to redirect their children's behaviour (Carolan, Bagherinia, Juhari, Himelright, & Mouton-Sanders, 2000; Segal, 1991).

Counselling Interventions

South Asians have been highly receptive to cognitive-behavioural interventions due to their short-term, problem-solving focus (Juthani, 2001; Segal, 1991; Sharma, 2000). Counsellors can use such interventions to assist South Asian families to work through parenting stress related to differences in acculturation. Within the context of family counselling, counsellors can begin by examining each parent's beliefs and expectations regarding their children's ethnic identity and behaviour, as well as their perceived role in child rearing. Counsellors can then examine adolescents' views of each parent's role and expectations, and how these impact their own behaviour. While engaging in this exploration, counsellors should pay specific attention to how differences in family members' perceived roles and expectations impact family interactions, guiding the family through a collaborative process of renegotiating behavioural expectations consistently across parents.

According to Segal (1991), when South Asian families do enter counselling, parents tend to view the adolescent's behaviour as the sole source of family conflict, believing that the child has disgraced the family into seeking external help for their problems. To reopen this dialogue, counsellors can externalize the blame for family conflict away from any individual member through an intervention called "cultural brokering" (Speigal, 1982). Cultural brokering is a reframing intervention that involves blaming family problems on the acculturation process and differential cultural experiences of parents and youth, thereby normalizing family conflicts due to the transition to a new host society (Speigal). Reframing the source of family problems may assist South Asian parents to view their adolescents' behaviours with increased empathy and understanding. Parents will be most likely to see alternative perspectives on the situation once rapport has been established, so cultural brokering should only be used within the context of a strong therapeutic alliance. If counsellors attempt to reframe the problem too early in the counselling process, the parents may feel invalidated and perceive that the counsellor is minimizing the seriousness of the problem, resulting in premature termination.

In the South Asian culture, parental gender roles tend to be clearly defined, with mothers being traditionally responsible for nurturing and daily child-rearing activities, while fathers are responsible for behaviour regulation and discipline (Almeida, 1996; Carolan et al., 2000). When South Asian adolescents' conduct departs from parental expectations, fathers have been found to experience significantly higher increases in parenting stress compared to mothers (Shariff & Merali, 2007). Within the context of differential parenting responsibilities based on gender roles, South Asian fathers' heightened stress may be partially explained by their responsibility for managing and enforcing appropriate behaviour in their adolescents (Shariff & Merali). When fathers are unsuccessful at regulating adolescent behaviour, particularly that of their daughters, they may experience increased stress and feel as if they have failed in their parental duties (Almeida).

Counsellors can assist South Asian fathers to lower their stress levels by facili-

tating increased openness to the host culture. Bemak, Chung, and Bornemann (1996) argue that one essential role for cross-cultural counsellors is that of a “cultural systems information guide.” This role involves providing information to clients about the majority culture’s values, behaviours, and practices and their possible impacts on one’s self and family. Counsellors working with South Asian families can assist fathers to become familiar with behaviours expected of youth in the Canadian school system, particularly in areas such as language use, assertive expression, cross-cultural interaction, and mixed gender interaction. These behavioural expectations for adolescents in contexts outside the home (such as school) will inevitably affect their ethnic behaviours, as well as parental reactions. Since the South Asian culture places a high value on education (Sharma, 2000), fathers may recognize that adolescents’ acquisition of select host society behaviours may be advantageous for their children’s educational success. This may assist the fathers to become more open to the dominant Euro-Canadian culture and facilitate a decrease in parenting stress.

Before counsellors can work effectively with cultural conflicts, it is imperative that they first examine their own cultural beliefs and potential blind spots. It is critical for counsellors to cultivate this self-awareness to avoid imposing their values on South Asian clients, which can cause harm by intensifying family conflict (Collins & Arthur, 2007; S. Sue, 1998). The counselling interventions discussed above were presented with the assumption that counsellors had already engaged in this self-reflection and are aware that their beliefs and values are culture bound. (For an expanded discussion of this topic, readers can consult Collins & Arthur; S. Sue.) In the next section, a hypothetical case illustration is presented to provide an example of how the interventions described can be applied during the counselling process.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Aman is a second-generation 19-year-old Sikh Punjabi female who was born and raised in Canada. She lives at home with her parents, her 17-year-old brother, and paternal grandmother and is currently studying to be a secondary school teacher. Recently Aman’s parents caught their daughter telling lies about her whereabouts, once catching her returning home after midnight dressed in revealing clothing with alcohol on her breath, when she had told them she would be studying late at the library. Her parents also searched her room and discovered photos of Aman with another South Asian male, whom Aman admitted was her boyfriend. Aman’s father demanded that she end the relationship immediately and told her that her actions had disgraced their family. Aman refused and lashed out at her parents for invading her privacy and letting her younger brother roam free while she was forced to sit at home and play the obedient daughter. The tension had escalated to the point where Aman’s parents decided to turn to family counselling as a last resort. In the interests of simplicity, only the issues between Aman and her father will be discussed in this case example.

In working with this family, the counsellor should begin by listening to each family member's perspectives (starting with the parents) and what they hope to achieve from this process, using empathic statements and validating each family member's concerns. Once the therapeutic alliance is established, the counsellor could take a cognitive approach, which has been found to be more congruent with South Asian expectations for counselling (Juthani, 2001; Sharma, 2000). Since Aman's family viewed her as the sole problem that forced them to seek external help, the counsellor would begin by focusing on Aman's ethnic identity development first, so that the parents would feel that their counselling expectations were being understood.

With the family present, the counsellor and Aman would jointly explore various aspects of her South Asian cultural values and practices (e.g., dating, dress, drinking alcohol, filial piety, traditional gender roles) that she identifies with and those that do not fit for her. For each of these, Aman and the counsellor can also discuss why she does or does not identify with specific South Asian beliefs and practices, within the context of who she is as a person, having also been shaped by the larger surrounding Euro-Canadian culture. The counsellor could also use a cost/benefit analysis to help her weigh the disadvantages and advantages of maintaining or relinquishing beliefs that she is ambivalent about. Second, the counsellor should assist Aman to not only examine the costs and benefits to herself, but also the potential positive and negative impacts that her cultural choices might have on her family members. They would also explore situations in which Aman might be willing to make a compromise to maintain family harmony. The outcome of this intervention may help Aman to affirm her commitment to many aspects of her South Asian identity while seeing the potential for compromise with her parents in situations where she wishes to adopt Euro-Canadian behaviours and values.

After working more closely with Aman, the counsellor can then turn his/her attention to working with the parents' roles in the family conflict. First, the counsellor can ask each parent to discuss their expectations for both of their children regarding ethnic behaviours and cultural identification. As part of this process, the counsellor could refer back to Aman's cost/benefit analyses and ask each parent how their perceptions compare to their daughter's cultural choices, negotiating compromises where possible. If the parents continue to view Aman as the main problem, the counsellor could use cultural brokering to externalize the blame away from her, with the goal of increasing the parents' degree of empathy and understanding of their daughter's experiences. The counsellor could explain to the parents that intergenerational cultural differences are a natural part of the acculturation process, since both the parents and their children have had different cultural experiences in Canada. The counsellor might also attempt to normalize the family conflict, given that the parents are adjusting to the new culture in Canada and Aman is attempting to balance multiple cultural norms for behaviour across home, school, work, and social contexts.

Since Aman's father reported feeling particularly guilty and anxious, the counsellor would focus on the father's distress by serving as a cultural information

systems guide and providing some education on the differing cultural norms of the dominant Euro-Canadian society. As part of this intervention, the counsellor would provide information on cultural expectations for mixed gender interaction, asserting one's opinions, and making independent choices. In taking on this role, the counsellor should frame this information in a way that is respectful of the family's cultural choices, while encouraging increased openness to certain aspects of the dominant culture to help Aman achieve educational and occupational success. It is hoped that these interventions with Aman's father would facilitate a decrease in his stress levels by assisting him to reframe his perceptions of his daughter's adoption of certain Euro-Canadian behaviours and values. Overall, working with both Aman and her parents in family counselling using interventions that are culturally responsive will assist counsellors to build a strong rapport and facilitate increased family harmony.

CONCLUSION

South Asians are the second largest visible minority group in Canada, and the fastest growing immigrant population in the nation (Statistics Canada, 2001a). Given their prominent presence and their distinctive cultural beliefs and practices, it is likely that South Asians will begin accessing mental health services in increasing numbers in the future. To address the counselling needs of this thriving ethnic community, it will be vital for counsellors to become aware of the core beliefs of South Asian culture, common culturally based counselling issues, and culturally compatible interventions in a way that informs their practice, while also remaining open to cultural variation and individual differences. The article presented two common problems related to the acculturation process for South Asians, adolescent ethnic identification and parenting stress, along with recommended interventions for addressing each of these issues in counselling. A better understanding of the roles and expectations incumbent on different family members will assist counsellors to adopt a more contextualized approach with South Asian clients that emphasizes the role of family dynamics related to individual well-being.

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