



Adolescent females between tradition and modernity: gender role socialization in South Asian immigrant culture

AZIZ TALBANI AND PARVEEN HASANALI

The study examines the social and cultural experiences of adolescent female belonging to various south Asian immigrant groups in Canada. Applying qualitative research method, the authors interviewed 22 adolescent girls of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin in Montreal. Like other immigrant communities, south Asian families undergo acculturation stress. South Asians tend to integrate secular European cultural elements with their culture; however, family and community structure remain male dominated. The study showed that gender roles were maintained through gender segregation, control over social activities of girls and arranged marriage. Interviewees felt that their parents and communities have more stringent rules for female socialization than any other community in Canada. The study also found that adolescent girls perceived high social cost attached to protest and dissent, therefore, they accept prevalent conditions and expect to change social situation gradually. Some adolescents undergo stress resulting in behavioral problems.

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Introduction

Adolescence is often considered as a difficult period of transition to adulthood. This age is characteristically difficult for females, due to social and cultural expectations of female roles in society. The situation becomes even more complex when a family or group migrates from one country to another. Immigrant groups undergo fundamental social and economic changes in a new social and cultural environment. Migration causes tension between the traditions that a group would like to retain and the host culture, resulting in individuals and families redefining and renegotiating their roles and identities within and outside the community. This study is an examination of the social and cultural experiences of adolescent females belonging to various south Asian* immigrant groups in Montreal, Canada. The study examined how female roles are changing in south Asian families. The study focused on two questions:

- (1) What strategies do south Asian families employ to maintain traditional female roles?

The study examined the processes and techniques used by south Asian families and communities to maintain traditional culture and specifically female roles in society. In this respect, it analyzed the process of socialization and the institution of marriage as key techniques in perpetuating traditional female roles.

Reprint requests and correspondence should be addressed to Aziz Talbani, Department of Leadership, 113 Patterson Hall, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152, U.S.A. E-mail: atalbani@memphis.edu.

*South Asians in Canada represent diverse groups of people divided on the basis of religion, culture, language and nationalities. In political taxonomy, all these groups have been identified together as south Asians, their origin in the Indian subcontinent being the common denominator.

- (2) How are south Asian female adolescents in Canadian society effecting cultural change? It especially explored their views on power and control in families and communities, gender equity, and social change.

Literature review: adolescence, migration and traditional values

Gender schema theory organizes and analyzes information related to gender roles in society and explains how gender roles are perpetuated (Jacklin, 1989). Most researchers classify sex-role ideologies along a continuum ranging from traditional to modern. Traditional ideologies apportion men with greater social status and power than women. They also legitimize male domination and control over women, economic and political resources of community and society. In contrast, modern ideologies allow a more egalitarian distribution of social status and power (Best and William, 1997).

South Asian migration to Canada started toward the end of the 19th century; however, it was in the 1970s that an increasing number of south Asians moved to Canada (Buchignani and Indra, 1985). Currently, there are over 750,000 south Asians in Canada (Statistics Canada, 1998). Most of the south Asians migrated to Canada for economic reasons. However, a small number of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were also refugees seeking political asylum.

Migration is a tremendous transformative experience for people. They engage themselves in a struggle to construct a new identity. Bharati Mukherjee calls it "refashioning the self" (Sant-Wade and Radell, 1992). Cultural groups face the issue of cultural adaption in a pluralist society. Immigrants have "dual frame of reference" (Suarez-Orozco, 1991) and they make comparisons between "here" and "there". Through acculturation, they learn behavioral repertoire that is appropriate to the new cultural context. In the process, some "cultural shedding" may also occur that may be accompanied by "cultural conflicts" (Berry, 1992). In cases where there is cultural conflict, individuals may experience "acculturative stress" (Berry and Sam, 1997, p. 289).

South Asian groups, having a long history of living in diverse societies, tend to adopt new values and retain and renew their cultural and social values. Furnham and Sheikh's (1993) study shows that Indians and Pakistanis adjust well in the host country even when they do not totally integrate. Nevertheless, the process of negotiating cultural change is a difficult one. The south Asian family structure has altered greatly, e.g. nuclear or single parent families are replacing extended families (Buchignani and Indra, 1985). If parents still live with their married children, their authority has become merely symbolic. The sources of social support are inevitably reduced (Furnham and Sheikh, 1993, p. 23). Women have also become earning members of the family. Studies have shown that women achieve greater freedom after they enter the workforce (Ewen, 1985). However, it is questionable whether female participation in the work force has equalized gender roles to a great degree.

Societies and communities employ various strategies and mechanisms to maintain power discourse. In most societies, socialization plays the most significant role as a technique of habituation and cultural control. Socialization is a process of regulating behavior and educating children into procedures for social interaction based on core cultural values (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1990). Within the context of a traditional culture, socialization may mean instilling respect for authority, conformity to social roles through beliefs, rituals,

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