Choosing Identities in a Globalised World: South Asians in Britain

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This paper will examine contemporary re-workings of the notion of identity, and show that the notion of single identities based on 'ethnic' origin, which continue to determine policy in child care practice, are overly simplistic and inadequate. The focus will be on South Asian settlers and their children in Britain, material for the talk being drawn from a number of sources – from the speaker's clinical experience as a child psychiatrist, from a series of focus groups conducted recently, and from her personal experience as a member of the South Asian community in Britain. Of the clinical sample of South Asians the majority are rural Bangladeshis, and smaller numbers came from the middle or professional classes. The focus groups were composed of South Asian professional women (including Asians from African countries and child care professionals), and a group of young affluent South Asian men and women.

The Clinical Sample of South Asian Children

When asked about their 'culture', the sense of belonging to it (or not), and how this affected their lives, South Asian (mainly Bangladeshi and mixed race) children often spoke of an unease, or outright shame, at being identified by others (peers from other ethnic groups or other Bangladeshis who were more obviously 'integrated') with negative cultural stereotypes (e.g., as poor, un-sophisticated - un-'cool', or 'fundamentalist'). They named concerns around cultural markers that were more 'visible' - for example, around food, dress, accent, choice of partner, and fewer concerns about 'internal' beliefs (such as value systems around age or faith). While the boundary between the home and the outer world seemed to protect them from these anticipated criticisms, they seemed to also experience as uncomfortable their inability to 'explain' why they were 'different'. These children seemed to welcome (though not actively initiate) the opportunity to find words and concepts that helped them give meaning to cultural practice, and difference. Most children seemed to want merely to be the same as their local peer group, irrespective of whether they were white, African Caribbean, or from other Asian groups. The future aspirations they voiced in their parents' absence seemed to be determined by the norms and role models of the majority culture, and especially as these were presented in the media. Thus, while their parents might want them to be doctors many young Asians confided hesitantly to dreams of becoming pop-stars or media celebrities.

Clinical Sample and Focus Group

outh Asian adolescents and young persons from both the clinical sample and the focus group seemed caught between public representations of their communities as 'traditional', and their private yearnings to blend with an 'individualised' majority culture. This was most often exhibited in rejection of 'arranged' marriages (or of 'forced marriage' - as these are often described in the media), or manifest as internal debate over the merits and drawbacks of the values espoused by their parents, and which they were unable to shake off easily, and a recurring wish to have access to the choices they were excluded from - such as for the sexual freedom or employment choices of their British peers. These young people seemed to use labels of identity rather more flexibly than their given 'ethnic' origins would suggest. Self-

descriptions of identity seemed to express the flux within individuals - between belonging or distancing themselves from public representations of their cultural groups.

Talking Culture

Social class appeared to be an important marker for whether 'cultural' talk among family or peer group was frequent and explicit. Current public debates, around racism or other criticisms of the 'mainstream' (e.g., anti-war sentiments around the Iraq war), seemed to make these safer subjects, but only when the group had an ethnic homogeneity. However, within such homogenous groups greater energy seemed to be stimulated by a focus on intra-group, or regional conflict within the country of origin. Thus, for example, Indians referred to inter-faith conflict in India, and Bangladeshis expressed concern at political corruption in Bangladesh. Debate and analysis appeared to be influenced by theoretical models that were secular and 'psychologised'; middle class Islamic participants were equally likely to cite religious authority in these contexts.

The factors that seemed to contribute to greater degrees of ease in considering, debating and making individual choices from the range of available cultural repertoires (though not necessarily without conflict) included - public discourses triggered by contemporary events, level and type of (Western) education, and most importantly, the availability of positive experiences of cultural practice within the family and community of origin. The most convincing evidence of 'cultural pride' came from parental pleasure and confidence in such participation, for example in cultural events, religious practice, or performance of ritual.
Finally, the question must be asked whether, and in what form, the notion of 'identity' remains valid. Is it time to abandon this as an outdated construct? Or does it still add something to discussions of how ethnicity contributes to the contours of relationships - both within oneself, and to the group? (Is it time to empty the bathwater, or… is there a baby in it?) It is suggested that identity may more usefully be spoken of in the plural - as multiple, hybridised and shifting with the focus of discourse or intention, rather than as single, and only 'authentic' when narrowly defined by ethnicity. Further, cultural knowledge is not automatically acquired by children, but needs to be communicated by parents, over time, through discussion and participation. A failure to appreciate the amount of thought and planning this might require carries significant risks to the overall mental health of minority ethnic children. The risks include those of ever-widening chasms between parents and children, the increasing perception of alternatives to mainstream Western culture as oppressive, and the natural urge of parents to share their mostly deeply cherished traditions and value-systems with their children as 'abusive'.