Building Bridges: The Collaborative Development of Culturally Appropriate Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect for the South Asian Community

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Abstract

This study emerged from concerns raised by providers of social services to South Asians-Canadians that many of their clients experienced many problems with the Children's Aid Society (CAS) during child welfare interventions. These service providers felt that problems arose because of a lack of understanding of the norms, values and parenting approaches of the group. A mixed-method exploratory study was conducted with 29 South Asian parents, 18 mothers and 11 fathers, to understand the discipline styles and help-seeking approaches of South Asian-Canadian parents, what they perceive as unique about their parenting approaches and the issues that they confront in raising children in Canada.

Findings from the study suggest that what South Asian-Canadians consider to be appropriate and inappropriate parenting does not differ substantially from the standards used by the Children's Aid Societies in Ontario. However, participants were fearful that these families would be treated more harshly by the system and that they would experience greater problems as their values would not be understood by the CAS. They also had a strong sense that their values are judged and invalidated by society generally. Parents identified the stressors on South Asian immigrant families in parenting their children in a Canadian context and the ways in which they negotiate these stressors. The findings are useful for child welfare and support practitioners to better understand the cultural and contextual issues for South Asian-Canadian families so as to provide culturally relevant services to families that come to their attention. Issues for consideration for service providers is the reluctance on the part of South Asian-Canadian parents to seek help outside the family and to report concerns they may have about families.

Overview of Research Conducted

Background

The increasing diversity of the Canadian population has placed demands on mainstream institutions to ensure that services meet the needs of minority populations. A considerable challenge has been to Children's Aid Societies (CASs), which provide mandated child protection services to families from diverse backgrounds. Still, many immigrant groups are finding the interventions of Children's Aid Society very problematic. They feel that current child protection standards used and the corresponding interventions are not sensitive to culturally diverse child rearing practices. The large numbers of clients on child welfare caseloads who identify their birth to be outside Canada (50% for CAS of Metropolitan Toronto), differential representation of minority children on child welfare caseloads (Abney, 1996) and a dearth of knowledge about minority groups despite a legal requirement for culturally sensitive services (CFSA), makes it essential to develop knowledge in the area.

Method

An exploratory mixed-method study was conducted with 29 parents – 18 mothers and 11 fathers – of South Asian background. This group was chosen as the focus of the research for three reasons: (1) Providers of social services to South Asian families involved with the child welfare system, identified this as an area that needed attention. They requested for collaboration with the university to conduct research in the area. The CAS of Metro Toronto also identified this an essential area of research. Their research director noted that the agency provided child protection intervention to an increasing number of families of South Asian background, yet there was a serious lack of knowledge available about the group. Over a period of a year, joint meetings with community members, service providers and academics had helped to better understand the nature of the problem and to develop collaborative relationships. (2) Research has identified differential rates of substantiation for different forms of maltreatment for South Asians by the CAS when compared to white families (Trocmé, McPhee, Tam & Hay, 1994). (3) South Asians confront barriers to services and are at risk for ethnocentric practice by mainstream agencies because of their racial, cultural and linguistic diversity. We were interested in understanding the child-rearing norms and values of a diverse group, their help-seeking behaviours, whether they perceive their child rearing approaches to be different to those of the dominant community, issues they confront in raising children in Canada and ways in which they negotiate these.

We chose a mixed-method research approach, with both a quantitative and a qualitative component to our study for several reasons. Previous studies had used quantitative techniques to record the differences in what parents from diverse backgrounds identified as abusive (for examples see Rose & Meezan, 1996; Hong & Hong, 1991; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979) and used this information to demarcate differences in child rearing approaches among diverse groups. This approach however, did not provide a comprehensive understanding of the group and the rationale for specific expectations of

children and parents, contextual issues that parents struggled with the healthy ways in which struggles were negotiated.   The result was that the behaviours of groups were evaluated, either as better or worse than a normative center, that of the dominant group.

With the current study we sought to move away from such an approach.   A two-part exploratory descriptive procedure utilizing questionnaire and focus group interviewing was employed. A/   Questionnaires that included case vignettes developed to elicit what parental   behaviours   are   considered   to   be   appropriate   and   inappropriate   were administered.   Culture specific expectations of children were included in the vignettes to understand   how   South   Asian   parents   in   Canada   negotiate   these   expectations. Information on the group's help seeking behaviour when encountering child rearing problems was sought and participants were asked to eleborate qualitatively the reasons for their responses.   This section provided parents with the opportunity to distinguish the importance of culture specific expectations of children while also assessing the responses of parents to non-compliance by   children to these expectations.   The questionnaire helped to focus the study on child discipline issues while also providing an opportunity for parents to privately discuss issues that they many not want to discuss in personal conversations.   B/   Subsequent to completing the questionnaire parents were interviewed in a focus group.   The aim of the focus group was to enrich the quantitative data. Participants were asked what they considered to be appropriate and inappropriate discipline,   what   community   sanctions   exists   for   behaviour   that   is   considered inappropriate, who they contact in situations where problems are encountered, whether they felt that their parenting approaches were different to that of mainstream parenting and issues they encounter in raising children in Canada.   Focus group interviewing was the preferred method of collecting data as the aim of the study was not to gain insight from each specific individual about their thoughts on parenting but rather to ascertain how participants as a group thought about the subject matter being discussed.   Within group differences as well as similarities were of interest as were areas that raised discussions and understanding of how these were addressed in a group.   Focus group interviews provide certain advantages that other qualitative data gathering techniques do not.   :Through discussion about conscious, semiconscious and unconscious psychological and socio-cultural characteristics and processes" (Berg, 1995, p. 68), researchers can learn about specific topics.   Interactions between members can lead to the introduction of and elaboration of different aspects of a topic.

Recruitment occurred through referrals from local service providers, leaflet postings, presentations at community centres, English as a Second Language classes, and local gathering places of the group.   Other interviewees referred several respondents.   South Asian-Canadian parents who had been in the country less than twelve years were included in the study. All individuals who had immigrated directly from the South Asian region – India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and so forth and who identified themselves as South Asian were included.   South Asians from other parts of the world were not included in the sample, as these groups would have additional influences from their countries of origin confounding the findings of the study. Many factors influence the changes individuals and families experience as they settle in a new country, however, a decision was made to set the limit of immigration to Canada at twelve years as it

provided a greater opportunity of eliciting responses that are uniquely South Asian. This time frame can also highlight the contextual issues that may be prevalent due to the resettlement process.

Participants were chosen to represent gender, religion, education and socio-economic status. In selecting the mix for the focus groups, efforts were made to ensure that all participants in a specific group spoke a common language. Since the project manager and the research assistant spoke four South Asian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and Gujerati) and English, the focus group interviews were conducted in one of these languages.

Recruitment and interviewing was conducted by the project manager, a doctoral student of South Asian background, and the research assistant, also of South Asian background, who is planning to apply for doctoral studies. These group facilitators were integral to the project as they provided access to the community, developed culturally specific vignettes, promoted greater openness during the interviews, provided language interpretation during interviews and cultural interpretation during the analyses.

Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. The project manager and research assistant conducted content analysis of the first two focus group discussions and identified the themes that emerged. Additional themes were added as analysis proceeded. By the fifth focus group no new themes emerged and it was clear that saturation had been reached. SPSS was used to organize and analyze the quantitative data. Several team members reviewed the themes to assess if the interpretations were appropriate and grounded in the data (Charmaz, 1983).

Results

Participants considered persistent use of physical discipline, use of physical discipline to the exclusion of other methods of discipline, use of an instrument, leaving bruises, spanking in vulnerable areas such as the head and the face and use of physical force with older children to be inappropriate. Other actions of parents considered inappropriate were: both parents being very busy; not having rules for children; not teaching cultural ways; parents fighting in the presence of children; reprimanding children in the presence of others in a way that causes them embarrassment and neglecting children. Neglect included lack of supervision, inappropriate clothing for the weather, lack of responding to a dangerous situation and the lack of parental involvement in assessing the safety of children. Participants identified a number of strategies used for disciplining children. These included: talks with the child; asking father to intervene; telling the child stories that capture acceptable behaviours in children; taking away privileges; ignoring the inappropriate action of the child; being emotionally unresponsive to the child; removing oneself from the situation if one is becoming very angry; withholding emotionally from the child; and telling the child of the shame they are bringing to the family.

Two themes that emerged strongly in our research were that of parental responsibility and of expectations of children. With regards to parental responsibility parents considered it to be important to have routines for children and parents were to set examples for their children. Teaching of culture and religion was also considered to be extremely important. Participants viewed the teaching of culture and religion as both providing a moral base for children as well as acting as a shield against racism in society. Important themes regarding expectations for children was that of respect for elders, listening to them and being obedient to their wishes. Other themes in this respect were that children should learn about culture, have an affiliation to religion and have a strong work ethic.

Participants felt that it was ideal to access help firstly from family members. They identified grandparents, brothers, sisters and other elders in the family. However, some noted that they preferred help from close friends rather than family. Participants noted several problems in obtaining help from family members. They noted that since the move to Canada, family members were not always available. Even if there was family here, often the closeness that existed between family members was no longer present because of distance and the fast-paced lifestyle in Canada. Another issue in seeking help from family members was that of privacy. Participants did not want others in the family to know of their problems. There was a sense of shame around experiencing problems, especially problems with children. There was a concern that family members would judge them for experiencing problems.

Religious leaders were also considered for help, although not as strongly as one would have expected. Participants messed the ability to easily access help from neighbours and the support that they had from living in neighbourhoods where there was a similarity of values.

In the Canadian context family and community members were generally reluctant to intervene if they found that parents were experiencing difficulties. A few participants reported that they would intervene and some have helped families both directly as well as to access help and community supports. Participants were reluctant to report problems in a family to the CAS as they were concerned that these families would then face greater problems rather than get the needed help. There was a sense that western society, of which the CAS is a part, does not have an understanding of South Asian customs and values and that social workers would not be supportive of these when providing services.

Indeed, participants felt that South Asians had an approach that was different to the mainstream. They reported that for South Asians there was less focus on the part of parents on their individual needs, there was a greater focus on the family as a group, on all members working for the good of the family unit and parents remaining involved in the lives of their offspring even into adulthood. Some unique values that participants identified were respect for elders, acceptance of the decision of elders, modesty, privacy, non-acceptance of premarital sexual relationships and early dating and having religion as an important guide for values. Participants also commented that there was a

commonality of values amongst South Asians despite affiliation to different religious groups.

Participants identified a number of issues, both cultural and contextual, that they experienced in raising their children in Canada. Although there have been benefits to moving to Canada there have also been difficulties. Cultural differences place stress on parenting and in transmitting values. Parents sometimes have increased the practice of religion and adherence to culture as it is one way of establishing pride, combating denigration in society and having some of their values transmitted to their children. They find that mainstream values are pervasive, imparted at schools and other institutions placing stress on parents in transmitting their values. In addition there is a lack of a close knit extended family/neighbourhood to support transmittal of values, South Asian values are not validated in society and are in fact denigrated and there is greater emphasis on material goods in Canada. Still, as parents have immigrated to give their children advantages, they have the desire to give their children as much as possible. Lifestyle differences in Canada due to the weather also makes parenting stressful. There is a greater need for parents to occupy children during leisure times. Lack of extended family adds to these difficulties. Participants recognized that non-South Asian Canadian parents are also experiencing stress in child rearing because of changes in society.

Program, Policy and Research Implications

Although qualitative studies are designed to be neither representative nor generalizable, our findings do provide insights for program development and indicate areas for future research that may have important implications for policy development.

Program Development

Program developers need to take a holistic approach to South Asian families and consider both the contextual and cultural issues that are prevalent for South Asians in the Canadian context. Clearly, this group does not conform with the directives issued in some training programs that "some ethnic or cultural backgrounds may be more likely to condone severe spankings or beatings as a form of discipline" (Crawford, 1999). Participants made a clear distinction between appropriate and inappropriate actions and persistent use of physical discipline is not condoned. What participants reported as being inappropriate would not differ from the eligibility spectrum for service used by CASs in Ontario. However, program developers need to include South Asian values and norms in service provision. Participants provided a wealth of information about ways to discipline children that were not abusive. These should be included in services provided to South Asian. Certain core values may lead to tension between service providers and South Asian families, such as a high expectation of respect for elders, the importance of listening to the advice of elders, strong adherence to religion and rules around dating and premarital sex. If parents come to the attention of the CAS for abusive or neglectful behaviour, it should not be assumed that this behaviour is cultural. Parents may be experiencing problems in a number of areas. The action may result from an effort to

transmit values in an environment that denigrates such values as well as a number of other factors such as personality of individuals in the family, problems in finding employment and so forth. Taking an ecological perspective, South Asians face a particularly harsh environment and program developers must make all efforts to provide services in ways that do not exacerbate this environment. However, as with parents from the mainstream some best efforts may not help to resolve problems and this may be due to a variety of reasons.

Policy and Research Implications

Although the Child and Family Services Act currently specifies that services should be culturally sensitive, there needs to be greater efforts by service providers to develop policies at the local levels to operationalize the concept. Policy should be developed to clarify the concept further and then require social workers to take training to learn to apply the concepts. Participants in this study provided a wealth of information that could be used by service providers to develop policy and training.

Further research should be conducted to continue the knowledge base in this area, not only with other South Asians but also with members of other diverse groups.

South Asian Canadians are now living in a context that is different to the context they left behind. This new environment has advantages as well as challenges. One of the challenges may be the disruption caused to families when they move and the gap created by this disruption. The study has provided information on how parents are negotiating and managing in the new context. Efforts need to be made to develop programs that support newcomers who are struggling with these issues and funding is needed to support such programs.

Research Outputs

Two Conference Presentations

Maiter, S.; Trocmé, N. & Shakir, U. (May, 1999). Fabricating tools of resistance: Moral and ethical dilemmas in cross-cultural research. Qualitatives '99 conference, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

Maiter, S.; Trocmé, N. (August, 1999). Understanding South Asian-Canadian approaches to parenting: Findings from a research project. Conference presentation for OCASI.

Work in Progress

Maiter, S.; Trocmé, N. & Shakir, U. (May 2000). Understanding South Asian-Canadian approaches to parenting: Findings from a research project. For the peer reviewed journal, Child Maltreatment.

Dissemination Activities

In addition to the academic publications and conference presentation there will be several other forms of dissemination. Findings from the study will be presented to social workers in Children's Aid Societies as well as to social workers in other settings such as hospitals, schools and children's mental health agencies. The social workers at both collaborating agencies have requested that findings be presented to their staff and plans are underway for these. The Hospital for Sick Children has also requested that findings be presented to them. Plans are underway to have this occur in March 2000. Finally, a handbook is being written by team members for use by child welfare professionals. Findings are also being presented at the CERIS conference in Toronto in March, 2000.

Nature of the Research Collaboration

The CERIS grant helped to strengthen links with local service providers. The research addressed an issue of direct concern to the community partners involved and thereby established credibility about the value of academia and local service providers collaborating to conduct research that is meaningful for practice. Without community partners identifying the need for the research, having a participatory voice in various stages of the study and facilitating recruitment this study would not have the rich data that it produced.

Training Opportunities

Both research assistants played key roles in the project. One was a doctoral student while the other had plans to apply for doctoral studies but needed current research experience to enhance her application for the program. Under supervision of the principal investigator and the co-investigator they developed their skills in conceptualizing research, linking the appropriate research method to the research question, recruitment, question development, analysis and writing. While both are co-presenters at a conference, one, Sarah Maiter, has also presented independently at a conference. Her proposal to the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children has also been accepted for July 2000. There are further plans for her to present at local hospitals, schools and social service agencies. Ms. Maiter is currently writing an article from the research for submission to a peer-reviewed journal's special issue on cultural diversity. She will also be including aspects of the findings in a chapter that she has been asked to write for a book on cross-cultural social work practice. The experience gained on the project has helped Ms. Maiter to conceptualize and refine her doctoral research contributing to her progress in the program. As a result of her work on the project she is conducting research that will contribute to better services for South Asian-Canadians. The research assistant, Ms. Uzma Shakir has been hired as the executive director for the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians. Experience on the project contributed to her gaining this employment.

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Additional presentations not included in this report:

1/ Maiter, S. (March 22-25, 2000). Immigrant experiences of abuse and violence: Developing collaborative approaches to child maltreatment. Fourth National Metropolis Conference. Working Together for the Future: Building Partnerships in Immigration and Research Policy.

2/ Maiter, S. (May 8, 2000). Working with South Asian families and children: Findings from research. To Social Work professionals at the Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, Ontario.

3/ Maiter, S. (Forthcoming July, 2000). Inappropriate child rearing practices as perceived by South Asians in North America. Annual conference of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. Chicago