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Understanding the Experiences of British South Asian Male Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

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Introduction

Despite South Asian communities having long been settled in Britain, most of the limited, extant research on child sexual abuse (CSA) in these communities only considers the experiences of female CSA survivors. Consequently, male CSA survivors have reduced access to support services—a situation that is further compounded by institutionalised racism. This chapter aims to explore the phenomenon of CSA among British South Asian male survivors and to understand how

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they make sense of their experiences. Themes to emerge from interviews with male survivors from these communities include the barriers to disclosing CSA, the effect of concepts of masculinity and sexuality on how survivors process their abuse, and the impact of sociocultural norms that impede discussing and disclosing CSA. Through the lens of masculinities theory, the chapter finds that the way British South Asian men construct and understand their experiences of CSA is largely determined by cultural and societal expectations of 'being a man'. When contextualised within the masculinities framework, the cultural imperatives of shame and honour are revealed as crucial to South Asian men's experiences of this abuse. The survivor narratives illustrate the complex interplay between culture and masculinity—two factors that place British South Asian male CSA survivors in the difficult position of trying to recover from their trauma while also grappling with culturally sanctioned ideals of masculinity and being expected to live up to or embody these ideals. The research finds that engaging with parents and communities to discuss these sensitive topics is a necessary first step in breaking down the conversational barriers identified in this study.

British South Asian male CSA survivors face a twofold problem: lack of research on this phenomenon and limited service provision. First, male CSA survivors have traditionally been marginalised in favour of female CSA survivors, a group that forms the basis of most academic research and to whom the majority of counselling and support services currently operating in the UK cater (Gagnier and Collin-Vézina 2016). The centrality of these female experiences, although crucial to understanding the experiences of CSA survivors in general, has eclipsed the specific narratives of male survivors. Second, despite the UK's incredibly multicultural population, people from minoritised backgrounds still experience institutional forms of racism that are entrenched in service provision and research and that lead to racialised and Eurocentric perspectives and practices (Singh 2019; Dominelli 2017). This chapter thus seeks to contribute to and expand on the existing body of literature on male CSA in minoritised groups. It illuminates the experiences of male survivors from British South Asian communities, creating space for the much-needed voices of a critically under-researched group.

Child Sexual Abuse Within South Asian Communities

To date, no studies have examined the experiences of South Asian male CSA survivors, which raises the question of why. Black and minoritised communities have often been labelled 'hard to reach', a highly ambiguous and contested term used by various agencies to describe communities that they have difficulty accessing (Darko 2021). Ironically, when this term is used in an attempt to tackle inequality across the board—including in health care, education and academic research—it actually perpetuates stereotypes of minoritised groups as problematic and reluctant to be reached (Hardy and Chakraborti 2019). Therefore, this chapter attempts to uncover the hidden victims of CSA—in this case, British South Asian men—and to illuminate their lived experiences of this form of abuse.

Two pertinent constructs play a large part in how South Asian communities operate: *izzat* and *sharam*, which broadly correspond to 'honour' and 'shame', respectively, in Western understanding (Sangar and Howe 2021). These social and cultural constructs emerged from the traditionally patriarchal structure of South Asian families and often pertain to the women of the household, who bear the responsibility of upholding honour and avoiding shame (Tonsing and Barn 2017). However, there is increasing evidence that men are also affected by izzat and sharam (Jaspal 2020). One of the ways in which sharam can be brought upon a South Asian family is through acts that are considered taboo and break with tradition—in families who adhere strictly to religion, such acts can also be regarded as 'sinful'. They include marrying outside of caste/ethnicity/religion, dating, having sexual relations before marriage and disclosing issues such as domestic violence and abuse outside of the family or community (Couture-Carron 2020; Begum et al. 2020). These issues have traditionally been considered off limits for discussion with external actors, with the ability to contain such information reflecting an individual's, their family's and the wider community's izzat (Kaur and Kaur 2020; Mucina and Jamal 2021).

When izzat and sharam have a ripple effect on an individual's family and community, it creates what is known as 'reflected' shame and honour

(Gilbert et al. 2004; Mucina and Jamal 2021). That consequence places pressure on individuals to recognise the importance of maintaining family izzat and how it is linked to one's personal sharam. Mesquita (2001; Sahota 2019) argues that this view of communal honour and shame relates to the collectivist nature of South Asian communities, in which emotions are connected to how behaviour reflects on others; conversely, in more individualistic communities, emotions such as honour and shame reflect more on the self. In the context of sexual abuse, izzat and sharam can be understood to operate beyond cultural boundaries, with research indicating that these constructs resonate with many South Asian survivors of abuse (Reavey et al. 2006). Though it is widely acknowledged that shame is a universal emotion and a common outcome for CSA survivors (Goffnett et al. 2020; MacGinley et al. 2019), South Asian people can face the added pressure to remain silent in order to not compromise the izzat of their family unit by bringing sharam upon it (Gilbert et al. 2004; Jaspal 2014; Peart 2013). This means they still conceptualise their shame in a way that is external to their experience as a survivor.

Reavey et al. (2006) gained access to South Asian female sexual abuse survivors who struggled with 'cultured selves'. This term refers to problems in transferring Westernised notions of selfhood to situations where help for sexual abuse is needed; such problems are rooted in a wide range of cultural differences and practices. In South Asian communities, traditional conceptualisations of culture would consider selfhood a largely redundant notion, with individuals instead measuring their actions according to the standard that is accepted at a community level rather than for one's own benefit. Gilbert et al (2004; Jaspal 2014; Peart 2013) illustrate this point by arguing that shame can not only be internal, related to negative self-perceptions and feelings, but can also relate to how one thinks others feel and think about one. Gilbert et al. (2004) emphasise that South Asians grapple with decontextualising their personal schema of self and others, as this schema has evolved from cultural dispositions and personal histories. This view is reinforced by Dey et al. (2017), who assert that British South Asians possess

dual/multiple cultural identities and that their daily lives and sociocultural interactions are influenced by the dichotomies and complexities that emanate from their bicultural/multicultural heritage.

Gilligan and Akhtar (2006) explored some of the cultural barriers to CSA disclosure in South Asian communities across Bradford. They found that although many people within these communities shared the view that abuse must be responded to, numerous factors prevented those who knew about the abuse of others from responding in any impactful way. Focus groups and consultations with (mostly) South Asian women across Bradford revealed that the cultural imperatives of sharam and izzat were powerful enough to hamper CSA disclosure. In addition, there was a lack of basic knowledge about CSA, a fear of public exposure if the abuse was disclosed, a lack of awareness regarding the provisions available following disclosure and a fear of culturally insensitive responses from service providers. Gilligan and Akhtar (2005) call for more culturally competent professional responses to CSA in minoritised communities and recommend avoiding support service practice that is based on generalised assumptions of a particular ethnic/cultural/religious group.

While Gill and Harrison (2017) acknowledge that the full range of barriers to sexual abuse disclosure is multidimensional and universal and that these barriers exist in some form within all communities of all ethnic backgrounds, their study of 13 British South Asian CSA survivors identified the following significant barriers to disclosure: honour and consequential shame (including repercussions or consequences arising from the disclosure), compromised modesty, fear of being disbelieved, language barriers and not recognising that the abuse they had experienced was sexual. Gill and Harrison recognised that the most influential barrier for British South Asian women was honour and consequential shame. Although shame is recognised as a barrier for survivors more generally, its translation and conceptualisation within the South Asian communities in this particular study appeared more powerful because it produced a ripple effect for the survivor's entire family.

Given the majority of CSA studies are based on female experiences of disclosure, little is known about male experiences of disclosure (Sivagurunathan et al. 2019). Even when male participants are included with

females in CSA study samples, their numbers are often so small that their experiences are overlooked compared with those of female survivors (Hohendorff et al. 2017). Although the literature in this area is growing and service provision is increasingly catering to the needs of male CSA survivors, significant progress still needs to be made in attempting to understand the complexities of male CSA.

Male Child Sexual Abuse and Masculinities Theory

Male CSA survivors face the same social pressures to live up to the ideals of masculinity as other men do (Kia-Keating et al. 2005). However, they must also deal with cultural definitions of 'manhood' and the conflicting experience of sexual victimisation, which involves violation within an interpersonal context (Kia-Keating et al. 2010). This chapter thus draws on masculinities theory to analyse the experiences of British South Asian men who were sexually abused in childhood and to explore how such abusive experiences infringe on a male survivor's sense of masculinity.

Many men with histories of CSA struggle with issues of masculinity and face gender-role conflicts (Gagnier et al. 2017). For example, Spataro et al. (2001; Soni 2013; Robertson et al. 2016) report that male survivors feel it is 'unmasculine' to be labelled a victim, particularly in cases of sexual violence. These feelings are exacerbated when the abuser is male, as male survivors then contend with issues of shame, stigma and homophobia (Easton et al. 2014). Stereotypes of 'ideal' men—as aggressive, stoic and dominant—are conveyed by a hegemonic construct that is, in turn, underpinned by heterosexuality. Further, culturally sanctioned expectations that men must reject 'feminine' characteristics, be economic providers and have a preoccupation with sex (Kia-Keating et al. 2005) point towards an overarching system of heteropatriarchy that favours heterosexuality and cisgender males. Traditional conceptualisations of masculinity oppose feminine-associated behaviours, equating femininity with helplessness and passivity, while homophobia and dominance prove one's masculinity (Eisen and Yamashita 2019). Moreover, Kia-Keating et al. (2010) emphasise how gender-role socialisation encourages men to

avoid emotions and vulnerabilities. Consequently, male CSA survivors are up against a direct contradiction of masculinity's core expectations: to be strong and invulnerable.

Depraetere et al. (2020) assert that the underrepresentation of male victims of sexual violence in academic research is rooted in prevailing gender roles and stereotypical rape scripts. Kia-Keating et al. (2010) too acknowledge a 'societal disinclination' to accept men in a role of sexual victimisation rather than sexual prowess. Eriksson (2009) discusses this positioning of men and women into two very distinct categories of perpetrator and victim in the context of a constructivist notion of 'ideal victims'. The 'ideal victim' is perceived as dependent, passive and helpless, conforming to cultural constructions of 'childlike' and 'feminine' behaviour; conversely, characteristics associated with perpetrators include agency, dominance, control and violence and align with constructions of 'adultlike' and 'masculine' behaviour. An adult male disclosing a history of CSA thus presents a direct contradiction of the 'ideal victim' construct, which can become an instant barrier to disclosure. Research has also found that male survivors of sexual violence are less likely to be recognised as 'legitimate' victims (Hlavka 2017), thus demonstrating the power of gendered social constructs. The perpetuation of these stereotypes has fuelled perceptions of how men and women should behave, indoctrinating these ideas internally through the external force of societal expectation.

The concept of masculinity within minoritised communities is underexplored, particularly in the UK (Jaspal 2019). However, slowly emerging studies in the US have examined masculinities in relation to Southeast Asian American (such as Chinese and Korean), African American and Hispanic men (Kyler-Yano and Mankowski 2020; Walters and Valenzuela 2020). Purkayastha (2000) is a notable example: this study explored how masculinities are embodied within South Asian American communities. Purkayastha found that the parental expectations of Asian youths—that these youths should be respectful, reserved and accommodating—contrasted with the parental expectations of their White peers. The aforementioned traits were considered effeminate by those outside these South Asian American communities, as American norms of youth masculinity prioritise competitiveness, physical prowess and aggression

over politeness and compassion. Young Asian men may then seek respect through behaviours that conform to these masculine norms, yet find that these lead to their further exclusion from mainstream society (Balzani 2010). This is an example of 'protest masculinity' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), which usually affects men who are marginalised and disempowered in particular societies. Archer's (2001) work with young British South Asian Muslim men found elements of protest masculinity in their behaviour and identified how the men used this specific model of hegemonic masculinity ('powerful patriarchal') to assert their position among White and African-Caribbean men and Muslim women.

Kia-Keating et al. (2005) argue that racial and cultural expectations serve to perpetuate masculine norms, resulting in hypermasculinity. Hypermasculinity is the exaggeration of male stereotypical behaviour, with those classed as hypermasculine embracing physical and behavioural traits such as aggression or developing a more muscular physique (Balani 2019; Szto 2020). Kalra (2009) highlights how racialised minorities, such as British South Asians, are often conceived as problematic in the context of the broader sociocultural discourse, which then shapes how South Asian masculinities are conceptualised and presented in mainstream media and in political and academic discourse. For example, Kalra (2009) points to the media coverage of young Asian men rioting in Northern England in 2001, which resulted in a narrative that presented these men as hypermasculine. British South Asian men have very often been viewed as embodying an 'assertive and deviant masculinity', which again feeds into the hypermasculinised perception of this group (Kalra 2009: 115). More recently, Gill and Day (2020) explored negative media representations of British South Asian men following the Rochdale sexual exploitation case (and similar cases that followed). They argue that negative media portrayals of the alleged perpetrators in these cases reinforced culturally specific misconceptions of British South Asian masculinity. Hesse (2000) contends that there are two dominant discourses around the masculinities of young Muslim men: one emphasises patriarchy and aggression and the other effeminacy and academicism. Hesse (2000: 337) calls for an empirical effort to 'disrupt these dichotomised stereotypes by exploring the complex, multiple and multi-faceted nature of youthful Muslim masculinities'.

The discourses and stereotypes that currently prevail leave little space for alternative representations of Asian masculinity outside of the dominant framework of deviance (Gill 2020). They also leave little space for male CSA survivors: Javaid (2017) contends that male victims of sexual violence are relegated in the gender hierarchy, as they are perceived to embody subordinate masculinities and are thus marginalised as a result. This goes some way to explaining low disclosure rates among male victims of sexual violence, as this form of abuse largely challenges and inverts overall norms of hegemonic masculinity and sexuality (Javaid 2017).

Some researchers have attributed the paucity of research into male CSA survivors to a social belief that men are the perpetrators of abuse and not the victims (Yancey and Hansen 2010). According to Stanko and Hobdell (1993), criminology fails to acknowledge male experiences of victimisation, and this lacuna, in turn, is ascribed to men's reluctance to speak out and expose their own 'vulnerability'. In patriarchal societies, men may feel further pressure to conceal or suppress feelings associated with victimisation because they fear denigration and social stigmatisation, particularly in cases of rape and sexual violence (Begum 2018; Elkins et al. 2017). This returns us to masculinities theory, which suggests that normative heterosexuality underpins society's expectations of male behaviour and that behaviours that do not adhere to heterosexual ideals are to be rejected (Balani 2019; Kukreja 2021; Walklate 2007).

Methodology

The overall aim of this research was to examine how male British South Asian CSA survivors make sense of their experiences. This aim was split into several discrete sub-aims:

- to understand the complexities around the disclosure process;
- to explore how men's sense of masculinity is impacted by abuse;
- to explore the significance of culture and community in relation to CSA disclosure;

- to explore men's experiences of help-seeking and the implications of this for service provision.

All participants were adults, and the decision to interview adult rather than child survivors was made for two reasons. First, there are significant ethical issues to consider when working with children in trauma research (Crane and Broome 2017). Randall et al. (2016) point out that disclosure of abuse from children needs to be met with caution, and researchers have a duty to report a revelation of ongoing abuse to authorities. Second, the age at which survivors tend to disclose abuse and the symptoms that arise in adulthood as a consequence of that abuse justified the adults-only sample. Many studies concur that the majority of survivors confide in people about abuse during adulthood (Tener and Murphy 2015). McTavish et al. (2019) highlight post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological problems that can manifest in adult survivors as a direct result of CSA, including suicidal tendencies, depression, anxiety, and drug and alcohol abuse. Purposive sampling was adopted to recruit participants.

Demographics of the Sample

Eight South Asian male survivors volunteered to take part in the study. The youngest was 20 years old and the oldest was 41. The details of the participants are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Participants

Pseudonym of survivor	Age	Ethnic background
Nathan	20	South Indian (Tamil)
Gurdeep	26	Indian Punjabi
Mahmud	34	Pakistani
Ayaan	24	Bengali
Dev	41	Indian Gujarati
Suleman	29	Bengali
Sanjay	31	Indian
Aman	33	Indian Punjabi

The Interview Process

Research with sexual abuse survivors has increased over the past 30 years, resulting in a distinct, parallel body of literature on how participating in research affects survivors (Kirkner et al. 2019). Though much of this literature indicates that survivors generally report little to no distress after participating in research (Jaffe et al. 2015; Legerski and Bunnell 2010), there is evidence that survivors with histories of CSA have reported negative reactions to participation (Edwards et al. 2013; Massey and Widom 2013). One way of mitigating participants' distress is to ensure the research actively seeks to empower them, in line with the principles of emancipatory research (Noel 2016; Biggeri and Ciani 2019). This was incorporated during the research design phase of this study: Butler (2002) code of ethics, which endorses emancipatory research with disempowered communities and individuals, was heavily drawn upon.

Emancipatory research also stipulates that researchers should enter interviews with the overall aim of the study in mind and should possess self-awareness and reflexivity, traits that will encourage them to constantly question their motivations, values and actions and ensure that these promote participant well-being (Dodgson 2019). Smith et al. (2009) advise researchers to monitor the effect of the interview on the participant and to look for verbal and non-verbal cues that indicate how participants feel. These cues should guide researchers throughout the interview and determine what direction they can take with the questions. In this study, most of the interviews had a similar trajectory: each individual interview situation was met with an individualised response, and the survivor's welfare was the primary concern. None of the participants wished to end their interview and demonstrated great courage when narrating their experiences. A debrief was carried out between the interviewer and participant after the interviews had taken place and participants were offered a chance to see their transcripts and make any changes.

The next section introduces the eight survivors and their individual life stories. It includes a timeline that documents significant events and stages in each survivor's life.

Nathan[1]

Nathan was 20 years old at the time of the interview. He had a South Indian Hindu background and was born and raised in England. He came from a single-parent family, as his parents divorced when he was six years old. He lived alone with his dog and was a university student at the time of the interview. Over a two-year period, beginning when Nathan was eight years old, his abuser, a male family friend, abused him during family gatherings and occasionally during religious events where community members would come together. As Nathan came to associate the abuse with his religion, he could no longer bring himself to practise it. He therefore classified himself as an atheist.

In the aftermath of the abuse, at around 17 years old, Nathan began exhibiting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. He tried to push the abuse flashbacks he was experiencing to the back of his mind, but in his first year of university, Nathan felt that he could no longer cope. He confided the abuse to his personal tutor, who then referred to him to the university counselling service. The counsellor helped Nathan work through his trauma and discussed the possibility of reporting the abuse to the police. Nathan then confided in his university flatmates, who attended the police station with him when he reported the abuse and provided details of the abuser, who was still in contact with Nathan's family.

The police began their investigation and arrested the abuser; following the arrest, a female member of Nathan's extended family confessed that she had also been subjected to sexual abuse by the same man. The fact that there were now two survivors was of significant help in bringing charges against the abuser, who then stood trial for CSA. He received a sentence of 11 years, which Nathan was not fully satisfied with. However, Nathan said he was grateful that the abuser had been imprisoned for his crimes, as he acknowledged that many survivors did not see any justice with their own cases of abuse.

Nathan disclosed the abuse to his mother after he had confided in his tutor, counsellor and university flatmates. He revealed that his mother did not have the reaction he anticipated; despite being upset by the disclosure, she did not want the abuse dealt with by the police as she

feared that the issue would become public in the community. Nathan was upset, angry and disappointed by this response, as he believed that public knowledge of the abuse should not be a deterrent to justice. He went to the police without his mother's approval and, after the trial, cut ties with his mother and his community. He still had contact with his siblings. His support network comprised the university friends he lived with before acquiring his own flat, and he described his dog as a huge comfort and a loyal companion both during and after the trial. Nathan was receiving counselling at the time of the interview and felt that it was having a positive impact on his healing.

Gurdeep

Gurdeep was 26 years old at the time of the interview. He was a British-born Indian with roots in the Punjab, India; he classified himself as Sikh. Gurdeep lived with his family: his parents, grandmother and two siblings. He had a business degree and was working in a sales-based role at the time of the interview. When he was nine, he was abused by an older male relative. The abuse carried on for five years, until the abuser moved abroad, at which point Gurdeep described feeling helpless. Gurdeep tried to carry on with his life but had frequent panic attacks, nightmares and debilitating anxiety that started to affect his schoolwork. He said he felt disappointed that nobody noticed his poor high school grades compared with his good performance at primary school and that nobody questioned why he seemed unhappy.

Gurdeep attended a different school to complete his A Levels. He felt this move was a new start, as no bad memories were attached to this environment; he also made a new group of male and female friends, which boosted his confidence. He performed well, completing his A Levels and gaining a place at his chosen university, which was in a different city to his family home. Gurdeep moved into student accommodation, where he thrived, although he still suffered nightmares and panic attacks. He eventually went to see a GP close to campus. This GP was from a White English background, and Gurdeep stated that he felt comfortable in her presence and confident that she would not know Gurdeep's family or

community. Gurdeep confided the abuse to his GP, who referred him to a local counselling service. Gurdeep then saw a counsellor for 12 weeks. He had mixed feelings about this—on the one hand, it helped him accept what had happened to him; on the other, it brought up difficult emotions and increased his nightmares and panic attacks.

Around three months after these initial counselling sessions, Gurdeep found another counselling service a few miles from his university. He felt that this second round of counselling continued helping him in his recovery, as he felt that the previous counsellor he spoke to had helped him start to accept what had happened to him. At this point, Gurdeep had not confided in anyone other than his GP and counsellors. He tried to keep his university and family life separate from his private life, feeling that this compartmentalisation would give him a sense of control over everything. After his second round of counselling, Gurdeep's nightmares and panic attacks were less frequent; he began enjoying the social side of university and also kept busy with his studies. He then graduated with honours and moved back to his family home. After starting employment, Gurdeep occasionally used counselling helplines when he needed support; eventually, he began to receive regular in-person counselling again and was doing so at the time of the interview.

Gurdeep felt more comfortable disclosing the abuse to counsellors and his GP than to his family. He cited the main reason for not wishing to disclose to his family as a fear of being disbelieved and because, as the only son in his household, he would be perceived as a failure. Gurdeep felt he had familial expectations to fulfil and did not want to compromise the respect and high esteem in which he was held by his relatives.

Mahmud

Mahmud was 34 years old at the time of the interview. He was a Pakistani-born male who settled in England at the age of 16. He identified as a practising Muslim and was part of a 'joint' family arrangement, living with his parents, his wife and his two children. Mahmud was 12 years old when he started being abused by a male family member.

Mahmud was living in Pakistan at the time. The abuse occurred sporadically, as the abuser was not a frequent visitor to Mahmud's family home, and took place over a period of roughly two years. Mahmud referred to the abuser as an 'opportunist', as he would carry out the abuse on random visits. At the age of 16, Mahmud, his parents and his siblings moved to England. Mahmud described blocking out the abuse for many years and continuing his college education in England while holding down part-time jobs. Mahmud lived in a densely populated city with his family and was surrounded by a large Muslim community. He met his future wife at university and married her after graduating. He acquired a graduate job in finance and had two children. Living in a joint family made him feel secure, particularly as he had a close bond with his parents.

Mahmud did not disclose the abuse to anybody in his family but instead confided in an imam at his local mosque that he frequented for his daily prayers. The imam encouraged Mahmud to seek help through a counsellor. Mahmud was initially reluctant, so a few years passed before he sought help from a counselling service. During his initial counselling sessions, Mahmud stated that he felt very uncomfortable, as the prospect of telling a stranger what had happened to him was particularly difficult. Mahmud said that he would have preferred an Asian counsellor who may have related to him better, but he was eventually assigned a White female counsellor with whom he developed a good relationship. He felt the abuse was not something he could discuss with his wife and family, as he did not want to burden anybody with an issue he felt was his to deal with. He also stressed that his elderly parents were not in a good enough state of health to be able to handle such a disclosure.

For Mahmud, religion was a major source of help and acted as a calming influence. He also stated that various aspects of his faith helped him come to terms with the abuse, particularly the idea that everything in an individual's life is predestined and the will of God. His faith combined with counselling was an important part of Mahmud's healing process.

Ayaan

Ayaan was 24 years old at the time of the interview. He was a British-born Bangladeshi male who identified as a Muslim, although he stressed that his religious beliefs were moderate. He lived with his girlfriend. For around seven years, starting when he was nine, Ayaan was abused by an uncle in his extended family. The abuse was frequent until Ayaan reached adolescence; as he got older, Ayaan began feeling suicidal and increasingly depressed. When he could no longer cope, he confronted the abuser and threatened to expose him to the rest of the family, but the abuser denied all knowledge of the abuse. Consequently, Ayaan moved out of the family home and worked as a waiter, living above the premises with other staff. After a few years, Ayaan completed a vocational course at college and started working as an apprentice electrician. During his time at college, Ayaan met his non-Muslim girlfriend and stated that he felt, for the first time in his life, happy and content and that he had a sense of control over his life.

Ayaan and his girlfriend began renting their own flat; at this point, Ayaan confided in his girlfriend about the abuse. Her reaction was understanding, and Ayaan said he felt she was the only person he could trust. His girlfriend recommended that he seek counselling, found two local counselling organisations and attended the first session with Ayaan. He enjoyed his first session and continued the counselling for the maximum period the organisation allowed due to waiting-list demands. Ayaan liked the talking element of therapy and felt as though he could discuss all aspects of his life and relationships with his counsellor, not just the abuse, as he did not want the abuse to be a central aspect of his existence.

Ayaan remained in contact with his parents and siblings. He did not feel as though he could tell them about the abuse due to the abuser's relationship to his family and the shame and heartache the disclosure would bring them. The abuser was still in regular contact with Ayaan's family and occasionally visited their home with his wife and children, although Ayaan maintained that he was a much more frequent visitor when Ayaan was younger. Ayaan felt as though he could not face bumping into his abuser, as it would bring up bad memories and send him back into depression. His relationship with the abuser had ended the day Ayaan

confronted him, and Ayaan felt as though the abuser had not taken the threat of exposure seriously. The abuser had a lingering impact on Ayaan's life, and Ayaan did not want to risk letting him back in. Ayaan also kept his relationship with his girlfriend hidden from his family, as his parents would not have approved on cultural and religious grounds—it was not deemed correct to live together out of wedlock, nor was it acceptable to be with a non-Muslim partner.

Dev

Dev was 41 years old at the time of the interview. He was a British-born male of Indian heritage who was raised Hindu but, as he had not practised Hinduism since his teens, classified himself as a non-religious Hindu. Dev identified as gay and lived with his partner. Dev's abuse began when he was 14 years old. It was carried out by a young male in Dev's extended family who was not a blood relative. It carried on for around one year and occurred in Dev's family home, usually during family gatherings. Dev described how he did not fight off the abuser as, at the time of the abuse, he was unaware that what was happening was wrong. Dev said that he felt a lot of self-blame for not fighting off the abuser and could not make peace with this. The abuser stopped visiting Dev's family home around the time the abuse stopped, although Dev was unaware of why these visits ceased. He found out many years later that a feud had occurred between the two families and ended their relationship.

Dev described how, in the aftermath of the abuse, he blocked out what had happened and continued to excel in school. He described himself as an overachiever and an avid reader, using fiction as a way of escaping reality. Dev attended university, where again he excelled. At around this time, Dev began to question his sexuality, which he had been unable to explore while living in his family home. He began frequenting gay bars and embarked on his first long-term relationship, which ended when Dev graduated from university and moved to a different city to begin his graduate job. This had been Dev's first serious relationship and marked a significant point in his life, as it was when he came to identify his sexuality. Dev did not tell his family that he was gay, as he did not wish

to complicate matters with them—particularly not with his parents, who had very traditional views of marriage and relationships. As Dev entered adulthood, his family placed huge pressure on him to marry somebody from the same ethnic, religious and caste background. As a result of this pressure, and because of his secular and more Western perspectives, Dev lived independently and tried to maintain a distance from his family, keeping contact via phone and visiting only when a family wedding took place.

Dev met his current partner through a work event and described him as his soulmate. His partner is White, and Dev found that their personalities and views were much more compatible than they would have been with an Indian partner. Dev kept this relationship hidden from his family and stated that he felt as though he lived a double life at times. He recalled one occasion when he decided to talk about his past to his partner and, upon doing so, began to cry. Dev believed that he had somehow retrieved 'lost' memories that he had blocked out and, after disclosing the abuse to his partner, sought counselling. Because of Dev's financial position, he was able to begin private counselling sessions and continued these weekly for around three months, until a disagreement with his counsellor made him question their motives—when Dev had to cancel a session because of a work emergency, the counsellor attempted to charge him the hourly rate for this missed session, which Dev disputed. Dev subsequently took a break from counselling until he found that free counselling sessions were available for male abuse survivors. Dev took up these sessions and felt that he benefitted from them, developing a trusting relationship with his female counsellor.

Suleman

Suleman was 29 years old at the time of the interview. He was a British-born Bangladeshi male who identified as a Muslim and lived with his wife and daughter. Suleman was abused for three years from the age of seven. His abuser was an imam who was around the same age as Suleman's father. The imam would abuse Suleman in his private office at the back of the mosque. He would take other boys into the office

at different times, and Suleman suspected they were being taken there for the same reasons he was. Suleman reported going numb during the abuse and having an 'out-of-body' feeling. He described this as his coping mechanism. When Suleman was around 10 years old, a complaint was lodged against the imam, the details of which were not told to the children at the mosque. The imam did not return after that, and rumours established that a young girl had reported the imam to the police for inappropriately touching her.

When Suleman was around 12 years old, he told his mother what the imam had done to him; her response was to tell Suleman to keep quiet and not disclose what had happened to anyone else. Suleman was told that saying such things was 'shameful', and this notion of shame stayed with him until he was around 18, when he began to resent his mother for her response (Harrison and Gill 2018; Romo 2013; Sivagurunathan et al. 2019). Suleman questioned why she had told him to hide what had happened to him and, as a result, blamed himself for his abuse for many years. Shortly after Suleman turned 18, his father suddenly passed away from a heart attack, which deeply affected Suleman. He spiralled into a depression and began smoking marijuana, a habit that eventually progressed into a heroin addiction. Suleman was working in an Asian grocery store at the time and used his wages to fund his growing drug habit. At his lowest point, Suleman stole his mother's gold jewellery and sold it to a pawnbroker; Suleman's mother was devastated when she found out what Suleman had done, as the jewellery held sentimental value. Suleman's older brother cast him out from the family, and Suleman temporarily moved in with his mother's sister.

Suleman's drug habit continued for around five years, with his family intervening at many points to offer rehabilitation and help. He continually broke their trust by stealing from them, and his brother and mother eventually took him to Bangladesh. He was told he would be entering an arranged marriage to 'fix' his behaviour and give him a sense of responsibility. For the six weeks he was in Bangladesh, Suleman was drug-free, and he stated that the withdrawal symptoms severely affected him. After spending time with his new bride, he booked an early ticket home and obtained a drug supply within hours of landing. He overdosed and was

taken to hospital; his family arrived and Suleman then agreed to attend rehabilitation.

After about two years, Suleman was clean of drugs and had confided in his support counsellor about the sexual abuse. The support worker referred him to a specialist counselling service that dealt with sexual assault and Suleman was assigned a female counsellor. At around this time, Suleman's wife gained a visa to enter the UK. He continued his counselling sessions but did not inform his wife—he felt that since she had a different country of birth, she would not grasp what abuse was. Further, his confidence had been knocked by his mother's response to his disclosure, and he could not face disclosing to another family member.

Sanjay

Sanjay was 31 years old at the time of the interview. He was a British-born Indian male who identified as Hindu and lived with his mother. He was abused by his father and later discovered that his father also abused his older sister. Sanjay was unaware of how old he was when his abuse began, but his earliest memory of it was when he was around four years old. Sanjay's mother was subjected to physical abuse by his father, who would consume alcohol and violently beat her in the presence of Sanjay and his sister. After a particularly bad beating, Sanjay's sister called an ambulance and their mother was taken to hospital, where she stayed for a few days. During this time, social services began investigating Sanjay's family situation; Sanjay and his sister did not reveal that they had been sexually abused, but did report that their mother was frequently beaten by their father. Their father was arrested but subsequently released, as Sanjay's mother did not wish to press charges. They then separated and their father remarried and moved out.

During Sanjay's teenage years, his sister moved out to attend university; Sanjay attended high school and worked part-time at a fast-food chain to help his mother financially. Sanjay had a close bond with his mother and, when he was around 15 years old, confided in her about the abuse. When he told her, she had a nervous breakdown and went into a depression, racked with guilt that she had not been aware of the

abuse. When Sanjay's sister came to visit, his mother did not reveal that Sanjay had disclosed the abuse to her, and Sanjay also refrained from telling his sister. However, Sanjay stated that he knew in the back of his mind that she had also been abused because he noted similar traits in their behaviour.

When Sanjay was around 16 years old, he heard through family friends that his father had passed away as a result of his alcoholism. Sanjay recalled feeling nothing when he heard this news—no sadness and no relief. Sanjay's sister had a similarly blank response. When his mother was not present, Sanjay asked his sister whether she had been abused by their father; she admitted that he had abused her frequently from a very young age and that part of the reason she moved away from home for university was to get away from the reminders. She had no idea that Sanjay had also been abused and asked him whether he had told their mother. Sanjay told her that he had and, upon hearing about their mother's reaction, Sanjay's sister decided against telling her, as she did not want to cause her further distress.

Sanjay said he felt as though his life from the age of four had been one big blur and that he had drifted through it with no feelings of happiness. He described feeling as though he was on 'autopilot' until the age of 24, when he met his current girlfriend. She gave him a sense of purpose and was the first person outside of his mother and sister whom he trusted, so he disclosed the abuse to her. She was a trainee nurse at the time and advised him to seek help through a counselling service. Sanjay followed this advice and received counselling for the maximum period of one year the organisation allowed due to waiting-list demands—however, because of the severity of his case, his counsellor continued seeing him for another six months.

Aman

Aman was 33 years old at the time of the interview. He was a British-born Indian male whose family came from the Punjab region of India. He identified as Sikh and lived with his parents, wife and daughter. Aman grew up in a predominantly Asian neighbourhood where 'everybody knew everybody'. He recalled being abused at the age of 11 by

a man from the local community. The abuse was a one-time incident and had a long-lasting impact on Aman. The abuser, who was also Sikh Punjabi and lived with his wife and children, was known in the neighbourhood to approach young boys and offer them money to enter his house. Aman was out playing with friends on his street where the abuser lived and wandered away from his friends to walk home. The abuser approached him and offered him £5 to go into his house; as a child, Aman was impressionable and tempted by the offer of £5, which seemed like a lot of money. He entered the house and was taken into the bathroom and abused. The abuser's wife and children were not home at the time of the incident, and after the abuse had taken place, Aman was given the £5 and led out of the house. He walked home and did not tell anybody what had happened until many years later.

Aman completed high school and began working for his father's business alongside his parents and older brother. As he did not perform well academically, the family business was Aman's only career option, but he felt miserable at the prospect of working there permanently. After a few years, Aman started work in a call centre instead and enjoyed being outside the family business, but returned to it after the call centre made him redundant. In his twenties, Aman was given more control over family business decisions. As the business grew, Aman's family bought and moved into a larger home. At around the same time, Aman was approached by his family with a marriage offer for a girl recommended by family friends. Aman met her and agreed to the arranged marriage, as he felt the two of them had clicked. Aman and his wife continued to live in his parents' home, as it was tradition to do so in his family. After a few years, he and his wife had their first baby, and it was around this time that Aman began to have flashbacks of the attack. He had sleeping difficulties and felt as though he could not hide the reason from his wife, whom he trusted deeply. Aman told her about his abuse and she encouraged him to seek professional help. Initially, he did not feel comfortable doing so for numerous reasons, including a fear that his family members might have found out and want to know why. Aman described his family as a 'typical Punjabi family' with traditional views of masculinity and an adherence to many cultural imperatives, including izzat.

Disclosing Abuse

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for any CSA survivor is trying to disclose their experience of abuse. There are two major categories of CSA disclosure: accidental disclosure and purposeful disclosure, with the former being more common among children and the latter more characteristic of adult survivors. Accidental disclosure occurs when the abuse is observed by someone else or when children exhibit behavioural or physical signs that indicate abuse (Crosson-Tower 2014). Any form of disclosure can be a progressive step towards the healing process, with many survivors reporting that positive changes occur when they take control of their lives, including acceptance from others and feeling a sense of liberation and freedom (Draucker et al. 2011).

'Why Should I Be Scared of Telling My Own Mum?'

For many survivors, the process of disclosing CSA is akin to a journey, a continuum or a process (Collings et al. 2005; Alaggia 2004). All the survivors in this study had disclosed abuse to a family member, peer, partner or health professional, with all but one retrospectively disclosing CSA in their adult years. The exception was Suleman—after experiencing abuse at the hands of an imam in his place of worship, Suleman disclosed to his mother around two years later, after a young girl was rumoured to have reported the imam to the police for a similar offence. For Suleman, trying to tell his mother at the age of 12 was an immense challenge:

> I remember thinking well this is my mum, you know, why should I be scared of telling my own mum? She gave birth to me and up to that point she always kind of treated me like the baby of the family … so yeah I thought I'll just tell her, maybe she'll help me, but no, no. She basically said to me that I have to hide it, don't tell your dad, don't tell your brothers, and at that age you just do what your parents tell you … I was hurt, really hurt. She said we won't tell anyone … and I didn't for a long time. (Suleman)

Suleman's experience of disclosure was tinged with anger, sadness and disappointment. He began his account by describing the difficulty of disclosing and questioning why he feared telling his own mother, particularly since he was the 'baby' of the family, and his expectation was that she would react in a maternal and caring manner. Her blunt response effectively shut down the magnitude of the disclosure and her instinct was to silence him rather than protect and nurture him. Suleman was also silenced by his abuser—in effect, he was wronged in two situations that should each have warranted very different reactions. He was asked not to tell his father or brothers, which reinforced the need to continue keeping the abuse a secret. This first, and arguably most significant, experience of disclosure had an impact on Suleman's decision to not disclose again years later.

According to Allnock and Miller (2013), the average amount of time it takes a survivor to disclose abuse is seven years; the younger the child is when the abuse starts, the longer it takes for them to disclose. Suleman did not fit this profile, deciding to tell his mother in trust and confidence, but he was rebuffed with an unexpected response:

> 'itha sharam, itha manshoreh koin nah' [it's shameful and we don't tell people that]. (Suleman)

Suleman quoted what his mother told him in Bengali when he disclosed to her. Her justification for keeping the abuse a secret between herself and Suleman was that it would be shameful if other people were to learn of it. This response was steeped in cultural notions of shame being brought upon the family and a desire for Suleman not to tell other people in order to avoid such shame. Gilligan (2005; Kukreja 2021; Jaspal 2019) work with Asian communities across Bradford found that cultural factors had the power to impede individuals' and families' willingness to disclose CSA. These findings are congruent with Suleman's mother's response, which signifies how cultural norms can hamper an individual's ability to sufficiently respond to and deal with sexual abuse disclosure. For Suleman, his mother's response had a debilitating effect later in life in the form of his drug addiction, which he stressed with expletives ('fucked me up later, fucked me up for years'). This statement expressed his anger and

frustration at his mother's attitude that the abuse was 'shameful', which placed this shame on Suleman and ultimately made him feel responsible for what had happened to him. Suleman emphasised that this was not an excuse for his drug problems, but an explanation as to why he began using drugs and why his mother's reaction to the disclosure 'fucked [him] up for years' and 'made [him] do all that shit [he] did later'. As a further consequence of his first disclosure experience, Suleman also developed trust issues and did not discuss the abuse again for a long while. In their study of maternal responses to CSA disclosure, McCarthy et al. (2019) found that when disclosure responses conveyed a sense of protection and support, this resulted in improved mental health and social functioning for survivors. They argue that the responses survivors receive from caregivers—and, indeed, from professionals—have the power to either aid their recovery or retraumatise them.

Sanjay's experience of trying to tell his mother about his abuse contrasted with Suleman's. Sanjay was sexually abused by his biological father and was around 14 years old at the time of his disclosure. He lived alone with his mother and felt safe enough to confide in her:

> Telling Mum wasn't easy; I had to keep thinking about what effect it would have on her and whether I was being selfish. I thought I was being selfish by wanting to tell her but I had nothing left. I lost my self-respect early on in my life … I couldn't deal with it anymore and I thought maybe if I tell her, it will get easier for me. So one day I was sitting with her, I think we were watching something … I was waiting, thinking, how do I bring it up? How do I say it? So I thought, just say it … I just said to her, Mum I gotta tell you something, she's like, what, and she didn't know what was coming and I said it's about Kirpal, and she's like, yeah go on, and I just said it … I said he raped me. (Sanjay)

Sanjay's disclosure was blunt and, although rapid in its delivery, extremely powerful. 'He raped me' is abrupt, direct and emotionally charged, suggesting that the abuse was like a pressure cooker inside Sanjay—he was no longer able to keep it a secret. He recalled feeling selfish about his desire to tell his mother, wanting to put her feelings before his own due to the hardships she had also endured at the hands of his father. However, Sanjay expressed having 'nothing left' and being

emotionally and physically drained, with no enjoyment in his life and nothing left to lose. He chose a random and mundane moment to reveal the abuse—in the middle of watching television—which demonstrates the urgency he felt to get it off his chest; it was a now-or-never situation. Like Suleman, Sanjay disclosed to his mother because he felt he was able to confide in her—being in a situation where he felt that he and his mother only had each other enabled him to tell her directly what his father had done to him. Sanjay was much more fortunate than Suleman in that his mother's reaction was not to place blame on him or attempt to silence him:

> She was shocked more than anything, I remember her reaction; when I think about it, it makes me wanna cry, she let out this scream, it was such a painful scream like someone had stabbed her in the heart or something, I can't forget that sound and I can't forgive myself for making her hurt like that but … at the time it really got to her, she got so affected by it, and … she never blamed me, she never said to me 'you let it happen' or 'why did you tell me or anything', if she did that's what I was scared of, but if she did I would've killed myself, I really, really would've killed myself 'cause I felt like I had nothing at that point and all I wanted was her … she still loved me and I have nothing but respect for her 'cause she went through all that beating and still she did everything and, see, that's why I didn't respect [my sister] 'cause she never put Mum first when she always put us first.

Sanjay's recollection of his mother's first reaction to his disclosure was one of intense pain and grief—he likened her 'painful scream' to the sound she would make if she were being stabbed in the heart. His choice of analogy indicates the physical and mental anguish his mother's scream caused him, and the impact of this scream was something he could not forget nor forgive himself for. Sanjay's strong sense of protectiveness towards his mother is evident in his account, which indicates a constant need to protect her and place his needs as a survivor aside to ensure that she was okay first. Sanjay was forthcoming about his belief that he would have committed suicide if his mother had blamed him in any way for the abuse and about the fact that the only thing he wanted at that point was his mother's support. His respect for his mother is apparent

throughout his account ('I have nothing but respect for her'), and her approval and happiness seemed a core priority for him. This was one of the reasons he expressed unhappiness with his sister, whom he felt had abandoned the family when his mother needed her most. As Sanjay's mother was subjected to domestic violence from his father, it seemed that her reaction to his disclosure of abuse brought them closer together, as they were both survivors of different forms of abuse at the hands of the same person.

Parental reactions to CSA disclosure have been given inconsistent attention in the research. Nevertheless, the studies that have been conducted have yielded similar findings. For example, McElvaney and Nixon (2020) report that parents often grapple with feelings of guilt and struggle with negotiating their parental identity as 'protectors' following such disclosures. Bux et al (2016) emphasise the significant distress that many parents suffer as a result, as was evident in Sanjay's account. According to Allnock (2010), children are most likely to confide in their mother or their peers when disclosing sexual abuse; Wamser-Nanny (2017), Serin (2018), Sawrikar and Katz (2017) and Roberts (2020) corroborate these findings, stating that children are more likely to tell a friend or their mother, as they usually choose the person they think is going to believe them. However, choosing to tell such an individual does not necessarily mean that the survivor will receive a supportive response. This was the case with Nathan, who disclosed to his mother after initially confiding in his university tutor:

> My mum was the main person who raised us, so even though I didn't tell her first for my own reasons, after I told my tutor and other people I thought maybe I have to tell her 'cause at that point I made the decision to go to the police … her reaction, it was, well, I don't know what I expected really, it's not that she didn't believe me. She got upset, very, very upset, and then said, well, what do you wanna do about it, and I told her, well look I've gone to my tutor and a counsellor and they advised me to go to the police and that's what I want to do … she couldn't really accept it then and she went into this other mode about, that everyone's gonna find out and [Nathan's abuser] has a family etcetera. (Nathan)

Nathan's decision to disclose the abuse to his mother seemed more of a necessity than something he wanted to do; he had already told his university tutor and a counsellor and at that point had made the decision to go to the police. Disclosing to his mother was the next step, as he was sure it would be only a 'matter of time' until she found out. Nathan picked up on his mother's reluctance to accept what had happened—he stressed that although she believed him, she did not agree with his decision to report the abuse to the police. She was also inclined to consider the impact of the disclosure on the abuser's family and what the community might think if the abuse was to become public knowledge as a result of the police report. Because of her reaction to the disclosure, Nathan ended his relationship with his mother and cut ties with the rest of his family. Only three of this study's eight survivors disclosed their abuse to a close family member, which raises the question of why the other survivors could not confide in a family member about their abusive experiences.

Interestingly, despite Nathan's own construction of his identity as 'not very cultural' *and* non-religious, his mother's consciousness of people finding out about the abuse suggests that culture still played a part in his fractured relationship with her after the disclosure. Further, it demonstrates how, for both Nathan and Suleman, culture contributed to how their relationships with their mothers developed in the light of their abuse disclosure. Their experiences contrast with Sanjay's, whose supportive reaction from his mother brought the two closer together; notably, Sanjay did not mention culture or issues of this nature relating to the disclosure, either for himself or for his mother. On this basis, it can be argued that a cultural consciousness of 'community' finding out—or, in Suleman's case, the notion that the abuse itself and others knowing about it is culturally 'shameful'—reveals how South Asian men's experiences of disclosure are impacted by culture.

'Not Letting Everybody Down'

The majority of the survivors interviewed in this study opted to disclose to non-family members for various reasons. Mahmud, for example, confided his experience of CSA to an Imam; Dev, Ayaan and Aman

confided in their partners; and Gurdeep confided in his GP. According to Hunter (2011), the person(s) to whom sexual abuse is disclosed is of great importance and should be included in the construction of theoretical models of disclosure, as the experiences of telling a friend, family member or the police are all very different. These differences were clear in the interviews, and when the analysis of the transcripts commenced, it became clear that certain factors prevented some men from disclosing to family members. One reason for this was the interviewees' feelings that they would be letting their families down in some way if they were to disclose the abuse. Traditional Asian family structures are unique in that first-generation immigrants carry a set of expectations regarding the position of men, women and children within a patriarchal hierarchy. This is characterised by male dominance and patrilineality, or the continuity of the family line through males (Sawrikar and Katz 2017; Pabla 2019). This places an expectation on children to live up to the obligations and ideals of their parents and the wider community (Berrington 2020; Pabla 2019).

> I'm in an Indian family and I hold a certain place, I'm a son, I'm an older brother, a first-born, Asian, so … we have that pressure on us all the time to be not perfect, but it's about pleasing everyone, you know, keeping everyone happy, so 'cause of all that I didn't wanna let them all down. My grandma lives with us and she's a big influence on me, she's like a second mum, but even then she's a hundred billion times more strict than my parents … she's got strong principles, so she's got this thing about her where everything's about what you're looking at, izzat, it's about that, it's just about protecting that and my dad, that's his mum, you have to imagine he's learned everything from her so he has that same thinking … so I can't just one day go up to them and let them all down when I know already I know what they'll say, I know what they think, for me they're everything, I love them and … it isn't their fault and they couldn't have stopped it. (Gurdeep)

Gurdeep listed the many facets of his identity that were obstacles to his disclosing the abuse to his family, including being the first-born Asian male—holding a 'certain place' in this way meant that he had an expectation to live up to that would be shattered if he was to

disclose that he was an abuse survivor. He emphasised the importance of pleasing everybody around him because he 'didn't wanna let them all down'. He characterised his paternal grandmother as an important figure in his life and as traditional and strict in her views. Intergenerational dynamics were evident here, with Gurdeep's grandmother and father having shared views on protecting izzat. While Gurdeep himself was not overly supportive of this notion of honour, he exhibited a fear of letting everybody down and, in the process, compromising the family's honour. However, this fear seemed driven primarily by the family pressure that Gurdeep referred to. He demonstrated understanding towards his grandmother and father for their 'strong principles' and maintained that the abuse was not something his family were responsible for, nor could they have prevented it. Gurdeep lived with his family at the time of the interview and did not harbour any ill feeling towards them, instead seeming content that he had disclosed the abuse to his GP and counsellor:

> I had the opportunity to go to my doctor and she was the first person ever who I'd spoke to and she referred me to the counsellor and helped me a lot, I'm grateful to them.

Gurdeep's account of not letting down his family aligns with his view that telling them would be a 'headache', an unnecessary pain that he did not need in his life. He made the decision that he felt was best for himself and his family. Aman articulated a similar view:

> I didn't tell them and I wouldn't tell them and that's not something I think I'll regret because knowing my family the way I do and all of what I've learned growing up, it wouldn't make sense for me to go tell them, especially now at this age, and I don't wanna say it's nothing 'cause for me it was, but people go through worse, I can't say I'm the only person in the world it's happened to … but no I don't regret not telling them. For me, my wife was it for me, she's my rock and she's on a level with me; as soon as I told her she cried and yeah I expected that because she loves me, I'm her husband. (Aman)

Aman tried to downplay the scale of the abuse by stressing that other survivors had endured much worse than him, placing his experience on

a comparative scale as a possible way of minimising its severity. He then praised his wife for her support when he disclosed, calling her his 'rock', which signifies how her positive response contributed to the strength of their relationship. Aman shared a number of reasons for his decision not to disclose to his parents; these tended to revolve around cultural factors and a need to not let his family or community down. For Aman and Dev, culture affected their decision not to disclose to their parents. Their belief that their parents' cultural values differed from their own influenced their decisions, with both holding a strong sense that they would be misunderstood. This response indicates a generational clash and difference in worldviews between both men and their parents.

Other survivors, such as Mahmud, expressed concern for their family and a desire to place the family's needs before their own. Mahmud's first disclosure was to an imam whom he had known for a number of years and clearly trusted:

> I just pushed myself in prayer and went to see my imam and it was eating away at me, praying and having patience, it just, as much as it helped, it didn't make me have that release I suppose that I needed … the imam, he's a good friend of mine too, he's a family man and he's very, very knowledgeable, so it was just instinct for me to trust him really and … we sat one day and I told him and he was very calm about it and he didn't judge me and that's all I needed … and because he's not family I wasn't causing him that same pain my mum or dad might feel or even my wife. I couldn't imagine what they would react like especially because [when it] happened it was a good time for my dad … we had money in Pakistan, my dad had businesses and he's got nothing but good memories from our time there, so for me just to come in and say what happened to me, I think it will destroy all that for everyone … when we came here to England, we didn't come with a lot and my dad's health was bad and it's gotten worse with age so just all those things put together … I don't see myself putting [the abuse] on anyone else. (Mahmud)

Mahmud, like many of the interviewed survivors, thought first of the impact the disclosure would have on his family. Juxtaposed against the trauma of his abuse were his cherished memories of life in Pakistan, a time of wealth and stability that his father held dear. Mahmud contrasted

this time with the family's life in England, which was characterised by his father's poor health and unstable financial situation. For that reason, Mahmud wished to protect the memory of their former life in Pakistan.

Mahmud seemed motivated by a desire to protect his family from pain. Research has established that many CSA survivors are conscious of the effect their disclosure may have upon other members of the family (McElvaney et al. 2021). Parental reactions to disclosure can have a profound impact on how the survivor ultimately heals from the abuse, with negative reactions aggravating the trauma and positive responses minimising (although not always) the impact of the abuse (Chiaramello et al. 2018).

'They Wouldn't Believe Me'

There are many reasons why survivors choose not to disclose abuse or at least choose to delay disclosure, one of which is a deep-seated fear of being disbelieved (Morrison et al. 2018). Validation of the survivor's experiences is crucial, particularly during their initial disclosure (Stiller and Hellmann 2017). Many survivors who have been sexually assaulted struggle with the fear of being disbelieved or being held accountable for what happened to them and may actually be disbelieved upon disclosing the abuse to someone (Gill and Harrison 2019).

Many survivors feel a sense of uncertainty regarding how family members may react to a disclosure of abuse. Some of the survivors in this study expressed doubts about whether family members would believe their disclosure, and this fear of being disbelieved was a hindrance to them. As Lovett et al. (2018) note, this is a common issue for CSA survivors in general and acts as a huge barrier to disclosure (Harrison and Gill 2018; Roberts 2020). Ayaan was one such survivor who expressed this fear:

> The abuser was a relative so he still goes to see my family and stuff, I can't hack that, I don't wanna see his fucking face 'cause it just takes me back there, so I just stopped going. I talk my mum on the phone still … I don't wanna cut them off … but me telling them about this is different, it's not gonna go down well, they probably wouldn't believe me or they

> wouldn't understand it … he's a cousin of my mum's. They all think he's this nice guy and he's got a wife and kids and … they wouldn't think someone like that could do that, so I don't see the point of telling them and putting myself through that. (Ayaan)

Ayaan had little faith that his family would believe his account over the abuser, a relative of his mother who was perceived as a 'nice guy' and had a family—for Ayaan, these facts meant that his account of events would not be seen as credible. While it may seem inconceivable that a parent would fail to believe their own child over an extended family member, Ayaan remained adamant that this was the case and that his family 'wouldn't understand' the disclosure. This belief was driven by the fact that the abuser was still in contact with Ayaan's family. Ayaan seemed to have an underlying desire to protect himself emotionally because he anticipated a negative reaction to disclosure, which was his broader reason for choosing not to disclose: 'I don't see the point of telling them and putting myself through that'.

Aman's account echoed Ayaan's in relation to this fear of being disbelieved:

> I'm lucky, very lucky [my wife] believed me, it's not something that you talk about in our circles … our community is very, very close and it's not that easy … certain things are out of that area, you just can't talk about [them], like White people can say anything to their parents and it's fine but for us it's different. I don't think I could take [my parents] not believing me because for a woman … we know it happens but for men how many of these cases do you hear about, what would my mum's response be … she would think I'm mad. (Aman)

Aman attributed his mother's anticipated disbelief to her perhaps not being aware of what CSA is, and he cited the hidden nature of abuse as a contributing factor to this lack of knowledge. Aman felt he was lucky that his wife believed him and noted that sexual abuse was not a topic that could be readily discussed within his community because certain subjects were taboo, whereas he thought White people could discuss anything with their parents. According to Aman, there are cultural differences regarding what discussion is acceptable and what is not. He

explained that whereas sexual abuse against women is known to occur, there is less knowledge regarding sexual abuse against men. This lack of knowledge and understanding may also contribute to a survivor being misunderstood or disbelieved, an outcome that Aman did not want to risk.

Of those who chose to disclose to family members, only Sanjay received a sympathetic response—his mother's own experiences of domestic violence at the hands of Sanjay's abuser, his father, possibly led her to believe in and support her son's disclosure. Conversely, Nathan's and Suleman's disclosures to their mothers garnered responses that were loaded with cultural pressures pertaining to shame and the possible loss of community reputation. Those who did not disclose to immediate family members did so for a variety of reasons, with factors that hampered their decisions to disclose to a relative, encompassing undercurrents of cultural shame, a fear of not being believed, a feeling that they were letting everybody down and a fear of causing distress. These survivors reported feeling content and satisfied with disclosing to other people they felt they could trust. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that disclosure is not a vital step towards recovery from CSA and that these different responses to the issue of disclosure reflect the heterogeneity of survivor experiences (Pabla 2019; Roberts 2020).

Masculinity and Sexuality

A growing body of research points towards the significant impact sexual abuse has on males, and one such impact is the way it influences the development of their masculine identities (Kia-Keating et al. 2005; Pabla 2019). As notions of masculinity are stronger and more prevalent in patriarchal cultures such as those of South Asian communities (Alexander 2004), this research seeks to explore the accumulative effect of this construct on South Asian male CSA survivors. Sexuality is also included in this discussion of masculinity, as there were considerable overlaps in the study findings: masculinity was intertwined with how the survivors' sexuality was perceived by others and their fears of how their sexuality

would be construed in the aftermath of abuse. The two subthemes identified and presented below were 'not being manly enough' and 'questioning sexuality after CSA'.

'Not Being Manly Enough'

Research has indicated that many men view sexual abuse as an attack on their masculinity and believe that identifying as a victim of sexual abuse will contribute to the loss of their masculine identity (Corbett 2016; Jaspal 2019; Pabla 2019; Sharma 2020). The men interviewed in this research discussed how they made sense of their own masculinity as CSA survivors:

> I identify as a gay man and for me I'm very secure in my own masculinity; there isn't a lot that could have changed that for me, but thinking back now at the time, yes, it did [confuse me]. I was 14, I was in that growing stage where you're confused and you're still finding yourself, it's hard to figure out what your identity is or what you're sexuality is and I'd never had any other kind of sexual experience prior to that so … it confused me about what kind of person I am. (Dev)

Although Dev's initial response indicates that he was confident in his masculinity and secure in his identity as a gay man, he then stated that the abuse caused him to feel confused—as it occurred during adolescence, his sexual identity had not yet formed, and this negative sexual experience created a sense of uncertainty around the 'kind of person' he was. Aman's response carried a more subtle sense of how he interpreted his masculine identity and how he thought his wife may have perceived him:

> … though you never do in those situations. I thought, what if she thinks less of me, what if she loses respect for me. (Aman)

Aman referred to his first abuse disclosure, which was to his wife, and how he worried that she might have lost respect for him or thought less of him as a result. This example emphasises the fear male survivors possess

around disclosing CSA and the gendered expectations to which men are under pressure to conform. Spiegel (2013) explains the process of gender-role socialisation and the ways in which boys are reared to be powerful, resolute and self-reliant. Thus, when a boy is sexually abused, a conflict occurs between two psychosocial processes: the realities of CSA and the mythology of masculinity (Roberts 2020). This conflict affects the ability of many adult survivors to come to terms with and disclose the abuse and to renegotiate their identity in relation to their traumatic experiences. For Sanjay, being abused by his father from a young age made him question his identity as a man and as a son:

> I think I didn't know what was going on; so, for a long time, up till about 11 or 12, when I knew what was happening was wrong, I started getting this feeling of, I don't know [if] it was insecurity. I'd be around other boys at school and I never felt like myself, I can't really explain it. I never felt normal, I never felt like one of them, they used to say things they did with their dad … and I couldn't relate to it so I thought maybe he's [my dad] and I'm a bad son … my mum didn't know so I felt like I betrayed her as well … it was always this feeling I wasn't a normal guy … I still feel it now sometimes. Before I met my girlfriend it was hard for me to approach girls for that kind of thing, like a date or a number, I wouldn't ask, I didn't wanna get close in case they thought I was abnormal or something and [I was] constant[ly] just feeling insecure. (Sanjay)

Sanjay was subtle in his explanation of masculinity, but key pointers in his response indicate that he harboured significant insecurity around his identity as a son, as an adolescent among his peers and as a potential boyfriend. Sanjay referred to multiple dimensions of his masculine identity and the ways in which he felt he could not live up to the expectations of these roles. He was emphatic regarding how insecurity blighted him when he was growing up and referred several times to his sense that he was not 'normal'. He also explained the difficulties he experienced with approaching girls and fear that they would perceive him as 'abnormal'. Crowder (2013; Pabla 2019) argues that many male CSA survivors do not see their relationship difficulties or dysfunctional behaviours as related to the abuse they have experienced; instead, they tend to view themselves as flawed or accept their difficulties as inevitable personality

traits. There is evidence of this explanation in Sanjay's response, as he questioned what kind of a son he was to his parents and whether he betrayed his mother by not informing her of the abuse earlier.

Questioning Sexuality After Child Sexual Abuse

Many survivors of male CSA often question their sexuality in the aftermath of abuse (Payne et al. 2014). However, Durham (2003) and Roberts (2020) acknowledge that adolescence is a significant period of change for many young men during which their identity development is evolving—therefore, sexual abuse survivors may attribute confusion around their sexuality to the experience of abuse as opposed to viewing it as a normal part of adolescence. However, what is undoubtable is that such questions and confusion arise for many survivors of abuse and usually intersect with discussions around masculinity, as is apparent in Dev's account:

> As a gay man I've always had people assuming I'm effeminate or camp and there's this added expectation that I'm not manly, which offends me, and that usually comes from other Asians I've encountered, men being the worst. Asian men can be very judgemental towards gay Asians and that just makes me think … they have an insecurity or denial. (Dev)

Dev described the hostility he had received from Asian men and how they had expressed certain attitudes towards his sexuality that questioned or undermined his masculinity, which Dev found offensive. Dev also stressed that Asian men can be judgemental of other Asians who are gay, suggesting that this attitude may indicate 'insecurity or denial' on their part. Homosexuality and same-sex relationships remain taboo within Britain's Asian communities, with religious and cultural pressures to conform to a heterosexual ideal still strong in many Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities (Mitha et al. 2021). These views shape the way in which homosexuality is conceptualised and negatively perceived within

these communities, which is perhaps what Dev had experienced. Alongside the abuse he suffered, Dev kept his sexuality a secret from his family and community:

> My family don't know I'm gay. I've learned to just shut off so when I do see my family on rare occasions I don't divulge personal details, you know, my love life or anything, that's my business … if somebody isn't willing to accept that side of me, then I have no business in telling them my affairs. (Dev)

McKeown et al. (2010) examined experiences of discrimination and disclosure among Black and South Asian gay men in Britain. Almost all the men interviewed expressed the view that the experiences of gay and bisexual men from minoritised backgrounds were more problematic and challenging than those of White British gay men. Viewed through the lens of intersectionality theory, Dev's ethnic identity as a British Indian man overlapped with his sexuality as a gay man to place him at a disadvantage due to what he perceived as two conflicting identities. Moreover, taking masculinities theory into consideration, powerful heteronormative ideals that are often perpetuated within South Asian communities reinforce the culturally generated silence around homosexuality (Khubchandani 2019; McKeown et al. 2010; Jaspal 2019; Pabla 2019).

Homophobic attitudes in South Asian communities also prevent many survivors from coming forward about abuse, as evidenced by Gurdeep:

> There's always that fear there that maybe they won't understand what you're trying to say, if you turn around and say 'I was abused by a guy' they might say, well, what, you did gay stuff then? I don't think it would register in their head that it's not something you chose … you had no control over it, but it does make me angry thinking that something that bad can be made into something else … that's how it is in our community, they don't get it, goreh get it, Indians don't.

Gurdeep expressed anger that his experience of CSA could possibly be misconstrued as a voluntary act of homosexuality, adding that '*goreh*' (which refers to 'White people' in Punjabi/Urdu) would understand it,

but his own community would not. This speaks strongly to a cultural ignorance on the part of Asians regarding the phenomenon of male CSA, with a lack of understanding leading to harmful assumptions that could hamper survivor recovery. While it is widely acknowledged that male CSA survivors often experience post-traumatic stress disorder and its associated symptoms, common reactions also include a fear of appearing 'unmasculine', societal, peer or self-questioning of their sexuality and a fear of homophobic reactions (Adams et al. 2018; Petersson and Plantin 2019). Masculinity and homophobia have considerable overlaps in the context of male CSA, as homophobic attitudes towards perceived 'homosexual' acts can call one's masculinity into question. This was a fear expressed by Ayaan:

> You don't want people saying you're gay or something, you'd be surprised how many people say that, I mean we say it as jokes between us like 'oi gay boy you're gay you're gay'.

Ayaan's response offers insight into the humour men use in order to demasculinise other men, which includes equating homosexuality with femininity to ridicule other men into feeling 'weak'. The term 'gay' has long been used as an insult by heterosexuals, usually towards other heterosexuals (Swan 2016). For Ayaan, fears of accusations that he was less masculine or that he was gay were a barrier to disclosing abuse. Roller et al. (2009) discuss how confusion over sexuality is a central issue for many male CSA survivors, who may question whether the abuse 'caused' them to be gay. There is no evidence to suggest that sexually abusive experiences determine one's sexuality, but plenty of research has acknowledged the ambiguity survivors feel about their own sexual identity and their sense of masculinity (O'Leary et al. 2017).

'Not Losing My Honour Within the Family'

Honour, or izzat, was considered a significant subtheme in this research on the basis of the interview findings. Bhanbhro (2021) asserts that izzat is reflected in the way a family (or individual members of that family)

conducts itself. There are many interpretations of izzat across the literature and even more interpretations at the individual level (Pabla 2020). The participants in this research discussed what izzat meant to them in relation to their experiences and whether it had any impact on their lives.

> I wouldn't want it to get back to the wrong person and have anything said about my family, I mean I don't care what people say about me … but my family, I wouldn't ever want them spoken about in a bad way, so to protect them, especially my parents … [they're] old and they're vulnerable and they can't really protect themselves, so I see that as my job. (Mahmud)

When asked whether honour had played a part in Mahmud's not disclosing to his family, he acknowledged that it did. However, he was more concerned about protecting his family's izzat than his own. Gurdeep noted that his grandmother and parents placed great emphasis on the concept of honour:

> [My grandmother's] got this thing about her where everything's about what you're looking at, izzat … it's just about protecting that and my dad, that's his mum, you have to imagine he's learned everything from her so he has that same thinking.

While Gurdeep acknowledged that honour played a role in his life because of his parents and his grandmother, he was quick to point out that it was not the sole reason for his decision not to disclose to his family. Gurdeep's position on honour was part of a pattern among some of the other survivors who recognised the importance and existence of honour while also dismissing the standing it had in previous generations (Gill 2021; Pabla 2020). Both Aman and Gurdeep knew how significant honour was for their parents' generation and the integral part it played in their lives. For Aman, living and working with his parents after marriage exemplified this honour, which was all about family image and was experienced within the wider family context (Sodhi 2017). Ayaan offered a slightly different interpretation of honour based on his experiences:

> I've heard about it in Pakistani families like when their daughters run off with a guy or something, it's quite a big thing and they end up killing the girl or the boyfriend, so for them it's bigger than it is for us, I wouldn't say we get that affected by it. (Ayaan)

Ayaan was aware of what honour meant but was not affected by it and stated that the concept did not play a major role within Bengali families. He associated honour with the Pakistani community and used honour killings as an example. However, although izzat is a familiar concept in Pakistani culture (Balani 2019; Chambers 2020), it is not exclusive to this particular community. For Suleman, honour was one of the reasons his mother attempted to silence him after he disclosed his abuse to her. This example puts into perspective the magnitude of honour and how it can outweigh the well-being of one's child. It also demonstrates how individual interpretations of what honour entails differ from person to person, family to family and, indeed, community to community.

> Being told to stay quiet, I'd say that's about honour, that's about izzat and not bringing shame on myself or anyone else. (Suleman)

Social networks are extensive across South Asian communities (Chambers 2020; Giwa 2016; Phillips et al. 2007), and gossip is a powerful tool that can potentially jeopardise the izzat and standing of an individual and their family. A fear that your community will talk about you and subsequently compromise your family izzat is a 'mechanism of social control' that is felt in particular by young British Asians who feel that they are under surveillance from community elders (Gill and Walker 2020).

Notions of guilt and betrayal (of family secrets) can pervade in Asian family structures (Aziz 2017; Chambers 2020), with community and/or family honour being threatened by the admission of 'shameful' secrets. Cowburn et al (2015) list three contributing factors that explain why women from South Asian communities are hesitant about disclosing sexual abuse: a fear that they are somehow betraying the perpetrators of the acts (usually close members of the same family or community), a fear that they will not be believed and a sense that the assault was not violent enough to constitute rape (Gupta 2003; Gill 2008, 2020; Patel

2008). These factors go some way towards demonstrating the complex interplay between the crime of abuse, its impact on the community and the survivor's position in the aftermath of disclosure. Although these findings are from studies of Asian sexual abuse survivors, they are not exclusive to South Asian communities—literature demonstrates that a fear of disbelief and negative consequences in the aftermath of disclosure are common among survivors regardless of ethnicity (Manay and Collin-Vézina 2021). Confidentiality is of paramount importance to abuse survivors across all ethnic groups (Gill and Harrison 2019). However, within South Asian communities, the added layer of exposure to the wider community feeds into their distrust and doubts about whether their confidentiality will be maintained (O'Neill Gutierrez and Chawla 2017).

Research has indicated that in some families, survivors feel so guilty and rejected upon disclosure that their family ties are severed (Alaggia et al. 2019). Many survivors seek resolution and reparation through disclosure, wishing for acceptance, acknowledgement and confirmation in the hope that these will contribute to their healing (Easton and Parchment 2021). Izzidien (2008) reports that in the context of domestic abuse, many South Asian people found it difficult to come forward because they worried that if the community found out, their family would be shunned, made outcasts and exposed to shame. This exposure to shame underpins the fear of community rejection that seems to be prevalent among South Asian abuse survivors. McGregor (2014) reports that many CSA survivors, male and female, fear being cast out of their families for 'airing the family's dirty laundry' or 'dredging up the past for nothing'. This further legitimises ostracism as a very real fear for survivors from all backgrounds. However, what differentiates the experience of Asian survivors, according to the findings of this study, is the added element of community and the way family and community are entwined. These two groups pass a double judgement on the survivor, who may end up being rejected by both. Gagnier and Collin-Vézina (2016) argue that there is a lack of awareness around male CSA that, in turn, leads to a lack of acknowledgement that this form of abuse can impact men as much as it can women. However, it may be that such lack of awareness is driven less by denial and disbelief that such crimes

exist than by the socially perpetuated myth of masculinity and manhood, which is incompatible with the traditional image of a 'victim'. When these two phenomena cannot be reconciled, denial is the result.

Conclusion

While CSA can affect children from all communities and ethnicities, it is important to acknowledge the nuances across these experiences and the culturally specific complexities that can present additional challenges for survivors from minoritised communities. With this in mind, the chapter's overall aim was to explore how British South Asian male CSA survivors make sense of their experiences. There is a concerning lack of empirical research on CSA among minoritised men that has left significant gaps in knowledge. Indeed, much existing research on CSA in Asian communities has centralised Asian men as the enforcers of honour and violence—but as this current study demonstrates, Asian women can also perpetuate and maintain harmful cultural practices and attitudes.

Many of the survivors in this research decided not to disclose to family members as a result of fears around unsupportive reactions, ostracisation from family and/or the wider community, and the unprecedented ramifications that survivors often anticipate in the aftermath of disclosure. The tight-knit structure of South Asian communities was recognised as a contributing factor that not only enabled abuse to take place more easily but maintained the silence around it. Hesitancy around disclosure to family members was driven by a fear of ostracism from the family; what distinguished this experience for the South Asian male survivors was the important role of the community and the wider family network within this cultural context. These survivors felt that they had to consider the ramifications of disclosure for their wider family and community, which is why only three out of the eight interviewed had revealed their abuse to immediate family members. This suggests that a significant shift is required to change embedded attitudes around shame, honour and heteronormativity and the ways in which these constructs negatively impinge on healing from trauma.

All eight survivors resisted culturally enforced ideas around izzat, characterising it as a negative construct that acted as a barrier to disclosure. This finding aligned with Ahmed et al's (2009) research into South Asian female survivors of sexual violence, which presents culture as the reason why family and community members in that context held problematic views about sexual violence. Izzat has been conceptualised in the literature as a patriarchal construct created by men to subjugate and control women (Gill 2021). The current study sought to challenge this idea by illustrating the ways in which izzat can also shape the experiences of South Asian men. The findings not only demonstrate how izzat impacts South Asian men but also how it is inextricably linked to men's construction of their own masculinity. Indeed, many of the survivors who did not disclose to family felt they could not because of different culturally driven understandings of, and attitudes towards, masculinity. By contrast, previous research on masculinity in South Asian communities has discussed it in relation to protest masculinity and hypermasculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Kalra 2009; Jaspal 2019; Pabla 2020).

The results of this study thus offer insights into how abuse disclosure for British South Asian men would threaten their standing within the family and their (perceived) masculinity. Engaging with parents and communities around these sensitive topics is therefore a necessary first step in breaking down the conversation barriers identified in this research. The secretive nature of CSA means its impact on survivors and society is too easily concealed, and research such as this study can help bring it to light and allow us (survivors and their families, counsellors and others) to understand it better and overcome those communication barriers to progress efforts on identifying, responding to and preventing CSA. Group-based consultations with Asian communities to raise awareness of the harms of CSA and the need to support children and adults who disclose abuse could be one way to mitigate harmful attitudes towards abuse disclosure. This would also open up a dialogue for conversations around subjects that have traditionally been viewed as taboo. These consultations would perhaps be better facilitated by practitioners from a similar ethnic background to prevent exacerbating group-based differences on the basis of ethnicity and any potential power imbalances

that may emerge as a result. These consultations could help survivors from Asian communities develop healthier coping mechanisms, disclose abuse earlier and forge a wider support network.

Ultimately, this research has merely scratched the surface of the issue—we still have much to learn regarding the importance of deepening our understanding of South Asian male CSA survivors and how they can be supported. Future research not only needs to recognise and challenge existing assumptions around culture and gender but should also pay greater attention to a critically under-researched group of survivors to ensure their voices and experiences are included in—and can help shape—policy and practice.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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