




“Children are going on a Different Path”: Youth Identity from the Bangladeshi Immigrant Parents’ Perspective

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to describe youth identity from the parents’ perspective focusing on the impact of migration on identity formation for both parents and children. The semi-structured interview guide was developed using an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1989). Interviews with Bangladeshi immigrants ($n = 18$) living in Toronto, Canada, were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (*Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101, 2006) guide on thematic analysis and a systems framework (Khanlou et al. 2018). Parents described youth identity as a time of conflict fraught with turmoil, confusion, loneliness, and dual identity. Parents felt their children were on a divergent path from themselves in terms of identity and often felt the changes in their children as a result of acculturation were difficult to comprehend. Their identity as a “parent” took precedence over all other roles in life, particularly for mothers. Parents and children experienced changes in their identity at the macro-, meso-, micro-, and individual levels. Parenting support programs and resources are particularly needed for families with adolescent children to help mitigate conflict within the home and bridge understanding between parents and children as identities shift and transition through the migration and resettlement process.

Keywords Youth identity · Parent · Immigrant · Canada · Bengali · Bangladeshi diaspora · South Asian diaspora

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The period of youth and emerging adulthood is a time of complexity and transition in a young person's life (Arnett 2004; Erikson 1963, 1968). Parents often play a pivotal role in a young person's life (Schachter and Ventura 2008) and youth often talk about their relationships with their parents when asked about youth identity (Gill 2007). However, youth identity is rarely studied through the lens of the parent. Adolescence can be a time of conflict within the parent-child relationship (Collins 1990) and migration and resettlement can pose additional challenges (Tyyska 2008).

South Asian populations (those reporting origins in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and other countries) make up the largest visible minority group in Canada (Statistics Canada 2008) and is projected to increase to over a quarter (28%) of the population by 2031 (Statistics Canada 2016). It is estimated that 32,385 immigrants from Bangladesh reside in Toronto (6870 people or 21% are recent immigrants who landed in the past 5 years) (Statistics Canada 2017). Bangladeshi professionals and students began arriving in Canada in greater numbers following the opening up of immigration policy in 1967 with many also seeking asylum during the war for independence with Pakistan in 1971. This initial wave of immigration started a chain reaction with many immigrants sponsoring their relatives from Bangladesh. Since 1986, Bangladeshi immigrants to Canada have been steadily increasing with the majority settling in Ontario and Quebec (Government of Canada 2009; Encyclopedia of Canada's People n.d.). Despite the complexity and variation of South Asian populations, very little research has focused on specific countries of origin within South Asian populations in Canada.

A large concentration of the newcomer Bangladeshi community resides in the locale of "Little Bangladesh" in Taylor-Massey (formerly Crescent Town) neighborhood of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. It is estimated that over four thousand residents in this area are Bangladeshi (Keung 2008). "Little Bangladesh" is a relatively newcomer and transient community with high rates of poverty (Access Alliance 2008; Lewsen 2017; Monsebraaten 2017; Recknagel 2017; Sava et al. 2016; Toronto Central LHIN 2016). Many Bangladeshi newcomers choose to settle in this neighborhood to help mitigate culture shock upon arrival by having Bengali/Bangladeshi neighbors and having access to Bengali resources and services (Ghosh 2007; Halder 2012).

The Bengali/Bangladeshi diaspora is a complicated construct, which cuts across ethnic, national, racial, religious, sociopolitical, and historical crosscurrents (Alexander et al. 2015). Bangladeshi immigrant populations in Canada face unique challenges to their identity upon arrival. Halder (2012) found that Bangladeshi immigrant parents in Toronto, Canada, attempted to influence their children's cultural identity formation by taking them to cultural, language, religious, and music classes and encouraged practices such as eating with one's hands and marrying within the Bangladeshi culture to retain their children's ties to Bangladesh. Residing within ethnoculturally homogenous neighborhoods such as "Little Bangladesh" was conducive to greater communal interconnectedness for the first migrant generation, but this was often met with the children's disapproval because they did not appreciate their parents' over-reliance on their neighbors (Ghosh 2014). Religion was a central identifier for the immigrant Bangladeshi, and parents tried their best to raise their children with Muslim, Hindu, or Christian values (the three most common faith traditions in Bangladesh) (Halder 2012). On the other hand, there were also parents who did not care to pass on their cultural-religious identity to their children but rather preferred to raise them as "global citizens," hoping this would help them acculturate and adapt more effectively (Halder 2012). Linden (2017) found resistance against acculturation to be common amongst first-generation immigrant Bangladeshis, while the second generation was open to embracing rapid acculturation and change. Bengali youth developed a "dual identity" and could identify with both Bangladesh

and the host country's culture, reconciling that it was "alright to be a part of two worlds" (Linden 2017).

To date, there has been very little research that has focused on Bangladeshi immigrant youth identity formation in Canada that gleaned through the parents' perspective. Considering the contribution of migration, resettlement, and acculturation to youth identity formation and parent-youth conflict, it is important to elucidate youth identity at the intersection of migration and resettlement.

Thus, the following research questions were considered in this paper:

1. How do Bangladeshi immigrant and newcomer parents characterize youth identity?
2. What is the impact of migration and resettlement on identity formation for both parents and youth?

Methods

Qualitative Research Design

This qualitative descriptive study was carried out in the "Little Bangladesh" locale in Taylor-Massey (formerly Crescent Town), Toronto, Ontario, Canada, from June to September 2013. Research ethics were submitted to York University's Research Ethics Board. The study was approved by Research Ethics Human Participants Review Sub-Committee Board. The original study was a mixed methods research study designed to understand the mental health concerns and mental health service access barriers of Bangladeshi immigrant and newcomer populations. Purposive homogenous sampling (purposeful/non-random sampling from a single segment of the population (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011)) was carried out by posting promotional flyers in public areas of congregation (community centers, Bengali supermarkets, places of worship, etc.) in "Little Bangladesh." Snowball recruitment was then employed by asking initial participants to refer their friends and relatives. Forty-seven participants were recruited for the quantitative survey phase of this study and a subset of twenty participants from this sample were interviewed in the qualitative leg of the study. For the purposes of this present study, the participants who did not have children ($n = 2$) were excluded from the analysis for a final sample size of 18 parents ($n = 18$; 14 mothers and 4 fathers).

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) was used to formulate the interview questions. Intersectionality focuses on understanding an individual's social location by understanding the interlaced systems of oppression in our lives (e.g., race, class, gender, religion, and nationality). Mental health and attitudes towards seeking care are complex phenomena, and this study cuts across many intersections such as migration, mental health, and gender. Important contextual variables such as gender, social support, and socioeconomic status were included in this study's sociodemographic questionnaire. Questions regarding mental health service access which considered the importance of structural and cultural barriers and facilitators were asked during the interviews (e.g., How do you think income/employment/lack of health insurance could influence a community member's ability or openness to seek

mental health care?) to provide as complete a picture as possible of the participants' lived experience. In addition, a systems approach (Khanlou et al. 2018) was used to guide the analysis of the interview transcripts to consider the influence of the youth's social position and external forces, rather than only focusing on personality and internal factors. Youth identity can be conceptually organized as being influenced by factors at the macro- (language, religion, culture), meso- (migration), micro- (family, friends, school, and community), and individual levels (gender, self-esteem) (Khanlou et al. 2018). Each theme gleaned from the thematic analysis was summarized according to these four levels of factors.

Rigor

Several strategies were employed to ensure rigor in this study (Guba and Lincoln 1981, 1982; Lincoln and Guba 1985). A sample size of 20 participants was collected for the qualitative phase to allow for rich data collection. A self-reflexive journal and field notes were kept for reference and to contextualize the analysis of the data. A second translator was asked to translate five of the interviews along with the PI to ensure there was intertranslator agreement. Researcher positionality was noted and reflected upon as the researcher could be viewed as both an insider (Bangladeshi immigrant to Canada) and outsider (born and raised in the West, academic). Researcher triangulation was carried out with intercoder agreement (Miles and Huberman 1994) and was reached after individual coding of transcripts.

Thematic Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide on thematic analysis, the basic elements of interest in the transcribed interviews were preliminarily coded. This coding was largely conceptualized/theory-driven (as opposed to data-driven), since it was stated at the outset that the main focus on this study was to identify barriers and promote of seeking mental healthcare. Qual analysis was done manually, and codes were organized into sub-themes and overarching themes. A thematic map was finalized, and detailed analyses were written for each theme. A constant comparative technique and iterative refinement process were utilized throughout.

Results

Sample Profile

The parents in this study ($n = 18$; 14 mothers and 4 fathers) ranged in age from 28 to 60 years old. The majority of the participants were Muslim (55%), while 35% identified as Hindu. About 40% of participants self-rated their English proficiency as "quite a bit" to "extremely well" and the majority (60%) had an annual household income less than \$29,999 per year.

Thematic Analysis

Youth Identity Through Parents' Eyes

Bangladeshi immigrant parents were deeply concerned for their children's mental health and well-being. Although the interviews were structured to focus on the adult's mental

health concerns, time and time again, parents would center their discussion on their children's mental health and offer their descriptions of how they view youth identity. The first major theme parents discussed in terms of youth identity was that of "challenges of dual identity," which encompasses macro- (language, religion), meso- (immigration), and micro-level factors (family, friends, school, and community) (Khanlou et al. 2018). Parents described the difficulty their children faced in having a "dual identity" and struggling to identify as both Bangladeshi/Bengali and Canadian. Parents saw their youth as undergoing rapid acculturation upon arrival in Canada when they compared their own slower (and perhaps) reluctant adoption of Canadian culture. For example, parents viewed their children as being more open to the idea of seeking mental health services, "Maybe our kids will be feel more open about this idea [of seeking mental health services]. But I don't think it will not happen in the first generation" (mother 5). Parents lamented how their child's "dual identity" led them to hide and compartmentalize the more "Canadian" parts of their life which they feared their parents would disapprove of. Naturally, this lack of honesty between parents and children led to tensions within the home. Parents empathized with their children's loneliness and how much they missed their friends and family back home. Parents commented that their children experienced difficulty in communicating because of language/cultural barriers and were concerned that this led to them being bullied at school, "...their speaking stays separate. They don't teach them about bullies...I feel the teachers should tell them about this issue...[and] make sure they don't get bullied" (mother 13).

The second major theme that emerged in the parents' discussion on youth identity was that of "challenges of adolescence," which involved factors at the micro- (family, friends, school, and community) and individual levels (sense of identity and belonging). Parents often described youth identity in terms of the difficulties they saw as hallmarks of the youth and young adulthood time period. Parents described this time as one punctuated by turmoil, "with your children – many things can go wrong. Problems never end" (mother 2). One area of turmoil was that of romantic relationships, which often led to mental health issues in this period of life. "People can also go [seek mental health services] for problems during their teenage years, attraction to the opposite gender, heartbreak" (mother 5).

Parents also continuously spoke about their children in relation to how difficult they were to raise and discipline, which could fall under both the themes of acculturation/migration and adolescence. This difficulty could be as a result of the cultural divide in the household after migration or could be related to the generational clashes that often occur between parents and adolescents.

Parents and Children: Intertwined Identities

The Bangladeshi parents interviewed in this study felt a profound connection with their children, which often shaped their own identity. Parents most often described their identity in relation to their children with micro-level factors related to family and community. Parents' identity as a parent often took precedence over all other roles. This phenomenon was gendered, with mothers more often identifying on a deeper level with their children than fathers (although the sample size of fathers was too small to draw concrete conclusions). For example, one mother said, "For me, my priority is my household, my two children. I need to settle them. I cannot see them as separate." (mother 11). To illustrate this further, one father stated,

Also, another issue, is that if I think of my family, the majority of the stress comes from raising children. And mainly this falls on mothers. This stress that falls of the mother, this stress can fall then on the father. Such as, I am taking care and you are not taking care. It is not fair. It can come to a point that between the two there can be conflict. And maybe it hasn't happened before, but after coming to Canada, this situation is coming about more. Because here family means, mother, father and kids – (Father 2).

Parents saw their children as an extension of themselves and felt that whatever the parent did had concrete ramifications on their child. The concept of seeing the child as an individual separate from the parent was not prevalent among Bangladeshi immigrant parents. Parents felt inhibited from seeking mental health services because they were concerned that if the community found out, their child's marriage prospects and reputation would be tarnished. "Would be a problem when I go to try to marry off my children. Truly, not something to share. People will think it will happen to my children. This is not something to share" (mother 1).

The Discomfort in Shifting Identities Through Migration and Resettlement

Parents described the negative shift in their identity as a result of changes to socioeconomic status, culture, and religion after arrival in Canada. "We've come from good status but come here and cannot make enough money" (mother 1). "Those who come from Bangladesh are in a job crisis, financial crisis...new culture, new lifestyle...new society, culture. To get used to this takes at minimum 2-3 years and during this time most people go through mental stress" (father 2). The challenges of economic integration and the loss of status was often the first part of the parent's identity that suffered the first blow. Changes in lifestyle, culture, and religion were secondary to this. "They come here, there is no job, no money, religious change, cultural change" (mother 1).

While on one hand the parents wanted to maintain an identity that was intertwined with their children's, they expressed distress because they saw the process of acculturation changing their idyllic picture of the integrated parent-child relationship. Parents often remarked on how distant they felt from their children after arriving in Canada. Parents were uncomfortable and unprepared for the rapid change the process of migration and resettlement brought to their families. Prior to migration, parents had felt they understood their children to a certain level as they shared the same language, culture, values, etc. Post-migration, however, this harmonious worldview became disjointed because of the differing rates of acculturation and attitudes towards change. One mother described the heartache the Bangladeshi immigrant parent experienced after arriving in Canada, where his/her children essentially became strangers. The children rapidly took on an entirely different lifestyle and no longer held their parents in esteem. She recounted how the shock of change was so acute for a woman in the neighborhood that she committed suicide from the stress.

In Bangladesh there is a feeling of – we are going abroad to a country like Canada – there are many things there. I am going to do something big in my line of work, my children will get a better education, my children will have a better life, we...we...but when they come and change completely. The type of work they have to do in order to run the household, and...the way children don't listen to them. Education...don't know if it is being absorbed but it seems the children are going on a different path. Taking all of this together, depression starts. I know someone that committed suicide from stress. [She] wasn't able to tolerate all of this, and mentally they become sick.

– Mother 13

Parents described themselves as being slow to acculturate and reluctant to adopt new cultural values, while their children easily and eagerly adapted to their new Canadian environment. One parent expressed this reluctance, "...without wanting to, we are becoming accustomed to another culture" (mother 11). After migration, parents expressed anxiety; they did not know their children anymore and felt their children were keeping them in the dark, while they adopted aspects of a "Canadian" lifestyle that their parents would not approve of. The conflicts parents described occurring within the home went beyond the natural generational conflicts and "adolescent rebellion" that occur between parents and children. Migration, resettlement, and acculturation added a new layer to this conflict where parents now felt their child's shifting identity was an assault on the parent's culture, religion, values, and beliefs. One mother described Bangladesh as a "very restricting" environment in contrast to Canadian society where "children are doing and [Bangladeshi children] want to do that too. And there are often times that the family won't support these things, so they will hide it from the family...This affects [parents] mentally" (mother 13). One mother poignantly captured the stress these changes had brought to her family,

Our children are becoming accustomed. This is a continuing problem. It will keep going. It will not stop. This is culture. This is religious. Another problem is race. We bring a child here, they were born in Bangladesh now to another land. This is another conflict. From another land, but speaking in Canadian language. Now I have another child that is Canadian. Now between them they will have difficulties/problems. I know this. At one time he will say I am Canadian, I am Bangladeshi. And the Bangladeshi child will be in between both – will receive everything from Canadian culture but will be Bangladeshi. This is a big problem. As a mother I have to cope, I am very worried. I have two children. How will I cope between them? – Mother 11

Discussion

This study offered the Bangladeshi immigrant parents' perspectives on youth identity formation. The meso-level factor of migration played a substantial role in the identity formation of both parents and youth. This article adds a new understanding to youth identity formation from the perspective of parents. Parents interestingly see the compartmentalizing of their children's activities as being detrimental whereas children may see it as liberating and one of the only ways to maintain footing within the hyphenated reality of Bangladeshi-Canadian and the liminal intercultural space they now inhabit inside and outside their home. The finding of intertwined identities connecting parents to their children can open pathways of health and well-being for children when expressed in the ideal situation where parents see their children as extensions of themselves and take an active role in their child's life, putting their child's well-being before their own (going to mental health services will impact their child's marriage prospects, they need their kids settled before they are, etc.). However, this is a double-edged sword because in the pursuit of intertwined interconnected identity, when their child's identity changes through the process of migration, resettlement, and acculturation, this has a much more significant impact than it might for other communities. It can lead to an earth-shattering shift for parents who suddenly find that their world (i.e., their children) takes a different path and moves on without them. This compounds the loneliness and isolation the immigrant parent feels after leaving their ancestral land, home, and family behind in Bangladesh. Generational

differences are exacerbated by the process of migration and resettlement. The inequalities faced also contribute to this discomfort in identity shift. For parents, it feels like they are losing everything. They must grapple with the struggles of economic integration as new immigrants, and at the same time, face emotional and spiritual instability within the family unit due to the dynamic shifting of youth identity formation.

Our research study is consistent with the literature that also identifies the process of migration as one leading to political, social, gender, and class inequalities that exacerbate stressors related to mental health. (Halder 2012). Our research study also corroborated that children experiencing bullying was a concern for parents and that they identified that the cause was often due to racial and ethnic discrimination as well as xenophobia (Halder 2012). Parental anxieties surrounding their children's integration into "Canadian" culture post-migration shape their view of youth identity as a time of fear, stress, and turmoil, and a time that is often punctuated by mental health crisis. This study also speaks to the intergenerational cultural dissonance leading to increased family conflict and tension within Asian diasporic families (Choi et al. 2008). Furthermore, our study also corroborates the finding that parental identity is gendered with parental identity being higher for mothers compared with fathers (Fadjukoff et al. 2016).

Next Steps

Future studies that speak to a robust sample of both mothers and fathers pre- and post-migration and resettlement specifically focusing on youth identity formation at the crux of migration would be an important addition to the literature. Comparisons to youth identity formation for young people growing up in Bangladeshi in contrast to those in the diasporic community would also be interesting to study. Halder (2012) found that the process of globalization has had a varied impact on youth identity formation in Bangladesh. While generally globalization is dismissed as a process that homogenizes cultures, it has had a more nuanced effect in Bangladesh, where globalization has led to Westernization, Indianization, and Arabization of youth cultures and identity formation among different classes and religious groups. Future studies that appreciate this nuance and variation in Bangladeshi youth identity formation are needed. Globalization has also impacted Bangladeshi youth identity formation in the diaspora. The migration patterns of British Bangladeshis are influenced by living under British colonialism, and the Bangladeshi-British-Muslim youth identity is informed by systemic Islamophobia and the UK's stance on the "war on terror" (Zeitlyn 2015).

In addition, studies where both parents and children are interviewed separately about their own identity and their children and parents' identity formation, respectively, are also needed to see if their perspectives differ and what the implications are in terms of effective parenting and communication within the home. Future studies with different South Asian diasporic populations in Canada would also help to elucidate youth identity formation, for example, contrasting youth from differing migration generations such as 1.5 generation youth vs. second generation or Canadian-born youth (Islam 2015; Rumbaut 2004). South Asian populations in Canada come from wide and varying migration histories, socioeconomic backgrounds, and sociopolitical contexts, and the acknowledgement of these disparate backgrounds is critical in health promotion and social planning (Chapman et al. 2013). For example, Indian Bengalis and Bangladeshi Bengalis in Toronto have vastly different migration paths, settlement patterns, and housing trajectories (Ghosh 2005). Youth identity formation after arrival, particularly in

relation to mitigating the communication breakdown within the home and downward mental health spiral, needs to be studied within the varying South Asian populations and contexts in Canada. Future studies with Bangladeshi populations living across Toronto (outside the “Little Bangladesh locale) in addition to other diasporic communities (e.g., London Borough of Tower Hamlets) would also shed light on this area.

Limitations

This study did not explicitly ask parents about their identity and their views on their children’s identity formation. The original interview was centered on mental health concerns and mental health service access barriers. This may have colored the parents’ discussions and may have given an overly anxious picture of the parent-child relationship as it was discussed often under the context of mental health stressors. As a result, the conclusions that can be drawn from this study in regard to identity are not as robust as they could be. Parental discussions on youth identity only offer one side of the story. Interviews with the children, in addition to other members of the family, would have added more perspective. Since this study was not originally focused on parent-child identity formation, information was not collected on the number of children in the household or the ages of the children. The transferability of these findings may be low and the study findings may only be applicable to newcomer and immigrant Bangladeshi populations living within the “Little Bangladesh” locale of East Toronto.

Conclusions and Implications

The integration of Bangladeshi immigrant youth into Canadian society is a point of tension that exacerbates the natural generational tension. It is yet another stressor on the newcomer’s already overburdened plate. It is important that this be considered both within a systems framework (Khanlou et al. 2018) and also by health providers when considering outreach, therapy, and resources for this specific community. Bangladeshi immigrant parents are highly invested in the well-being of their children. Leveraging spaces and opportunities where the parent identity is quite often invoked, such as in schools (i.e., parent-teacher meetings and school pick-ups), could be a site of intervention with dedicated material that speaks to the challenges with mental health (adolescence, acculturation, generational tensions) as well as potential resources (Kids Help Phone, etc.). Özdemir and Koutakis (2016) found that parents are a useful intervention opportunity to potentially stop negative substance use such as underage drinking. Leveraging the parent-child relationship by increasing parents’ restrictive attitudes towards underage drinking was an effective and robust strategy for reducing heavy drinking regardless of the adolescents’ gender, cultural origin, peers, etc. The intergenerational and cultural clashes within the immigrant home especially between parents and their adolescent children support the need to expand parenting programs from focusing solely on early childhood development to programs that can support parents of adolescent children as well (Fadjukoff et al. 2016). Beyond parenting programming and support, thoughtful mental health programming needs to be developed for Bangladeshi immigrant populations. Newcomer services almost solely focus on employment access and English language proficiency. While the challenges of economic integration are an

overwhelming mental health stressor, the devastating consequences of the migration and resettlement process where children essentially become strangers to their parents are one that require more focus. The rupture of the parent-child bond, which is often the most intimate bond within the family, can lead to incredible distress and even suicide, as was recounted in one of the interviews. Understanding parental perspectives on youth identity formation is crucial in order to effectively tailor parenting programs and mental health supports that meet the needs of Bangladeshi newcomer and immigrant populations living in Toronto, Canada.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Human Participants Review Sub-Committee Board at York University, Toronto, Canada.

Conflict of Interest Farah Islam, Anjum Sultana, Syeda Qasim, Mari Kozak, Hala Tamim, and Nazilla Khanlou declare that they have no conflict of interest. Farah Islam received research funding from the Research Cost Fund (Faculty of Graduate Studies, York University), LaMarsh Child and Youth Research collaborative group (York University), and the La Barge Scholarship in Multiculturalism (2013-2014) (York University).

Informed Consent All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000 (5). Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

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