

# **National and ethnic identifications and acculturation practices in British-born Indian and Pakistani adolescents**

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## **Introduction and aims**

This study investigated the national and ethnic identities of British Indian and Pakistani adolescents. Identities are fluid and complex, and therefore the study looked at a number of different factors which shape the way adolescents feel about themselves. These factors included patriotism, context, self-categorisation, racism, cultural practices and institutional trust. This paper, in particular, covers the significance of being British, acculturation and context. The interviews reveal a complex interplay of identities at different levels (public and private, for example), as well as ways in which acculturation practices are far more complex than leading models would suggest. Moreover, there is a need for researchers to move away from essentialising individuals and groups, whilst also understanding that these individuals and groups may essentialise themselves to understand their own identities.

## **Method**

The sample consisted of seventeen adolescents, aged between 13 and 16 years old, all born in the UK. There were 8 Indian adolescents (5 female, 3 male), and 9 Pakistani adolescents (4 female, 5 male). All interviews were conducted in the South East of England, including London, Oxford, Slough and Windsor. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, issues which were addressed included the participants' self-categorizations, national identifications, ethnic identifications, the context-dependence of their self-categorizations and identifications, and the balance between their cultural practices based on their ethnic minority culture vs. mainstream British culture. A grounded theory methodology was used to guide the analysis, where themes were derived from the data. The following themes of significance of being British, acculturation and context will be discussed in more detail here.

## **Discussion**

### **Significance of Being British**

According to Kelman (1997), there are two types of attachment to the nation: sentimental and instrumental. On the one hand, the sentimental attachment is emotional and people feel that the group reflects their personal identity. On the other, the instrumental attachment is focused more on the idea of the nation meeting needs, interests and obligations that accompany citizenship and membership of the national group. The attachment most commonly found with these participants was the less emotional instrumental attachment. There was no need to change or take on any 'British' values or beliefs, but being British simply gives them status as a resident or a citizen. Moreover, it was seen as a more to do with a label or a tag.

### **'What does 'Being British' mean to you?**

*I don't really think about it. It's just that I'm British, it's not a big deal. Being born in Britain, doesn't really give me anything.'*

Perhaps this may be due to the fact that Britain is a 'state' category as opposed to a 'national' category. As defined by Barrett (2007), the former is a sovereign political entity which has a government and various institutions enforcing laws and policies within the territory as marked by its borders. The latter, on the other hand, is a named human community occupying a homeland, having a shared history, common stories of ancestry, a common mass public culture and shared values, symbols, emblems, traditions and practices. It is not apparent whether the respondents were making this distinction between state or nation, and it may also be that British is a national identity for these participants, rather than a state identity. Although some of the younger participants felt that being British did not mean anything to them, there were others who articulated that it meant having a higher standard of living, more opportunities and freedom. Whilst not explicitly stated, this could be in comparison to the country of their ethnic background.

In comparison to similar research with older participants aged between 18 and 26 (Vadher, 2005), it was clear that for many of these participants in the present study, the idea of being British and its personal relevance was something they had not given a lot of thought. This may be indicative of developmental and experiential differences. For example, in the current study, the participants were socialising primarily within the family and school domains. In the study with older participants, they were going to, or had been to university, they had jobs and their social circles were much wider. Within these different fields, they were becoming much more aware as to what being 'British' and living in a British society implied as individuals with an ethnic background.

There was also a sense of inclusion that accompanied being British and which did not have any relevance to ethnicity or nationality, but was reflective of living in a multicultural society.

### **'What does 'Being British' mean to you?**

*Being British is being part of a group which is not where you have to be a certain type of person to be part of that group.*

### **What do you mean?**

*Like you don't have to be white or black to be part of this group.'*

*'Um to me it means that you live in great Britain and although you're involved in a Western culture of Britain, you're not really, at core you're not really... that culture. you might be something else.'*

These views were synonymous to those raised in conversations about Britain being a multicultural society. The multicultural nature of Britain was evident in the ethnic composition of the participants' friends and was generally seen as something positive – an opportunity to learn more about other cultures. Nevertheless, location was an important factor in opinions of multiculturalism. London and more urban towns allowed participants to feel comfortable. However, moving into less multicultural areas often invited feelings of threat and intimidation:

*'Places like Oxford isn't much but like some places are like mixed and I like the feel to it, like you don't feel intimidated by the white people, you don't feel- there's not just one ethnic group or race.'*

A multicultural society meant that racism was being broken down; people did not have to be 'white' or 'Christian' to be British. There is more exposure to new cultures and more opportunities for people of an ethnic background to represent their own culture.

## **Acculturation**

On the whole, the participants seemed to show and endorse attitudes that reflected integration / biculturalism / hybridity (Berry, 1997; LaFromboise et al., 1993). However, upon closer inspection, there are clear differences with context. Within the interviews, there was an idea that cultural attitudes and lifestyle or behaviours were two distinct concepts. Britain was not seen of as having much of a culture, and so being Indian or Pakistani was seen as allowing these respondents to have some idea or feelings of being cultural. Their lifestyles, on the other hand, were more British, or more appropriately, Western. Having more than one cultural society that they could pick and choose from certainly puts these respondents in an advantageous position.

*'I think I pick and choose parts of both*

### **Why?**

*Because there are some parts of British culture I don't like and some parts of Indian culture I don't like*

### **Can you give me any examples?**

*Um... like the whole.. I don't know. You know our family, we don't really do the whole covering your head thing, being really really super respectful, you know I don't touch my gran's feet every time I see her, um... I don't eat fish and chips every Friday. You know, just things like that.. so I pick and choose.'*

This lends to the idea of being able to adapt to different contexts when the situation arises, as suggested by a 15-year-old Pakistani female:

### **'Do you view yourself as being 'between two (or more) cultures' (i.e. Pakistani and British) or do you think they work together quite well?**

*Um, I guess in a way yeah, cos if you've been brought up here, you know how to adapt to certain things, I guess for me, I think it goes well cos I've learnt how to deal with things better.'*

Such views clearly support LaFromboise et al.'s (1993) suggestion that there are different types of biculturalism. For example, the participants illustrated examples of 'alternation'. This is where they develop competence in two or more cultures and display understanding and positive attitudes to both cultures. In developing these competencies, they will be able to manage stress and learning effectively, and develop contacts and commonalities with people from both cultures. These participants have been able to deal with the social and academic demands at school as well as the more cultural and religious spheres within the home.

*'I am actually quite comfortable with it because I've been brought up in a Western and Eastern culture simultaneously, you know the differences and you know when to adapt to each one. If I'm with my school friends you sort of act in a way that's appropriate for British culture and then with your mum's friends you have to act like, um, be respectful, use your Indian culture.'*

There was no sense of 'cultural conflict'. As Ballard (1994) argues, the only times when such conflicts are apparent, are when parental views are often challenged by the children's views. This of course, could be even less specific to issues of culture, and moreover, a common issue faced by many adolescents. Sam and Virta (2003) found that there were no differences in psychological adaptation and intergenerational conflicts between minority adolescents in Sweden and Norway and their host majority counterparts. They argue that researchers tend to use acculturation too often to account for psychological problems, which could be part of the normal developmental process adolescents go through.

The adolescents in this study show the ability to move between different arenas of their lives competently and with ease – supporting Ballard’s analogy of code switching in language with that of moving between different cultural fields. This, of course, could be different as they enter wider social arenas, such as higher education, relationships and so on. Perhaps a few issues that were raised in the Pakistani interviews were more to do with certain barriers that their religious upbringing did not allow.

**‘Do you ever have any conflicts (being British and Pakistani) or do they both come together quite well?’**

*Yeah I like both of them, I don’t think... I mean sometimes in Britain, you- a lot of people who are non-Muslims do stuff that Muslims can’t. Like a lot of Muslims can’t talk about girls and stuff like that and they do collide with each other in British schools... there’s loads of people talking about stupid stuff and in places like Pakistan which is a Muslim country you don’t talk about things like that.’*

Interestingly, there were some responses which reflected the idea of ‘choice’. The British identity was unconscious, everyday and banal. Ethnic identity, however, was seen as a more conscious effort or choice. Perhaps this was because ethnicity was forced on to the participants (strict rules for girls, eating ethnic food, speaking the home language). You could, for example, choose to be Indian, but not British:

*‘I’m British in the sense that you know I speak English, like there are things that I probably don’t realise I do, but I do them unconsciously- you know without knowing. But um, Pakistani as well... I think I do that more consciously cos like it’s not me, but it’s like family influence and stuff like that. Like if it was me, I would just be whatever, but it’s family influence and stuff like that.’*

Nevertheless, there were also those respondents, for whom ethnicity and religiosity were always evident:

**‘Can you think of any situations where you feel very Indian?’**

*Everyday life, I just like, from the minute I wake up to when I go to sleep, yeah I’m Indian the whole way through. I don’t think that there’s ever been a situation where I’ve felt more British than Indian.’*

**‘Can you think of any situations where you feel very Pakistani?’**

*Not really. I do a lot. But I don’t really think of it all the time. It’s just there.’*

## **CONTEXT**

The participants were asked whether various identities were more apparent when at school, home or with friends. The responses revealed the fluidity of these multiple identities and the role that varying contexts will also have. Language and sports were also additional contextual factors that emerged from the interviews. There was also a clear distinction between the public and private spheres of the respondents’ lives, which further illustrated how mutable and flexible these identities were. Similar findings have been echoed by Ghuman (2003) who found that there were clear distinctions between public and private domains and whereby minority children were more likely to use hyphenated self-descriptors.

### Home (private)

Twelve of the seventeen participants felt their ethnic and/or religious identities at home; with three of these participants feeling only Muslim. This was primarily because they were constantly surrounded by their family, and so it may be fair to say that their ethnic and religious background was always evident within the family home. This assertion was also supported when an Indian girl said she felt 'Gujarati' and more cultural at home. The role of religion was clear in the interviews with the Pakistani respondents, and the parents were found to be encouraging and enforcing the religious aspect within the home.

### **'When you are at home, do you feel British, Pakistani, Muslim or something else?**

#### *Pakistani Muslim*

#### **Why?**

*Cos my parents are really Islamic, and although we're not so Islamic, we still have to read the Koran, read namaz, especially on Fridays and um, yeah but I feel really Pakistani, like I told you our culture is so mixed into who we are and how we been brought up so...'*

When at home, none of the participants said they felt 'British'. There were combinations of either 'British-Pakistani' or all three identities (national, ethnic and religious).

*'At home, I'm just me and I don't have to think about it.'*

### **'When you are at home, do you feel British, Indian, Hindu or something else?**

*I feel a bit of both or everything really.*

#### **Why?**

*Well, when I talk, I kind of mix Gujarati and English together, um, just the way we live is kind of Indian compared to how English people would live, and yeah it's just little elements of those things, and like the stuff we have in our home, it's just different, it's mixed.'*

The following quote from a Pakistani girl clearly illustrates the meta-contrast principle of the self-categorisation theory (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994):

*'When it comes to like where do you feel at home, its like, cos at school everyone's British around you, you feel as though, I feel as though, I'm Pakistani. Whereas, I think it's cos when I'm in a Pakistani environment, I feel more British, and when I'm in a British environment, I feel more Pakistani. I think I'm kinda like a rebellious person generally, so I think that's what it is.'*

In a context with people who are of a similar group, the participant uses the meta-contrast principle to find dimensions (i.e. being British) upon which to differentiate themselves from those in the intragroup context.

### School (public)

Six of the participants said they felt British at school. This was either because they felt their background was unimportant or not brought up, or because 'everyone' was British. This could mean that there is more exposure to white British people within school, or simply that being at school, and taught in the British education system meant that they felt British.

*'When I go to school cos I have to assimilate with people who were born in Britain as well usually, and so you feel involved in that western culture so you do feel British when you go to school and just when you go out as well.'*

A 15-year-old Pakistani participant elicited a defensive response when asked about how she felt at school:

### **'When you are at school, do you feel British, Pakistani, Muslim or something else?'**

*Pakistani Muslim. I'm not gonna change my ways in front of white people, I'm who I am.'*

This reaction may be in response to a sense of value threat that the respondent may feel. As suggested by Branscombe et al. (1999), when a group's value, and in particular, morality is threatened, high identifiers tend to respond defensively. In another light, as with the spontaneous self-descriptions, it may also be seen as an assertive response.

There was a lot of variation in the identities of the children at school. There were those who only felt Indian or Muslim, as well as those who felt Pakistani- Muslim, British-Pakistani, or even all three. In one interview, they felt all three but in a specific order,

*'I feel a British Pakistani Muslim'*

### **All three?**

*I feel Pakistani first, and Muslim second and the British last*

### **Why?**

*Cos Muslim I ain't that religious but I do go to the mosque when I can and the school I go to it's the most ethnic school in the borough, so there's like, lots of blacks, whites, Asians, and a lot of my friends are Asians so I do sometimes speak Pakistani with them.'*

*'I just feel Muslim because I don't- I feel more Pakistani when I'm standing out from the crowd and they're all English and they're all Indian or whatever, but because it's so multicultural, there are so many different cultures and it's so multicultural you just intermingle with them, so I just feel Muslim.'*

Interestingly, two of the Indian female participants said they felt 'Asian'. This superordinate category was used to acknowledge the different South Asian friends that some of the participants had. It disregarded any ethnic or religious divides, and allowed a sense of inclusion under this 'umbrella' term.

*'I feel Asian. Cos like my school is like loads of Asians, there's like Asians and white, English. I feel Asian, but it's not as if I only hang around with Asians, cos I have white friends, so I don't really feel anything, cos I hang around in a mix.'*

*'I feel, um, um, Indian or Asian, because like there's other children there who aren't from India but they're from Asia and like, we're really good friends, and if we said 'oh I'm from India and you're not' then it would cause really big problems between the two, so yeah, I feel Asian.'*

Baumann's (1996) ethnography work with people in Southall also revealed (although more frequently) the use of the term 'Asian' among the adolescents. In using this term, the adolescents created their own Asian culture characterised by three factors: classification of others as Asian; a wish to achieve a sense of unity in this classification; and to symbolically express this unity, usually through music. Brown (2000) argues that minority individuals are in an advantageous position whereby they can simultaneously maintain subgroup identities, as well as superordinate identities – an option not always available to majority groups trying to use such approaches to deal with outgroups. For example, as shown in this example, and in previous examples, the same person could at once identify with the superordinate category of 'British or 'Asian', and if they want to distinguish themselves from any negative connotations attached to these identities, could then identify as 'Indian' or 'Hindu', and so on.

## Friends

For many, which identities came into play with their friends, was dependant on the ethnic makeup of their social circles.

*'It depends cos it's like if I'm with Indian friends, you can relate to things that only Indians do, but when it's like a mixed group, you just feel English, British or something.'*

*'Again, it's always Muslim. I think that's there's no really 'feel' Muslim, I just am. That's what I am, who I am. But when it comes to friends, family, school- I think with my friends, it's either Indian or British, no I don't know. If I'm with my Pakistani friends, I generally feel Pakistani. Whereas if I'm with my British friends I feel British, but yeah like I'm always Muslim.'*

Most respondents were friends with other Asians or those of same background, or in this case, religious converts:

**'When you are with your friends do you feel British, Pakistani –**

*I feel Pakistani Muslim. I have a few close friends black friends, but they're converts to Islam.'*

The two Indian boys who had only or primarily white British friends went to schools where the majority of pupils were white British. Where the ethnic background was similar, the participants would feel that being Indian, Pakistani, and/ or Muslim was more apparent. They would be able to share the same experiences and cultural understandings, or be more aware of their ethnic identity.

*'Um it depends which friends I'm with. Like If I'm with friends from an Indian community type of thing, um even though I'm speaking English, you sort of feel more Indian cos you're around Indian people and you learn more about Indian culture, but um, with school friends, it's completely different, more British'.*

In the case of a 15-year-old Pakistani male, being with certain friends raised issues of religious differences:

**'When you are with your friends do you feel British, Pakistani, Muslim or something else?**

*Muslim*

**Why?**

*Just got a lot of friends that ain't Muslim and I feel it*

**That aren't Muslim?**

*Yeah. There's just things that they can do and I can't. Like they can eat all sorts and I can't so you feel it.'*

For others, feeling British with their friends was used to create an inclusive category, where differences were not important, and others were not excluded.

**'When you are with your friends do you feel British, Pakistani, Muslim or something else?**

*British.*

**Why?**

*Cos like most of my friends are Indian or something like different races, so you can't speak Punjabi to them, you speak English so they can understand and its sort of rude to speak in a different language in front of other people.'*

Barrett, Eade, Cinnirella and Garbin (2006) also report similar contextual findings in their research with British Bangladeshi and mixed-heritage youth. For the Bangladeshi youth, the home context was dominated by ethnic and religious identifications, whereas being at school allowed them to feel more of a mixture of identities. Three-quarters of the respondents also had at least one Bengali friend. For the mixed-heritage youth, however, there was no dominant trend in the identifications at home, school or with their friends.

### **General Discussion- Summary of findings**

There was little affective or sentimental attachment toward being British, although with the older participants, there was an acknowledgement of the benefits associated with being British

There was a less developed sense of national identity – both personally and in general for these youngsters, when compared to previous studies with older Indian and Pakistani respondents (Vadher, 2005). This could suggest a developmental factor, where ethnicity and nationality, in particular, become more salient with age. The participants did not reveal anything to suggest a 'culture conflict'. Moreover, they showed an ability to move seamlessly through different spheres and contexts of their lives. Any problems experienced were more to do with restrictions placed by family or religious upbringing.

Some responses to being British or being Indian/Pakistani suggested an idea of 'choice'. One could assert their ethnicity, but not their nationality. There were clear differences in how the respondents felt about their ethnic, national or religious identities when at home, at school, or with friends. Ethnic and religious identities tended to be more dominant at home, where as being at school revealed a more mix of British and ethnic identities.

The mixtures of identifications at school were found to be dependant on the ethnic makeup of the respondents' circle of friends. There was a tendency for the Pakistani respondents to have more two or more friends who were also Muslim. The majority of respondents felt comfortable with people of other ethnicities, but a minority also suggested that they preferred to get along with those of the same background.

### **Conclusion**

The family plays an important role in the lives of these adolescents. Currently, the family and extended family allow a connection to be maintained to the ethnic and heritage background during these crucial years of identity development. In some cases friends of the same background are also important, because they allow a 'gateway' or access to their ethnic heritage and background. As they get older, this identification may become even stronger: their motivations, experiences and lifestyle changes may make nationality as well as ethnicity more personally salient. Interestingly, in two interviews with Pakistani adolescents, there were mentions of their friends on the verge of converting, or recently converted to Islam. Although it was not discussed further, it would be of interest to look at this further – especially as they are 'young', and could be reflective of a developmental stage in identity formation.

The strength of a Muslim identity was apparent throughout the whole study - an observation that has been made in many other studies with South Asian groups.

The contextual differences suggest that there is a key role of multiple identities that seem to work with each other to accommodate with different demands placed by the different contexts.



This may also be related to what Roccas and Brewer (2002) call 'social identity complexity', which refers to the degree of overlap perceived to exist between the different groups of which a person is simultaneously a member. The interviews revealed a great deal of variability. Parental upbringing as well as parental education, personality influences, location differences, are all possible factors that could help explain some of these differences. What this means is that there is no point in trying to label or pigeonhole groups into certain categories, or strategies or orientations of how they define and make sense of themselves. In doing so, we essentialise and make these 'identities' become unchangeable, inherent and general across groups. The present study reveals that this is not necessarily the case and that identities, particularly at this age, are likely to experience change and redefinition. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the essentialising that the subjects themselves may do, in order to consolidate and make sense of their various identities. For example, how they authenticate and make their own sense of identity something 'real'.

*'The experiences of Indian American youth call for a theory of identity in cultural practice that transcends old binaries of essentialisation and hybridity, while still being able to encompass both possibilities as aspects of the lived realities of social actors. Second-generation youth, indeed all individuals, are able to draw on models of personhood that are based on stability and authenticity of cultural elements in some situations and to embrace identities that emphasize fluidity and multiplicity at other moments.'* (Marr-Maira, 2002, p.195)

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