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Cultural Barriers to the Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse in Asian Communities: Listening to What Women Say

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Summary

There is apparent under-reporting of child sexual abuse in Britain's Asian communities and a varied capacity amongst professionals to respond with cultural competence. Professional approaches originate in cultural contexts, which are often different from those of most British Asians. If the proportion of children and non-abusing carers from Asian communities who access relevant services is to increase, professionals need to develop better understandings of cultural imperatives which determine behaviour in those communities. Consultations with Asian women in Bradford reinforce the view that culturally competent practice and respectful dialogue are essential to the protection of children. They also highlight a number of recurring themes. Members of Asian communities are aware of child sexual abuse, they recognize that the issue needs to be addressed by all communities and they report that many of those affected within their own communities have found it difficult to access relevant services. These consultations, like reports of similar work elsewhere, indicate that difficulties, which appear to arise from Asian women's fears about how agencies will respond, are frequently compounded by the impact of cultural imperatives arising from *izzat* (honour/respect), *haya* (modesty) and *sharam* (shame/embarrassment), which have a considerable influence on how many will behave.

Keywords: Sexual abuse, Asian communities, Bradford, cultural competence, izzat

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Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to understanding of particular issues relating to Asian culture and child sexual abuse. It will recommend that the professionals involved need to both recognize and overcome their lack of knowledge regarding the cultural imperatives which determine the behaviour of many Asian women in the wake of such abuse. It will argue that professionals and agencies need to listen to messages emerging from consultations and outreach work undertaken in Bradford and elsewhere. It will also emphasize the need for agencies to develop more flexible and sensitive responses to disclosures.

Whilst doing so, the authors wish to emphasize four points. First, the protection of children from abuse and the provision of effective services to children who have been abused must remain paramount objectives for all practitioners working in this area. Second, individuals within all cultures have individual needs, motivators and experiences. They need assessments and interventions which take sufficient account of their culture rather than those processes being based on any preconceived ideas of what their culture means for them. Third, Asian culture is varied, fluid and dynamic. The particular impact and meanings of the concepts discussed here will vary, amongst other things, with gender, class, education, religious beliefs and age, as well as the geographical origins of individuals, their parents and grandparents. Finally, any increased understanding of other cultures by practitioners and policymakers does not remove their obligation to apply critical understanding to their own. In particular, it does not remove the need to reflect on eurocentric and racist aspects of cultures from which most social work theory and practice originates. Alongside a developing understanding of Asian cultures and their impact on individuals' lives and behaviour, professionals need to review the extent to which their own practice and policies may deter people from accessing relevant services.

Context

Social work and culture

Cheetham (1982) warned that 'social workers are doubtful about their ability to judge needs and problems in unfamiliar cultures' (p. 143), while O'Hagan (1999) identifies 'neglect of' and 'negativity towards' culture amongst child and family social workers (p. 279). Many white practitioners certainly seem to see their insufficient understanding of Asian 'culture' as a major difficulty in the delivery of effective services to Asian families (Barn *et al.*, 1997; Brophy *et al.*, 1999a; O'Neale, 2000). The vast majority of child and family social workers are non-Asians. In the authors' experience, their confidence is frequently undermined by a sense of dealing with lives that are bound by cultural and religious imperatives they struggle to comprehend. This can result in unrealistic, and for some Asian service users, unwelcome policies of trying to allocate work with Asian service users only to Asian workers.

More often it has, rightly, led to a desire to gain an increased understanding of Asian cultures. However, O'Neale (2000) in her inspection report on services for ethnic minority children expresses concern that 'the religious and cultural needs of Asian children were misunderstood and therefore not adequately met' (p. 38). It, arguably, remains true in the context of working across cultures that 'Social workers need practical help as well as exhortation' (Cheetham, 1982, p. 144).

Contrasting cultures?

The training and values of British professionals dealing with child sexual abuse are overwhelmingly rooted in western cultural traditions. 'Sexual abuse' remains a concept constructed through discourses which have usually been in English and which have generally explored the experiences of white children in North America, Western Europe and Australasia, rather than those of children in Asia, Africa and South America or in minority communities in the west (Kenny and McEachern, 2000; Futa *et al.*, 2001).

In contrast, the attitudes and responses of most members of Asian communities in Britain are rooted in cultural and religious traditions, which they or their parents or grandparents have brought with them from Pakistan, India or Bangladesh. Whilst migration has been a force for cultural change as well as cultural conservatism and whilst many have argued convincingly in favour of understandings based on 'hybridity', 'diaspora' and 'new ethnicities' (Hall, 1992a,b; Gilroy, 1993; Brah, 1996; Back, 1996; Werbner and Modood, 1997), there is also much evidence that Britain's Asian communities are actively maintaining and interpreting the cultural and religious values of earlier generations (Drury, 1996; Ghuman, 1999; Darr, 2001; Cressey, 2002; Lewis, 2002). There is some evidence of family systems adapting, but research also demonstrates that most Asians in Britain remain committed to the traditional system of a joint and extended family in which power is distributed according to age and gender (Warrier, 1994; Dosanjh and Ghuman, 1996; Modood *et al.*, 1997; Anwar, 1998).

In anthropological terms, Asian and Muslim societies, especially, tend to be categorized as 'high-context'. They emphasize the collective over the individual, whereas 'low-context' societies in Europe and North America emphasize the individual over the collective (Hall, 1976; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000). Hofstede (1984) reports that British culture emphasizes rapid change and a limited need to reduce uncertainty in the context of relative political and financial stability, whereas Pakistani culture is conservative, in an attempt to reduce uncertainties of life in a more turbulent and vulnerable context. At the same time, while Islam expects individuals to satisfy their needs and interests, it requires them to do so without hurting the group or community. The interests of the individual and the group are seen as mutually reinforcing (Al-Radi and Al-Mahdy, 1989; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000).

Under-reporting and lack of access to relevant services

Information regarding the 'prevalence' of child sexual abuse is difficult to establish with certainty (Ghate and Spencer, 1995), while many researchers suggest that attempts to calculate 'incidence' on the basis of what is officially identified underestimate the number of cases in the population as a whole (Finkelhor, 1986; La Fontaine, 1999; Corby, 2000). Stuart and Baines (2004) suggest that fewer than one in 50 sexual offences results in a criminal conviction and that, 7 years after the publication of *People Like Us* (Utting, 1997) there are still gaps in the information available to parents and children, which would help them recognize abusive behaviour or know where to seek help.

Government statistics for 'children in need' offer limited information about numbers from different ethnic groups. Those for 2003 suggest that the proportion with 'ethnicity other than white' is 'between 1.2 and 1.7 times the national average'. However, whereas 'children of a black or mixed ethnic identity' are over-represented, 'children of an Asian ethnic identity' are under-represented (National Statistics/Department for Education and Skills, 2004, p. 6). Data regarding children registered on child protection registers also indicate that, while 'Black or Black British' children, children of 'mixed race parentage' and children from 'other ethnic groups' are over-represented amongst those receiving formal child protection services by a ratio of almost 2:1, 'Asian or Asian British' children are under-represented by a ratio of 1:2 (Department for Education and Skills, 2004). Several studies report low levels of self-referral by Asian families seeking help from social services (Barn *et al.*, 1997; Qureshi *et al.*, 2000), while Asian children also appear to be under-represented in figures for 'looked after children' (O'Neale, 2000).

Research focused on Asian children who have been sexually abused or which has disaggregated data according to ethnic origin suggests a consistent pattern of Asian children being under-represented both amongst those registered because of 'sexual abuse' and amongst those receiving relevant services and interventions (Gibbons *et al.*, 1995; Moghal *et al.*, 1995; Monck and New, 1996; Barn *et al.*, 1997; Bradford FSU, 1998; Brophy *et al.*, 1999b).

Bradford FSU (1998) reported that agencies emphasized the very low take-up of their services by Asian families and that many offering therapeutic services had little experience of working with Asian children who had been sexually abused.

In 2002, only 7 per cent of allegations of child sexual abuse investigated by the Bradford Police related to Asian children, and the police reported that many allegations were withdrawn at an early stage. The limited data available suggest that approximately half the number of cases are reported than might have been expected in Bradford, if it is assumed that the prevalence of child sexual abuse is similar in Asian and white communities. This assumption cannot be validated conclusively in the absence of other data, but is supported by other studies in Leeds and London (Patel, 1991; Moghal *et al.*, 1995; Bernard, 2001).

Others have noted the lack of sufficient evidence about the black, Asian and ethnic minority experience of the child protection system (Alexander, 1999;

Barter, 1999). They have suggested that one reason why research has failed to focus on this area may be elements of racism within the research process itself. Others have, meanwhile, emphasized the difficulties experienced by Asian children and young people in contacts with agencies such as the police and social services (Children's Society, 1999; Humphreys *et al.*, 1999; Race 1999; O'Dell, 2003).

Bradford's Asian communities

Bradford, like many places in Britain, has a rich ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. In 2001, its Asian population comprised 18 per cent of the total. These communities are predominantly Muslim (16.1 per cent) and largely of 'Pakistani' origin (14.5 per cent) (National Statistics, 2003; Gilligan, 2005). The 'Pakistani' communities remain concentrated in the inner wards of the city, where they often live amidst 'a relatively self-contained world of businesses and institutions, religious and cultural, which they have created to service their specific needs' (Lewis, 2002, p. 203.) As elsewhere, Bradford's Asian population is relatively young compared with the majority white communities (National Statistics, 2003). They also tend to be located in areas facing relatively high levels of deprivation and disadvantage (DETR, 2000; Cantle, 2001; Denham, 2001).

Consultations with Asian communities: Alma Street Project, FSU Bradford

fsu Investing in Families (previously known as Family Service Units) is a voluntary sector organization committed to working with marginalized and excluded children and families (fsu Investing in Families, 2005). It has units in several cities in Britain, including Bradford, where services include the Alma Street Project for children and young people who have been sexually abused. In 2002, the project secured additional funding to consult with people from Asian communities and ultimately to produce 10,000 copies of a multi-lingual booklet *Protect Children from Sexual Abuse* (Bradford FSU, 2003), which provides information about both child sexual abuse and relevant services available to those affected by it (see Gilligan, 2005 for a full English text of the booklet).

Subsequently, a further 12 group discussions involving a total of 130 Asian women were facilitated at community centres and similar places in Bradford District during the winter/spring of 2003–2004. These women were aged between 20 and 60 years. Five groups gave consent to at least some of their discussion being recorded. These recordings were transcribed and translated. Notes, in English, were taken during the remaining seven discussions. Discussions took place in Urdu, Punjabi, Bangla and English. Ninety per cent of participants were from Urdu/ Punjabi-speaking communities. The remainder were from Bangla-, Pushto- and Gujarati-speaking communities. All appear to have been Muslim, but participants were not asked for individual information.

Women in the groups were invited to give feedback on the booklet, which they read or had read to them by a facilitator. It includes the following inset:

> Alia was abused by her uncle, from the age of 5. She told her mum when she was 11, but her mum asked her not to tell anyone else, and told Alia, 'Just keep out of his way when he visits'. Alia's mum felt that she couldn't ask her brother-in-law to stop contact with the family because everyone would know why? She thought that, if people found out, this would bring shame and dishonour on the family. She was also afraid that Alia's father would believe his brother, if he denied what her daughter had told her. Meanwhile, Alia was very frightened that her uncle would carry on abusing her. She did not feel safe or protected and finally told a friend's mother who was able to help her contact the police.
>
> What do you think Alia's own mother should have done? Did she protect her daughter? (Bradford FSU, 2003)

Many of their responses were presented to a larger consultation event in Bradford in September 2004, when feedback from group discussions was again recorded and transcribed in English. Forty people attended the consultation event, from 12 organizations. The majority were Asian women. Three group discussions were conducted in English and another in Urdu. Three groups were 'women only'. The fourth included the three men attending the event.

The fact that these discussions were confined almost entirely to adult women, who were to some extent self-selecting, obviously means that the feedback obtained cannot fully represent the views of whole communities. Indeed, many participants in the consultation event stressed the long-term need to involve more men in consultations and outreach work. However, it was nevertheless, arguably, essential to give immediate priority to outreach work with women, in light of research evidence that children frequently disclose sexual abuse to mothers, but rarely to fathers (Monck *et al.*, 1995; Monck and New, 1996). At the same time, it should be noted that contacts with five local imams, during the same period, resulted in positive responses to the outreach work and agreement to make copies of the booklet available to men attending mosque.

Listening to Asian women

Messages from Bradford

The immediate responses of women in one group (group A) to Alia's story were particularly instructive to the non-Asian author. The transcript included,

> Most of the women in the group: 'No she didn't protect her daughter'.
>
> Woman A3: 'When her daughter told her about it she should have done something'.

> Woman A4: 'She probably felt helpless thinking Alia's father won't believe her and her uncle will deny it'.
>
> A few women at once: 'Yes no one admits to anything like this but it's wrong and something should be done about it, she probably thought of lots of different potential problems and kept quiet'.
>
> Women A5 and A6: 'Look poor child being abused till she's eleven and mother thinking about izzat of the family and feeling she can't do anything because she wants to protect family honour'.
>
> Woman 7: 'Yes you can understand about family izzat but you have to think how the little girl would be affected, her whole life and personality could be affected. It is wrong after all, and she would always be scared and lack confidence. You have to protect the children'.

Gilligan (2005) has reported more fully on the work which led to production of the booklet used as the catalyst in these discussions. This earlier outreach work confirmed impressions that, in Bradford at least, child sexual abuse remains under-reported in Asian communities and that Asian children and their carers are less likely than their white counterparts to access appropriate services. It also confirmed that many people within Asian communities acknowledged the facts of child sexual abuse and shared the view that it must be responded to.

However, these earlier consultations also suggested that progress was hampered by many factors, including the following:

- Lack of basic knowledge about child sexual abuse.
- Lack of awareness of the existence and nature of the services available to respond to it.
- Fear of public exposure, if child sexual abuse is disclosed.
- Fear of meeting culturally insensitive responses from professionals.
- Cultural factors, which appeared to impede individuals' and families' willingness to disclose child sexual abuse.

The more recent work added detail to the impression that cultural imperatives arising from concepts such as *izzat* (honour/respect), *haya* (modesty) and *sharam* (shame/embarrassment) are, for many in Asian communities, crucial determinants of behaviour in response to incidents of child sexual abuse. They appear both to heighten other barriers and to contain some of the potential means to overcome them. *Izzat*, *haya* and *sharam* or associated concepts and equivalents in English were discussed by almost all the groups.

Women in group E, for example, suggested,

> The community will keep sexual abuse undercover because of izzat. Such cases are not discussed so easily and openly.

> It's difficult to go to someone outside including services for help as this would show that family in a bad light and it could also get out in the community bringing shame to the family.

> It won't be easy to talk to people about this kind of things, only with certain members of the family, i.e. those from the same generation and in certain contexts such as when it actually takes place. ……it'd be difficult to talk to the elder generation about this.

The response of one woman in group H was typical of others. She responded to Alia's story by saying:

> Her mother is feeling helpless too because of her izzat and her family's izzat, who's going to believe her daughter. Mother believes her, but who else would believe them or support them? This could cause major family feuds, and instead of dealing with Alia's issues it would create other problems.

Izzat, haya and sharam: impact on responses to child sexual abuse

Izzat is usually translated into English as 'honour' or 'respect', but there are clearly many pitfalls inherent in such translation. *Izzat* is a complex concept, consistently reported as a major influence in Asian family life. It has a long history and a diverse and changing set of meanings for particular cultures, communities, groups, households and individuals. NCCR/UNICEF (1999) note that in the context of Puktoon society, for example, *izzat* is 'Honor, not so much as what is honourable, but in terms of community standing', while *sharam* is 'Shame' defined 'not so much as what may be deemed as wrongful (or even sinful), but by behavior and conduct which bring shame to the family and community as a whole' (p. 12). They note that

> The boundaries will shift and change according to 'visibility'. Honor or 'Izzat' is a possession, not a quality. Shame is an expression of honor being removed. …… If the behavior is not visible, then it doesn't exist (p. 12).

In light of this, it seems pertinent to recognize that despite professional attempts to safeguard 'confidentiality', disclosure of sexual abuse is often experienced by victims and non-abusing carers as a very public event. The woman giving feedback on behalf of group Z, at the consultation event, commented,

> If you've got white social workers turning up at the door all the time …… it's really hard then to keep it within that family to deal with it because the word kind of gets out in a community and you have to start explaining what's going on.

Such feelings are likely to be heightened for children who continue to view themselves as being responsible for abuse perpetrated on them by others and those who are not believed or supported by carers (Monck *et al.*, 1995; Corby, 2000). At the same time, although studies consistently demonstrate that most

children welcome the outcome of disclosure and intervention, they also note that these processes are often traumatic (Roberts and Taylor, 1993; Berliner and Conte, 1995).

Messages from elsewhere

Other studies clearly support the conclusion that *izzat* and *sharam* are crucial to understanding the experience and behaviour of people within Asian communities. Chew-Graham *et al.* (2002) from a study of Asian women in Manchester report that,

> The groups proposed that *izzat* was given precedence over the care and happiness of children in some families. The groups also theorised that *izzat* could be misused to reinforce women's roles in family life, often to coerce women into remaining silent about their problems. *Izzat* was described as all pervasive, internalised and reinforced by women, preventing other community members from listening and getting involved. The groups thought that the burden of a family's *izzat* was unequally placed upon the women of the family (p. 341).

They also note that the differing lengths to which a family might go to protect their *izzat* depended on exactly how they defined the concept, in terms of personal or family honour or as prestige and status in the eyes of the community.

In the context of domestic violence and mental health, Gilbert *et al.* (2004) concluded from their study in Derby that maintaining the good name of the family was essential to all generations and that, where individuals ignored *izzat*, they knew they would suffer the consequences of being cast out and disowned.

Other discussions of gender-based violence suggest that for all black and ethnic minority women, the experience is intensified, not only by the additional pressures of racism, language barriers and immigration issues (Avan, 1995; Debbonaire, 1998), but also by 'pressures within some communities to uphold family honour', which act as further impediments to accessing support (BEMWS, 2002).

In the context of so-called 'honour killings', campaigners have again emphasized that for some *izzat* takes precedence even over an individual woman's life. Gill (2003), following interviews with Asian women in London, concluded that 'issues of shame and honour were central to whether women stayed or left a violent relationship' (p. 23). She cites Amnesty International (1999) in support of her view that,

> In the concept of izzat, it is incumbent upon women to maintain and increase the male or family honour. Any digression from this code, whether real or alleged, bears grave consequences for the woman—from gossip, to her chances of marriage being ruined, to being beaten or killed by her immediate male kin (p. 23).

She notes that 'Inherent in the code of honour is a constant effort by individuals and groups to maintain honour and to avoid the state of shame (sharam) at all costs' (p. 23).

The women interviewed by Chew-Graham *et al.* (2002) also emphasized the extent to which the experience of migration may heighten difficulties by adding to competition between families and to pressures to be seen to be 'doing well' in the eyes of relatives in Pakistan. They noted, in particular, that the 'good' behaviour of women is seen as adding to status and prestige. Meanwhile, what constitutes 'good' behaviour is very clearly stated, especially for Muslims. Sexual activity in particular tends to be prescribed within moral limits. These clearly forbid the sexual abuse of children and promote their protection. However, they also require behaviour which maintains *haya* (modesty) to an extent that many individuals and, women in particular, find extreme difficulty in discussing matters relating to sexual activities both within their own families and with those outside.

Many writers quote the *hadith* (saying attributed by Islamic scholars to the prophet Mohammed), which tells believers 'Every religion has a morality, and the morality of Islam is *Haya*',while Maududi (1987) stresses that, as an Islamic term, *haya* implies a shyness that should serve as a strong defence against evil inclinations. Islam offers Muslims very clear rules for almost all associated aspects of their lives, all of which tend towards the promotion of *haya* and the creation of a social environment that endeavours to avoid sexual excitement and stimulation (Maududi, 1987).

Understood through the filter of cultural conventions current in most of Britain's Asian communities, such rules clearly reinforce other barriers for members of those communities both in disclosing child sexual abuse and in exploring appropriate responses. The women in Bradford generally recognized the need to educate children about the risk of child sexual abuse, but also noted difficulties in doing so. In group E, one woman noted,

> As they get older and go into their teens we won't be able to talk to them as openly as we'd like to because of our cultural practice haya (modesty) and sharam (shyness/embarrassment). Haya/sharam will act as a barrier and will not allow us to talk to our children freely.

Another suggested that parents do damage,

> Because we tell our children not to talk about anything sexual, which leads them to believe any sexual act is shameful and this prevents them to talk about any wrongful incident such as sexual abuse

Bhardwaj (2001) suggests that cultural beliefs, such as *izzat* and *sharam*,

> can be described as a double-edged sword, they persistently legitimise gender violence and oppression and further silence women from being able to discuss, seek support or challenge such oppressions, for in doing so it is deemed as bringing further shame and dishonour to the family and community. .... Patriarchal power dynamics within the family and community setting serve to contain issues likely to bring dishonour, but in doing so they limit the expression and, therefore, the support of external structures including service interventions (p. 56).

However, she also notes that 'Asian families have nurtured their own solidarity and community autonomy in direct response to the hostility of a racist British

society' (p. 56) and suggests that community insularity frequently ensures protection for individuals and groups.

At the same time, some women in Bradford suggested that the cultural, and more particularly the religious, imperatives of their communities provide important possible foundations for appropriate responses to child sexual abuse. Their comments, arguably, reinforce arguments in favour of giving religious issues greater prominence in qualifying and other training for professionals (Gilligan, 2003; Gilligan and Furness, 2005). Feedback from group X, at the consultation event, for example, stressed the potential usefulness of increasing consciousness of 'how sexual abuse is wrong and that there is a punishment for it, Islamically.' Group Y, at the same event, suggested the inclusion of 'sanctions from the Koran and other holy books' in leaflets so that the information has 'a religious sanction which makes the information more acceptable for people to actually do something about', while the woman speaking on behalf of group Z reported that,

> There's a positive shift by the younger generation in Asian families, not just the females, but the males as well …… to more Islamic values rather than cultural values and that's leading to them challenging and questioning traditional cultural norms and making them more outspoken.

Meanwhile, another woman during discussions in group A asked perhaps the most challenging question, in response to discussions about the impact of *izzat* in cases such as Alia's. She asked,

> Would you not protect your child because of izzat?

Discussion

This article has sought, in part, to give voice to the views of ordinary Asian women and of front-line Asian women workers, in the context of discussions about child sexual abuse. Consultations emphasize the need for both practitioners and policymakers to give greater priority to ensuring that services are relevant and culturally competent. They also highlight several ideas for making them so.

Outreach and education

Almost all participants in the consultations welcomed the fact that outreach work on the issue was taking place. They offered many practical suggestions for written materials. For example: the inclusion of more 'stories' such as Alia's; a smaller, single sheet format; and distribution of relevant information in 'maternity packs', at nurseries, etc. They also offered ideas for extending the scope of the work, for example by including child sexual abuse information within parenting training provided by Sure Start projects, and social work students on placements undertaking associated projects. Many also emphasized the importance of

targeting both children and men in future outreach work. They suggested that this be done in schools and through existing men's groups and mosques.

Regarding themes to be included in such work, many judged that parents and carers would be encouraged to take the issue seriously if they were given information which raised their awareness of the emotional and behavioural issues that the child would be going through in sexual abuse and after disclosure, and of the impact on children of not feeling heard. Others stressed the need to highlight the view that 'good' parents protect their children and to underpin this message with religious and cultural injunctions.

Training and support for practitioners

Practitioners involved in the consultation event were particularly keen that they should receive more training in how to deal with disclosures and that there should be a more readily accessible network for advice and consultation. They saw this as combining the experience of those involved in sexual abuse prevention with the expertise of others on their own cultures.

They also recognized the importance of colleagues becoming familiar with and sensitive to particular aspects of Asian cultures. These included not only very widespread cultural imperatives such as izzat, but also issues that may be relevant in work with specific groups. They suggested, for example, that social workers conducting investigations might easily be drawn to inaccurate and negative inferences regarding the level of co-operation being offered by the mother of an abused child who did not tell them her husband's full name. However, amongst some orthodox Hindus, particularly in northern India, and amongst some Bangladeshi Muslims, it is usual to avoid saying a husband's name and, instead, to refer to him as 'the father of *child's name*'. Such phenomena have been recorded in the past (Tyler, 1865) and are still noted by travellers (Morris, 1997), but they are not always known to members of other Asian communities and are certainly unknown to most British social workers. They serve as a reminder that all practitioners need to remain alert to the fact that they are at risk of misinterpreting the behaviour of people whose culture they are not familiar with, particularly if they approach such situations with an insufficient awareness of their own potential for ignorance. They also have particular implications for the qualifying and post-qualifying training of social workers and emphasize the need to ensure that development of culturally competent practice is prioritized at all levels.

Flexibility in service provision

Many participants emphasized the need for practitioners to have sufficient discretion and to develop sufficient confidence to allow them to respond flexibly to people making disclosures. This reflected a perceived need for families to

feel they are in control of the process and of the pace of events. It connects with the views expressed by at least one group at the consultation event. They noted that if professionals wish to help people overcome barriers to disclosure, they need to recognize that what may most concern them are 'the consequences of disclosure'. They emphasized the need for practitioners to talk with families about what would happen if they did disclose and about the processes involved. In relation to children, they noted the need not only to advise about what will happen, but also to build confidence that disclosing will actually be helpful. They commented, 'some children in some families think that "if we disclose life is going to be a lot worse". We need to empower them to feel that "no, its going to be better"'.

Participants urged agencies to give families choice about the identity of their worker. The woman speaking on behalf of group Z commented,

> Some people think 'yeah they prefer an Asian worker, an Asian female or Asian male', but maybe some families might think 'hang on a minute, an Asian worker, they may know all my community and they won't keep the confidentiality', so they might feel a lot happier having a white worker. So we need to think about that and give them that choice.

They emphasized the desirability of families having only one or two professionals to deal with and the need for service users to be reassured that interpreters will maintain confidentiality.

Others pointed to the need for non-abusing carers to be able to access advice, without other family members knowing. They suggested that 'drop-in' sessions could be provided at agencies such as Sure Start, but again recognized that workers in such sessions would need confidence, discretion and adequate support to make judgements about whether they needed immediately to alert investigating agencies to incidents of sexual abuse or whether such a decision could be left in the control of service users. The consultation participants noted that children will be better served if service users are able to talk anonymously, before reaching a point where they feel comfortable in taking matters forward, than if they cease to co-operate having felt 'pushed into accessing Police or Social Services.'

Conclusion

In all communities, it remains difficult, and frequently traumatic, to disclose sexual abuse. In many Asian communities, some cultural imperatives appear to make it even more difficult. Cultural beliefs and values may also impact on the effects of abuse (Fontes, 1995). Professionals must, therefore, take full account of such issues both in designing services and in responding to service users. At the same time, we need to avoid practice based in generalized assumptions about ethnicities, cultures or religions (Ahmad, 1990; Carby, 1992; Robinson, 1995). We must recognize and respect the uniqueness of individuals and families,

including those aspects that are rooted in culture and religion. In doing so, we need to listen carefully to what members of different communities tell us and to engage in respectful dialogue about what will be effective in meeting individual, family and community needs in the context of the sexual abuse of children.

As noted in more detail elsewhere (Gilligan, 2005), Cameron *et al.* (2001) point out that policy and practice with regard to the protection of children frequently are based in an Anglo-American paradigm, underpinned by a rugged individualism. They note that, 'Other settings have constructed quite different responses reflecting their own priorities and desired outcomes' (p. 1). Such a recognition that professional responses to 'child protection' issues are socially and culturally constructed must, arguably, be central to ongoing discussions about how we make responses to child sexual abuse more culturally competent. We need to develop policies and procedures that can respond to specific cultural contexts. At the same time, we need to maximize the protection of children. In doing so, we must also ensure that individuals who need therapeutic services feel able to disclose their abuse, in the first place. Only culturally competent practice which facilitates and empowers children, young people and non-abusing carers to seek relevant services will provide effective protection for them.

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