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IRFAN, S. and COWBURN, M.

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Disciplining, Chastisement and Physical Child Abuse: Perceptions and Attitudes of the British Pakistani Community

SHAZIA IRFAN and MALCOLM COWBURN

Abstract

There are a number of cross-cultural differences in people's perspectives of what constitutes physical abuse of children. The focus of the present study was to explore the British Pakistani community's perception about physical child abuse and to understand more about the values held by them in relation to child protection. The study aimed to discover issues that are important to protect the children from harm, and to describe the possibilities these issues present. The study used a questionnaire survey that focused on 16–25-year-old British Pakistani's, exploring their experiences of childhood, of physical punishment and physical child abuse. The findings indicated that although serious child abuse was not experienced by most of the respondents, 75% of respondents experienced some kind of physical punishment as part of their childhood experience. However, 72% of respondents who received such punishment in childhood accepted it as an appropriate disciplining method. The future research and policy implications with prevention in mind are discussed.

Introduction

An Asian¹ girl aged 15 was beaten by her mother with an iron rod to the extent that the girl was covered in bruises. The mother justified the beating by stating that her daughter came home after three days and admitted to sleeping with different men and that she was on drugs. According to the mother the daughter's behaviour was against Asian culture², izzat³ and religion.

While considering the scenario, several questions come to mind:

- Can the primacy of culture be an explanation for abuse?
- What is acceptable and appropriate behaviour for disciplining a child?
- What are Asian families' views about disciplining, chastisement and physical child abuse and other similar practices?
- What is the mother's understanding of child protection?
- What are the underlying cultural and religious issues/practices of izzat and honour?
- If it was a boy instead of a girl, would he be getting the same treatment/punishment?
- What are the cultural explanations for the behaviour versus respect of young person/child?
- Is it acceptable in the Asian community to respond harshly to children who stray from religious and cultural norms?
- What are the main reasons behind using disciplining, chastisement and physical child abuse on children in the Asian community?

All these questions prompted the exploration of questions of disciplining, chastisement and physical child abuse in the British Pakistani community as a research project. This paper reports part of the doctoral research undertaken by the first author.

Culture, Ethnicity and Abuse

Abuse is not condoned by any racial group.⁴ Children need to be protected. To work effectively and assess whether abuse is taking place it is important to understand the context in which it occurs. Dealing with child abuse and neglect is difficult within any community and the problem of understanding the context in which abuse occurs is exacerbated when different communities come into contact, or when sub-cultural groups, often referred to as communities in their own right, differ in their beliefs about child rearing practices including child abuse and neglect.⁵ In effect what this means is that what is perceived as abusive or neglectful within one culture may be viewed otherwise by other cultures.

Relevant to the present research is the attention that has been paid by the British government in recent years to ethnicity. The Children Act 1989 sets out legal parameters for Social Services Departments to meet the needs of the children and young people of ethnic minorities.⁶ It places a duty on Local Authorities to give due consideration to children's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background, when making decisions concerning them (section 22.5 of the Act). With supporting guidance from the Department of Health, this legal provision officially puts an end to 'colour-blind' policies and practices, which by ignoring relevant differences, could reflect and reinforce any underlying racism of social institutions.

Child abuse occurs in all cultures, ethnicities and socio-economic groups. The literature has recognised the need for a cross-cultural perspective on child maltreatment. However, too much cultural sensitivity may lead to a lack of protection for children at risk of abuse. Therefore, not all forms of behaviour towards children should be acceptable because of cultural sensitivity.⁷

There is a difficult balance to be achieved by the child protection agencies, for they need to be non-racist and culturally sensitive. Professionals and agencies working in child protection may inadvertently overlook the abuse of a child simply to protect themselves from being labelled as racist. Being anti-racist and culturally sensitive does not and cannot mean providing a lower level of care and protection to children from minority ethnic groups. These children may not just be victims of abuse, or at risk, they may be the victims of the ignorance, unawareness, subjective judgement, insensitivity and prejudice of social workers (and other professionals). They may be at the receiving end of personal and institutional racism.⁸

Social Construction of Child Abuse

In Britain, the central government, in its 1995 review of DoH-sponsored research programmes, has accepted the view that child abuse is socially constructed.⁹ In the 1999 guidelines¹⁰ physical abuse is defined as: ‘hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating, or otherwise causing physical harm to a child. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer feigns the symptoms of, or deliberately causes ill health to a child. This situation is commonly described using terms such as fictitious illness by proxy or “Munchausen syndrome” by proxy’.

Intention has generally been considered to be a key variable in deciding whether an action is abusive or not (though it is not one specified in the 2000 guidelines).¹¹ The context in which physical mistreatment abuse takes place is another important factor in deciding whether or not to define it as abusive.

The Department of Health consultation document *Protecting Children, Supporting Parents*¹² acknowledged that one of the most difficult skills for parents to exercise is to apply consistent and effective guidance to their children, to enable them to develop an understanding of what is acceptable and appropriate behaviour and grow up into responsible and social adults. On the one hand, applying appropriate discipline—in the sense of responding consistently to a child’s behaviour, and setting clear boundaries—is part of bringing up children well. A failure to provide guidance and set boundaries is in itself a form of neglect that can be very damaging to a child. On the other hand, discipline that is harsh can be damaging to a child, both physically and emotionally.

Legal Definitions

The law recognises that there may be occasions when moderate and reasonable physical punishment of a child by a parent may be appropriate. Currently, where a parent—or somebody acting on their behalf—physically punishes a child and is charged with assault, they may raise a defence of ‘reasonable chastisement’. If the court agrees then the accused person cannot be convicted of assault.¹³

The concept of ‘reasonable chastisement’ has its origins in Victorian times. A case taken to the European Court of Human Rights has exposed that the law needs modernising to make sure that children are protected from harsh physical punishment.¹⁴

In nine European States and Israel physical punishment by parents and all other carers is prohibited.¹⁵ A number of UK organisations representing children’s rights and interests have argued that the most appropriate, and indeed the easiest, way to protect children from harm is to follow the example set in these countries. As a first step, they are proposing that the defence of reasonable chastisement should be removed, thereby putting children in broadly the same position as adults in respect of

the law on assault. A second step would be to introduce a law that would specifically ban physical punishment of children by their parents.¹⁶

All children need to be protected. Just as abuse occurs in affluent majority communities, it also occurs in ethnic minority communities.¹⁷ The harmful and degrading treatment of children can never be justified.¹⁸

Lack of Protection

There is no specific literature in the child protection area with reference to Pakistani children and their families. Most of the research that has been undertaken, in relation to the protection of children from physical child abuse, has failed to address adequately the issue of abuse of black and Asian children.¹⁹ Similarly, very little research at present is available that focuses on the experiences of black children and families in the area of child abuse.²⁰ There is as yet no reliable body of research in the UK that could indicate whether the risk of abuse and neglect to black children is any different from that in the rest of the population.²¹

Most of the research carried out in the Asian community centres around cultural variations, lifestyle, religious practices and migration patterns. Very little work has been carried out on the child protection/child abuse issues of the Asian community living in Britain. Most of the available studies in this field have analysed the problems and issues for black and Asian children together, speaking of a collective experience, but this does not present an accurate or true picture of the Asian community.²²

Aims of the Present Study

The aims of the present study were to explore the perceptions and understandings of the British Pakistani community about the physical child abuse and to develop a better understanding of the Pakistani community while dealing with a complex area such as child protection.

Methodology

To collect the primary data, 150 questionnaires addressing childhood discipline, chastisement and physical child abuse experiences and perceptions were distributed through voluntary organisations, universities and one Asian video shop. The sample distribution was subject to convenience (often used in exploratory studies) as there is not a complete sampling frame available for the Pakistani population. This was an important point to stress, particularly so from the point of view of victims of physical child abuse, who may otherwise feel that they have been specifically targeted for the survey, as something was known of their personal history, and they may feel deeply threatened by this. A total of 52 questionnaires were returned, 50 were from female respondents and only two were from male respondents. Male responses were excluded as they were too insufficient to offer meaningful analysis.

Procedure

To encourage participation in the study a covering letter highlighted that the survey would provide important data which were needed to protect British Pakistani children from physical child abuse and/or harmful and degrading treatment, and that the research was not simply an exercise in voyeurism or an opportunity to probe into the intimate details of the respondent's private life.

Participation in the study was restricted to young people aged between 16 and 25 years. Since below 16 years of age parental agreement and consent were necessary, and in view of the fact that a substantial proportion of physical child abuse may be perpetrated by parents, guardians or other family members, they would be unlikely to consent to respond to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was piloted and questions that were ambiguous or difficult to answer were changed. The SPSS package was used to analyse this data.

Questionnaire

The development and design of the 'Perception of Disciplining, Chastisement and Physical Child Abuse in Young Pakistani Community Questionnaire' was one of the most important and challenging aspects of the present study. The questionnaire was developed from a review of literature relevant to the research that considered demographic and family relationships, the circumstances and context of physical child abuse, what constitutes disciplining, chastisement and physical child abuse. The topics covered by the questionnaire are summarised below:

(a) Establishing context

Current background/demographic details

Decision-making, role of power and gender

Children's upbringing and relationships within the family

(b) Physical abuse knowledge and experiences

(c) Effects

(d) Relationship of physical abuse to mental health, disability and domestic violence.

(e) Understanding of problem and recommendations

After preliminary questions that addressed demography, decision-making, role of power and gender and children's upbringing and relationship within the family, the survey examined the respondents' understanding and views on the definitions of child abuse and disciplining through open-ended questions. This section was an attempt to establish what the respondents' views, attitudes and understanding were of disciplining and physical child abuse, prior to exploring their individual disciplining experiences. The next component of the survey explored the methods that were used to discipline them, by whom and how frequently during their childhood experience and whether they perceived that treatment as abusive, or as a method of disciplining. The categories of punishment, disciplining and abuse used for this part of the questionnaire are based upon Marjorie Smith's Child Protection: Messages from Research.²³ Appropriate permission was obtained for the use of these

categories. The sensitive questions were placed at the end of the questionnaire, as the respondents were more likely to be relaxed and at ease with the questions and environment. The questions invited respondents to give causation of physical child abuse, which was useful for deeper understanding of the subject, and aided evaluation.

Findings

In reporting the findings the data concentrated solely on females as male respondents were excluded due to their insufficient number.

Socio-economic Background

The majority of the respondents' homeland town (52%) was Mirpur in Pakistan and most were from the rural areas of Pakistan. Most of the respondents' fathers were either in skilled–semi-skilled manual work (35%) or retired (31%). Only fathers of 27% respondents were in managerial, administrative or professional positions. As for age, 46% of the respondents were between the ages of 19 and 21 years while 30% were between 22 and 25 years of age.

Decision-making

Marriage is the basis of Islamic family and society. In response to the question about decisions regarding spouse selection, 48% of respondents said they would decide mutually with their parents, 31% said they would decide themselves while 19% said their parents would make the decision about their marriage partners. In response to the question, 'What do you do if your parents do not agree with your decisions?' 35% of respondents said that they did not encounter any objections related to their decisions and that their parents participated in their decisions, while 57% said they tried to persuade their parents when disagreement arose.

The results showed that young women perceived that parents were more rigid about the choice of marriage partner. They were in favour of the same nationality (54%) compared to young people (27%). As far as religion was concerned young people (88%) and their parents (88%) were coming from the same standpoint that there should be no difference in religion between marriage partners. According to Islam a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry out of the Muslim religion, and if she does so it is not considered to be a legitimate marriage.

Family Matters

The most contentious issues between young people and their parents, according to young British Pakistanis, concerned selection of friends (27%), spending of money (31%), strict religious observance (31%) and conventions of dress (25%). At the same time 30% of respondents said there was no issue of conflict at all between them and their parents.

British Pakistani children generally express their desires and requests in the first instance to their mother (65%), then to fathers (27%). At the time of the research, 85% of respondents were living with their parents.

About 25% of the respondents did not experience any physical punishment during their childhood. The fathers in these cases were all from professional class.

Chastisement

Of the physical punishment categories, slapping was the commonest form of punishment (65%), in terms of the number of children who had experienced it. But out of this group nearly half (41%) considered it as part of disciplining and did not consider this act abusive. In other forms of chastisement, 50% of the sample had been punched and 42% spanked, pushed/shoved and/or hit by the shoe. Some forms of punishment, such as placing of a hand/object over the nose or mouth (11%), putting in cold water (3%), Chinese burns (3%) and forcing children to eat (15%), were fewer, but were still reported by some young British Pakistani people (see Figure 1).

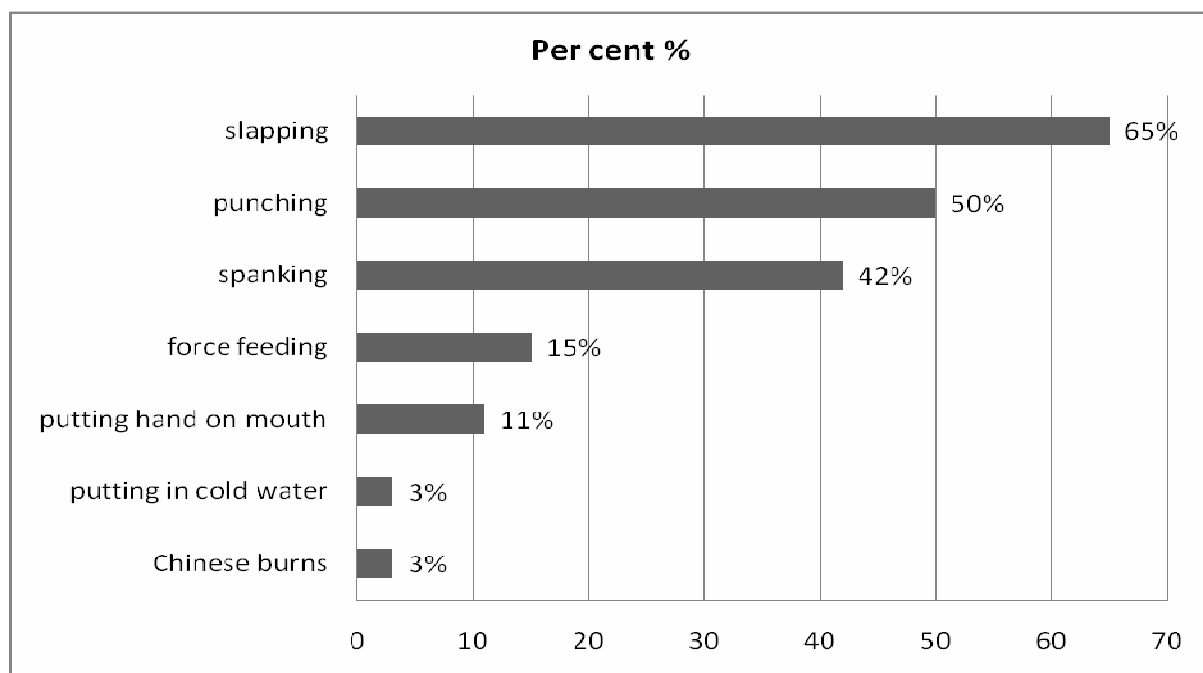


Figure 1 Forms of chastisement

Among perpetrators of abuse, 35% (highest proportion) of physical abuse was perpetrated by siblings, 33% by mothers and 19% by fathers (see Figure 2). Siblings used a range of methods including punching, slapping, pushing/shoving, thumping and pulling hair, kicking and scratching and beating and throwing objects.

There is a distinction between physically injuring a child and using some form of physical chastisement such as smacking. Although 42% of respondents experienced

getting hit with a shoe by their mothers, 27% of respondents did not consider this to be abuse. Similarly 42% of respondents did not consider spanking as an abusive act.

The most common causes for physical punishment/abuse described by the respondents were marital discord (32%), relationship with the opposite sex (32%), lack of communication between generations (26%), parents' lack of education (22%), cultural acceptance of physical abuse (20%) and going against parents' will or rebelling (20%). Other causes mentioned were control, culture, gender role and izzat, dressing, stress, high expectations from children and religion.

Among the respondents, 31% thought that physical abuse is a serious problem in the British Pakistani community while 38% feel that it is not a serious problem, and 23% were indifferent.

Discussion

Chastisement and Decision-making

The study showed that parents from professional background, living in Britain, are more tolerant, and women and children from that class are participating in decision-making processes more often.

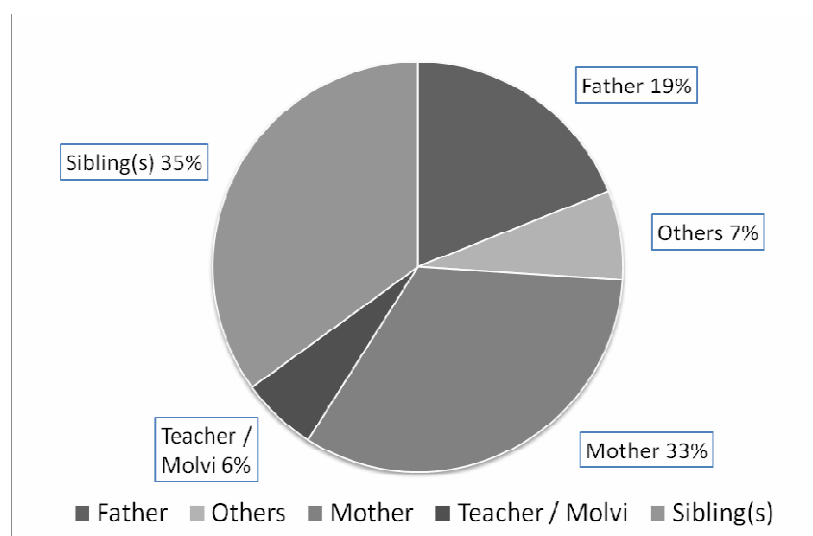


Figure 2 Perpetrators of physical child abuse

Previous studies have also shown that the majority of Asian marriages are arranged.²⁴ Parents usually choose partners for their children from families known to them and approved of by them. However, the results of this study are interesting in this regard, in that they showed that there is a change in this traditional trend either due to a shift of balance in working class as the younger generation is more educated than their parents and becoming more assertive and aware of their rights in making their life decisions, but on the other hand, it indicated the area of major conflicts as well. Early marriage among girls was considered more acceptable by respondents. The study found that as the mother is the major source of sustenance

and love, children generally have deeper emotional bonds and more intimate contact with her.

Uses and Abuses of Chastisement

In some cultures physical discipline is acceptable. Slapping and smacking was acceptable as a discipline method by most of the respondents in this research. What this means in effect is that what is perceived as abusive within one culture may not be viewed in the same light in others.

The analysis of the respondents' responses indicated two viewpoints: the first is that sometimes even loving parents on occasion will use physical punishment as a last resort so long as it is no more than a slap on the leg or bottom; the second is that some parents in the moment of heat lose their temper and/or are cruel and hurt their children unnecessarily. It is vital that this distinction is understood clearly.

Physical abuse by siblings is one of significant findings of the present study. Parents normally tend to ignore sibling physical abuse and reason the behaviour as sibling rivalry. In Pakistani culture males are more highly valued. They act as the head of the household, the primary wage earners, decision-makers, and disciplinarians. Elder brothers, or on some occasions even younger brothers, take over the role of father and never get challenged by the parents. This is considered normal.

The expectations that parents have of their children are related to their racial, cultural, class, and gender expectations of their family.²⁵ However, when parents and peer groups originate from different cultures, this continuity is shaken and conflict may develop. Making an attempt to understand the reasons why a parent has used physical chastisement is important. The most common causes described by the respondents for physical abuse were marriage, relationship with the opposite sex, lack of communication between generations, cultural acceptance of physical abuse and going against parents' will or rebelling.

These causes are clearly linked with the concepts of honour and shame, which many Asian Muslim families are reluctant to let slip and they will go to any length to keep intact. The concept of honour and shame for the victims of abuse becomes nothing more than a form of social control designed to protect the abuser.²⁶

Most of these families and parents are not abusive parents to start with, but when the situation arises where young people are involved in sexual relationships out of marriage, and/or girls wanting to get married to someone not of the Muslim faith, there does not seem to be any tolerance or negotiation on their behalf, and acute crisis is the result. Young people find themselves in a position where they cannot speak up on these religiously conflicting issues with their parents. These are some of the situations that are not acceptable to Muslim parents and the Muslim community in general. There are no resources available to support parents or work with young

people from an Islamic viewpoint, which leaves parents the only option, to react very harshly.

Conclusion

On the basis of the findings, this research identifies some of the major areas where improvement can be made to protect British Pakistani children from physical child abuse and/or harmful and degrading treatment. There is a need to help children and young people who may have experienced physical punishment, and to help parents to break the pattern of their learned behaviour of child rearing in order to develop healthy relationships. That could be achieved by providing education in parenting skills and training for Pakistani parents and particularly for mothers as they play a vital role in child rearing in the Pakistani community. It would be useful to help British Pakistani families to look at alternative methods of discipline. This can be best achieved by putting resources into the Asian voluntary sector.

Children's experiences of sibling abuse need to be acknowledged and addressed in the most appropriate ways as forms of significant abuse. This study would like to propose that child protection legislation and the service system should explicitly reflect the understanding that sibling abuse also constitutes a risk of harm to children.

Also there is a need for effective and consistent responses to young Muslim girls facing the dilemma of forced marriage and involvement of religious institutions and the wider community to combat this issue.

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NOTES

1. In this study the term Asian refers to people whose families originated from the subcontinent of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and East Africa (whose families migrated from the Indian subcontinent). The Asian community is not a homogeneous group and it is recognised that there are wide variations in language, religion, culture and historical values.
2. Culture is defined as a set of guidelines and customs to which individuals subscribe as members of a particular society, which influence the way in which individuals perceive the world and the way in which they behave. Cultural identity may be expressed through a variety of elements including language, diet, dress and religion.
3. In Asian perspective, the term used to depict family honour is izzat. It is related to reflected shame and a complex set of rules followed by Asians in order to protect the family honour (izzat) and keep their status in the community.

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