

Family support for South Asian communities: a case study

There is growing emphasis in government policy on providing support for children and parents at risk of family breakdown. However, it is known that social services for minority ethnic groups are inadequate and few South Asian families, in particular, use support services. This study, by Tarek Qureshi, David Berridge and Helen Wenman, explores the use of family support services by South Asian families in one case study authority. The study found that:

- f** In focus group discussions, South Asian parents expressed the view that family stress and breakdown were more common in their communities than was often perceived by professionals and the wider public.
- f** Though there were specific cultural and religious issues, comments from South Asian parents about family support and professional help were similar to findings from other research involving white families.
- f** Parents identified economic hardship and poor housing for South Asians as significant obstacles in bringing up children.
- f** A major barrier to receiving family support was said to be that parents were unaware of what was available.
- f** In this sample, most South Asian women would have welcomed an extension of family support services, whereas the men were less enthusiastic.
- f** Social services employed very few Asian staff and no South Asian managers; there were no specific policies concerning services for South Asian families; nor had any specific training been provided for staff. Compared with existing information, the case study authority is probably quite typical of many others in England.
- f** Most social workers had tried to provide culturally appropriate services but felt they lacked confidence and skills in this area.
- f** Professionals' misunderstandings about family circumstances had sometimes led to negative assumptions about parenting.

Background

South Asian families generally make relatively little use of social work family support services. However, the exact reasons for this are unclear. A stereotypical view is that people from South Asian communities do not require social work services and that family and community resources are adequate. Alternative opinions are that services are not offered in an appropriate form for people from different backgrounds, or that individuals are unaware of what is available.

Using focus group discussions, this research, based in Luton, questioned 53 South Asian parents about family problems together with their awareness of, and attitudes towards, social work family support services. Managers and social workers were also asked about their provision of services for South Asian families.

The views from the focus groups

Six focus group discussions were held, separately for women (four groups) and men (two groups), with the main ethnic and linguistic communities in Luton - Bangladeshi (Sylheti), Indian (Gujarati), Indian (Punjabi) and Pakistani/Kashmiri (Punjabi).

Group participants emphasised that family stress and breakdown were more common in their communities than was often perceived by professionals and the public. They also expressed the opinion, paradoxically perhaps, that close-knit communities could generate social isolation, and that families undergoing acute stress could feel a sense of shame about their difficulties.

Though there were specific cultural and religious issues, comments from South Asians about their family difficulties were in many ways similar to findings from other research involving white families. Families experiencing problems would first seek help from families and friends; there was an embarrassment and 'stigma' about the use of social work services; and the safety and welfare of their and other people's children were a high priority. A major barrier to receiving family support was said to be that parents were unaware of what was on offer. The need for improved communication between social services and South Asian communities was identified. Many group members did not know what the social services department did or that preventive and supportive services existed. As one group member put it:

"There is nothing different about Asians, we love our children same as other people do, we want the best for them. But we also know that some people have problems with their children, all communities have similar things happen, but the only difference I can see is that some of us (Asian community) don't know where to turn to for help."

However, gender differences emerged in the focus groups that cut across ethnic groups. South Asian women were positive about initiatives and programmes that could reduce domestic stress and prevent family breakdown. Men, on the other hand, were more suspicious of the motives for intervention in family life.

Though only a minority had had direct contact with social services, focus group participants felt that social services were failing them. Social workers who had been in contact with families were reported to have made an effort over language and cultural differences but this varied considerably. Group participants who had visited the social services office spoke of how frustrating it had been trying to see a social worker, particularly if there was a language barrier. There was dissatisfaction with the attitude of reception staff. Concern was also expressed over the role of interpreting services, which were felt less likely to be available for certain minorities. Furthermore, there was confusion over whether the interpreter's role was specifically that of an interpreter or an advocate. There were also worries over confidentiality.

Though there was diversity within and between those from different ethnic groups, many focus group participants highlighted a connection between family stress and a lack of employment opportunities for South Asians. The stress of economic hardship, poor housing and the lack of affordable day care were seen as significant obstacles in bringing up children.

Social services' perspectives

Social services managers were critical of services provided for South Asian communities. Despite a fifth of the town's residents having South Asian origins, it was felt that services and policies catered primarily for white residents. There was no integrated South Asian voluntary sector. Particular concern was expressed over the unrepresentative nature of the social services workforce, which had only two Asian social workers and one administrative

colleague out of the entire group (though there were more African-Caribbean workers).

Social workers who had worked with South Asian families over the previous 12 months were interviewed. They stated that they lacked confidence in working with families from different cultures. Referrals had mostly occurred due to child protection concerns, with few families voluntarily seeking help. This unavoidably made matters adversarial. Social workers felt their desire to undertake culturally sensitive work was impeded by a lack of knowledge and skills. Generally, professionals had done their best to try to provide an appropriate individual service and to take account of ethnic and language differences. They primarily sought advice from South Asian colleagues, who were very few in number, or from families themselves. Social workers also accessed community facilities or resources in London. But despite this individual knowledge, there was a lack of a strategic approach within the department. Whilst the majority of social workers interviewed said they were assured in their general practice and appreciated the departmental support, this did not extend to working with people from diverse cultures.

Social workers gave several examples of how a lack of understanding could lead to negative assumptions about child-rearing, which in turn could influence decisions about children and families. For example, health professionals had been concerned about the failure of parents to visit a child in hospital. Once interpreters were involved, it was discovered that this was due to responsibilities for other young children at home and to work commitments. A child at the same hospital was thought to be 'failing to thrive'; it emerged that she was not being given food with which she was familiar. Social workers also disapproved of young children sharing the same bed as their parents, though parents often considered this as normal.

Despite all this, wherever possible, social workers attempted to keep children within their families with a network of relative or family support. Yet this was not possible in half the cases studied; these parents had little support from family or friends, or were isolated and ostracised within their community.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that the low level of family support services provided for South Asian families in this particular case study area confirms other research

findings and provides insight into some of the processes involved. Again as others have argued, the 'traditional Asian family', with support from extended family relations, is at a stage of transition and does not always apply in any case. Given this context, it would have been surprising if the findings about the absence of family support had been otherwise.

The case study agency was probably quite typical of local authorities in England, as revealed in the recent Department of Health Social Services Inspectorate (2000) report on services for minority ethnic groups, *Excellence Not Excuses*. This authority is eager to make progress in this area and to build on the research findings. The researchers suggest that the following issues – and their implications for social work management – need further consideration:

- Despite the efforts made by individual social workers, there were no specific policies or practice guidelines relating to work with South Asian families. There were said to be 'ground rules' that were passed on within teams, for example concerning South Asian children in foster homes. These were not formalised in written policy and staff therefore could not be held accountable to them. Similarly, there was no detailed monitoring of service provision and use for and by minority ethnic communities. No specific training had been provided on anti-racism and cultural awareness.
- In addition, professionals expressed concern over the unrepresentative nature of the social services workforce. No particular strategy had been adopted to recruit or retain South Asian professionals and support staff. However, 'ethnic matching' is more complicated than it may first appear, as some South Asian parents interviewed expressed preferences for white, male social workers, who were perceived to exercise power in their organisation.
- Women in the focus groups were more positive about the provision of professional support services than were men. Social services staff need to consider ways of ensuring that policies and practices are relevant to women and children's needs and perspectives within the South Asian community, whilst respecting cultural and

religious beliefs and practices. Men held particular power as religious and community leaders.

- In discussions with social workers especially, problems linked to service delivery were often attributed to 'culture'. Practitioners felt that the main barrier to providing effective services was insufficient knowledge about the lives of families and communities and approaches to parenting. This may be a first step but risks generating stereotypes. The focus groups revealed much diversity within and between South Asian communities in Luton, including varied religious beliefs and practices. 'Culture' is a broad and complex term. It is important for social workers to approach families individually, seeking partnerships with parents and young people, and to develop appropriate courses of action for each family.

The researchers conclude that considerations of 'race' and culture should inform the basic frameworks of family support, and professional skills should be developed to enable this to occur. Essential in this are the quality of social work management and practice, irrespective of family origins.

About the study

The study was located in the new unitary authority of Luton as a case study. Focus groups were organised with the four main South Asian ethnic and religious groups involving 53 parents. Social workers were interviewed responsible for work over the previous year with 20 South Asian families. Four of these were developed into more detailed individual case studies involving discussions with parents. Key senior managers were also interviewed.

How to get further information

The full report, **Where to turn? Family support for South Asian communities** by Tarek Qureshi, David Berridge and Helen Wenman, is published for the Foundation by the National Children's Bureau (ISBN 1 900990 61 X, price £10.95 or £7.95 for NCB members, plus £3 p&p for orders under £28).