

## Black families' survival strategies: ways of coping in UK society

The Black Families Talking project listened to individuals and groups of African, African-Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani respondents in London and Luton discussing the ways in which they coped with exclusion and other difficulties in British society. The study, which involved more than 200 people, found that:

- f** Interviewees who held on to or developed a cultural identity and values which opposed the perceived materialism and individualism of the majority UK community felt they coped better with most problems.
- f** This often involved reliance on community spirit and spirituality, with regular group meetings and discussions. Support was also gained from family, friends, religious and cultural networks and prayer.
- f** Interviewees felt that individuals who have tried to adopt UK values, or to mix these with competing world-views, have been more vulnerable to confusion over their cultural identities and disruption within the family.
- f** Respondents preferred where possible to solve problems for themselves or within their families, and to abstain from the use of statutory and mainstream voluntary family service provisions.
- f** Most respondents expressed concern that the actions of state officials, such as school teachers and social workers, were undermining their parental authority.
- f** Families were adapting to life in the UK while staying within their own cultural traditions. For example, many of the young Muslim women interviewed considered that the Holy Quran provides the framework for true equality between women and men.
- f** Similarly, some young South Asians were keen to develop nuclear family households, rather than live as part of an extended family economic unit. But they wanted to continue to fulfil what they saw as their moral obligations to their parents and grandparents.

## Background

Most research on African, African-Caribbean and South Asian individuals and families is concerned with problems. This study goes beyond this to look at how most ordinary African, African-Caribbean, and South Asian families are enabling their members to overcome the difficulties confronting them, and developing positive ways of life.

## Spirituality

There is a strong aspect within the lives of the five ethnic groups surveyed which they feel defines the essence of their group identity and solidarity. Retaining this essence is at the heart of various practical and ideal strategies which African, African-Caribbean, and South Asian individuals and family members feel have enabled them to cope with life in Britain. It is this which has enabled them to adapt to the UK environment without a total loss of their separate cultural identities.

From the discussions, it seemed that interviewees felt that this spirituality encompassed the following:

- wider feelings of sharing and community, not just religious adherence;
- a source of personal strength, fostering both perseverance and forgiveness;
- the ability to build and concentrate on self-knowledge, without detriment to other ethnic groups;
- inner contemplation and outer activities which lead to the building of positive individuals and communities, greater self-knowledge and understanding of others.

An African-Caribbean woman in her mid-forties explained how she felt:

*"... God sees me as someone of importance and value and I think that is what I see within Black families that are disadvantaged here. In the Caribbean, be it Catholic, be it Baptist, be it Pentecostal, you grew up knowing something about this God. So the self-esteem that is lacking in our children ... it wasn't at home. I am of the belief that if no one else in the world loves me, my God loves me: and for me that's a powerful statement ... when the chips are down ... I know that I get my daily inner filling from my strength."*

Another respondent commented:

*"... there's nothing about sustaining the society, they [the majority UK community] are not brought up to think like that, and this is where I feel a difference. Because they're brought up for the outside, they're not brought up encouraging things on the inside. It's a very dangerous way ... it doesn't train you for survival."*

## Group discussions

There was a strong reliance on regular group discussions among some respondents. This was especially important for members of sub-groups of ethnic communities involved in developing religions oriented to coping with life in the UK. Such religious sub-groups are mainly found within the African and African-Caribbean communities - for example, Sokka Gakkai International (SGI) UK Buddhists, Rastafarians, and Seventh Day Adventists. These groups used discussions as a means of sharing the feelings and problems of members of immediate and extended family and the wider sub-group and as a way of finding group solutions to individual problems.

However, an equally important reason for these group debates was the transmission of group values, and the creation of mutual bonds, which strengthened feelings of love, commitment, and respect between family and sub-group members. One young woman said:

*"We all go to our mother's house ... I will sit at the table and I will start the discussion, and I see my little nieces and nephews fascinated ... even my little four-year-old niece contributes ... I think that sort of thing is good for children. I will bring up the most controversial topic, and they have to either leave the table or grow; and I want them to grow. I want my family to grow in the sense of knowing who they are, although they've been born in this system."*

## Concerns about parental authority

There was widespread concern from Africans, African-Caribbeans and South Asians that state officials such as school teachers and social workers have taken away their parental authority. This response, from a 27-year-old woman of African-Caribbean descent is typical:

*"... [UK] society is destroying the Black family in the sense that the very same society who said to you, you cannot scold your children, you cannot speak too roughly to your child, will take your child away from you, put your child in a social environment, and the social workers there are like pigs. So the values that they passed down to your children are worst than what you would give, and it's the same society that would pick up your child that they took away from you in the first place, and put your child behind bars, and say he is a criminal. So can you see the vicious circle? So somehow we have to rewrite the agenda and say this is how we want to bring up our children, allow us to do that."*

A Pakistani woman who had grown up in the UK and now had four children, argued:

*"The western system is spoiling our children and making them bad. This system has snatched the right of parents from them and has given it to the young people."*

## Arranged marriages and gender roles

Generally, South Asian women wished to continue with arranged marriage systems, although they insist on the ability to refuse a prospective partner. Interviews with young Pakistani Muslim women, aged 15 to 25, indicated that they are proud of their Pakistani culture and Muslim faith and accepted their parents' right to assist the organisation of their marital affairs. However, they were equally firm about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable gender relationships within marriage. There was a belief that limiting women to domestic roles is now an 'outmoded' practice. Many of the young Muslim women interviewed considered gender equality as a right, and believed that this is achievable through a return to the tenets of the Holy Quran which provide a framework for equality of treatment of women and men. They recognised that this might be at odds with the interpretations made by many male religious leaders in the UK.

*"We are more independent, we are more educated, we work, we put our share into the home; so therefore we should be treated equally."*

Older Pakistani women also supported this stance:

*"You know the Holy Quran ... has said, men and women are equal, and they should be treated equally. Western countries are still struggling with this idea, whereas our religion gave equal status to women a long time ago."*

*"Some parents have abused the religion as well. It does not say that girls should not be sent to schools and colleges. It says very clearly that human beings should take every opportunity to learn and practice that knowledge. That means women are allowed to work with men."*

## Ways of coping

The interviews suggest that there are some key common features in the ways in which African, African-Caribbean and South Asian families cope with the problems of life for them in Britain. At the heart of this is the focus on spirituality. This is partly a matter of pursuing a concept of an ideal way of living and thinking which they believe has to be protected from 'contamination' by the British way of life. Interviewees felt that individual and family disruption were in part based on the degree of the individual's ability to maintain or not maintain a vision opposed to the perceived materialism and individualism of UK society:

*"... basically values from the host society have been adopted and ways of being with people: hostility, that's how they operate, just general hostility. So it's important for us to instil in our children that we*

*don't have to live like hostile beings, and you have to be careful when you are out there ..."*

*"It's like the Asians and the Jews, you find stability in Jewish families because they keep their Jewishness ... You find stability in Asian [families] because they keep their culture. I think what is happening to our Black families in Great Britain is because some parents wanted to integrate into British society so much that they refused to educate their children about the good and bad of where they came from, so they grew up with an empty slate, ... neither good nor bad. So the children have been drifting in the sea with no anchor."*

Such alternative visions or models of society have additional positive features for ethnic minority individuals and groups:

- strength is drawn from very positive interpretations of individual and group history;

*"I am West Indian because of my philosophy and historical sense of being; and we relate to the Caribbean as home. Even though my sisters and my brother were born here, they're very much Caribbean."*

- there are millenarian prophecies or expectations for the future, in which the group is destined to be released in the long term from its present difficulties;

*"...if I had a problem with my child and I couldn't sort it out, I think rather than going outside to an outside body, I would probably kneel down and pray about it ... most problems I have, that's the way I deal with them."*

- thirdly, and very importantly in the short term, there are practical tools available, like the cultivation of African, African-Caribbean and South Asian role models, or a strong belief in personal independence and self-responsibility, for helping to cope with day-to-day problems and resisting the pressure of UK values.

*"I had one teacher that I will never forget ... she was a Jamaican lady, and all the things that I'm good at today ... she was the one who taught me. So she was teaching me child development, and I became a nursery nurse ... She also headed textiles, and she taught sewing, and sewing is another way that I make my living ... She was a role model outside my family."*

*"Well, I never allow them [her three children] to call themselves British - seriously. I suppose they would see themselves as Grenadians born in England, or something ... because I don't allow them to see*

*anything else, because I just bombard them with everything Grenadian and West Indian. So if you ask them they will talk about Grenada with the same passion I do ... My granddaughter who's four, has just come back [from Grenada] ... and she will talk with a Grenadian accent."*

## Conclusion

The interviews reveal that many families regard keeping in mind a culture and identity which is different from, and opposed to, that of white British society as central to their daily lives. Those individuals who have tried to accommodate a range of competing world-views seem to have been more vulnerable to identity confusion and family disruption than those people who have developed practical means to co-exist with different world-views while keeping their alternative identity and spirituality intact.

*"We've assimilated so much that we've become like water - nothing to hold on to ... a lot of us have been fooled by the concept that this society is a spiritual society, when it's not and never was ... But because our children have been born here and because they wanted to become accepted, they've dropped everything spiritual ... Now these children, my age group [30-40 years old] went and had children and they didn't have that to give to them. So [this younger generation] have been born without that spiritual dimension ... So it becomes materialist, it becomes entertainment-centred, it becomes the quick-fix centred, and you have no soul to hold you together."*

The researchers conclude that these findings are consistent with the rising trend among young members of ethnic minorities towards an African-centric way of life, and the growing phenomenon of interest in the ideas contained in the Holy Quran.

## About the study

The project was carried out between late 1994 and the end of 1996 by a team of eleven people from Exploring Parenthood. They were predominantly of African-Caribbean and South Asian descents. Twenty-five group interviews were conducted with Africans, African-Caribbeans and South Asians, involving women's organisations, refugees, senior citizens, and people involved in group counselling. Included in

the total group interviews were five group interviews with young people between the ages of 8-18 years. In addition, there were eight case studies looking at the lives of particular individuals in greater detail, including one conducted in India. Overall, 230 people were interviewed.

## Further information

For further information, contact Lynthia Grant at Exploring Parenthood, Black Families Talking project, 4 Ivory Place, Treadgold Street, London W11 4BP, Tel: 0171 221 4471. A full report, *Moyenda: Black Families Talking - Family Survival Strategies*, is published by Exploring Parenthood and is available from the same address (ISBN 1 899140 15 8, price £10 plus £2 p&p).

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