

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP AMONG INDIAN CANADIANS

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Abstract

The impact of immigration on the parent-child relationship is complex and multilayered. Using a phenomenological approach, this qualitative research involving unstructured, open-ended, in-depth interviews conducted separately with parents and their children seeks to understand how international migration affects the dynamics and quality of relationships between parents and children in a nuclear family setup. Applying Hinde's theory, ethnic socialization studies, and transnationalism from a Third World perspective, the study underscores the pivotal role of the host society's policies in shaping these intimate relationships, influenced by individual and societal challenges, particularly in navigating a bicultural identity. The principles of the home country and premigration beliefs did not always align with the realities of the host society. In the absence of conditions required for traditional grooming, several other factors come into play, leading to the emergence of a new version of the family. The study provides opportunities to explore various aspects of parenting to enhance the well-being of families, create an inclusive environment in Canada that values cultural diversity, and support Indian migrant families toward a bicultural identity.

Key Words: Family, Immigrants, Indian, Parent-child, relationship

INTRODUCTION:

I interviewed Indian immigrant parents living in Canada to understand their parent-child relationships. The respondent's parents included doctors, psychologists, social workers, cab drivers, software professionals, and their children of all age groups. They shared stories about their immigration experiences and struggles that centered around ethnic identity and the process of acculturation. I asked them, "How would you describe your parent-child relationship in Canada? In what ways do you believe children/parents are needed in your family?" The most prominent theme that emerged from their conversation was the "culture of relatedness." The narratives reflect the multilayered ethnic identity and their influence on the parent-child relationship.

This research adds to how ethnic identity and acculturation impact parent-child relationships in immigrant families. The dominant approaches in understanding the parent-child relationship have been in the context of human development (Frosch et al., 2021), systems approach (Dunst, 2023), bidirectional (Tromsdorf, 2006); neuroscience (Clark et al., 2021), parental socialization (Axpe et al., 2019), quality of parent-child relation (River et al., 2022; Shakiba et al., 2022). Large-scale ethnographic studies indicated that ethnic identity and social and religious practices influence parent-child relations (Hackett, 2017). Several quantitative studies have also attempted to develop a conceptual model to assess ethnic and racial socialization in parent-child relations (Zhu et al., 2022). Meta-analysis (Zhu et al., 2022) has emphasized ethnic-racial socialization's theoretical and empirical basis and its consequences on parent-child relations.

I explored the challenges in family life using Hinde's theory (Hinde, 1997), ethnic socialization studies, keeping a feminist perspective in the background, and diaspora and transnationalism from a Third World perspective (White et al., 2019). Multiculturalism and globalization have equated diaspora and transnationalism for migrants with family ties, active networks, and homeland connections (Redmond et al., 2023). The long history of colonization, decolonization, and globalization has resulted in an asymmetrical integration and distinctness between the Third and the First World, referred to as deterritorialization (Appadurai, 2000), where bipolar movement and its associated change in social identity affects family relationships.

Inherently, immigrant families are relational, seeking residence rights but not locked into the structural relations of their host countries (Redmond & Martin, 2023). Instead, online communications and occasional trips anchor them to their home country and expand their horizons beyond one nation (Morad, 2021) with varying family attachments and redefined roles. Taking a transnational approach makes sense as Canada, like India, is also inherently plural, with religious and regional differences shaping its identity.

A Little History of Indian Immigration to Canada

The Immigration Act of 1976 and the current Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) of 2002 have encouraged the migration of skilled professionals securing white-collar jobs. Currently, newer-generation Indians make Canada the eighth-largest Indian Diaspora in the world (Prachi, 2024) because they also provide reliable

pathways for those not technically inclined. Also, the stringent immigrant policies of the U.S. simultaneously prompted Indians to reconsider Canada as a potential location for their permanent settlement. No matter when they relocated, participants saw Canada as a reference point when constructing their identities with one universal hope: "Life is prosperous in Canada."

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted separately with parents and their children in the winter of 2020, which presented methodological challenges. Parents were hesitant to share family secrets or negative opinions about the host country, fearing it would affect their residency and employment in Canada, hence guarded one another. The ethical dilemma was to balance the experiences of participants' immigration stories, parent-child dynamics, and my reflexive thoughts. The literature on ethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), methodology, and analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013) proved invaluable throughout the data collection and analysis. The data was inductively analyzed using NVivo-12.

Re-conceptualizing family across border

During the years of India's struggle for independence, Caucasian European families who adopted Indian children faced difficulties, especially in embracing children's cultures.

Says Ram, "My strict White mother emphasized English language, culture, and religion."

Later, many Indians migrated to Canada after independence who expressed a sense of being "different" and felt disparaged for being Indian. Separation and isolation from their families strengthened their awareness of family and culture, motivating them to cultivate Indian values in Western society and encouraging sponsorship of the resettling of extended families in Canada.

Parents ensured their children were taught a pure version of unified Indian culture, reflected in their way of life, values and habits that showed no bias towards society.

Jasdeep says, "I tell kids about history and what we do during the festivity."

Old Canadian policies initially promoted Anglo-conformity and Christian philosophy, making it challenging to preserve Indian traditions and ethos (Bolaria, 1988). The older immigrants shared painful experiences of being isolated and bullied in schools. Reema says, "My father could not have long hair because it was prohibited."

Ram narrates, "I had forgotten all Hindi because there were no Indians that time."

Contrarily, despite Western antagonism, the contemporary government's policies facilitate immigrants to re-establish their cultural roots within a restricted frame and transplant their extended family to Canada (Thobani & Butt, 2022). They share similar ethnic neighborhoods and participate in personal networks, enabling them to meet one another. Indian Associations provided a platform to network and access resources, allowing Indians to rejuvenate in Canada.

Jasdeep says, "we meet and discuss at Regina Open Door Society and Gurudwara committee."

Ramila says, "We unite to enjoy our Bengali tradition at a Bengali association."

The complexity of relocating to a new country requires families to adapt to the host country's ways of life, profoundly impacting beliefs about the redistribution of household responsibilities, parenting roles, values, and family size (Cabrera et al., 2014), emphasizing self-discipline and adaptability in children (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). As a crucial step towards building a successful future in a new country, they embrace new gender ideologies and navigate according to cultural norms (Hari, 2018). Indian women in Canada experienced greater freedom and independence due to separation from their extended families and supportive laws for women.

Prachi says, "I enjoy living in Canada because I can work and have freedom."

Women were not threatened by "shame" cultures that demanded adherence to traditional roles and personalities.

Life as an Indo-Canadian parent

Pride for Indianness with inherent stress

Parents are considered the most vital link to ethnicity among immigrants (Mitchell, 2019). Almost all parents expected to raise their children, instilling a proud Indian identity that shapes their behavior and understanding of the parent-child relationship. Says Jasdeep, "I share my childhood experiences and Sikh religious stories, introduce Indian religious movies, and play traditional games."

Emanuel describes, "We aim to instill religion in children to maintain a cultural continuity."

Parents tend to view their children as an extension of themselves, and the experiences of violating cultural norms and intergenerational dynamics put them under stress and challenge in relations (Mitchell, 2019).

Emanuel describes, "Every day is a challenge because children feel that Indian parents are trying to impose more Indianness on them. Extra efforts are required to keep them happy."

Rakesh says, "I strive to teach children Sanskrit, traditional music, religious texts, and serving God."

Harmeet says, "We should not impose our culture on kids, knowing our child is in a different family culture."

Estrangement, Dissatisfaction and Anxiety

Brody (2012) claims that though parenting enhances self-esteem, parents also bear the burden of meeting children's financial and emotional needs, which can leave them unhappy and dissatisfied. Rakesh shares, "I cannot give my children what I want because life is different and restricted here. Parents work extra hours, and children also remain engaged in electronics." Canadian laws have reshaped a significant part of parenting, discouraged

authoritative parenting styles, and encouraged children to make decisions. Parents felt anxious and powerless observing their children more independent. Emanuel shares, "This is a major conflict situation for Indian parents. Kids discuss among themselves, saying, Oh! I am turning 17 and moving on this date." Harmeet shares, "There are legal provisions stating one cannot leave a young child alone at home; children may complain about you." Shamita says, "My concern is my daughter's clothing and dating, which I cannot control much." Potential conflict and estrangement between parents and children were concerning due to differences in societal perspectives and varied community role expectations. The contradictions arose due to gendered and cohesive family ideologies and personal desires for autonomy.

Decision Making

Although physical discipline is accepted in India, some expressed frustration when they could not maintain control and even lacked monitoring networks. Some families negotiated with children to reach a more positive, and productive resolution, reconciling their differences. Jasdeep explains, "As a parent, I cannot dictate over children. They become more independent as they grow older."

Although the fundamental pattern of parenting remained constant, parents often made decisions based on their adopted acculturation strategies (Londhe, 2006). Jasdeep says, "I am prepared to inform my children at the age of 17 that they should start seeking employment to contribute to their tuition fee while we support them."

Harmeet shares, "The plans should be mutually discussed with children."

Rakesh says, "We discuss with children and strive to exemplify the values we teach."

Despite the standard norm of gender role segregation in Indian parenting, role flexibility was observed as an adaptive response and balancing strategy to external sociocultural pressure. There remained a constant interplay between the experiences and competing demands of the two cultures.

Parental aspirations and control

Indian parents often prioritize their children's education, career, and marriage aspirations, favoring science over personal passions. They ensured their teenagers remain focused on academic aspirations to receive a high-quality education from a reputed university, as a valuable investment essential for matching. Jasdeep says, "Excelling in academics is essential, and I expect them to pursue a career in medicine."

Emanuel says, "We want our child to surpass our accomplishments and pursue engineering at a reputable university."

Parents also focused on integrating cultural awareness in children by adhering to approved cultural norms and making occasional trips to India (Kapadia, 2009). Jasdeep states, "We plan to visit India every five years and meet every family. I often remind my son to speak in Punjabi."

Rakesh says, "I plan to return to India shortly so they understand India well and become devotees."

Corollary was the expectation of obedience to elders. Says Reema, "I obey the elderly and parents to make kids follow." Marrying someone of Indian ethnicity was traditionally encouraged for both genders, along with strong reservations about late-night parties and overnight stays. Says Emanuel, "I am liberal enough for my son to have a girlfriend but within boundaries."

Jasdeep's father says, "We cannot allow inter-caste marriage in our house."

Parents taught their children to abstain from dating to uphold Indian sexual chastity standards. Harmeet says, "I expect my daughter to study more rather than dating and relationships."

Parent-child relationships across the border

Differences in values and culture

Vast differences in culture and values manifest into opposing development ideals, straining family relations (Greenfield et al., 2006). Although children adapt quickly, parents often adjust to new ideas and beliefs, holding onto traditional culture and gender perspectives to align with Canadian values. Parents aspire to provide their children with a blend of cultures to

help them adapt and succeed in the new society.

Says Ramila, "I prefer Western grooming with an Indian touch."

Jasdeep says, "I will impart a blend of Indian and Canadian values, creating a diverse upbringing."

Children adopt the prevailing culture as they grow up and often struggle to balance cultural expectations with personal freedom. Conflicts and dissonance are likely to become more pronounced among adolescents and young people, as the social setup reflects a disagreement between traditional Indian values and the dominant group.

Jasdeep says, "My dad still adheres to his old values, which creates clashes."

The family's adaptive culture influenced parent-child interactions in response to external stressors. Says Emanuel, "We cannot apply anything directly to children growing up here. We customize it, and then children will take it according to their Canadian-influenced perspective."

Value of familism, hierarchy, and age

Indians value familism, where family is the basis of identity, trust, warmth, and support, coexisting with values of linearity, hierarchy, and reverence for age (Praveen et al., 2013). However, the acculturation has changed children's aspirations, and where parents are expected to support their decisions, communicate, and exchange ideas freely.

Ramila says, "I am friendly with kids; they can discuss anything under the sun."

Parents sometimes tend to get more involved in mentoring and disciplining their children. Conversely, as children grow, they become more independent and expect parents to respect their privacy and decisions, creating hostility and bitterness in their relationship.

Joe, at 13, says, "My mother's strict punishments and overprotection frustrates me. I aspire to join the military, but my mother disapproves. Given the chance, I wish to change some of her qualities."

The autonomy granted to minors by Canadian laws often leads children to embrace Canadian culture, leaving parents feeling a loss of cultural identity. Shamita says, "We believe that smacking or scolding is ingrained in us as necessary when children misbehave."

Parental expectations often clash with children's rights and personal liberties as they tend to prefer premature independence, which can lead to future identity crises.

Transfer of Power

Traditional Indian parenting often prioritizes men over women. However, migration brought family disharmony due to power transitions between parents and children, leading to disrespect. The strained relationships intensify when parents, lacking competence in education, language, and technology, depend on their children, feeling restricted.

Jasdeep says, "We accompanied Father for going anywhere because we were the ones who knew driving, could communicate in English, collect and provide information."

Canadian regulations redefined the power structure between parents and children and the extent to which parents reinforced their parental authority. Transitioning from a vertical hierarchical power structure to a more balanced horizontal power distribution strained the relationship, keeping older parents feeling isolated and overwhelmed.

Parental absenteeism and the internal support

A supportive parent-child relationship also depended upon the full-time availability of parents at home. Respondents often relied on the support of extended family members, who aided them in raising children, overcoming challenges, and maintaining their ethnicity (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

Shamita says, "I completely depend on my elder sister to care for children in our absence."

Grandparents acted as a bridge to cultural heritage, preserving emotional connections through family traditions, stories, and values of family unity (Ramos, 2012). However, parents were frustrated with their inability to reconcile different opinions among family members due to cultural and generational gaps. Rohit, at 16, says, "My grandparents would handle all the chores, but I dislike their constant pressure to do things I do not want. I wish the relationship between my mom, dad, and his family had been better."

The emphasis on material obligations, parental absenteeism, and dependence on extended family members affected parent-child relations. A struggle to balance generations due to a mismatch of cultural backgrounds and differing views on individuality and independence has led to frequent conflicts and communication breakdowns.

DISCUSSION

The recent worldwide migration trend highlights the cultural continuity of Indians in Canada and its implications for parent-child relationships. I offer an Indian perspective in light of an oppositional culture involving different cultural values, degrees of freedom, negotiations, and resentment between parents and children. To maintain ties with their home country, they sent remittances, occasionally visited, and participated in cultural festivals such as Mosaic to express their ethnicity (Sano et al., 2015). Temples play an essential role in re-instilling religious values and manners into the day-to-day lives of parents, which they pass on to their children more modern and secularly to fit into Canadian society (Sahoo & Sanga, 2010). Further, ethnic associations assisted immigrants in coping with immigration stress, receiving government assistance, and adjusting families to new environments.

Where parents feared cultural annihilation through Canadianization, children felt monitored and restricted by their parents. There was a shift in gender power relations as they moved on to the next generation, from institutionally repressive and restrictive gender roles to more independent and liberal women (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2016). However, gendered parenting and socialization issues in immigrant households remained challenging at different life stages (Somerville, 2019). Fathers transitioned from being the patriarchal head to just another male member of the family, which led to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness (Roy, 2007).

Parents' busy work-life schedules depended on external support mechanisms like grandparents or siblings who lived with them and cared for their children. Children often struggled to adapt to their parent's beliefs and mainstream cultural expectations (Schuler et al., 2022), causing imbalanced parental expectations and intergenerational relationship crises. The author identifies immigrants as a population most susceptible to hybridity and cultural ambiguity, growing with an invisible border, striving to be absorbed into Western culture and nurtured equally (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 78). The only solution to the identity dilemmas of children and parental efforts to preserve Indian ethnicity was to reach halfway through compromises and bargains (Gautam, 2013). Rakesh says, "The decisions at times require us to take a step back."

Parental expectations and disciplinary orientation towards children are crucial aspects of Indian culture, where immigrants struggle with unfamiliar value systems and lack a network of monitoring mechanisms. Parents often struggle to guide their children in a new educational environment vastly different from India (Sondhi, 2017). In

actuality, these policies end up experiencing “systemic discrimination and a feeling of exclusion” (Ali et al., 2019, p.157). Participants shared their experience of being labeled as “Fresh out of the Boats” (FOBS), which perpetuates a Eurocentric approach to parenting by emphasizing differences

CONCLUSION

The study sheds light on how international migration impacts the dynamics and quality of the relationship between parents and children in a nuclear family setup. Several other actors create a newer version of the family because of the absence of conditions required for traditional grooming. The principles of the home country and premigration beliefs do not wholly comply with the parent-child relationship among immigrants. There are varied re-molding levels based on the host society's experiences and policies. Understanding this remains a complex social process affected by challenges at the individual and societal levels, especially in navigating bicultural identity, which impacts intimate relationships. The study offers opportunities to explore various aspects of parenting to enhance the family's overall well-being, highlighting the need for interventions to facilitate a smooth transition towards a bicultural identity.

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