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'We tend to stick together and mostly we stick to our own kind': British Indian women and support networks at university

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Background

The study of support and support networks has become increasingly important when assessing well-being. Social support refers to the provision of instrumental, emotional or practical assistance and the nature and magnitude of resources provided to an individual by network members (Laireiter and Baumann, 1992). Network characteristics such as size and frequency of interactions can provide systematic variations in support resources amongst groups. Gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status have been found to affect the types of support that individuals give and receive (Campbell and Maclean, 2002). This paper examines how 'race', gender and class interact to inform how British Indian women negotiate different types of support as strategies to manage their success whilst at university.

Research Questions

There has been little research which has explored support networks for Asian women, particularly within higher education. The research that does exist has examined the importance of friendships for the settlement of Pakistani migrants which exist beyond the kin network (Werbner, 1990) and Shaw's research (2000) has examined family support in the arrangement of marriages in Asian communities. Much of the literature assumes that Asian women receive support from family and kin networks and friendship networks do not take precedence or provide support for Asian women (Paliwala and Risseu, 1996). This paper will examine the support networks which exist for British Indian women in the community of the university. It will examine how British Indian women, particularly those from middle class backgrounds who have larger support networks than those from working class backgrounds are able to use these support networks as strategies for managing their success within the academy.

Methods

This paper is based on data from a research study which examined the experiences of British Indian women in a 'new' (post 1992) university. It is based on thirty-two in-depth qualitative interviews with British Indian women. All of the interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the respondents and subsequently transcribed. The women were contacted via personal contacts in universities where there were high numbers of Asian women attending. Notices were displayed around the university campus to encourage respondents to participate. Respondents were aged between 20-25 and twenty-four (out of thirty-two) were from traditional middle class backgrounds (as defined by their parents' occupations). The remaining eight were from traditional working class backgrounds.

Frame

In examining women's support networks and their communities at university, the research focussed on the following themes:

- Support: how do women engage in support networks? What do they provide women with? Who is a member of these networks?
- Communities: how is the sense of community within the university environment understood? What benefits do women see from being a member of this community?

- Belonging: how do women understand their sense of belonging in the university community?

The data was analysed using methods of grounded theory as developed by Charmaz (2006). This process was based on analysing concepts and developing categories within the data in order to develop a more general analytical framework from which to make connections between the categories. The research used theories of social capital as developed by Putnam (2000) to examine British Indian women's engagement in support networks at university from which they develop 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital. It is also based on understandings of the concept of community in relation to those groups with which we identify and belong (Bauman, 2001; Putnam, 2000).

Research findings

The research argues that British Indian women depend on their support networks as strategies to manage their success at university as they provide them with a form of network capital, but at the same time, they have access to varying degrees of social capital inside and outside of their own ethnic group. Being successful in higher education is crucial for women to succeed and in order to achieve this success; they use their networks as sources of support whilst at university. Their success will enable them to enter the labour market in which they can transform social capital into financial capital (high earnings), human capital (gaining skills) and further social capital (contacts with other people). Women's access to social capital increases their chances of social mobility once they leave the world of the Academy.

Many of the women relied on their friends for support such as help with assignments and sharing resources (borrowing books and laptops). Close friendships with other Asian women from similar backgrounds were based on shared experiences of exclusion such as experiences of racism and a sense of being the 'other'. Friends were able to offer mutual support and understanding. Women's identity was related to a strong sense of place (the community they formed whilst at university) and their social networks were based on informal rather than formal relationships. The centrality of friendships to the everyday lives of Asian women is clear. The social networks that women develop at university could be said to constitute 'bonding social capital'. As Putnam (2000) argues social capital in the form of networks of trust, facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit in which individuals display high levels of participation. This was derived from tight friendships and group membership. 'Bonding' social capital is important for social support, emotional well being and 'bridging' social capital to enable women to have access to the labour market and greater social mobility.