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Title: Second-Generation South Asian Muslims in the United States

Introduction

Initially, this research project involved using the concept of “culture shock” to assess the assimilation of second generation South Asian Muslim immigrants. However, as my research will demonstrate, culture shock does not necessarily influence one’s connection to one’s native land. This particular demographic of second generation South Asian Muslim immigrants, although very particular in nature, actually represents a wide range of ideas, opinions and beliefs.

My research involved interviewing seven individuals between the ages of 19 and 22: Sajid, Sara, Ali, Aisha, Osman, Asif and Anum. I asked them a variety of questions relating to their experiences as second generation South Asian Muslims, as well as their views on things like marriage and the importance of language. Since sequential order of the questions proved to be valuable in acquiring information from them, I am providing the list of questions:

Do you speak your native language and how well? Even if you speak the language well, do you encounter discrimination in your native country due to your accent and/or dialect?

When did you or your parents move to the United States, and under what circumstances?

How often do you travel to your native country?

In the Chicago area, does your neighborhood consist of many people from your native country? Do your schools, places of worship and social circles consist of many people from your native country?

As a second generation or 1.5 generation immigrant, would you marry a first generation immigrant who has not adapted to the U.S. as much as you have? Would you be willing to move to your native country and marry a native?

Do your parents expect you to marry from your native country? If so, do your parents also expect you to marry someone from your specific region of your native country?

When you visited your country of origin, were you immediately comfortable or did it take you some time to adjust to the new setting?

In the United States, do you associate more with United States pop culture or are you more interested in movies, music etc. of your native country?

What is your family's economic status in the United States compared to what it was in your native country and compared to any relatives who live in your native country?

In what type of region do you live in the United States, compared to your native country (i.e. urban/rural/suburban, wealthy/poor etc)?

The more interesting answers revolved around the questions concerning language and marriage.

Language

One notion that I had going into this revolved around the idea that language plays a key role in whether one appreciates the culture from which that language comes. In other words, my hypothesis was that if a respondent is well versed in his or her parents' first language, then that respondent most likely visits the country often, and feels an attachment towards it. However, my research proved otherwise. Consider Ali's words, when asked if he can speak his native language well: "It depends really. I can speak it. I speak it 85 percent. My mom would speak to me in Urdu so I can understand 100 percent..." However, when asked about traveling to Pakistan, he says,

"In 2006 was the first time I went... My mom is going with my two sisters and brother in December... They just go to go shopping. It's an expensive shopping trip, basically. They take empty suitcases... They don't necessarily go to see anyone. Once my mom went with my uncle because he bought some property so they went to set it up. She didn't want to take us there to see how Pakistan was, or to experience the culture."

Conversely, consider the words of Sara. When asked if she could speak her parents' native language of Urdu, Sara reported,

“Not that much and not very well. My parents rarely speak to me in it. They always speak to me in English and I always speak in English. My dad doesn’t speak Urdu at all and my mom says like one line in Urdu in conversation; it’s kind of in passing, and out of habit. Even that is fading. English is the main language in our house.”

In the same interview, Sara reported,

“I love Pakistan... I love going there and being there. When I’m not there, I really have the desire to visit. I love going and hanging out with my cousins and talking for hours, and wandering around, and going to the mountains, and shopping with my uncles.”

The responses show quite a bit of contrast. Ali claims to be highly fluent in Urdu but does not seem to be that attached to Pakistan, while Sara can barely speak Urdu but has a strong connection to Pakistan.

Additionally, Sajid reported,

“I do speak my native language well and I would say I’m pretty fluent; I can understand 95 to 100 percent of what I hear. As far as vocabulary and sentence forming, I would say I’m pretty good. A lot of times people are surprised that I can speak Urdu as well as I can, considering I am second generation...When I was in Hyderabad, people would come up to me and tell me and say, “wow you speak Urdu so well even though you’re from the United States. So they have this misconception that I was never taught Urdu since I was raised in the U.S. And I would say that discrimination wise, it doesn’t necessarily occur in a negative way.”

When asked about his connection to his parents’ native hometown of Hyderabad, India, Sajid said,

“Interestingly, I only went once in my childhood, when I was 4 years old. But my family is very in touch with Indian culture, so for me, it was really important to go there and witness it first-hand. The second time I went was this past summer. During the time I didn’t go, during my whole childhood, I really wanted to go. It was a goal of mine because I felt an attachment. It was never forced upon me. Even though I don’t go often, when I went, I felt a sense of attachment.”

Sajid demonstrates a high level of attachment to Hyderabad and also speak Urdu very well. However, it is interesting to note that this attachment still exists even though he has only visited India a few times.

Value of Language

Something of note that I discovered through my interviews was the value that subjects placed on language. Sara, in regards to how burdensome it was to be in Pakistan and not have a grasp on the national language of Urdu, stated,

“The shopkeepers would try to take advantage of us because of our accent. There was a lot of ridicule for my lack of Urdu skills, especially from my family members like my grandparents. My aunts would make fun of me a lot. They would be poking fun, but it was kind of mean. It was nothing to get sensitive about but it was enough to make me think about how I cannot speak it well.”

Furthermore, Ali said,

“I really do plan on buying a house there when I “grow up”. I’d love to go once a year. I think every generation loses a bit of culture. I can’t read or write the language that my parents speak. For my kids, I’d love to have them in touch with their roots. That’s important for anyone.”

This shows that the subjects value the concept of being bilingual. Although knowing Urdu is not necessarily for survival in U.S. culture, the participants seemed to highly value it.

Additionally, it seemed that some respondents exaggerated the extent to which they knew their parents’ native languages. When I asked them how well they knew the native language, many boasted of their knowledge of the language. However, when I inquired about the level of language-related discrimination they experienced, their pride in their language skills suddenly decreased.

Take for example Ali. Although he reported that he could understand Urdu 100 percent and speak

it 85 percent, he also said, “They [people in Pakistan] always know that I’m not from the area, from the moment I open my mouth.”

Anum said, “When I travel to Pakistan, I get picked on for my English accent and my Urdu accent and it makes me really sad because then I feel like I do not have a place in the world.”

Osman, when asked about his potential marriage prospects in the future, said,

“It has nothing to do with geographic restraints but more so with language. She has to be Muslim... It all comes back to the language though. My parents speak English well. But my wife would have to speak Urdu well. They say that anything besides that would begin to break up a sort of cohesiveness with the general, extended family. They wouldn’t consider any woman from another culture. Family is very important to them in this sense.”

Asif, in terms of marrying a first-generation immigrant woman, said,

“I could see it happening but it is very unlikely. I would feel a little stupid if she talked to my parents in Urdu and I didn’t understand. She’d have upper-level grammar. There would be an inferiority thing in terms of she being more cultured than I am.”

Marriage

The questions regarding marriage brought up an incessant amount of interesting points among the respondents. Although none were married, they all had very definitive opinions concerning this topic. This is especially interesting since it deals with this subculture, within which marriage is highly discussed and valued. Among the most fascinating answers were those in response to the question of marrying first generation South Asian Muslim immigrants. Consider all seven of the respondents’ answers:

Sajid said,

“I would say that, yes, I would be willing to marry a first generation immigrant, as long as she intends to come here and settle and assimilate or at least shows the potential of being able to assimilate into American culture.

Speaking from my heart, I think that it would be unfair to not give a first generation immigrant a chance just because she is an immigrant. My parents are living examples that its possible to come here and make a life for yourself. Because I’ve been raised the way I am, it would be easier to compete with the cultural differences that she would bring. Because I was raised close to the culture, I think that I would be able to get along well with someone who’s a ‘fob’ [acronym for ‘fresh off the boat,’ a term used by second-generation immigrants in reference to first-generation immigrants].”

Asif said,

“It is very unlikely because I see myself as relating to people here more in terms of customs, traditions. I’m more assimilated into this culture more than in Pakistan. I could see it happening but it is very unlikely.”

Ali said,

“Right off the top of my head, my answer would be yes. I can’t say definitely, but 90% yes. I’ve been to Pakistan, I’ve seen the culture, and I feel that they’re genuine people. They’re caring; I love their family structure. I love the feel I get, how they’re hospitable and caring. I feel that I understand a lot about how the country works, and the culture. If the girl came, I would think that she would probably be pretty helpful, caring, submissive, and respectful in the sense that she was probably raised in a way that would have her be respectful. She’s probably been exposed to typical female roles. She probably knows how to cook; that’s a plus, and so is staying home and cooking. Certain disadvantages would be the language problem, communication, culture barrier, and that she hasn’t been exposed to this culture. She might see me doing something she won’t like, and vice versa. In a nutshell, I would. I would never say no just because she wasn’t from America.”

Osman, after pondering the question for a bit, said,

“Yea, sure. My reason for not saying no is that I believe I would be still able to relate to a ‘fob’ because of the fact that I know the language and I know about the culture, or at least moderately so. There would be trivial barriers, at best. I think I am saying this as a male; if I were female, I would probably have a different answer.”

Just as Osman predicted, female respondents had quite different answers.

Sara said,

“I don’t think I would marry a first generation immigrant. It might have to do with me being picky. I would be picky because I feel like we would be really different. It would be hard to get along. We’d get along on the surface but later we’d find that there were a lot of differences, causing it to be difficult to be married. There would be cultural differences, like religious practices, gender roles, and gender expectations. I think my religious practices would be more flexible because there wouldn’t be any cultural influences in it; there are not cultural influences on the way I practice my religion. In Pakistan, women aren’t allowed to go to the *masjid*; they aren’t allowed to go out very much versus how it is here. This is a smaller example of bigger problems that would come up in a marriage. This might be where our ideas of Islam would clash. There is probably a western influence on the way I practice my religion.”

Anum said,

“I would probably not marry a boy who recently came to the United States from Pakistan or South Asia. I think it’s because of based on the environment we grew up in, our interests would probably be very different and just the mentality that people have would be different. I think that my mentality growing up here would be different from his growing up in Pakistan. There are expectations; but based on what I’ve seen I would not be interested in this. When I travel to Pakistan, it’s sometimes difficult to create a close relationship with my cousins and similarly I can assume it would be difficult to do so if I married someone straight from Pakistan.”

Aisha said,

“I don’t think I would. I don’t think I would be able to connect enough with a person who just came here. It’s just not something I would want; the upbringing is so different. They grew up there; I grew up here. I don’t think I’d have a lot in common, enough that I would want to marry them.”

These findings reveal a great disparity between men and women. Men surveyed revealed that they would either have no issue with marrying a first generation immigrant, or if there were a problem, then it could easily be resolved. Women, on the other hand, reported that problems would be so immense that marrying a first generation immigrant would not even be a consideration.

As such, these second generation women will mostly likely not marry first generation men, and will probably turn to second generation men. However, they will be surprised when they realize that expectations regarding marriage will not be the same among second generation men.

As such, these second generation women will most likely not marry first generation men and will probably turn to second generation men. However, they may be surprised when they realize that expectations regarding marriage will not be the same among second generation men. Some second generation women may either be unable to find compatible second generation men, or may end up marrying second generation men who desire stereotypical qualities of first generation women. Further research is needed to determine the repercussions of this potential trend.

Attachment to Family

A common theme that ran throughout all of the interviews was attachment to one's family. Many of the subjects even reported only visiting their parents' native countries to visit family. Sara says, regarding her family's view on both spouses and families being compatible, "They are big on the idea of in-laws; they believe that marriage involves two families joining together."

Osman also references his attachment to his family, and his parents' attachment to the family. This has to do with why his parents would prefer that he marry a woman who can speak Urdu; Urdu is what ties his entire family together. Aisha also references her attachment to her nuclear family in her response to why she would not want to move to India: "[When I visited India,] I was homesick for the people I was used to and the way the home is set up. I'm more comfortable with the concept of the nuclear family."

In-group and Out-group Mentality

A common thread that I did not expect to come across during this research was the concept of associating similar characteristics on all members of a particular out-group. For example, I asked Osman about his whether he could potentially move to India or Pakistan. His response was:

“No I wouldn’t. It’s because I’m not familiar with that culture enough to be comfortable living there. I don’t feel there is enough in that culture for me. I would be willing to live in any other culture that I don’t know about. But why would I not be willing to live in that culture. As an American, that’s the only culture that I would have to downplay aspects of my American-ness. In other parts of the world, there’s no expectation of being immediately assimilated into that culture. It’s something you can learn about, and observe from an impartial view. In the Indo-Pak culture, there’s an immediate expectation that you have to tend to; that’s an uncomfortable place.”

Note that Osman has never visited these countries he referenced; he said it was merely his prediction about the lifestyle there. He goes on to say, in regards to spending the majority of his time with his family instead of exploring the culture, “The reason is that it is not as safe as other parts of the world, so you need family. You have to just stay with family. There’s not much of an option. You can’t go out because there is a lot of crime.” He particularly mentions that India and Pakistan are not quite as safe as different areas of the world, yet he has also said that he has never visited these other parts of the world.

Also, consider Asif’s explanation regarding marriage to a first generation Pakistani immigrant:

“I hate nationalism. I very strongly am against nationalism. But she wouldn’t be obviously. In terms of Pakistan Day, I don’t really like it. I don’t mind culturally connecting with it, but I think it created barriers and boundaries between people who aren’t like you. Whereas I wouldn’t have a problem with, for example, an Indian, someone from Pakistan who has lived there for her entire life, she might. I bet she would watch a lot of Indian movies too, not that the girls here don’t.”

Asif categorizes Pakistani women, claiming that they all share a sense of national pride. This is in contrast to his views that national pride is not desirable. However, a Pakistani woman

could also express these views just as he has. It seems he has gone against his subculture in thinking this way; she might also go against her subculture to think this way.

Consider again what Sara said regarding marriage to a first generation Pakistani immigrant:

“I think my religious practices would be more flexible because there wouldn’t be any cultural influences in it; there are not cultural influences on the way I practice my religion. In Pakistan, women aren’t allowed to go to the *masjid*; they aren’t allowed to go out very much versus how it is here. This is a smaller example of bigger problems that would come up in a marriage. This might be where our ideas of Islam would clash. There is probably a western influence on the way I practice my religion.”

Participants even made generalizations regarding their own subculture. Ali said,

“There is a high focus on religion in the Pakistani culture in general. Most families will emphasize religion to a higher degree than what you would see in American society.” Compare this to

Anum’s remarks concerning being placed in Islamic school by her parents:

“My parents thought to put me in Islamic school in an attempt to prevent me from deterring from the religious path. My parents were very busy and they worked a lot and we didn’t have a lot of time to sit and discuss Islamic values so they “threw the job on someone else.” The values and morals and all-around aspects of Islamic school were stricter than those of my parents. Also, they didn’t directly disagree with the values of Islamic school, but they alluded to the idea that all aspects taught in Islamic school were not as important as what our teachers said. For example, in Islamic school, the dress code required that girls had to cover their hair. Many of my classmates and friends continued to do so after leaving the classroom and continue to cover their hair today. However, my parents never stressed the importance of this concept for me and my sister.”

Participants seemed to also have strong opinions concerning the home their parents left behind. Consider Sajid’s views on the lifestyle of people in Hyderabad, India. He says that these are not his view nor his immediate family’s views, but rather a compilation of observations he has made:

“This is not characteristic of me or my family, but this is my interpretation of why Hyderabadis want their children to marry Hyderabadis. They feel like, no matter what, Indians are good people but...from Pakistan...something shady in there. It’s not as much in my family but a lot of people have that mentality. My parents would have preferences, but

some people have it a lot. They have certain opinions about Pakistanis, like they're advanced, losing culture; they're adapting too much to American culture. They're not as traditional. In Hyderabad, they're descendents of Moghuls, so inherently in our culture, it's a very reserved culture. We don't sing; we don't dance; we don't intermix genders...From the lowest to highest class of Hyderabadis... they have a sense of something like pride.. the way they carry themselves.. in a kind of royal way.. they have this spirit, maybe unconscious royal or regal mentality that they try to portray. It's like a characteristic of Hyderabadis. They try to be reserved and proper. Hyderabadis say that Pakistanis do these things because they're advanced; they [Pakistanis] don't mind moving or straying away from tradition.

Since Hyderabadis are descendents of Moghuls, they have this regality in their demeanor. In their culture, there is this need to constantly revert back to that regality. There are these flashes of this need to be regal that are visible in the way we behave. Our behaviors, for example, include: how we're more reserved, more prudent, wanting to do the right thing, being more righteous, pious.

Look at a Hyderabadis versus Pakistani party; there are big differences. Look at Hyderabadis weddings; the bride is dolled up, as fancy as possible, wearing more gold. In a Pakistani wedding, the bridal clothing is more simple...Now it's become this kind of wannabe royalty [for Hyderabadis] that they display, even though it's long gone. It's something they hold on to. They do it because it sets them apart. There is a lot of pride. Hyderabadis are very resistant to people who are advanced and moving away from that lifestyle. They feel that other cultures like the Pakistani culture are a threat to that. They would say that marrying a Pakistani is fine, okay do it, but it's messing with what we've been working on and putting it in danger.

That one idea of regality is a major thing that sprouts controversies between Hyderabadis and Pakistanis. If a Pakistani kid and a Hyderabadis kid marry, the kids might not have problems, but families might. Hyderabadis are trying to hold on; they view Pakistanis as a threat.

[My opinion is] Hyderabadis and Pakistanis are different. One's not better, but I do think they're different. I don't think you shouldn't marry, but you should be ready to deal with families' ideas of it and having to compromise, somewhere in the middle."

Sajid's opinions concerning this matter are especially fascinating, particularly as a young adult who has grown up in the United States. Further research is also needed to assess his notions on Hyderabad.

Limitations

Respondents were mostly from the Chicago suburbs, and generally financially well-off. Even the respondents from more rural areas of Illinois reported coming from families who did not struggle financially. Additional limitations come from only having interviewed four males and three females. Additionally, these respondents all reported at least a general interest in religion; they all fell into the stereotypical mold of mainstream second generation immigrant South Asian Muslims. More diverse responses may have come from poorer or wealthier respondents. Also, all respondents reported an increase or a similar nature in wealth that their parents experienced upon traveling to the United States. In other words, each respondent came from a family who had a certain amount of money in India or Pakistan, and had the same amount or more wealth after moving to the United States. No one's family had a certain amount of money in India or Pakistan, and then had a smaller amount of money in the United States. This has most likely contributed to the respondents' attitudes towards moving back to their or their family's native country permanently. Some respondents directly cited the financial discrepancies they would encounter upon leaving the United States and moving to India or Pakistan. It seems like this created an attitude among the respondents that India and Pakistan serve in creating their identity as unique among their American peers. They want to live in the United States but they want to have India or Pakistan as their background.

Additional Research

This topic would require a lot more research before arriving at definitive conclusions. For example, it would be interesting to study a broader demographic, like those who are poorer,

wealthier, less inclined toward religion, more inclined toward religion, less educated, more educated, those from more diverse areas throughout South Asia, especially India which is more is culturally diverse than Pakistan, and those who have actually moved back to South Asia for an extended period of time after living in the United States.

An interesting follow-up to this research paper might involve interviewing both second generation and first generation young adult South Asian Muslims. It would be interesting to ask them about each other's groups in general, and then compare their answers. The researcher could ask them questions about their sub-culture. This would be interesting because many of the second generation immigrants who I interviewed for this project claimed to have a thorough understanding of first generation immigrants and their subculture, as well as of those people who live in South Asia.

The researcher could ask them questions about marriage, like what the other group expects in a husband or wife. Since many respondents in this project claimed that first generation men do not necessarily treat women respectfully, it would be interesting to see if first generation men and women agree with this, and if they would actually apply the same generalization to second generation men. Also, since the men claimed that first generation women can cook well and be submissive, and women respondents claimed that first generation men valued cooking skills and submission in their wives, it would be interesting to question first generation men if they actually do value this, and first generation women if they actually do live up to the notions held by people from the United States.

Conclusion

In short, this paper unlocked many of the values and beliefs held by young second generation South Asian Muslims in the United States. Especially fascinating were their views on marriage, language, family and culture. This paper also made an effort to compare and contract the respondents' views to one another. Since research on this group of people and these topics has thus far been limited, this paper will serve to open the door to more research in the future.