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A Sikh Boy's Exclusion in Australian School: A Phenomenological Study of Parent's Response

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Abstract

Diasporic relocation and resettlement ideally generate new experiences for diasporic communities and their host societies. At times, host societies (in general) and education (in concomitance) could remain impervious towards the unique cultural practices of diasporic communities, fostering a cultural gap. Such gaps may result in conflicts that impact social engagement, including education, posing cultural and educational challenges for diasporic people. Towards realisation of social justice and whilst balancing diversity, contemporary multi-cultural Australian society and educational institutions may cultivate the enactment of exclusion for students with unique diasporic cultural backgrounds. Hence, the search for equity within Australian education may remain elusive. Considering the responses of two diasporic Sikh parents faced by potential exclusion of their child in a Melbourne suburban school due to wearing a Patka (turban for young Sikh boys), this qualitative study provides a phenomenological exploration of their experiences.

Keywords

Diaspora, diasporic communities, Sikhs, Turban, education, exclusion, discrimination, multi-culturalism, phenomenology, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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Diasporic relocation and resettlement ideally generate new experiences for diasporic communities and their host societies. At times, host societies (in general) and education (in concomitance) could remain impervious towards the unique cultural practices of diasporic communities, fostering a cultural gap. Such gaps may result in conflicts that impact social engagement, including education, posing cultural and educational challenges for diasporic people. Towards realisation of social justice and whilst balancing diversity, contemporary multi-cultural Australian society and educational institutions may cultivate the enactment of exclusion for students with unique diasporic cultural backgrounds. Hence, the search for equity within Australian education may remain elusive. Considering the responses of two diasporic Sikh parents faced by potential exclusion of their child in a Melbourne suburban school due to wearing a Patka (turban for young Sikh boys), this qualitative study provides a phenomenological exploration of their experiences. Keywords: Diaspora, diasporic communities, Sikhs, Turban, education, exclusion, discrimination, multi-culturalism, phenomenology, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

The Impetus and the Incident

The impetus of this research was an Australian incident highlighting a cultural confrontation that became a matter of social contention. In 2017, a suburban Melbourne school denied admission to a Sikh child due to his wearing a Patka (boy's Turban) on his head. The school stated that it was against the stipulated uniform policy as Patka was not a part of the standard dress code. As the matter gained media attention the issue raised a sentiment of resentment within the Sikh community. The parents of the child challenged the school's decision and subsequently the matter got escalated to Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) for a hearing. Finally, VCAT overruled the school's earlier decision and the young Sikh boy was granted admission to the school by allowing him to wear Patka as part of his uniform. This incident intrigued us and drove our interest in the diasporic resettlement experiences of one Sikh family within the context of cultural and educational challenges faced by global diasporic communities, in particular, the Sikh diaspora in Australia.

Sikhs and Sikhism

To understand what follows, a brief orientation to Sikhs and Sikhism is imperative. This requires a study of its inseparably intertwined history and religion (McLeod, 2004). Sikhs are an ethnic community from the north-western state of Punjab, India. Sikhism is a 14th century religion founded by Guru Nanak Dev in India (Cohen, 2008; Grewal, 2008; Singh, 2004). Guru Nanak called for a society that aspired an equal treatment for all irrespective of caste, gender, occupation, religion and language (Singh, 2004). His disciples became known as Sikhs (Grewal, 2008) who were pacifists and believed in the principles of universal brotherhood and

egalitarianism (Singh, 2004). In the 17th century the tenth guru, named Guru Gobind Singh (originally Gobind Rai) gave all Sikhs a new name of Singh meaning Lion and initiated a new discipline by proclaiming the order of the Khalsa (the pure one; Singh, 1988). A central ideal emerged, that of Saint Soldier. McLeod (1976, p. 4) explained:

The Khalsa is a society possessing a religious foundation and a military discipline...the sparrows transformed into hawks...a community dedicated to the defense of righteousness by the use of the sword, an invincible army of saint-soldiers destined to withstand the most fearsome persecutions.

The Singhs of the Khalsa now resorted to arms, ready to sacrifice their lives for the causes of social justice and protection of the meek (Singh, 2004). Guru Gobind obligated an adherence to the five new emblems that Sikhs were required to observe (Singh, 2004). The five symbols of Sikh faith (kakkars) are “kes (uncut hair); kanga (comb); kirpan (sword); kara (iron bracelet); and kachcha (undergarments)” (Klein, 2015, p. 23). Adoption of the kakkars, particularly the outwardly visible long uncut hair acted as both social marker and expressed solidarity and commitment to the Sikh faith (Cohen, 2008).

The most visible sign of Sikh identity, the turban was initially worn to cover uncut hair. Over time, Turban became a symbol, embodying commitment to Sikh moral values and faith (Cole & Sambhi, 1978; Kalra, 2005). Patka is worn by young Sikh boys to cover uncut long hair and is a repository expression of faith. The wearing of a Turban (Patka) is sometimes a matter of contention in social engagement, particularly, education. This is heightened when Sikh's live in different countries with different social contexts.

The Sikh Diaspora

Sikhs have become a diasporic people, traversing multiple types of diaspora (Brubaker, 2005; Cohen, 2008; Faist, 2010) in changing political and economic circumstances. Simplistically, diaspora refers to “that segment of a people living outside their homeland” (Connor, 1986, p. 16). Diasporic communities, propelled by choice, necessity, coercion or circumstantial duress (Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006) relocated from their homelands to settle in foreign lands (van de Vijver & Phalet, 2004). Experiences of dispersal, diaspora and its cognate meanings have proliferated beyond the traditional notion of homeland (Cohen, 2008). This proliferation has progressed through four phases (Cohen, 2008), and we draw upon the second phase of “metaphoric designation” (Safran, 1991) to construct our arguments. Due to the unique cultural practices of diasporic communities, diasporic relocation and resettlement ideally generate new experiences which may result in conflicts and impact social engagement, including education.

The experiences of diasporic Sikhs have “varied with the backgrounds of the Sikhs involved and with the differing relationships these Sikhs have maintained with the Punjab, with their host societies, and with one another” (Dusenbery, 1989, p. 3). The earliest Sikh movements (1870-1890) were primarily as soldiers, mobilised by employment in British colonial army (McLeod, 1989; Tatla, 2005) which opened employment opportunities for Sikh males, paving the way for overseas deployments (Cohen, 2008; Tatla, 2005). Punjab was designated as a martial province and Sikhs as finest soldiers (Tatla, 2005). The first group of 100 Sikhs arrived in Hong Kong in 1867 (Tatla, 1995, 2012). This number continued to grow from where they meandered their way into Australia and New Zealand in 1890's (Gabbi, 1998; McLeod, 1986).

Sikhs in Australia

Sikh migration into Australia can be broadly classified into three phases (Dusenbery, 2005). In Phase I (1870-1901), Sikhs came as classic male “sojourners” for whom the “Punjabi Village” remained home (Allen, 2009; Ballantyne, 2010; Dusenbery, 2005; ; Lal, Reeves, & Rai, 2006; Rhook, 2014, 2015; Stevens, 1989; Tatla, 2005). In Phase II (1901-1980), Sikh migrants remained farm workers and labourers. Between 1940s and 1950s they started to consider permanent settlement. The Commonwealth Colombo Plan brought in a number of Sikh students into Australian capital cities in the 1950s and 1960s further inflated by liberalisation of immigration policies (1966) and by the official annulment of White Australian policy (1973). In Phase III (1980s-present) there was a major influx of Sikhs came through direct India migration visas. Sikhs now contribute to all spheres of Australian life. There are approximately 129,900 Sikhs in Australia and it is now the fifth largest religion in the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2016). Our research addressees the paucity of research in area of Sikh scholarship (McLeod, 2004).

Researchers’ Perspective

Kanwarjeet is currently a doctoral student at the faculty of education, Monash University. His research foci are diaspora, diasporic communities, cultural identity, equity and social justice, particularly within education. As a diasporic Sikh migrant and father of two school-aged children, he has lived in Australia for nearly 14 years and is a part of the greater diasporic resettlement experience. Being a Sikh, he brings an insider perspective to the issue and possesses a deep and insightful understanding of Sikh religious values and cultural practices.

Jane is a highly experienced researcher and is Kanwarjeet’s supervisor for his on-going doctoral project. She is an Anglo-Celtic Australian who holds an outsider perspective to Kanwarjeet’s research. As an experienced educator she has keen interest in diasporic movements, diasporic cultures, diversity, social justice and equity within Australian society and education.

Methodology

Qualitative research is fluid, data driven, contextually sensitive (Mason, 2002), descriptive, interpretive, exploratory, and is “focused on exploring and reporting the particularities of a locally defined knowledge” (Chenail, Duffy, George, & Wulff, 2011, p. 272). Qualitative researchers adopt “inductive reasoning to seek meaning, understanding or explanation from the data” (Williams & Patterson, 2009, p. 694). In this study we delineate the experiences of two Sikh parents faced by potential exclusion of their child in a Melbourne suburban school due to donning a Patka on his head.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology focuses on the meanings that actors attach to their experiences in their own context (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2009) and as a phenomenological researcher, the key is to attain subjective experience by placing oneself in the actors’ place (Gray, 2004) and develop an understanding of these meanings from actors’ point of view (Bryman, 2016).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Established by Jonathan Smith (Smith, Harre, & Langenhove, 1995), Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was initially used in psychology in mid-1990s (Shinebourne, 2011), but with time its application permeated into fields like nursing, medicine and education. In IPA, individuals attribute meaning to their contextual experiences via interpretation and researchers which necessitates an understanding of the participants' point of view. The inquirer seeks to understand the understandings of the participants and interpret them, forming the hermeneutic circle also called a double hermeneutic (Rodham, Fox, & Doran, 2015; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

This study applied purposive or judgmental sampling (Hagan, 2006). A small sample was selected comprising two diasporic Sikh parents of a secondary school-going Sikh boy in a Melbourne suburban school. After the university's Human Research Ethics Committee approved the study, the two participants were contactable through opportunity (Smith et al., 2009) as they were a part of the researcher's social contact list.

Samples in phenomenological methodology represent phenomenon and not a population (Smith et al., 2009). IPA inquiry focuses on contextual detail of unique participant experiences in detail, therefore, sample sizes in IPA studies are customarily small (Frankel & Devers, 2000; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). Rarity of topic also determines sample size (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, case studies characterised by simple and straightforward questions yield better outcomes with small sample sizes, preferably two to four (Yin, 2018). Thus, sample size for this study was small.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured (in-depth qualitative) interviews with open ended questions were employed to elicit thick, detailed and contextualised first-person accounts of participant experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews are considered a powerful efficacious method of data collection in phenomenological studies, particularly the ones that employ IPA (Bevan, 2014; Eatough & Smith, 2006). In-depth qualitative interview is deemed conversational and purposeful, informed by the research question (Smith et al., 2009). The interview allows participants to tell their stories, and in their own words (Smith et al., 2009). Seidman (2006) very simply and eloquently states, "I interview because I am interested in other people's stories. Most simply put, stories are a way of knowing" (p. 7). At the "root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Interviews, therefore, are enriching. As Seidman (2006) states that for those who would repeat and pose Churchman's (1971) question, "Is telling stories science?" (p. 8), Reason (1981) responds

The best stories are those which stir people's minds, hearts, and souls and by so doing give them new insight into themselves, their problems and their human condition. The challenge is to develop a human science that can more fully serve this aim. The question, then, is not "Is storytelling science?" but "Can science learn to tell good stories?" (p. 50)

Because stories are important and impactful, as van Manen (2016) evinces that anecdotal stories engage the reader in a profound manner and impact at multiple levels, initially by drawing attention, then engaging the reader on a personal level (enkindling reflection) and subsequently offering the possibility of transformation; all of these intensify interpretation and responsiveness.

Questions in IPA are “broad and open ended so that the subject has sufficient opportunity to express his or her viewpoint extensively” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 245). Open ended questions enhance flexibility and encourage participants to indulge in lengthy conversations (Allan & Eatough, 2016) and provide rich details of their lived experiences. An interview protocol (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) comprising 12 questions including prompts was formulated. With ethical approval, the interview was conducted at a mutually decided venue at 9:30am and lasted for about 60 minutes. The participants were well-versed in English and resorted to the use of Punjabi language at convenience. All interview proceedings were audio recorded.

Analysis

Inductive procedures of IPA “are intended to help the researcher develop an insider’s perspective on the topic” (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p. 22). Since IPA “moves from the particular to the shared; from the descriptive to the interpretive” (Allan & Eatough, 2016, p. 411), the analytical process of IPA progresses from emergence and identification to convergence of themes. There are no fixed rules in IPA analysis (Smith et al., 2009), however, they suggest some steps which were followed.

In IPA, the researcher develops a constant and interpretive relationship with the data, established by repeated reading and re-reading of the text (Smith et al., 2009). As different people and analysts, we bring prior experiences, biases, and assumptions to our shared process of sense-making (Mjøsund et al., 2016). By independently analysing the same transcript we are able to enhance trustworthiness and ultimately reach thematic consensus (Rodham, Fox & Doran, 2015).

Areas of interest and significance were annotated in the left-hand margin. Initial notes were colour coded to maintain a coherent connection between different responses of the same participant and same responses of different participants. This process involved making comments on similarities and differences, connections and associations, amplifications, echoes and contradictions identified in the responses (Smith et al., 2009). Next, emerging themes were identified.

By process of reduction, provisional notes and annotations made during the original transcription were analysed to identify any emerging themes. This was attained by making succinct statements of what was previously noted as significant and important in the exploratory notes or comments. Condensed phrases were stated on the right-hand margin of the text and following a simple chronological order of presentation, themes were listed as they appeared in the transcript. This was a complex stage and involved higher level of abstraction. Upon identification, themes were then connected.

An intense and deeply analytical stage that involved theme clustering based on similarities and dissimilarities of repeated responses. This was attained by working on hard copy with hand written notes on the margins along the transcription. Finally, after coherently ordering these clusters into separate tables, the connected themes were further reviewed, interpreted and analysed to form a cohesive structure (Mawson, Berry, Murray, & Hayward, 2011).

The quality of qualitative inquiry is often disputed and “what constitutes quality in qualitative research” (Cooper, 2011, p. 1731) remains a matter of on-going debate (Shenton, 2004; Rolfe, 2004). Traditional inquiry with its proof-based rhetoric of empiricism aims for attaining objectivity in knowledge construction that is explorable by systematic theories and methods which are universally bound by common agreement and enhance progression (McNamee, 1994; McNamee & Hoskings, 2012). Traditional approaches focus on one version of reality where meaning construction is sought objectively outside the process and medium of

social interactions. Lincon and Guba (1986) argue that there could be multiple accounts of social reality, and the observance of rigour presupposes a single version of the truth. Alternatively, from a social constructionist perspective, reality is a product of social interactions and knowledge is constructed locally through the medium of these interactions (McNamee, 1994; Cunliffe, 2008).

Credibility according to Merriam (1998) replaces internal validity because it deals with congruency within reality and findings. Contextual factors are important and impinge upon the given case in question (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000). Dependability addresses reliability (Shenton, 2004) and is not easily attainable due to the dynamic nature of phenomenon under investigation (Fidel, 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Confirmability parallels objectivity in positivism (Patton, 1990) and he argued that even rigorous methods like questionnaires and experiments are designed by human beings and intrusion of bias is unavoidable.

Ethics

Ethical dilemmas are endemic to qualitative research and impact both participants and researchers (Hammersley, 2014; Rosenblatt, 1999; Sabar Ben-Yeshousha & Sabar, 2017). Research is a relational conversation between the researcher and the researched, and is mediated by histories, cultures and environments (McNamee, 1994). Qualitative researchers “need to acknowledge that indeed it is impossible to remain outside of one’s study topic” (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, & Carciativo, 2017, p. 426). Reflexivity (self) entails this acknowledgement (Cunliffe, 2004; Fontana, 2004; McNamee 1994) where researchers reevaluate their own values (Parahoo, 2006) and foster an understanding of the ways in which research practice is impacted by their “fore-structure” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 194) including assumptions, location and social background (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Phenomenologists understand this as a process of bracketing or *epoche* (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, & Evans, 2019) which is connected to general reflexive practices in qualitative research (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Deliberate discussions in the form of naive questions and answers were repeatedly mooted with other peers who had no previous subject knowledge (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, & Evans, 2019) and a critical reflexive journal (Cunliffe, 2010) was maintained.

As potential participants were part of first author’s social network, sampling by opportunity was a primary ethical issue during this study. This could raise an unequal power relation due to participants consenting engagement out of obligation. Cautiously, the first author refrained from making any contact with the participants. Instead, all formal communication was initiated and managed by Jane, who had no previous acquaintance with the participants. This provided the participants with the opportunity to refuse participation.

Informed consent is an absolute requirement of contemporary research (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). Participants were provided with research related information prior to the interview, consent form was duly signed, and a copy of the interview schedule was provided beforehand. Participants at times elicit information that makes them uncomfortable at a later stage and are reluctant to share with other stakeholders (Harrison, Macgibbon, & Lesley, 2001). Our participants were entitled to withdraw from this research at any stage due to anticipated or unanticipated reason(s). Transparency is an important standard of ensuring trustworthiness within qualitative research (Cooper, 2011) and this underpins our ethical process.

Findings

First, we introduce our participants and their story. The findings are then presented under four arching themes of Being Sikh, Being Proud, Being Different and Diasporic despair.

Participants

Our participants were two diasporic Sikh parents of a school-going child from the Sikh community. Amrit and his wife Dimpy lead a suburban Melbourne life with their two sons (Vicky and Anmol aged eighteen and eight respectively). They follow Sikh religion and hail from a middle-class family background in Punjab (India). Aspiring for a better life in terms of employment, living standard and particularly better education of their children, Dimpy and Amrit migrated to Australia from Punjab in August 2008. As Amrit recalled

we came here with very good opportunities here . . . we were very happy when we came here . . . we thought there are better opportunities here in Australia . . . definitely there are better opportunities here . . . there would be good education and opportunities for the kids . . . definitely.

Dimpy concurred “opportunities over here are better, life, education, standard of living.” They found their initial experiences in Australia pleasant, very acceptive and open. Local people were helpful and friendly. Amrit expressed some initial nostalgia:

for a few days, we thought India was a better place. . . like for a few early days. . . like you are away from home aren't you...maybe missing your family... but when we start to be in the system. . . schools. . . overall system. . . then we realise that no man. . . obviously this is a better place. . . education-wise. . . life wise.

Amrit and Dimpy were ready to be steered into a new direction, full of aspirations for their children. But things did not unfold as anticipated and their journey took a new turn, onto a rough and bumpy road.

The Bumps

Things progressed smoothly as both Dimpy and Amrit settled into a new way of life and their elder son Vicky attended primary school. This changed when they decided to send the Vicky to a catholic secondary school of high reputation. Amrit explained: “Till primary school everything was fine . . . moving on to secondary . . . I chose to send my elder son to a catholic school . . . a bit expensive . . . I was paying one entire week of my wages for his school fees . . . about \$900 a month.” All began well but then “he began to get bullied” and Dimpy and Amrit noticed a few changes. Vicky did not have the “Kara” (arm bracelet) on his wrist, and when asked he made some excuses which the parents ignored at that time. Then Vicky attempted to cut his facial hair as Amrit painfully stated,

one day I noticed that he had trimmed his facial hair . . . I was shocked. . . what you have done. . . we do not even have any gear. . . like a hair trimmer. . . maybe someone from school helped him I am not sure. . . then he told me that other children and teachers ask him questions.

Both participants reported that as the issue intensified, school began to exert pressure on the child, and he was caught between school demands and his cultural values. Consequently, Vicky developed anxiety issues resulting in low school grades and ended up in counselling. Amrit was very emotional:

I realised later that it was due to peer pressure and also the duress from school authorities. . . the school started asking questions about his beard. . . about his Patka. . . I think they were intending to exert pressure...yes two days in a week I took him for counselling sessions [mellows] . . . imagine as parents...you are sitting outside a counsellor's office. . . [chokes] . . . something we never imagined.

The school began seeking meetings to discuss the issue. Amrit and Dimpy shared that the school offered two choices: either they sign a written agreement that their son will forego the Patka and facial hair and come to school clean shaven, or they look for a different school. In Amrit and Dimpy's view, the school used uniform code as a weapon to exert pressure to attain their aim. Amrit recalled that he was shocked that the school referred to a school contract in which it was required that students be clean shaven. The school "used the school uniform policy as a shield later." The parents resisted the schools' demands and negotiations were futile as school's remained intransigent. The parents continued to fight but the boy in his distressed moments decided to leave the school. The parents supported this for their son's well-being. The following themes emerged.

Being a Sikh

Amrit stated that, "I am a Sikh . . . Turban is my identity . . . most important thing . . . it is not like a hat." Amrit explicated that for him and his family, identity emanated out of the Sikh faith and they will continue to be associated with it. Their identity concerned how they saw themselves and how they liked to be seen by others. Amrit and Dimpy explained that for their son, wearing a Patka is not merely a sartorial expression, "it is not a fashion . . . it is identity . . . we are born with it." He explained, "This is my identity . . . my workplace never asked me . . . why do I come to work with my Turban on . . . it is my identity . . . but it is part of our faith . . . not a hairstyle . . . it is a religious requirement . . . like hijab . . . our identity."

Patka holds great significance for the Amrit and Dimpy which is inextricably intertwined with their Sikh identity. Amrit restated, "Turban is our identity . . . I still have it intact as it was in India . . . for that matter for our son as well . . . he wears a Patka as he did in India. . . . Our gurus gave us the turban as a mark of identity."

Citing Sikh history, Amrit and Dimpy mentioned that Turban was originally a mark of identification so that a Sikh could be approached for help, "basically it meant that Turban distinguished Sikhs . . . it also meant that needy person could approach the Sikh for help" stated Amrit with pride.

Being Proud

Amrit asserted that "even if a Sikh is clean shaven for any reason, he still respects the Turban and feels proud about it, being proud like a Crown." The metaphoric designation of the Turban to a crown is self-explanatory. A sense of belonging fosters a sense of pride and this could be expressed in varying notions, for Amrit and Dimpy it expressed cultural religiosity and ethnicity. The theme of pride emerged and reemerged during the interview when Amrit spoke about Sikh history and stated how "Turban epitomised help," "like the needy would know that the man with turban will help."

Pride also emerged when Amrit spoke about daily Sikh practices and rituals they observed at home, "my job starts at 3:00am but I wake up at 1:30am just to leave time for my Turban . . . the process takes twenty-five minutes to do the turban and then also my beard," because they are also a part of the five K's that we are required to observe. He added that

outside his house “I always go with my Turban and never without it . . . I want to be seen with it.” The outward expression of their Sikh identity through cultural artefacts made their social appearance a bit different. As Amrit and Dimpy stated, “it meant that Turban also distinguished the Sikhs from others . . . we don’t look the same.”

Being Different

Our participants repeatedly pointed towards the notion of difference and expressed concern over the way this difference impacted their son and themselves. Amrit and Dimpy remembered the remarks other school students made against their son “because you do not match with us . . . you are different . . . because of your Turban and all.” Amrit confronted the school authorities when he was advised to look for an alternative school for Vicky and stated, “Why should he go to a different school, how is he different from others?” Amrit repeatedly raised the concern of being different (outwardly) and still not different as he stated, “we look different . . . we understand . . . it is confusing . . . but we are same . . . like everyone . . . but this is a multicultural society.” Amrit and Dimpy chose Australia because “it is a multi-cultural country . . . we believed that being a multicultural country everything here is good . . . Australia adapts to the needs of everyone . . . with so many cultures . . . like they adapt to everything.” Australia’s multicultural reputation and the expectations of acceptance of difference in a diverse society were the determining factors for choosing their new home.

Diasporic Despair: Surprise and Shock

Both participants stated that they had expectations before they moved to Australia, “We came for a good life . . . for our kids . . . means with good education they can go places . . . we spend one third of our income on his school. . . .” They expressed despair and mentioned the gaps in policy, as Amrit stated,

see education is an important thing of anyone’s life . . . Australian education is good . . . unfortunately in our son’s case the system did not work . . . I say there is a gap of some sort . . . we heard the news . . . about the Sikh boy’s admission . . . I would say there is a gap related to some communities . . . when you are admitting someone to school you should be aware whom you are admitting . . . what are their values . . . if that is not possible . . . when parents explain to authorities . . . they should acknowledge.

Amrit and Dimpy were surprised when the school mentioned a contract and was “shocked when the school counsellor told me that my son is going to face issues in the future . . . in terms of job opportunities . . . because of the Turban and all . . . how could this happen . . . in this country?”

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of two diasporic Sikh parents faced by potential exclusion of their son in an Australian suburban school due to wearing a Patka on his head. Though the sample size remained small, purposive sample and corresponding findings provide a deep insight into our participants’ lived experiences. Underpinning our participants’ primary concern was difference and its treatment, and how this treatment could magnify into larger stakes of identity and discrimination. Amrit asked school authorities, “Why should he go to a different school, how is he different from others?”

Difference: Assimilation, Accommodation or Accentuation

Underpinning difference is “a social selection of human differences when it comes to identifying differences that will matter socially” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). Response to perceived difference lies in its accommodation and not accentuation (Parekh, 1998, 2006). Globally, difference has been treated by varying stances adopted by different societies at different times. Over time, Australia has held stances from assimilation to cultural inclusivity. We focus on how the accommodation of difference has focused on cultural dress.

Assimilation

As a mono-cultural policy, assimilation lays emphasis on minimising cultural differences and encourages social conformity (Lemmer & Squelch, 1993). For example, in 1994 three African Muslim girls were banned from wearing foulard (hijab) to school. In 2006 the French government finally imposed a ban on wearing any religious object to schools. In its zest of conforming to a Republican Citizenry and pride of national identity, France adopted an assimilationist approach (Wayland, 1997) where no importance was given to the unique minority cultural practices and the significance these practices held for their cultural identity. Echoes of this decision continue to resonate.

Reasonable Accommodation

Canada’s model of reasonable accommodation has shown more tolerance in acknowledging difference and accommodating it within reasonable relevance. Wayland (1997) reports the case in which the Peel Board of Education (largest school board in Ontario, Canada) banned a Sikh teacher from wearing Kirpan to school. A supply teacher, Mr Harbhajan Singh Pandori was advised that wearing a Kirpan to school was in violation of the Peel Weapon’s Policy (backed by provisions in Ontario Education Act). Pandori countered with the Ontario Human Rights Code stating: “All I want is to be allowed, and that every Sikh in Canada be allowed to live as a full citizen, to work and live expressing his religion” (The Toronto Star, 8 February 1990, as cited in Wayland (1997), p. 547). The contention was that it is the intent attached to the design of an object that matters, a baseball bat they argued would potentially impose the same threat. On 6 July 1990, the Board of Inquiry decided that the Peel Board’s policy of prohibiting Sikhs from wearing a kirpan on school premises was in violation of section 10 of the Ontario Human Rights Code and was considered as discriminatory against the Sikhs (Wayland, 1997).

Two older examples from England shed more light to give longevity to this issue. In 1972 a British Parliament Law was enacted that stipulated that wearing a crash helmet was mandatory for motorcyclists. The Sikh community contested this on the grounds that Turban was a religious requirement and helmets posed a hindrance wearing it. The judge was unconvinced and upheld the law but did not argue that Turban was not a religious requirement. Upon further contention the law was amended in 1976 and permitted Sikhs to wear Turban instead of the crash helmet (Parekh, 1998). Similarly, the Construction (Head Protection) Regulation 1989 mandates all employees to wear safety helmets on construction sites, however the Employment Act 1989 exempts turban-wearing Sikhs from doing so and states that no employer could refuse employment to Sikhs if they refuse to wear safety helmets on construction sites (Parekh, 1998). In all three examples, Sikhs fight for their right to cultural expression and become exceptions to the rule.

Accentuation

Amrit and Dimpy felt that difference for their son was not accommodated but accentuated. Equality does not mean equal treatment, it indicates an equal treatment of those who are equal in relevant respects (Parekh, 1998, 2006) as Amrit stated, “How are we different . . . I mean . . . yes we look different . . . we understand . . . it is confusing . . . but we are still same . . . like everyone.” He added that they were treated equally but still remained unequal because the school failed to acknowledge the difference of wearing a Patka as a cultural need that could not be accommodated. Amrit and Dimpy were not only concerned about cultural artefacts, but felt the stakes were much higher because the school accentuated their difference which in turn impacted their identity. The balance of identity rests on two legs, *l'ipseité* – the difference from others and *la memete* – identity with oneself over time (Bauman, 1998).

Identity

Identity is a complex entity (Georgoulas & Southcott, 2014) that entails the questions of “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” (Clark, 2008; Bauman, 1998). Identity is performed and enacted in the way we conduct and present ourselves in our daily lives (Goffman, 1971). A person may possess different identities that change with time and circumstance, yet it is “the persistent sameness of a person despite changes over time...the subjective sense of oneself as an individual” (Chandler & Munday, 2016, p. 197). Identity is an ambiguous and often elusive idea that encompasses the desire for individuality and for membership of a culture or community (Bauman 2004; Buckingham, 2008). This interaction of cultures generates change (Berry 2005; Wake, 2018). Identity can then be thought of as “a collective term referring to the dynamic organization of sub-identities that might conflict with or align with each other” (Mishler, 1999, p. 8) since “we speak – or sing – ourselves as a chorus of voices, not just as the tenor or soprano soloist” (Mishler, 1999, p. 8).

At any given time, our self-identity is the “overall view that we have of ourselves” in which different self-concepts may remain unresolved and under contestation (Hargreaves, Miell, & Macdonald, 2002, p. 8). Bicultural individuals face inner turmoil as they attempt to reconcile the “tensions and dilemmas an individual who belongs to two worlds can face” (Kakava, p. 1384). In bicultural individuals, the self remains a work in progress aptly described by Bruner (1991, p. 76) as “highly negotiable, highly sensitive to bidding on the not so open market of one’s own reference group.” The self is “formed and developed continuously through conversation and interaction...made up of interactions with others – we are ultimately social and not personal beings” (Hargreaves, Miell, & Macdonald 2002, p. 10). The self, according to Pavlenko (2001) is “fluid, fragmented, and multiple” (p. 339) and in this mutable changing self, identity “is a discursive construct that emerges in interaction” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 587).

Self-identity is mostly formed through a sometimes-changing sense of belonging to a particular group or groups and should not be “oversimplified, summarized by a single word or reference” (Campbell 2013, p. 12). Feelings of belonging remain a crucial component of one’s cultural identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Identity emanates from this “sense of belonging” to a particular group (Campbell & Wiggins, 2013) which is the most significant constituent of cultural identity (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Identity constantly negotiates and renegotiates (Georgoulas & Southcott, 2014), is relational and situated (Bhatia & Ram, 2001), never simple or fixed but depends on the social context and gets determined by the frame in which it is displayed (Kakava 2003; Papademetre, 1994).

For Sikhs the relation is with the cultural artefacts (five K’s) situated in their religion. Clark (2008) posits, “the notion of identity becomes much stronger and firmer when we define

our “selves” in relation to a cultural Other. We start then to see ideas around “ways of life,” “us” and “them,” and this is at the heart of racism, hatred and exclusion” (p. 511). Our participants felt that in its treatment, difference for them was accentuated and not accommodated, hence their identity was challenged and discrimination against their son was enacted.

Discrimination

For Vicky, discrimination was enacted in three tiers. First, through bullying by his peers and other children at school as they did not find him matching but different. He told his parents that students called him, “Loser . . . loser . . . you are a loser . . . because you do not match with us . . . because of your Patka . . . you do not match with us . . . so you are a loser . . . and your other things . . . your facial hair . . . doggy face . . . you are a doggy face.” Second, by the role teachers played and did not play. Not only did the teachers’ fail to protect Vicky from his peers but also exerted pressure by asking questions regarding his appearance. Vicky “became upset due to teacher and peer pressure.” Third, Amrit said that the school was unable to resolve the issue and protect their child both from peers and teachers. He felt that the discrimination for his son was institutionalised; “I could not understand that how you discriminate against a child by virtue of his faith . . . how anyone can even think about doing this?” This remains untenable “in societies such as contemporary Australia complex [where] culturally diverse identities are more the norm than the exception” (Georgoulas & Southcott, 2014, p. 54).

Discrimination has societal, individual and educational consequences. Any challenge to identity and pride may afflict ripples across all areas as identification with ethnic background is indicative of general well-being, mental health and success in education (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2013). A strong association with ethnic identity amplifies distress ensuing from discrimination (Weber, Kronberger, & Appel, 2018) and simultaneously, a sense of belonging remains an important aspect of cultural identity (Weber, Kronberger, & Appel, 2018). Amrit and Dimpy felt that their identity and pride were challenged, impacting all areas and generating the sense of exclusion, diasporic despair, identity denied, diminished pride and social injustice. Psychological stress, emotional catharsis, low self-esteem and identity crisis at individual level. Reduced parental choice, lowered academic achievement and compromised educational opportunity, at educational level. For our participants, as Amrit remarked, all three related but undesired.

Choice

For Amrit and Dimpy their main concern was how the restriction of their choice of cultural expression impacted their identity and trespassed their personal and cultural liberty. Amrit acknowledged the need for uniformity within the cultural norms of any society to avoid confusion in the face of diversity, however, his concern was that a “blanket all” approach (Barker, 2017) may not be the solution. Gereluk (2007) argued for the formulation of a logical framework which could assess the likelihood and extent of potential threat that could be posed by exercising choice in matters of such cultural artefacts. Amrit and Dimpy argued that as long as unique cultural expression does not inflict harm to other stakeholders, its choice within education and larger society should not be restricted. In their opinion, their son’s choice to wear a Patka as a cultural expression did not pose any such threat and need not be restricted.

Resourcefulness

According to Amrit and Dimpy, resourcefulness to confront such challenges was another concern. This entailed two notions of intention and ability. Both of them were unwilling to compromise on their cultural identity while negotiating with the school. When queried about their own stance and advice to another Sikh family in a similar plight, both Amrit and Dimpy asserted:

this is impossible . . . no way possible . . . for us it is unacceptable . . . this is about our identity . . . we will never compromise on that . . . our family has followed these traditions and my sons are doing as well . . . we will guide them to put up a fight . . . ask them not to compromise . . . under any circumstance.

Amrit's intention to contend became visible but the ability to do the same remained an obstacle. He did not have the financial capacity to put up a legal fight and also did not know where and how to start. He posited "I think it differs money wise . . . I was not on any such level."

Diasporic Despair and Multi-Cultural Australia

Diasporic movements mobilised by aspirational aims of a better life carry expectations (Cohen, 2008). Dimpy agreed, "oh yes opportunities over here are better . . . life . . . education . . . standard of living." Amrit and Dimpy explicated, "Australia is a multicultural country . . . proud of its multiculturalism . . . as multicultural country everything here is good...Australia adapts to everyone's needs . . . with so many cultures." The Australian multi-cultural statement asserts that, we are "the most successful multicultural society in the world, uniting a multitude of cultures, experiences, beliefs, and traditions . . . Australians welcome those who have migrated here to be part of our free and open society, to build their lives" (Department of Home Affairs, Australian Government, 2017). Our participants have absorbed this assertion. They left India with high expectations, "we came for a good life . . . for our kids . . . with good education . . . they can go places" but their experience has left them shocked, "how could this happen . . . in this country?"

Education Policy: Problems and Possibilities

Both parents expressed an arching concern over the paradoxes and ambiguity within education policy. Amrit noted that, "unfortunately in our son's case the system did not work . . . there is a gap of some sort . . . related to some communities." They felt that the school teachers and administrators failed to resolve the problem. Once they decided to look for an alternative school for their son the school authorities stopped communicating with them, despite the promise of support in seeking mid-term admission elsewhere. Amrit said that "after they handed the letter, they stopped taking my emails . . . phone [calls]." Amrit and Dimpy felt that the school washed their hands of them, and they fell through the educational policy gaps at all levels.

Conclusion

We explored the experiences of Amrit and Dimpy, two diasporic Sikh parents faced by the potential exclusion of their son from an Australian suburban school due to wearing a Patka. Identity, pride, difference and diasporic expectations emerged as our main themes. Our participants' experiences make explicit the ways in which bicultural individuals struggle to

negotiate their identities and the turmoil they face in such dilemmas. We offer a deep insight into our participant's lived experiences and shed light on the way unique cultural differences of diasporic people can preface the enactment of discrimination and exclusion for such people in general and within education in particular. In the context of global diaspora, the concerns raised, and questions posed by our participants bring to fore the cultural and educational challenges of diasporic people.

As Australia's cultural diversity proliferates, the predicament of schools is understandable because multicultural schools struggle to find a balance between diversity and uniformity (Caruso, 1996; Gereluk, 2007). Schools do not operate in a social vacuum; therefore, larger societal aims must be congruent with education policy and the placement of onus on schools alone is unfair (Gereluk, 2007). Be it the Turban, Patka, Hijab or any other cultural artefact, as both participants repeatedly emphasised, the treatment of difference does not deserve indifference. Our participants opined that Australia is a beautiful country and diasporic people harbour many hopes, aspirations and expectations. All it takes for various stakeholders is to start seeing difference a little differently. Siegel (1999) argues that,

schools, and people and institutions more generally, should acknowledge, value and respect cultural differences and the alternative experiences and perspectives of members of different cultures; and that members of "minority" cultures should not be required to assimilate into, nor to adopt the alien cultural commitments or identities of, nor be marginalized, silenced or oppressed by, a dominant, hegemonic "majority" culture. (p. 388)

As far as the Turban (Patka), Sikh community, and their diasporic needs in Australia are concerned, our participants explained that in all walks of Australian life, their right to unique cultural expression is deserving and so is their choice to wear a Turban (Patka) or not. Summarizing Sikh diasporic needs, we recall a beautiful statement from Dusenbery (2005) when he asked a young Sikh person in Sydney about his sentiments of home and the answer remained, "Home is where I tie my Turban" (p. 487).

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