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Primary care

Understanding influences on smoking in Bangladeshi and Pakistani adults: community based, qualitative study

Judith Bush, Martin White, Joe Kai, Judith Rankin, Raj Bhopal

Abstract

Objective To gain detailed understanding of influences on smoking behaviour in Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities in the United Kingdom to inform the development of effective and culturally acceptable smoking cessation interventions.

Design Qualitative study using community participatory methods, purposeful sampling, one to one interviews, focus groups, and a grounded approach to data generation and analysis.

Setting Newcastle upon Tyne, during 2000-2.

Participants 87 men and 54 women aged 18-80 years, smokers and non-smokers, from the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities.

Results Four dominant, highly inter-related themes had an important influence on smoking attitudes and behaviour; gender, age, religion, and tradition. Smoking was a widely accepted practice in Pakistani, and particularly Bangladeshi men and was associated with socialising, sharing, and male identity. Among women, smoking was associated with stigma and shame. Smoking in women is often hidden from family members. Peer pressure was an important influence on smoking behaviour in younger people, who tended to hide their smoking from elders. There were varied and conflicting interpretations of how acceptable smoking is within the Muslim religion. Tradition, culture, and the family played an important role in nurturing and cultivating norms and values around smoking.

Conclusion Although there are some culturally specific contexts for smoking behaviour in Bangladeshi and Pakistani adults—notably the influence of gender and religion—there are also strong similarities with white people, particularly among younger adults. Themes identified should help to inform the development and appropriate targeting of smoking cessation interventions.

Introduction

Studies in the 1980s of combined heterogeneous South Asian populations in Britain suggested that smoking rates were similar to or lower than rates in the white population, but recent surveys in the United Kingdom have shown that smoking is much more common among Bangladeshi men (49%) than among white (29%), Pakistani (28%) or Indian men (19%).

The rate is particularly high (56%) in Bangladeshi men aged 50-74. Cancer of the trachea, lung, and bronchus is the commonest cause of death from cancer in South Asian men, and the second commonest in South Asian women. Smoking is the principal risk factor for these cancers.

Sex and age differences in smoking rates in South Asian populations are marked. In South Asian women, smoking rates are reportedly low (Bangladeshi women 4%, Indian women 1%, Pakistani women 2%) though possibly underestimated. National smoking prevalence is strongly associated with socioeconomic status in Bangladeshi people living in the United Kingdom, although the association is less clear in the Pakistani population.

Detailed understanding of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviours in relation to smoking in minority ethnic groups is lacking. Such understanding is necessary to inform development of smoking cessation strategies that are culturally appropriate for these communities.

We report community based, qualitative research (March 2000 to March 2002) that aimed to gain such insights in Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities.

Methods

Participatory approach

We used a community participatory approach previously developed successfully in these communities, in which members of the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities in Newcastle (box 1) participated in study development, implementation, and analysis. After community publicity, application, and interview, 13 bilingual “community researchers” (six men and seven women) were recruited from the local South Asian population and attended a 14 week, accredited training programme in qualitative research.

These researchers were responsible for organising, recruiting, undertaking, and translating in-depth interviews and focus groups, facilitated by JB. In discussion with the research team, the community researchers also developed interview topic guides, publicity for the study, and strategies for recruiting participants and contributed to data analysis.

Research methods

The community researchers held semistructured, in-depth interviews with 37 participants and 24 focus

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Box 1: Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities in Newcastle upon Tyne

Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities in Newcastle upon Tyne are the most recent immigrant groups among South Asians in the United Kingdom. In the 1991 census, 292 residents in Newcastle upon Tyne identified themselves or their family members as Bangladeshi (0.5% of total population of the city), and 293 (1.2%) identified themselves as Pakistani. Both communities are mainly concentrated in five of 26 wards in the city.

In these five wards, smoking rates among the Bangladeshi and Pakistani typically have higher levels of socioeconomic deprivation than white residents. Recent national surveys have also shown Bangladeshis to be the poorest and least well educated, and further disadvantaged with respect to their health.

The dominant religion is Islam among both Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities in Newcastle are broadly similar to the rates for those populations nationally.

Research participants were sampled purposively from the local Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities on the basis of ethnic group (that is, Bangladeshi or Pakistani), sex, age, smoking status, and occupation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Bangladeshis</th>
<th>Pakistanis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-18</td>
<td>36 (41)</td>
<td>22 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-24</td>
<td>32 (37)</td>
<td>22 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;25</td>
<td>19 (22)</td>
<td>10 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>50 (58)</td>
<td>37 (69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age left full time education (years):</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not attend school</td>
<td>5 (6)</td>
<td>5 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;16</td>
<td>15 (17)</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-18</td>
<td>22 (25)</td>
<td>12 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;18</td>
<td>10 (11)</td>
<td>8 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages spoken:</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian language only</td>
<td>17 (20)</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian language and English</td>
<td>56 (64)</td>
<td>40 (74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English only</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>13 (15)</td>
<td>10 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking status:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current smoker, men</td>
<td>30 (60)</td>
<td>19 (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current smoker, women</td>
<td>7 (19)</td>
<td>3 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former smoker, men</td>
<td>8 (16)</td>
<td>5 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former smoker, women</td>
<td>2 (5)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never smoked, men*</td>
<td>12 (24)</td>
<td>13 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never smoked, women*</td>
<td>28 (56)</td>
<td>14 (62)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Or tried only once or twice.
Smoke. Because of elders’ respected status in South Asian society the participants viewed it as more acceptable for older men and, to a lesser degree, older women to smoke openly. In contrast, smoking in young people tended to be regarded as “disrespectful,” particularly in front of elders. Thus, smoking in young people tended to be hidden from older members of the community (box 4).

Elders who smoked were perceived to lack knowledge of the health effects of smoking and have a more fatalistic approach to life. Younger people were viewed as being more likely to smoke because of influence of peer pressure, image, and rebellion (box 4). However, if a participant’s peer group comprised predominantly non-smokers, this sometimes resulted in that person being less likely to start smoking.

### Religion

Unlike alcohol, tobacco is not specifically banned or prohibited in the Islamic faith. The Koran does prohibit intoxicants and addictions, however. Most participants agreed that it was religiously unacceptable to smoke in a mosque and that the potential for women to smoke was reduced as they have a protected status in the Muslim religion.

Participants held conflicting perspectives on how religiously acceptable it is for men to smoke and to what degree smoking is permitted in the Muslim religion. Many believed that, although smoking is not banned or prohibited, it does not fit comfortably within the Islamic religion, that it “isn’t right” or is “makrucc.”

This argument was used in two contradictory ways.
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Islam, He said if anything is damaging your health, it is haram [banned or prohibited], which is sinful ... the reason Mohammed allowed smoking and banned drinking is that, [drinking] was damaging people’s health at that time. Nowadays smoking is no different from drinking; it is more dangerous. So if you could get that to the people’s knowledge then I think most of our majority may just stop smoking” (non-smoker, participant 1, focus group of Bangladeshi women aged 18-29, English).

“Alcohol has a substance that makes you ... lose your senses ... you don’t know what you are doing. You lose that control over yourself. So that’s why it becomes unlawful ... when you smoke you still know what you are doing. You don’t lose your senses” (non-smoker; participant 1, focus group of Bangladeshi women aged 18-29, English).

“Older people, they can smoke in the house because [they] are allowed. Because of their age they can smoke” (current smoker, Bangladeshi man aged 40-49, interview in English).

“They [young people] will sneak out of the house or will just say they are going out ... It’s a cultural thing. It’s like respect for your elders if you don’t smoke in front of them” (former smoker, Pakistani man aged 20-29, interview in English).

“I think there’s an image that if you smoke you’re cool, you’re stylish, you’re in with your friends. I think that’s what [young] people think when they smoke” (current smoker, Bangladeshi woman aged 20-29, interview in English).

“When there is five of them [young people] together they think ‘oh, let’s have a fag’ ... I think a lot of them, being rebellious, they think ‘do something hidden’” (non-smoker; participant 1, focus group of Bangladeshi women aged 18-29, English).

Some used it to justify the need to ban smoking; others used it to justify the acceptability of smoking in the Muslim religion as long as the smoker was not “addicted to” or “intoxicated by” cigarettes (box 5).

Box 5: Influence of religion

“Alcohol has a substance that makes you ... lose your senses ... you don’t know what you are doing. You lose that control over yourself. So that’s why it becomes unlawful ... when you smoke you still know what you are doing. You don’t lose your senses” (non-smoker; participant 1, focus group of Bangladeshi women aged 18-29, English).

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“I have read many [religious] books. It doesn’t say smoking is unlawful. But it does say if you feel that you have become addicted to something and rely on that to make you a better person or make you feel more comfortable, then it becomes unlawful. So in other words, smoking does become unlawful to those who become addicted to it” (non-smoker; participant 1, focus group of Bangladeshi women aged 18-29, English).

Box 4: Influence of age

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Muslims should not allow their hands to contribute to their own destruction) (box 5).

Box 6: Influence of tradition, culture, and family

“My uncle smokes and he’s in his 50s. He’s come from Pakistan, so he started from there. So my cousins are in Glasgow and they have started smoking and they are my age. It’s from working in a shop and, like I say, the fascination is there. They see old people buy cigarettes and they think what’s the fascination of it?” (non-smoker; participant 1, focus group of Pakistani men, aged 18-29, English).

“I imagine because my dad smokes as well, when you see someone else smoking in your family when you are young you kind of think that it is okay ‘cause they are doing it” (former smoker; participant 3, focus group of Pakistani men, aged 18-29, English).

“I’ve seen that teenagers, young people ... put a lot of pressure on parents and aunts and uncles about smoking. They say that smoking is so bad for you. And the example they give is from awareness in school. I can sort of say that with my two kids, and the children I mix with in other families, there are very strong feelings, ‘stop smoking dad! It does this and that and that.’ They feel very strongly. It’s the teenagers, the young children who are telling the parents” (non-smoker; participant 5, focus group of Pakistani women aged 20-39, Punjabi/Urdu).

“When I used to smoke, my children used to complain ‘dad we can’t breathe.’ They used to cough and say ‘dad is a stinky’ and ‘we can’t breathe. Dad smokes and it smells.’ This is why I can understand that it does affect those people who don’t smoke. They feel they can’t breathe” (former smoker; participant 3, focus group of Bangladeshi men aged 20-49, Bengali/Sylheti).
children or trying to give up smoking altogether. In some families, however, criticism of elders was not acceptable.

Other traditional practices involving tobacco (smoking hookahs, Pakistanis; and chewing “paan” (betel leaf and areca nut), Bangladeshis) were viewed as being less common today among younger people. Cigarette smoking was often viewed as becoming the modern equivalent of smoking hookah for young people.

**Discussion**

Although our results show some similarities with those of studies of smoking behaviour in predominantly white populations, they also highlight important differences, particularly the influence of a person’s gender and religion. The findings must be interpreted with regard to the characteristics of our sample and the participatory nature of the research. We had a broad range of participants in terms of age, sex, occupation, socioeconomic status, educational level, and smoking status. By working with members of communities at all stages of the research, we used our participatory approach to increase the validity of our findings. The socioeconomic characteristics of Bangladeshi and Pakistani people living in Newcastle upon Tyne are broadly typical of Bangladeshi and Pakistani people nationally. Thus, although we must be guarded, our findings are likely to be generalisable to other Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in the United Kingdom, although local variations reflecting differing regional origins within Bangladesh and Pakistan may exist.

**Comparing Bangladeshi and Pakistani populations**

Despite smoking being less common in Pakistan than in Bangladesh, we found few differences in beliefs or attitudes between these two groups. Differences in smoking levels between Pakistani and Bangladeshi men may be explained largely by socioeconomic factors and social disadvantage, which, although acknowledged by several participants, are difficult to confirm in qualitative research. However, our data suggested that compared with Pakistani men, smoking in Bangladeshi men may be more deeply socially ingrained, contributing to group cohesion and identity.

**Gender and age**

Our analysis shows that in Pakistani, and particularly Bangladesh, men smoking is central to socialising and identity and is an antidote to stress. In women, smoking has been traditionally regarded as disreputable, and cultural restrictions have reduced opportunities for women to smoke. However, both male and female participants said that smoking, which was often private and covert in women, seemed to be increasing among young women. This increase was attributed to westernisation, peer pressure, and rebellion.

Smoking was viewed as more acceptable in male elders and, to a lesser degree, in female elders. Young people smoking in the presence of elders was deemed disrespectful. Peer pressure and image were viewed as powerful influences on young people starting to smoke.

**Islam, tradition, and family**

As others have found in relation to diabetes and heart disease, religion plays an important but contested role in influencing attitudes and behaviour. Islam forbids addiction and intoxicants, and those that harm health but does not expressly forbid tobacco (which was unknown in the Old World when the Koran was written). There were conflicting interpretations of how religiously acceptable it is for Muslim men to smoke. These conflicting interpretations were linked with participants’ understanding of whether smoking is an addiction or intoxication.

The family was viewed as an important medium through which traditional norms, rules, and values associated with smoking were shaped and negotiated.

**Implications for smoking cessation**

Currently ethnic minority groups are not given special mention in national policies on smoking cessation, although the Department of Health has recently launched the NHS Asian tobacco education campaign, and local smoking cessation services are increasing. Our findings and those from other studies suggest that substantial effort and investment is needed in culturally sensitive smoking cessation interventions for South Asian people, involving the government and national and local health agencies (in particular, primary care trusts). The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which obliges public authorities, including the NHS, to promote racial equality in access to services will underline and add urgency to this requirement.

**What is already known on this topic**

- Smoking is common among Bangladeshi and Pakistani men in Britain but rare among the women.
- Smoking is particularly common in Bangladeshi men.
- Socioeconomic status is thought to influence smoking uptake in Bangladeshi men.
- Influences on smoking in South Asians in Britain are poorly understood.

**What this study adds**

- Smoking among Pakistani and Bangladeshi men is strongly seen as socially acceptable—a “normal” part of being a man.
- Smoking in Bangladeshi men is more deeply socially ingrained than in Pakistanis, contributing to group cohesion and identity.
- Smoking in Bangladeshi and Pakistani women is associated with a strong sense of cultural taboo, stigma, and non-acceptance.
- Islam forbids addiction and intoxicants, but opinions differ on whether the Muslim religion allows smoking.
- Culturally sensitive smoking cessation interventions for Bangladeshi and Pakistanis are needed.

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Appropriate targeting and involvement of ethnic minority groups and respect for cultural norms is essential. Work with Muslim religious leaders should clarify the religious acceptability of tobacco use in the Islamic faith and support the dissemination of an agreed policy nationally. Further work should develop and evaluate culturally sensitive smoking cessation interventions with South Asian communities.

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Contributors: JB contributed to the supervision, management, and training of the community researchers; design of research materials; data collection; and data validation. She also took the lead in data analysis, report writing, and drafting of this paper. RR, MW, JK, and JR contributed to the study hypothesis, research design, data analysis, research materials, and data validation; commented on drafts of the text; and gained funding for the research. JK and JB designed the training programme. Jane Harland contributed to the research design and obtaining funding. All authors are the study guarantors. Thirteen community researchers organised (including recruitment, held, and translated in-depth interviews and focus groups facilitated by JB. The community researchers also contributed to developing interview topic guides, publicity for the study, participant recruitment strategies, and data analysis. The community researchers were Masuk Ahmed, Asif Shariif, Shubh Ghai, Khalid Mohammed, Akla Rahman, Anita Sarkar, Neelam Verma, Rushna Ahmed, Afzal Choudhry, Afroz Qureshi, Rurkinder Kaur, Monnoj Rahman, and Jumal Sarwar.

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Competing interests: None declared.

Ethical approval: Ethical approval was obtained from Newcastle and North Tyneside local ethics committee.