

# Diasporic and Bicultural Experiences of Sikh Women in Canada

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**Abstract:** This paper recapitulates the data and results of my doctoral study, which explored the bicultural identity formation of fifteen Punjabi-Sikh women living in Canada. It also examines the cultural experiences internalized by Punjabi-Sikh women as they juxtapose the Punjabi-Sikh and Canadian value systems into one mindset. This paper consists of two parts; the first part delineates biculturalism and the second part discusses bicultural issues encountered by Punjabi-Sikh women.

**Defining Biculturalism:** The concept of biculturalism has been well documented (Drury, 1991; Ghuman, 1995; Sodowsky, Kwan, and Pannu, 1995; Das and Kemp, 1997; Tse, 1999). Biculturalism entails, “the ability of a person to function effectively in more than one culture and also to switch roles back and forth as the situation changes”(Jambunathan, Burts, and Pierce, 2000).

For some Punjabi-Sikh women, ethnicity is situational. Rosenthal (1987) summarizes her sentiments about situational ethnicity:

It seems that ethnic individuals adopt a variety of strategies in dealing with their dual cultural environment. For some, the primary ethnic group serves as the most potent identification. Others adopt a more assimilatory position or view themselves as members of two cultural worlds, switching identification according to the situation (p.178).

Situational ethnicity permits Punjabi-Sikh women the option of selecting and discarding assorted cultural values and traditions. Equally, postmodern perspectives acknowledge that an individual’s identity is constantly altered and modified because of the continuous interaction between self and society. What eventually occurs is that individuals assume different identities according to the situation. Hall (1996) further explains, “as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildered, fleeting, multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with, at least temporarily” (p.598).

Ho (1995) contends that individuals raised in multiethnic environments may develop multicultural or hybrid identities. Phinney (1999) suggests, similar to situational ethnicity, hybridized cultures are created as a result of constant socialization and transfer of information from individuals of diverse cultures. Furthermore, Ghuman (1995) suggests this trend in Vancouver with teachers claiming that their students possess multiple-identities (p.232). Lessenger (1995) also observes that individuals develop what she calls a “transnational identity.”

## **Bicultural issues encountered by Punjabi-Sikh women**

From my study, the following bicultural issues emerged:

### **1. Conflict between the two values systems; i.e., individualistic (dominant) and collectivistic (home) cultures.**

The dominant culture promotes personal autonomy and independent decision-making; whereas, the home environment suggests conformity, family interests before the individual’s interests, group decisions, and unconditional respect and obedience towards older family members. **Punjabi-Sikh women may experience difficulties accommodating both**

value systems into their tenuous lifestyle, which may result in resenting their home culture while simultaneously trying to assimilate into the dominant culture. (Triandis, 1994 ; Phinney, 1999).

**2. Topics derived from both value systems include: gender roles; cultural, language, and religious preservation; identity formation; and family expectations/responsibilities.**

Gender roles, cultural/language/religious preservation, and family expectations and responsibilities are enforced in most collectivistic households. **Punjabi-Sikh women are expected to conform to the gender roles dictated in their households. The mother may not be as vocal and primarily lives her life for her children and husband; whereas, the father is non-communicative with his children but still makes all the decisions in the household.** Patriarchal households and mentality continue to be prominent in Punjabi-Sikh households today (Das and Kemp, 1997; Tse, 1999).

With respect to family expectations and responsibilities, the extended family arrangement may cause problems within the household. Lack of privacy, freedom, multiple child-rearers, and criticism from older family members are considered disadvantages of this arrangement. **However, cultural, language and religious preservation by older family members, specifically grandparents are advantages to this living arrangement. Live-in grandparents, allow Punjabi-Sikh women the opportunity to practice their Indian language(s) and learn about their religion (Das and Kemp, 1997; Jambunathan et al., 2000).**

**3. Lack of intergenerational communication may lead to less cultural preservation in the household.**

Communication is key for effective cultural preservation to occur in Punjabi-Sikh women. Parents should make an effort to explain cultural traditions, ceremonies and customs to their offspring. As well, there is a need for dialogue to compromise on certain cultural values. Until this occurs in the household, parents should be prepared to encounter difficulties with their offspring. Subsequently, Punjabi-Sikh women should feel comfortable asking culturally related questions to their parents. **Parents should welcome and actively listen to these queries posed by their offspring. This may lead to less confusion, and future cultural surprises and perhaps a better understanding and appreciation of their parent's culture. (Segal, 1998; Mann-Feder and Mojab, 1999; Sodhi Kalsi, 2003).**

A generation gap or a lack of understanding may warrant communication issues between first- and second-generation individuals and preclude parents from openly conversing with their children. I would also like to include the term 'cultural gap' in which parents and children experience difficulty understanding each other's background and therefore are unable to communicate openly.

Correspondingly, Ken Wilber (1999), author of *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, describes a concept, 'transliberal awareness' which may bridge the 'cultural gap' between parents and their children (p.211). This term suggests that parents and children try to understand each other's subjective side (i.e., cultural values, background, socialization practices) in order to engage in meaningful discourse.

**4. Double standard towards male and female offspring. More freedom and trust is denoted to sons than daughters.**

With regards to this issue, males are often given more freedom to date and socialize outside of the home environment than females. Females are expected to assume gender specific chores and duties (including cleaning, disciplining younger siblings and cooking) and engage in minimal socialization outside of the home; whereas male offspring are not

obliged to participate in the family and household responsibilities. This naturally causes resentment towards the parents but also to male siblings. Equality between the sexes should be implemented in the household in order to avoid unnecessary sibling resentment. (Drury, 1998; Ghuman, 1999)

What may be the common premise of these converging factors is a lack of intergenerational communication. Effective communication between the two generations is imperative for positive bicultural identity formation. That is, parents should encourage their offspring to discuss cultural and non-cultural related topics in the household. Second-generation individuals should feel safe in disclosing their concerns about their culture with their parents as well as ask culturally related questions.

In essence, intergenerational dialogue as mentioned by Kurian (1992), and Segal (1998) is also essential in cultural preservation. Continuous intergenerational communication may influence Punjabi-Sikh women to find a third space (Bhabha, 1994) and zone of proximal development (ZPD) to develop bicultural identities (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Tejada, 1999).

The ZPD, as described by Cummins (1996) “is the interpersonal space where minds meet and new understandings can arise through collaborative interaction and inquiry” (p.26). **This third space represents a safe, mutually respectful, comfortable, and authentic environment, which encourages an individual to be proud of his or her ethnic heritage and in turn, integrate it into individual identity (Sodhi, Gamlin, Maracle, Eamer, Komorowsky, and Yee, 2001).**

### **Conclusion**

With increased intergenerational communication, Punjabi-Sikh women will continue to move in their ZPDs as they are constantly socializing with other individuals and are learning more about their culture and other cultures (Gutiérrez et al., 1999).

In addition, meaning making plays a significant role in culturally shaping individuals (Bruner, 1990; Newman and Holzman, 1993). For some, meaning making enhanced movement in the ZPD; values that are not easily understood or created conflict (i.e., arranged marriages, extended family concept) could also be used as a catalyst to encourage movement in the ZPD (Gutiérrez et al., 1999).

To reiterate, factors that influence Punjabi-Sikh women to move in their ZPD include socializing with other individuals thereby learning about their culture and other cultures and meaning making as a method of developing their understanding of certain cultural values or causing a catalyst to encourage movement in the ZPD.

It is anticipated that these suggestions will encourage Punjabi-Sikh women to be proud of their heritage, preserve their culture, and transmit their values to future generations. Bicultural identity formation is a lifelong process, which continues to evolve as one accomplishes various milestones in their life. Educators, teachers, counsellors, and parents should be aware of the obstacles that hinder Punjabi-Sikh women from moving in their ZPD and assist them in developing a positive bicultural identity. This will only happen with continuous intergenerational discourse and compromise of certain cultural values within the home and school environments.



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