Traditional or Western Marriage and Dating Customs: How Newer Migrants Can Learn from Other Hindu Indian Female Immigrants

EMMA WOOD
BERNARD GUERIN*

Abstract
Recent migrants and refugees to Western countries face problems that others have faced before them. This research was one part of a larger project mapping the strategies developed by previous migrant groups so that new migrants might draw on them. Qualitative data were collected during interviews conducted with seven Indian women residing in New Zealand on topics surrounding dating and marriage practices. Findings suggest that while many of the women interviewed appeared to be adapting and modifying some aspects of their attitudes to reflect Western expectations regarding dating and marriage, they were still open to, and accepting of, traditional Indian beliefs regarding arranged marriages. Results are discussed in relation to the general problems encountered by migrants, and are summarised for their practical relevance for newer migrants.

One of the constant problems of migration is that of adjusting to a new society with different practices, and dealing with the stress and conflict that can arise if those practices are incongruent with tradition (Darvishpour 1998; Goode 1963). There are many ways that immigrants deal with these conflicts, and the most general patterns are well known (eg. Berry 1997; Krishnan and Berry 1992). For any general pattern however, there can be many diverse strategies adopted by individuals and communities in handling the problems they face. Rather than trying to label a single strategy of adjustment for each immigrant community (integrated, assimilated, etc.) or for groupings within one immigrant community, we can also document the range of diverse strategies used, the social and cultural

* Professor and Head of Psychology, University of South Australia, GPO Box 2471, Adelaide, South Australia 5000. Email: Bernard.Guerin@unisa.edu.au.
contexts in which they arise, and the factors indicating their relative success (cf. Guerin 2004; Zaidi and Shuraydi 2002).

One beneficial outcome of documenting how immigrant groups have adjusted their specific practices is that these strategies can be presented to new immigrant groups facing the same problems for the first time. It should not be assumed however, that the new immigrant groups will want to use the strategies or that they will be successful if implemented, but they can certainly learn from the range of options that have already been tried.

This research is concerned with one ethnic group and with one example of cultural change brought about through migration: middle-class Hindu Indian families who migrated to New Zealand and how they have dealt with changing marriage customs for daughters. The rationale for this research was twofold: to explore in detail the adjustment strategies adopted by Indian families when faced with incongruent Western practice; to document these strategies with the purpose of guiding recent immigrants facing the same issues through interventions so they may learn from the experiences of others (Guerin 2005). Like many Western countries, New Zealand has taken in many Somali, Iranian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees over the last ten years. While they are adjusting well, some issues such as dating and arranged community marriage practices are only now starting to surface for their children who have been through the New Zealand education system (Guerin et al. 2003a; Guerin et al. 2004a; Guerin et al. 2004b; Guerin et al. 2003b). However, there is currently very little literature in New Zealand which documents the experiences of Indian women migrants.

**Traditional Hindu Indian Marriage Practices**

Within Hindu religion, marriage is a profound and complex tradition that has spanned generations (Mullatti 1995). Whereas in Western society marriage is viewed as the bonding between two individuals, within the realms of Indian society marriage is seen as more of a community event, with an emphasis on fulfilling broader social obligations (Goodwin and Cramer 2000:50). Marriage is a process that unites two families almost like blood relations, hence it is not only a ritual but also a significant social event (Guerin 2004; Mullatti 1995).

In both traditional and contemporary Hindu society the notion of arranged marriage still plays a significant role in union formation. Partners are often introduced by relevant parties (usually family members) with
TRADITIONAL AND WESTERN MARRIAGE PATTERNS

matching usually made on the basis of the respective families' economic position, reputation, education, caste and religion (Bhachu 1985; Brah 1978; Goodwin 1999; Mullatti 1995). Advertisements to find a suitable partner may even be placed in local newspapers (Fowler 1997; Mullatti 1995).

With the emphasis placed on arranged marriages it is clear that love between prospective couples is not considered an important element of the marriage process. In Hindu society, love between a husband and wife is expected to grow as a relationship develops, and it is predicated on the concept of devotion, not only to each other but also to god (Goodwin and Cramer 2000; Goode 1963; Mody 2002; Seymour 1999).

Due to the importance of the marital process in traditional Indian society, a controversial issue for migrant Indian parents and their children is the concept of dating and the pre-marital association between adolescent boys and girls (Dion and Dion 1996; Kurian 1986, 1991; Kurian and Ghosh 1983; Shah 1993). Many Indian parents, regardless of the period of time they have resided in Western society, are still strong advocates of arranged marriages believing that Western practices of dating and pre-marital relations are actions to be frowned upon, and the expectation of restrictive dating practices among women are not uncommon (Srinivasan 2001).

While dating is a sensitive issue within the typical Indian family unit, it is amplified by the degree of adherence to traditional gender distinctions. Some parents are willing to let their sons date and associate with the opposite sex with little or no supervision, but do not grant the same freedom to their daughters (Kurian 1991; Wakil, Siddique and Wakil 1981). The conflicts resulting from these gendered distinctions for Indian girls being raised in a Westernized society are thought to inevitably put great stress on the parent-child relationship.

While conflicts regarding dating and marriage are thought to be common within the Indian family, they are not universal. Some researchers have shown that there is diversity with regard to the marriage process, and to abate the conflict associated with the clash of generational values, strategies have been devised to accommodate such differences (Goodwin and Cramer 2000; Marshall, Stenner and Lee 1999). One effective form of compromise which appears to be widespread, is to let children associate with members of the opposite sex within their community (Wakil et al. 1981; Kurian 1991; Zaidi and Shuraydi 2002). The premise for this decision is based on a recognition that “it is better for their boys and girls to mingle with each other or even fall in love than it is for them to ‘go astray’
in…society” (Wakil et al. 1981:934). This decision has seen the relaxation of many parents’ attitudes regarding their children’s marital arrangements.

Mixing the old with the new appears to be another effective contemporary form of compromise within the British-Asian immigrant community. Forming a delicate balance which maintains the more traditional collectivist views regarding marital patterns with the more Westernized individualistic independent ideals is a difficult process, but some older and younger generations appear to be willing to compromise to allow for the modification of a distinctly traditional process (Goodwin and Cramer, 2000). The form this compromise tends to take echoes that previously researched by Wakil et al. (1981), and is based on the premise that while parents alone may not be able to make the decision regarding who their daughters marry, they can influence it by altering the people with whom they keep company. Often a “pool of eligible males” is selected by the family resulting in “greater power of choice to the young people whilst allowing the older generation to limit the field to an appropriate range” (Goodwin and Cramer 2000:56). Similar compromise arrangements have been reported by other researchers in their analyses of South Asians residing in various Western societies (Ballard 1978; Singh Ghuman 1994; Stopes-Roe and Cochrane 1988; Zaidi and Shuraydi 2002).

**Research Objectives**

A commonly held view is that when reaching Western countries migrants, and especially their children, abandon their traditional practices, causing cultural shock, family conflict and a weakened ethnic community. Our research with Somali communities in New Zealand has tended to affirm this perspective and parents who harbour such fears can become authoritarian as a means of preserving traditional practices (Guerin et al. 2003; Guerin et al. 2004). Marriage arrangements are foremost amongst the practices it is feared will be lost.

In reviewing research on Hindu Indians however, we have seen that not a great deal is known about strategic dating practices for migrants and their children, and many of the studies fail to provide adequate detail of the strategies which have evolved. The practical insights which more recent migrant groups may gain are therefore lost (Guerin 2004), and an important link in the settlement and adjustment of newer migrant and refugee groups is not documented.
The overall aim of this research therefore, has been to document the histories of a small number of Indian women as they recount the experiences of dating and marriage for Hindu Indian women residing in a Western society. A large sample was therefore not required, as the purpose was to provide more contextual detail about particular cases, and to examine the diversity of strategies.

**Method**

**Participants**

The seven participants in this research were all women of Indian descent who had, at one period in their lives, resided in India. Participants were selected using a snowballing technique. Each prospective participant received a letter inviting them to participate in the study as well as a project information sheet giving a brief summary of the themes to be covered in the interview.

The women interviewed fell within one of two distinct age brackets: 20 to 24 years and 40 to 60 years. The four aged 20-24 years were all currently studying at the University of Waikato, and while two of the older women were employed at the time of the interview, the other was retired. All participants came from middle-class, professional family backgrounds. While the sample was obviously not representative of all Indian women, it may be said to represent a cross-section of migrant Indian women in New Zealand, who tend to be educated and of middle-level income. Such women were also likely to hold more “liberal” views of dating and marriage, an element of sample bias which undoubtedly influenced the qualitative data obtained.

**The Interviews**

Each of the participants agreed to an audio-taped, face-to-face interview, which ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour. Six participants were interviewed alone while one opted to have a friend present for the duration of the interview. The topics covered reflected the research questions and focused on the women’s experiences of both Indian and Western dating and marriage procedures, any conflicts the participants had faced or knew of in respect to dating and marriage, and their views about inter-racial dating. Unmarried participants were also questioned on perceived parental attitudes.
toward dating and their own potential marriages. In addition to the more general questions, married participants were asked about their own marriages and the processes undertaken to find their husbands, as well as how their own children’s marriages would be decided. During interviews, participants spoke openly about issues regarding marriage and dating, and appeared to be unguarded when discussing their views.

Results

The primary themes that were evident from the discussions with the participants are illustrated in the following pages.

Traditional and Contemporary Views of Marriage and Dating

Initially the participants were asked to describe their understanding of customary Indian views about dating and marriage. All the women appeared to share similar perceptions and talked of arranged marriages as a norm, recognising however the notion of love-marriage, but noting that it has yet to become a common practice:

In India we have arranged marriages right and it’s like that, you know you don’t really have many love… love marriages do exist but it’s not common and you’ve got to go against societal norms and stuff like that. (Amrita)

A common theme discussed in relation to this question was the respect for the family unit and the acknowledgment of the parental role in decisions regarding potential marital unions:

If I want to go for a love marriage, you know, then I have to think about what my parents would think, you know, what sort of restrictions they would have. (Shalini)

Whilst the majority of the participants recognised that their parents would assume the responsibilities of finding them a suitable partner, Shalini stated that this had been attributed to her uncle, her father’s older brother, as he was the decision-maker for the family. Similarly, Priya pointed to the joint family system’s role in this process, hence making marriage a community event:

You need not exactly live with them, your relatives, but then they are involved in most of the decision-making, especially marriage. Yeah there are a lot of family involved; it is not just your parents but your grandmother, your uncles, everybody together. (Priya)
When unmarried participants were asked to express their thoughts regarding the concept of arranged marriages their responses were positive about the prospect, providing there was no pressure to marry someone with whom they felt no affinity. Arranged marriages were described as more "scientific" and "foolproof" than love marriages. All unmarried participants wanted to play an active role in the search for a potential partner and all wanted the opportunity to date their potential husband and spend time getting to know him before embarking on a marriage:

I don’t think arranged marriages are that bad…but… I wouldn’t go for a marriage where it’s basically just the parents deciding, you know what I am saying. (Savita)

All participants agreed that in traditional Indian society, the concept of dating is not accepted nor openly practised; it is considered to be unnecessary and not part of the customary marital process:

Traditionally, I don’t think [dating] is really accepted; even now I don’t think it is accepted in India. (Savita)

In summary, although participants agreed on traditional ideas and practices, their positive attitude towards arranged marriages appears to challenge the common perceptions surrounding the subject. Whilst much of the literature states that the area of marriage and the impact of Western ideals are a source of great contention within the family unit, these participants did not believe it to be so.

**Marriage and Living in New Zealand**

All participants were asked whether they thought that living in a Western society had altered their attitudes towards dating and marriage in any way. Interviewees had been residing in New Zealand for varying periods of time, ranging from nine months to 42 years. While most had not noticed many changes in their attitudes, they noted that residing in New Zealand had strengthened their pre-existing outlooks on various issues surrounding dating and marriage. A number of the participants even reported a strengthening in their feelings towards arranged marriages:

I think I am more open to the idea of arranged marriages than I was when I was in India… I know it sounds strange doesn’t it! I don’t think arranged marriages are that bad… I don’t think it is a better idea, I just think, I’d be more open to it because I think, to a certain extent your family knows you
best and so if it’s done right, they will look for somebody who, you know you’ll get along with. (Savita)

Mahima who has four children, felt it was the “children’s choice” as they had been raised in New Zealand and as a result they “think in English” and were “very Kiwi”. She remarked that it would be very hard to bring in a potential husband or wife from India because while the couple may look similar, they would have differing expectations. She was also the only participant who felt her attitudes had changed significantly since arriving in New Zealand at the age of eighteen:

I have changed tremendously, I have changed that when I first came from India I would argue with my husband, I would defend the Indian, I would say Indian is better and he would say no no, kiwi culture is better… but now when I look back I think I want my children here, in this country, to settle down with anybody they love, as long as they can make it right…I’m not that kind of person that I would try to stop them getting married because they are Indian. (Mahima)

While Savita was now more positive regarding arranged marriages, she also stated that residing in New Zealand and experiencing everyday life had demystified the notion of Western style love marriages that she and her friends had previously held:

I think we just used to look at what we know of the Western culture, the so-called Western culture, and then think that they have the right to choose who they want to marry and we should have the right to do that too… but it’s like when you come here you see that not all sorts of marriages and partners in New Zealand are working out too… you see people breaking up all the time and divorcing, it makes you wonder. (Savita)

Participants were asked whether they thought their attitudes would be different had they never come to New Zealand, and responses to this question varied. Priya felt that she would be more against arranged marriage had she never resided in Western society:

I think I would be a bit more against arranged marriage if I was just in India. I think we have a different, a narrow view of what marriage can be when you are in India. (Priya)

One explanation for this change in attitude that was suggested by a number of participants is the image of romance that is portrayed by Western media. Mahima, Ananya, Savita and Amrita all made specific reference to the
Western image of love and romance that is becoming increasingly influential in India:

A lot of false images have been projected through movies and they think that that is what romance is all about and they have these kind of misconceptions about it but I think, I don’t know now, there is no such word as love in our society. (Ananya)

Amrita felt that living in New Zealand had allowed her to develop more liberal attitudes but at the same time she recognised the importance of respecting others, particularly when in the company of more traditional Indians:

I think what happens is when people come abroad and stuff, the limits they would set, like even your clothing, you know simple things like that, maybe things change…. It’s like always rationalizing… you have to like, do things according to the time and place and stuff. (Amrita)

When discussing the main differences between Western and Indian style marriages, the principal distinction made by many participants was with regard to the notion of love. Although two participants stated they would like to have a love marriage, they were aware that love is not an essential quality in a successful relationship. This notion was specifically discussed by three of the participants. Compromise and respect appeared to be the key ingredients in a successful relationship, love considered as something that grows from having respect for each other:

So you see love is not at first sight, you sort of develop that understanding you know? Understanding, it is more… like I say to my children sometimes, you have got to understand the person, then the love comes automatically. (Mahima)

Unmarried participants were subsequently asked about their parents’ views regarding marriage and whether they would be expected to have an arranged marriage, whilst married participants were asked how they felt about their own children’s marriages. Most of the unmarried participants felt that their parents had compromised in letting them make their own choice regarding their future partners:

It’s my choice. I’d like it to be a love-come-arrangement because… I’d like my family to approve my wedding. (Shalini)

Savita offered a slightly different perspective:
My family is an exception to most Indian families you are going to come across 'cause they are like, they're like, “find who you want to marry, don't come to us, I don't want a part of finding someone for you”. I don't think I'll have any problems about who I can and cannot marry. (Savita)

**Participants’ Views Regarding Dating**

Participants were asked whether dating and marriage were issues that were discussed openly with family and friends. Savita, Amrita and Shalini all firmly stated that dating was an issue which, while openly discussed in the company of friends, was never discussed within the family unit:

No, it is never discussed [in the home]... with my friends it is always discussed, like most of the examples in the school everyone talks about arranged, arranged…but my parents never talked about it. (Shalini)

Priya however, stated that while she never had a particular boyfriend, she had lots of male friends and that her parents did not mind her going out with them. She felt that her parents were “very liberal” and consequently dating could be openly discussed in her household. Shalini felt that while her attitudes toward dating had not changed in the sense that she still did not believe it to be appropriate for her, she recognised that she had become more receptive to the idea:

When I was in India I would never have thought about dating before marriage but you know when I came here...you know when somebody asks me, do I want go out with them, I'd hit him then but now I wouldn't go out but I wouldn’t hit. (Shalini)

Married participants Ananya and Mahima felt that dating and marriage had always been and could be openly discussed in their households, although Mahima felt that it would have been less acceptable for her daughter than for her sons; she feared, for example, that her daughter “may end up being used by a boy” who would consequently not marry her, but she did not harbour these concerns for her sons. Ananya did not appear to make this same distinction and was happy for her daughter to date, and felt that both her son and daughter would be treated in the same way with respect to their marriages:

I think that parents have become a bit more mellow now because the girls, like if my daughter said she wants to go out with a guy, I don't think I would mind. (Ananya)
When the unmarried participants were asked whether chaperoning was still a procedure employed by parents, two of the respondents, Priya and Amrita agreed. Mahima and Ananya had had chaperones in their engagement period whilst they frequented their future husbands, but felt that today, chaperones were being used so that a girl and boy could date and get to know one another before making the decision to marry. Chaperones were therefore being used as a compromise strategy, enabling parents to allow their children a greater say in selecting their future spouse:

“If it is like an arranged marriage that the parents are trying to push on the woman and the woman is like “No I want to get to know the guy first”. Then what you do is, once the families are together and once you are kind of alright about the guy then you kind of…either you get engaged and you go out or you wait for the engagement, you go out a couple of times… with a chaperone around, and then if the guy and the girl are agreeing, because that is what is happening these days, you can’t just push people into marriage. So what they do is let them go out with a chaperone around and if they agree they put them into engagement.” (Amrita)

Savita and Shalini however, did not believe that dating was an acceptable practice in their community at present, and as a result parents would not need to organise chaperones for their children because they would not be dating in the first place. Savita discussed how friends might go out and there may be a boyfriend and girlfriend amongst this group but she did not really consider this as chaperoning. Shalini felt that the concept was irrelevant, as she did not know of anyone who had tried to date overtly in the presence of their parents:

“No [chaperones are not used], I don’t think any Indian I know has ever dated in front of their parents; if they are dating then their parents don’t know they are dating.” (Shalini)

As the focus for this project was directly aimed at women’s experiences of dating and marriage, Indian men’s experiences were not mentioned very often. A number of interesting indirect comments were made however, in relation to dating practices. Respondents considered men could freely exercise double standards regarding sexual behaviour. Amrita noted that she was warned by her male friends that while it was acceptable for men to “play around” they wanted their wives to be sexually inexperienced:

“Indian men tell me… like this is according to my friend, you know he’s like: “an experienced man can make out whether a woman is a virgin or not and believe me or not, I don’t mind having fun and stuff but I want my wife to be a virgin”… I was like, what the heck you know, but that’s how it
is you know, even people of my generation, they are like so chauvinistic.  
(Anrita)

Ananya also mentioned incongruence in the treatment of divorced men and women: while women are traditionally expected to maintain their dignity by moving home to their parents, men are allowed to remarry.

**Family Conflict over Dating and Marriage**

Drawing mainly from the experiences of others, participants were readily able to give examples of conflict with parents regarding boyfriends, dating and marriage. The unmarried participants had not experienced conflict themselves, and the two married women seemed to have had relatively little conflict over their marriages. The most commonly cited reason for conflict was disagreement over a potential spouse due to religious differences:

There’s been heaps of complaints… mostly it happens that the girl wants to marry someone that the parents don’t agree for some reason, like they are not the same caste…It’s not caste anymore, it’s more religion. (Savita)

Mahima talked of the conflict that had arisen with her husband when she first moved to New Zealand regarding “the proper way” to do things. Due to the disparities between her traditional Indian expectations and her husband’s more Westernised behaviour, there were many arguments regarding how to raise their children. Initially Mahima felt they should be raised according to traditional Indian custom, but she finally came to accept that they were “Kiwi kids”.

Implicit in both married participants’ responses was respect for the child’s happiness beyond any concerns of defiance towards parents. Ananya summed this up succinctly in her statement:

There is nothing you can do because we don’t disown our girls and we don’t threaten them ‘get out of the house if you don’t listen’, you just have to grin and bear it, it is not worth losing your daughter over. (Ananya)

**Inter-racial Dating**

Although the literature reports in many cases, “a high level of scepticism…with regard to inter-religious or inter-racial marriage” (Talbani and Hasanali 2000:621), all participants, regardless of their age and period of residence in a Western society, expressed a positive and liberal attitude towards the notion of inter-racial dating and marriage. Several participants
noted that race should not be a deciding factor in the search for a suitable partner:

... you feel that you seem to relate well, better than with other people from other communities than from yours... familiarity breeds contempt in a way. What happens is you get like fed up of the same mentality and the same set of thinking [sometimes you] relate better with people from other communities. (Amrita)

In contrast, Ananya stated that she was happy for her children to date with people of different backgrounds but also expressed concern regarding issues that may ensue in conservative Indian society, such as the potential rejection her daughter might face if dating out of her community:

I am not too sure how people would accept... like living here in New Zealand, if my daughter went out with a Kiwi boy or something. It’s alright here but I don’t know how well it would be accepted in India. (Ananya)

She was also of the opinion that her daughter would not be happy if she married a Western man because she would face many cultural and religious differences that would have an impact on all spheres of the married couple’s life. She used the example of vegetarianism to explain her position:

... she is a vegetarian, if she falls in love with someone who is a non-vegetarian she is going to find it hard to cook at home. So then it is going to cause conflict because it is not feasible to eat out every time, and see these are very small things that I think people in the Western world are not aware of. (Ananya)

Both Ananya and Mahima expressed a level of concern regarding how a Western girl might adapt to Indian family life, particularly as it involves a high level of interaction between family members and significant involvement of the potential mother-in-law in the young couple’s relationship. Ananya made the comment that “if you marry out of caste, or if you marry below or above your social status, it’s going to cause problems”.

Using the arranged marriage of her own daughter who she described as “the most Kiwi of all her children”, Mahima gave an example of the incongruence between Western and Indian cultural mores:

His parents came out when she was expecting a baby and my son-in-law decided to bring the family because she was pregnant and then there was a good chance that they would never go back. Then they got residence here and my daughter was put off ...she said “it is very difficult Mum”...see she
didn’t mind the boy but she didn’t want to marry the whole family.

(Mahima)

One stipulation with regard to inter-racial dating that was explicitly mentioned by Savita, Ananya and Shalini, and mentioned implicitly by the others, was that it would be considered culturally inappropriate to date an individual of Muslim faith:

[My parents have] got certain ideas about who I cannot and can date, like I know they would be very upset if I went out with a Muslim, but that’s ‘cause of the whole India-Pakistan thing you know. (Savita)

In sum, interviews suggest that inter-racial marriages were seen as positive, with the exception of those between Hindu and Muslim boundaries.

The Education and Westernization of Indian Girls

In contemporary Western society it is not only marriage values and customs that are different when compared with traditional Indian culture, but also gender roles. Women have a growing desire for education, and consequently expect to be employed outside the home. This issue was raised spontaneously by both married participants as they highlighted changing attitudes and marital roles for Indian women who had migrated to Western societies, as well as those remaining in India:

When we got married, we were strictly told that whatever is fated for us now you have to live with it but now these girls, they are quite educated and they start to question everything. (Ananya)

Ananya felt that education was the cause of this change in attitude, and that the education of girls was a real “Catch 22 situation”; by not educating girls they would remain vulnerable and reliant on their husbands’ financial support, yet educating them would create problems as they established more independence with regard to decision-making:

[Girls are starting] to question everything, “why should I…”, you know and again, that leads to, like I said, ego clashes and girls tend to walk off now, out of their marriages, because they are educated and they can earn money for themselves. (Ananya)

Both Mahima and Ananya felt that divorce was rapidly becoming a serious issue within Indian society and attributed the increased levels to both
improved female educational achievement and the growing level of societal westernization:

In our country now people are having a divorce problem just like...see the more advanced you get... the more Westernized you get, the same problems as Western people. (Mahima)

As mentioned earlier, Indian men have traditionally been allowed to remarry, but women have been subject to stigmatism by their community, and have often become dependent on their parents or brothers for financial support. However, Ananya felt that this traditional inequality experienced by divorced women was beginning to change both as a result of Western influences and the education of women:

When a girl became a widow [or divorcee] her life ended at no matter what age, but now even widows and divorcees are starting to get married again, and that's where the Western influence is coming in you know. They are saying 'what's wrong, why should we stop our lives just because our husband left us so that doesn't mean our lives should end'...and that's very Western, girls here [in New Zealand] don't give up there lives. (Ananya)

Discussion

By interviewing seven Indian women who migrated to New Zealand and asking about their experiences with regard to marriage and dating, we of course do not get a representative picture of what these experiences must be like for all female Indian migrants. What we have achieved however, is a description of some of the ways that the women interviewed have dealt with this situation. The strategies they have developed will not necessarily be relevant for other migrant groups, or even for other Indian women, but they can be a useful guide for others in terms of what they might expect when moving to a westernized country which embraces alternative expectations of marriage and dating.

The first finding from our research has been that these women were not opposed to traditional arranged marriages, nor did they personally experience family conflicts as a result of marriage and dating issues, findings which run contrary to broader literature in this area (Singh Ghuman 1994; Wakil, Siddique and Wakil 1981; Zaidi and Shuraydi 2002). They did not wish to embrace traditional values without question, but their contact with divorce and unstable partnerships in Western countries had in some cases, reinforced their appreciation of arranged marriages. Marriage was
recognised as a matter for both family and community, and for those with children exercising more liberal attitudes towards their offspring was seen as preferable to ostracism if the children were to oppose their parents' wishes.

These findings highlight an interesting resolution to an otherwise contradictory situation: there are good reasons for arranged marriages and bad reasons for Western “love” marriages but compromise can be achieved by modifying the ways in which “arranging” is arrived at. This strategy may therefore provide an insight to new migrants if they are faced with the dilemma of preserving or rejecting traditional practices of dating and marriage.

The variations to traditionally arranged marriages were many. Most respondents wanted to have some choice in whom they married; even while accepting the arranged aspect they still wanted to be able to vet proposed suitors or to suggest their own. Most wanted to get to know the person before, rather than after marriage. They also wanted their parents to like and approve of their marriage partner, and were cognisant that the person would have to deal with the whole family and not just their spouse. Finally, they were generally opposed to having an arranged marriage with someone coming from India and they remarked that the marriage had a better chance if the person lived in New Zealand already.

With respect to dating, most saw that it was not a traditional practice but was becoming more common and were aware of the problems it could cause. In particular, the problem seemed to be that having some form of dating followed directly from wanting more pre-marriage contact with partners and getting to know them better. While all participants agreed that this was desirable, there was no clear consensus on “safe” forms of dating. Some thought going out in groups was a solution, others saw problems with this; some saw chaperones as a solution, others thought this not necessary. Hence, our results suggest that there is no clear answer to finding strategies for safe and acceptable dating practices but further research with other groups may provide more insight and innovative solutions.

There was some indication that the issues of marriage and dating caused family conflict between parents and children, although only one interviewee drew from personal experience. The one case of clear conflict that our interviews did illustrate occurred between parents, with the father’s more Western and liberal views opposing the mother’s who argued for more traditional marriage practices. It might tentatively be suggested that the
likelihood of conflict may be over-stated in the literature, and that further research would shed more light on the subject. Sampling from a broader range of participants with more varied socio-cultural backgrounds would also undoubtedly provide further insights into the incidence of conflict.

Whatever the sampling strategy adopted, relating westernization to family conflict is probably more complex than the literature currently portrays and so merits further investigation. For newer immigrants it could be helpful for example, to distinguish whether potential conflict comes from parents’ concerns about the consequences of a new practices or from a worry that it symbolises a break with tradition.

Finally, one of our findings that differs from previous research is that of inter-racial marriage. Most of the respondents were favourable to such marriages, at least in principle, and could see the benefits, although a strong exception to this was that of marriages between Hindu and Muslim partners, which all participants still saw as prohibited, even where the reasons were not clearly stipulated and perhaps not even understood. This finding probably again reflects the more liberal attitudes held by our specific sample, and may not necessarily occur for other socio-cultural groups. A second exception was that while agreeing in principle to inter-racial marriage, the two married women still believed that some problems were inevitable in mixed-race marriages and would lead to conflict even if couples experienced a happy relationship themselves.

**What Can Be Passed on to Newer Migrant Groups?**

By examining the contextual detail of interviews with seven Indian women, we have identified a number of strategies for dealing with potential problems. Our hope is that as new migrant and refugee groups move to Western countries and some years later encounter these same problems, we can outline ways in which older migrant communities have handled such difficulties. Simply knowing that they are not the first to experience these conflicts will in itself probably give them some assurance. More specific strategies which stem from our research can be identified:

- The best general strategies reported involved compromise and respect - respect between children and their parents, and respect for the communities to which they belonged, with the child’s happiness as an over-riding consideration;
• Parents have found ways to influence the company their children keep without being authoritarian and have drawn on other family members for advice and discussion;

• Many children appear to accept parental involvement in their dating and marriage behaviour so long as they do not feel strong pressure is being exerted, and can exercise a degree of choice in selecting their partner and getting to know them. Experimenting with different dating and chaperoning strategies may facilitate these processes;

• Arranged marriages can be positively portrayed as more “foolproof” than those founded on sentiments of romantic love for several reasons: they reflect the influence of family knowledge and experience, may be less likely to end in divorce, are more adaptable to the long-term commitment to the wider family and community, and are less influenced by Western media constructs of the “ideal” marriage;

• Arranged marriages may be more acceptable if prospective partners are identified in the country of migration rather than the country of origin;

• Emphasizing that marriage may also require an ability to live closely with the family and wider community, may alleviate potential group conflict.

To conclude, by studying the broader social context within which marriage and dating occur (Guerin 2004) we are perhaps able to avoid an oversimplified representation of migration and its effects. Diverse communities can be sustained within New Zealand, and indeed they can “compromise” their traditions and yet still remain traditional.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by a grant from the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (UOWX0203, Strangers in Town: Enhancing Family and Community in a More Diverse New Zealand Society). We wish to thank Pauline Guerin for helpful discussions, and all the participants for opening up their lives to us.

References


