

## **“IT’S HARD TO BALANCE IT”: CULTURAL IDENTITY PRODUCTION AMONG YOUTH OF THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA IN METROPOLITAN NEW YORK AND OSLO**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Drawing upon semi-structured, in-depth interviews with young women and men living in the US and Norway with one or two parents from South Asia, perceived advantages and disadvantages of their upbringing is explored, as well as identity construction and identity performance in different spatial and cultural contexts. For those youth who don’t comply with parents’ social norms and expectations of dress codes and behavior, different lifestyles are led with parents and with friends. Thereby one tries to pretend complying with what is perceived as too traditional or over-protecting parental norms while living out other identities when outside of the parental gaze. The role that travel to parents’ home countries plays in the process of identity formation is analyzed. Visiting the places where the parents grew up has dispelled myths about parents’ home countries and cultures. Cultures are not static, and youth found cultural traits and practices that were much more liberal than the culture their parent(s) had left decades ago and had kept using as a template for social norms when raising their children. Youth of a bicultural upbringing are often experts at switching back and forth between different sets of cultural codes. Their cultural competency—not only in understanding cultural difference but also in being able to participate as an insider in different cultural settings—is an important potential resource for our globalized societies. However, it can also be confusing to have separate identities and it can be “hard to balance it.”*

**Keywords:** *youth, identity, South Asian diaspora, metropolitan New York, Oslo*

This paper is the result of a comparative project where I interviewed young people of a mixed South Asian and Western upbringing both in the US and in Norway. These two countries do provide an interesting comparison because Norway—in contrast to the US—has a relatively short history and limited extent of non-western immigration and multiculturalism. The paper focuses on how Norwegian and American youth with one or two parents from South Asia perceive their identity formation, performance, and negotiation. This paper also discusses what the participants described as advantages and challenges they faced in their bicultural upbringing. It is particularly interesting how the youth perceive the effects of visits to their parents' countries of origin. Have their travel experiences influenced their identity formation and their understanding and perceptions of their own upbringing? Do they feel a sense of belonging to places both where they were raised and in their parents' home countries? What seem to be decisive factors in the formation of a sense of home and belonging? Another geographical aspect of the study is to explore the youths' different cultural practices and identities in private and public space—both where they grew up and where they/their parents came from.

What brought me into this topic is both my own family's experiences with immigration and multiculturalism and the fact that I know some young people both in the US and in Norway who have had confusing, annoying, and/or frustrating experiences growing up bicultural/multicultural. This could be due to parents being overly protective because they perceive the prevailing culture in the place that they raise their child as very different from the culture they grew up in themselves, or due to parents of different ethnicities projecting opposite parenting styles and philosophies to their common child.

For selection of participants I used a combination of purposive sampling and the "snow-ball method." First, I interviewed some young people I already knew who had been raised by parent(s) from South Asia and who represented different ethnicities and religious backgrounds, and from them I solicited other potential participants by explaining to my first participants what characteristics I was looking for. In the beginning of the research I focused on female youth instead of youth in general, because I wanted to get at the gender specific negotiations of identity in private and public space as experienced by girls and young women, and also on perceived problems with how they were raised, based on the expectation that gender norms in the cultures in question were perceived as significantly different from the majority cultures where they live. However, as the research progressed I felt a need for interviewing males also, in order to find out whether the experiences and perceptions that young women had about gender differences were shared by their male counterparts.

Most of my 20 participants (sixteen women, four men) were either college students at the time of the interview or were getting ready to start college, or had already completed a college degree<sup>1</sup>. They belong to middle class families. They all have either one or two parents from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, or Sri Lanka. Fifteen of them were born in either Norway or the US to South Asian parent(s) born in South Asia, and in this article they are referred to as the “second generation.” The remaining five participants had moved to one of these countries with their parents before age 12, and they will be referred to as the “1.5 generation” (Rangaswamy, 2000: 167). Five of the participants have only one parent from South Asia. The age of the participants at the time of the interviews was 18 to 28. I chose the minimum age of 18 because the youth had had some years to reflect on their teenage experiences. The oldest person recruited through the snowball method was 28, which may be a stretch of the “youth” term, as it is common in literature on children’s and youth geographies to include people up to age 25 (see, for instance, Hopkins, 2004, and the journal *Children’s Geographies*<sup>2</sup>). “[T]he terms ‘youth’ or young people are popularly used to describe those aged between 16 and 25” (Valentine, 2003: 38). However, my oldest participants were in similar situations as the younger participants because they were either still living with their parents or were still in college. The different religions represented were Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism. Three of my participants defined themselves as agnostic or non-religious<sup>3</sup>. My interview guideline focuses on memories from the participants’ childhood and teenage years as well as current experiences and attitudes. Depending on the involvement of the conversation, the interview guideline was often used more as a checklist than a questionnaire. The interviews took place in cafes, restaurants, my office, or the home of the participant. Some of the interviews/conversations were split up into several meetings. However, most of the participants were interviewed only once, ranging from one to eight hours, with an average of almost three hours. With some of the participants I had follow-up conversations on email, and one of my participants wrote a short essay for me about her experiences traveling to her parents’ home country.

The participants’ perceptions of me before being asked to participate may have influenced both their decision to take part in the research and their answers to my questions and to which extent they were willing to go in-depth when explaining their experiences and attitudes. In Norway, some of the participants knew me from the time I lived in Norway more than eight years prior as an “aunty”, i.e. a friend or acquaintance of their parents. In the US, some of the participants knew me from having once taken a course<sup>4</sup> with me or from my acquaintance with their parents. The fact that they knew that I am a white Norwegian woman with a husband who is originally from Bangladesh and that we have an adult daughter who was raised by us in Norway and the US was most probably helpful both in the recruitment and in the interview situation because it is likely that they assume that many of the topics we would talk about would be somewhat familiar to me not only as an academic who has read about the issues but as a member of a partly South Asian family.

## **NEW YORK AND OSLO AS IMMIGRANT CITIES**

The long history of the US as a country of immigrants puts it in sharp contrast to Norway. However, the contrast is less sharp when we compare metropolitan New York and Oslo, as both city areas are ethnically diverse and have many people with origins in South Asia. The borough of Queens—where several of my participants live—is known as the most ethnically diverse place in the US (Lehrer and Sloan, 2003). Although the US has had significant immigration from non-Western countries for hundreds of years, it is the sharp increase of non-European immigrants since 1965 that has led many researchers to explore how the immigrants and their children are adapting to the US (Purkayastha, 2005). The US has had a noteworthy presence of South Asian people since the early 1900s although the numbers soon decreased because of new, stricter immigration laws. In 1946, naturalization of South Asian immigrants became possible, and from 1965 20,000 South Asians were allowed into the US each year, with preference given to educated professionals and relatives of citizens and permanent residents (Narayan, 2002). During the last two decades many South Asians have attained permanent resident permits through the Diversity Lottery, and these immigrants tend to have lower education and English proficiency than the former South Asian immigrants (Chhaya CDC, 2011). The South Asians who arrived after the mid-1980s are therefore often found in blue-collar jobs (Purkayastha, 2005). According to the 2010 US Census, 12.7% of the population in New York City are immigrants from South Asia. The different parts of metropolitan New York vary a lot with respect to percentage of South Asians, though, with certain parts of the metropolitan area—especially in the borough of Queens—having much larger percentages of South Asians. Since the beginning of the 1990s several studies have been conducted on the “new second generation” of South Asian immigrants in the US, often referred to as children of the post-1965 immigrants (see Agarwal, 1991; Foner, 2009; Jain and Forest, 2004; Khandelwal, 2002; Narayan, 2002; Purkayastha, 2005; Rangaswamy, 2000).

Non-western immigration to Norway of any significant numbers did not start until the late 1960s (Andersson, 2005). Norway needed laborers, and Pakistanis and Indians were among the first so-called foreign workers (*fremmedarbeidere*) to come (Horst et al., 2010). In 2011 Norway—with its total population of 4.9 million had 600,900 immigrants; this number includes 100,000 people born in Norway to two immigrant parents (Statistics Norway, 2011). Thirty-two percent of the immigrants live in Oslo; however, of the immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, 40% live in Oslo. Of the children of immigrants from those three continents, 50% live in Oslo (Aalandslid and Østby, 2007). Of Oslo's population of 611,491 (Oslo Kommune), 17.6% were of a non-Western background in 2004 (Blom, 2006). Seventy percent of Pakistani immigrants live in Oslo (Daugstad, 2008). "At the start of 2007, every fourth Oslo citizen had an immigrant background, and the majority of these were non-Western" (Daugstad, 2008). Although Oslo is the most ethnically diverse city in Norway, there is still significant difference between Oslo and metropolitan New York. This is pointed out by Alghasi, Fangen, and Frønes (2006: 35), who write that Oslo has a long way to go in order to become a real multi-ethnic city such as New York City, where "the complexity and the many small, different ethnical worlds as part of a larger entity, is the definition of the city" (author's translation from Norwegian). In the last decade several studies have been conducted on the "second generation" of South Asian immigrants in Norway (see Andersson, 2005; Engebriksen, 2009; Østberg, 2003).

## **CULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION**

Identity is not fixed; it's fluid. Ethnic identities are constructed, multiple, and changing (Hall, 1988 in Dwyer, 1998). According to such a social constructivist approach, "identity is not something we have, but something we do or perform in our everyday interactions" (Mehrota and Calasanti, 2010: 780). Brah (2001: 234, quoted in Mishra and Shirazi, 2010: 195) states that diasporic identity formation is an excellent example of the claim that "identity is always plural, and in process." Creating and negotiating ethnic and cultural identities is a complex issue. It is not only a matter of balancing different cultures that an individual is a part of at home, in school, and in the work place—it also includes making sense of the impressions one gets through different forms of media. Youth today are negotiating their identity formation amidst many intersecting discourses: media discourse, gender discourse, religious discourse, fashion discourse, and parental discourse. For diasporic youth, there is an added aspect of often diametrically opposite expectations from the people they interact with in different settings in private and public space. This means that the cultural and spatial context of ethnic identity formation is manifold and transient.

"Dissonant acculturation" (Portes, 1997 in Jensen, 2003) means that different family members—usually the different generations within the family—are adjusting to the majority culture in their country of residence in different tempos and to different degrees. The most common pattern is that the parents are holding on tight to the cultures of their original home countries, in their mentalities, their clothing, and food, whereas their children go through a phase of "culture shedding" (Jensen, 2003) and end up practicing either a mixed culture, or performing quite different cultural identities with family and with friends. Youth who live in multiple cultural realities become experts at "cultural frame-switching" (Hong et al., 2000 in Haritatos and Benet-Martinez, 2002: 600); bicultural people can "move between different interpretative lenses rooted in their dual cultural backgrounds" (Haritatos and Benet-Martinez, 2002: 600).

Based on the above conceptual framework, the following research questions were formulated: What do young women and men of South Asian descent in New York and Oslo perceive as advantages and disadvantages of their upbringing? How are their identities constructed and performed in different spatial and cultural contexts? How has travel to parents' home country influenced identity and attitudes? Where do they feel a sense of home and belonging, and why? Among my participants, are there significant differences in the experiences of youth in New York and Oslo on the above questions?

## **PERCEIVED ADVANTAGES OF CULTURAL BACKGROUND**

The advantages that were mentioned were family-based culture, respect for the "elderly," having learned cultural frame-switching, and having learnt to prioritize education. My participants talked about how Norwegian/American culture is individualistic, whereas South Asian culture is family-oriented and communal. The latter was often mentioned in very favorable terms:

Pakistani culture is family-based, communal—we embrace everyone, and it's a huge advantage. (21-year old woman in the US living with Pakistani parents).

When talking about the family-based South Asian culture, positive expressions such as “family values,” “being so close,” and “feeling of belonging” were used. Our conversations were about not only core family members, but also the extended family, where sharing of joy and responsibilities is often important. There was a focus on respect as a positive value in the parents’ culture; they had learned from their parents to respect people, especially the “elderly,” such as teachers. Sonia—a 23-year-old woman in the US who lives with her Bangladeshi parents said:

We learn respecting the elderly...Teachers are kind of elderly so we have to show respect. But they (Americans) don’t do it. But back home if we misbehaved we got complained at and given a big lecture; how to behave and treat other people. It’s just a big gap between American families and typical Bangladeshi families.

A 19-year-old woman in Norway, who lives with one South Asian parent and one Norwegian parent, said that her unique background has taught her to see any issue from several angles. “It is easier for me to look at things objectively because I am used to seeing things from two perspectives.” About her ability to see an issue from multiple angles, she said “I do it all the time—I’ve become used to thinking like that and I think it’s a big advantage.”<sup>5</sup> Such an ability to “move between different interpretative lenses rooted in their dual cultural backgrounds” is what Hong et al. (2000 in Haritatos and Benet-Martinez, 2002: 600) call “cultural frame-switching.” A 27-year-old 1.5-generation male participant in Oslo with two South Asian parents said: “I switch between different cultural milieus all the time. I have become good at it!” He sees himself as so “adaptable” that he labels himself a “chameleon.” A 22-year-old second generation woman in New York with a South Asian father and American mother, sees cultural frame switching as a “cool” thing: “It means I can relate to different people. I always thought that having both cultures is a cool thing.”

The value of education is often highly emphasized among South Asian parents, and my participants mentioned that their parents’ attitudes had helped them prioritize education throughout their childhood and youth. A 20-year old woman in New York living with two South Asian parents expressed it this way:

As a teenager I found the strictness of my parents so annoying! And I rebelled a lot. But now I realize that they actually helped me focus on my education and I am thankful for that.

## **PERCEIVED DISADVANTAGES OF CULTURAL BACKGROUND**

My participants spent much time talking about disadvantages of their cultural upbringing, such as authoritarian parenting and strict rules, repression, monitoring by the extended family and ethnic community, and taboos tied to love, dating, and sex. Authoritarian parenting was frequently mentioned as a disadvantage. However, as seen above, it was mentioned as an advantage too, because the strict rules had helped in forging a focus on education. Curfews were stricter than for friends with non-South Asian parents. Everyone said that they have strict parents, but not necessarily in the typical patriarchal sense. Mothers seemed to have had as much if not more power and influence over their children than their fathers have had. A 23-year-old man in Oslo with two South Asian parents said: “I was always more scared of my mom than my dad. She would be the one yelling and she was always really strict. My dad is more relaxed and withdrawn.” However, Monira—a 22-year-old woman in New York—had a different experience about her South Asian father: “My dad would always tell me what to do. I was kind of brainwashed by my dad.” Not until friends made her aware early in high school that she was “totally controlled by [her] dad” did she start realizing it. Monira explained that she now feels thankful for her friends for making her aware and teaching her to become more independent.

My dad was always very nice and supportive and I would get anything I wanted from him. So I guess I did not realize the power he had over me. I needed to start using my own brain—it came to a point where I realized I didn’t really think for myself—I was so obedient...My dad would always tell me what to do, what to study and so on, and I would always follow that.

This statement illustrates Mehrota and Calasanti’s (2010: 778) description of the “[immigrant] family as a source of support and a location for oppression.”

When I asked Sonia (23) how she would explain South Asian culture to a person who knows nothing about it, she thought for a while and then she said:

Main thing, the first thing, we got beaten up, Bangladeshi people, South Asian people, we got beaten up so bad that American people have no idea. If their parents yelled at them they would complain. But we got beaten left and right, and lot of restrictions, first 10-12 years...Here [in American families], as soon as you reach puberty they [the parents] don't care, well, some care. But typically Bangladeshi people are very uptight of their children—"who, where"—they would like to have a full list of their friends. Bangladeshis are like that. And you have to have breakfast, lunch, and dinner at home. Americans are only like just dinner OK.

Repression—both mentally and physically—was mentioned by others, too, such as in this statement from Anu—a 22-year-old woman with Indian parents in New York: “We learn to keep problems to ourselves. We are supposed to be successful and do our duties, they [parents] don't care that much about how you feel.” Parents not talking about emotions—such as love—often came up in conversations. Anu, who grew up in Queens and for the first time experienced being an ethnic minority when starting college, said that she felt that her family members and other Indians take each other for granted: “I was not used to getting any Thank you's. Not until I started college really—I never had anyone saying thank you to me for opening a door for them for instance.” Anu said that her opposition to her parents steadily increased during her college years. Looking back on her childhood she has realized that she strongly disagrees with her parents' values. “It's been hard to learn that everything you grew up with is wrong. Their attitudes and ideas are just wrong.”

The extended family was seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage by my participants. There were many examples of how extended family members would keep monitoring and policing them—even when in their twenties. One such example was given by a 22-year-old woman living with South Asian parents in New York who said she had been rebellious in her teenage years and eventually had managed to convince her parents and her grandmother to give her more freedom and less strict curfews. However, a conservative aunt who would often visit them had convinced her parents and grandmother that these new rules were wrong and then rules became stricter again.

The participants talked a lot about their parents' focus on keeping the façade vis-à-vis the South Asian community they belonged to. Often times they felt that their parents were actually willing to let them have less strict curfews and also to be a little laxer on other rules, but what hindered that from happening was the fear of being shamed and/or ostracized, or have rumors spread about them in the ethnic community. A 28-year-old man with a South Asian father and Norwegian mother told me:

It is so hypocritical—all these Pakistani parents who let their daughters go to Poland to study to become doctors, but here in Oslo they cannot even let them go away for one weekend with friends!

When I asked him whether that's because what happens in Poland stays in Poland, he put on a big smile and said “Yes, exactly!”

Boys as friends equals trouble; Boyfriend equals serious trouble. This was a sentiment that my participants spent much time talking about. Many do have or had previously had a boyfriend/girlfriend and very few had told their parents. It was especially hard for the girls who had boyfriends from other ethnicities, as they knew it would be a catastrophe if their parents got to know about it. “My boyfriend is black and there is no way I can ever tell my parents. They'll not accept him.” Racism against black people seems to be deeply ingrained in the psyche of many South Asians, and several of my participants mentioned it, albeit as more of a problem among people belonging to the older generations. A female youth used the word “taboo” when describing her family's attitudes towards dating and sex. This was also found by Jacobsen (2002: 147) in an interview with a girl with Pakistani parents in Norway. When I asked my participants whether they felt there were any taboos in their parents' culture, some answered “no,” and others mentioned “love,” “dating,” “sex,” “gay/lesbian,” and “When things are not good, we don't talk about it.”

## **DUAL IDENTITY, DUAL EXPECTATIONS, AND HYBRID CULTURE**

When I asked my participants whether they ever felt they had been living a dual life, several of them answered that they had experienced it. Monira gave a sigh of relief and uttered enthusiastically:

I am so glad you asked that question! I had actually forgotten about it, but I used to be doing that. For many years I was living a dual life—I was one type of person at home and another one at school. At home I was always introvert and silent, at school I was very talkative—extremely talkative actually...I could show more of my real self.

Monira is the 22-year-old woman who said she had been brainwashed by her dad. Eventually she felt less of a need to live a dual life as she became aware of the need to act independently of her parents' expectations and opinions on how a good girl should behave. Youth who had not felt a need to live a double life said that it was because they had an open, constant dialogue with their parents and that their parents were understanding of their need for some freedom. A word that was used repeatedly in the descriptions of these positive parent-child relationships was "trust."

Among those who said that they have two separate cultural identities there were different opinions as to whether these two identities were "compatible" or "oppositional" (Haritatos and Benet-Martinez, 2002). A 25-year-old woman in Oslo living with her two parents who had moved to Norway from South Asia when she was one year old said:

When I talk this much about these topics I realize that they are really complicated. It is really not easy living with two identities. I am more Norwegian than foreigner, or I don't know... I feel it had been easier being either/or instead of in between.

Another woman believed in compatibility:

I am not only Bangladeshi or only American. It's just that sometimes I am more of one of them, sometimes more the other. It depends on who I am with and where I am...My different identities are compatible I guess.

Several participants said it is an advantage to be able to pick and choose from different cultures. This could be seen as what Bennett (1993a in Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman, 2003: 425) describes as "constructive marginality," where "movements in and out of culture are a necessary and positive part of one's identity."(ibid.) Identity confusion and problems associated with having two contested identities were well illustrated by Anu, who said, "I feel in a limbo...I am a little bit of both (American and Indian). I feel left out of both cultures." This notion of being left out is similar to what Bennett (1993a in Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman 2003: 425) describes as "encapsulated marginality," where "the separation from culture is experienced as alienation." Hammer (2011: 486) has re-interpreted Bennett's encapsulated marginality concept and renamed it "cultural disengagement," referring to the "disconnection one can experience from one's primary cultural community(ies)." Later in the conversation with Anu, when we talked about the future, she said, "I will take the good things from the different cultures." Such a sentiment of having a dual, contested identity and creating a hybrid cultural identity for oneself can be seen as a strategy to overcome encapsulated marginality/cultural disengagement and reach constructive marginality/cultural engagement.

A 20-year old female youth living with South Asian parents in New York illustrated the importance of parents' pride as a reason for doing well in school. The following statement can be read as an example of the above-mentioned focus on keeping the façade in the ethnic community, and also as a sense of collective versus individual values:

I always think about how things I do will affect my parents, and the family's reputation. We want to give them sources of pride, things parents can brag about.

She said this in a positive way, as a good motivational factor for her focus on education. However, she also gave insight into a more complicated part of her life:

There are certain things I cannot do at home, certainly not in front of my dad, like wearing shorts or be out late...I use short dresses and stuff when I hang out with friends on the weekends, but my parents don't know.

A little later in the conversation she added: "It's hard to balance it." Expectations from parents to focus 100% on school and not have a very active social life often clash with friends' expectations of living a regular American/Norwegian teenage/pre-marriage adolescent life of combining education/job with freely hanging out and

maybe dating. Both female and male youth are conscious about safeguarding one's reputation in the diaspora milieu. They have learned to be careful with their behavior in public space. This means that clothing and whom one is seen with must be carefully planned and executed. It was apparent that some of the youth had internalized parents' and relatives' gaze and started to self-regulate.

One of the aspects of a hybrid culture that both women and men focused on was limitations that they perceived as a result of their belonging to a more conservative culture than the mainstream American or Norwegian culture, but a more liberal culture than their parents. These limitations produce cultural markers such as the wearing of conservative clothing, as well as behavior in public space that may reveal their belonging to a certain cultural group. A 21-year-old woman who lives in Oslo with parents from South Asia put it this way:

I've always known the limits. I can go to the movies with friends and I can go to birthday parties and things like that, but there are certain limits and I respect that.

This young woman is producing her own hybrid identity, where she is dressing in a more modest way than most of her ethnic Norwegian friends, but not as conservatively as her mother. There were many other examples of "dissonant acculturation" (Portes, 1997 in Jensen, 2003) in the households where the parents were immigrants from South Asia—in clothing styles, food habits, and entertainment preferences. Only one of my participants uses ethnic clothes in her daily life whereas several of them have mothers who do. An exception was two of the four women among my participants who had chosen to wear hijab (a way of dressing conservatively which includes a head scarf). These two women dress more conservatively than their mothers.

### **Gender Differences**

Boys get more freedom than girls to do what they want in their leisure time, and especially to spend time outside of the home, according to both female and male participants. Girls from South Asian families are often over-protected to the extent that they start living a dual life: one life with parents and another in private and public spaces outside of parental scrutiny. Muslim participants said that it is a misconception that non-Muslims with South Asian parents get more freedom than Muslims. This matched what non-Muslim girls told me about their experiences: they had also been strictly protected with strong curfews and strict monitoring by parents and other family members. A 27-year old man put it this way:

The girls have to lie more; this means that girls face a stronger switching culturally. Boys can come home late and just say "I was there and there." However, for girls that's not possible.

Interestingly, among my female participants, the opinions on treating girls stricter than boys span the whole continuum from strong disapproval to approval. A 21-year-old woman living with two parents from South-Asia said that although she disliked being treated stricter than her brother she would still treat a potential future daughter stricter than a son. The overprotection of girls—which often becomes even stronger after puberty—is a sharp contrast to mainstream culture in both Norway and the US. Although exceptions exist within the majority cultures in both places, the main pattern is that in South-Asian culture it is seen as important to control girls' sexuality after reaching puberty so that no sexual relationship occurs before marriage, whereas in mainstream Norwegian and US culture girls are given more freedom to decide for themselves when to start having relationships—and of what kind, because it is seen as important to learn to act independently and take responsibility for one's actions.

### **TRAVEL TO PARENTS' HOMECOUNTRY**

Stereotypes about parents' home countries have been dispelled as a result of the youth's traveling to those countries. A Muslim woman with Bangladeshi parents in Oslo said she had been surprised to learn that "physical contact" between youth is common in Bangladesh, and that the cousin whom she had asked about it even thought it was a stupid question! A female Muslim youth who lives in New York with Pakistani parents told me how she had been surprised by the glamorous life and busy night-life of her young relatives in Pakistan. She shared with me her travel experiences that she had written down, and this is a short excerpt:

Living in America I was raised to hold onto my traditional, cultural values of the East. One of the things that shocked me the most [in Pakistan] was the young adults; it was almost as though the Easterners were striving to be more Western. The modernity of the youth stunned me; they spoke only in English, wore jeans and t-shirts, watched only MTV, and the most shocking of all; drank and smoked. With this revelation, I learned about the underground scene of hip, rich kids in Lahore. And by kids I mean anyone ranging from 16 to 30. Since Pakistan is an Islamic Republic, alcohol is strictly forbidden, so just like the American prohibition there are bootleggers.

After this introductory overview of youth culture in Lahore, she goes on to give us an impression of her daily life as a visitor:

An average day in Pakistan (during wedding season) went like this:

We woke up at around 3 in the afternoon, the cook made us lunch, [we] went to the beauty salon for full body massages, had a hairstylist and make up artist waiting to get us ready for the wedding, got last minute fittings from tailors, went to the wedding at around 10pm, danced, ate, left at around 3am to our very own after-parties usually consisting of more dancing, playing video-games, and ending the night by going out for breakfast at 6am and crashing around 9am.

Although this description reflects a unique time of the year when weddings of several relatives were celebrated, it still is a valuable example of how the stereotypical notions one tends to have of countries' cultures are often wrong.

A sentiment that several of the participants shared was that their parents tend to view the cultural norms that existed at the time they emigrated from their home country as the ideal culture or template against which their children's behavior, dress, and curfew should be judged. A 21-year-old female youth who lives in Oslo with her parents from Pakistan had this reflection on what she had learned from visiting Pakistan:

Some of the people who came here (to Norway from Pakistan) in the 70s try to raise their kids that way, very strict, the way their life was when they grew up. It's wrong. They won't even let their kids go to regular birthday parties! Some freedom you just got to have—otherwise you become totally isolated. Even in Pakistan people are not that old fashioned anymore. For instance in how they dress. Many girls here use hijab. But in Pakistan some Muslims use regular pants and even shorts. People who live here think it's unheard of, but many in Pakistan think it's OK! Some people here (in Norway) want to conserve things the way they were before; keep the values that they were raised with. They probably want the best for their children, but this is why you get conflicts.

An experience that a 23-year-old Muslim woman shared with me from a trip to her parents' home country was her cousins' reactions to her style of clothing. Her cousins had expressed disappointment with the fact that she—their cousin from the US—did not dress in tight jeans and tank tops:

When I came back to Bangladesh after five years they perceived you differently. It was like "Oh you're Americanized, so if you're living there, you're going to school there and wear dresses there and stuff so when you come back here why do you put hijab on your head?" They think that when you come back to Bangladesh you should wear tight pant and top, tank top and so on, "but you're coming here as a Desi girl—I don't want to see that girl—why are you so covered up—since you're living there why are you so covered up—you're Americanized so you should be like that." It was a problem there, for a week or so, they all felt that I was not what they expected; they all had that expression on their face, disappointed I was the same person, the Desi girl, they were very disappointed.

Similar notions of the culture in the parents' home countries being much more liberal than the culture of the times that they emigrated and that it is therefore wrong of their parents to try and hold onto that culture by raising their children according to those old social norms, have been found in other research on South Asian immigrants in the US and Norway (see Purkayastha, 2005: 107; Zaman, 1999: 14). "Indeed, one could view the tension between South Asian-born parents and their America-raised children as being partly the result of their different placements within imaginative landscapes of meaning in terms of what 'India,' 'Pakistan,' or 'the United States' might represent." (Narayan, 2002: 430).

When it comes to a sense of belonging/sense of home, there was a difference between the second generation and the 1.5-generation: The five youths who were born in South Asia—including a girl who was only 1 year old when she arrived—plus two of the youths born in the US or Norway perceive their parents' country as their



home country—in addition to Norway/the US. In other words these seven youths have two home countries, although some of them said that they do not like to stay very long in their parents' country because although they feel at home there, they feel more at home in Norway/the US. All participants had experienced some sense of belonging while visiting their parents' home country. Several reasons were given: "I like the food," "I feel comfortable," "People look like me," "I know the language and blend in," "I can bike around and I feel peaceful," "I like the landscape," "I appreciate the slower-paced lifestyle," "I like the family-centered lifestyle—with shared meals and more time for each other." However, the sense of belonging is stronger in the place where most of the childhood was lived. That is where the sentimental attachment is.

### **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH IN THE NEW YORK METROPOLITAN AREA AND OSLO**

Overall, there were more similarities than differences in the experiences and attitudes among my participants in Oslo and metropolitan New York. The global processes of difference in opportunities across world regions and the resulting pattern of migration have led to similar patterns of hybridization of culture in many places in the world. However, there are also some unique local outcomes depending on the history and extent of immigration as well as mainstream cultural practices and attitudes in each specific place. Both in metropolitan New York and in Oslo there are certain geographical areas where non-Western immigrants and in some cases South Asian immigrants are in the majority. Some of my participants in New York City had experienced belonging to the majority ethnicity in their local area all the time until college. In Oslo, a few had experienced belonging to the majority ethnicity in their local area until starting *videregaende* (i.e., grade 11 in the US). I found a few significant differences between my participants in Oslo and New York. The "burden of representation" (Tagg, 1988 and Williamson, 1993 in Dwyer, 1998: 60) was more of an issue among the youth in Oslo than in New York. This was as expected, because immigration is a newer phenomenon in Oslo and because Oslo is less diverse than metropolitan New York, so that South Asian immigrants in Oslo are more visible to strangers in public space as well as maybe in people's psyche. A woman in Oslo said:

When I enter the bus people see I am a Muslim because of my hijab. Therefore I feel it's extra important that I give up my seat to an old person for instance, because then people will think: That was a nice Muslim!

A 28-year-old man said he feels he is a representative for both Muslims and foreigners:

I feel I have to be extra nice and polite, and helpful...Other Pakistani Muslims feel the same way—they feel like an ambassador. You are not Norwegian until you are white.

Others think of themselves as representatives of foreigners, South Asians, or Bangladeshi/Pakistani, etc., and because of this they are conscious of how other people perceive them while in public space. A male participant in Oslo said:

Here (in Oslo) we are all ambassadors—for immigrants, for Bangladeshis...There (in Bangladesh) I don't have to worry that I have another skin color. I am not a representative—I don't have to make an effort to be a good representative. I can be myself.

However, Samira—a woman in New York who wears hijab and therefore could be noticed by the general public as "Muslim"—explained that she feels the "burden of representation":

You have a feeling of being on your best behavior, because people tend to remember bad things even if it was a one-time event. On the flipside, there are a lot of people who do remember the nice things too. It helps that there are a lot of Muslims in New York, but we do have a tendency to stick to ourselves, and others stick to themselves so it's not always the case that mere presence means interaction and understanding.

The other main difference I found between my data from Oslo and New York had to do with perceptions of ethnic identities. What it means to be "Norwegian" seems to depend on a more hegemonic discourse than the

discourse on what it means to be “American.” The US is known as a melting pot or a salad bowl—according to whether one believes in assimilation or integration—but we have no such notion in Norway, as immigration of non-European people in significant numbers is a relatively new phenomenon and we do not share US’s history of being a “country of immigrants.” It therefore seems to be a bigger step to go from being an immigrant in Norway to becoming “Norwegian” than from being an immigrant in the US to becoming “American” (as per people’s perceptions, not citizenship). One of my female participants, who had been working in Oslo East, where almost all the non-Western immigrants in Oslo live, had been asked by several elderly customers whether she had been adopted since she is fluent in Norwegian. Many ethnic Norwegians are still not used to thinking of “foreign-looking” people as Norwegian. When I asked my participants to define what it means to be Norwegian, they would answer by mentioning concrete cultural traits related to food, an active outdoor lifestyle, and even personality traits, as identity markers of “Norwegian-ness”: “[Being Norwegian means] to like brown cheese and fish balls,” “to go hiking and skiing,” “spending a lot of time outdoors in nature,” to be “shy,” “reserved,” and/or “optimistic.” Whereas when I asked my participants in the US what it means to be American, no such specific cultural traits or practices were mentioned, but rather statements such as “you become American when you live here for a long period of time, when you learn English, when you get citizenship. Anyone can really become American. That’s what’s so great about this country.”

## CONCLUSION

According to my participants, strong social norms influence identity production in both negative and positive ways. The negative aspects include oppositional identities, feeling sometimes confused about one’s identity, and for some, living a dual life. The main positive aspects are perceived as being able to switch between different cultural frames in different settings, and having incorporated educational efforts as an important part of identity work. Repression at many levels is experienced from authoritarian parents and extended family members, although those who have been met with trust by their parents have more positive views of their family life. Similarities and differences in identity formation do not seem to follow ethnic (parents’ home country) or religious divides, except for some similarities found between women in the US and Norway wearing hijab, as their experiences are influenced by the fact that they openly display markers of their religious identity in public space. Travel to parents’ home country has influenced identity and attitudes because myths have been dispelled about the present-day culture in the places where parents emigrated from decades ago. Also, a sense of belonging has been found and enjoyed by diasporic youth in the spaces of their parents’ childhood, but the strongest sense of belonging is felt where most of the childhood was lived.

The two main differences in South Asian diasporic youths’ experiences in Oslo and New York can be explained by Oslo’s shorter history and lesser extent of South Asian immigration than metropolitan New York. Firstly, the participants in Oslo have a stronger sense of being representatives of their parents’ countries and/or religions and/or foreigners in general. This is based on the youths’ experiences of being looked at as “different” and has in some cases led to feeling a “burden of representation” in the sense of feeling a need to always behave their best so that people from the mainstream ethnicity get a good impression of the “group” to which they belong. Secondly, the participants in Oslo feel more excluded from mainstream ethnicity because of the hegemonic, narrow discourse of what it means to be “Norwegian.”

Youth of South Asian descent in New York and Oslo have faced challenges and complexities that exceed identity negotiation and confusion of teenagers in general. For some, performing a dual identity results in weaker identity in both cultures, whereas for others familiarity with navigating different cultures is seen as a strength. It is important to see the positive aspects of the hybrid identities and cultures of second/1.5-generation youth, i.e., to discard myths about the “American Born Confused Desis” (Narayan, 2002: 427) and to realize that they are resourceful persons with important cross-cultural competency. In our globalized realities, it is important to know different cultural codes in different places of the world and to have the skills and insight to apply these in different spatial and cultural settings. Young people who from early in life have become used to negotiating multiple identities in their navigations of different cultures and dual expectations do inhibit a cultural competency that is valuable. However, the struggles and challenges experienced by children and youth of a bicultural background should not be overlooked.

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<sup>1</sup> This research project has been approved by the IRB at Hofstra University. Where any names of participants are used, these are pseudonyms. Because of the limited number of participants I sometimes found it necessary to also avoid revealing the exact country of my participants' parents, so that "South Asian" is sometimes used instead of exact country.

<sup>2</sup> “Children's Geographies is a peer-reviewed journal that provides an international forum to discuss issues that impact upon the geographical worlds of children and young people under the age of 25 and of their families.”  
<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/journal.asp?issn=1473-3285&linktype=1>

<sup>3</sup> Religion has not been analyzed separately in this article because of space limitations.

<sup>4</sup> The students I interviewed who had taken a course with me had either finished their studies at my university or were close to finishing or had started on a Master's program so that they were sure that they were not going to take any more courses with me (my department does not offer Masters' degrees).

<sup>5</sup> All quotes from the interviews in Norway have been transcribed and translated from Norwegian to English by the author.