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Marital instability among British Pakistanis: transnationality, conjugalities and Islam

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Abstract

This article offers insights into the dynamics underlying an increase in marital instability in British Pakistani families, thus challenging stereotypes of British South Asian populations as representing 'old-fashioned' families, with their lower rates of divorce in contrast with the wider British population. In addition to problems of compatibility, domestic violence and infidelity, we explore dynamics that may be more specific to the British Pakistani population, namely the transnational nature of many marriages, attitudes to parental involvement in arranging marriages, and the place of Islam. We suggest that, while arranged marriages were conventionally seen as safer than love marriages, both young people and their parents may now be viewing arranged marriages as riskier. In an arranged marriage that brings family approval but not personal fulfilment, young people are increasingly supported to divorce and remarry, with a greater degree of personal say in spouse selection.

Keywords: transnational; diaspora; kinship; marriage; divorce; Pakistani Muslims.

Introduction

The trend across all ethnic groups towards lower rates of marriage and higher rates of lone parenthood has been less apparent among British Asians (here referring to South Asians) than for other ethnic groups. In the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities (1993–94) the rate of separation and divorce for British Asian families was found to be just 3 per cent compared with 7 per cent for whites (Modood and Berthoud 1997). Berthoud (2000, p. 21) writes of British Asian families that:

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many of their characteristics now could have been observed among White families in the past; they are "old-fashioned", too, in the sense that loyalty to their own communities' histories and traditions is one of the driving forces behind the preservation of these cultural patterns.

This image of British Asians 'flying the flag for traditional family life' (Younge 2000)has been central not only to academic work but also to the self-identity of British Asian communities (Yuval-Davis and Werbner 1999).

However, data from the 2001 census suggest dramatic shifts in marital instability and divorce in British Asian families. The percentage of lone-parent families among British Pakistanis has at least doubled since the mid-1990s, when the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities was carried out. While in 1994–95 lone parents were just under 10 per cent of all British Pakistani and Bangladeshi families with dependent children, and 5 per cent of British Indian families (HMSO 1996, p. 53), in the 2001 census this figure was just under 20 per cent for British Pakistani and Bangladeshi families and over 10 per cent for British Indians (Babb et al. 2006, pp. 24–5) (Figure 1). These statistics on lone parenthood are likely indicators of significant marital instability, long-term separation and divorce.

There has been relatively little research investigating the processes underlying the statistics. Studies of divorce acknowledge the paucity of empirical research on ethnic minority experiences (Simpson 1998; Smart and Neale 1999; Smart et al. 2001). There have been moves to theorize marital breakdown and divorce beyond the fragmentation and separation implied by the 'individualization' thesis by developing theories of 'connectedness' emphasizing the relational, emotional and intimate dimensions of marriage that mean so much to its actual experience (Smart 2007, p. 189), but the diversity of intimate relationships among migrants and minorities has not been appreciated (Majumdar 2007; Mai and King 2009; Jamieson 2011). It is in this context that strong calls have been made for sustained empirical research focusing on marital breakdown in these populations (Ahmad 2006, p. 288).

The few explicit explorations of divorce in British Asian families have focused on the stigma of divorce and how families try to avoid it. Sinha's (1998) findings with British Asian lone mothers have been replicated by a considerable literature on domestic violence and forced marriage, confirming that divorce is highly resisted unless the marriage becomes a situation of extreme conflict (Samad and Eade 2002; Sen and Kelly 2003; Gill 2004; Guru 2009; Thiara et al. 2010). Das (2011) shows that resistance to divorce takes its toll on adult children who grow up in conflict-ridden families. Socio-legal work suggests that this situation is exacerbated by the non-recognition of Muslim divorces in English civil law, which leads to 'limping divorces' (Pearl and Menski

Figure 1 *Families with dependent children by ethnic group and family type, 2001.*
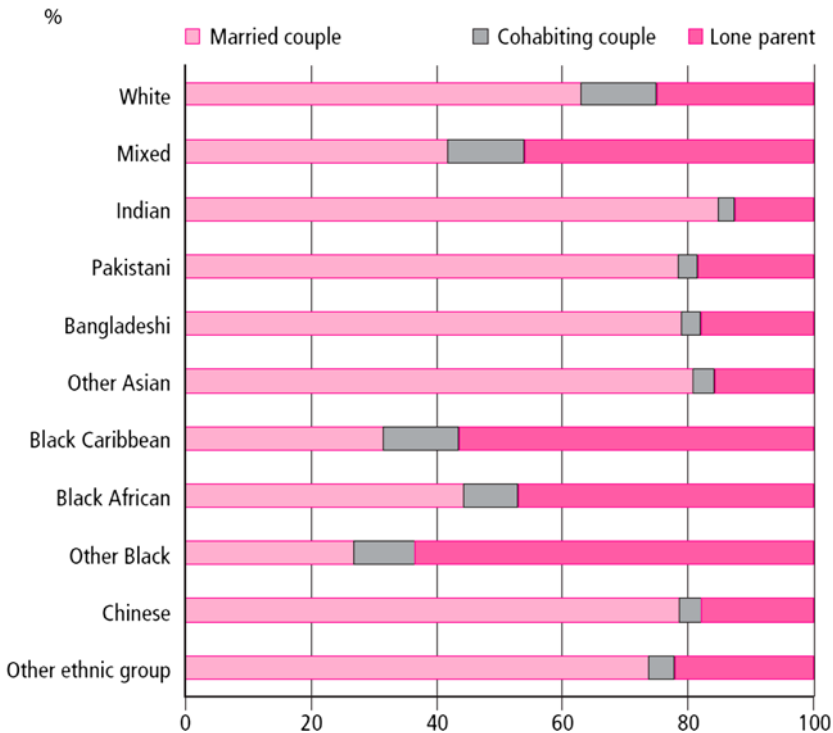
Source: Babb et al. 2006, p. 25

1998, p. 34) where women divorced through civil procedures continue to be married under religious law or vice versa. Moreover, studies on arbitration by sharia councils show that British Muslim women are often discouraged from applying for a divorce by a combination of family opposition and discouragement by religious authorities (Shah-Kazemi 2001; Bano 2007, 2011).

This existing literature on lone parents and divorce thus suggests some important ways in which British Asian experiences may depart from the 'mainstream'. Domestic violence, which may be the consequence of resistance to divorce except in extreme cases, has been highlighted among the motivating factors. Modes of spouse selection, specifically 'arranged' and 'forced' marriage, may also play an important role. However, these studies do not attempt to situate marital instability within wider kinship and marriage practices.

In this regard, ethnographic literature on British Asian kinship practices provides some useful points of orientation. Perhaps the most substantial attempt to develop an ethnographically informed model of

South Asian families in Britain is Ballard's (1990) analysis of the differential impact of marriage rules, gender norms, and the political economies of the regions of origin on the migration patterns of Punjabi Sikhs and Mirpuri Muslims; about half of Britain's Pakistani population has origins in Mirpur district in Azad Kashmir, the rest originating mainly from the Punjab. This model contrasts the Sikh rule of descent-group exogamy with the Mirpuri Muslim preference for marriages between the children of siblings, the former implying the geographical separation of a married woman from her natal kin, and the latter implying physical proximity through overlapping ties of natal and affinal kinship. Close-kin and especially first-cousin marriage has important implications for marital stability. A bride is expected to be treated well in the household of in-laws who are trusted aunts and uncles. Further, close-kin couples can expect practical and emotional support from the wider family in the event of marital difficulties, inhibiting separation and divorce. On the other hand, marital conflicts involving close kin can result in long-term rifts within families, as in the case of brother–sister exchange marriages (known as *watta-satta* or *doatee*), where the breakdown of one marriage has serious implications for the other. Werbner (1990, p. 89) has described chains of 'revenge divorce' as a consequence of close-kin marriages.

More recent research has critiqued the empirical and theoretical underpinnings of Ballard's influential model in ways that are pertinent to the study of marital instability among British Pakistanis. Shaw (2000, 2001) identifies the preference for consanguineous marriage to be less marked in other regional and *biradari* (caste) groups, specifically the Arain castes from central Punjab. Moreover, drawing on earlier work by Donnan (1985), Shaw suggests that the notion of the preference for close-kin marriage being a 'rule' misconstrues the way that this preference comes into play in specific instances *in conjunction with* other considerations, for instance wealth or the virtues of the proposed spouse, such that the notion of a marriage rule needs to be recast as a 'rhetorical device' used to bargain and negotiate with others.

Moreover, where kin are separated by migration, consanguineous marriage often entails spousal migration, demonstrated by the high rates of transnational marriage among British Pakistanis. Almost half of British-born Pakistanis in the age group nineteen to fifty years has a spouse who has migrated to Britain (Dale 2008). In such marriages, the gender of the migrant spouse may have important consequences for domestic relations of power, and thus for dynamics of marital instability and divorce. 'Importing' a husband may enable young British-born women to attempt to gain a more equal marital relationship, and evade the proximity and scrutiny of the husband's kin (Lievens 1999; Shaw 2004; Charsley 2005). A migrant wife, in

contrast, may find her isolation heightens her vulnerability and reinforces the control to which she may be subjected by her husband and in-laws (Charsley 2008; Liversage 2012). The truncated form of rights conferred by the state during the two probationary years before a migrant spouse may apply for permanent residence adds to this vulnerability (e.g. Anitha et al. 2008; Sharma and Gill 2010). Families' assessments of the benefits and risks of arranged transnational marriage are made in the light of these changing kinship dynamics and immigration situations (Charsley 2005, 2006). Indeed, young British-raised adults may themselves give good reasons for preferring transnational marriages with consanguineous kin that also meet parental approval (Shaw and Charsley 2006).

This work suggests some of the changing formations and re-negotiations that are occurring in British Pakistani marriages. In contextualizing instances of marital instability within the internal dynamics of British Pakistani families, particularly the extended kinship networks that are such a salient feature of family life, this paper makes a substantial contribution to the literature on changing British Asian family practices. The paper is based on a series of case studies to explore the factors undergirding particular manifestations of marital instability, drawing attention to migration histories, gender, life-course changes and intergenerational relations. In the discussion, we draw out the dynamics as specific to British Pakistani families and outline the contours of an agenda for future research.

Methods

This article draws from ethnographic fieldwork by the first author in East London (2005–07, 2009) and Peterborough (2011), combined with insights from long-term fieldwork by the second and third authors. In East London, the research was mainly situated in the docklands borough of Newham, an ex-industrial and predominantly working-class borough situated between inner-city Tower Hamlets and the commuter suburbs of Essex. Among remarkably complex waves of migration, which have led it to be seen as a prototype of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007), Newham is home to about 19,000 Pakistani Muslims, who make up 9 per cent of the population of the borough (LBN 2006). These are mostly of Mirpuri and northern Punjabi heritage but with smaller streams of more recent settlement from central Punjab and other large cities such as Karachi and Peshawar. By contrast, Peterborough in the east of England is a small provincial city, but due to its brickworks, engineering and food-processing industries it has now also been recognized as super-diverse (Erel 2011). There are some 7,400 Pakistani Muslims, 4.5 per cent of the population, concentrated in the central ward of the city known as Millfield

(ONS [2010]). As in East London, the Pakistani population in Peterborough became established in the 1950s and 1960s, when single men from Mirpur and northern Punjab came for industrial work and subsequently built their families by reunification.

Marital instability and divorce were not the initial focus of the fieldwork, which was on chronic ill-health, families and households. However, these emerged as major issues for families as well for local community and religious organizations, which have increasingly become involved in mediation work. Spending long periods of time with families in everyday domestic contexts and asking people to reflect on their life experiences in narrative interviews enabled us to learn about instances of marital instability in the context of the extended kinship relations in which the couple were embedded. In a seminal paper, Hopper ([1993]) questions what may be understood about divorce from one-off interviews, identifying what he calls a 'rhetoric of motives' in which initiating and non-initiating spouses develop particular scripts in relation to one another, and emphasizing that part of the very complicated process of undoing a marriage is developing a narrative to attribute blame. Like Hopper, we found that the relationships of trust we had established with one spouse made it inappropriate to access the other spouse. Usually, our initial relationships in cases of marital instability were with women, so most of the cases presented here are centred on the perspectives of women – who are the majority of British Asian divorce claimants, as in the wider British population (Das [2011], pp. 67–8). However, we were also able to situate conversations with one spouse in relation to conversations with parents, in-laws or adult children.

The following five case studies from Mirpuri- and Punjabi-origin families have been selected to illustrate factors underlying particular manifestations of marital instability and to highlight ways in which perceptions and negotiations of marital instability are changing. The first case studies are of conflict in pioneer-generation arranged marriages in which a wife joined a husband in Britain. We then present cases of marriages among the British born that represent different combinations of transnationally and locally arranged marriages.

Pioneer-generation marriages

Nusrat and Sadiq

In this generation, divorce was not unheard of. Nusrat and Sadiq are a case in point. Nusrat joined Sadiq in East London in 1971, bringing three small children with her but leaving her eldest daughter behind in rural Azad Kashmir, as has been discussed previously (Harriss and Shaw [2010]). Nusrat explained that if you looked to the older

generations of her family, there had been quite a few divorces. Her own father had two wives. The first wife bore him one son, who died in France during the Second World War, and she never conceived again. Nusrat narrated a well-worn family story about how it was actually her father's first wife who pushed him to take a second wife, so that he might have more children to carry on the family name and inherit the land. The first wife permitted the second only to sleep with him and produce babies, and controlled the time that he was allowed to spend with her otherwise. She also used to take out her frustration with the situation by beating the second wife. Nusrat remembered this with emotion, as she was one of the eight daughters and two sons born by the second wife. Turning to a different branch of the family tree, Nusrat told the story of her husband's eldest brother, who was the most educated person in their family and worked as village postmaster. He had a divorce against his wishes because of problems arising from a *doatee* exchange marriage. When his sister was divorced by his first wife's brother, his mother – Nusrat's mother-in-law – made him divorce his wife in revenge. Nusrat described this as a tragedy because he truly loved his first wife and did not want to leave her. He remarried to another divorcee, a cousin who had taken a divorce from her first husband after he lost his mental balance when his émigré brother in London divested him of his land.

This selection of divorce stories from Nusrat's immediate family illustrates that divorces did take place in the generation of pioneer migrants, for reasons of infertility, conflicts arising from *doatee* exchange marriages and land disputes – connected, interestingly, to out-migration. Nusrat had personal experience of marital instability too, as her husband Sadiq had been in London for a decade before she joined him, and had a string of relationships with white women before she arrived. In those days he had frequented pubs and because his name was unfamiliar to the white women he met in them, he used to go by the nickname 'Peter'. Before large-scale family reunification, it seems that Pakistani migrant men often ended up in relationships with white women (Shaw 2000, pp. 56–7; Nava 2007), but the insecurities these created for women like Nusrat have not been given much attention.

Nusrat never sought a divorce and talked about her marital difficulties within a discourse of *sabar* (patience or forbearance) that was common among women of her generation (see Qureshi in press). Many of the older women talked about putting up with conflict as an almost inevitable downside of kinship. Kapadia (1994) draws attention to a similar ambivalent discourse in Tamil women's talk of how 'kinship burns'

The older women linked marital difficulties to the pressures of marriage migration, of establishing themselves in Britain, of

'adjusting' with a husband and bringing up a young family in an unfamiliar context, and of managing their torn obligations to their transnational families. Another example is Khadija, a fifty-five-year-old who joined her husband in London in the early 1970s.

Khadija and Karim

Khadija grew up in rural Kashmir and married Karim, a paternal cousin, in 1970. Karim seemed to be a good *rishta* (match). Top of his class at school, he had joined the Pakistan army, and when he came to England in the 1960s he retrained at a local college as an electrician, creating opportunities for a more comfortable income than most of the men in England from his *biradari* who were working in factories. In 1975, just a few years after Khadija had brought their elder children and joined her husband in London, Karim was overlooked for promotion and had a younger, less-experienced white colleague appointed as his supervisor. Karim lost his mental balance, a turn of events that Khadija explained sometimes as the product of his racist discrimination at work and sometimes as *jadu* (sorcery) by his jealous brothers. He lost his job and became abusive to Khadija and the young children. At this point they were still responsible for sending money to their parents in Pakistan, and she was pregnant with their fourth child. She recalled that she 'used to go mad' just thinking about how they would manage without his wages. 'He was the one sending money for his parents – now who would look after them?', she said, recollecting her despair. 'And I had my parents as well. They too would starve – who would feed them?'

Khadija tolerated the abuse with patience and forbearance. Khadija stressed that she resolved never to tell her family in Pakistan because they were so far away that they could not do anything to help with the situation, and no good could possibly come from worrying them unnecessarily. However, in the late 1980s her brothers became involved in the conflict. Khadija and Karim had a huge *laraee* (argument) in which she was violently beaten. She left home with the five children and took refuge at the house of her older brother. Karim discovered their whereabouts and turned up at the house shouting in what one of their sons described as an obsessive and controlling way, and demanding to know where his wife and children had been taken. Khadija's brother had misgivings about allowing her to return to the marital home, but sent her back to him in London on the understanding that the physical abuse would stop. When the abuse did not stop, relations between the brother-in-laws deteriorated. Khadija's brother bought a ticket and sent her back to Pakistan to spend some time with her parents, leaving the children at Khadija's sister's house. During Khadija's absence in Pakistan, there was another huge *laraee*

in which another of Khadija's brothers – who was married to Karim's sister in a *doatee* exchange marriage – took it upon himself to go round with his grown-up sons and beat Karim up to teach him a lesson. At the time of the fieldwork, Khadija's sons had different opinions about whether this was a legitimate intervention by their now deceased uncle. However, they agreed that this had been unhelpful in polarizing the support for their mother in the family and creating ruptures among their aunts and uncles.

On this occasion the intervention of siblings served to amplify tensions, but on other occasions it served to keep Khadija and Karim together. On two occasions the violence was such that Khadija was forced to leave home and take the children to a women's refuge. At the refuge, Khadija received advice about leaving the marriage and taking a divorce. However, this advice went in contradiction to the problem-resolving processes of Khadija's extended family. Karim would 'run off to his sisters' and tell them what had happened, and the sisters would entreat Khadija to return and repeat Karim's promises to treat her better. The couple stayed together, but by the time of the fieldwork they were estranged under one roof.

These cases of couples from the early years of Pakistani settlement in Britain illustrate the situations of migrancy and gendered problems of isolation that formed the wider context to marital difficulties. While divorces did happen, responses to marital instability in this generation were underpinned by notions of female compromise and sacrifice. Divorce was often resisted due to concerns about stigma, and through the intervention and mediation of the extended family, although this could also backfire. Improvised solutions, such as long-term separation or a long-term estrangement within marriage were often preferred.

Marriages among the British born

In this section we look at more recent marriages among the British born. The first of these cases illustrates marital difficulties that may be experienced when women from Pakistan marry British-born men, and contains echoes of the isolation experienced by pioneer-generation women in unhappy marriages. In the next case, involving two British-born partners, the wife attributes her inability to 'adjust' and her unmet expectations of marital intimacy to the fact that the marriage was arranged. In our final case, a young British-born woman is able, with her parents' support and encouragement, to end an unsatisfactory marriage, obtain a divorce and to remarry happily. We suggest that this signals a significant shift in thinking, across generations, in expectations of marriage and attitudes to divorce.

Shoaib and Samina

Shoaib is a thirty-year-old man who was born and brought up in East London, who married a Samina, a Pashtun woman in her early twenties, as a second wife in 2002. Shoaib's parents were from Mirpur, and their Pashtun daughter-in-law was a cause for speculation in their *biradari* in London. Shoaib's aunt told the first author darkly about how they had 'bought that girl for two lakh rupees', expressing on one level a misconstrual of Pashtun customary bride-price but also the gulf in wealth between the two families. Shoaib had previously been married to his British-born cousin in an arranged marriage but it had not worked out. His first wife continued to see a boyfriend from college, and Shoaib spent time in prison after a 'brawl' with his rival. When he reached the age of twenty-five, his parents began to talk about the need for him to remarry. His mother started asking around in networks of extended kin in Kashmir but Shoaib said that she was thwarted by 'jealous relatives' who sabotaged any potential *rishta*s by letting out the secret of his criminal record. They had to search long and far for a family who could be kept in the dark, and eventually this led them to Samina's family in the Frontier Province.

Samina was unaware of how Shoaib's first marriage had ended when their *nikaah* (Islamic marriage) was performed in 2002, but this history led to immediate problems in their relationship. Upon arriving at his ancestral home in Kashmir, Samina became the object of spiteful rumours and according to both of them also *jadu* from the Shoaib's ex-wife's relatives, who lived in the next compound. Moreover, Shoaib was not particularly interested in the marriage. He admitted that his second marriage was a 'gamble'. 'She's a decent girl', he said, 'but I should have actually spoken to her before we got married.' He regretted that he could not 'relate' to her. After regular trips until 2004, he did not visit for two and a half years.

In 2005 when the first author met her, Samina was living at her husband's parents' home in their village in Mirpur district with her infant son, waiting for Shoaib to apply for her spouse visa. It had already been more than a year since he had returned to Britain. He had been unable to apply for her visa due to the combined problems of his criminal record and inability to hold a job down for the six months required to prove to the Home Office that he was not dependent on 'public funds'. Samina was unhappily looking after Shoaib's elderly and cantankerous paternal grandmother, who would otherwise have been living alone. She talked sadly about her *kismet* (fate) and the hardship that she faced at the hands of her husband's ill-tempered grandmother and the other spiteful relatives in the village. She had lost hope in Shoaib's phone calls and reassurances that 'next month your papers will be fixed for sure'. Shoaib was working as a security guard

in a nightclub, but his attempts to gain steady work were unsuccessful. Indeed, their son was two and a half years old before Shoaib returned to Pakistan and finally met him. He was three years old before Shoaib had the six months of continual payslips required to apply for Samina's spouse visa. There were then further delays while the British High Commission subjected them to DNA testing to ascertain whether Shoaib was the biological father, given the lack of any evidence of fatherly interest.

Samina and her son came to England in 2007 to join Shoaib at his parents' home in East London, but their conjugal relationship failed to blossom and Samina felt unsupported by her husband whenever there was disagreement with her in-laws. In 2008 she attempted to leave home for a women's refuge, where she was told that if the marriage broke down she might be returned to Pakistan as she was still within her two-year spouse visa (by contrast, in situations where a marriage breaks down due to domestic violence, indefinite leave to remain may be granted; Sharma and Gill 2010). Under pressure from her parents, who were hoping for her to arrange the marriage of her younger brother with a family in London, she returned to Shoaib's home. The two now have three children, but their marriage is still unhappy.

The next case explores how marital expectations are changing in response to a desire for intimacy and fulfilment that seems to be increasingly emphasized in British Asian marriages.

Farhat and Fiyaz

Husband and wife Farhat and Fiyaz were first cousins brought up in East London by parents from northern Punjab. Farhat said that she had been unhappy in the marriage from the very beginning, as she never developed a good rapport with Fiyaz and had suffered at the hands of her overbearing mother-in-law, with whom the couple lived for the first eight years of the marriage. Two years into the marriage Farhat left the marital home and returned to her parents' home, taking her infant daughter with her. Farhat's parents told her to go back to her husband's house, which disappointed her deeply. The return led to further deterioration in her relationship with her in-laws. After eight years, Farhat's in-laws recognized that the couple were not able to 'adjust', and freed up one of their rental properties for Farhat and Fiyaz in the hope that their relationship would improve. Farhat's mother-in-law complained that she had bent over backwards to help Farhat adjust, and she increasingly viewed Farhat's inability to settle as a flaw in her character. From her side, Farhat thought that her mother-in-law just wanted someone she could keep under her thumb.

She complained that her mother-in-law had 'run to Pakistan' for a more *gharailo* (comely) bride for her next-youngest son.

Farhat's reflections on her dissatisfaction with Fiyaz suggest that expectations about what kind of a relationship marriage is supposed to entail are undergoing change. Farhat expressed what she was missing neatly in the following complicated complaint:

> It's hard to say that I love him but I care for him, to the extent that I can say that I love him. But I didn't fall in love with him and he didn't fall in love with me ... He just goes quiet when I mention the word love.

The spark Farhat missed in her marriage was distinct from the kind of habitual affection developed through living and bringing up children together, which her parents and her in-laws expected would be inevitable. The emphasis on romantic love, personal fulfilment and nuclear conjugality rather than enmeshing with the extended family is talked about as part of a 'modern' as opposed to a 'traditional' marriage. The burdens of intimacy, of the difficulties of living up to these high expectations, are also exemplified in Farhat's testimony.

Like many of the other young couples we talked to, Farhat attributed her long-standing difficulties to the fact that the marriage was 'arranged', and that she and Fiyaz had little chance to assess their compatibility beforehand. She recalled:

> I got married at 20. I had no choice, I had to get married to him. I put my parents' feelings first ... We had our *nikaah* done four months before the actual wedding day but after that he wouldn't contact me. No phone calls, no going out, nothing, and we were complete strangers on the wedding night ... It was just really hard because we still had to get on, for the sake of the marriage. Have children, see if we do get on after the child's born. We had so many problems. Just – personality-wise, we didn't click at all. Had we gone out, spent time with each other when our *nikaah* was done, maybe we would have realised that we're not getting on. It's been 11 years now, and still it's just really hard for him to understand me and me to understand him.

As other studies have suggested, modes of spousal selection seem to be an ongoing source of contention in cases of marital difficulty. 'Love' marriages, often non-conformist outside of elite circles, are described by many British Pakistanis as more risky than 'arranged' marriages, in which the parents seek an appropriate match for their children, and for which the parents are notionally accountable. Young people are wary of entering into a 'love' marriage, and many premarital relationships

end because young people feel unable to negotiate the thorny topic of marriage with their parents (Shaw 2000; Shaw and Charsley 2006). However, we suggest that the numbers of broken 'arranged' marriages are leading to them also being seen as risky by young people and parents. Farhat, as we saw, was reviewing her assessment of her arranged marriage retrospectively as 'forced', dwelling on the extent of familial pressures and emphasizing her lack of choice in the alliance. Moreover, it seems that a perceived lack of love in the beginning of an 'arranged' marriage may reduce the incentive for young people to resolve problems, as the final case study also shows.

Saima

Saima was born in Peterborough and married her mother's sister's son from Kashmir while she was doing her GGCEs. Like many young women in her situation, the fact of being responsible for her husband's spouse visa brought her into paid employment, even though her parents might not otherwise have been keen for her to work outside the home. This intensified the tensions she began to experience in her marriage. Her husband, when he did arrive from Pakistan, was working inconvenient shifts in a fruit-packing warehouse that clashed with the office timings she maintained in her travel agent job. She explained that they never really 'bonded' with one another from the start. Saima's dissatisfaction came to a head when her maternal grandmother died and her husband refused to allow her to temporarily move back to her parents' house so that she could look after her mother. She felt this was overly controlling, since it made no practical difference to him anyway as he was always at work.

Unlike the other predicaments we have presented, Saima's parents were understanding of her marital difficulties and gave her their blessing and support to separate. Significantly, this was because they felt that their attempt to find a match for her had backfired and that it would be more reliable if she were to find a match for herself. As Saima described:

> They sat me down and said "look, we don't know what's going wrong, but we can see that something's wrong." So we had this chat . . . My father said "we won't hold anything against you if you want to divorce, but you should get married again. The first one, we tried. We wanted someone who'd be able to look after you as well as we do, but it didn't work out so now you choose your own, it's better that you marry than you stay alone."

Saima's account is important as it suggests a volte-face to seeing marriage on the basis of parents' wishes as inherently *un*stable. The relatively less-risky character of 'arranged' marriage is now uncertain.

In such cases it seems that young people are implicitly manoeuvring to pursue dual aspirations, 'putting parents' feelings first', trying to satisfy familial aspirations *as well* as hoping for love in their arranged marriage. They may be prepared to give their parents' choice a try, but if love is not forthcoming they, and their parents, do not see it necessary to stay married to that person for the rest of their lives.

Saima's account is suggestive of changing attitudes towards divorce. Significantly, these seem to be supported by changing ideas about the nature of Islam itself and a turn to textual interpretations of Islam that are seen as offering women certain rights within a universalistic framework of gender complementarity, including clearly defined legitimate grounds for divorce. Saima described a process of learning and personal change as she researched the Islamic grounds for divorce and came to a different understanding:

> Both my parents and myself never thought I could get a divorce, because we were taught... "taught" – blindly following [said chastisingly], about the fact that it's the man's job to give a divorce. It was a five-year journey before I actually got the information through the Qur'an, talking to people, that actually I could initiate a divorce. So I did, after five years, initiate a divorce. Took another three years to get it, but it was a long road and finally I did get divorced. But that was a learning for my father as well. He said, "I learnt more about my faith." I'd come and speak to him and my mother about it and he'd tell me what was happening in the mosque and so on, and they would talk about it... I said, "Dad I found this in the Qur'an, which says I have rights. If I'm not happy, just on the basis that I'm not happy, I can ask for a divorce. It's called *khul* rather than *talaq*. Can you find out more?" So dad said he'd like to speak to the imams, saying "what's this *khul* about? How does it happen?" And then he'd found out there was shari'a council or someone, but that took forever so in the end I just said, "look, let's do it this way". But dad was behind me. We got a mediator involved, got it sorted.

Saima remarried happily, in circumstances where she had substantially more personal say in the choice, to a Pakistan-born classmate she met while she was studying for her degree.

Discussion

The case studies presented here suggest that there are problems with representing British Pakistani families as stable custodians of 'old-fashioned family values'. Marital difficulties were prominent even in the life histories of older women, although divorce was uncommon

and members of the extended family stepped in to reconcile couples. Other studies of South Asian diaspora may find resonance with the pressures that older women described from moving and settling in a new place, gendered dynamics of isolation and the conflicted awareness of responsibilities to transnational kin. As we have seen, there was considerable resistance to formal divorce and couples often negotiated long-term separation or estrangement, within which women, in particular, exercised *sabar* and tried to work towards improvements in their situation. Rather than being seen as bearers of unchanging tradition and stasis, the negotiation and emotional labour within marriage testified by this older generation shows the dynamism entailed in sustaining a family.

While the five case studies illustrate underlying factors in marital conflict that may be found in any ethnic group – domestic violence, lack of personal compatibility, infidelity – these combine with further dimensions with more specific relevance to British Pakistani families.

Transnational marriages introduce geographical separation and imaginaries about the wealth of Britain that create imbalances in the knowledge obtainable about a possible *rishta*. The immigration regime may then reinforce patriarchal relations and increase the vulnerabilities of migrant brides, while creating space for British Pakistani women to retain an unusual degree of parental support against an errant or unwanted migrant husband.

While many British Pakistanis say that 'love' marriages are more risky than 'arranged' marriages, lack of romantic love and personal fulfilment seem to be increasingly important in processes of marital instability. Among young people, the willingness to exercise *sabar*, 'adjust' and 'compromise' seems to be changing. In this, there are important commonalities with wider societal changes. Giddens (1992) has written approvingly of a general shift to intimacy, companionate marriage and equality in late modernity, but the situation of Farhat and Fiyaz suggests that the expectation of intimacy is a factor in destabilizing marriage. In addition to exploring specific practices such as transnational close-kin marriage, we agree with Majumdar (2007) that it is important to de-exoticize the study of British Asian marriage and kinship and explore commonalities with wider-changing expectations of conjugality. Expectations of intimacy do not map straightforwardly onto a geography of modernity that contrasts the 'progressive' expectations of people born in Britain with the 'traditional' aspirations of Pakistani migrant spouses, because marital expectations are far from static in migrants' countries of origin (Ahmed 2003; Parry 2004; Mody 2008; Grover 2010; Qureshi 2011). Saima, it should be remembered, pursued her aims for personal

marital satisfaction through a second, self-selected match with a Pakistani migrant.

These changes may, moreover, play out in particular historical contexts of marital practices. The contemporary place of Islam in the lives of British Pakistanis influences the acceptability of divorce, as the interrogation of Islam as a textual and juridical tradition offering certain universal rights – and the assertion of religious authority over parents – has emerged as a significant resource in accessing divorce, particularly for young women. This observation is relevant to the wider body of research on Islam as a source of legitimacy in the lives of young British Muslims (Jacobson 1997; Bradby 1999; Brown 2006).

One of the most intriguing suggestions from our analysis here is that there may be a growing willingness among parents as well as young people to see 'arranged' marriage (rather than just 'love' marriages) as risky. One potential resolution of the complex set of concerns raised by marriage is to enter into an arranged marriage bearing the stamp of family approval, trying to satisfy family expectations, but if love is not forthcoming, young people are increasingly supported to divorce and remarry with a greater extent of personal say in the selection. We suggest that this is a significant volte-face that requires further explicit research. For example, it has been suggested that young men may use polygamy as a further way to negotiate parental approval and a desire for intimacy (Charsley and Liversage 2012).

The increasing, under-studied, and likely under-reported, trend of marital instability and divorce among British Pakistanis thus does not represent a simple cultural convergence with majority ethnic patterns of marital breakdown, fragmentation and separation, but is the outcome of complex, interacting and dynamic processes. This article brings some of these to light for British Pakistanis, but more research remains to be done to explore the similarities and divergences among other British Asian groups. While changes in marriage trends among British Bangladeshis – a South Asian Muslim population with similar patterns of transnational marriage – may in some ways echo those identified here, the fact that the British Indian population, diverse in religious affiliation, appears to lag behind in the trend of increasing single parenthood raises questions about the underlying dynamics. Further research is also needed to capture men's perspectives, as men are typically more reticent to discuss marriage despite the fact that their lives also change dramatically because of it (Osella and Osella 2006). This paper is an initial response, arguing for the need to shift the lens on British Asian marriage and kinship practices from notions of stasis to the specific processes underlying change in marital dynamics within Britain's ethnic minority populations.

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