



# The wisdom of culture

**P**AUL Ghuman moves with ease between the worlds of education and psychology. Until the end of August he holds the post of Professor of Education at Aberystwyth, he is a Fellow of the BPS, a Fellow of the RSA, and he was awarded the degree of DLitt by the University of Wales in 1998 for his lifetime's contribution to research. The question of cultural adaptation has always fascinated him: how the lives and the educational achievements of children and young people of South Asian origin are influenced by factors associated with their ethnicity. I first became aware of his work through his important book *Coping with Two Cultures* (Multilingual Matters, 1994). The BPS subsequently published another book of his, *Asian Adolescents in the West* (1999), while last year he published *Double Loyalties* (University of Wales Press, 2003), a book which represents the culmination of a very rich line of inquiry that he has pursued throughout his academic career.

I began by asking him to fill me in on the beginnings of his academic career. I discovered that he started his studies at Panjab University, but came to Britain shortly thereafter. 'I left the Punjab in April 1959 after gaining a degree in mathematics and a teaching qualification,' Paul explained. 'My intention was to gain further qualifications from a British university, and of course to travel. I took an MEd degree at Birmingham in the 1960s, writing my thesis on programmed learning. Skinner visited Birmingham in 1963, and he sparked off an early interest in operant conditioning and its application to learning in the classroom.'

## **Culture, cognitive development and education**

In his PhD, Paul went on to examine the effects of culture on the conceptual development of Punjabi children. I asked him about the theoretical concerns that led him to research this area. 'My theoretical concerns were related to the nature/nurture debate raging at that time. Eysenck and Jensen were both arguing for the

**MARTYN BARRETT** (*University of Surrey*) interviews Paul A. Singh Ghuman, who retires this month from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

overwhelming importance of hereditary factors on the measured intelligence of students, and by extrapolation on their scholastic achievement. I wanted to explore the effect of the cultural and social milieu on the development of cognitive processes on Punjabi immigrant children. I studied this by taking a sample of boys who were living in a Punjabi village and a matched sample of Punjabi boys living in Birmingham. I also included a matched sample of indigenous white boys. The cognitive profile of boys from Birmingham was very similar, but significantly different from the native Punjabi boys – showing the

young people. However, his theoretical stance was rooted in "biology" and it was only later on – post 1960s – that he really acknowledged the significance of social milieu. Pierre Dasen, Bevali and I published a collection of papers which were based on research in India. The message was that Piagetian concepts are useful in a pragmatic way, provided due care is taken of the cultural context within which children are assessed. Partly for this reason, in my view, Vygotsky's model has gained popularity among academics and professional educators, as it stresses the importance of peer culture and contingent dialogue between teacher and learner.'

In pursuing his early work on the role of ethnicity in children's cognitive development, Paul examined the child-rearing practices of first-generation Punjabi parents living in Britain: 'I found that first-generation parents carried on the practices of their forebears – there were no surprises there. The notion of a good child held by parents was "to be obedient, hard-working and aspiring, and to preserve the *izzat* or honour of the family". But the basic philosophy was "children have to be seen and not heard". Despite this, they were very ambitious

for their children. High aspirations were instilled in children from the word go. "You have to be twice as good as your white friends" is the phrase which still echoes in my head. And this was being internalised.'

However, child-rearing practices are now changing among South Asian second-generation parents in Britain, with traditional family values being adjusted in response to the ways of British society (Dosanjh & Ghuman, 1996). Paul explains: 'Children are now encouraged to be bilingual and to learn the ways of the British. Most parents are aware of the



strong influence of social and educational factors on the development of cognitive abilities.'

Paul subsequently applied Piagetian psychology to the cognitive development of children living in India. Because his own work has tended to emphasise the effects of factors such as ethnicity, social class and language on cognitive development, whereas Piaget tends to underplay the role of cultural factors, I asked him how he evaluates Piaget's contribution today. 'I think Piaget's contribution has been monumental in understanding the processes of cognitive development of children and

racial discrimination in Western countries and prepare their children by reinforcing pride in their own religion and culture to counteract the corrosive effects of exclusion. Nowadays, parents in general appreciate that their children have to learn to cope with the demands of two cultures and are becoming more tolerant.'

As children's educational outcome can hinge crucially on their parents' level of engagement with the process of schooling, I asked Paul about how South Asian parents in Britain view teachers and the educational process. He has found overwhelming evidence to support the notion that the vast majority of Asian parents – like most other immigrant groups – are very interested in their children's education and hold high aspirations for their future careers. 'They are willing to make financial sacrifices to give them good education; for example, by sending them to private schools, giving them extra tuition, and having computers in the home. They respect the professionalism of British teachers, and by and large have faith in the system – Hindus and Sikhs more so than Muslims. As a result, students of Indian origin are achieving better school grades than their white peers. But young people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origins are not doing so well. Social class is emerging as an important factor, as it is with indigenous white students. Girls are doing better than boys in all ethnic groups. The reasons for the relative weak performance of Pakistani and Bangladeshi students are complex, but their families are often from rural backgrounds and can have a poor command of English – these sorts of factors seem to be implicated.'

### Living with two cultures

In his BPS book *Asian Adolescents in the West* Paul argues that, in addition to racism, the other major issue which Asian youth have to deal with in the course of their everyday lives is the discrepancy and sometimes the conflict between the culture of their parents and their home life on the one hand and the culture of the peer group and school on the other. I asked him to explain how young Asians respond to this discrepancy. 'There are various strategies they employ. One strategy is trying to keep the two worlds apart, psychologically speaking – compartmentalising their experiences. Some try to compromise

and synthesise, and a few are courageous enough to 'educate' their parents and teachers about their dilemmas. Sadly, some young people, especially girls, feel quite alienated both from their family – because of their very traditional attitudes – and wider society because of racism. The lucky ones develop their own style and find outlets in creative activities, like Monica Ali and Meera Sayal. Girls generally find it harder to cope than boys. Because of the

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extra expectations of home and school, proportionally more Asian girls than boys suffer from psychosomatic illnesses such as bulimia, anorexia, and severe anxiety and depression. This conclusion is tentative, though, and drawn from small-scale studies. We need longitudinal research with large samples to test its validity. It means that the caring professionals and teachers do need to be sensitive to the needs of Asian girls.

'That said, however, many young people do succeed in moving effortlessly from culture to culture. The late Peter Ustinov made the word 'mongrel' respectable. His forebears belonged to many cultures of the world, and in my view he was a genius and a true polymath. Research from the US and Europe – and my own – supports the view that the vast majority of young people are developing bicultural identities, which are rooted both in their home culture and in that of the host culture. Erikson's notion of identity and its formation seems to be outdated in multicultural contexts, where young people have to negotiate their way into a variety of cultural situations.'

In his most recent book, *Double Loyalties*, Paul reports the findings of a study which examined South Asian adolescents growing up in four different countries, Britain, the US, Canada and Australia. I asked him about the impact which these different national contexts have on the cultural adaptation of these young people. 'I think the social and political climate impacts strongly in

shaping the attitudes and behaviour of both immigrants/ethnic minorities and those of indigenous society. Canada, for example, stresses the value of cultural and linguistic diversity, and people of colour are in positions of authority; that does make a big difference in integrating ethnic minorities. Indo-Canadian young people were very sure of themselves and were strongly in favour of "integration", as opposed to young people in Australia. At school level, I think, the practice of appointing school counsellors, like in Canada and the US, is of great value in advising and mentoring young people with social and psychological problems.'

And are there any important lessons Britain could learn from the practices and policies that have been adopted in other countries? 'For the healthy psychological development of the individual, it is important that his or her home culture and language is recognised, valued and appreciated. I think attitudes towards bilingualism are more positive in North America than here. Many teachers in Britain still think – contrary to research evidence – that bilingualism does not enhance children's cognitive and social development. This was also found to be the case in Wales until the mid-1960s. We have a golden opportunity to encourage children to learn their community languages, which will not only benefit the individuals themselves but will also be good for trade, business, communication and diplomacy.'

With these optimistic thoughts the interview ended, and I left pondering how Paul Ghuman's deep scholarship and humanity shine through all that he says and writes. He may be retiring from the University of Wales, but I hope that he will remain actively engaged with the academic community for many years to come, so that we can all continue to benefit from his insight and wisdom.

### References

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