

Migrant values adapt over just one generation

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Migrants' thinking styles and social values rapidly shift over a single generation to become more similar to those of the wider society they have moved into, new research has indicated.

A study led by the University of Exeter has concluded that the children of [people](#) who migrated to the UK tend to think and reason in a way that is more typical of the wider UK population. The research allays fears that migrating communities will fail to integrate due to psychological differences, according to the team.

The study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and published on Wednesday January 13 in the journal *PLOS ONE*, involved collaborators from the universities of Durham and Edinburgh. They assessed members of the British Bangladeshi community in East London's Tower Hamlets borough, where British Bangladeshis make up 32 per cent of the total population.

The team wanted to establish whether previously observed cultural differences in [psychological characteristics](#) changed over a single generation. They carried out an assessment of 108 first generation migrants - people who were born and raised in Bangladesh and had moved to the UK after the age of 14. They also assessed 79 second generation migrants - people born and raised in the UK to two first generation British Bangladeshi migrants.

In line with previous research, they found differences in the psychological characteristics of first generation migrants, compared to non-migrants whose parents were born and raised in the UK. One example was that first generation British Bangladeshis tended towards collectivism, meaning they were more family-orientated and community-centred, and motivated by teamwork, much like people from other non-Western societies. Non-migrants living in the same area of

East London tended to be less collectivistic, on average. Another example concerned how people explain other people's actions. Non-migrants, like people from other Western countries, tended to explain other people's actions in terms of that person's own intrinsic dispositions. For example, they might say that a student who failed an exam did so because the student is unintelligent or lazy. Those who had migrated from Bangladesh explained the outcome in a way similar to people from other non-Western countries, and tended to explain the same events in terms of situations rather than dispositions. For example, they might say that a student who failed an exam did so because of a lack of support, or overbearing pressure to succeed academically.

In just one generation, these differences had significantly reduced. On average, second generation British Bangladeshis showed less collectivism than their parents' group, and were more likely to blame individual dispositions rather than situations for others' actions. This shift occurred despite them retaining many cultural similarities with their parents. For example, nearly all were Muslim and were fluent Bengali speakers.

Lead author Dr Alex Mesoudi, Associate Professor of Cultural Evolution at the University of Exeter, said the findings suggested that communities could integrate over a single generation much more effectively than commonly assumed. He said: "This study should allay fears that migrants will fail to integrate because of unalterable social and [cultural differences](#). Surveys have shown that half of the British public believe you can't be 'truly British' unless you have British ancestry, but our study shows a rapid shift over a single generation towards the same values and thinking styles, even while the second generation British Bangladeshis retained their sense of heritage identity through language and religion.

"While on the one hand the shift seen in the second

generation can be seen as good in the sense that it may encourage greater integration of migrant groups with the wider UK society, on the other hand it's a shame that values less typical of modern-day British society, such as close family ties and community support, are being lost."

The research project originated when Dr Mesoudi was lecturing psychology at Queen Mary University of London in East London, and his students, many of whom were second [generation](#) British Bangladeshis themselves, took an interest in research about cultural integration. They began to survey their peers, prompting a successful application for the ESRC funding.

Dr Nasima Akhter, who was involved in data collection for this study and has also conducted focus groups with East London British Bangladeshis as part of another project examining migration and its impact on wellbeing among Bangladeshi migrants, said: "Members of the British Bangladeshi community often say that it is not always clear what 'integration' means or entails, and that negative mainstream perceptions of immigrants can be a barrier to successful integration. A better understanding of the psychological changes that occur in migrant communities, and factors that influence integration, can help to clarify these issues and counter false perceptions."

More information: The paper, entitled "How Do People Become W.E.I.R.D.? Migration Reveals the Cultural Transmission Mechanisms Underlying Variation in Psychological Processes", is published today, Wednesday January 13, in *PIOS ONE*.

Provided by University of Exeter

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