

Children's Age Ascription and Consequences across Family Life Cycle between Muslim and Santal in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Children's age ascription across family life situations is culturally constructed in every society. Relevant literature suggests that children's age ascription and its consequences across family life situation are enormous and pervasive across the cultures. Despite this, there is a paucity of systematic cross-cultural evidence on which social workers may play important roles in changing age ascription and its negative consequences. Reviewing cross-cultural literature, this study compares age ascription and its consequences in family life situations between Muslim and Santal cultures in Bangladesh. Evidence suggests that age ascription of the Santal for working/earning, marrying, mothering and family authority is earlier, but later in schooling, separation between boy and girl, separate sleeping between son and daughter and/or parent than that in the Muslim community. Santal children with early or late age assignment in those family life situations compared to Muslim ones are more likely to suffer from negative social, psychological, and health consequences. Based on the evidence, social work implications are discussed to change age status assignment and consequences in the family life situation between the two ethnic communities in Bangladesh.

Keywords

Children's Age Ascription, Family Life Situation, Consequences, Muslim, Santal, Social Work Implication, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Sociologists and anthropologists over the decades have studied age assignment and its consequences in family

life situations across the societies or ethnic groups within a society (Biddle & Thomas, 1966). Their evidence may have implications in social work practice to combat personal and social consequences related to age assignment in family life situations. Actually, age ascription and its related behavior in family life situations are socio-culturally constructed in every society. Schooling, working or earning, separation/attachment between parent and sibling, marrying, childbearing/motherhood and family authority are important areas of family life situations for age ascription across the cultures.

Socio-cultural construction approach and its related cross-cultural studies reveal that parents with minority and lower socio-cultural status compared to the parents with majority and higher socio-cultural ones assign late age for their children's schooling (Hauser et al., 1982; Mazzoni et al., 1999; Nsamenang, 2006), long-term sleeping between parent and sibling and/or between the siblings (Owens, 2004; Latz, et al., 1999; Morelli, Rogoff, Oppenheim, & Goldsmith, 1992; Kawasaki et al., 1994), but more early involvement in familial and extra-familial productive activities (Larsen, 2003), in marrying and parenthood (Billari et al., 2002; Balestrino & Ciardi, 2007; Choe et al., 2004; Husz, 2008; Matsuo et al., 2004; Mazumder et al., 2005; Singh, 2006; Saikia et al., 2009) and in taking family authority (Uddin, 2006). In addition, conservative parents compared to the liberal parents are more likely to prohibit interaction between adolescent boys and girls. These age-behaviors of the minority groups have more negative consequences on their children's proper development and adult role taking than the dominant children.

Research in Bangladesh reveals that enrolment of Muslim children at school is earlier than that in minority ethnic groups, especially among Santal children (Ali, 1998; Rahman, 1984; Sattar, 1984; Uddin, 2006). Further evidence shows that late school enrolment of the Santal children is more likely to decrease attention in education and likely to increase early drop-out from schooling. As most of the Santal parents are poor, their children's engagement in child labor is earlier than the children of Muslim parents (Uddin, 2006). This situation hampers proper human development for the Santal children than for the Muslim children. Likely, separate sleeping between parent and sibling and/or between brother and sister in the Muslim culture is earlier than the Santal ones, because they have sufficient rooms with furniture for sleeping. Although the Muslim male and female children can communicate with one other till the early or middle childhood, after puberty their interaction is strictly prohibited (Uddin, 2006). On the other hand, the Santal children across the life cycle may communicate with each other (Ali, 1998). Age of marrying, childbearing and family authority assignment in the Santal culture occurs earlier than the Muslim ones (Kayes, 1995; Sultana, 2003). Early age of the Santal for marrying, mothering and family authority has enormous negative health consequences for female and family role taking for male.

Relevant literature reviewed suggest that age assignment and its related negative consequences in the family life situations, including schooling, sleeping, working, interaction, marrying, childbearing, and family authority continuation are well-evidenced. Cross-cultural evidence suggests that minority ethnic children compared to children from dominant cultures suffer from negative consequences, depending on early or late age assignment across the family life situations. Despite well-evidence on age ascription and its related consequences in the family life features across the world cultures, especially between Muslim and Santal cultures in Bangladesh, there is a paucity of systematic, organized cross-cultural information on which social workers may play important parts to overcome negative consequences. Therefore, first purpose of this paper is to review literature intended to compare age status ascription and its related problems in family sociocultural context between Muslim and Santal communities in Bangladesh. The paper also describes social work implications to overcome the negative consequences between Santal and Muslim communities in Bangladesh.

2. Family Socio-Cultural Context and Age Ascription

Bangladesh is an agrarian economy based rural country where Muslim and Santal live side by side. The *Muslim* in this country is the dominant group, while the Santal people are the non-dominant group. Religiously, the former believe in Monotheism (Levy, 1963; Alam, 1995; Sarker, 1997), but the later believe in animism (Bongas). The former speak in *Bengali* language with the mixture of *Arabic-Urdu* preference, the later speak in *Austriac-Mundary*, and sometimes they speak in *Bengali* version with the other *Bengali*-speaking people (Ali, 1998; Sultana, 2003).

Economically, both the communities live in subsistent economy in which most of them are poor. Minority groups such as, Santal, are the poorest of the poor. One report indicates that 53% of the rural peoples are poor and there are 55 million food insecure households and 62% adults are illiterate (World Bank, 2000). Although main occupation of the rural villagers is agriculture, man-land ratio is very low and many of them are landless or

near the landless due to law of inheritance, land fragmentation and over-population. Some reports indicate that about 62% of the rural households are functionally landless (World Bank, 2000; Toufique & Turton, 2002).

Both Santal adult men and women take part in agriculture and any other fields as manual labor and work outside the family from dawn to dusk as laborers (Ali, 1998). On the other hand, division of labor between adult men and women in Muslim community is strictly maintained according to sex norms. The Muslims think adult men are only breadwinner of the family. So the Muslim men have to work in agricultural field and other economic sectors. Generally, Muslim women do not work on the agricultural field and do not go outside the family alone. Their main functions are to bear and rear children, maintain family chores, serve family members, although women in the lower class families work outside the family under economic pressure for family maintenance (Afsaruddin, 1990; Jansen, 1999). Sarker (1997) and others indicate that the vast majority of Muslim women in Bangladesh are not only poor and are confined in four walls in the household, but also depend on three pillars of their supports: on father, husband and son in their life cycle. In these fundamental belief systems and socio-economic status ideal age status assignments for schooling, working/earning, separation, sleeping, marrying and family authority continuation between the Muslim and Santal communities are widely different in Bangladesh context.

2.1. Schooling

Cross-cultural study suggests that ideal age for formal schooling of the children widely varies: one culture motivate their children more early schooling, while other late ones (Larsen, 2003; Long, 1984; Mazzoni et al., 1999; Nsamenang, 2006; Peek, 1979). For example, Mazzoni et al. (1999) explored that children begin their elementary school at 6 in the United States and 7 in Finland, because of the initial acquisition of reading skills and motivation for schooling. Like other cultures, ideal age for first schooling in Bangladesh is 5 years. In spite of it several research reports indicate that age for schooling widely varies across the religion, region, class and ethnicity, especially among the majority and minority children in Bangladesh. Regarding this Uddin (2006) and others (Field & Ambrus, 2006; Khanam, 2006; Rahman, 1984; Siddiquee, 1984; Shafiq, 2007) found that the parents of the majority, such as the Muslim had more aspirations for their children's education compared to the minority parents because of their higher socio-economic status, lower child labor, and more job opportunity in formal labor force participation. As a result the former motivate their children to early enrollment for their formal schooling, while the later are delayed ones. This late admission of the Santal children at school creates not only disinterest in education, but also hampers their career building, proper manpower development, and upward social mobility. As a result, Santal children are behind the ladder of social structure.

2.2. Working or Earning

Every man from childhood to until death works to meet human needs. When a son or daughter will involve in the familial activities within and outside the family also depends on cultural patterns, family socio-economic status and economic system (Larsen, 2003; Long, 1984; Mendelievich, 1979; Uddin, 2006). Although child labor in Bangladesh is forbidden, relevant research studies reveal that children of lower class families compared to middle class or upper class ones, children of majority group compared to the minority ones work for earning from their early age because of parental severe poverty (Alam et al., 2008; Khanam, 2004, 2006). In one cross-cultural study Uddin (2006) and Sattar (1984) found that age of working or earning status in the Santal culture was earlier than that in the Muslim culture due to mass poverty and slow cultural change and modernization. Further evidence suggests that early working or earning impedes children's physical growth. In addition, earning at childhood engages in drug addiction and social deviance.

2.3. Separate Sleeping

Sleeping is a basic human need without which man cannot be sound mentally and physically (Mayes, ed., 1983). Actually sleeping is a universal phenomenon that is socio-culturally arranged in every society. Every baby sleeps with his or her mother from the infancy due to sucking and care and gradually attaches with father as she or he ages. When the child becomes matured enough, sleeps separately (Owens, 2004; Latz et al., 1999; Morelli et al., 1992; Kawasaki et al., 1994). Separate sleeping arrangement between parents and siblings or between brother and sister is also an important point to assign age status between the Muslim and Santal communities.

Uddin (2006) explored that about 70 percent of the Muslim and 54 percent of the Santal considered that parents should sleep separately when children were 8 - 9 years old, 33 percent of the Muslim compared to 26 percent of the Santal thought that parents should sleep separately from the children when they were 10 - 11 years. And the rest of the both respondents indicated 12 years or above. In brother and sister sleeping arrangement about 10 percent of the Muslim and 6 percent of the Santal thought that brother and sister should sleep separately when they were 6 - 8 years, 86 percent of both the communities' age of separate sleeping between son and daughter should be 9 - 11 years.

2.4. Interaction Prohibition

Like sleeping arrangement interaction may also occur across the age, sex, and ethnicity. Relevant cross-cultural literatures reveal that communication occurred between male and female across the life cycle widely varies among the world cultures depending on the cultural systems followed. Children of both the Muslim and Santal communities like other ethnic communities in Bangladesh and around the world communicate according to their respective cultural patterns in which the Muslim male and female children can freely communicate with one other at early or middle childhood, after puberty their interaction is strictly restricted, because of cultural conservativeness in sexual sense. On the other hand, the Santal children across the age and sex levels may communicate each other because of more cultural freedom (Uddin, 2006). Interaction prohibition is more likely to affect heterosexual attachment for the Muslim than in the Santal in adult life.

2.5. Marrying and Childbearing

After separate living for some times, every culture again matches and binds them together for marital life. Actually, when a male or a female will marry also depends upon cultural patterns and socio-demographic status that influence assignment of marital age status. Relevant researches suggest that ideal age, especially legal age at marriage for both male and female widely varies around the world cultures (United Nations, 1988, 1990). In this respect research findings reveal that as early marriage occur in the rural and minority families in the developing and under-developed cultures, especially in Bangladesh, many of them become mother before the legal provisions (Asaduzzaman, 2009; Billari et al., 2002; Balestrino & Ciardi, 2007; Choe et al., 2004; Field & Ambrus, 2006; Khambalia et al., 2006; Majumder, 2005; Matsuo et al., 2004; Singh, 2006; Saikia et al., 2009). According to legal provision ideal age at marriage in Bangladesh is 19 years for female and 21 years for male and they acquire parenthood accordingly (Aziz & Maloney, 1985). Further evidence has shown that early marriage and child bearing affect or damage physical and reproductive health for the Santal women than the Muslim women. In addition, frequent child bearing is more likely to accelerate maternal morbidity and mortality for the Santal women than in the Muslim women.

2.6. Family Authorizing

In patriarchal community father or an elder member holds authority in the family (Sarker, 1997; Uddin & Arfin, 2007). As he gradually declines physically, so he makes sure family authority in the same sex to order and control family behavior. Accordingly, he assigns authority on the matured son who is able to conduct and manage the family. When family authority will be assigned on son depends on cultural age norms (Uddin, 2006). Uddin (2006) and others explored that about 8 percent of the Muslim and 17 percent of the Santal parents opined that when a son became 20 - 24 years, parents would assign authority on him, 50 percent of the Muslim and 62 percent of the Santal considered appropriate age for authority assignment was 25 - 29 years, but 37 percent of the Muslim and 20 percent of the Santal thought of suitable age of authority assignment was 30 years and above. Early family authorizing is more likely to affect family decision-making, family control and family management in the Santal than in the Muslim.

3. Discussion

Age ascription is the fundamental aspect of social structure that is socioculturally constructed in every society. This paper compares ideal age status assignment across the family life, especially for schooling, working/earning, sleeping, separation, marrying, childbearing, and family authority maintenance between Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh. For the research purpose, we review relevant cross-cultural literature

that suggests significant differences in ideal age status assignment on the family issues between the communities in rural Bangladesh

Evidence in cross-cultural literature suggests that ideal age for formal schooling of the children widely varies: one culture motivate their children more early schooling, while other late ones (Larsen, 2003; Long, 1984; Mazzoni et al., 1999; Nsamenang, 2006; Peek, 1979). Ideal age for children's schooling in this study was one of the aspects of age ascription comparison. Uddin's study (2009) suggests that age assignment for schooling in the Santal community was later than that in the Muslim children's. The findings of the study are consistent with several studies across the cultures. For example, Mazzoni et al. (1999) explored that children begin their elementary school at 6 in the United States and 7 in Finland, because of the initial acquisition of reading skills and motivation for schooling. Like other cultures, ideal age for first schooling in Bangladesh is 5 years. In spite of it several research reports indicate that age for schooling widely varies across the religion, region, class and ethnicity, especially among the majority and minority children in Bangladesh. Regarding this Uddin (2006) and others (Field & Ambrus, 2006; Khanam, 2006; Rahman, 1984, Siddiquee, 1984; Shafiq, 2007) found that the parents of the majority, such as the Muslim had more aspirations for their children's education compared to the minority parents, because of their higher socio-economic status, lower child labor, and more job opportunity in formal labor force participation. As a result, the former motivate their children to early enrollment for their formal schooling, while the later are delayed ones.

Every man from childhood to until death works to meet human needs. When a son or daughter will involve in the familial activities within and outside the family also depends on cultural patterns, family socio-economic status and economic system. As these socio-cultural situations vary from Muslim to Santal, ideal age status for working or earning of the children for family economic support also varies between the communities as well (Larsen, 2003; Long, 1984; Mendelievich, 1979; Uddin, 2006). Although child labor in Bangladesh is forbidden, relevant researches reveal that children of lower class families compared to middle class or upper class ones, children of minority group compared to the majority ones work for earning from their early age, because of parental severe poverty (Alam et al., 2008; Khanam, 2004, 2006). In one cross-cultural study Uddin (2006) and Sattar (1984) found that age of working or earning status in the Santal culture was earlier than that in the Muslim culture due to mass poverty and slow cultural change and modernization.

Sleeping is a basic human need without which man cannot be sound mentally and physically (Mayes, 1983). Actually sleeping is a universal phenomenon that is socio-culturally arranged in every society. Every baby sleeps with his or her mother from the very beginning due to sucking and care and gradually attaches with father as she or he ages. When she or he becomes matured enough, sleeps separately from the parents (Owens, 2004; Latz et al., 1999; Morelli et al., 1992; Kawasaki et al., 1994). Actually, separate sleeping arrangement between parents and siblings or between brother and sister is an important point to assign age status for both male and female children that has significant similarity between the Muslim and Santal communities. The findings on age assignment for sleeping are supported by Uddin's (2006) findings. He explored that in his cross-cultural study. According to Uddin's (2006) research findings: about 70 percent of the Muslim and 54 percent of the Santal considered that parents should separately sleep when children were 8 - 9 years, 33 percent of the Muslim compared to 26 percent of the Santal thought that parents should sleep separately with the children when they were 10 - 11 years. And the rest of them indicated 12 years or above. In brother and sister sleeping arrangement about 10 percent of the Muslim and 6 percent of the Santal thought that brother and sister should separately sleep when they were 6 - 8 years, 86 percent of both the communities' age of separate sleeping between son and daughter should be 9 - 11 years. Like sleeping arrangement between pubescent boys and girls, human interaction between them may also occur. Cross-cultural literature reveals that communication occurred between male and female across the life cycle widely varies across the world cultures, depending on the cultural systems followed (Uddin, 2010). Children of both the Muslim and Santal communities like other ethnic communities in Bangladesh and around the world communicate according to their respective cultural patterns in which the Muslim male and female children can freely communicate with one other at early or middle childhood, after puberty their interaction is strictly restricted, because of cultural conservativeness in sexual sense. On the other hand, the Santal children across the age and sex levels may communicate with each other, because of more cultural freedom (Uddin, 2010).

After separate living for some times, every culture again matches and binds them together for marital life. When a male or a female will marry also depends upon cultural ideas, norms, values and beliefs that influence assigning and determining of marital age status for them. Ideal age, especially legal age at marriage for both

male and female widely varies around the world cultures (United Nations, 1988, 1990). In this respect, research findings reveal that as early marriage occur in the rural and minority families in the developing and less-developed cultures, many of them become mother before the legal provisions provided (Asaduzzaman, 2009; Billari et al., 2002; Balestrino & Ciardi, 2007; Choe et al., 2004; Field & Ambrus, 2006; Khambalia et al., 2006; Majumder, 2005; Matsuo et al., 2004; Singh, 2006; Saikia et al., 2009). According to legal provision, ideal age at marriage in Bangladesh is 19 years for female and 21 years for male and they acquire parenthood accordingly. Relevant researches reveal that ideal age at marriage and parenthood varies according residence, class, caste, religion, ethnicity etc (Aziz & Maloney, 1985). In one cross-cultural study Uddin (2010) found that ideal age at marriage for both male and female and parenthood in the Santal culture was earlier than the Muslim culture.

In patriarchal community, father or an elder member holds authority in the family (Sarker, 1997; Uddin & Arefin, 2007). As he gradually declines physically, makes sure family authority in the same sex to order and control family behavior, so he assigns authority on the matured son who is able to conduct and manage the family. When family authority will be assigned on son depends on cultural age norms (Uddin, 2010). Uddin (2006) and others explored that about 8 percent of the Muslim and 17 percent of the Santal parents opined that when a son became 20 - 24 years, parents would assign authority on him, 50 percent of the Muslim and 62 percent of the Santal considered appropriate age for authority assignment was 25 - 29 years, but 37 percent of the Muslim and 20 percent of the Santal thought of suitable age of authority assignment was 30 years and above.

Limitations

Cross-cultural literature review suggests that age ascription and its negative consequences in family life situations are pervasive across the cultures. Evidence in the relevant literature indicates that minority groups compared to dominant group, especially Santal community people in Bangladesh are more likely suffer cognitive and social consequences from delayed enrolment at school and child laboring, reproductive and health consequences from early marriage and mothering than the Muslim. Although age ascription and its consequences across family life situations are well-chained, further cross-cultural research is necessary whether Santal people compared to Muslims are more likely to face negative consequences in family life situations, because of early age ascription. Substantive evidence based on cross-cultural research may be more fruitful for social work practice in the given area.

4. Conclusions and Implication

Sociological and anthropological literature reveals that age ascription and its negative consequences occur in family sociocultural context. Reviewing cross-cultural literature, this study compared age ascription and its consequences in family life situations between Muslim and Santal cultures in Bangladesh. Evidence suggested that age ascription of the Santal children for working/earning, marrying, mothering and family authority was earlier, but later for schooling, separation between boy and girl, separate sleeping between son and daughter and/or parent than in the Muslim community. This early or late age assignment in those family situations had more negative social, psychological, and health consequences for the Santal children compared to Muslim ones in family sociocultural context of Bangladesh. Especially, several cross-cultural studies suggest that minority status, low rate of modernization and severe poverty among the Santal people compared to Muslim people influence early age ascription across the family life for human and cultural adaptation.

Based on the findings and its sociocultural contextual interpretations above-mentioned, social practitioners in Bangladesh may apply social work to reduce and change early or late age assignment and its social, psychological and biological consequences, following social work values: respect and dignity for human beings, communication, self-determination, human justice and equality. Based on ethnic sensitive approach, social worker may play important roles to provide direct psychological supports and counseling (e.g., inter-personal influence, motivation, skill training and awareness) to the Santal parents who assign age earlier for working/earning, marrying, mothering and family authority, but later for schooling, separation between boy and girl, separate sleeping between son and daughter and/or parent than that in the Muslim ones. In so doing, social workers must consider family social and cultural status of the ethnic community. In addition, social workers may also provide socio-economic supports to achieve early enrolment, to prohibit child labor, to enhance parental income and housing status. This support may delay early marriage and mothering practice in the Santal community than that in the Muslim community in Bangladesh.

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