

# 'Ah Cha'! The Racial Discrimination of Pakistani Minority Communities in Hong Kong: An Analysis of Multiple, Intersecting Oppressions

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree\* and Hung Wong

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*Dr Sara Ashencaen Crabtree is the Deputy Director of the Centre for Social Work and Social Policy at Bournemouth University, UK. Dr Hung Wong is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work at The Chinese University of Hong Kong.*

\*Correspondence to Dr Sara Ashencaen Crabtree, School of Health & Social Care, Bournemouth University, Royal London House, Christchurch Road, Bournemouth, Dorset, BH1 3LT, UK. E-mail: [scrabtree@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:scrabtree@bournemouth.ac.uk)

## Abstract

Racial discrimination towards minority ethnic (ME) groups in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is argued to be endemic. This paper considers research studies focusing on this issue as extended to the Pakistani community, which appear to constitute in part a general xenophobia towards certain ME groups. In addition, the authors contribute findings from an ethnographic study of low-income Pakistani families in Hong Kong, offering narrated accounts from participants regarding the impact of racial discrimination on their lives, metaphorically signified in the idiomatic term *Ah Cha* to denote people of North Indian heritage. These data are supplemented by additional interview data from Hong Kong social workers. An analysis of the impact of racism upon Pakistani individuals and families is offered in relation to micro, meso and macro-level forms of discrimination. These in turn relate to interpersonal relationships, perceived community attitudes, social work responses, and relevant social policy and legislation. The discussion of the implications of racial discrimination in HKSAR, with a specific focus on its Pakistani community, is underpinned by theorisation of multiple oppressions.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong, Pakistani, racism, legislation, oppression

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## Introduction

Despite the reputation of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) as a vibrant, international centre of commerce and enterprise, the dominant Chinese culture largely ignores the position of resident, minority ethnic (ME) groups by attempting to maintain an ethnically homogenised monoculture (Ku, 2006). Serving to exclude culture, beliefs, traditions and languages of other members of society, it appears to be commensurate with certain xenophobic attitudes towards the needs of ME communities in Hong Kong (Ku *et al.*, 2003). This has been a trend that has deepened rather than improved since the 'handover' period in 1997, when Hong Kong returned to China's sovereignty (Ho, 2001). Rice (2002) argues that the colonial government's reluctance to create specific legislation prohibiting racist discrimination in Hong Kong was later continued by the HKSAR government, which equally viewed it as unnecessary. In this vein, Tang *et al.* (2004, p. 353) comment on the role of local pressure groups (such as Hong Kong UNISON, being one of the most influential pressure groups promoting racial equality and cross-racial understanding) in agitating for appropriate legislation by citing the International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted in Hong Kong in 1969. This move has also been strongly promoted by the United Nations and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). Bowing to this pressure, the HKSAR government has since proposed a new piece of legislation, the Hong Kong Race Discrimination Ordinance (RDO). This will seek to address direct and indirect forms of discrimination, and victimisation between individuals, which, to date, has been lacking among existing forms of HKSAR legislation pertaining to discrimination at various levels.

Here, we consider racial discrimination and responses to this phenomenon at a variety of levels, where micro, meso and macro aspects are identified and discussed (Penhale and Parker, 2008). The micro and meso stratum of discrimination are explored in relation to the findings of an ethnographic study of Pakistani participants residing in Hong Kong. The perceptions and narratives of ethnographic participants serve to inform our understanding of how discrimination is experienced at both the individual and interpersonal micro level, as well as in terms of the meso, community-level issues, pertaining to employment and access to public resources, including social services support. Encompassed within a meso-level analysis is an exploration of local social work response towards ME communities in terms of anti-racist approaches. Finally, with regard to macro-level analysis, this relates to relevant social policy and legislation, which in the latter case is reviewed in terms of issues pertaining to its effective enforcement.

In considering black perspectives, [Graham \(2009\)](#) describes the 'demise' of anti-racist social work education in the 1990s through its subsumation into the broader analytic schema of discrimination of anti-oppressive practice, which is taken to address 'wider structural issues and inequalities' ([Parker, 2007](#), p. 151). Anti-oppressive social work has sought to address cultural ethnic, gender and class differences ([Dominelli, 1998, 2002](#); [Strier and Binyamin, 2010](#)) and is described as embracing the values of 'equity, inclusion, empowerment, and community' ([Campbell, 2003](#), p. 394). Nevertheless, it has also been criticised as ideologically driven and oppressive ([Millar, 2008](#)), furthermore relying on words rather than actions ([McLaughlin, 2005](#)). It is interesting therefore to note the revitalisation of anti-racist theoretical frameworks that have the conceptual capacity to specifically focus on the disadvantages of, and discrimination towards, underprivileged ME groups in society ([Bhatti-Sinclair, 2011](#)). Accordingly, therefore, both anti-racist and critical race theory are used to illuminate the manifestation of racism in Hong Kong using an intersectional theorisation of multiple oppressions.

Critical race theory (CRT) originally emerged from North American critical legal studies ([Price, 2009](#)) to expose the binary opposition of white privilege/black oppression embedded across legal and social policy structures. CRT was subsequently exploited by the wider social sciences to examine the permeation and entrenchment of racial discrimination in society ([Lightfoot, 2010](#)). CRT has been critiqued as not providing an overarching theory but, at best, as 'an intellectual "movement"' and in providing a miscellaneous, analytic toolbox that can be used to study diverse forms of discrimination ([Treviño et al., 2008](#), p. 9). Nonetheless, it has enabled researchers to examine social phenomena relating to social exclusion and marginalisation by analytical vertical dissection down the strata of macro-level social policy to the micro-level experiential layers of the personal. Accordingly, the politico-social-spatial context of racial discrimination is more easily brought into the foreground. CRT therefore provides a useful contextual and analytical space to explore the normalisation of racism in Hong Kong, where, [Parker \(2007\)](#) warns, social work as applied social policy may contribute to oppressive practice by assimilating the negative connotations popularly applied to marginalised groups in the local context. Anti-racist social work perspectives serve to highlight the negative impact upon, and the related need for redress for, the victims of such discrimination ([Bhatti-Sinclair, 2011](#); [Graham, 2009](#)).

Additionally, the construction of the concept of 'intersectionality' developed by [Hill Collins \(1998, 2005, 2008\)](#), originally in reference to black African Americans, enables the multiple oppressions of class, race, gender and national identity to be analytically deconstructed. In reference to theorisation of intersectionality, [Hancock \(2008\)](#) draws out Hill Collin's inference that black identity, whether self-identification or imposed, is associated with deviance. Hill Collin's conceptualisation of the 'new racisms'

(Hancock, 2008, p. 15; Hill Collins, 2005) resonates with findings in this study, where historical formulation of race remain present in some forms, while also being transformed by the vectors of globalisation in its various guises. Although both critical race and intersectionality theorisation have prima facie emerged from and refer to the experiences of ME groups in North America, both have application to other minoritised groups, such as the Pakistani community in Hong Kong.

## The Pakistani community in the Hong Kong Territories

By July 2006, a total of 342,198 ME individuals, constituting 5.0 per cent of the whole population in Hong Kong, were living in the Territories. This comprised Asians (other than Chinese) (83.4 per cent), white (10.6 per cent), 'mixed' (5.3 per cent) and 'others' (0.6 per cent). The Pakistani community is one of the smallest ME communities in HKSAR, with a population of 11,017 and stands at 3.2 per cent of the Asians ('other than Chinese') category. In comparison, there is a greater number of Filipinos, comprising 32.9 per cent, as well as Indians standing at 6.0 per cent and the Nepalese at 4.7 per cent (Census and Statistical Department, 2007, p. 15). Unlike the Filipino community, the Indian and Pakistani communities have a historical association with the Territory stemming back to the nineteenth century when migrants from the Indian subcontinent settled in Hong Kong under the colonial authorities and where some intermarried with the local Chinese population (Plüss, 2005; Ho, 2001; Weiss, 1991). A contemporary migration pattern for this community is commensurate with that in the UK, where transnational, arranged marriages enable Pakistani-born brides and grooms to be united with their spouse in the 'host' country (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2011; Charsley, 2005).

The Partition of India and the birth of the Republic of Pakistan in 1947 served to segregate much of the Indian Muslim population from the rest of the country, and would bifurcate a common historical legacy. However, at this juncture in history, such national differences had yet to emerge in Hong Kong, although the migrants from the Indian subcontinents carried their own distinct cultural heritage. Entrepreneurial success was one feature of these migrant communities, although the Muslim contingency was also predominant in the militia, the penal services and allied occupations (White, 1994; Weiss, 1991; Ho, 2001).

Today, there is a notable socio-economic difference between the resident Indian community in HKSAR and that of the Pakistani one, although the reasons for this are by no means clear (Lee *et al.*, 2007). What is known, however, is that, of employed Indians, 9.3 per cent are 'elementary workers' (the lowest category of work in the Hong Kong census), but 43.2 per cent occupy the highest category of 'managers and administrators' whereas, of employed Pakistanis, 31.1 per cent work in the unskilled

'elementary' occupations (including street vendors, security guards and watchmen, freight handlers, construction labourers and hand packers). Notably, only 16 per cent of Pakistanis act in the highest employment category. In a further comparison, of those occupying the 'poor-poor' groups among ME populations, employed Nepalese workers constitute 41 per cent of the lowest category, with only 9.1 per cent occupying the 'managers and administrators' category; 68.4 per cent of working Thais are employed in 'elementary' work, with only 3.3 per cent in the highest category. Of working Filipinos (the greatest majority of whom are female), 34.6 per cent occupy the elementary strata, with 11.3 per cent acting as managers and administrators (Census and Statistical Department, 2007).

In considering the monthly median income for Indians across gender, this stands at HKD\$17,500, while the median income for the whole working population in Hong Kong is estimated to be HKD \$10,000 (Census and Statistical Department, 2007). By contrast, the median income for Pakistanis across gender is HKD\$9,000, which is similar to the situation for Nepalese workers, while Filipinos, Indonesians and Thais achieve monthly income medians of HKD\$10,000 for males but only HKD\$4,000 for females, most of whom are employed as domestic workers (Census and Statistical Department, 2007).

Taking a comparative view of socio-economic status irrespective of ethnicity, the monthly median salary for the entire working population is not very much higher than for the Pakistani community. However, this picture does not reflect the fact that Pakistani women have the lowest employment participation rate at 16.7 per cent, compared to Indian women at 47.2 per cent and Nepalese women at 65.1 per cent, or the whole population of women at 52.4 per cent (Census and Statistical Department, 2007). The higher participation rates by some ME women reflect the active involvement of local Chinese women in the Hong Kong labour market. Consequently, the average income of a typical Hong Kong family is likely to be higher than the median salary indicated for individuals in the Pakistani community, where such salaries are more likely to represent the sole income for the family unit due to culturally prescribed gender norms (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2011; Graham *et al.*, 2007). In addition, unemployment is estimated to be over twice as high for South Asian people as for the general population of Hong Kong. Among the South Asian ME groups, Pakistanis have the highest unemployment rate at 20.9 per cent, while the unemployment rate for the Nepalese and Indians stands at 16.0 and 11.4 per cent (Ku *et al.*, 2003; Ku and Chan, 2008).

There are few studies concerning racial discrimination in HKSAR or that focus on the Pakistani community. Yet, we learn from two studies that a lack of marketable employment skills and suitable qualifications represents a challenge to the Pakistani community (Kam, 2003; Lee *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, a survey from another study of 200 Pakistani individuals showed that 81.9 per cent of respondents regarded employment issues as

representing their greatest problem (Ku *et al.*, 2003). Lee and Wong (2004) also report that working conditions for those in elementary employment are very poor, being characterised by insecurity, excessively long hours, low pay, unpaid overtime and strict surveillance by employers.

With regards to daily living issues in HKSAR, anecdotal evidence of quotidian discrimination at the micro and meso levels abound in research literature on this topic. Ku (2006) draws on some early findings from a study undertaken by the Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor in the late nineties that found that, in a survey of 123 ME participants, 67 per cent had either witnessed or been a victim of racial discrimination. Discrimination was experienced at multiple levels, including in relation to employment, accommodation, admission to resources and merchandising transactions (Ku, 2006). In 2004, Chan and Wong (2005) were commissioned by Oxfam Hong Kong to carry out a survey on public attitudes and perceptions towards ME communities. In this study, over 60 per cent from a randomly selected study of 512 respondents agreed that Hong Kong Chinese people have negative perceptions towards ME groups. When asked 'if you are willing to let your children study in schools which have ME pupils?', 27.6 per cent of the respondents disagreed. Tang *et al.* (2004) quote findings from another study describing the interpersonal rejection felt by ME participants by Hong Kong Chinese people where friendships across ethnic divides appear to be a rarity. Finally, a random study of 1,022 Hong Kong households exploring degrees of acceptance towards diverse ethnic groups in 2008 revealed that Chinese respondents demonstrated the lowest levels of acceptance towards South Asians compared to other ethnic groups (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2009).

Furthermore, as noted by Ku (2006) in a rare study of the embodiment of cultural values in Pakistani women, demeaning Islamophobic stereotypes are attributed towards traditional *hijab* dress worn by Pakistani women, which differs markedly from the contemporary, Westernised social uniforms of fashion-conscious Hong Kong Chinese residents. This may carry further resonances in the post-9/11 era in which the symbolisation of the hijab-clad Muslim woman now carries connotations of both cultural benightedness and the threat of fundamental Islamist-inspired terrorism (Ashencaen Crabtree and Husain, 2012; Zine, 2004). Ku suggests that these views become internalised by Pakistani women who begin to view themselves as embodying the racist assumptions that are provoked by their appearance. The patriarchal structure of Pakistani culture governing social and gender norms (Graham *et al.*, 2007) not only influences women's participation in the labour market; it also impacts on civic participation, thus drawing further points of comparison between women across ethnic divides in Hong Kong.

In relation to macro-scale racial discrimination in HKSAR, Ho (2001) discusses the historical changes in social policy in the period prior to the handover to China. This analysis considers the effect of affirmative policies

introduced by the colonial government in Hong Kong towards ME employees and their families, typified by a liberal attitude towards religious expressions, such as providing formal permission for the building of Muslim mosques, as well as encouraging culturally congruent educational facilities for ME children (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000). This intelligence provides a clearer context to consider Rice's (2002) critique regarding the asserted failure of the colonial administration to establish further legislation as being unnecessary in Hong Kong. However, in the post-colonial period, affirmative policies have been significantly eroded with the greater emphasis on Chinese sovereignty. The increasing prioritisation of Cantonese over English language skills have additionally served to disadvantage many ME groups.

These developments represent a conspicuous move away from colonial Hong Kong's vested interest in their ME communities—where government tolerance in terms of religious practice and culturally congruent schooling was a pragmatic political response—and are creating a new and much more challenging landscape for the established Pakistani community (Heung, 2006; Ho, 2001). Furthermore, this marginalisation is exemplified in terms of equal access to health provision, where there is a failure to translate important health and social welfare information into prevalent ME languages, even during crises, like the SARS respiratory epidemic (Tang *et al.*, 2004).

There have been some general expressions of concern that Hong Kong's ascendant star as an international hub of fiscal enterprise is in danger of being eclipsed by the meteoric rise of other competing cities and regions. Ho (2008), in direct reference to a policy speech by Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Sir Donald Tsang, argues that, in order to maintain its position, HKSAR needs to attract the flow of finance generated by Muslim countries in the Middle East. In order to achieve this hugely profitable aim, however, there needs to be a serious change in Hong Kong's attitudes towards matters pertaining to the Islamic world. Ho (2008), accordingly, argues for a new educational directive geared towards breaking down cultural and attitudinal barriers among students to encourage successful capitalisation of these promising markets. Ironically, however, such endeavours are unlikely to assist local Hong Kong Muslim, Pakistani youth who face considerable educational (and commensurately employment) barriers at both secondary and tertiary levels. Heung (2006), for example, comments that a Hong Kong UNISON study found that 70.1 per cent of Pakistani, Hong Kong-born youths had not acquired facility in Chinese dialects or English language skills. Commensurate data in this regard are lacking for older adults, although statistical information regarding educational achievement for Pakistanis aged fifteen years and over reports that attainment to 'upper secondary level' achieves the highest percentage, at 24 per cent (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2007).



## Racism at macro level: enactment of the Race Discrimination Ordinance

The deprivation and discrimination faced by ME communities in general, and Pakistanis in particular, as outlined in the research literature, have not received much attention from the mainstream Hong Kong Chinese society or the HKSAR government in keeping with the exclusive, privileging of the Hong Kong Chinese identity (as Chinese mainland migrants hold lower status than Hong Kong-born citizens) (Hill Collins, 2008). For example, the government previously opposed individual legislators' efforts to introduce the Racial Discrimination Bill (RDB), thus maintaining the prevailing status quo in favour of the dominant ethnic and 'birth-right' citizen (Treviño *et al.*, 2008). Although racial discrimination in the public sector has been prohibited by the Bill of Rights Ordinance (BRO) since 1991, it is an ineffective tool, as the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has no power to enforce the BRO or to investigate complaints under it. It was not until 2004 that the government finally agreed to legislate against racial discrimination and consequently issued a Consultation Paper describing the approach.

In the Consultation Paper, the government did not indicate any intention to insert a *general* exemption for governmental acts and policies. However, when the RDO was introduced into the Legislative Council, the government changed its position, without any explanation. The RDB is therefore viewed as much weaker than the Sex Discrimination Ordinance and the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (Petersen, 2007).

After many years of campaign and advocacy by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and human rights organisations in Hong Kong, along with pressure from CERD, the RDO was finally passed in 9 July 2008, and came fully into force on 10 July 2009. However, NGOs and political parties continue to protest about several serious defects in the RDO.

First, unlike Hong Kong's other anti-discrimination laws, the RDO does not cover 'the performance of Government's functions' or 'the exercise of Government's power' (HKHRM *et al.*, 2009, p. 1). Second, discrimination based on immigration status, right of abode, Hong Kong permanent resident status, length of residence and nationality are all excluded from the scope of racial discrimination. Third, there is an exclusion of all laws concerning nationality, citizenship, resident status or naturalisation and immigration legislation. Furthermore, the RDO allows exemptions for the language of instruction in education and vocational training institutes. Finally, the RDO does not include any statutory equality plan in which the government and public authorities are required to eliminate racial discrimination and to promote racial equality and harmony (HKHRM *et al.*, 2009).



As a result, the police, immigration and other law enforcement authorities and their officials are not bound by the RDO in the exercise of their powers, although ME groups have long been subject to racial harassment and discrimination by police officers. Commensurately, many police officers do not take language barriers into consideration, despite initiatives by the police force to promote cultural sensitivity and the value of racial equality (HKHRM *et al.*, 2009). In March 2009, a Hong Kong-born Nepalese man was shot and killed by a police constable, triggering anger among members of the Nepalese and other South Asian communities. This resulted in a demand that the government set up an independent commission of inquiry to investigate the shooting, and review related police policies and practices, together with exploring the racial, cultural and social roots of this tragedy.

Similarly, the Education Bureau is not bound by the RDO when it implements its primary and secondary school places allocation exercise resulting in ME children missing out on vital months of schooling, as commented on by this social worker in interview:

One ME parent asked me when the Chinese children cannot find a school place what do the families do? 'Why do we spend half-a-year [looking] and still not find a school place? Are the Chinese children the same?' I answered that [for] the Chinese it is not like that. A Hong Kong resident can get nine years compulsory education. If the parents don't put their children into school they may be gaoled... it is interesting that [some ME] parents and I have discovered that they *are* Hong Kong citizens, some of them even *born* in Hong Kong and they are permanent residents. Why is it like this? It pushes us to think!

The RDO is not empowered to protect ME communities from discrimination by the government itself. Acquiring a facility in the Chinese language is important for the livelihood of ME groups in Hong Kong. However, the Hong Kong government has persistently refused to formulate an education policy for learning Chinese as a second language, and failed to adequately accommodate the special needs of non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students. The government has insisted that the Chinese curriculum, as offered by individual schools, should be adapted; however, experience has shown that diverse abilities among most NCS students militate against their being able to successfully meet the common required standards in public examination. Given the difficulties these children face in learning Chinese, the current assessment and secondary school placement system puts ME students in a disadvantageous position that, in the case of residents, reinforces the generational marginalisation of these groups (HKHRM *et al.*, 2009).

Although the government claims resources have been allocated to enhance Chinese-language learning for ME students, these efforts have been limited and ineffective. A full-scale and standardised Chinese-language curriculum has yet to be developed, as has quality teaching materials/textbooks, appropriate assessment tools and systematic teachers'

training. Regardless of this, the government encourages schools admitting ME students to develop their own school-based Chinese-language curriculum under the mainstream framework (UNISON, 2009).

## Life on the margins: ethnographic research of Pakistani families in HKSAR

### *Parameters of the study*

A review of the research literature indicates that discrimination is an endemic feature of life for many ME groups in HKSAR, particularly those who are also likely to occupy low socio-economic brackets (Ashencaen Crabtree and Wong, 2010; Ku *et al.*, 2003; Tang *et al.*, 2004; Ho, 2008). A recent ethnographic study, conducted by the first author (a white British academic) and funded by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, with the aim of exploring the coping strategies of low-income Pakistani families residing in the New Territories area of Hong Kong, produced findings that were congruent with other studies in noting the existence of racial discrimination in this ethnic community.

The inclusion criteria for participation targeted Pakistani families with dependent children, living below the median Hong Kong salary of HKD\$10,000 in one of the less affluent, densely populated localities in the Territories with a prominent Pakistani community. Due to the intensive nature of ethnography with regard to in-depth interviewing strategies, the sample group was restricted to fewer than twenty families, of which seventeen were finally recruited. Subject to university research ethics approval, participants were identified first through the assistance of Pakistani community workers at the Lady MacLehose Centre, a community-based enterprise targeting Pakistani families in the Kwai Chung district of the New Territories. An opportunistic 'snowballing' strategy was used, in which participating participants served to introduce the researcher to other Pakistani families of their acquaintance living in similar circumstances.

For the purposes of this paper, additional interviews conducted by the second author, a Hong Kong-based social work academic, were also sought from two local social workers with extensive experience of advocating on behalf of ME families, with questions seeking to elicit responses on the topic of racial discrimination in HKSAR. Although, clearly, these translated interviews can only provide limited data at this stage, they begin to develop an understanding, albeit currently inchoate, of how ME groups are perceived and responded to by Hong Kong social workers. These findings are sufficiently intriguing to generate a number of urgent questions that it is hoped future research into this topic may soon address.

Initially, with respect to the ethnographic study, it was anticipated that parents of both sexes would be targeted for participation. However, due

to the permeable network of close family relations typical of many Pakistani families (Graham *et al.*, 2007; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000), participation sometimes involved a number of adult relatives living in the same home. However, a notable feature of the interviews was that it was usually women (and older daughters), twenty-two in number, who chose to participate, rather than males. Accordingly, due to gender and religious issues governing the propriety of interviews conducted by a stranger of the opposite sex, eight male participants were offered the opportunity of participating in male-only focus group discussions facilitated by a male Pakistani community worker. Finally, in order to overcome language barriers, the Lady MacLehose Centre provided an Urdu/English-speaking Pakistani interpreter when required. This person greatly facilitated the first author's entry to and acceptance in Pakistani homes. Furthermore, through her familiarity with cultural nuances, she provided valuable clarification for elucidation and assurances of researcher bona fide intentions to our hosts.

Analysis of data was grounded in standard ethnographic techniques where phenomena were coded at multiple levels of complexity and recurring instances noted, in addition to single concepts or contradictory data. These recurrent instances served to form the thematic findings of the study, once saturation of data has been achieved, where no significant new codes emerged. Accordingly, the coding process picked up employment issues and language barriers as recurrent phenomena across two-thirds of the transcribed narratives from participants, both across individual interviews and in the focus group discussions. Unsurprisingly, given the selection criteria, all participants conveyed concerns about financial survival on low incomes. Furthermore, sixteen families were reproductive unions characterised by large (four or more children) and young families (twelve years old and under). Poverty issues were aggravated by unemployment as well as insecure or part-time employment. This concern was a particular problem where only eight families were actually wage-earning, with ten having to deal with a chronically ill or disabled family member. Out of seventeen families, all were living in privately rented accommodation as opposed to government-owned tenancies, and all but two were living in conspicuously overcrowded and substandard accommodation. Thus, narratives conveyed the experiences of multiple, intersecting and interlocking oppressions impacting upon families.

### *Employment issues*

In their report on the 'Life Experiences of Pakistanis in Hong Kong', Ku *et al.* (2003) note that a large number of respondents (based on a sample of 200 participants) have serious difficulties in finding suitable work, which would offer them a level of security, an average salary and reasonable working conditions. They note that this problem was associated by a

majority of respondents (70.1 per cent) as being connected in part to language problems (even if there was a proficiency in English but not Cantonese) or associated with a deficiency in qualifications. However, 29.1 per cent believed that they were rejected simply because they were Pakistanis.

In accordance with some of these points, two male participants from the focus group discussion element of our ethnographic study observed the following:

(It's) really hard to find a job because there are a lot of language barriers. Before the handover it was easier to get a job and good income. After the handover we are not able to find long stay jobs, mostly we find temporary jobs with low pays. Even worse is (that) now mainland China people (have) come to Hong Kong. They can speak Chinese [Cantonese] as well as *Putonghua* [Mandarin]. This results in even more problem for us, since most of us are working in low skill field now and they are taking all these places. As a result we are unemployed and forced to go and get Social Welfare money.

Another added the following comment:

After 1997 Chinese became more important than English and its [Hong Kong's employment market] totally changed. We face more difficulty in employment and education. In medical area [seeking medical help] too.

The reference to medical help relates to Tang *et al.*'s (2004) point that there is usually no attempt to offer translation or interpreting skills in public hospitals or indeed social services. Equal access to public services is thereby made highly problematic for the majority of ME groups in society.

In relation to employment, one man had this to say:

The employer when we go to interview they will say 'sorry, you don't know Chinese'. Sometimes they say 'we don't hire Pakistani people'. We are often rejected.

Not only is it harder to find employment, but, once found, Pakistani families comment on how poorly the cultural needs of Pakistani employees are understood in relation to family responsibilities and expectations, as indicated by this female participant, while also passing judgement on the perceived lack of filial support from Chinese families:

Work in Hong Kong can be very strict and the Chinese cannot understand our problems. Someone I know tried to return to Pakistan to see their dying father but his boss would not give him permission to go. The Chinese don't have time for their own parents.

### *Racism at the interpersonal level*

Ku *et al.* (2003) record a number of verbatim examples by Pakistani respondents of their personal experiences of racist abuse or conduct by Hong Kong Chinese individuals. In accordance, 83.5 per cent (out of 167 respondents) believed it was difficult to make friends with Hong Kong

(presumably Chinese) people. Moreover, mockery in terms of the usage of racially based insults, typified by the derogatory term *Ah Cha*, appear to be in common currency in denoting people who have originated from the Indian subcontinent and having a darker complexion (Lai *et al.*, 2009). However, this pejoratively used term has an interesting historical connotation in being a direct reference to the occupation of 'police officer'. The inference to Hong Kong's colonial past is made apparent in its reference to a traditional role of North Indian Muslims in the Territory and their monopoly of occupations that variously served to uphold colonial law and order (White, 1994). This, however, is not to imply that law enforcement is a despised occupation in contemporary Hong Kong—indeed, quite the opposite is true—but that the past stereotype of the typical incumbent of such roles (being often ethnically and religiously distinctive) has been transmitted over time and debased in turn into a general insult.

Today, the meaning of the term may not be clear to the target of the insult but the offensive nuances are evident, as this quote from a male participant from our ethnographic study further indicates:

They [Hong Kong Chinese] call us 'Ah Cha!'. What does that mean? We don't know, but something like 'Boy!' Or even worse maybe (Male respondent, ethnographic study).

Vilification can run deeper, as this extract from the focus group discussions indicates:

When we take the lift people will cover their mouth, thinking we're smelly. Also, they call us 'Ah Cha'. Sometimes they discriminate because of our facial look, because we have a beard and they will say it's ugly.

Tang *et al.* (2004) additionally refer to problems Pakistani people may have in relation to accessing services and goods. Ethnographic findings corroborate this in relation to the hostile reception that a few participants claimed to experience in shops, such as the example given by a female participant complaining that she and her children were not permitted access to certain Chinese shops, but were peremptorily ordered out upon entry.

Only two female participants in the ethnographic study claimed that they or their children had Chinese friends. Another said that she knew that some Pakistanis 'believe that Chinese children hate their children', with respect to the occasional and minor but unpleasant physical rejection that the children received from potential Chinese playmates. This was balanced by the added comment that, despite this, it was felt (or hoped) that the local (Chinese) people could 'respect good behaviour by Pakistani people'.

Generally, however, the ethnographic accounts also highlighted the anxiety of many participants to avoid being seen to be critical of Chinese neighbours. A second concern articulated was that any anti-social behaviour by certain members of the population led to the traducing of

the general reputation of the Pakistani community. Such concerns are also raised by respondents in the study by [Ku et al. \(2003\)](#). In our ethnographic study, this general stereotyping of the community was described as ‘unfair’ in relation to the alleged activities of some people in claiming social welfare benefits fraudulently or dubious industrial injury claims. Although confined to a small minority of individuals, it was feared that such activities were extrapolated to the entire Pakistani community by the Hong Kong Chinese majority, seriously tarnishing the image of all Pakistanis. Summing up her concerns, this participant had this to say:

This is the main problem. I tell them the truth about us [Pakistani community], but they don't believe me.

### Meso-level oppression and social work responses

For over 100 years, a dynamic tension has existed between those who understand the mission of social work to be one of remedial work and control, and those who regard the mission as one of transformation and resistance ([Campbell, 2003](#)). Hegemonic status has tended to be awarded to those theories and practices that have supported social work as a one of cure and control ([Franklin, 1986](#); [Haynes, 1998](#); [Howe, 1987](#); [Rothman, 1985](#)), although this, too, is clearly subject to ethnocentric and nationalist interests. However, the adoption by the practitioner of the discourses of resistance and transformation within an anti-racist approach may be also be subject to oppression in the professional sphere ([Parker, 2007](#)), as indicated in this translated account by one Hong Kong-based, Chinese Cantonese-speaking social worker:

However those professional workers refused to do assessments on [ME] youths. A colleague told me he never studied these issues on his degree course and wondered why I was so strange that I wanted to serve these guys . . . . The [agency manager] said that the needs I identified were not ‘professional’. He stopped me doing this, then I resigned.

This social worker commendably went on to set up an NGO in 2001, which today prominently seeks to advocate on behalf of ME communities, as a reaction to the perceived lack of social work response to racial discrimination in Hong Kong, the prevalence of which is reflected not only in research literature, and captured in the words of Pakistani research participants, but is additionally powerfully described by this Hong Kong social worker:

How do I know social workers racially discriminate? Because I have heard them call them [ME people] ‘Ah Cha’. They say, ‘Ah Cha are smelly, they block the way . . .’ [Asking] Why do they come to Hong Kong? They do not have the right to use social services.

Another account describes how far the purported racial superiority of Chinese ethnicity, as the biological norm, is contrasted with the racial inferiority of ME groups, as the deviant and socially and nationally

excluded (Hill Collins, 1998; Price, 2009), specifically in reference to Pakistanis, where overt discrimination is extended here to local Pakistani teenagers:

... the staff still did not allow [ME] youth to come into the Centre. The cleaner of the Centre always complained to me that 'Ah Cha' smell badly and create a negative image for the Centre. In a meeting a member of staff said, 'As a Chinese, in my veins is Chinese blood, and to serve these black skinned people, that I can't do!'

Aside from any discrimination Pakistanis may face from social service personnel and allied organisations, this is also prevalent in mainstream institutions, such as banks. An interesting example of new racism as a form of intersecting oppressions of race, religion, gender and geo-political discourse (Hill Collins, 2005) was demonstrated in the Hong Kong media, where it was reported that two (female) Pakistani residents and holders of Hong Kong identity cards allege that the powerful Hang Seng Bank refused to allow them to open accounts because they were 'from a country involved in terrorist attacks' (Chiang, 2010). Upon subsequent petitioning of the Bank of East Asia with the same request, they were advised not to include their ethnic origin on their application form. The Hong Kong ME advocacy NGO, UNISON, in turn notes that, to date, they have received fifteen complaints from Pakistanis who were barred from opening accounts because they came from a 'terrorist country', although this is contested by the Monetary Authority (Chiang, 2010).

## Concluding discussion

The body of growing evidence regarding the existence of ingrained racial discrimination towards certain ME communities in Hong Kong is supported by the findings of this study, despite its limitations in terms of scale and scope. Accordingly, daily difficulties caused by negative and pejorative attitudes at the micro, individual level for Pakistani participants are compounded by meso-level discrimination in the community, in terms of problematic or denied access to public services and resources, where CRT underlines the social and spatial apartheid of deeply stigmatised ethnic minoritisation (for not all ME groups are equally stigmatised) (Lightfoot, 2010; Price, 2009). The marginalised and disenfranchised position of the Pakistan community with respect to education, job-seeking and employment conditions further militates against the ability to create improved life prospects for individuals and families, through the compounded impact of replicating multiple oppressions across generations (Hill Collins, 1998). In relation to macro-level social policy and legislation, the Hong Kong landscape has been distinctly altered for ME communities during the post-colonial period, where less consideration is now given



towards the educational and religious needs of the Pakistani population, as an example (Heung, 2006; Ho, 2001; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000). This would be more manageable if these had been replaced by wide-reaching legislation empowered to tackle discrimination at both the micro and meso levels, but such is not the case. An orchestrated social work response by the profession based on Hong Kong's indigenised version of anti-racist or anti-oppressive practice has yet to emerge, although pockets of activism, often fuelled by individual social work concerns for equality and social justice, are evident in the protest against racist discrimination. However, these have yet to translate into a targeted and collective response towards combating prejudice against ME communities in general, as well as specifically in the case of established ethnic groups who have historically contributed so much to the wealth and status of Hong Kong society. Thus, the Hong Kong social work curricula must continue to focus on the needs of ME groups. In turn, social service agencies need to review and ensure that policies, procedures and practices attend to these needs, as opposed to alienating ME groups, whilst challenging systematic and legislative issues that maintain prejudice and discrimination.

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