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Intimate Partnership Formation and Intergenerational Relationships among Ethnic Minority Youth In Denmark

Summary

This article is based on a research project drawing upon in-depth qualitative interviews (N=61) and data from a survey (N=628) of young people and parents belonging to the five largest ethnic minority groups in Denmark. The theoretical framework combines conceptualisations about conflict and the family with theories about individualisation and discrimination effects. The dominating tendencies in the inter-generational relationships between young people and their parents on the subject of the young people's intimate partnership formation are analysed and discussed. The ethnic minority youth and parents' reflections on the ethnic majority partnership formation patterns are delineated. The analyses indicate that relationships between young people and parents on the issue of intimate partnership formation can be cooperative or in opposition. This is contrary to the widespread discourse about serious conflicts between generations. Thus the article criticises the reductionistic conception of partnership formation being a question of *either-or* processes, i.e. own choice *or* parental choice, and appeals for broad concepts which include *both-and* processes, i.e. own choice *and* parental accept.

Background and objectives

The dynamics of the formation of intimate partnership patterns, the management of sexuality, romantic relationships and marriage among

minority young people have been topics for societal, political and academic discussion for the past few years in Denmark, but not much empirical research has been conducted. There have been changes in the population composition during the past two decades – with the percentage of ethnic minorities¹ from the so-called third-world countries increasing from 3% to 7%. There are a variety of discourses about marriage patterns. For example, according to Mogensen & Nørgaard (2003), Sareen (2003), there is extreme parental pressure in the process of intimate partnership formation, the so-called “forced marriages”, while on the other hand, Rytter (2003a) and Schmidt & Jakobsen (2004) observe a high degree of autonomy among minority young people in Denmark. Similar contrasting discourses pre-

1 In Denmark some other controversial terms are used as an alternative to ‘ethnic minorities’, for example ‘new Danes’, ‘aliens’, ‘visible minorities’, ‘persons with another ethnic background than Danish’, and ‘people with a non-Danish background’. The term chosen here is ‘ethnic minority’ because it implies at least that one belongs to the society. However, the term ‘ethnic’ also has problematic connotations, implying structural/institutional racism in the fragmentation of the population into different groups through a majority-minorities discourse (Holzkamp 1995, p.26)

vail in Norway about immigrants taking their children, born and raised there, back to their country of origin, to be married against their will (Wikan 2002), while Bredal (1999) and Prieur (2002), draw attention to the young people's own active role in their partnership formation. Despite the dominant discourse about "forced marriages", which implies pressure and coercion from the parents and the rest of the family in minority young people's intimate relationship formation in the Nordic countries, there are surprisingly few studies in which the voice of the parental generation is included. Usually only the perceptions of the young people and professionals are highlighted. Similarly, we may assume that the patterns are affected by the context in which young people and their parents live, including the minority's understanding of the ethnic majority's partnership formation. Existing research focuses on the majority discourse about ethnic minority's partnership formation, and there is hardly any research depicting the ethnic minority's understanding of intimate partnership formation among the ethnic majority.

This article throws light on intergenerational dynamics by including both the parental and the young generation's voices along with a brief coverage of ethnic minority reflections on the majority's partnership formation patterns. I shall draw upon relevant national and international studies in various parts of the article to provide a comparative angle.

The aim of the article is to further knowledge about the field from a social psychological perspective in the context of the dominant discourse about problematic forms of intimate partnership formation among ethnic minority groups. The main research questions addressed in the article are:

- How do minority young people's relationships with their parents affect their intimate partnership formation?
- How do ethnic minority young people and

parents think about the ethnic majority's intimate partnership formation?

To some extent this article can best be viewed as a report on an explorative study focusing on Denmark. It attempts to add to our knowledge about the ethnic minority and majority and in particular about continuity and change in ways of forming intimate partnerships among minority groups in a larger context.

Theoretical Framework and the Conflict Perspective

In the present study, the epistemological framework is social psychological pertaining to the relationship between the person and the society. The framework follows a middle course between the two contrasting world-views underlying philosophical assumptions of knowledge, captured in the statements "reality constructs the person" and "the person constructs reality". This middle course is consistent with both reality constructing the person and the person constructing reality. Crude realism (positivism) and pure (linguistic) idealism are both rejected in favour of a dialectical approach to knowledge, as also delineated by Verkuyten (2005:28).

According to modernisation theories, societal changes due to technology and media lead to psychological changes and new modes of action. Individualisation is associated with freedom from traditions, narrow social groupings as well as constraints from the labour market, and existence as a consumer (Hietmeyer & Elk 1995). Individualisation has not only "bright" but also "dark" sides, such as uncertainty related to responsibility for one's own choices and consequent feelings of guilt and self-reproach over mistaken choices, accompanied by isolation and loneliness (Jørgensen 2002). But intergenerational relationships are characterised not only by individualisation, but also by complex patterns of mutual contact and

interaction (Dencik 2002, 2005). The ethnic minority is seen as a part of the larger society, in which there are complex relationships between the experience of racial discrimination and the creation (as well as transformation) of the boundaries in the process of intimate relationship formation among the ethnic minority youth (Barth 1969). According to Fernando (2003) most minorities deal with racism by learning strategies to sidestep it and/or to counteract its effects on their psychological and social functioning.

In family research, there are two main “traditions” for the study of family function. The first focuses on family-related characteristics whereas the second focuses on how individuals function in the family. In the former, the family function is investigated through family indicators like conflict, communication or support (Sabatelli & Bartle 1995). The present article focuses on the conflict perspective in order to examine young people’s intimate partnership formation and their relationships with their parents.

There are contrasting views in the existing research on intergenerational conflicts. On the one hand there are social scientists like Baumann (2001), who assert that per definition belonging to different generations implies different experiences and interests, but not serious conflicts. On the other hand there are psychologists who observe that a potential for intergenerational conflict exists between the ethnic minority parents and youth, migrated from the so-called third-world countries to Western countries (Lalonde, Hyne, Pannu & Tatla, 2004). So it is important to throw light upon both cooperative and conflictual aspects of inter-generational relationships. In the present study, relations between the two generations are mainly examined through the conflict perspective. Conflict is seen as collision between the interests, judgements, actions and goals of the different parties involved in a relationship.

Within the classical social psychological

conceptualisations of Coser (1956), conflict is perceived to have some basic functions within a group. Coser argues that not all types of conflict are likely to benefit group structure, and that conflict cannot subserve such functions for all groups. Whether social conflict is beneficial to internal adaptation or not depends on the types of issues over which it is fought as well as on the type of social structure within which it occurs. However, types of conflict and types of social structure are not independent variables. Internal social conflicts which concern goals, values, or interests that do not contradict the basic assumptions, upon which the relationship is founded, tend to be positively functional for the social structure. Such conflicts tend to make possible the readjustment of norms and power relations within groups in accordance with the felt needs of its individual members (ibid: 151). Such conflicts can be seen as having a stabilising and integrative function for the group. Furthermore, Coser underlines the importance of the social structure of the group, because closely-knit groups in which there exists a high frequency of interaction and high personal involvement among members have a tendency to suppress conflict. While they provide frequent occasions for hostility (since both sentiments of love and hatred are intensified through frequency of interaction), the acting out of such feelings is sensed as a danger to such close relationships, and hence there is a tendency to suppress rather than to allow expression of hostile feelings. In close-knit groups, feelings of hostility tend, therefore, to accumulate and hence to intensify. If conflict breaks out in a group that has consistently tried to prevent expression of hostile feelings, it will be particularly intense for two reasons. First, because the conflict does not merely aim at resolving the immediate issue which led to its outbreak. All the accumulated grievances, which were denied expression previously, are likely to emerge on this occasion. Second, because the

total personal involvement of group members make for the mobilisation of all the sentiments during the conduct of the struggle. Hence, the closer the group, the more intense the conflict can be. Where members participate with their total personality and conflicts are suppressed, conflict, if it breaks out, is likely to threaten the very roots of the relationship, tending to “tear apart” the group. On the other hand, conflict within a group may help to establish unity or to re-establish unity and cohesion when they have been threatened by hostile and antagonistic feelings among the members. One example from the study of reorganisation of relationships is that alliances are forged among siblings in confronting the parental generation, if the parents are too strict with one of the siblings. Another example is that the mother may support her daughter in a conflict between the father and the daughter about the choice of an intimate partner. Third, in conflicts within groups, the individual is given an opportunity to recommit her/himself to the values that underlie the membership of the group, thereby revitalising the existing norms or contributing to the emergence of new norms. Thus conflicts can assist in bringing about connection and revitalisation.

We can from the examples conclude with Coser that conflicts may benefit the group, though the costs and benefits vary depending on both the structure of the group and the issues involved. Flexibility and rigidity within the group are important aspects because conflicts tend to be dysfunctional for a social structure in which there is no, or insufficient, toleration of conflict. The intensity of conflict, which threatens to “tear apart” and attack the consensual basis of the group, is related to the rigidity of the structure. It is not the conflict as such but the rigidity, which leads to hostilities accumulating and being channelled along one major line of cleavage once they break out in conflict.

It can be argued that everyday life’s disagree-

ments or minor conflicts in families, which are flexible, can lead to the revitalising of existing norms or to the emergence of new norms. However, in rigid families – with fixed roles and functions and next to no place for reorganising or accepting change – conflicts can have serious consequences, like the “tearing apart” of the family. In the present study, young people are asked to express their own understanding of the conflicts in the family on the question of their intimate partnership formation. Conflict is used as an analytical concept from a social psychological perspective without differentiating between *open and hidden* conflicts (Lennéer-Axelsson & Thylefors, 1991).

There is a probability that the participants do not fully reveal the *hidden* conflicts and attempt *desirable responses*, which I consider to be two of the methodological difficulties involved in the questionnaire survey. However, this difficulty has been addressed in the present empirical study by combining the survey with in-depth interviews.

Methodology

Population and sample

This article is based on an investigation conducted in 2003-2004 in Denmark². Multiple methods of data collection were used – quantitative and qualitative. The overall patterns in intimate partnership formation in the minority groups was addressed in a questionnaire survey, while the commitment to see reality from the point of view of the subjects and to address the complexities of the interpretative process led to the in-depth interviews.

² The study was funded by the Danish Ministry of Integration, and conducted by the researchers Garbi Schmidt, Vibeke Jakobsen, National Danish Social Research Institute and myself. Garbi Schmidt conducted 23 interviews, including 2 parental interviews, while I conducted 36 interviews, including 18 interviews with the parents.

The quantitative method consisted of a national questionnaire survey conducted by the National Danish Social Research Institute. Professional interviewers made home visits to 628 ethnic minority young people aged 17-27. The qualitative method was in-depth interviews with 35 young persons, 20 parents and 11 professionals. The young people and parents belong to the five largest ethnic minority groups from outside the European Union and Scandinavia: immigrants from Turkey, ex-Yugoslavia, Pakistan and refugees from Lebanon and Somalia. Refugees from Iraq were not included in the survey due to their insecure socio-political situation in the year 2003.

The basis for choosing these groups is that they are the “visible” ethnic minority groups in Denmark targeted in the prevalent discourse about the so-called “forced marriages”. The placing of these groups is indicative of their symbolic position as minorities with a low socio-economic position, with three to four times the unemployment level found among the population as a whole, and the object of discrimination, racism and negative media attention (Fenger-Grøn, Qureshi & Seidenfaden 2003:12). Despite these similarities between the groups, it is important to be aware of the heterogeneity of the historical, demographical and socio-cultural aspects of the groups, which affects the acculturation process and the family dynamics for the younger generation. However, a more detailed description of these groups’ socio-economic situation is beyond the scope of this article.

The survey was conducted in 2003 with young people who had lived a minimum of 7 years in Denmark. A sample of 200 people from each of the five above-mentioned groups was randomly chosen. Questionnaire interviews were conducted in Danish among 64% of the youth, while 12 % refused to participate in the survey, with the highest dropout percentage in the capital region, similar to the survey

by Møller & Tøgeby (1999). On the one hand some inferences can be drawn about the wider population because the answer percent of 64% is regarded as satisfactory, while on the other hand, the dropping out of what is possibly the “most vulnerable” part of the population calls for caution in the interpretation of the results.

Data collection

Participants in the in-depth interviews were contacted through institutions in contact with these groups, such as educational institutions, minority women meeting centres, social centres and key persons in the groups. The young people and parents came from various parts of Denmark. The interviews were primarily conducted in Danish, though some in Somali/Arabic through an interpreter. Moreover I conducted some interviews in Urdu/Punjabi (mother tongue for the Pakistani parents). Particular attention was paid to ethical aspects, keeping in mind the sensitivity of the topics and the vulnerable situation of the ethnic minority in society. Most of these interviews were conducted one-to-one. On a few occasions a spouse was present.

Analysis

In agreement with Verkuyten (2005), I consider the three levels of analysis – societal, interactional and individual – as interdependent, though not reducible to each other. In the present study, the focus is on the interaction between young people and the parental generation as well as on their reflections on the ethnic majority’s partnership formation patterns. The quantitative analyses are predominantly bivariate. The qualitative data analysis involved meaning condensation and categorisation of the participant’s narrative on the theory-based themes. In answering the first research question, the analysis consists of meaning condensation of the narrative and thereafter categorising the young person

as predominantly experiencing no conflicts, minor conflicts or serious conflicts. The aspects of flexibility and rigidity form the basis of categorising the parents. Similarly the second question is answered by analysing young people’s and parents’ narratives about the ethnic majority’s partnership formation into the categories of predominantly positive reflections and negative reflections.

Results: Emergence of a Picture with Various Patterns

According to the quantitative analysis 87% of the young people and 90% of the parents in the present study answered that their religion is Islam.

The analysis indicates that about half of the young people had formed intimate relationships – 24% were married, 7% were engaged, and 19% had a boy/girlfriend. The following table presents the differential patterns among the five groups as well as the overall figures for the ethnic minority as such. Although the number indicating the total for

the five groups can be criticised for overlooking significant differences between the ethnic minorities, documentation that “only” approximately one fourth of the youth in the age group 17-27 years are married challenges the myths about high prevalence of marriage among ethnic minority youth (Mogensen & Nørgaard, 2003).

Of course, there are significant differences among young people belonging to the different ethnic groups. One example is that there are three times as many young people with parents from ex-Yugoslavia who have a girl/boyfriend compared to young people with parents from Pakistan or Lebanon. In the present survey, experiences of discrimination and marginalisation are reported by 50% of the young people³. Similarly there are almost twice as many Turkish young people who are married compared to Ex-Yugoslavian young people. One possible explanation could be the relatively more “European” way of life among this group compared to the Turkish group. These differences between the groups are related to a number of complex factors, such as the acculturation

Table 1: Ethnic minority 17-27 year-olds divided according to intimate partnership and country of origin.

17-27 year-olds originating from	Married	Engaged	Has a girl/boyfriend	Is neither married, engaged, nor in an intimate relationship	Total percent	Total number
Ex-Yugoslavia	19.29	7.14	31.43	42.14	100.00	140
Turkey	37.80	7.09	17.32	37.80	100.00	127
Pakistan	22.69	8.40	10.92	57.98	100.00	119
Lebanon	31.50	9.45	12.60	46.46	100.00	271
Somalia	9.73	1.77	19.47	78	100.00	113
Total	24.44	6.87	18.69	50.00	100.00	626

Table 3: Ethnic minority 17-27 year-olds divided according to intimate partnership and the age categories.

	Married	Engaged	Has a girl/boyfriend	Is neither married, engaged nor in an intimate relationship	Total percent	Total number
17-20 years old	4.38	5.98	19.92	69.72	100.00	251
21-23 years old	30.34	8.43	18.54	42.70	100.00	178
24-28 years old	44.22	6.53	17.09	32.16	100.00	199
Total	24.36	6.85	18.63	50.16	100.00	628

process and experiences of discrimination, which are only briefly dealt with here. The survey results focus on overall patterns in the intergenerational dynamic in young people's intimate partnership formation. These considerations involve the classical dilemma between breadth and depth.

The overall conclusion based on the survey data gives a picture with variations about intimate partnership formation:

The first category is the 68% who report no conflicts with their parents on the issue of intimate relationship formation. The second category is the 17% who report some conflicts, and the third category is the 7% who report serious conflicts with the parental generation (8% answered that the question was not relevant for them). In the present article the focus is on young people in the first and third categories as they cover the "extreme" cases, though there is to some extent negotiation, ambivalence and rebellion among the young people in the second category.

The term conflict is used directly in the questionnaire⁴ and the young people are given

the opportunity to express their understanding of any conflict with their parents about having a girlfriend/boyfriend. The Danish word "kæreste"⁵ was used. The relationship covers a particular period and not changes over a period. However an analysis by age shows that a larger number of young people in the group aged 21-23 have conflicts with their parents about intimate partnership formation than those in the group aged 17-20 or 24-27. One possible explanation is that young people in the first age group are not as involved in intimate relationships as those in the middle group. This is in agreement with the conclusion in an exploration of young people's sexual experience in Denmark (Ung 99, 1999) that the average age for the first sexual experience for young Danish people is 17-18, while non-Danish young people have their sexual debut at a later age. Another implication is that there

girl/boyfriend? The possible answer categories were: serious conflicts, small conflicts, no conflicts, not relevant, do not remember, not informed.

5 The term "kæreste" is used, which is difficult to translate to English because it implies a romantic, intimate relationship without differentiating between genders. The nearest translation in everyday life is either girlfriend/boyfriend or partner.

4 The question asked was: *Have you had small or serious conflicts with your parents on the following – about a*

are relatively more young people aged 21-23 who involve their parents in their intimate relationships.

Positive relationships between young people and parents over young people's partnership formation

What contributes to making the intergenerational relationship positive for some? The question is addressed below based on a combination of analyses of the survey data and the data from the in-depth interviews.

For some young people, managing romantic relationships, sexuality and partnership formation is an area of crucial negotiations with their parents, a very salient area, in which they reformulate their identities. Their prior experiences of help and guidance from their parents play an important part in this phase of life.

Gender-based analysis of the survey data in the present study also indicates that 69% of parents accept the boy/girlfriend relationship for their young sons and daughters. 79% of the young women and 60 % of the young men reported that their parents had accepted their romantic relationship. On the other hand young women report three times as many serious conflicts with parents on this issue than young men. There are some apparent paradoxes such as a larger number of parents accepting the daughters' boyfriends yet a greater number of generational conflicts about the issue.

There are, however, significant differences between the different ethnic minority groups. For example, most of the young people from ex-Yugoslavia express parental acceptance about their girl/boyfriend whereas only 31% of the young people originating from Pakistan report parental accept. Most of the parents either show acceptance or ambivalence towards these relationships and only relatively few do not accept the relationship at all.

Voices of the Young people

A narrative from a 19-year-old, ex-Yugoslavian girl, Narima who did not have a boyfriend at the time of the interview but had expressed her expectations regarding her parents' guidance, contributed to our understanding of the positive intergenerational dynamic. She appreciated that her parents had worked hard in order to provide better life conditions for their children and that they were always there to help them. Everyday life disagreements with her parents are also mentioned along with the solution to the problems.

They [parents] will of course advise me and guide me, and tell me "he is the right person" or how it is. I think in some way or the other, it will be a learning process. One learns a bit, one prepares for the future ... our parents have always advised and guided us about all sorts of things. If there is something we want to know, we can just ask them.

Furthermore Narima explains her viewpoints about the disagreements with the parents:

There were disagreements. It is clear when you are growing up. There are teenage problems and there is always something or the other. Like going to a party. ... "No you should not go to the party, girls do not do that. ... So you are irritated with them and do not talk to them for a couple of days. ... Do not eat the dinner with them.

The narrative demonstrates the presence of everyday life problems between the generations, which lead to the expression of disagreements and some feelings of hostility. Though at the same time it is important to point out that these problems do not contradict the basic assumptions upon which the parent-young person relationship is founded. The imposition of limitations from the parents about youth activities like attending parties leads to discontent. The young woman expresses her irritation through strategies like avoiding contact with her parents, by not talking to them, or isolating herself at mealtimes. There are op-

portunities to resolve these everyday conflicts as the parents also show flexibility. Thus these disagreements can be regarded as stabilising, confirming connectedness and revitalising the parental norms about the daughter's social activities. The overall relationship between the generations remains positive, in spite of some disagreements because there is flexibility in the family structure.

Another aspect is the positive communication and trust between the generations as illustrated by an ex-Yugoslavian college student, Jasna, who had a boyfriend at the time of the interview. She emphasises the mutual trust and openness between herself and her family, especially her father.

I have a really good relationship with my family and we are very open. We talk about everything at home; there is nothing that is taboo, not even sex. ... There are of course limits about what I can talk about to my father ... though I know he is open. He helps as much as he can ... We really communicate well.

The above narrative implies a positive relationship based on sharing of life experiences indicated by common interest and openness on both sides. This is in agreement with the results in a psychological review (Coley 2003) that many aspects of parent-young people relationships, including emotional closeness, nurturance, sharing of activities and parenting styles, relate to emotional health. Part of the explanation for the positive relationship indicated in the above quotation can be sought in an empirical study about Asians in Britain (Anwar 1998), which concluded that sharing of various life experiences such as discrimination contribute to bringing the parental and youth generations together.

Despite the young people's declarations of psychological attachment to parents, including positive aspects of communication, trust and love, only a few young people fully trust the parents to make the crucial decisions for them,

most of them want to be involved in these processes themselves. Young people are struggling to find some middle ground between the parental perceptions and the changing practices in their environment. Young people feel that they benefit from parental advice and guidance in these matters in a similar way to the positive effect of parental support in alleviating the negative effects of perceived discrimination and in enhancing school adjustment (Leibkind et al. 2004).

These narratives emphasising parental cooperation, sharing and advice hardly support the views about the relationships between young people and parents among immigrants in the USA, where the "roles of the parents and children are often reversed. In these situations, children become, in a very real sense, their parents' parents, elders [being forced] to rely on their youngsters for guidance" (Portes & Rambaut 1996:240). On the other hand a positive relationship between young people and their parents is perceived as an important factor in preventing abusive and exploitative girl/boyfriend relationships as indicated by Gupta (1999:135) in a study about dating and marriage among South Asian young people in the USA. There are examples in Gupta's study of young people struggling with emotionally and physically abusive relationships because they are deprived of parental support and advice about their intimate relationships. In contrast to the above-mentioned young women in the present study, the young people in Gupta's study were unable to discuss their unease over specific situations with their parents and sometimes even their friends. Although some parents allow their daughters to date, most of them do not approve of multiple relationships, which are commonplace and almost expected in the mainstream America, explains Gupta. These differences can be related to the differential generational dynamics in the young person's family, which could be affected by the dominating partnership formation practices

among the group and their reflections on the majority's partnership patterns.

Parental voices about youth's selection

In the present study, a Pakistani mother, Tahira, with an adult son and daughter, shows the parental supportive role in the choice of intimate partners for the young people. Her narrative shows that parental involvement can contribute to making the process easier for the younger generation, if there is mutual understanding and flexibility.

I would like to be a part of the marriage process for my children, but that doesn't mean that I will decide. Others [family members] will just be invited – no more interference. ... We have our Indian and Pakistani friends, from whom they can get support and meet the right person. The most important thing is that they understand each other. They will not choose someone from the Danish culture. I don't think so.

Answering a question about the young generation's choice of partner, Tahira states:

[But] We give them a chance. If something happens for my children, in the first place for their happiness, I will listen to them, their reason why they have chosen a person who is not from their own culture. Of course, they are welcome with either one or the other. If it has to be someone close to our culture, then it is an Indian who is much like us, but in fact I like Danish young people and I have nothing against them.

The above narrative points to the positive dynamics of parent youth relationships such as agreement about the goals, rights and power position of the youth generation. Tahira is aware of the potential differential choices of her son and daughter but at the same time she expresses her flexibility and willingness to accept the choices. Similar changes in some of the Pakistani parents are indicated by Samad & Eade, 2002, in a study about arranged and forced marriages among South Asians in England. Although the parents show less acknowledgement of the "forced marriages" as compared to the

young generation, yet they are willing to give more place to the young people's own choices, influenced among other things by the increasingly dominant discourse about romantic relationships and personal choices in cultural productions like films, television dramas, theatre.

Perhaps Tahira's narrative may seem contradictory at first, because she implies freedom of choice as well as ethnic group endogamy (marriage within the same group) for her children but a deeper analysis, differentiating between the mother's wishes and what is acceptable for her, makes her viewpoint consistent. She states that her son and daughter should have the option of choosing themselves, which implies her accept of dating. At the same time she hopes that the choice will be within the same *culture group*, which is perceived primarily as the Pakistani group, secondly as the Indian group, though she adds that she is willing to accept a son or daughter-in-law from the majority group too. Her narrative also makes the basis for placing her as *flexible* in contrast to parents who are placed as rigid and transitional as mentioned earlier in the conceptualisation of conflict in relation to the family as a group.

Differential strategies in the generational struggle

An ethnographic study about the choice of partners and arrangement of marriage among Pakistani young males in Denmark argued that the issue of marriage is about the family's identity – who they are and what they want to be (Rytter 2003). There are three strategies involved – at both the individual and collective level – in the generational struggle over the selection of a spouse.

One strategy is for the young person to know and accept the parents' and family's preferences about any potential partner and "fall in love" with a person who will be accepted by the family. Thereby the positive relationship continues and serious conflicts that might threaten to "tear apart" the family are avoided.

The second strategy for the young person is to choose a partner and be indifferent to parental acceptance because the choice is not up for discussion. This strategy implies conflict and a possible revitalisation of family values leading to the parental accept of the partnership if they want to keep the relationship with their son or daughter. According to the conceptualisation by Coser mentioned in the theoretical framework, conflicts about partner formation in the family can help in the emergence of a new norm, "acceptance of the young person's choice", if there is some level of flexibility in the family structure, the daughter/son-in-law will be accepted by the parents. Thus the conflict about the choice of young people's partner becomes a mechanism for adjustment of norms adequate to the new conditions. The conflict has thereby both a revitalising and an integrative function. But there is a risk of the family "tearing apart" – if the parents are rigid and do not accept the young person's choice.

The third strategy, "once bitten twice shy", is seen among the youth who accept the parental choice the first time in order to avoid serious conflict, and when the first marriage fails, they decide to marry again only if romantic feelings are involved. At the collective level the parents maintain relevant information as a prerogative, while the youth generation uses education and association membership as strategies for negotiating the different positions and possibilities in marriage arrangements. Rytter's study documents both the importance of the parents and the increased empowerment of young people in their partnership formation, in congruence with the findings in the present investigation.

Coming back to our analysis, Tahira's narrative also implies the parental expectation that the young people's relationships will lead to marriage. The results from the present questionnaire survey indicate that 2/3 of young people expect that their boy/girlfriend relationship will lead to marriage. A large number of

young people and their parents consider dating and romantic relationships as a step on the path to marriage, hopefully a stable marriage.

We can summarise on the basis of the narratives of the youth and parents combined with relevant studies from the national and international context that large numbers of ethnic minority young people are able to negotiate with the parental generation about partnership formation, in spite of everyday conflicts and disagreements. Flexibility in the family structure contributes to the functionality of the disagreements, thus maintaining relative harmony between the generations. But the results also indicate that some young people experience serious problems with their parents over partnership formation.

Serious conflicts between young people and their parents over partnership formation

The positive intergenerational relations described above are not seen among the 7% of young people in the present survey who report serious conflict with their parents about their intimate partnership formation. For some young people their relationships with their parents is highly conflictual, because the processes of complex renegotiating and reformulating are not primarily covert, but also overt. The psychological review about parent-young people relationships (Coley 2003) mentioned earlier indicates that contentious relationships, with a lack of, or decreased, closeness over time, are related to negative behaviour by young people. It also suggests that paternal alienation and interest disagreement are related to poor psychological health. Recollecting Coser's conceptualisations about conflict and the family structure, attention is also directed towards the question of parental rigidity and flexibility.

Some young people experience major di-

lemmas in their relationship with their parents regarding their intimate partnerships. Young people do not want their parents to influence the crucial decisions, yet they care for the parents. At the same time, they make the relationship with their partner untidy by controlling and limiting what their parents learn of their feelings and activities (Leonard 1999). This way of dealing with the dilemma has been termed as *partial concealment*, related to a complex negative relationship between the parents and the youth. The narratives of the young people in the third category in the present study – who experience serious conflicts – present a complex dynamic around the disagreements, ranging from hiding the fact about the boy/girlfriend to keeping the relationship secret in the preliminary stages and making it public when a serious, committed relationship is established. In this way sharing the relationship with parents can be postponed for some period.

The following narrative from a young Turkish woman, Ayse, illustrates that “timing” in revealing the relationship is a significant factor. She is concealing the fact that she has an intimate relationship with a Turkish boyfriend at the time of the interview, but plans to disclose it later. This implies ambivalence because she regards her relationship with parents as open even if she conceals her intimate relationship. She is hesitant whether the family will accept him and at the same time she suspects that the family is already aware of their relationship.

... I think I am open with my parents, very, very open. Also with my father. I talk to him about many things. I do not tell him that I have a boyfriend in that way, but I think he knows that I have a boyfriend. Somehow one keeps it a bit secret ...

On the other hand for some it is the indirect parental expectations and the young person’s transgressions that make the situation conflictual and some young people just have no

plans of sharing the fact of their intimate relationships with the parents at all. As Jamal, the 18-year-old Arabic youth, expresses that he does not want to share information about his girlfriend with his parents because it is against the parental, especially maternal, expectations. His narrative implies contradictions and ambivalence.

When I have a girlfriend, I don’t tell my parents. I met her in a school party ... As my mother said to me: “Oh Jamal, you are sweet, you are a good boy, you don’t have girlfriends.” And I do anyway. So sometimes I feel bad about it. I also had another girlfriend. I didn’t tell my parents. She was Arabic and I met her in a football match ...

Suffering, concealment and voices of the youth

The following narratives bring out the dilemmas and sufferings experienced by some of the young people. The young Turkish woman, Sengul, explains the conflicts leading to her keeping certain activities secret, in terms of her mother’s lack of trust in her, control and worry about the family network’s negative reaction to “their reputation”.

... She misunderstands me. She often thinks so when I come late [and asks] “Why do you come home late?” And I don’t want her to ask, “Do you have a boy friend, have you been out with a man, where have you been?” As if she doesn’t trust me. I know, I can see it, she hardly trusts me. ... In a way she reminds me, what to remember and take care about. It really irritates me a lot that she messes up in everything ... What they are afraid of is that people begin to say that they have a daughter who is not proper. That is it. They say all the time “Remember now, what people will say. Take care.” I will run away if I am caught with a man/boyfriend.

This narrative reflects aspects of the situation described by Mørck (1998), about minority young people in Denmark. Gossip of a ma-

licious nature constrains the lives of young women because it is not just directed at the young woman, but at her whole family, and once the family reputation has been tarnished, this may lead to further sanctions such as physical assault, limitation of freedom.

These conflicts, including the practice of secrecy and deception, indicate that the family no longer shares the basic values upon which the family system rests. These conflicts lead to different intra-psychological reactions for the young people. Just keeping the relationship secret for some time involves ambivalence and uncertainty, if not total disagreement between the generations. On the other hand, lack of mutual trust in the long run indicates deeper non-sharing of the basic values and can be harmful for mental health and lead to psychologically self-destructive and aggressive behaviour.

The results of the present study indicate slightly higher conflicts among young women (8.3% reporting conflicts) as compared to young men (5.7% reporting serious conflicts), which can be partly understood by Lalonde et al.'s (2004) argumentation that the young women report greater family pressure in comparison to the men, though the women's awareness of this pressure might even be evidence that they are resisting their parent's expectations. To some extent, Ayse's and Sengul's narratives also imply resistance to parental expectations. Furthermore the analyses show that both young men and women experience serious conflicts, warning us against overemphasising the gender factor and ignoring the psychological pressures experienced by young men. The Arabic young man Jamal's expression "*sometimes I feel bad about it*" and the young Arabic woman Fatiha's expression "*bad conscience*" in the next narrative illustrates the psychological pressure related to concealment across the gender borders. Fatiha describes how her relationships with a couple of boyfriends, who belonged to the same ethnic minority group as her own, were managed by de-

ception of the parents at a high psychological cost.

I had two boyfriends before him. Two boyfriends, it has never been a Dane. ... And we were together for a month, and it was just like that, I had to lie to my parents, and say that it was a new girlfriend, to spend time with him. And we were at his place or we were in a café. And I reached a point when I didn't want to do it anymore. I was tired that all this had to be hidden and we could not see each other [openly]. I was bad at lying and I didn't like that. I had a really bad conscience about that.

The expression of emotions of pain and suffering related to lack of trust, concealment and a form of rebellion against parental reaction to *what will others say*, indicates some of the dynamics involved in the intergenerational conflicts.

Suffering, concealment and parental voices

It is important to include the parental reasons for these actions, which can be termed as rigid according to the analytical conceptualisation based on psychologists Pels (2000) and Juliusdottir (2002). The parental narratives below illustrate that some parents emphasise that the next generation must follow the guidelines – based on an oversimplified, static cultural and/or religious foundation. These parents probably do not consider the societal context and the societal changes as significant. A Turkish father, Mehmet, explains his point of view about the young person's intimate partner formation. His narrative points to the salience of religion in his understanding of the gender relations and intimate partnership formation including marriage.

In our religion [Islam], this [having a boy/girlfriend] is not allowed. Not living together. It is against my religion. First get married. Those who live like that, they decide for themselves. We cannot do that.

Similarly a Pakistani mother, Ruksana, emphasises clear limits for the young generation's opportunities for intimate relationship formation. Her narrative implies that it is part of parental socialisation to make young people internalise these religious and cultural practices related to contact between the two genders. According to her narrative there is no place for any romantic sexual relationship before marriage or for young people to choose partners themselves, which can be considered a rigid way of approaching the partnership formation of young people.

The parents set a limit for their children. If you cross these limits, it is not good for you. To children they say what is halal [allowed] ... Both girls and boys, we are not much [open]. My child will think, before she says: "I love that young man, and I want to marry him."

Although 87% of the young people and 90% of the parents in the present study answered that their religion is Islam, there was hardly any measure of salience attached to the religion in the survey. The data cannot be used to indicate the number of people in the survey for whom religion is highly important as illustrated in the above narratives from the in-depth interviews. Still these narratives contribute to our understanding of the serious conflicts between young people and their parents in the case of rigidity. It is important to point out that there are many complex reasons for parental rigidity, religion may be one of them. It is probable that for young people with parents with such viewpoints, getting attracted to and choosing partners themselves involves a denial of these limits. The young person can conceal the romantic relationship from the parents. There can be psychological suffering involved in developing and implementing the concealment strategy as well as fear and anxiety related to being caught for the youth and the psychological feeling of loss for the parental generation. Consequently there is a risk of serious

conflicts and repercussions, which threaten to "tear apart" the family.

Serious Conflicts – Some reflections

There can be both methodological as well as conceptual explanations for the relatively low reporting of serious conflicts in the present study. Perhaps the number would be higher if other research methods were used, because there is a possibility of *desirable responses* that underplays conflicts as discussed earlier. Secondly the "weakest section" of the population was probably among the non-respondents to the questionnaire. Conceptually, there are empirical studies such as Øia in Bredal (1999), which show a lower reporting of serious conflicts among ethnic minority young people in Oslo. The explanation is "traditional families are built on respect and obedience with lower levels of conflicts. Though on the other side there is high potential for conflicts among the immigrant families because the youth are influenced by the majority society and because the parents are more strict" (ibid: 35). This explanation contains too much generalisation and ignores the nuances in the parental relationship to young people mentioned by Pels (2000) and Juliusdottir (2002). It is relevant to bring in Coser's earlier mentioned theory that there is a tendency to suppress conflicts in close-knit groups with high frequency and high personal involvement – like the ethnic minority families in countries like Denmark and Norway, experiencing marginalisation and discrimination. Thus one possible explanation for the low reporting of serious conflicts may be that conflicts are suppressed. When conflicts do break out in such families they are particularly intense.

On the one hand, for some young people whose secret relationships are discovered, the repercussions are fast and rather predictable – parents pressurise the young couple to justify their actions and feelings through a formalised agreement to get married, without

consideration for the young people's original plans (among South Asians in America as described by Gupta 1999). On the other hand the British and Nordic studies point out more tragic consequences among ethnic minority groups like Turks, Kurds and Pakistanis (Anwar 1998, Bredal 1999, Wikan 2002, Rytter 2003, Schlytter 2004), when the concealed relationships are discovered by rigid, non-compromising parents. It can lead to actions like running away, living under constant anxiety, getting a new identity, being totally neglected or in some instances being subject to violent attacks by family and/or community members, or being forced to go back to the country of origin. In a few cases, reactions lead to assassination by family members. These cases tend to get exaggerated attention in the media.

Serious Conflicts – Some conclusions

We can conclude that the discussions about young people's choice of intimate partners and parental reactions to the partner or vice versa are complex. A large number of the minority young people have positive relationships with their parents, characterised by everyday life's disagreements or minor conflicts about the issue of intimate partnership formation. These small disagreements or minor conflicts tend to be positively functional for the family as a group: confirming the connections, revitalising the norms (e.g. parents accepting the young person's choice), readjustment of norms and power relations within the family (e.g. the young person accepting the parental "guidelines" to some extent). Thus depending on the level of flexibility between the parents and the young person, the conflicts over intimate partnership formation can contribute to the emergence of new norms adjusted to the new conditions of living in highly modern, multi-ethnic societies. The narratives illustrate that resolution of conflict implies mutual accommodation, especially openness, and acceptance

of changes on the part of both generations, especially the parental generation. Most of the young people who choose partners themselves want parental approval and acceptance at some point in time.

The present analyses also indicate that there are serious conflicts and a risk of consequent destructive reactions, including the "tearing apart" of the family seen among 7% of the young people questioned. These processes involving psychological suffering for both generations are related to rigidity in the family system. This rigidity is related to a number of complex factors like the family's acculturation, experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, which are not in focus in this article (see Singla 2004a).

The focus on intergenerational dynamics demonstrates that the parental generation plays an important part in minority young people's intimate partnership formation. A suitable form of intervention for helping young people with these problems implies involvement of the family especially the parental generation. However, a large number of paradoxes and controversies between ideals and reality are seen in the last category of young people, who experience serious conflicts with the parental generation that often threaten to "tear apart" the family. These serious, destructive conflicts point to the relevance of psychosocial intervention to ameliorate the psychological suffering of both the generations. The analyses of the intergenerational relationship form the basis for a suitable intervention and prevention system for helping young people and their parents when such serious conflicts arise, as described elsewhere (Singla 2004b, Singla 2006).

At the same time the ethnic minority family is part of the larger society, interacting with and affected by the majority. One of the overlooked factors involved in ethnic minority young people's partnership formation is their own and parents' understanding of the majority's partnership formation patterns. The

minority groups are influenced by the dominant discourses about the majority's partnership formation patterns at various levels and by the perception of the ethnic majority's partnership formation patterns. In the next section I briefly discuss these perceptions.

Ethnic minority understandings of mainstream Danish partnership formation patterns

The present study shows that the young people's patterns of intimate relationships also involve a critical assessment of the patterns found among the majority population, i.e., so-called *Danish intimate partnership formation patterns*. As mentioned earlier, the ethnic minority intimate partnership formation pattern simplifies the complex diversity among the different minority groups. Similarly any conceptualisation of Danish patterns can be considered simplistic, because there are many divergent ways of partnership forming among the Danes. In some ways this conceptualisation also contributes to the stereotypes of "them" and "us". However, the context of the dominant discourse *about minority partnership formation patterns*, there is justification for examining the ethnic minority's understanding of the mainstream Danish patterns.

In the qualitative part of the study, the participant's views about intimate partnership formation among the ethnic majority were questioned. The answers were analysed and categorised as predominantly *positive* or *negative* reflections. Some narratives bring out a positive evaluation from the ethnic minority young people and parents. The narrative from the young Turkish man, Bulent, points to the positive aspects such as the contact between the partners before marriage and ease in ending a marriage.

... One can say that they [the Danes] get easily divorced or they get easily married. I think that it is important that the couple know each other, before they get married.

Similarly a young Lebanese woman, Amne, regards the "less dependent" relationship and amicable dissolution of marriage as positive features of the Danish partnership formation.

... The good sides are that they are not so dependent on each other. ... If they want to leave each other, they do it in a good way. There is understanding from both sides. In relation to us, if a woman wants to get divorced, then the husband doesn't want to leave her.

Contrary to the dominant discourse about the high divorce rate, the Pakistani mother, Tahira, comments on the stability of some Danish intimate partnerships as a positive feature:

The best thing about the Danish way of getting married is that many marriages are stable relationships, a number of them reach silver and golden wedding anniversaries ...

Other narratives focus on the negative features. The young Lebanese man, Jamal, commented both about the romance in the Danish partnership formation and the high frequency of divorces. His negative reflections were also directed at the marriage breakdown, even when there are children in the family.

... *The Danes are good in having romantic relationships. But they get divorced, they get children, and they get divorced again. The foreigners are not like that. Foreigners, when they get married, they remain married their whole lives, otherwise they don't get married.*

This negative criticism about the high level of divorce in Danish partnership formation can be seen as a discourse accompanied by a relative overlooking of the breakdown of marriages among the minority groups. As the Bosnian young woman, Jasna, stated:

It came as a shock for me when I came to Denmark and heard how many divorces there are. It was rather strange because divorces are a taboo topic in Bosnia.

For the Pakistani mother, Ruksana, the negative feature in the majority's partnership formation is the practice of cohabitation as well as changing partners often.

... I know people who are not married but still live together; I think that is wrong...this is what we call "haraam" [forbidden]. Getting married several times and leaving the person you are married with ... it is wrong. ...

These narratives are just some illustrations of the complex and varied responses of the ethnic minority to the majority's partnership formation patterns. Some of the narratives appreciate the possibility of contact between the partners before marriage while other reflections imply negative individualism and relatively less consideration for the children.

The analyses of the young people's and parents' narratives from the in-depth interviews indicate an understanding with nuances, which doesn't just accept or reject the *Danish way*, but mention both the negative and positive aspects with respect to the relatively high average age of marriage, intense emotional involvement, high proportions of men and women who never marry, fewer marriages per capita, cohabitation (so called "paperless" relationships), non-marital childbearing and higher divorce rates (Schultz-Jørgensen 1999, Ottosen 2000). For example getting to know a partner before marriage is seen as a positive aspect by some parents and young people, especially the latter, while they perceive the high divorce rate, changing partners and "sharing" children with negative criticism. At least in their expressed attitudes, if not in their actions, young people distance themselves from the practice of easily getting separated and divorced. It is suggested that the ethnic minority—both the parental and the younger generation—are critical about

some aspects of the above-mentioned trends, which have been termed as a "retreat from marriage". Moreover there are indications about changing family and marriage patterns among immigrant groups according to Oropesa & Landale (2004), who argue that the exposure to the USA is likely to erode marriage among Hispanic immigrants and their descendants.

The present study does not provide definite results on the above-mentioned trends, but indicates that changes in intimate partnership formation patterns among minority young people in Denmark are complex and paradoxical. They are rather paradoxical because both young people and their parents ignore the increasing divorce rates among the ethnic minorities in Denmark (Jeppesen & Nielsen 1998) and in their countries of origin. Perhaps they are maintaining an idealised and nostalgic version of intimate partnership formation among ethnic minority groups. In other words there is massive criticism of partnership dissolution. Minority young people want to avoid this, which among other factors contributes to their intimate partnership formation patterns not being like those of Danes. But at the same time there are transformations, some of the reasons are the awareness that the surrounding society hardly supports the "traditional" cultural practices and the perceived pressure of negative media coverage of minority marriage patterns by both generations.

Discussion: Combination of Individualisation and Interdependency

These results suggest that most minority young people reject the totally individualised ways of forming intimate partnerships, because they want the family to be involved to some extent. Thus there is an emergence of a pattern that is *neither autonomous nor totally fitting within*

the family. There is the creation of patterns which combine *both the young generation's own choice and parental accept*. There is both redefining of the young person's identity and "updating" of the traditional system of intimate partnership formation. The practices among young people indicate that these dichotomous concepts (independent/interdependent, Danish/ethnic minority) are being either dissolved, or reformulated. On the one hand concepts like amalgamation of the different modes of life, creolising, hybridising (Ålund 1998, Mørck 1998, Tireli 1999) are used in the Nordic context to indicate multiplicity of identity and cultural mixing. On the other hand, there are studies (Baumann 2003, Verkuyten 2005), which argue that the multiplicity of the identity and cultural mixing is more at the theoretical, academic level than in everyday life. According to Baumann, culture is both what you have and what you create.

A recent study about partnership formation among South Asians in Canada by psychologists Lalonde et al. (2004:505), also illuminates complex patterns. The study highlighted the potential for serious conflicts in the realm of close interpersonal relationships using the concept of the heritage culture. The parental generation have experienced their heritage culture both socio-structurally (schools, media), and interpersonally (family, peers, partners), while the young people experience primarily through their families. The results suggested that young people have internalised some of the values of heritage culture, like family connectedness, a relatively higher measure of interdependent self-concept, and greater preference for traditional attributes in a partner in comparison to Euro-Canadians.

This partial continuity of the family values in the Canadian study is similar in some ways to the results in the present study, where the young people want both parental involvement, approval and their own choice. Young people's patterns of partnership formation are

neither like their parents' nor like the majority young people. How do we further explain these patterns? Perhaps part of the explanation could be found in the exploration of the issues of secret marriage among young South Asian women in America by anthropologist Leonard (1999), who emphasised young people's critical assessment of their parent's own marriages or their observation of the traditional arranged marriages as the reasons for these patterns. On the other hand the main reason for these changes according to the Swedish sociologist Schlytter (2004), is the minority young women's assertion of right over their own bodies, while Indian researcher Bhopal (2000) relates the changes to the high level of education among the minority girls in the United Kingdom. These explanations could be seen as part of the individualisation processes. But none of these studies directly involve the minority young people's critical perception of the majority intimate relationship formation patterns. Neither do they, more generally, help us understand the combination of the processes of individualisation and interdependency which the narratives about mutual understanding and flexibility in this study can be seen to reflect.

Conclusion

This article focuses on the complex and heterogeneous aspects of ethnic minority young people's intimate partnership formation, especially the intergenerational relationships. The results indicate that the patterns of intimate partnership formation, including romantic relationships, having a girl/boyfriend, marriage, cohabitation, dissolution of marriages, are changing and that changes engage both generations. The present empirical study shows that processes like trust, sharing, emotional closeness, and positive communication contribute to positive intergenerational relationships in respect of these changes. The majority of young people with ethnic minority background in

Denmark are able to negotiate and reformulate their relationships at different levels, through processes like amalgamation and creolisation. They adapt ways in which they combine their own choices with parental choices and acceptance. Conceptual frameworks involving simple binaries like *arranged/love marriages*, *chosen by parents/self-chosen* fail to capture the complexity. While these terms may hold some truth, the differences are over-emphasised. In the process of intimate partnership formation both young people themselves and their parents play a part. There are elements of “love” involved in marriages, which are arranged by the family and voluntarily accepted, by young people, and acceptance by parents of “love” relationships according to which marriages are “arranged” by the parents. The difference is therefore often a matter of degree⁶.

The hegemonic, one sided, simplistic discourse of problematic partnership, especially forced marriage, is challenged by the narratives from young people and parents, which document a pluralisation of the forms of intimate partnership formation. Emergence of a complex, multi-layered picture of partnership formation among minority young people is one of the major results of the present study. There are

everyday disagreements and conflicts among many of the youth and parents about the issue of intimate partnership formation, which have a stabilising and revitalising function in the structure of the family. Moreover the conflicts can have an integrative function for the new family member in the long run, if the parents develop openness and flexibility. Sharing of some life views, reciprocal acceptance of choices, and particularly parental accept and support in connection with the young people’s choice are some of the salient features which characterise the positive intergenerational relationships. Paradoxically, the experiences of discrimination shared by some parents and young people can help in strengthening these relationships, whereas for others such experiences may lead to more rigidity and serious problems.

A small number of young people do experience serious conflicts with the parental generation on these issues. They have contentious relationships characterised by lack of or decreased closeness over time, and contradictions in the basic assumptions between the generations. These results provide a basis for developing intervention practices targeting specific areas of personal, family and societal functioning (Singla 2006). The ethnic minority understandings of the ethnic majority’s partnership formation patterns further highlights the complexities because minority young people and parents indicate an understanding with nuances, which doesn’t just accept or reject the *Danish way*. There are changes and an emergence of new patterns of partnership formation among young people. Some of the findings regarding the complexity of parents’ attitudes towards their children’s intimate lives may seem intriguing and certainly worth delving into more deeply. Therefore more empirical research is required in order to confront the exaggerated focus on problematic forms of intimate partnership formation among the ethnic minority as well as to provide appropriate

6 Anthropologist Wikan (2002) rightly criticises anthropologists for propagating a fundamental difference between the “collective” self in the East and the “individualistic” self in the West. She judges the differences as exaggerated because all selves are relational and everybody has some experience of themselves as unique individuals. The difference is a matter of degree and it crosscuts a simple paradigm of East vs. West. Still, in my understanding she perpetuates a “romanticised” notion of Western individualism and over-emphasises the oppression by minority parents based on some tragic examples. Wikan overlooks the negotiations between large numbers of parents and young people. Thus she contributes, perhaps unintentionally, in her zeal to “salvage” the “poor” minority young women, to a hegemonic demonising of ethnic minority parents, especially the fathers.

intervention strategies for young people who experience serious conflicts and problems.

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