

## Research Proposal

### Current Level & Stage of Study

I am in my first year of the Ph.D. in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. My research supervisor is Dr. Robinder Bedi, an expert in cross-cultural research with South Asian (SA) populations (1,2,3). I am currently writing my dissertation proposal. During my award tenure, I will accomplish all required coursework in my first two years of study, complete my dissertation and ethics proposals by the end of second year, carry out my research in third year, and report my research findings, prepare for my defense, and disseminate results in my fourth and final year.

### Objective

This present study aims to add to the literature on Racial/Ethnic (RE) bias at the entry point of social services. Specifically, the present study seeks to examine the possibility of RE disparities (i.e., religious bias) amongst a particular SA group of individuals (i.e., Punjabi Sikh individuals) in accessing social services in Canada.

### Background/Context

Research has examined RE disparities in the utilization and delivery of social services to minority groups in North America (4,5,6). These RE disparities have been linked to the discrimination of minority groups (7). One systematic review of RE biases among social service providers found that “providers appear to have an implicit bias in terms of a positive attitude towards White people and negative attitudes towards people of colour” (8). Another integrative review (9) found evidence for the attitudes of providers worsening the disparities among immigrant and ethnic populations around the world. Examining provider attitudes, especially in real-world contexts (10), has been recommended to understand and diminish unequal social service delivery and effectiveness among minority groups (8,10). SA individuals, the largest minority group in Canada (11) are subject to differential life outcomes following experiences of day to day discrimination (12) based on differences in culture (e.g., attire, ethnicity, skin colour, religion) (13,14,15). More specifically, Baptized Sikhs, the third largest religious group in Canada (11), are often the target of prejudice, discrimination and hate-based violence due to physical characteristics including head coverings, beards and traditional clothing (15,16,17,18,19,20).

There is limited research in Canada regarding the usage of social services with SA populations (22,23). To develop a more comprehensive understanding, future research will need to examine the attitudes of social service providers at the entry-point of accessing services with visible minorities, especially Punjabi Sikh individuals in Canada. One strength to this present research will be the methodology used which counters socially desirable responses from service providers. Previous studies have used a research design called the Audit Method to explore the implicit biases of social service providers but were focused on African American individuals (24,25). Audit procedures have successfully been employed to examine RE bias in other areas such as the housing market (26, 27), but there remains almost a complete lack of literature that examines religious bias for Punjabi Sikh individuals in Canada. The proposed study aims to use a similar audit procedure with Punjabi Sikh individuals.

I have assisted on a study in my supervisor’s (Dr. Bedi) lab investigating if religious bias with social service providers exist and the proposed study aims to build on that research by applying theories of prejudice to see if one can predict whether RE bias exists by social service providers in Canada.

Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis (28) grew into a theory (29,30) stating that more intergroup contact (e.g., social interactions) between individuals from different groups improves intergroup relations (31). In other words, intergroup contact generally reduces intergroup prejudice (31). A study using meta-analytic testing found that contact reduces prejudice by enhancing knowledge about the outgroup, reducing anxiety about intergroup contact and increasing empathy and perspective taking (32). This proposed study aims to test whether intergroup contact theory can predict RE bias, specifically religious bias, by social services providers at the entry point of services for Punjabi Sikh individuals. For example, a Canadian community with a higher percentage of Punjabi Sikh individuals may lead to more

opportunities for intergroup contact and decreased prejudice and religious bias (see research questions & hypotheses below).

If intergroup contact theory can predict RE bias for Punjabi Sikh individuals in Canada by social service providers, information is gained on the potential explanations behind this bias and suggestions to decrease prejudice based on theory can be provided. Further, training programs for social service providers will need to be examined to minimize religious bias against Punjabi Sikh Canadians to ensure equal access to social services.

### **Research Question & Hypotheses**

The research question for this study is: can intergroup contact theory predict whether religious bias exists by social service providers in Canada? Based on the ample evidence that RE disparities persist in Canada with respect to social service effectiveness and that intergroup contact theory has been proven in several empirical studies (32), it is hypothesized that individuals with a Sikh name requesting appointments in a community with a low percentage of Punjabi Sikh individuals, will be met with fewer returned calls and appointment time offers.

The three independent variables will be: (a) perceived religion (Sikh or non-Sikh), (b) intergroup contact (high or low), and (c) gender of caller (man or woman). Religion will be represented by the use of a traditional Sikh name (e.g., Balvinder, Jaspreet) or a more conventional Christian name (e.g., Noah, Grace) as supported in a pilot study conducted in Dr. Bedi's lab. Intergroup contact will be represented by two different types of communities in British Columbia (BC): communities with a higher percentage of Punjabi Sikh individuals provides the greater opportunity of intergroup contact (high intergroup contact); communities with a lower percentage of Punjabi Sikh individuals provides less opportunity for intergroup contact (low intergroup contact). The dependant variables will be the how receptive the service provider is to providing social services, represented by frequency of returning phone messages for appointment requests and the frequency of offering appointments.

### **Methodology**

Sample: The participants for this study will be social service providers (e.g., employment counsellors) from two types of communities in BC, one with a high percentage of Punjabi Sikh individuals and one with a low percentage of Punjabi Sikh individuals. Participants will be randomly selected from professional associations or licensure bodies common to BC (e.g., College of Psychologists of British Columbia) as found on their public directories.

Procedure: In each community (high or low percentage of Punjabi Sikh individuals), each social service provider will receive a standardized (i.e., pre-recorded) voicemail representing one of the four conditions (Sikh/man, Sikh/woman, non-Sikh/man, non-Sikh/woman) through random assignment, instructing them to return the call. To reduce the possibility that the phone call will be answered, all calls will be placed after conventional working hours (e.g., 8:30 pm). A pilot test of 20 individuals will assist in a power calculation to determine the sample size and effect size required to obtain a power of 0.8 due to the scarcity of research in this area.

Analysis: This study uses a factorial design with three independent variables and thus, a three-way (2 X 2 X 2) AVOVA will be conducted to analyze the data using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

### **Contribution to the Advancement of Knowledge and Special Interests**

This study adds to literature examining RE bias in receiving social services combined with answering a call for further exploring the racialized experience of SA individuals in Canada. Results will help determine if such RE disparities resulting from bias in a social service context exist and can be predicted by existing theories of prejudice and, if so, will contribute legitimacy for further efforts towards creating equitable social services for all Canadians and towards revising existing cultural competence training for social service providers (for example, increasing intergroup contact in training to enhancing knowledge about the outgroup, reducing anxiety about intergroup contact and increasing empathy and perspective taking) based on a theoretical perspective.