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The Identity Formation of South Asians: A Phenomenological Study

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Acknowledgment

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Abstract

THE IDENTITY FORMATION OF SOUTH ASIANS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

By Shabana Shaheen, M.S.

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This research explores the lived experiences of South Asians college students. This research, through a qualitative study that is rooted in the philosophy of phenomenology, explores the essence South Asians' identity formation. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with South Asian college students. The data analysis was under a phenomenological lens that centered the lived experiences and the essence of these experiences in the results. Seven themes emerged from this phenomenological study: negotiating bicultural identity, model minority expectations, meaningful impact of religious spaces, understandings of intra-community tensions, racialization of Islamophobia, understandings of South Asian identity and efficacy of Asian American identity. This study's findings provide a foundation to build a more expansive framework for understanding the identity formation of South Asians.

Introduction

Encompassing a vast array of ethnic identities and nations of origin, the category, 'Asian American' is pan-ethnic (various unrelated peoples which are perceived as a distinguishable group within the larger multiracial North American society) racial category (Espiritu, 1993; Kibria, 1998). The concept of Asian American came in the 1960s, born out of the influence of both the Immigration Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Movement. Pre-1965 immigration legislation put restrictions on who was permitted to enter the United States, and specifically targeted Asian immigrants (Kibria, 1998). With the creation of a pan-Asian (the promotion of unity of Asian peoples) identity came organized efforts for preserving and making visible a collective Asian history tied together by the immigration of Asians to the United States starting in the late 1800s (Bald, 2015; Espiritu, 1993).

The composition of "Asian Americans" began rapidly changing in the last 20 years, but the paradigm has not (Morning, 2001; Scatcher, 2014). South Asians (people of Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Indian, Nepali, Bhutanese, Afghani, Bangladeshi, and/or Maldivian descent) compose 20% of the Asian American population, and are the largest growing group of immigrants in the United States (David, 2016). This study explores the identity formation process of South Asian students through a multidisciplinary approaching incorporating analyses from sociology, phenomenology, ethnic studies, black studies, and critical race studies.

Conceptual Framework & Theory

Sociological perspectives on race have continuously shifted and changed from their formation. Changes and shifts have always been reflective of "large-scale political processes" (Omi and Winant, 1994). The rise of the modern world system has been historically narrated through a racialized lens. The importance in the conventionalization and understanding of race was at its highest post WWII. Racial formation theory is one of latest evolution in sociological perspectives on race. Omi and Winant have contributed extensively to this approach, which provides a theoretical foundation for this research.

The racial formation approach can be understood as understanding the meaning of race and contents of racial identities as politically contested and unstable (Omi & Winant, 1994). Racial formation also explores the intersections and conflicts of racial projects, possessing both representational characteristics along with structural ones. These intersections are viewed in this approach as sequences of articulations of race that are open to individual and organizational agency (Omi & Winant, 1994). Racial theory is heavily impacted by large-scale socio-political processes that establish racial understandings that are complex and contradictory. The creation and history of a panethnic "Asian American" identity fits within the parameters of Omi and Winant's narration of the sociological evolution of racial formation theory.

Panethnicity is a multifaceted concept that is defined as different ethnic groups cooperating and building institutions and identities across ethnic boundaries. Panethnicity is operationalized as a group formation strategy that focuses on analyzing the interactions and relations of subgroups (Okamoto & Mora, 2014). Asian American functions as a panethnicity, which is a group formation across various ethnic boundaries from the continent of Asia that focuses on building solidarity for political and cultural benefits. Okamoto and Mora lay a

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framework for panethnicity as more than a category encompassing internal diversity, but a negotiation of interests and identities. They acknowledge the challenges of maintenance of panethnicity, including difficulties that arise when one subgroup dominates.

Farah Ibrahim developed a South Asian specific model of identity formation. She identifies the unique aspects of South Asians, "from religious practices to regional cultures and languages". Understanding the dynamics of if and how South Asians reach a point of attaching themselves to the Asian American identity is rooted in several different factors. There is ambiguity as to where South Asians fit in the strata of racial categories and how their racialization is in many ways, incompatible with the perception of what an Asian American is (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu Singh, 1997). South Asians struggle with the question of "what you think your ethnicity is versus what they think your ethnicity is" (Espiritu, 1992). Ibrahim identifies self-concept, which is the way one defines themselves from their own vantage points, the ways others define them and how they want to be considered. Understanding this multidimensionality of identity formation is basis of this study's intention to address these various pieces of identity. This thesis will explore the subjective experience of racialized identity formation among South Asian students. These data will be analyzed for how students self-identify, understand others identification of them and desire to be identified by others. The literature on the diversity within the Asian American panethnicity suggests these three conditions of identity formation among South Asians should consider religious identity, national origin and socioeconomic status. Next, I summarize the literature on each of these themes.

Religious Identity

Religion is a significant source of identity for South Asians as they are assimilated into the racial landscape of the United States (Kurien, 2016). Casteism in particular plays a huge part

in the formation of this paradigm. Caste still has deep structural and social power over the life outcomes of South Asians living in the subcontinent and the diaspora (Omvedt, 2008).. Caste in the subcontinent mirrors the ways white supremacy permeates American life both structurally and socially. Individuals born into upper caste Hindu families in the subcontinent enjoy a certain number of privileges including social, monetary and educational capital (Prashad, 2014; Omvedt, 2008).. In India in particular, religion defines and sustains one's ethnic identity (Kurien, 2001). Hinduism is a significant part of this discussion of religious identity because most South Asian immigrants trace their national origin to India, 65% of whom immigrants identify as Hindu (Kurien, 2001).

Religious innovations are a common part of the assimilation and acculturation experience for immigrants in the United States (Kurien, 2001). Religion and ethnicity are intertwined. "Immigrant congregations are not transplants of traditional institutions but communities of commitment and therefore arenas of change" (Smith, 1978). Immigration is also noted as a theologizing experience for many (Smith, 1978). Diasporic South Asian communities in the United States tend to form around religious identity, with a strong conscious effort by elders to maintain a balance between working towards the benefit of the whole community while individually pursuing the American Dream (Kurien, 2001; Morning, 2001).Hinduism does not have a traditional group religious activity or practice in the same way other faiths, particular the Abrahamic faiths do (Kurien, 2001; Omvedt, 2008). Practices of Hinduism vary by regional and ethnic origin. Indian Hindu immigrants in particular have used Hinduism to assimilate themselves while simultaneously maintaining their cultural identity. Hinduism in an American context has been transformed as a part of the process of Indian Hindu immigrants adapting.

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Various strategies are employed to re-create a Hindu Indian environment in the United States (Kurien, 2001).

The Hindutva, an extreme right religious fundamentalist group have pushed a creation of a Hindu lobby to grow their political influence in the states (Prashad, 2014; Omvedt, 2003). Modeled after Zionist lobbying efforts, the Hindutva are aiming to establish a relationship between India and the US that's akin to Israel's. Vijay Prashad argues that such a relationship would be impossible because of the US' close relationship with Pakistan, putting India and the US at odds in some instances. The Hindutva's ideology is similar to white supremacist ideology of Nazi Germany and eugenics (Prashad, 2014). A vision for an ideologically pure form of Hinduism that asserts upper caste supremacy and places Muslims and other non-upper caste religious and ethnic groups as a threat to this vision. Prashad calls the many Indian Americans who bring facets of this ideology with them to the United States, "Yankee Hindutva". This strain of right wing Hindu ideology adheres to liberal multiculturalism and the formation of a liberal political identity. His conversation leads to a focus on Indian lobbyist, who in the past decade have grown immensely in numbers and power. The Hindu right, in particular, has capitalized on the post-9/11 geopolitical climate which is steadfastly focused on fighting terrorism through islamophobic (anti-Muslim rhetoric) and orientalist (set of ideas about "the East" that are shallow and stereotypical) policies (Bald, 2015). India has long framed many of its own conflicts and issues on internal cultural matters such as the continued occupation of Kashmir. But in a post- 9/11 world, the discourse around Kashmir has begun being framed as a part of the global war against terrorism, not a decades long conflict about self-determination and sovereignty. The post 9/11 configuration and social construction of a Hindu American identity was modeled after Jewish American identity post 1967 (Prashad, 2014). The Hindu right both in the homeland and

diaspora sought to affirm their belief that India is culturally Hindu. The rise of Hindu nationalist ideology has spread beyond the subcontinent and expanded into the politics of the diaspora as well. This macro context might influence how students, all young adults still tethered to their families but also navigating the world as racialized individuals, understand their racial identity. It might also present conflicting affinities among those who identify as Asian American but do not share religious histories or allegiances with the demographic majority of Asian Americans.

National Origin

The national origin of South Asians immigrating to the United States affects racial identity formation and life outcomes. Immigration laws, the geopolitical climate of a post 9/11 word and the circumstantial and structural realities of each nation all affects how South Asians enter the U.S. racial hierarchy: from being able to secure access to the United States, to how the acculturation process happens. Within the subcontinent, identity generally is formed around what state or region within a nation individuals come from. The formation of states happen around

Figure 1 Languages of Indian
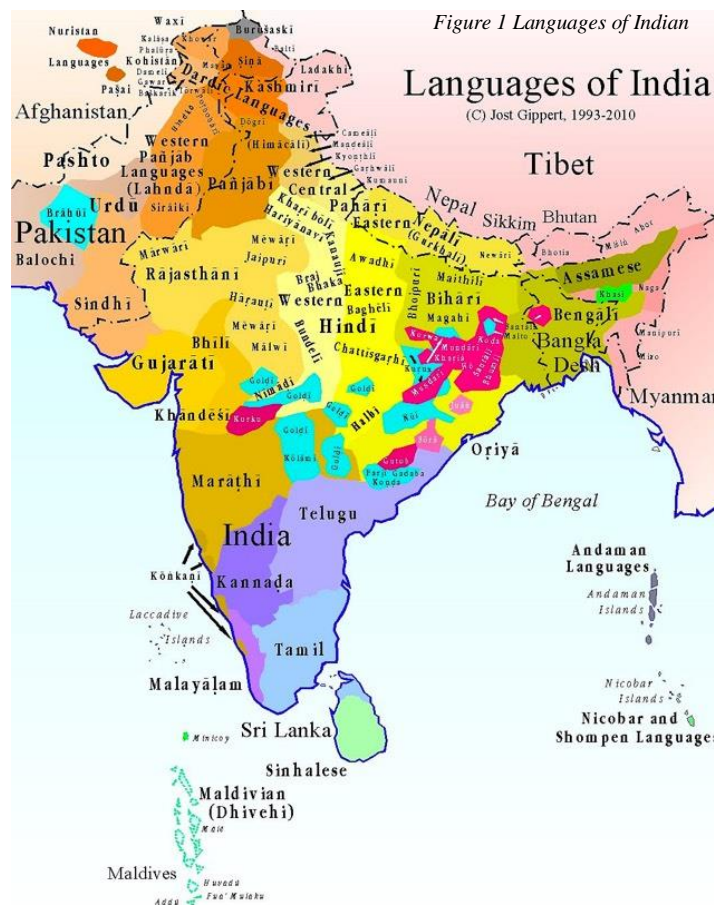
linguistic criteria, with each state having a distinct language and culture (Kurien, 2001).

In 1965 after the passage of new immigration legislation that ended the ban on Asians entering the United States, the first major waves of South Asian migration began. A vast majority of the first wave were Indians from highly skilled technology and science backgrounds

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(Prashad, 2014). The second wave of South Asian immigrants that came through in the 1980s were more diverse than earlier immigration waves, but still mostly Indian. The second wave comprised of immigrants with various educational backgrounds and job prospects. Most South Asian immigrants are of Indian origin, but the number of immigrants from other South Asian nations continues to grow, especially in the 21sth century (Kurien, 2001). [End here with another summary sentence/statement that ties this section to your argument and research question] Because South Asian represents a diversity of national backgrounds and national identity is a cornerstone of identity formation among ethnic minorities and immigrants, I will explore how these respondents draw on national identity in their racial identities.

Socioeconomic Status

The South Asian panethnicity includes groups from different nations and religious backgrounds. It also includes groups of different socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status affects how one enters the U.S. racial hierarchy and what types of capital, economic and social, they can accumulate. These differences may shape how ethnic minorities form racialized identities, which form partly as protective defenses against the stagnated mobility associated with discrimination. The first South Asian immigrants came to the United States with visas because of their "special skills". This translated to mostly Upper Caste Indian Hindus who were highly educated in managerial and professional skills and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and emigrated for better economic opportunities (Prashad, 2014). They initially planned to stay in the United States only temporarily but ended up settling permanently. American pro-family unification laws were used to sponsor family members to join them in the United States. The vast majority were highly educated upper caste professionals with no interest in politics. They felt no social obligation to the struggles and labor of the civil rights movement

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in the states and grew up after the anticolonial struggle against the British Raj in the subcontinent (Prashad, 2014). The second wave of immigrants began in the 1980s. These immigrants were different from the preceding wave, with much more diversity in socio-economic background among other things. They did not possess the same level of professional and managerial skills or education and had a socially different experience upon their arrival in the states. The following generations were more connected to a culturally American way of life and this reflected in the generational shifts in identity.

In the 2000 census, Indian Americans had the highest median income of any other group. Indian Americans also have the highest rate of income inequality, with 25% of them living with incomes below 25,000 a year (Prashad, 2014). One in five Indian Americans is uninsured, a rate higher than the national average. While Indian Americans possess some of the highest levels of income and educational attainment, they also experience some of the largest gaps in terms of socio-economic status (Prashad, 2014).

Ethnic attrition, a concept economists Stephen Trejo and Bryan Duncan have developed, argues that with each generation, ethnic identification decreases. Ethnic attrition is understood as the generational shift from identifying with one's national or ethnic origin to identifying as American. Trejo and Duncan's most recent findings conclude that ethnic attrition is higher for less educated and lower class Asians, and those higher educated children of Asian immigrants retain a strong sense of Asian ethnic identity (Trejo & Duncan, 2016). Based on these findings Trejo and Duncan argue that there is an overestimation of the achievement of Asians and an underestimation of achievements of Hispanics. Trejo and Duncan come to these conclusions about Asians by first defining achievement by years of schooling and socio-economic status. Their treatment of Asians as a pan-ethnic group replicates typical approaches to studying this

population. Trejo and Duncan's provocative finding highlights the significance of studying the process of identity formation. From their study we can affirm that socio-economic background impacts one's ethnic and racial efficacy.

Ibrahim identifies self-concept, which is the way one defines themselves from their own vantage points, the ways others define them and how they want to be considered. Given Omi and Winant's theory that identity formation happens within a macro context, I have summarized the three broad areas from which South Asian students in this exploratory study might draw to assemble their racialized identity: religious affiliation, national origin, and socioeconomic status.

Literature Review

There is has been extensive literature in the last twenty years discussing pan-ethnic identity, immigration and assimilation, and the experiences of Asian Americans. Much of the literature produce findings that have identifiable trends as well as conflicting conclusions, especially in the identity formation of South Asians. Classical assimilation models of acculturation highlight the general trend of middle and upper class immigrants being highly assimilated, while lower class immigrants who live in immigrant enclaves retain their culture and language (Min & Kim, 2000). The literature summarized next informs how I understand panethnicity, the macro context within which South Asians are forming their racial identities, and gaps in the literature to which this study will contribute.

When South Asians enter the U.S. racial hierarchy they are not un-tethered from any racial caste system. Race scholars argue that anti-Blackness (denial of access and a disdain for Black people) defines the global system of dominance (Bashi, 2004). The global nature of anti-blackness privileges immigrants, despite the complicated history of anti-immigration legislation

in the United States (Bashi, 2004). Anti-blackness is situated at the bottom of a world system, placing nations in a hierarchy. Asian nations have been a particular target of US immigration legislation creating barriers for migration. The post WWII language of legislation reflected a supposed "race neutral" perspective, framing limitations of specific groups as a result of market needs or cultural knowledge. This included language explicitly requiring specific educational levels and occupations and downgrading prioritizing family reunification (Bashi, 2004).

Jared Sexton's discussion of multiculturalism pinpoints the issues of antiblackness that arise in a globalized racialized immigration system within the United States racial framework. Sexton argues that conversations around moving beyond the "Black - White binary", which much of Asian American and Ethnic Studies is built on, only reify antiblackness. Nazli Kibria's analysis of Asian American "racial dilemmas" exemplifies a common trend in race and ethnicity literature that problematizes the current racial framework as exclusive and limiting (Kibria, 1998). Sexton argues that making such claims does not conceptually change the impacts of the so called "Black - White binary", but rather ignores the underlying antiblackness and white supremacist ideology it perpetuates.

Sexton along with other Black scholars including Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson, have provided a framework to critically analyze race literature and identity formation through an anti-racist lens. This study subscribes to this anti-racist vision of analysis and understanding of the world. My review of the literature is rooted in a historical and contextual review of Asian and South Asian history, from the subcontinent through the diaspora. This means remaining cognizant of the contradictions that emerge from the multidisciplinary review of literature and commitment to anti-racist work that centers a critique of anti-blackness (Sexton, 2008).

Literature specifically focused on Asian Americans discusses the idea of bicultural identity, which is a result of a process of identity formation. Beginning with conformity, the process of assimilating is followed by dissonance, which is the realization that assimilating does not get rid of cultural differences or discrimination (Iwamoto et al., 2013). Resistance and immersion back to one's culture occurs, and the final part of the process, synergistic articulation and awareness, establish a bicultural identity. However, for South Asians the first part of the process, conformity, is not experienced in the same capacity, because of the diversity within the subcontinent even among each country (Iwamoto, et al., 2013). There is a disconnect and lack of common ground because of little similarities between South Asians and East Asians, who dominate Asian American spaces (Min & Kim, 2000).

Conflicting conclusions have been made as a result of various studies that approach the study of South Asians is vastly different ways. A 2014 study focusing specifically on Indian Americans and their relationship to Asian American panethnicity posits immigrant integration and engagement with the American racial boundaries are less likely to produce a self-identification as Asian American (Schatcher, 2014). Schatcher's study also highlighted several conclusions conflicting with literature on Asian American identity. These findings include the decreased likelihood of Indian immigrants identifying pan-ethnically as the size of the non-Indian Asian population increases (Schatcher, 2014). This is in direct opposition to panethnicity literature which posits that as various Asian immigrant groups become more integrated, they are more likely to identify pan-ethnically. Schatcher also argues that "Asian" as a racial classification for Indians "does not mean that the boundaries of Asian American are open to them". She also concludes by asking a significant question to move this work forward:

"We ought to ask: Do members of particular national-origin groups identify panethnically

for the same reasons?"

Schatcher provides a critique of Asian American literature which is valuable but I argue, is still extremely limiting. Her focus on Indian Americans provides insight but also neglects a fuller conversation about non-Indian South Asians. As highlighted in the previous section, I argue that national origin is a significant variable within South Asian identity formation.

Ann Morning's study of South Asian self-identification used data from the 1990 census to test three hypotheses, coming to mixed conclusions. Morning found that racial self-identification by national origin of non-Indians was inconclusive due to the low numbers of respondents. Morning did find a correlation between socio-economic background and efficacy in South Asian identification. When measured by educational attainment, socioeconomic status positively correlates with identifying as South Asian, but higher acculturation leads to what Morning calls "mainstream, non-South Asian labels" (Morning, 2001). The study also highlights the rising diversity among South Asians in terms of national origin, occupation and socio-economic status.

Morning posits first generation South Asians (those who immigrated to the US), tend to identify more strongly with national origin than Asian American panethnicity, and avoid engaging in discussion about where they fit within the American racial landscape (Morning, 2001; Schatcher, 2014). Their children, especially those born in the United States, are more likely to identify with South Asian, than nation of origin, and engage in groups and activities related to building and solidifying a South Asian community and identity than panethnic Asian American groups (Morning, 2001). While there is a generational divide on how South Asians

identify, the general trend remains that South Asians identify more so with origins in the Indian subcontinent, rather than a pan-Asian identity (Eukland, 2005; Morning, 2001).

Morning argues that South Asians generally tend to engage in and recognize the pan-Asian identity that they are officially a part of, at least in the government's eye, only out of politically strategic motives (Morning, 2001). They do not see themselves as Asian American, but have recognized the political and social implications not engaging in the organizing. September 11th and its aftermath have changed the way South Asians navigate race and social life in an extremely visible way (Bald, 2015). Schatcher also mentioned the impact on September 11th to South Asians, particularly the effect of racial discrimination one's affinity with Asian American identity. Morning and Schatcher come to similar conclusions, arguing that the post 9/11 experiences of South Asians impact their ability to relate to self-identify as Asian American.

Alternatively, there is literature that has come to the opposite conclusions. Studies that have been conducted about all Asians conclude that South Asians are among the strongest of subgroups to identify pan-ethnically (Lie, Connay, Wong, 2003). Similar research also concludes that involvement in political activity encourages pan-ethnic consciousness (Masouka, 2006). Masouka's study in particular argues that more marginalized members of pan-ethnic groups rely on group-based activity for resources, but does recognize there is a lack of individual level examination of pan-ethnic consciousness. There are also inconsistencies with conclusions about how racial discrimination effects pan-ethnic consciousness (Masouka, 2006).

The differences in these bodies of literature may be rooted in the way South Asians are approached as a part of the study. Research that discussed the specific impacts of post 9/11 discrimination, lack of affinity with Asian pan-ethnic identity, and political outcomes all were

conducted with South Asians of various backgrounds being the focus. While the studies that

came to the opposite conclusion focused on Asians a whole, and broke down the population of

study by Asian countries, except for South Asian, which was the only subgroup used. This

highlights issues of negotiating subgroup maintenance and relations.

Research Questions

The central research question this study aimed to answer was *how do first generation South

Asians conceptualize their racial identity?* The following questions guided this study:

- What are the lived experiences of South Asians as they navigate their identity

    formation process?

- How do these South Asians describe the essence of their identity formation

    process?

Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to capture the lived experiences of

South Asians and better understand their identity formation process. Phenomenology was the

philosophy that informed the analysis of the data collected. Phenomenology seeks to understand

the possibility and structure of the phenomena of interest. The goal of this philosophy is to

explore the essential structures and conditions of possibility of the phenomena (Hoffding &

Martiny, 2016). Phenomenological interviews provide a framework that combines qualitative

interview and the phenomenological philosophy, allowing for distinctive research in which the

participants of the study are producing the account of themselves and their worlds (Hoffding & Martiny). A phenomenological interview comprises of two autonomous subjects producing a reciprocal conversation about the phenomena in question. Phenomenology aims to "get back to the things themselves" and reveal the phenomenon to which the meaning is being attached (Wimpenny& Gass, 2000).

Role of Researcher

My role as the researcher is to facilitate reciprocity in the conversation with the interviewee, an underlying part of the phenomenological interview process. The interviewee is a conscious participant who has the agency to produce accounts of their world and the phenomena in question. My role was to assume a second-person perspective to engage in a subject-subject relationship where I am aware of the interviewee (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016). As the interviewer acknowledging I had specific aims in the encounter is in important in understanding the structure of the interview and my need to assume a second-person perspective. As the researcher, I also did not come into these interviews as a neutral party because I had some idea of what I wanted to know and what the interviewee might say (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016).

Generally, discussions about social science research focus on shaping a study and illustrating in proposal the work around achieving that unbiased position. However, phenomenological philosophy acknowledges the realistic aspects of a research inquiring about a particular phenomenon and engaging in a reciprocal knowledge producing conversation (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). As the researcher, having a conscious awareness of my theoretical inclination was important as I engaged in a conversation as a co-generator of knowledge. At the heart of phenomenology is capturing the lived experience of the

participants not just in the here and now, but also in the invariant phenomenological structures (Hycner, 1985).

Literature on phenomenological interviewing suggests that there is no one structured process or technique that solidifies a successful phenomenological study but that the continued honing of one's skill as an interviewer and research is the key to building success (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016). My awareness of my commitment to the phenomenological philosophy was an important part of the interview process (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016).

Participants

A sample of eight South Asian students on the VCU campus were interviewed (Englander, 2012). The parameters of what constitutes a South Asian student included individuals who were of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Nepali, Maldivian, Sri Lankan, Bhutanese, and/or Afghani descent enrolled at VCU at the time of the interview. I used purposive sampling procedures to yield relevant and plentiful data (Yin, 2010). Concerns about the sufficiency of the size of the sample were addressed in Englander's discussion of qualitative interviewing. While the there is no standard, the general inclination is that the researcher has the autonomy choose what they think is sufficient, keeping generalizability in mind. For this specific research, because of time and resource constraints, and because the aim of this study is to capture the lived experiences of the participants, a sample of eight was sufficient. As a member of the population of study, I used my access to various South Asian social groups to send out a call for participants for anonymous interviews. I made a list of registered student groups and unregistered student groups around campus. I used both online and in person student groups that center South Asian students including the Nepali Student Association, Indian Student Association and the Bangladeshi Student Association

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is rooted in the belief that knowledge generated from a phenomenological interview as unique from other methods because the knowledge is enacted, embodied and embedded. The reciprocity of the interview, which is more a conversation between two knowledge co-generators including the interviewer who is actively taking on a second person perspective. The reciprocal interaction and embodied nature of the interview directly feed into the generation of knowledge (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016). Gaining access to the participant's experience during the interview is possible through an empathetic second person perspective that not only considers the discussion but also the body language and other non-verbal gestures and cues throughout the process.

Hoffding and Martiny outline four principle phenomenological commitments that inform phenomenological interviews. The first is a commitment to the thing itself, meaning using the interview process to get a detailed first person description of the experience in question. In my study that translates to a commitment to acquiring a first person description of what and how the participant identifies as they do. The second commitment is to the invariant structures and using the interview pinpoint and understand the invariant structures of the experience. For my study this meant a commitment to understanding what invariant structures are informing the identity formation process of the participants. I went into the interview phase of this study with some key structures that I identified through the literature review: religious identity, national origin and socio-economic status.

The third phenomenological commitment is to treat the first person perspective captured in the interview as on its own terms, meaning not reducing the subjective perspective the participant provides as objective. In my study that means that the perspectives and knowledge I

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co-generate cannot be made into anything other than what it is, and especially in my analysis should not draw me to objective conclusions. The fourth and final commitment is enaction, embodiment, and embeddedness. The subjectivity gathered from the interview is embodied, enactive and embodied. The interview creates the space for a direct confrontation with these aspects of the experience of the phenomena in question.

Qualitative Interviewing

Qualitative studies focus on the researcher as the main instrument and avoid a strictly scripted framework (Yin, 2010). This study used semi-structured interviews to gather data. Semi-structured interviews provide a framework for a clear set of questions and topics that will be discussed through the course of the interview (Creswell, 2007). Open-ended questions allow for the interviewee to guide the direction of the conversation and allow them to speak freely in their own words. This allows an opportunity for the interviewer to capture the lived experiences and distinctiveness of the conversations and the interviewee's responses. The interview had a predetermined set of topics that guided the conversation. The interview was not limited to these predetermined topics, but insured that particular topics were covered to meet the goals of this study (Creswell, 2007). The interview guide was constructed with the goal of providing a guide for the interviewer to capture specific information while still staying true to the semi-structured framework of the interview.

Each interview was approximately 60-85 minutes long. The interview was structured in two phases, 30-40 minutes devoted to each phase. The first phase was the life narrative phase. In this phase, the interviewee was asked specific questions that captured demographic information including their gender, age, religious identity, national origin, and socio-economic status.The second phase of the interview was the identity phase where the interviewee was asked open

ended questions about their racial identity and identity formation processes. The interview followed the trajectory of the interviewees answer and conversation. Ultimately, the goal of this phase was to capture the lived experiences of the interviewees a through their own descriptions.

Ethical considerations

As always, especially with human subjects involved, there are ethical considerations that must be upheld for the research to be conducted and completed with legitimacy. A clear and concise written explanation of the rights of the interviewees and the intended use of the data they will provide should be laid out to insure consent has been given (Association, 2015). Providing accommodations such as previously mentioned the selection of the setting, as well as being aware of possible triggering language or body language that could create an unsafe environment for the interviewee. Discussing race and identity is also a very personal topic that could lead into a conversation about traumatic occurrences such as bullying or harassment. Being mindful of all these possibilities and the sensitivity of discussing these topics include providing trigger warnings if needed, and having information to refer students to campus mental health services in the event that counseling is needed.

Another ethical consideration is that I as the researcher, being a part of the population of study am aware of my biases throughout the study. Being reflective of the framing and language used in the interviews process helped avoid my own biases affecting the validity of the study (Schutt, 2015).

Data Analysis

Phenomenology cannot be reduced to a step-by-step set of instructions of a methodology (Hycner, 1985). Rather approaching phenomenology as an investigative posture and attitude with

a specific set of goals is the best way to center our understanding the analysis stage of this study (Hycner, 1985). As the researcher it falls on me to put emphasis on the analysis process must arise out of responsiveness to the phenomenon being studied. This means sensitizing myself to the number of issues that may arise and need to be addressed during the analysis of the phenomenological interview data. As a newer research just acquainting myself with the philosophy of phenomenology, it is important to begin this process by centering the phenomenon in the analysis and looking to other resources as a guidance in my process. Hycner (1985) and Yin (2010) provided guidance for my analysis. The following provides an outline of my analysis processes:

- After conducting each interview, I transcribed them into Microsoft Word, including my notes during the interviews that accounted for non-verbal and para-linguistic communications. As a part of the transcription process, I also noted emphasis on particular words/phrases, pauses during the conversation and the cadences of the participant's speech/voice. All non-verbal and para-linguistic notes were including in the margins of the transcription.

- Listening to the audio recording of the interviews several times over as well as rereading the transcription of the interview several times provides a space to understand the interview as a whole. Again, the processes of listening and reading of the interview requires the acknowledgement and notation of non-verbal and para-linguistic levels of communication (Hycner, 1985).

- The unit of general meaning emerges from identifying the words/phrases/non-verbal communications that provide a coherent and unique meaning that stands

out in the overall interview. Delineation of the units of meaning must be done while still staying close to the literal data from which these units are coming from.

- The units of general meaning therefore can be identified as the words, phrases, and non-verbal communications that express a unique and coherent meaning that is differentiable from what precedes and succeeds it in the interview (Hycner, 1985).

- The research question was brought into the phenomenological analysis process. With the units of meaning that have been identified in the preceding step, those words/phrases that do connect with the research become the units of relevant meaning.

- Another review of the list was done to eliminate any redundancies. This process required more than eliminating words/phrases that come up multiple times. Instead, redundancies were identified through a consideration of how many times meanings were mentioned and how such meanings were being mentioned.

- Any clusters that organically appear through common themes were identified. This step was focused on essence of the units of meaning in the given context. A crucial part of this step was an awareness the effect presuppositions may have on the clustering because the researcher's judgement is a major part of this step.

- The common themes that emerge were clustered together to indicate an emerging themes. Staying true to the phenomenological philosophy, this elicits the essence of each viewpoint and gives acknowledgement to the individual variation as well.

Validity

To ensure validity as the researcher, I employed an exhaustive perspective method as I conducted data analysis. This means commitment to the phenomenological process from the interview to data analysis of the co-generation of knowledge of their lived experience of their identity formation as South Asians. This conception of validity puts the weight on the interpretative process of tier two of the analysis.

Another important of part ensuring validity in this study is the need to understand the participant's experiences and their descriptions of it. This is significant both in tier one as the interview process is going on and in tier two during the phenomenological analysis of the interview. However, it is also important to keep in mind that while the intention of this methodology and study is to capture the lived experiences of the participants, the experiences themselves are something that they may retroactively returned to in a straightforward manner (Huffding & Martiny, 2016). The descriptions the researcher hear are not static data that remains unchanged and isolated of the invariant structures and the experiences in that point. Rather we understand the descriptions as conceiving of the experience in question as subject to developing interpretations. Rooting processes of tier one and tier two in the need to understand the relationship between the participant's experiences and their descriptions of it insured validity in this study (Hoffing & Martiny, 2016).

Results
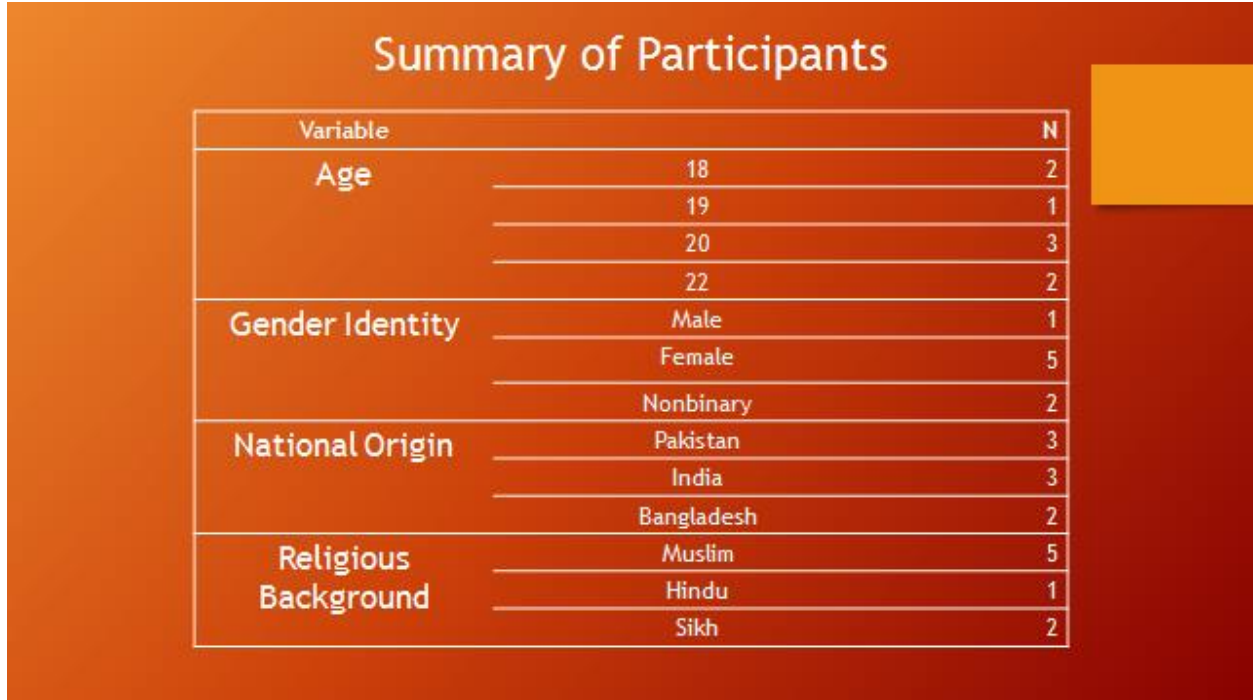
The results of this phenomenological study are a culmination of the participants sharing their perspectives on identity formation through their lived experiences. The results were developed from eight interviews with South Asian students. This study was designed using a

qualitative framework and methods common to a phenomenological research philosophy that guided data collection and analysis. The findings evolved from data collected from a sample of eight South Asian student at VCU. Analysis of interview transcriptions was done under careful consideration. Through my analysis, I identified word and thought patterns that led to the delineation of units of meaning. These patterns were noted by participant descriptions and understandings of their identity formation process. I then identified clusters of meanings that ultimately led to the identification of several emerging themes.

Summary of Participants

The results for this study were developed from eight semi-structured interviews involving South Asian students connected to VCU. The sample consisted of three females, three males and two nonbinary individuals with ages ranging from 18-22, providing a range of different student experiences and time on campus. The participants represented Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi origins. Several of the participants were born outside of the United States and emigrated as young children while the rest were born on the east coast. The sample also represented a diverse range of academic and extracurricular interests including participation in Greek life, MSA (Muslim Student Association) and a bike co-op. Participant demographics and frequency data is

displayed in *Table 1*.

Summary of Participants

Variable			N
Age		18	2
		19	1
		20	3
		22	2
Gender Identity		Male	1
		Female	5
		Nonbinary	2
National Origin		Pakistan	3
		India	3
		Bangladesh	2
Religious Background		Muslim	5
		Hindu	1
		Sikh	2

Participant Narratives

Phenomenological interviews provided me with the opportunity to engage in a conversation with participants about their lived experiences as I studied the phenomena informing their identity formation. Through this process, I discovered how each participant's lived experiences affected their experience and understanding their identity formation. The following descriptions of each participant's descriptions of their lived experiences presented as a representation of their viewpoints and the essence of them. The participant's names are omitted because their interviews were conducted under an agreement of anonymity. The following participant descriptions are presented to provide the reader with the essence of their stories. Participant responses are presented as a representation of their voice

Participant 1 (P1) is an 18 year old female studying biomedical engineering at VCU. Her parents from the Punjabi region of India and are religiously Sikh. She is reluctant to identify

herself as Sikh and feels little connection to religion outside with being raised with the faith. She describes her father as "sort of assimilated a little bit more" than her mother, which indicates is because of his exposure to white Americans through the various jobs he worked upon arriving in the U.S. She also describes how her mother considers the US a temporary home and longs to go back to India. Her father has a bachelor's degree in computer science and currently works in a related field while she unsure of what her mother's degree and job is focused on she said "in a science". The participant grew up in the upper middle class suburban area of Richmond, and attended private schools throughout her childhood. She spoke about her memories attending a predominately white private high school that a small minority of non-white students. She described an incident that stood out in particular in high school:

> There was some drama that went down senior year and I had a lot of suppressed feelings about certain at school and about the difference in culture. I tweeted about it and a bunch of white girls got mad and took it to the dean and the dean called me in and was like 'some of the girls have some concerns'.

She also talked about how her experiences in high school impacted a change in her understanding of identity:

> High school which was not diverse at all, I was identifying as Asian. It wasn't until senior year of high school that I realized there are a lot of privilege differences. For a while I identified as Asian but now in a more diverse group, I like identifying as South Asian American first. And right now I have like six brown friends in my English class so we will go deeper like 'I'm Indian, I'm Pakistani, I'm Sri Lankan'……I don't find myself identifying or saying that I'm Punjabi at first.

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Participant 2 (P2) is a 20 year old female on a pre-med track. Her parents both were born outside of Pakistan but were raised in Karachi, we she also was born. Her mother was born in Bangladesh while a family member was stationed in the country as army officer, while her father is a Muhajir (Muslim immigrant of multi-ethnic origin who migrated from India after the Partition to the newly formed state, Pakistan) and traces his family roots to Uttar Pradesh in India. She describes her family as practicing Muslims, raising her in a traditional household with strong cultural ties. She is also the only participant in the study who wears the hijab. She describes her family as, "average, middle class" but explains how her parents struggled when they first arrived in the United States when she was one years old. She describes how because of degrees earned in Pakistan, her parents had to pursue other careers and additional education and certification to remain in their fields. Her father was an accountant while her mother was a beautician. She shared her observations about how things have changed for her over time:

> When I was younger I feel like there wasn't just as much openness in America in general and overall. I have been more open in my culture and when I was younger I felt more like a minority than I do now.

The participant also described the importance of her culture to her identity formation:

> I grew up in a household where my parents have shared that with us and I think it's important to keep your culture and hopefully share it with the next generation in the future.

Participant 3 (P3) is a 19 year old female born in Canada to Bangladeshi parents, and emigrated to the U.S. at the age of four. She comes a Muslim background and describes her family as moderately practicing. She describes attending a high school that was 50% white and

50% non-white, with most of the nonwhite students being either Latinx or East Asian. She describes her educational goals:

> I am currently in the school of business. It's a stereotype that *Deshi* parents want their kids to be engineers and doctors. My parents fortunately are not like that.

She also describes how her family's socioeconomic background changed from what she described as low class to middle class. She reflects on this:

> Fortunately for me, when I was little, I didn't understand any of that stuff and when my parents were in the low class and by the time I was older they had moved up to the middle class.

> *Participant 4 (P4)* is a 20 year old family born in the U.S. to Bangladeshi parents. She parents lived through the 1971 war for independence against Pakistan. Her father was an internal refugee due to a deadly cyclone displaced him and his family. He later became solider in the independence war against Pakistan. She describe the traumatic experiences of her parents as a reason for a lack of more knowledge of their history:

> My dad has a lot of pride in Bangladesh. But there is a lot of war crimes that he witnessed and that's why he doesn't like to talk about it…..My dad seems to have PTSD and when he talks about it, my mom gets uncomfortable.

She describes her family as comfortably middle class and religiously traditional. Her father obtained a STEM degree and was employed at NASA upon moving to the United States, while her mother obtained a degree in Bengali literature and later transitioned into a teaching career after immigrating. She is an art student at VCU and shares that while her parents are supportive, they did pressure her to choose a medium that had better job prospects .She also discussed her

Muslim identity and the conflicts that have arisen because of her queerness and viewpoints on certain aspects of faith. She also is an active member of an Asian student alliance group on campus.

   Participant 5 (P5) is a 22 year old nonbinary individual from a Sikh Punjabi family. Their family has roots in a section of Punjab that after partition became a part of Pakistan. The family migrated to another part of Punjab that falls within the border of post-Partition India. This post-colonial history has made them and much of their family identity with a nationality. They also articulated how their family's religious identity impacts their ability to associate with the nationalism in India because of its Hindu nationalist, anti-Sikh rhetoric. They discussed the vastly different experience between them and their sister because of class differences. Their father came to the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant and work in restaurants, convenience stores and as a cab driver to support his family. He later completed his education and transitioned into a job at IBM, which improved the family's socioeconomic status. They grew up in a working class neighborhood while their sister was born after their parents moved up to into a middle class neighborhood. The participant also discussed their unique experience as a queer South Asian, which impacted their connection to their family and community at large:

   I was 13 and my parents kicked me out. I've been so disconnected from what is considered 1st generation. It's really atypical because a lot of us have our ties to where our parents are from based on us visiting there or what they tell us but I haven't really had that in almost 10 years. I haven't spoken Hindi or Punjabi in like 10 years.

The participant also discussed their educational pursuits which they indicated was more to fulfill the wishes of their parents to obtain a degree. They initially were a business student but changed

their major to gender, sexuality and women's studies, much to the chagrin of their parents. They also reflected on how their politics and identity have evolved:

> I've been thinking about that and how to measure the distance they've traveled between these two countries. And when people crossed here they became people of color which is something we're not in India but also they are non-Black people of color so they are positioned in like this different place and this was pre 9/11 as well and it was a different racial identity and its weird to think about people….and think about ways certain disadvantaged but like because you're not lower caste and not black and happen to be cishet there are ways that you can perceive these benefits.

Participant 6 (P6) is an 18 year old male from a Muslim Pakistani family. He is currently completely his first year on a pre-med track at VCU, and eventually hopes to attend medical school and become a cardiologist. His father came to this country to pursue an MBA and after graduating, ran several businesses related to real estate, convenience stores and car dealerships. His mother came from a family that was involved in many of those businesses in the U.S. as well. His mother came to the U.S. by being sponsored for a visa through family that already resided in the country. His father however, was the first in his family to come to the U.S. He also described how he prioritizes the different parts of his identity:

> Yea, I think being Muslims, and this is for me personally, being Muslim is more important than like being American or Pakistani because like, I feel like culture is important but, you know religion kind of shapes who you are in a way because each respective religion has its own morals.

He describes his family as middle class, though he shared how the 2008 recession had an impact on his family's socio-economic situation. He also is heavily involved with the VCU MSA and youth events at his local mosque.

Participant 7 (P7) is a 20 year old female who was born in Pakistan and moved to the Richmond suburbs in 2005. She comes from a wealthy and prestigious Pakistani family. Her mother was a cardiologist in the Pakistani military and her father a businessman hailing from a landowning aristocratic family. Her family is Muslim, and are heavily involved in their local neighborhood mosque, but does not feel her family is particularly religious. Her parents own several gas stations and convenience stores across Richmond, including one that she owns and operates herself. She was raised comfortably upper class and resided in neighborhoods with other wealthy and educated South Asians. She described how her political ideas have undergone an evolution:

> There is a difference between identifying as South Asian and then politically coming to terms to it. The groups of people that looked like us but the political identity of how we got there and who we stepped over. I see racial identities as political. Racial identity is like an active process and it's not for everybody and some people just identify.

Participant 8 (P8) is a 22 year old nonbinary individual. They are from an upper caste South Indian family, and immigrated to this country as an infant. Their family's socio-economic situation improved over their childhood and they are upper middle class. Their family is also extremely traditional and Hindu, particular their father who has become a part of the Krishna Consciousness. Their father grew up poor but was educated with a compute degree that allowed him to secure a job in the United States. They attended a science and technology high school that was predominantly upper class white and Asian. They currently are studying medical illustration

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and are planning on furthering their studies. They reflected on their identity and the privileges it has afforded them:

> I've recently come to know what savarna is like.... like even if you're not *Brahmin* which is like upper upper caste, you still have that amount of privilege associated with like being like Kshatriya or something like...which is like high caste but like not Brahmin. So it's something I've been thinking about like yea like you're still complicit in like um in casteism even if you're not like exactly Brahmin.

Emerging Themes

Through a rigorous and thoughtful collection and coding of the data, I mapped out an analysis rooted in phenomenology, focused on elevating the lived experiences of the participants. The following seven themes emerged from my conversations with eight South Asian students.

Theme One: Negotiating Bicultural Identity

All participants described the negotiation process of their bicultural identity. Commentary on their family's viewpoints about retaining their cultural heritage while also becoming acculturated with the cultural and morals they grew up with in the United States. Participants shared their own feelings about this process and forming meanings from their own reflections. *P1* provided insight into this theme by sharing her own experiences with her parents:

> A lot of time my parents are talking about American culture and their culture and they seeing me assimilate into American culture and as that being a bad thing. Little things like growing out my arm hair or cutting the hair on my head or switching majors and that was sort of tied to American culture like…pursuing what you want to do without regard

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to what your family wants and I commute from home right now and I finally convinced them to let me move out and that was seen as a kind of assimilation thing.

She also added:

My mom is always wanting to go back to India. My mom is always like remember where home is which is not how I feel because I was born here and I've only visited there a couple times and I guess I'm figuring myself here and what it means to be south Asian American. I see a lot of people doing a lot of things focused on where their parents are from mixed with being here from America.

P3 shared a similar sentiment:

So I associate myself…I do have ties with it and appreciate my culture and country but I don't know too much about it. So most of my culture, my clothing, the way I talk comes from living here in America.

Some participants associated positive value to adopting their parent's cultural views. *P6* described his parents:

I mean when somebody asks me where I'm from I always include like, you know, I'm American but my parents are from Pakistan. My parents they came from the background where they were surrounded by it so they carried along with them and taught the same thing to us children. And uh, I think we've done a fairly good job in following what they've taught. Not all of it but, you know, as much as we can. We can definitely try to do more.

While he associated positive value to following the cultural practices and values of his parents, he also reflected on his concerns:

> I guess some things we should keep from culture and some things we should....(pause). Like some things we should keep are traditional values that like you know, I guess make us happy in a way, that keep our traditions strong. Like you know, with family, with friends and stuff like that. But, a lot of our culture...cultural thinking....they can be very negative, like stereotypes and stuff like that. And frames of mind just in general. They can be detrimental to a person.

P7 described contradictions she found in parent's cultural evaluations:

> Genuinely the life we had in Pakistan was.....my parents were like teenagers in Pakistan. They went out to restaurants and long parties at night and my mom wore skirts not like short ones but like ankle long skirts. They were more free. And when I ask them about it they are like oh it's because like everybody has like the same moral compass over there in Pakistan and that's like their defense and stuff. There are pictures of my mom wearing dresses and stuff and like things she won't let me do here and it makes no sense.

P4 described her process of rejecting, rather than accepting aspects of her parent's cultural values and expressed regret:

> My parents are very cultural and its very apparent in my house like they didn't assimilate very much with American culture…with me being a mix….when I was younger I really assimilated with American culture and became white washed I guess and now I want to transition from that I want to learn more about my culture and I did do things like I

participate in Bengali dance class and would try to play the harmonium but I don't think it stuck with me because I rejected it.

While she was reflective on her past negotiations of her bicultural identity, she also provided a prospective associated negative value to maintaining a cultural identity reflecting a combination of their family and growing up in the U.S.:

the Brown town stereotype is being in touch with your culture while still trying to be Americanized. South Asians tend to still keep their culture but at home are still more Americanized. I think it's mostly for brown girls it's specifically people who try to act white but are still in touch with their culture.

P2 also expressed regret in reflecting on her own process:

When I was younger I feel like there wasn't just as much openness in America in general and overall there is more of an openness and I have been more open in my culture and when I was younger I felt more like a minority than I do now.

However, her perspective now associated positive value to a bicultural identity:

I'm half and half because I was born there and raised and my parents raised me in a traditional household and I visit there often so I would say I have ties to both America and Pakistan. I think my parents are really about pushing our traditional values and culture and have strong ties to it.

The first theme of negotiating bicultural identity captured how the participants have throughout their lives found themselves balancing their family's culture with their own cultural experiences residing in the U.S. during their adolescence. The next theme will continue to build upon

participant experiences in balancing expectations and values in understanding their own identities.

Theme Two: Model Minority Expectations

This theme emerged from several participants explicitly naming the model minority myth, while other implicitly provided a definition of this concept. This descriptive theme emerged from the participants lived experiences and allowed for them to define this theme in their own voice. Participants provided characteristics relating to this paradigm of a model minority. *P5* provided a definition of this paradigm:

> Someone typically of Asian descent will like immigrate here or born to immigrants here and they are given opportunities here that allow them to procure a job that pays a salary with benefits and finally start to climb this ladder of success that you think happens when you come here and then it's like well I did it why can't anyone else they have been here for so long what's the deal?

They also provided their own critical analysis of the impact of this paradigm:

> The model minority myth is to me it's built off this one thing but totally excludes undocumented people who run corner stores and gas stations and restaurants and shit and are sort of ignored in this whole thing and then there is another conversation about people who run corner stores and gas stations and are South Asians and doing this in Black neighborhoods and benefitting from Black income while being anti-Black. Those people are excluded from the model minority myth even though they have jobs and have families.

P7 also discussed what she identified as an anti-Black characteristic of the model minority myth:

The assumption you are here because you have a better work ethic and family values and makes you a better candidate for being the best nonwhite group. I see it in all Asians but also Asian is such a large group that encompasses so much ...and especially black folks and what it does to them...it's like a ladder we are stepping over black people to climb

P4 also provided a critical perspective on the paradigm of the model minority:

It's the whole model minority myth that's associated more with East Asians but I think it's also with South and Southeast Asians because you know white people think we're the good minorities because we don't do things ever and just keep to ourselves and don't get involved in anything. White people seeing Asians doing well in school and I think a lot of it has to do with a lot east Asians being lighter skinned and I think that has a lot to do with why white people are comfortable with east Asians out of all the minority groups that's what I feel.

Other participants implicitly described the model minority myth but associated positive value to these expectations *P8* described their motivation:

I guess like both my parents have bachelor's um so like I always wanted to get like more ...get like a higher degree than that so ….um yea I always like thought I would try to get a master's or something like that cuz like obviously my parents were like really about it too ..but um....yea....they always like prioritized education over anything else so I just like never thought twice about like pursuing higher education. They always expected me to like go into something like medicine or just like something that has a stable job.

P6 expressed a sense of obligation to fulfilling this paradigm:

The message that I get from my parents is that they basically want us to do better than them. That's like the whole reason they came here, so we can have like a better opportunity and better life basically. And for like the oncoming generations, so on and so forth. It's kind of ....we kind of owe to them because you know, if it was for them taking the initiative to come here we would probably still be in Pakistan.

P7 stood out because her evaluations of the model minority myth associated negative value because of her own lived experience:

I think they're not gonna like where my head is right now because im definitely into......*pause*…..*quieter voice* I don't know.......um....im studying gender sexuality with a minor in sociology and probably like a dual in psych and before the goal was to pursue psychology and get a masters but now I realized I don't want my masters I don't even wanna be in school period. Grad school is like a big expectation. Like I talked to them about taking a semester off in between undergrad and grad school and that they were ok with because they've seen a few other family members do it and it's worked out well. But I think of just not going back to school is going to jar them.

Participants developed understandings of theme two through descriptive narrations of their own experiences that built upon the values associated with theme one, negotiating bicultural identity. The characteristics included in these descriptions varied from anti-Blackness to parents wanting better for their children. In all the participants' descriptions, the impact of the model minority paradigm was definitely visible. The next theme is meaningful impact of religious spaces, which describes the influence of religion on how the participants experience and understand their own identity formation process.

Theme Three: Meaningful Impact of Religious Spaces

All the participants described some level of experience in navigating religious spaces. Examples provided by the participants included being involved in their local mosques, infrequently going to the gurdwara, and being a part of insulated caste based Hindu communities. All the participants provided unique experiences in their respective religious spaces, but all described the social significance of these spaces for the social production of their specific ethno-religious communities.

P8 described how being a caste Hindu from a specific region in South India was the basis of their ethno-religious community:

> Yea, my parents are like really prideful of upper caste cuz it's like (pause) we're Kshatriya, which is like the warrior caste uh I think that's like across India. And like our specific I guess is like Reddy in Andhra Pradesh so it's like a pretty high caste um last name. So it's like a prideful thing our parents mention it every time or like they mention when they go back to Indian it's like "oh yea I'm a Reddy". In their social circles like in NOVA there's like other upper castes who like, try to I guess like not like involve them so there is like Reddy's versus like a different upper caste or like they just have beef it's weird. Like all of them are like high caste but they like hangout in separate circles and they try to exclude each other. So that's just been my experience with it or like what I've seen. Yea I think they like only stick to our specific caste which is like Reddy's. If they like know that you're like a Reddy from Andhra Pradesh it's like ….it's like they're much more likely to help you out or um like they have a WhatsApp (laughs) group for all the Reddy's in Northern Virginia.

P2 shared the impact on her family:

> We get together and sing religious songs together and they get together and sing and eat and my mom has a really nice voice and she has been known and invited because of that and also her business reaching out to people about waxing, skincare. I have made a lot of friends through my parents friends.

P7 shared how she experienced the meaningful impact of religious spaces as primarily social:

> And occasionally she will be like oh yea and we also need to pray 5 times a day but that won't come up as often as like oh this person got invited to this thing at this thing. This person got invited but this person didn't. So that community dialogue of what aunty got invited to what is like more important than oh we like need to pray or go to taraweeh. When I said I didn't wanna go to taraweeh prayer it wasn't as big of a fight as me saying no I don't want to go to a dawat was happening. That was like a bigger deal, if you get what I am saying.

She also described how she observed religious spaces being formed in her community:

> Within the like last 11-13 years that I've been here... I've seen like all these different mosques really be built from floor up and have like all these different like Muslim communities built in. Like there is a Arab masjid and there is a masjid that's um....South Asian specific like geared more towards Indians...like north Indians and things of that sort.

P3 described how characteristics outside of religion impacted her experiences in religious spaces:

When I was little 1st or 2nd grade I started Islamic school and it was on and off and like one of them were fluent in Arabic and not that many Deshi people and I changed to another one and it was more better and there were more Deshi people and more enjoyable.

All of the Muslim participants articulated how spaces were impacted by ethnic and racial identity in particular. *P6* expressed how he prioritized being Muslim over other parts of his identity but also described conflict in the campus chapter of the Muslim Student Association (MSA):

A lot of people say that there's cliques in the MSA. That there is like a Pakistani group, a Sudanese group, an Arab group and that they are not like very um....they don't really bond together they don't really bode well together they are not very you know I guess corresponding with each other.

P3 comes from a Bangladeshi Muslim background, and described similar experiences with the MSA:

The MSA here…I avoid going there because I am very aware that there is some barriers between Pakistani and Indian people and Bangladeshi people. It made my cousin feel a certain way. That she felt exclude. Now I'm not going there because I expect that and there are a lot of Pakistani people and Indian people that feel a certain way about us because how their parents have talked about us to them.

Participants expressed the meaningful impact of religious spaces to their identity formation, sharing various experiences that highlighted non-religious impacts of these spaces. The next theme builds upon these narratives and provides descriptions of tensions that have impacted

participant's identity formation process and provides understandings of intra-community tensions.

Theme Four: Understandings of Intra-Community Tensions

All participants provided descriptions of tensions they have understood through personal lived experiences or that of other family members and peers. These descriptions touched the Partition of 1947, which resulted in the end of British rule in South Asia and the formation of newly independent states. This colonial history was a backdrop of much of the participant's understandings of intra-community tension.

P5 who came from a Punjabi Sikh background and described a strong affinity with an ethno-religious identity than any nationality provided insight of their family's particular understanding of tensions:

> The generation above my parents were all alive during partition so they remember having
>
> to move and the violence and because my parents are here they are like we are desi and
>
> are okay with other south Asian who aren't Indian but I know my other aunts and uncles
>
> do buy into anti-Pakistani rhetoric from the Indian media.

P4, who came from a Bangladeshi family who experienced the 1971 war first hand shared:

> I don't really know the history but I know there is some tension between Pakistan and
>
> Bangladesh like I don't see it with people my age but I've seen it occur maybe with my
>
> dad and another person having tension with somebody who is Pakistani or supported
>
> Pakistan in the war but like my generation we don't do that either because we don't know
>
> enough or we don't harbor those feelings cuz its not as personal. I remember one person

apologized for what their country did but I don't know if I can accept an apology like that because it didn't happen to me.

P3 also described situations as Bangladeshi, where the 1971 independence war was a point of tension with Pakistanis:

There are also some issues with other *Deshis*. Especially with Pakistani people of the older generations they will speak to me in Urdu assuming I know and that's like a whole other thing. It's a really big issue because of the big war with Pakistan we had so we could speak our own language and not be prevented from expressing who we are. And older generations they automatically knew Urdu because they couldn't speak Bangla and because we fought a whole war for that so you shouldn't still speak Urdu to me. (2019) the war between Pakistan and Bangladesh and how within the *Deshi* community Pakistani people really don't accept us in the *Deshi* community and how there is still tension between the two countries.

P7 shared a situation she observed at the predominantly Pakistani mosque she attends:

A women in the masjid was speaking Tamil and this aunty was laughing and I thought it was weird and I saw the aunties give each other looks. It's like she is desi but she isn't fully desi and because she isn't from Pakistan or India, and is Urdu/Hindi speaking and we are in a Pakistani masjid or when somebody in our masjid if someone wears a sari instead of shalwar kameez people think oh you're weird.

She also shared another situation in which she was the focus of tension:

The South Asian community the dichotomy of kind of imagining Indians....so like I'm in a South Asian sorority and the first time I walked into a room I was like there is a whole

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shit ton of Indians in here. And I was just like I have no idea who is from Pakistan here and kind of just walked out of the room. Like it kind of put into my head what South Asian was ...what it's supposed to be and what it's kinda represented as.

Several participants expressed similar tensions particularly because of what they articulated as Indian-centric. *P3* shared her experience:

I had this experience with my Indian roommate. She is…despite living here for a couple years she is very like…connected to her Indian background and there were times when she doesn't feel like she was connected with me and seemed like she had a problem with me because I wasn't Indian because she would say I wish you were Indian I wish you could speak Hindi so I could talk to you and she would also constantly make assumptions.

She also added:

The first comment is always "are you Indian". In my head it's like yes I'm brown but you shouldn't assume I'm Indian just like you shouldn't assume every East Asian person is Chinese.

P8 who is Indian, expressed how Indian-centric understandings impacted them as a South Indian. They articulated how a history of marginalization of South Indians in this Indian-centric conceptualization of folks of South Asian descent specifically elevated North Indians:

Definitely with being from Andhra Pradesh more than being Indian cuz like …cuz of like Dravidian and like North Indian stuff. [My parents,] they are very like….proud to be South Indian.

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They also talked about how despite their own issues with specific Indian-centric characteristics, they also articulate differences they saw in the understandings of non-Indians:

> I don't think so because like those people from like those areas are like...they've like definitely faced more oppression and like um...just like violence and things like that. That are partly perpetuated by like Indians so....I feel like it's kind of like a...it's like fine if it's like a prideful thing that people like identify as. Yea I wouldn't....like ….I wouldn't see that as like um (pause) I would see that as different from like saying your Indian American....it's almost like a....like a reclamation ….it's like a good thing to identify as it's like a good thing....I don't know....like claim your identity.

One of the Pakistani participants described her definition of the word *Desi (or Deshi)* which was used consistently by all participants as a word tangentially related to South Asian or Brown. Though participants seemed to have different contexts for the use of the term, P2's understanding of the term stood out:

> When I say *Desi* I'm usually thinking Indian, Pakistani, Bengali…I use it to describe myself, other people, food, certain dresses, any type of anything that relates to Indian, Pakistani and Bengali culture. I would yes because it also plays a big part in the language we speak it's like very similar….I don't think all of South Asians would be *Desi*. When I think of brown I think of *Desi* and more generally South Asian.

Her understanding of *Desi*, South Asian and Brown exemplify the points of tension that all the participants in some shape or form understood and/or have personally experienced. The next theme is a culmination of insights of the participants lived experiences and builds upon their descriptions of intra-community tensions and how they understand South Asian Identity.

Theme Five: Racialization of Islamophobia

While the participants described convergences among South Asians, some also identified an underlying connection that manifests itself as Islamophobia directed at South Asians, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

P5, a Punjabi non-Muslim who has described themselves as "visibly queer" described a recent incident:

> I was playing pool somewhere and someone called me a Palestinian terrorist so people still see me in these really specific ways and so part of the perception they have of me will shape my racial identity and stuff.

They also added:

> I grew up in New Jersey and a lot of people were I lived because we were an hour away from New York had family that worked or New York or lived there and so it was very interesting to see that shift in a very heavily south Asian area post 9/11 in that area and seeing all the different rhetoric and reactions to brown folks than I had experienced in the first 6 years of my life I think it was racialized. 9/11 changed how others perceived my race. The rhetoric was people's reaction to the community …so there was a lot islamophobia that manifested itself in xenophobia in a lot of ways specifically towards people who were brown who could be perceived as Muslim near new York. Like my dad still speaks with an accent and there were a lot more people who were being really shitty to him about it.

P6, the only Muslim male participant shared:

What society has portrayed it as like a majority of the people that have accents like Arab accents or desi accents or anything like that or if their skin tone is like that then they're automatically Muslims like....and they assume more stuff after that when like often times like you know I have so many friends from for example Egypt that are not Muslim and I've seen them like you know, get harassed and abused because people thought they were Muslim.

P2, the only participant that wears the hijab added:

I feel like issues of like being a terrorist I think that has more to do with my religion then where I'm from but also like because I am visibly brown that plays a part into it. There is definitely a racial part to it. I feel like there is a racial perception of what is a Muslim. I think my hijab definitely affects how people see me and my identity because they won't even think I'm Pakistani like they will think I am Moroccan or Egyptian.

Theme Six: Understandings of South Asian Identity

All participants expressed comfort with their understanding of South Asian as an indication of their identity. They provided various characteristics that defined South Asian to them, as well other language they use tangentially. *P3* expressed experiences with how defining identity may differ on personal experiences:

I identify South Asian as Deshi. I can't be so sure about calling everybody that way because I know that certain people feel a certain way of being called that. There are like different countries that I really wouldn't have thought were south Asian but are considered south Asian. For example Malaysia….there is a Malaysian person I know who

identifies as south Asian. I guess they see it more as geography but I identify it more with

the culture and not just geographically.

P8 also expressed how personal experiences and connections impact understandings of South

Asian identity:

I definitely use them interchangeably but like brown is probably more like (pause)

familiar. It feels just easier to say then just South Asian sometimes. I don't know. I

like...like I grew like identifying as brown.....and it just feels just like a lot easier and

more like....homey.

They added:

I think for me being South Asian is like more easy to identify with obviously

um…because there is just like a lot of like intergenerational and family stuff that comes

with being South Asian.

Some participants expressed how the ways they defined their identity differed by the social

situation. *P7* shared:

It wasn't until last summer I used it [South Asian]. Before I would say my race is

Pakistani American. But also it depends who I'm talking to. If I was talking to a white

person American Pakistani. If I was talking to a desi aunty I would say Pakistan. If I was

talking to someone in my age group like 1st gen 2 gen I would say Pakistan American

She elaborated on her shift is describing her identity:

I would probably start listing countries but also like not because I feel like there is just so

much about how we emigrated from so many different places and have our roots in so

many different things. A way to describe South Asia would be a whole land that's been colonized as fuck. And then we're kind of like stuck....stuck in the opinions of ourselves. I've been doing research on South Asian diasporas and what it represents and what not and a lot of the research is just like oh the immigration what kind of immigrant came over and like understanding who came over and who didn't.

P1 also defined South Asian identity similarly:

I identify more as South Asian American because at a starting point it's a bit easier when you're meeting people and guess like south Asians are racialized in a similar way and then you can get into specifics.

Some participants indicated citizenship as a signifier of how they should identify. *P5* shared:

My mom would say "I'm American now", because she just got her citizenship.

P6 elaborated on his feelings about citizenship and identity:

I think citizenship has a big role to play in what countries you hold like citizenship. Because like some people have like dual citizenship or a citizenship of one country or stuff. I feel like if you reside in South Asia then you are South Asian but like if you're from the South Asian ...like you're from South Asia and you move to America I think that classifies you as like American Asian or something like that.

His description of the relationship between citizenship and identity captures the complicated nature of conceptualizing identity formation, and the various valuations and meanings individuals carry. This leads to the final theme that emerged from the participants, efficacy of Asian American identity.

Theme Seven: Efficacy of Asian American Identity

All participants associated negative value to the efficacy of Asian American identity through describing lived experiences that have impacted their identity formation process.

P4 said:

> I think I struggle with it because when the word Asian is used almost everyone is referring to East Asians or Pacific Islander. I wonder if I fit into that but by definition I fit into that because by definition Bangladesh is in Asia I try to stay strong on that like if anyone is like you're not Asian. At least middle school/high school but not as much now. It came from people who weren't Asian and also East Asian friends.

P6 added:

> Usually like my mind goes like straight to Chinese (laughs) but then when I think more deeply there's more like Pakistan, Bangladesh, India all these other countries Because like China is so large and so big and I see so many Chinese people and stuff like that so I also think that's a big factor. I guess I think stereotypes have a big factor to play in that as well because a lot of my friends when they are talking about a Chinese person, they refer to them as Asian not Chinese. And a lot of like restaurants that are Chinese or something ...they are called like Asia café or something like that it makes you think like immediately oh Asia is China not like Asia is a lot more than China.

Several participants expressed the utility of Asian American only for bureaucratic purposes. *P8* described this:

I never felt comfortable identifying as Asian but I guess that's like ...yea.... (pause) you how know like on forms it will like say like "What are you?" ...Asian. I feel like being Asian is seen as like I mean Asian is like seen as being East Asian....usually. Yea I don't think they would feel comfortable identifying as Asian either.

P5 added:

There are a lot of association with the word Asians and East Asians and people who are primarily Chinese and Japanese and maybe Korean. It's about what people think. I feel like identifying as Asian while would not be incorrect wouldn't describe what my experiences is where my history is my family history is the family structure I've grown up with and the culture…and it's really hard to find south Asian stuff cuz when you search for it other Asian stuff will come up too. We don't really have a great concise language that talks about this community…this identity. I don't wanna further complicate and identify as Asian because that's not me.

P2 expressed frustration:

Whenever someone asks you where you're from and you say Asian right away they think East Asian like China or Japan so like they are really shocked to find out that Pakistan is considered Asian. They try convincing me I'm middle eastern and I'm like no I'm definitely in Asia I'm south Asian. I mean like maybe they could like specify on the census thing like East Asian, south Asian, maybe that would help because Asia is so big and there are so many like different cultures.

P3 described her experiences of being actively excluded by Asian Americans:

There is this stereotype with East Asians and Asians in generally that they are good

academically and for me I wasn't like that at all I was pretty average and my Korean

friends succeeded academically and bonded over that and I felt like they were looking

down at me because I wasn't academically advanced compared to them.

While there was expressed lack of efficacy, some participants also found some facets of what

they understood as Asian American identity being relatable. Participant #9719 explained a

particular experience:

My best friend is Vietnamese and she hangs out all the time and they called her a Chinese

girl and eventually they stopped calling her that and didn't learn her name until she was

the Salutatorian at high school graduation and they were like why can't we be like the

Asians and be smart like that they're really good at their stuff.

P4 added:

We have a lot similarities with expectations our parents have with who we are going to

marry and the importance on education and mainly associating with people of our

ethnicity instead of intermingling. A lot of parents don't feel comfortable with their kids

being involved in protesting or activism. I think a lot things associated with being Asian

are being quite keeping to yourself and not do anything to draw attention to ourselves

because we want to survive in this country and their definition of surviving is to just not

call attention even if someone from our community is being effected but that's the other

thing I've noticed Asians will only step up when it's an Asian person being effected but

will never step up if it's another person of another marginalized group.

P1 described where she experienced the similarities and the differences:

It was like oh yea our mom's do the same thing and they have the same expectations but then it's like my best friend is East Asian and she is super pale and hairless like once we were closer friends we realized differences between us and we just need to acknowledge them and not pretend those differences exist.

This final theme provides descriptions of the participant's identity in relation to Asian American identity. All participants associated negative value with Asian American identity, and provided descriptions of how their lived experiences shaped these valuations.

Figure 2 Emergent Themes

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Discussion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of South Asians and how they shape and inform their identity formation process. I was interested in exploring how South Asians in particular describe their racial identity and what shapes their identity formation processes. My motive for this study was from my own lived experiences as a South Asian trying to understand my own identity formation process and finding gaps in literature addressing this. The lived experiences of the eight South Asian students involved in this study were captured through qualitative interviews and categorized into seven emergent themes.

Connection to Research Questions

Investigating the phenomena related to the identity formation of South Asians was the driving force of this study. I set out to fill a gap in the literature regarding panethnicity, Asian American identity, and racial formation in the United States. To accomplish this, I posed two main questions as the guiding framework of this study from its inception to analysis. The following relates the results and emergent themes to the research questions to describe the essence of the lived experiences of the participants.

What are the lived experiences of South Asians as they navigate their identity formation process?

My first guiding question was focused on capturing the lived experiences of South Asians. The lack of comprehensive and in-depth literature on South Asians motivated this study and guided my process throughout the study. The purposive sampling for this study was done with the awareness of the gaps in previous studies on this population. I also brought my personal lived experiences as a South Asian student into this work. This also meant that I had to bracket

my own preconceived notions to provide accurate results and validity. My lived experience as a South Asian who identifies with the ethno-religious background of my family and the history of conflict and war we have experience reflects much of what the participants brought to this study.

These accounts of post-colonial history and violence traveling from the subcontinent to America as we emigrate here, provide a backdrop for several emergent themes. The participants demonstrated how personal experiences with their family, peers and community at large guide their understandings of their identity and sense of self. The persona narrations of stories of trauma and marginalization highlight the significance of lived experiences being integrated into the scholarly work focused on understand racialized people and their identities. Participants named how familial and societal values, taking shape as *model minority expectations* and *meaningful impact of religious spaces*, were significant parts of shaping their own understandings of their identities. Participants also provided reflective insight on their own *understandings of intra-community tensions* and *the racialization of Islamophobia*.

How do these lived experiences inform or shape their identity formation process?

My second guiding question explored the impact and meanings associated with how participants' lived experiences informed or shaped their identity formation process. In discussing the previous research question, I highlighted how several of the emergent themes provided an understanding of lived experiences, and with this question the conversation delved deeper into the impacts. The experiences participants shared associated values with certain identities or aspects of certain identities. Discussions about *South Asian identity, negotiating bicultural identity,* and the *efficacy of Asian American identity* all laid a framework for how lived experiences were shaping the participant's identity. The findings presented described how

participants experience and understand racial identity, aligning with the goals of the research questions posed.

Connection to Literature and Conceptual Framework

I presented a comprehensive literature review that contextualized this study in a multidisciplinary framework incorporating analyses from sociology, phenomenology, ethnic studies, black studies, and critical race studies. Qualitative and empirical studies on racial identity, immigration, Asian Americans and South Asians all were included in this comprehensive review of the literature. Through this overview of literature, I highlighted gaps, particularly in understanding South Asians, as well as what I argued were missteps in how results were presented as overarching representations without careful consideration for variables particular to this population. Previous literature had not explored South Asians specifically with an understanding of the unique dynamics of this population. However some previous studies did capture segments of a large conversation about identity formation for South Asians and implications for further study.

Ibrahim, Ohnishi & Sandhu Singh (1997) articulated a South Asian specific framework for understanding racial identity formation. They highlight the perception of self South Asians in American develop from a specific sociohistorical culture that includes ethnic identity and religious background. This framework provided a foundation to understanding the descriptions and lived experiences of participants. This paradigm of South Asian specific identity formation fits with Omi and Winant's discussion of the socio-political processes that impact identity formation. The participants described their experiences with socio-political processes that have informed their identity formation. The emergent themes represent the socio-political processes

that impact how the participants see themselves, how others perceive them and how those perceptions affect their own self conception.

The first theme, *negotiating bicultural identity,* captures the ways in which the participants dealt with balancing the cultural values from their families and those they were socialized with growing up in the U.S. Iwamoto et al., (2013) discussed a Asian specific bicultural identity that traces the pattern of identity formation. Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu Singh (1997) provide a South Asian specific model based on Asian bicultural model presented. They argued that understanding the multidimensionality of identity formation includes acknowledging the various vantage points from which they form a self-concept. The participants demonstrated these patterns of negotiating an identity formation process in their articulations and awareness. Participants also lamented about the uniqueness of South Asian specific negotiations of this process, as highlighted by Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu Singh (1997).

The second theme, *model minority expectations*, was observed or experienced by all participants. Some participants directly named the expectations and pressures they felt as the model minority myth, while others implicitly talked about characteristics of model minority expectations. Over half of the participants were pursuing a degree in a STEM field. Some felt they were pressured by family to choose their field, while others explained that they came to their decision on their own. Most of the participants' parents also had degrees and worked in a STEM field, reinforcing literature on South Asian immigration patterns. Prashad (2014) highlights how post 1965 immigration legislation that favored educated, highly skilled STEM workers. Several participants also characterized how academic success was associated with South Asians, and Asian Americans in general.

Trejo and Duncan (2016) argue that ethnic attrition is higher for Asians from less educated and socio-economically "successful" backgrounds. All of the participants in this study identified themselves as socioeconomically privileged, but did not retain a strong sense of Asian ethnic identity. Trejo and Duncan mainly focused on East Asians in their study but also included Indian Americans, but participant response put into question Trejo and Duncan's conclusions regarding the ethnic attrition of Asians.

The third theme, *meaningful impact of religious spaces,* captured the specific ethno-religious dynamics of participant's lived experiences. Kurien's (2001) research posits religion as a significant source of identity for South Asian as they acculturate with the racial landscape of the U.S. The significance of religion in the identity formation of South Asians within the subcontinent also is present in the diaspora, particularly when emigrating to the U.S. Smith (1978) argued, "Immigrant congregations are not transplants of traditional institutions but communities of commitment and therefore arenas of change". Smith also called immigration a theologizing experience. Diasporic South Asian communities built around shared ethno-religious backgrounds, which all participants described as a part of their lived experiences.

The fourth theme, *understandings of intra-community tensions,* provides insight into the dynamics of post-colonial history and how it impacts identity formation. National origin was highlighted as variable in the identity formation process. Literature on the differences in national origin highlight how both in the subcontinent and the diaspora, Indians are centered in conversations. Indian Americans are the largest group among South Asians, as well as possessing among the highest level of income and education. They simultaneously have an uninsured rate higher than the national average and the highest rate of income inequality. Several participants described how Indian-centric politics and understandings of South Asians has

impacted them personally. The participants of Indian national origin also acknowledge their own reluctance to identify as Indian with pride because of this history, and the Hindu nationalist elements of these politics.

What was not discussed in the literature but became a focal point of participant descriptions of the lasting impacts of post-Partition history and politics. Several of the Pakistani participants discussed their family's own migration histories into the newly formed state of Pakistan in the late 1940s and early 1950s. One of the Indian participants discussed how their Punjabi family is reluctant to identify with either Pakistan or India because of the violence and marginalization that occurred when the 1947 partition in half. All of the participants from Bangladesh discussed the continuing consequences of the 1971 independence war against Pakistan. In 1947 the country now known as Bangladesh was designated as East Pakistan. Ethnic, linguistic and cultural conflict resulted in a violent genocide against those in "East Pakistan" and led to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. Several participants discussed their family experiences living through the war and the continued consequences. The remaining tensions between those countries have translated into tense relations between Bangladeshi and Pakistani folks in the diaspora.

The fifth theme, *racialization of Islamophobia*, is present in post 9/11 literature on immigration and racialization. While all the participants discussed islamophobia in some capacity, only two explicitly mentioned 9/11. While much of the literature on South Asians has a particular focus on 9/11, the participants in this study articulated a racialized element to Islamophobia without 9/11 as the locus. Many of the participants were reflective of the different dynamics within South Asian communities in response to the rise in Islamophobia. Vijay Prashad's (2014) discussion of the Indian Lobby in particular connects to the participants

articulations of racialized Islamophobic violence. Prashad argued that the post 9/11 evolution of Hindu nationalist politics both within India and in diasporic communities in the U.S. The political influence of the Yankee Hindutva as Prashad calls it, is a mix of the liberal multiculturalism and right wing Hindu nationalist ideology positions Islam as an enemy.

The sixth theme, *understandings of South Asian identity*, was articulated by participant descriptions of what language they used and to describe themselves and others around them. Morning's (2001) study of self-identification came to mixed conclusions about how South Asians describe themselves. She argued that socio-economic background positively impacted one's self-identification as South Asian. Morning also highlighted the generational differences in describing identity. Morning also concluded that the children of immigrants, especially if they were born in the U.S., were more likely to identity as South Asian over their family's national origin. All of the participants self-identified as South Asians, whether they were born in the US or not. Although only one participant was old enough to remember moving to the U.S. from Pakistan and expressed how she only recently began identifying as South Asian. Schatcher (2014) examined Indian Americans in particular and also came to multiple conflicting conclusions. Her study highlighted conflicts with Asian American literature that complements the findings of this study. The previous five themes provided a framework for the dynamics that are unique to South Asians. However, Schatcher focused only on Indians, which the themes of this study highlight as limitations of her conclusions.

The seventh and final theme is *efficacy of Asian American identity.* Schatcher's (2014) revealed participants associated negative value with Asian American identity. Literature on panethnic identity has come to conflicting in regards to South Asians. All participants in this study expressed a lack of efficacy. Masouka (2006) argued that the most marginalized members

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of pan-ethnic groups rely on group based resources, which is consistent with the lived experiences of the participants of the study. All participants identified marginalization they felt and a lack of pan-ethnic consciousness, something Masouka acknowledged needed to be explored further. Morning's (2001) study specifically focused on South Asian self-identification argued that the bureaucratic function was understood, but beyond that Asian American identity was not valued. Panethnic literature also posits a building of solidarity focuses on political and cultural benefits that Okamoto and Mora (2014) articulate is born out of a framework of the negotiation of internal diversity.

Schatcher (2014) argued the opposite in her study of Indian Americans, coming to the conclusion that while Asian is the racial classification, which does not mean Asian American identity is open to them. Revisiting Schatcher's question, "do members of particular national-origin groups identify panethnically for the same reasons?", this study asked South Asians of various national origins and found that panethnic consciousness was little to non-existent. The efficacy of Asian American identity for the participants was low and while they came from various religious, national and socio-economic backgrounds, their reasoning was similar.
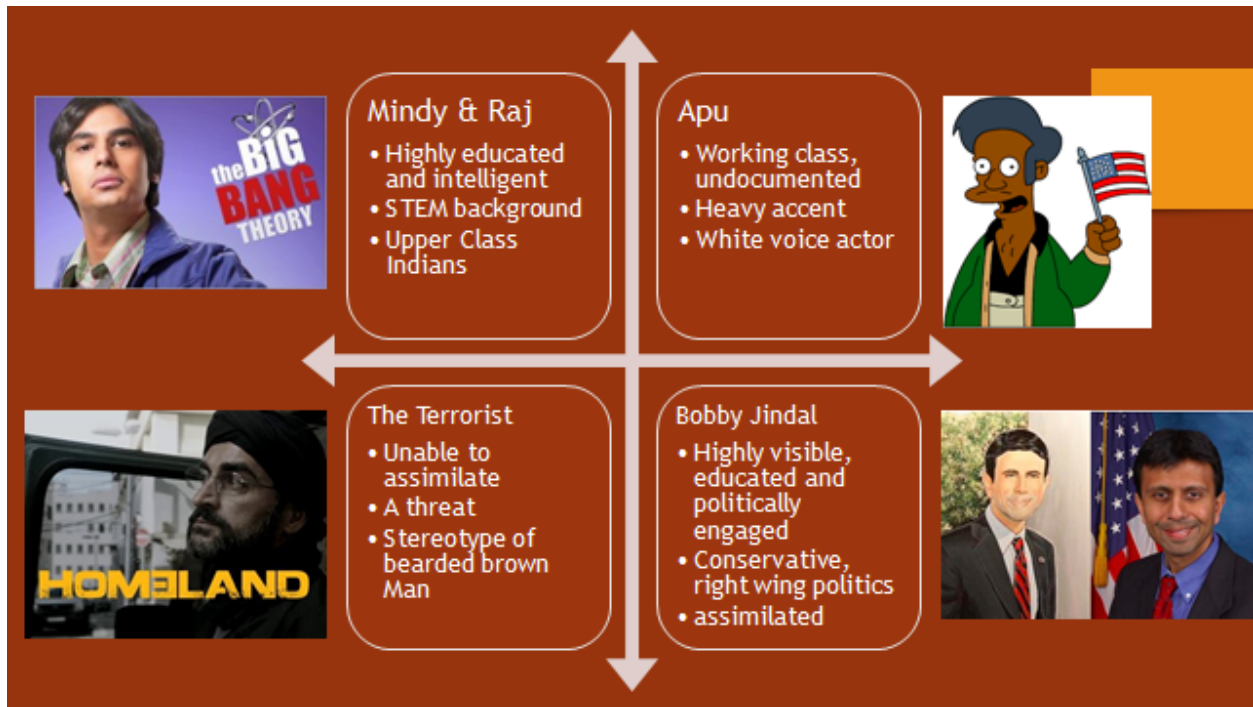
Figure 3 Typology

Typology

The comprehensive review of the literature highlights the gaps in our understanding of the racial identity formation of South Asians in the United States. One way to think of what we do not know about South Asians, both as a category and the constitutive groups, is to think about the cultural scripts that define what we do know about South Asians. Omi and Winant consider these kinds of images as part of the political process that gives racial categories their taken-for-granted meaning. They are also the way that minority groups contest how they are identified, one of the components of Ibrahim's theory of how racial formation happens. I looked broadly across dominant media messages to identify four dominant images of South Asians. These four archetypes represent the macro political context that has shaped the creation of the South Asian pan-ethnicity group: they speak to differences of national origin in different immigration waves, assumptions about the socioeconomic status of South Asians, and ideas about the religious beliefs of South Asians. Pop culture and South Asian identity have become a salient topic of

conversation among cultural critics and journalist. As The Guardian's Arwa Mahdawi noted in her discussion of the second season of *Master of None*, starring Aziz Ansari in May 2017, "things are very different in the US, where South Asians make up a far newer, far smaller percentage of the population and have traditionally occupied little, if any, space in the national consciousness…... 'Asian' refers to …. East Asians. South Asians are a subgroup of a subgroup." Using literature on typologies and classification alongside well-recognized pop culture figures and themes, a racial typology of four types of South Asian American trajectories of racial identity formation was created. The four types all fall on an axis of socioeconomic background and religion. The four types that I have formed through careful consideration of the literature and theoretical framework incorporate the multidimensional characteristics of South Asian specific racial identity formation.

The first type is named after two fictional South Asian sitcom characters, Mindy Lahiri from *The Mindy Project* and Raj Koothrapali from *The Big Bang Theory*. **Mindy and Raj** are both highly educated, high achieving, apolitical individuals working in STEM fields. Raj is an intelligent scientist who immigrated to the United States from India after completing his education in STEM. Neither Raj or Mindy's religious background are explicitly discussed, however based on their characterizations in tandem with the literature, they follow the archetype of upper caste Hindus. Raj comes from a presumably upper class stereotypical Indian family with accents and sensibilities common in portrayals of South Asians in the media. Raj is docile and socially and romantically stunted. Raj's identity is informed by his attempts throughout the series to balance his "Indianness" with being in America. He navigates a bicultural identity, and engages in parts of the culture he grew up in and the current cultural context he lives in. Raj's

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sister's presence briefly throughout the series also illustrates Raj's identity process, as his "Indianness" is more present around other South Asians.

Mindy Lahiri is also a highly educated upper class South Asian in a STEM field. She is the American born daughter of Indian immigrants, and unlike Raj, is more competent in navigating the dominate culture. Mindy is also characterized as extremely intelligent, articulate and ambitious. Mindy embodies the characteristics of a model minority Indian American with an Ivy League degree, a successful career in medicine and a racial identity that reflects a classical assimilation model. There has been controversy surrounding creator and star of *The Mindy Project*, Mindy Kaling, one of Hollywood's only and most visible South Asians. Kaling has been criticized for her perceived reluctance to embrace her cultural and racial identity, which in turn has translated into criticism over the fictional Mindy Lahiri, which also is believed to embody those values. The discussion surrounding Mindy Kaling and her identity, as well as the fictional Mindy Lahiri illustrate the tensions in racial identity formation among South Asians around the dominant narratives defining their realities.

The second type is *Apu* from The Simpsons, one of the most well-known and visible fictional South Asians in pop culture. Apu has a heavy accent and runs and operates a convenience store. His character becomes married in later seasons of the series in an arranged marriage to a traditional Indian woman who also has a heavy accent. Apu, unlike Mindy and Raj, is a working class undocumented immigrant not employed in a STEM field. However, it is revealed in a storyline about Apu's immigration history that he has a master's degree in a STEM field from an Indian institution. While Apu is Indian, the literature contextualizes narratives similar to Apu as a part of the second wave of South Asian migration in the 1980s of less financially successful migrants with vastly different trajectories then the Mindy & Raj type.

Contextualizing this narrative provides a wider understanding of Apu as the type representing the characteristics of lower caste or non-Hindu immigrants from India and elsewhere. Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sikh Indians have similar trajectories and illustrate the realities of the Apu type. Hank Azaria, a white American, is the voice actor that brings Apu to life. This has been a point of criticism, especially understanding the implications of a white voice actor providing the voice for one of the most well-known South Asian television characters while doing an imitation of an "Indian accent". Arwa Mahdawi contextualized the significance of this type: "It is not an exaggeration to say that, for decades, the most famous south Asian in the US was Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, proprietor of the Kwik-E-Mart in The Simpsons. And not only is Apu a cartoon character, he's voiced by Hank Azaria, a white man." The implications for this study and understand the literature include conceptualizing how unlike the Mindy & Raj, assimilation and acculturation is vastly different for the Apu type. The mark of "otherness" is a central part of the Apu type, falling out the conventions of the model minority classical assimilation conception of South Asian racialization.

The third type is the Terrorist. ***The terrorist*** is associated with foreignness and Islam. The educational and economic achievements are less relevant for the trajectory of this type because of the highly Islamophobic social climate they are navigating. The terrorist generally is visible to non-South Asians as a hyper masculine man with a large beard and/or turban or a desexualized woman with a hijab. The terrorist is a common trope that is visible in various TV shows and movies such *Homeland, NCIS, American Sniper, and Zero Dark Thirty*. Non-Muslims read as brown because of phenotypical characteristics also experience some of the realities of this type. The terrorist type also illustrates that intra-group tensions that inform understandings of South Asian racialization.

The terrorist is generally presumed to be Pakistani or of Arab descent, with the lines of what is understood as South Asian and Arab being blurred. The process of assimilation is a nonstarter for the terrorist who is perceived as threat to dominate white Christian American way of life, a trope that is reproduced incessantly through television and film (Misri, 2016). The terrorist embodies all that is presumed as at odds with American life and culture, and is unable to assimilate because they have been marked as a "threat". The rise of Hindu nationalism, especially with the election of Narendra Modi in India positions the terrorist at odds with dominant narratives of South Asian identity. The stereotypical conservatism of Muslims is position as a uniquely dangerous compared to the conservatism of the Hindu right. The terrorist embodies the marriage of western Islamophobic ideologies with South Asian specific ideologies about non-Hindus, lower caste, and particularly Muslim people from the subcontinent.

The fourth type is named for one of the most visible South Asians in the American Public, ***Bobby Jindal***. The former governor of Louisiana and onetime presidential candidate is a highly educated, high achieving and highly political South Asian. Jindal, along with other highly visible and political South Asians such as Former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley and political commentator Dinesh D'Souza are high achieving, highly educated and upper class South Asians representing an emerging type. Historically, South Asians have remained apolitical and uninvolved in American politics. South Asians are also the most democratic leaning of Asian American subgroups (Green, 2017). The emergence of Jindal and others as highly political and visible South Asians is a departure, both because of political activity and strong ties with conservatism. The overwhelmingly white Trump administration has also been historic for South Asians, rising to new bureaucratic heights including; UN ambassador Nikki Haley, FCC chairman Ajit Pai, and Seema Verma, head of the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

(Tate, 2017). All of these South Asian bureaucrats come from Indian families who immigrated with H1-B visas, for "special occupations" translating to STEM fields (Green, 2017) and with the exception of Haley, an upper caste Hindu Indian background.

The Bobby Jindal type represents the convergence of the Hindu nationalist politics from the subcontinent and the model minority assimilation politics of the diaspora. The Indian lobby has emerged in the last couple decades as a growing political presence that is in amalgamation of western liberal multiculturalism and the growing political power of Hindu nationalism. The strategic politics of the Indian lobby are situated in a geopolitical climate dominated by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and fascist populism. This type is politically motivated and following the example of the Jewish lobby in situating both their geopolitical interests and high achieving and assimilated group as a top priority in American civil society.

These archetypes suggest what the literature shows and what Omi and Winant argues is true of how racial categories are formed: the South Asian groups is contested, changes, and reflects political and organizational systems. These archetypes also show little awareness of how South Asians differ in national origin and religious identity, although they do account somewhat for SES. This study will examine how South Asian students form their racial identities given a macro political context that both draws on their diversity in national origin, religion, and socioeconomic status but also flattens them in dominant scripts about South Asians.

Of the four types identified through an analysis of the literature, three emerged in descriptions of participants lived experiences. The Raj & Mindy type was illustrated by *negotiations of bicultural identity* and *the model minority paradigm*. Just like Raj and Mindy, these themes emerged through conversations about the implications of societal and familial expectations and their individual acculturation processes. The Apu type emerged from *intra-*

community tensions and *understandings of South Asian identity*. Several participants also reflected one how their family's socio-economic background changed over time. Nearly half of the participants family members were involved in a convenience store or related business. The terrorist type emerged in participant descriptions of the racialization of Islamophobia and understandings of South Asian identity. Participant discussed how stereotypes of phenotype and color impacted their identity despite their various religious backgrounds.

The only type that did not emerge from the participant's lived experiences was the Bobby Jindal type. Many participants expressed concerns with what they understood as a lack of political engagement by South Asians. Several participants did provide critical insight into the nuanced complexities of identity that are often overlooked. However, conversations about the anti-Black dynamics of identity formation as well as the South Asian specific dynamics of caste and ethno-religious communities provide an opportunity for future explorations. While the Bobby Jindal type did not emerge from participants, the abundant presence of Indian-Americans in the Trump administration and the larger socio-political landscape of the U.S. lays the groundwork for future implications of this study.

Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

Last fall at the height of the presidential campaign, Donald Trump made an appearance at a fundraiser organized by "Hindus for Trump" in New Jersey. I watched reactions from peers, politicos and media critics who seemed dumbfounded by even the idea of such a coalition. I on the other hand, was not surprised at all. I grew up in a South Asian home and surrounded by the politics and social antics of my community. My family is from Kashmir, a region that has been occupied and immersed in conflict since 1947, with India and Pakistan edging closer to nuclear war over our beloved homeland. I grew up in a working class home with parents who didn't have

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STEM degrees but still set high expectations for their children because they wanted better for us. I am a first generation college student who is not in a STEM field but still have family members asking if medical school is still a possibility in my future.

I also have asked myself, "Am I Asian?" and responded to other people's inquiries about my race with, "Um, if you look on a map, I'm from Asia. So *yes*, I am Asian!" My identity and how I describe and understand it has and continues to change as I navigate through life. I've had awkward conversations with fellow South Asians because of the complicated post-colonial history that continues to impact our lives. As a sociologist, I have sought out social science work on the complicated dynamics of racial identity formation I personally experience. Exploring literature in a multitude of disciplines and looking for a theoretical framework to make sense of my lived experiences. The racial structure in the United States is firmly rooted in anti-blackness and important to any discussion about identity formation. For Asians in particular the wage of non-blackness arguably appears through the model minority myth which characterizes Asian immigrants as hard working, culturally competent and productive.

Tamara K. Nopper discusses rhetoric around immigrants including their productivity, value and character. Nopper examines how immigrants of color are characterized in anti-black terms. She roots her argument in discussions of anti-blackness and the characterization of Black folks as lacking character and work ethic, while nonblack people of color are valorized in relation to this characterization. She describes the economic productivity of immigrants that is used in defense of policy for immigrants both documented and undocumented as ironically praising them for being in a deprived condition. Talking points such as the lack of use of welfare by immigrants as well as the income and social security taxes paid are not necessarily positives Nopper argues. She situates these points with how Black folks are characterized as abusing

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welfare, lacking the drive to work hard, highlighting the underlying anti-blackness in this rhetoric.

Nopper argues that one does not have to be white to experience the treatment of whites and to have to access to what she calls the "psychological wage of whiteness". She describes how work is a category for whiteness while slave is for blackness. The latter category was never incorporated in the logic of civil society thus is not counted as contributors to the economy. The clear difference between slave and worker is non-blackness thus the characterization of immigrants of colors as productive is articulated through anti-black rhetoric that casts them as akin to whites.

This study's findings provide a foundation to build a more expansive framework for understanding racial identity formation of immigrants, people of color, non-black people, and South Asians. Further studies in how religious identity, and upper caste Hindu identity in particular play into this identity formation process is needed. Another recommendation for further research is to do more around centering conversations about racism on blackness and anti-blackness, instead of proximity to whiteness. The work of scholars in black studies, sociology and geography has long pushed for more serious theoretical work to be done on anti-racist work that centers anti-blackness and that scholars and researchers apply more rigor and nuance to their work on race and ethnicity.

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Interview Protocol

Phase 1 – Life Narrative
1. What is your age and gender identity?
2. Tell me about the national origin of your family
   a. Probe: Where were you born? Where were your parents and/or guardians born?
   b. How would you describe your association with your family's nation(s) of origin
   c. How does your association to your family's country of origin differ from your family's ethnic origin?
3. Tell me about you and your family's religious background
   a. Probes: do you participate in any practices, holidays and/or community activities related to your religious background?
   b. Tell me about any awareness you have of caste and its impact on you and your family
4. Tell me about your family's economic situation?
   a. Probes: would you describe your family as working, middle or upper class and why?
   b. How much do you think your class has impacted your future goals in terms of education and/or career choice?
5. Tell me about your family's educational background? Are you a first generation college student?
   a. What are your goals for your education?
   b. How did you/are deciding what field of study you are pursuing?

Phase Two – Identity Narrative

6. What category on the census would you pick (show them 2010 census choices for racial identity)
   a. What made you pick this category?
   b. Do you think this category represents your identity? Why/why not?
   c. Would your answer change depending on who asks? Why or why not?
7. How would you describe your racial identity in your own words?
   a. What parts of your life effect this? Does religion or class or national origin play a part in this? Why or why not?
8. How important is racial identity to you?
   a. Is this something you think about? Discuss with your friends and family?
   b. What does your racial identity say about you?
9. Does how you talk about race change depending who you are speaking to?
   a. Probes: How so?
10. Do you talk about it other Asian Americans? South Asians?

a. Where do you have discussions about race? In class? In a club or group meeting? With your family? At your place of worship? At cultural/community events?

11. How are you influenced by others expectations and perceptions you?
    a. Probes: how so?

12. What expectations and perceptions influence you the most? Religion? Education? Class?
    a. What influences (if any) do your family members' background, origins, and experiences have on your feelings about your racial identity?
    b. What parts of their backgrounds in particular do you think have influenced these feelings?
    c. What feelings do these aspect of your family background, origins and experiences bring up for you?

13. How important is racial identity compared to other aspects of your identity and sense of who you are?
    a. Probes: compared to class, caste, religious, gender, and/or sexual identity?
    b. How important are these different aspects of your identity in relation to each other?
    c. Which are more or less important? And why?

14. Have your views and description of your racial identity changed?
    a. Probes: If so, what do you think influence these changes?
    b. If not, why do think it has not changed?
    c. Are there specific moments/events in your life that influenced changes/no changes?

→ **NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.**

8. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

☐ **No,** not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
☐ Yes, Puerto Rican
☐ Yes, Cuban
☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin — *Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.* ↗

9. What is Person 1's race? *Mark* ☒ *one or more boxes.*

☐ White
☐ Black, African Am., or Negro
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↗

☐ Asian Indian   ☐ Japanese   ☐ Native Hawaiian
☐ Chinese   ☐ Korean   ☐ Guamanian or Chamorro
☐ Filipino   ☐ Vietnamese   ☐ Samoan
☐ Other Asian — *Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.* ↗   ☐ Other Pacific Islander — *Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.* ↗

☐ Some other race — *Print race.* ↗