THE ROLE OF SALIENT CULTURAL DISCOURSES AND SOCIALIZATION EXPERIENCES IN SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN'S AGENCY IN INTIMATE AND SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

By

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ABSTRACT

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Evidence suggests that South Asian adolescents delay premarital sexual debut and engage in lower rates of sexual intercourse in adolescence compared to their Euro-American, African-American and Hispanic-American counterparts. Due to this belief, they are seen as a low risk population and therefore understudied. However, sexual coercion by intimate partners in the form of threat of exposure of pre-marital sexual activities, forced sexual activities and threat of separation and abandonment from both marital and dating partners upon refusal of sex, has been documented in prior research with this population. In this critical ethnography, a sample of 20 South Asian women (22-34 years) participated in in-depth individual interviews. Inquiries include questions about manifestations of beliefs and behaviors embodying agency in relation to partnering and sexuality. Analysis of this qualitative data revealed the intricate links between young women's demonstrated agency in the context of partnering and sexuality and their perceptions of cultural discourses and socialization processes within their families. Participants' mothers' interactions and socialization practices emerged as central to their narratives of agency and mothers interacted with their daughters in culturally specific ways. This study has implications for the development of sexual assault prevention programs for South Asian families and potential applications to task-shifting models of public health programming.

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"

Simone de Beauvoir

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background and Significance

The South Asian population in the United States is the largest and fastest growing immigrant group, standing at 4.3 million people in 2014, a 119% growth from the year 2000 (South Asian Americans Leading Together, 2017; SAALT). Although lauded as model minorities (Kitano & Sue, 1973; Tummala-Narra, Deshpande, & Kaur, 2016), South Asian families face significant acculturation challenges which remain largely invisible to the host culture. They engage in a unique form of 'selective' acculturation, demonstrating a willingness to adopt many characteristics of the image of upper middle-class white families, particularly in academic and professional work settings, through shifting attires and linguistic performances, and extend the same allowances to their children due to the value placed on achievement in South Asian cultures (Prashad, 2000; Shankar, 2008). They simultaneously engage in selective identity performances where they overtly reject perceived Western values such as dating and premarital sexual activity, particularly within spaces predominantly occupied by their own ethnic community (Dasgupta, 1986; Inman, Howard, Beaumont, & Walker, 2007; Jambunathan, Burts, & Pierce, 2000; LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993; Sodowsky & Carey, 1988). Accordingly, prior research has shown that South Asian adolescents' intentions to adopt behaviors or habits typical of Euro-American adolescents, such as dating, are interpreted by parents as cultural corruption, and result in intergenerational family conflicts (Almeida, 1996; Segal, 1991). This dual expectation disproportionately impacts women, particularly daughters, in South Asian families due to the unique gendered role expectations placed upon them to preserve family honor by preserving their virginity, fulfilling traditions of

arranged marriages, and maintaining their marital relationships at all costs (Khanna, McDowell, Perumbilly, & Titus, 2009; Inman, Constantine, & Ladany, 1999; Kallivayalil, 2004; Kitano & Sue, 1973; Passel, 2011; Tummala-Narra et al., 2016; Talbani, & Hasanali, 2000; Yang, 2011). Women who break from these traditions risk ostracizing themselves and their immediate families from their ethnic group. For example, women in abusive relationships who wish to end the relationship are held responsible for breaking the family system and bringing shame upon the family (Abraham, 1999; Dasgupta, 2000; Dasgupta & Jain, 2007).

Across cultures, family values and parental socialization practices have been shown to have a significant impact on adolescent and emerging adults' relationship and sexual behaviors and choices (Askun and Ataca 2007; DeLamater 1981; Gravel, Young, Darzi, Olavarria-Turner & Lee, 2016; Halpern, Waller, Spriggs, & Hallfors, 2006; Wetherill, Neal, & Fromme, 2010). In South Asian immigrant families, mothers play a larger part in socialization and in transmitting relationship and sexual norms than fathers. As primary socializing agents in this highly gendered ethnic identity socialization process, they attempt to protect their daughters from the social costs of breaking these traditions, by establishing highly restrictive boundaries around relationship and sexual behavior prior to marriage (Dasgupta, 1998; Gravel et al., 2016; Kim & Ward, 2007; Talbani & Hasanali, 2000). However, there is little evidence of direct verbal communication about these issues between South Asian mothers and daughters. Although research shows that South Asian adolescents delay premarital sexual debut and engage in lower rates of sexual intercourse in adolescence compared to their Euro-American, African-American and Hispanic-American counterparts (Gravel et al., 2016), it is unclear if this can be attributed to maternal socialization practices. It could also be hypothesized that these young women remain unprepared to successfully negotiate intimate relationships, particularly

in a bicultural context. Though there is no direct evidence of this, the prevalence of violence and sexual coercion by intimate partners, exploitation by threat of exposure of pre-marital sexual activities, and threat of separation and abandonment from both marital and dating partners experienced by young South Asian women support this hypothesis (Deepak, 2004; Shah, 2015).

Despite these unique challenges in South Asian families, particularly those faced by South Asian adolescent and young adult women in relation to dating relationships and sexuality, there is a dearth of research on critical familial processes contributing to South Asian women's intimate relationships and sexual health. Similarly, current prevention and intervention approaches addressing relationship and sexual health and violence as well as the theories and research informing women's experiences of the same, are largely Eurocentric and fail to consider the differential experiences of women from various diverse communities (e.g. Adams, 1998; Levett, 2003). The dearth of research in this area is not just a passive lack of attention, it is also an active disregard for culturally unique socialization processes.

To that end, using a feminist-informed critical multicultural lens (McDowell and Fang, 2007), this critical ethnographic study (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Silverman, 2006) explores South Asian women's perceptions of cultural discourses and socialization processes within their families, particularly socialization by mothers, and its role in their understanding and demonstrations of agency in the context of intimate relationships and sexual interactions. I hope to ultimately advance knowledge of culturally informed prevention and intervention practices with South Asian adolescents and young adults. This study is the first in-depth qualitative study to examine women's agency and mother-daughter relationship and interaction processes, in relation to intimate relationships, sexual well-being and violence within South Asian

communities in the U.S. While prior studies have recognized the role of the intersection of multiple social identities upon South Asian Immigrant women's relationship experiences, none have examined how South Asian women's roles as mothers and daughters intersect with gendered expectations and migrant identities to influence the maternal socialization processes and consequently young women's relationship and sexual experiences.

Guiding Research Frameworks

A Feminist Informed Critical Multicultural Framework

Feminist Informed Critical Multicultural (FICM) frameworks bring together critical, feminist and multicultural theories, to examine and amplify marginalized voices at the intersection of multiple identities including gender, race, culture, ethnicity and religion (McDowell & Fang, 2007). At the core of the FICM framework lies a commitment to recognizing and questioning systems of oppression that privilege some knowledge and marginalize others, including gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, abilities, national origin, immigration status, culture, ethnicity, language etc. McDowell and Fang (2007) define *critical multiculturalism* as "a nonessentialist perspective that values diversity and acknowledges the politics of cultural differences and social location." That is, critical multiculturalist perspectives reject essentialist narratives that privilege the cultural knowledge of those in power within a social space where different cultural ways of knowing are constantly competing for legitimacy (May, 1999). Instead, these approaches value diversity and attempt to expose and override the politics of knowledge coming from different cultural and social locations by locating both researchers and participants amid their unique and complex social contexts. By ensuring that research is focused on the needs of those who occupy marginalized

locations, this framework extends the critical interrogation of the politics of knowledge construction, toward augmenting marginalized knowledge. Thus, a multicultural perspective inherently requires researchers to be multi-culturally competent, attend to the culture and context of participants, and place the concerns of (and benefits to) those being studied, at the center of analysis. Feminism brings a post-positivist influence to critical multiculturalism thereby bridging the fundamental challenge of critical realism ontology. Thus while critical realism (positivist stance) on its own holds fast to the idea that the researcher and participant realities exist separately and cannot be completely known by the other, the feminist influence allows me as a researcher to situate myself in the research, acknowledging that my social positions, identities, and values affect what I observe and study and to account for the biases I may bring to the interpretation of participant experiences as I attempt to closely align myself with them and to best represent and amplify their voices (McDowell & Fang, 2007). Lastly, adhering to feminist sensibilities, I attempt to approach this study not as a one that is *about* South Asian Women, but one that is *for* South Asian women.

This section provides a brief look at South Asian Women in America and the contexts and conditions of their immigration and then briefly examine South Asian Feminisms and intersection with the U.S. context. Subsequently, there is an examination into the nature of other cumulative systems within which South Asian Women in America are embedded, paying particular attention to their family systems and enactments in a host culture. Finally, I will share aspects of my own journey and the social identities I possess that are most relevant to my investigation.

South Asian Women in America: The Immigrant Context

The positionalities of South Asian women in North America today, and specifically in the United States, cannot be viewed independently, but rather taken in historical context of the shifting conditions and pathways of migration and the circumstances of resettlement. Although the United States has long been considered a nation of immigrants, South Asians were essentially excluded from the profile of the average immigrant to America until 1965 (American Immigration Law Foundation, 2004; Bean, Gushing, & Haynes, 1997). The Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1965 replaced the discriminatory nationality-based quota system that previously existed, with newer regulations that privileged skilled workers and family affiliations thereby opening the doors for many more South Asian immigrants (Keely, 1971). The immigration act of 1965 had significant implications for South Asian women in particular due to its family reunification provision, which allowed skilled South Asian immigrants to sponsor the immigration of less skilled relatives including spouses and married and unmarried adult children as well as adult siblings (Tichenor, 2002). Therefore, in a previously male dominated immigrant landscape (Leonard, 1992), women now had a pathway to immigrate to the united states as dependents of their significant others and adult male children and parents. Despite this shift, between 1980 and 2013, immigrants from India, the largest migrant sub-group from South Asia, were more likely to be men (SAALT, 2015) and South Asian women are still far more likely to enter the country as dependents than South Asian men.

Historically, South Asians have reported immigrating to the U.S. for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, the desire to reunite with family members, to escape political prosecution, to achieve economic mobility, or to escape discrimination as LGBTQ individuals

(Ross-Sheriff, 2001). However, South Asian women, in contrast to men, report not only gender specific challenges associated with immigration but also gendered motivations for migrating to the U.S. including, greater access to the outside world through the opportunity to work, educational and economic opportunities, greater freedom, financial independence, rights and respect as women, less stigma toward single and divorced women and fewer cultural constraints which women face at disproportionate higher rates (Ross-Sheriff, 2001). Thus immigration to North America offers the promise of a better life for South Asian women who are hoping to overcome gender-based barriers to advancement and freedom, and threats to safety that they face in their home countries. However, to the extent that their immigration status places limitations upon their movements, and to the extent that their right to remain in the country is controlled by other family members, usually men, these women are also vulnerable to exploitation. Additionally, for those who don't engage in formal employment, immigration to this country may bring with it a loss of community and social support systems.

South Asian Feminisms

Defining a 'South Asian feminism' might seem counter intuitive given the extensive diversity of South Asians, comprising of multiple national (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Afghani, Nepali, Sri Lankan and Maldives), religious (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Sikh and Jain) and linguistic affiliations, as well as inter-country politics and strife in the region. Yet, there is a need to explore different manifestations of feminism so as to recognize the distinctive historical and lived experiences of women across cultural and socioeconomic groups. While a pan-South Asian identity is largely impossible, women in the region are united by a shared cultural identity that has frequently been called upon in defining

entire nations of South Asia (Roy, 2012). At the culmination of the British Colonization of South Asia, when the nations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were being formed, leaders held strong to the idea of a national identity, different from the west (Chatterjee, 1989). Within these narratives, women of the region were identified as a symbol of this identity, through what was seen as their unique identity enactment. That is, the definition of South Asian womanhood, came to be the parameter by which these countries were defined, both by colonial powers and by national leaders (Chatterjee 1989; De Alwis 2002; Jayawardena 1986; Niranjana 2007; Rouse 2004; Sangari and Vaid, 1990). Interestingly, ethnic and regional identities of womanhood like Punjabi, Bengali or Gujarati womanhood, have consistently superseded and even relegated religious identities to the sidelines (Azim, Menon & Siddiqui, 2009; Mookherjee 2008). As stated by Roy (2012) in her exploration of *New South Asian Feminisms, "*Post-independence definitions of authentic cultural identity continue to be inscribed and asserted on the backs of Women." This elevation of women to a status of being the entirety of a country's identity, took the form of rigid directives and regulations of women's bodies including their clothing. Therefore, a moral hierarchy of acceptable behaviors for women is set up and instilled within members of the South Asian societies and religiously implemented and maintained by families (Thapan, 2009). For example, a woman wearing a *saree* or *Punjabi Suit* is seen as moral and chaste while one wearing more 'western' clothes is relegated to a hypersexualized and amoral status. Similarly, dating and pre-marital relationships are seen as '*western'* and as a violation of this moral code which in turn functions as a threat to family and societal identity (Inman et al., 2007; Jambunathan et al., 2000).

South Asian womanhood in America.

Discourses about South Asian communities in America, are closely aligned with those of South Asian womanhood in the homeland, both from American society at large and the South Asian Immigrant community, along common cultural and social characteristics shared by these sub-communities including common historical and immigration experiences, otherness, and worldviews (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997). That said, against the backdrop of dominant Christian ideologies, irrespective of proximity of immigration experiences, South Asians are likely to experience greater salience of religious identities, and private and public regard for their religious identities may become more prominent influences in their lives (Sellers et al., 1997). Religious conflict has always been a prominent theme in the South Asian subcontinent. The division of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh was at least in part influenced by religious dissent and India and Pakistan are frequently recognized as majority Hindu and majority Muslim countries respectively. In the United States, the fallout from the terrorist attacks of 9/11 was seen in the drastic increase in levels of violence, rhetoric, and intolerance against South Asians on account of traditional forms of dressing, languages spoken, and ways of praying (SAALT, 2017). Similarly, the 2016 election cycle brought historic levels of hate crimes against South Asians. Due to the identification of South Asian women's ways of dressing themselves with their cultural identities, and the distinctiveness of their attire, particularly of Muslim women (i.e. use of *dupatta, hijab, niqab, etc.*), they often become the target of such attacks. Between 2015 November and 2016 November alone, there were at least 4 documented incidents of violent attacks on women who were racially profiled based on their cultural/religious clothing (SAALT, 2017). In most of these incidents, the women were in public with their children. Still, there is little evidence to suggest that religious affiliation

results in significantly different socialization experiences among South Asian families or that South Asian Muslim girls receive different messages and have different experiences than South Asian Hindu, Sikh, Jain, or Christian girls. While a qualitative study does not lend itself to answering this question fully, it does hold the potential to provide preliminary evidence regarding the role of religion in the socialization of South Asian girls' around sexuality and intimate relationships.

South Asian Family Systems

South Asian women's experiences and enactments of their relationships and sexual identities are deeply embedded within family systems with collectivistic and familial cultural values. Familialism is a set of values centered around privacy, close identification with one's family, loyalty and solidarity, promoting the core importance of family relationships (Ahmad, Driver, McNally, & Stewart, 2009; Vega 1990; Triandis, Marin, Betancourt, Lisansky, & Chang, 1982). Consistent with the perceived importance of family relationships over all other attachments and accomplishments, collectivistic values intersect with familialism to promote the needs of the family as a whole over one's own wellbeing. South Asian families have been previously characterized as demonstrating a high acceptance of hierarchy within the family, of self-sacrifice for the collective good, and the unequal distribution of power within their family, even by the least powerful members of the household (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 2001; Triandis & Suh, 2002). These family values influence family members' behaviors and choices and create power structures that benefit some members while proving to be a conduit for enforcing oppressive systems on others. The strengths of familialism and collectivist values are seen, for example, in the high level of commitment demonstrated by South Asian families to caring for

elderly members of the family. Simultaneously, the intersection of familialism and vertical collectivism with highly gendered behavioral expectations and norms, operate a system which disadvantages women (Hofstede, 1980). For example, women in families may be expected to serve as the primary caregivers to elderly members, thereby either placing enormous demands on their physical and emotional resources or impacting their ability to obtain formal employment outside the home. In another situation, the responsibility placed upon women in South Asian immigrant families to preserve the family system has been seen to dissuade them from seeking formal help when faced with abuse by their partners or other family members. In one study, women reported enduring abuse for long periods due to fear of tainting family honor, bringing shame to their families and to preserve family unity and the wellbeing of their children (Ahmad et al., 2009). Similarly, there are numerous examples of South Asian young adults reporting secrecy around premarital sexual activity due to fear of bringing shame to themselves and their families (Abraham, 1999; Shah, 2015; Talbani & Hasanli, 2000).

Consistent with a critical perspective, in South Asian communities, the cultural performances of the family unit are perceived to reflect upon and influence the identity of the ethnic community and the social locations and behaviors of individual family members are perceived to be reflective of the family system (Tummala-Narra et al., 2016). As immigrants in the United States, South Asian families enact their South Asian Identities in the context of their host culture and do so through a selective acculturation process, where they may socialize their members to more fully acculturate in visible professional and academic settings, and discourage such acculturation in personal realms, particularly those that are closely tied to their national ethnic identities (Shankar, 2008). Because these ethnic group identities are typically closely tied more to women's cultural performances of womanhood (Roy, 2012), than to men,

such identity enactments are evaluated primarily on the basis of women's espousal and fulfillment of their familial roles as daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. Further, due to gendered role definitions, mothers bear the responsibility of socializing their children to adhere to cultural values and expectations, by modeling cultural enactments through close adherence to various family norms, and close affiliations with the South Asian cultural and religious groups (DasGupta & DasGupta, 1996). The assignment of a 'Model Minority Status' to South Asians in the U.S., (Kitano & Sue, 1973; Tummala-Narra, et al., 2016) the result of the selective inclusion of the best and the brightest talent, scientists, innovators and educators from the South Asian region, over several waves of immigration regulations starting in the 1960s has incentivized the enforcement of gendered behavioral expectations to preserve family honor, even at the expense of individuals' wellbeing, and rendered their significant acculturation challenges invisible to the outside world.

Self of the Researcher

I approach this investigation as a South Asian immigrant woman who has the dual experience of having lived both within India and outside of it. My family and I moved to Botswana, Africa, when I was very young and I grew up in a bi-cultural context. Growing up, I struggled to experience a true sense of acculturation and belonging, a problem which I believe was compounded by my parents' constant efforts to help me adjust and fit in at school, while simultaneously exerting firm boundaries in our personal lives, to separate me from the host culture and immerse me in groups representing the culture of my birthplace (India). Most of these boundaries and socialization came from my mother, though I suspected early on that my father exerted inordinate amounts of control whether intentionally or not. As a child and during

adolescence, messages I received about intimate relationships and sexuality were either absent, negative or just confusing. Interestingly, an entire community of Indian women (women I refer to as 'aunty' though they are not related by blood) who maintained close relationships with each other and with their children orchestrated a seamless cultural experience for us. In my broader culture (of practiced Hindu-brahminism in India) and in my family culture, dating and sex never was an acceptable topic of discussion, which effectively discourages sexual activity in adolescence. I only recall one time when my father said something about women's sexuality and it reflected a deep contempt for women who embraced their sexuality. In adulthood, I communicate with my mother about dating and relationships, although within certain limits. In recent years, she has demonstrated a willingness to reevaluate her views on dating and relationship formation over time, without compromising the ultimate aim to help attain a secure marital relationship. Interestingly, despite these cultural challenges, conversations and indirect communications with my mother (I discuss some of these forms of communication in the next chapter), are a primary mechanism by which I work through and resolve many of my personal struggles, including topics of dating and relationships. My motivation for this study thus comes not only from the understanding that the South Asian culture places some unique demands on women but also that mothers and daughters share a distinctive relationship and play a critical role in each other's wellbeing, experiencing oppression in some ways, and exercising agency in others, but all the while sharing this intergenerational experience that unites them.

Table 1 shows the goals of the study, with corresponding research questions that cohesively combines the theories being utilized for this study with the questions being used in the interview protocol.

Table 1

Goals, Research Questions and Interview Questions

#	Goal	Research Question	Sample Questions
1	To understand the mobilization of agency in the context of constraints posed by culture, religion and gender, among first generation South Asian American women, by critically examining their narratives in the context of their South Asian identities and cultural experiences in the United States (U.S.).	How do South Asian women define agency in their cultural context?	What does the term 'Agency' mean to you as a South Asian woman?
		How do South Asian women exercise agency in their efforts to form and maintain relationships and in their sexual development?	*This was drawn from the analysis of several questions listed on the next page which provided information on their interactions with their cultural context.
2	To understand the role of maternal socialization processes and its impact on South Asian women's relationship experiences, sexual development and agency.	How do mothers socialize their daughters in the area of partnering and sexuality?	- What information or knowledge and skills do you recall getting from your mother? (Probes) - What were some ways in which she communicated these behavioral expectations, attitudes, values, & beliefs to you?
		What impact did mother's messages regarding relationships and sexuality have on daughters?	- What do you wish that your interactions with your mother about dating, relationships and sexuality would look like? - What went right? What went wrong?

Methods

Overview of the Study

This investigation is a qualitative exploration of South Asian women's experiences, designed on the principles of critical ethnography. Through this process, relevant stakeholders will be engaged in a cultural reflection and critique, to understand their experiences, to identify needs and, eventually, to inform parenting interventions and prevention education campaigns to support healthy relationship and sexual development among South Asian adolescents. The qualitative design of this study offers the opportunity to scrutinize the nuances of participants' experiences, to represent them and to value their subjective interpretations of intergenerational interactions. In reporting and discussing findings, the core features of qualitative inquiry will be reflected in the use of rich descriptions and direct quotations to draw the reader close to the original source (Merriam, 2009). Critical ethnography (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Silverman, 2006) supports the exploration of the phenomenon of interest within the cultural context with a critical eye toward power dynamics, prescribed roles, and social constraints upon behavior. It is influenced by a symbolic interactionist paradigm, ethnographic methods and analysis & and the use of both inductive and deductive analysis of data. Critical ethnography allows me, as the researcher, to challenge existing social images of South Asian families, particularly women, to ask the questions that will facilitate self-reflection among women and the creation of new ways of knowing and existing.

Participant Sampling and Recruitment

A purposive sample of 20 South Asian women ages 22-34 in the U.S. was recruited via community and social media outreach (i.e. fliers, snowball sampling, & referrals). Study and

recruitment announcements were circulated to members of the South Asian community organizations (E.g. South Asian Women's Association, South Asian Sexual Health Alliance, etc.). To facilitate recruitment, a webpage dedicated to the study was created and participants signed up for the study directly via the webpage. Participants who signed up for the study were contacted via phone or email (as per their preference) to schedule an interview. Participants were given the option of completing the interview in person or via phone and were asked to set aside 1.5 hours for the interview. All consent and confidentiality information was be available on the webpage (Appendix A). The same information was discussed with participants again at the time of the interview to confirm that they were comfortable with the conditions of confidentiality and how their data would be used and to obtain their consent. Participants were offered a $20 gift card for their time. Participants were included in the study if: 1) they identify as South Asian and trace their proximal origins to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal or Srilanka; 2) were between the ages of 22 and 35 years; 3) were first generation Americans (who have either emigrated to the U.S. themselves from a different country prior to the age of 18 or whose parents emigrated to the U.S.).

Data Collection and Interview Procedures

A total of 20 individual interviews were conducted. The individual interviews were scheduled at times convenient to the participants within a 6-month period. All interviews were conducted over the phone and recorded in audio format with the consent of participants in order to ease the process of transcribing and analyzing the data. Participants provided verbal consent and shared demographic information via phone. The interview was conducted by the first author, based on a semi-structured emergent interview format (Appendix B). Interviews lasted

between 45 and 90 mins. Participants were asked to situate themselves in quiet and private location of their choice. Interviews included questions about 1) participants' perspectives on dating, relationships, sexuality, and relationship or sexual violence as South Asian women, and specifically from their positions as daughters and future parents; 2) The messages and modes of communication about relationships and sexuality growing up 3) Their first and subsequent relationship and sexual experiences 4) Direct and indirect experiences or knowledge they have of violence within their families; 5) What agency means to them as South Asian women and 6) How they expect to socialize their own children with regards to relationship and sexual health

Summary of Chapters

Chapter 2

In the first Manuscript, I explore South Asian women's socialization experiences and identify beliefs and behaviors exemplifying agency in the context of partnering and sexuality by critically examining their narratives. A total of 20 interviews of South Asian women aged 22 to 34 with diverse religious and geographic origins were interviewed for 45 to 90 minutes. Based on these in-depth qualitative interviews where they discuss how and where they learned about sexuality, the cultural messages they received, what role their parents played in socializing them, and how it influenced their relationship and experiences if at all, I attempted to better understand the South Asian cultural and familial context and its import for their understanding and practice of agency in their sexual lives and partnering endeavors. A few overarching themes and several sub-themes related to participants' cultural and familial context within which agency was exercised, how participants understood and defined agency, and

lastly, how they exercised agency as reflected in their interactions. Implications for South Asian families, for South Asian girls and women, and intervention needs are discussed.

Chapter 3

In the second manuscript, we extend the prior study by exploring the role of South Asian mothers in the socialization of their daughters' particularly as it pertains to relationships, dating and sexuality. In this paper, I examine the processes of communication both verbal and non-verbal more closely to better understand how mothers socialize their daughters. The mother-daughter relationship emerged as rich and complex involving connection, support, isolation and distance at various times. Mothers emerged as the primary socializing agents and, despite minimal direct communication regarding sexual development and relationships, they were identified as the primary sources from whom daughters in South Asian communities learned behavioral expectations and norms regarding relationships and sexuality. Six important sub-themes were identified that provide insight into the nature of maternal socialization in South Asian families, namely, Implicit and indirect messages; Monitoring behavior and promoting modesty; Emphasizing education and self-sufficiency; The Flip; Adapting to changing circumstances and needs; and Responding to abuse.

Chapter 4

In the final chapter, I integrate the findings from Chapters 2 and 3, each of which offers a closer look at a specific aspect of participants' experiences and narratives. I bring together the question of participants' agency and their perceptions of early interactions with their mothers to as a way to understand implications for future research and interventions.

APPENDIX

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE - (Focus areas, questions & probes)

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today to share your cultural experiences and your thoughts about relationships and sexuality in your family. And thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and for letting me record this conversation. I will transcribe or type it out later and this will make a whole lot easier for me to talk to you now instead of diverting my attention to taking notes. I want you to know that I will take every measure to protect what you share with me and of course erase the recordings once I type out the information and I will not use your name in any of the written documents. We will just pool all the information we get from all the interviews and surveys and all of your responses will remain completely confidential. If you have any questions or concerns at any time while we are talking just stop me and let me know and I would be happy to talk it through with you.

Background & Demographics

- Where are your family origins? (India? Pakistan? Etc.)
- How long has your family been in the U.S.? Were you born here?
- What languages do you speak at home?

Socialization

- What kinds of attitudes, values, beliefs or expectations about what you could do or what was not ok) about relationships were communicated to you when you were growing up, either from within the family or from outside in your school and neighborhood? *Probes: What was acceptable? What was not? At what age? Under what circumstances?*

Possible Follow-up Questions:

- Where, how, & from whom, did you acquire or hear these messages? *Probes: Culture? Religion? Family? School? Media?*
- What messages do you recall getting from your family in particular?
- What about from you mother? What were some ways in which she communicated these behavioral expectations, attitudes, values, & beliefs to you?
- What role did you think religion played in all this?

Relationship & Sexual Education

- So, when you were growing up, what did you learn about how to develop a healthy relationship, how to be in a healthy relationship or about having sex, about what to expect from your partner? *Probe: Where or how did you learn this?*

Possible Follow-up Questions:

- What information or knowledge and skills do you recall getting from your family in particular?
- What about from you mother? What were some ways in which she communicated these to you?
- Were you ever taught anything about this in religious spaces?
- What do you remember observing about parents, or your grandparents' relationships when you were growing up? What about aunts and uncles?
- Did you remember any of your family members having really scary fights or getting each other? Did you ever suspect that there might have been?
- *And what are your own attitudes, values, beliefs or codes of conduct now, as an adult?*

Regarding Relationship and Sexual Experiences & Self efficacy

- Let's talk about your own experiences with dating, relationships and sex. What have your experiences with dating been so far?

  Probes: Have you ever dated or been in a relationship? Have they been positive or negative experiences? Did you date or enter a relationship at some point? When was this? When was your first sexual encounter? How old were you then? What was your next relationship/dating experience?
- What does the word 'Agency' mean to you?

  Probes: What does it mean to exercise agency as a South Asian woman

  Possible Follow up Question:
  - When you first started dating, how did you feel about it? Did you feel confident? Did you feel scared? Did you feel like you knew what to do and what to expect, what to talk about?
  - Have you ever felt compelled or forced to be or to do anything in any of your relationships? *Has anyone ever pressured you to not use condoms? To have sex? To do something in a sexual situation that you didn't want to do?* What about violence - has that ever been an issue in any of your relationships?

Agency

- Earlier, we talked about everything you had been taught about being in a relationship when you were growing up. Do you remember times when you were able to use all that in your relationships to accomplish different things like express your ideas, say what you need, see what the risks and consequences might be, make decisions etc.?

  Possible Follow-up Question:
- What did you get that was most helpful? What did you miss, that would have helped you?
- Is there anything you wish you had known or understood back then that you know now, or that you wish you had done differently?
-

Parenting

- I just want to take us back to your early days for a minute, to your mother in particular. What do you wish that your interactions with your mother about dating, relationships and sexuality would look like?

  Probes: What went right? What didn't? What do you wish you could say or to her in this regard? What do you wish you could hear from her?
- Looking to the present and future, what would you like to do or communicate to your own children? Particularly your daughters? Why? And how would you go about doing that?
- What do think you need or would be helpful for mothers and daughters like you, to help you both do the best job you can, especially in negotiating your needs in the area of dating, relationship and sexuality? *Probes: What kinds of resources? Trainings? Guides?*

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CHAPTER TWO

Salient Cultural Discourses, Socialization Experiences and South Asian Women's Agency

ABSTRACT

Although South Asian adolescent girls are typically seen as a low risk population and understudied as a result of the low documented rates of sexual activity, both anecdotal evidence and research documenting violence and sexual coercion by intimate partners suggests that there is a need to address South Asian women and adolescent girls' experiences in the context of their sexual development and intimate relationship experiences. In this qualitative exploration, we set out to understand the mobilization of agency in the context of constraints posed by culture, religion and gender, among first generation South Asian American women, by critically examining their narratives in the context of their South Asian identities and cultural experiences in the United States (U.S.). A total of 20 South Asian women between the ages of 22-34 years participated in in-depth individual interviews investigating their beliefs about agency and how they exercise agency in the context of relationships and sexual development. Analysis of this qualitative data revealed how South Asian women demonstrate agency in the face of systemic constraints and the intricate links between the development of agency and cultural discourses and socialization processes within their families.

Introduction

South Asians in the United States are an extremely diverse group (South Asian Americans Leading Together, 2015). These include multiple national (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Afghani, Nepali, Sri Lankan and Maldives), religious (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Sikh and Jain) and linguistic affiliations. They are one of the fastest growing subgroups among the Asian diaspora in the U.S., having more than doubled in population since the turn of the century to over 4 million as of 2013 (South Asian Americans Leading Together, 2017). South Asians have an image as model citizens, students, professionals and families, a remnant of highly selective immigration policies of the 1960s, which privileged highly skilled and educated workers and their families (Prashad, 2000; Keely, 1971; American Immigration Law Foundation, 2004). This has resulted in the obscuring of South Asian immigrant women's significant acculturation challenges (Shankar, 2008); in particular, their distinctive historical and lived experiences and gendered vulnerabilities (DasGupta & Das DasGupta, 1996).

South Asian Families

The fabric of South Asian family systems is a tapestry of collectivistic and familial cultural values. Privacy, loyalty and solidarity, close family relationships and deep interdependencies with the precedence of family wellbeing over individual wellbeing are key characteristics of this cultural fabric, and often serve as protective factors (Ahmad, Driver, McNally, & Stewart, 2009; Vega 1990; Triandis, Marin, Betancourt, Lisansky, & Chang, 1982). Simultaneously, the accepted hierarchy and unequal distribution of power within families in conjunction with highly gendered behavioral expectations and norms, can lead to a system which disadvantages women (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 2001; Triandis & Suh, 2002). Due to the intersection of immigration

regulations, educational inequities, and cultural emphasis on marriage, South Asian women have historically migrated to this country as dependents of their spouses or parents and therefore face the additional vulnerability of dependency upon them, augmenting the importance of familial connections to their wellbeing (Tichenor, 2002; SAALT, 2017). Additionally, there is evidence from research conducted in South Asia, that while Hindu and Muslim women, the two largest religious groups of South Asia, show no differences in private behaviors within their household, significant differences can be observed in their public behaviors particularly in the practice of veiling and their likelihood of venturing outside the home for recreation and employment (Desai & Temsah, 2014). Any discussion of their relationship and sexual identities and enactments should therefore be considered in the cultural, religious and familial contexts in which they are embedded.

Dating and Sexual Experiences of South Asian Youth

Evidence suggests that South Asian adolescents, similar to other Asian adolescents, delay premarital sexual debut and engage in lower rates of sexual intercourse in adolescence (e.g. Gravel et al., 2016) Thus, compared to their Euro-American, African-American and Hispanic-American counterparts, they are seen as a low risk population and consequently understudied. There is a dearth of information on the dating and sexual practices of South Asian youth. However, a study examining violence among South Asians in the U.S., (Robertson, Nagaraj & Vyas, 2016), found that participants in their sample of South Asian adults in the U.S., who were predominantly female (>75%), with a mean age of 32 years, reported an average of eight lifetime sexual partners and 25.2 % reported experiencing some form of childhood sexual abuse (exposure, touching, attempted penetration, penetration). This suggests that estimates of sexual

contact in adolescence for this population may be skewed due to failure to account for non-consensual contact prior to the age of 18 or further that when South Asian young adults do initiate sexual contact, they may be just as likely, if not more, to have multiple sexual partners and engage in risky relationship behaviors. Additionally, the limited number of studies examining South Asian adult women's relationship and sexual experiences have documented relationship violence (Raj et al., 2005; Robertson, et al., 2016) and sexual coercion by intimate partners in the form of threat of exposure of pre-marital sexual activities, forced sexual activities and threat of separation and abandonment from both marital and dating partners upon refusal of sex (Deepak, 2004; Shah, 2015). While there are currently no estimates of prevalence rates of partner violence and sexual violence among South Asian American adolescents, it is clear that they are involved in sexual activities, either consensual or coerced. Traditional gender roles dictate that women who are sexually active will exhibit greater sexual passivity than men, which predicts poor sexual functioning and satisfaction (e.g. Keifer & Sanchez, 2007). Additionally, adolescence is a time of greater vulnerability and risk, particularly for girls. Therefore, we need to explore the development and enactment of South Asian adolescent girls' agency within the constraints of cultural discourses and role socialization.

Agency, Relationships and Sexuality

The term 'agency' has been of interest to scholars across a multitude of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, psychology and critical studies, and has been defined and used in a variety of ways. Broadly, agency can be thought of as the capacity to think, make decisions, engage in intentional actions that effect one's own life and/or that of another's (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007; Gray & Wegner, 2009). In the context of sexual encounters, for example,

Seabrooks (2017) defines agency as the ability to act on your own behalf, to express desires and needs, and to advocate for yourself. Agency plays a critical role in relationships and sexual health and has been found to influence sexual risk taking, coercive sexual experiences, ability to refuse unwanted sex, and so on (e.g. Curtin, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2011; Halpern-Felsher et al. 2004; Sieving et al. 1997; St. Lawrence et al. 1994; Troth and Peterson 2000; Rostosky, Dekhtyar, Cupp, & Anderman, 2008; Zimmerman et al. 1995).

Agentic action is typically observed in relation to events, relationships and situations. It is thus dynamic in nature and can vary across time both in an absolute sense and in relation to events and is thus a multidimensional construct. There are several pre-requisites or components of personal agency including a 'sense of agency' or seeing oneself as possessing the freedom, right, and ability evaluate situations, exercise choice, and act with intentionality; possessing the information/knowledge/understanding of the sociocultural norms of behavior in the circumstances in which agency needs to be exercised; and being able to access the resources and capacities needed to exercise said abilities in relevant situations.

Agency is also socio-culturally constructed and mediated (Ahearn, 2001), and therefore also political, even within the personal realm; a resistance to the oppressive structures in which one is embedded (e.g. Renold & Ringrose, Frank,). Feminist agency is thus agency that is effective against one's own oppression (Isaacs, 2000). This definition creates room to explore the emergence of agency within specific socio-cultural contexts, variations in conceptions of agency in those contexts, and the role of systems of power and hierarchies. Individualistic views of agency render invisible and invalid the agentic practices of women in collectivist societies where enactments of womanhood are central to familial, cultural and national identities and may be heavily scripted to maintain patriarchal arrangements. Scholars engaging with collectivist

notions have further argued that a circumscription of women's power, which occurs in most societies to varying degrees, does not negate their agency within the spaces they occupy (Gallagher, 2007; Mahmood, 2005). This is reflected in Allen's (2008, p. 575) definition of agency as, 'a reworking of the conditions of existence … not freedom from dominating forces but a double-edged process of submission and mastery'. In patriarchal systems, Isaacs (2000;112) argues that women "...can exercise their agency in liberatory ways even in the face of continued differential recognition." For example, women in South Asian families make 'patriarchal bargains', a delicate compromise between exercising agency and accommodating the constraints placed on their agency, to maximize their wellbeing and security, while asserting their own identities (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 286). This may include contesting, negotiating, and reproducing patriarchal relations (Shankar & Northcott, 2009, p. 425; also see Gerami & Lehnerer, 2001).

While we have made much headway in conceptualizing and defining agency, observing and documenting it is far more challenging. Some feminist scholars who explore agency through the lens of Bourdeau (1992) describe the emergence of agency as something resembling a *confluence*, where the person and the power structures in which they are embedded collide, resulting in a tension that either reinforces or challenges one's inherent tendencies (McNay, 2000, Reay, 2004; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010). Thus, agency can be seen as the creative action generated in the face of such tensions. This agentic behavior can include acts of resourcefulness, negotiation, repossessing control, circumventing systemic structures, direct defiance, and self-preservation. In a study of high school girls, Renold & Ringrose (2008) explored and mapped micro-acts of agency seen in girls' navigation, resistance to discourses of masculinity, femininity and sexuality configured within the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), momentary ruptures in

norms through performative acts, and sustained rejection of norms, staged through enactments of femininity in culture, race and class specific ways.

What is clear is that, to understand and document agency, we must recognize and describe the systems of power within which the individual is embedded. In the case of South Asian women in America, this includes familial, culturally specific and dominant discourses and assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality and their intersections with race and religion. Lastly, in keeping with the spirit of critical ethnographies, which take the cultural focus of ethnography one step further and move the agenda from description to social change by amplifying participants' voices (Foley & Valenzuela 2008), we need to pay attention to any systemic transformation evident in participant narratives. As argued by Leo van Lier (2007; 47), "The core of identity is voice, and voice implies agency".

Cultural Discourses, Socialization and Agency

Family values and parental socialization practices have a significant impact on adolescent and emerging adults' relationship and sexual norms and behaviors (Askun and Ataca, 2007; DeLamater 1981; Gravel, Young, Darzi, Olavarria-Turner & Lee, 2016; Halpern, Waller, Spriggs, & Hallfors, 2006; Wetherill, Neal, & Fromme, 2010). While there is little research examining the links between young women's demonstrated agency within the context of intimate and sexual relationships, and cultural discourses and socialization processes within their families, there is some indirect evidence of this connection. For example, acceptance of traditional gender roles, a documented feature of many South Asian families, has been known to contribute to lowered sense of sexual agency, greater passivity on the part of women, less communication with one's partner in sexual situations and greater power differences between women and men (Hynie

and Lydon 1995; Gavey and McPhillips 1999; Crawford and Popp 2003; Averett et al. 2008). In childhood, traditional gender roles are acquired largely through cues about acceptable gender specific behaviors provided by parents and internalized by children (Carter, 2014). Studies examining the impact of parental verbal communication about sexual behaviors, a primary mode of socialization, on adolescent relationship and sexual behaviors (e.g. Akers, Yonas, Burke, and Chang, 2011; Corona, 2015; Lesch and Kruger, 2005), have had inconsistent outcomes, with some studies reporting positive effects (DiClemente, Wingood, Crosby, Cobb, Harrington, & Davies, 2001; Hutchinson and Cooney 1998; Troth and Peterson 2000), some reporting negative effects (e.g. Chia-Chen & Thompson, 2007) and some reporting no effects at all (e.g. Santelli et. al., 2004). Such inconsistency could be the result of methodological limitations including but not limited to cultural myopia in the design of these studies. That is, the socialization processes found to be effective in achieving desired outcomes in certain ethnic or racial groups may not produce the same outcomes in others since the cultural contexts are distinct. In immigrant communities, religious identities further complicate the existing cultural socialization processes, influencing the social networks that families belong to, the value and belief systems driving their parenting practices, and the cultural spaces they occupy. Additionally, the indicators of agency employed in different studies varies widely including variables such as safe sex practices, sexual assertiveness, communication with one's partner, knowledge of safe/risky sexual practices and condom use self-efficacy (Tolman 1999; Impett, Schooler, and Tolman 2006; Curtin et al. 2011). Lastly, the effects of specific components of socialization practices are difficult to tease apart. For example, is it the gender role socialization, or nonverbal/indirect communication, the no-dating policy or something entirely different, that promotes delayed sexual initiation among

Asian and South Asian adolescents? Do these same factors promote agency in sexual and relationship settings?

Research indicates that Asian Americans adopt indirect modes of communication in setting boundaries around relationship and sexual behavior prior to marriage and are unlikely to engage in direct verbal communication, even though adolescents typically point to their parents as their preferred source of information (Somers & Surmann, 2004; Dasgupta, 1998; Gravel et al., 2016; Kim & Ward, 2007; Talbani & Hasanali, 2000). Aside from verbal communication, parental involvement, parent-child relationship quality and specific parenting practices, such as rule setting and parental monitoring, all tools utilized by parents in socializing children, have been found to influence adolescent romantic relationship quality including experiences of dating violence (Brendgen, Vitaro, Tremblay, & Lavoie, 2001; Corona, 2015; Kan, McHale, and Crouter, 2008; Madsen, 2008; Pflieger & Vazsonyi, 2006).

Bringing a Critical Feminist Perspective

Using a feminist-informed critical multicultural lens, this qualitative study explores South Asian women's intimate experiences to identify beliefs and behaviors exemplifying agency (or the lack thereof) within their intimate and sexual relationships by critically examining their narratives. Feminist Informed Critical Multicultural (FICM) frameworks bring together critical, feminist and multicultural theories, to examine and amplify marginalized voices at the intersection of multiple identities including gender, race, culture, ethnicity and religion (McDowell & Fang, 2007). At the core of the FICM framework lies a commitment to recognizing and questioning systems of oppression that privilege some knowledge and marginalize others, including gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, abilities, national

origin, immigration status, culture, ethnicity, language etc. Critical multiculturalist perspectives value diversity and attempt to expose and override the politics of knowledge coming from different cultural and social locations by locating participants amid their unique and complex social contexts. A critical analysis of the qualitative data can unlock the intricate links between young women's demonstrated agency within the context of intimate and sexual relationships and their perceptions of cultural discourses and socialization processes within their families.

Methods

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study is to understand the mobilization of agency in the context of constraints posed by culture, religion and gender, among first generation South Asian American women, by critically examining their narratives in the context of their South Asian identities and cultural experiences in the United States (U.S.). This investigation is a qualitative exploration of South Asian women's experiences, designed on the principles of critical ethnography. Through detailed individual interviews, 20 participants engaged in a retrospective cultural reflection and critique of their childhood and adolescent socialization experiences.

Procedure

A purposive sample of 20 South Asian women ages 22-34 in the U.S. was recruited via community and social media outreach (i.e. fliers, snowball sampling, & referrals). Participants were included in the study if: 1) they identify as South Asian and trace their proximal origins to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal or Srilanka; 2) were between the ages of 22 and 35 years; 3) were first generation Americans (who have either emigrated to the U.S. themselves from a

different country prior to the age of 18 or whose parents emigrated to the U.S.). All interviews were conducted in English by the investigator, based on a semi-structured emergent interview format (Appendix B). Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 mins. Participants were offered a $20 gift card for their time.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Transcripts were imported into a qualitative data analysis software (NVivo v11) and were analyzed using a three phase sequential coding process of critical ethnography (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Silverman, 2006) involving familiarization by reading data, identifying codes that shared similar ideas, grouping codes with similar meaning into categories with constant comparison analysis (Glaser, 1978; 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987), and reducing data by regrouping categories into central themes. In view of the relational nature of the research questions, data were analyzed with careful attention to conversational context and non-verbal cues (i.e. the "how" and the "what" of women's interactions with each other). To increase trustworthiness, coders engage in an on-going memoing process, met to code sections of interviews together to resolve discrepancies in coding, used of thick descriptions and direct quotations in final discussions along with researcher reflexivity.

Results

Sample Description

The sample consisted of 20 South Asian women (ages 22–34; average age of 29; median age of 27) who signed up for the study via a dedicated website between January and June of 2018. A majority of participants were born in the U.S. and 4 out of 20 participants were born in South

Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), and moved to the U.S. before the age of 4. Ten out of 20 participants had parents who identified as being from India (as defined by post-partition borders), and 4 from Pakistan, 3 from Bangladesh. Three participants had parents whose origins were from two different countries, India & Pakistan, India & Bangladesh, and India & Iran. These descriptions of national origins need to be understood in the context of colonization and subsequent partition of the 3 countries (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh). Several of the participants' parents had been forced to move from one country to another during the partition of 1947 and therefore belonged in some part to both countries. For example, participant 1 said that her father was born in modern day Bangladesh (then a united India), but immigrated to modern day India during the partition and therefore identified her parents as being both from India and Bangladesh. Nine of the 20 participants identified as Muslim, 7 identified as Hindu, 1 as Agnostic (with both Hindu and Muslim parents), 2 identified as Christian, and 1 as Jain. Participants varied greatly in how they defined their respective religious identities. All participants were college educated and were pursuing professional careers or graduate degrees. The women in this study had diverse religious and national origins but were fairly representative of the subgroups of the South Asian in the U.S (Table 1).

Summary of Findings

Primary findings documented the cultural and familial context within which agency was exercised, explored how participants understood and defined agency, and lastly, how they exercised agency as reflected in their interactions. Each of these larger themes included sub-themes (listed on Table 2) that describe and demonstrate the subtleties of each theme.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Demographic Characteristic	Number of Participants
Age (Mean, Median)	29, 27
Religion	9 Muslim, 7 Hindu, 2 Christian, 1 Jain, 1 Agnostic
National Origin	10 India, 4 Pakistan, 3 Bangladesh, 3 Dual origins
Languages Spoken	6 Hindi, 6 Urdu, 5 Bengali, 2 Kannada, 2 Malayalam
Sexual identity	19 Heterosexual, 1 Bisexual.

Table 3

Study 1 Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	**Sub-Theme**
The Cultural and Familial Context	Discourses on Sex-Gender-Sexuality
	Power and Gender Relations in South Asian Families
South Asian Women's Understand of Agency	Ownership and control over one's body
	Balancing autonomy and connection
	Reconciling sexuality and South Asian identity
	Expressing yourself and being seen
	Having knowledge and skills
Creative Agency in Action	Finding alternative sources of information
	Selective identity performances
	Leveraging South Asian Femininity
	Reclaiming their bodies
	Seeking out professional support
	Challenging patriarchy and heterosexual hegemony
	Pushing for social change.

The Cultural and Familial Context

Discourses on sex-gender-sexuality.

Irrespective of religious, national and regional identity, all participants' descriptions of their culture and the messages they received from their families growing up were consistent with a binary heterosexual matrix espousing the assumption that people are either male or female and express themselves in either masculine or feminine ways consistent with their biological sex.

This system was actively propagated in two ways. First, by limiting contact between boys and girls at a young age. A majority of participants recalled being kept apart from boys, to the extent that parents were able to exercise such control in certain environments. Play and social interactions were described as highly gendered. Some participants hypothesized that such interactions with the opposite sex were perhaps seen as gateways into romantic and sexual initiation by their parents. Several interviewees who identified as Muslim attributed this to religious beliefs, specifically that boys and girls being together alone would be considered a sin. Himani, who is a 26-year-old, and Muslim, explained it this way,

> I think we are Muslims who identify as Muslim first and then culturally Bengali, and then American. I think the reason why my parents would not look positively on like premarital relationships was primarily sort of from an Islamic standpoint...we're taught to not engage in interactions with the opposite sex because it would lead to flirting, which would lead to a relationship which will lead to premarital sex, which is like the ultimate kind of sin.

Hindu and Christian participants on the other hand were more likely to ascribe this to cultural norms though some described similar separation of men and women in Hindu prayer gatherings as well. Second, families placed an emphasis on 'marriage' (with a man) as an expected developmental milestone. Daughters did not seem to be given alternative pathways to

fulfillment of this milestone of adulthood. A majority of the interviewees' parents wanted them to partner with someone with the same or very similar cultural and religious background, education and social standing. In addition to highly gendered behavioral expectations and expectations of heterosexual partnering, families endorsed heterosexual hegemony by failing to acknowledge the possibility of alternative gender and sexual identification even in indirect communication, a system of *prohibition by omission*. However, these cultural tendencies are influenced by events in the public sphere as well. For example, some participants described incidents where their parents expressed overt objection or discomfort with homosexuality in response to the marriage equality legislation or to their children expressing support for LGBTQI issues on social media.

Gender was not the only characteristic of daughters' partner choices that parents were concerned with. Most Muslim participants identified religion as an important factor in their parents' opinion but also in their own preference for a partner. However, among Hindu and Christian participants, while a majority of parents preferred that their daughters marry someone of the same religion, they were most rigid about the incompatibility of a Muslim partner. This was true even in households where parents only had a loose connection with religion. Further, parents of many of the participants in this study were explicitly against their daughters marrying black men. Despite this, 3 of the 20 participants were married to non-South Asian men and several had dated and been in serious relationships with White, Black and Middle Eastern men. In Muslim families it seemed that the salience of religious identity led to religion taking precedence over race in their choice of partners and women often used this to negotiate their choice of partner with their parents. Discourses on culture and identity were also complicated by religion. Hindu participants had fairly diffuse religious identities in general. Muslim participants,

even those who only practiced their religion to a minimal extent, had more salient religious identities as seen in their partnering choices, their family discourses, and their choice of attire. That said, the South Asian identity and association remained quite strong for many of the participants and most found it difficult to clearly distinguish religious from cultural influences.

Power and gender relations in South Asian families.

Gender relations in South Asian families seems complicated. Within participants' descriptions of their parents' relationships, there was a fairly wide range in gender related power dynamics. While some participants described highly patriarchal households where fathers were breadwinners and decision makers, several other participants described seeing their fathers participate actively in general household tasks such as cooking, cleaning and supporting their mothers. Most acknowledged that the primary responsibility for household work fell on their mothers and that fathers shouldered the responsibility for formal employment outside the home. However, some participants identified their mothers as primary decision makers and heads of household even when they were not the primary breadwinners. This was particularly true in regards to parenting, including communication and boundary setting around sexual development and dating. Several women described their fathers as being 'uninvolved' and simply agreeing with their mothers on most parenting decisions. On the other hand, many participants indicated that their mothers had given up lucrative careers or had not utilized their professional and higher education degrees toward obtaining gainful employment or advancing their own careers though disentangling the impact of the demands of migration on families and women, from the impact of the gendered demands of marriage proved challenging.

How South Asian Women Understand Agency

To understand how participants exercised agency in their respective lives and to gain some insight into the cultural constraints posed to their agency, participants were asked how they defined agency and what the term meant to them in the context of their South Asian identities. Five major themes emerged: Ownership and control over one's body, Balancing autonomy and connection, Being sexual while being South Asian, Expressing ourselves and being seen, and Having knowledge and skills.

Ownership and control over one's body.

Several participants described agency as a sense of ownership over their own bodies and the belief in their right to make decisions for themselves and not experiencing fear or guilt. Tanya, a 23-year-old who identifies as Hindu said,

> ...like you can choose what you eat, you know, feeling empowered in my body and like my choices and feeling like I have agency and ownership of my body and sexual choices. I think it was very difficult for me to kind of understand that that was something I could, you know, have or feel comfortable with...

Another participant, Razia, also 23 years old, and a Muslim, articulated how attaining such control, choice and autonomy is complicated in the South Asian culture.

> I think agency is really complex, especially in the South Asian community because parental permission and filial piety is so significant. Like your family itself is just so significantly embedded that your agency isn't really your own definition. I think some people think that if you let your parents choose for you, it means you don't have agency. But I think that if you are okay with that and you want your parents to choose for you,

> and that's agency too. Um, but for me, I think that like my parents don't know me well enough to make decisions for me.

In seeking further clarification with this participant, I came to understand that exercising agency was problematic because if you made your own decisions then you might be seen as violating some of the core aspects of South Asian collective identity by not listening to your parents, with the alternative being to let them make decisions for you.

Balancing autonomy with connection.

Some participants emphasized bodily empowerment but extended it further by recognizing that agency, to them, was being able to exercise bodily autonomy while retaining the connections, support and involvement of family, particularly parents. Priya, a 28-year-old who identified as Hindu said,

> I mean...at the end of the day, I am a product of all the people that made me and my parents are still such an important part of my life...I detest the idea of my parents making decisions on my behalf...[but] why can't I at least have them in a consultative capacity? The truth is I just can't at this point in my life and I'm not comfortable with that. That's kind of unfortunate.

Like this participant, most interviewees expressed some degree of isolation and lack of guidance in navigating the dating process in general and particularly negative relationship and sexual experiences ranging from small bumps in the relationship road, to coercive and abusive experiences. Having such a connection can be deeply beneficial, particularly when one or both parents seem equipped to provide the necessary support. For example, here is how one

participant, Aditi, a 25-year-old, describes discussing her experience of abuse by her uncle with her mother:

> I mean, there have been definitely many moments in my life where my agency has been taken away, like that instance...with my uncle, my mom's sister's husband was horrifying to me... when I told her [my mom] about it, a few days after it happened, she was asking all the right [questions], like "Are you okay? What do you want to do about this?" One of the really lovely things which I think my mom said to me was, "Was that your first sexual moment" or something like that. And I said "no" because I, you know, I had been doing things with my middle school boyfriend and I just thought it was so lovely that my mom asked me that... [and] she was like, "good because I want to make sure that your very first moment of having your boob touched was not by your uncle, you know". It was just was so affirming. She said to me, "you know, the fact that you stood up immediately and like yelled at him." There's been a lot of fallout in the family after [and] we don't talk to them at all anymore. That's another way that my parents affirm me and, you know, support me as a survivor. It took a while, but they cut off that side of the family. In those ways, you know, in the moments when my agency has been taken away, I also do feel like it's been affirmed by my family and my friends.

In addition to recognizing that parents have the capacity to enhance agency, it is interesting to note the early age at which this participant had her first sexual experience, something which a few other participants acknowledged as well though Aditi was the only one who had admitted it to a parent. In situations where adolescent and young adult South Asian girls begin to date, because dating is taboo, it's often a secret from their families and sometimes their friends as well. This is a point of vulnerability because they may be unwilling to seek help in case of dangerous

liaisons with potential romantic and sexual partners due to fear of being exposed to their parents. Himani (previously introduced) describes a pivotal incident in her life in the quote below. She is visiting a man she has been dating in a different city.

> I found out he had another girlfriend and I left. I hadn't told my parents where I was. None of my friends knew where I was and no one knew that I was still talking to him. I remember when I left and I got a hotel. The [next] morning was the worst I have ever felt in my entire life...the worst I felt about myself. And I think I felt like I gave it [sex] to him and something that I can't take back anymore. I was surprised to realize that that's what I was so sad about and...its fine for love but it was for nothing. I remember calling a hotline and immediately I realized I was afraid to say I'm Muslim because she's not going to understand where I'm coming from. I've never had like suicidal thoughts, but it was just a moment where I felt like very uncomfortable. The only way I explained it to the lady was that I feel like it's an intense feeling of discomfort. And by the end of the conversation she was like, what you're saying is that you haven't told anybody. But why haven't you told anybody? [I thought] I can't tell my parents. I ended up reaching out to a friend and she...talked to me and calming me down, but I just remember that that moment was the worst for me.

Himani had previously had sexual experiences with the same man that she was not fully comfortable although she did not name the experiences as violence or coercion. The biggest deterrent of open communication with trusted adults seems to be the ambiguity of consequences of actions and the inability to identify any safe spaces where they can have these conversations. All but 3 of the participants described home environments where there was no direct conversation about sexuality, dating or relationships in childhood or adolescence. Participants

learned what was acceptable or unacceptable via observing their parents' reactions to, their (daughters') friends' behaviors and those of other young women in the community and dating culture in the media. Additionally, some came to expect aversive, and often embarrassing, incidents such as a highly negative and public emotional reactions, and sometimes verbal abuse, in response to events that parents consider unacceptable. Here is an example provided by Tanya (previously introduced):

> I have this early memory... I was in a competition in middle school and one of my friends, a guy, won and I hugged him afterwards. My parents came to pick me up at the same time and that led to this horrible, horrible experience. They [were] just, you know, screaming at me. My mom was telling me how terrible it was touching someone and giving him a hug. And I remember I was just sobbing because [I felt] I'm not doing anything wrong. [I wondered] why are you interpreting this as such a terrible thing. Even though we never talked about sex, I could tell that there was this idea in her head that, you know, there's some sort of like inappropriate, shameful thing happening. So yeah, there was never really an explicit conversation. I could kind of see the ways in which ideas about this kind of thing were creeping into the ways in which she prohibited me from doing things.

Because it is unclear how parents will react and what consequence will be imposed upon them, there is a greater reluctance to be honest about their choices. Ultimately, for South Asian adolescent girls, 'coming out as sexual' seems to be a task comparable to the 'coming out' of American teenagers as LGBTQ. The stigmatization of LGBTQ youth in South Asian communities is even greater. Aditi, who identified as bisexual, said,

> I think that there are certainly a lot of stigmas in general. And I think that is part of why, for example, I had a conversation at some point in college with my mom and she said, um, we're, talking about my sexuality, and she was saying how, you know, I support you and I'm here for you no matter what law. But like thinking about if you were to get married to a woman and you know, throwing that wedding and the community and she's like, I, I would definitely swallow it and I would do what I needed to do. But she was just being frank with, you know, that would be hard.

As described by this participant, the secrecy itself can become disempowering and the larger community has an unseen power over families and consequently over women. This sense of isolation can be deepened by a perceived cultural disconnect between South Asian immigrant youth and their mainstream American counterparts. Here is an incident described by Juvina, who is 27 years old and identifies as Muslim, that demonstrates just such a cultural disconnect:

> I think to an extent, up until a certain age, my friends were very understanding and they just knew, oh, you know, your parents are just strict. I knew that they didn't understand the cultural stuff because most of my friends were not South Asian. [When] I was a freshman in college, I [was] living at home and working at that time. I remember it was winter break [and] I was working two jobs so I was away from home a lot... One night, one of my best friends [who] I've known her since like middle school...She hit me up and she was like, 'oh, let's go to the movies tonight.' I was like, you know, it's 8 o'clock. I just got home, I haven't seen my mom all day. I can't just leave again, I know them and it's not worth the headache for me...Can we just go another night? But she wanted to go that night. So she got really upset with me...stopped being friends with me for a while.

Reconciling sexuality and South Asian identity.

Beyond a desire to retain family support, several participants also emphasized their struggles to reconcile their South Asian identities with their identities as sexual beings. As mentioned earlier, values such as respect for elders, including listening to parents, can feel antithetical to agency and autonomy. That said, participants wanted to find a balance, to be able to recognize themselves as South Asian and enact their South Asian identity while still being able to exercising their own choices about their bodies and sexuality. They wanted to be able to work *with* their parents while feeling respected and making their own decisions. Prachi, a 25-year-old, said this about agency:

> I think the real struggle is, you know, trying to maintain that agency that we were like we were kind of born with...I think the struggle is trying to maintain that South Asian identity while also maintaining that agency and seeing how the two fit together and see how you can still, you know, be with your parents...but be someone that has maintained their autonomy on, like is empowered and stands up for themselves.

Some participants did not see any conflicts between their South Asian identity and sexuality but did acknowledge that it complicated the ability exercise agency. For example, Rhea, a 32-year-old and a Hindu explains it this way,

> Does our culture complicate our ability to exercise agency? Yes, because I think there are some cultural expectations regardless of your immediate family...Like the idea of breaking a relationship because of, for example, violence, and how that looks to other people in the community. I think that culturally that would not be acceptable. I think that is a complicating issue. I think there are cultural narratives that are, that exist, that dictate in some ways or at least like shape it [agency].

Expressing yourself and being seen.

Multiple participants saw agency as the ability to fully express and be their true selves with others, and to be respected, heard and seen. Their narratives indicated that, throughout their childhood, adolescence, and even adulthood, an extensive amount of emotional labor had been directed to keeping parts of themselves hidden. One participant said that talking openly about herself, the hidden parts of her sexuality, would validate her right to make sexual choices. They also wanted to be in control of their own narrative and expression of who they are. Here is what Priya had to say:

> ...It's interesting because initially I would've said the independence to make your decisions outside of anyone else's purview [is agency], but because I feel like a lot of my dating and sexual relationships have necessarily been sort of hidden away from my parents...I've always made those decisions by myself without my parents knowing anything. But that's not ideal for me...a lot of people have told me like I'm very open about lots of things that [other] people aren't necessarily open about and I wish I could be that way all the time with...like familial intimate relationships. And I wish I could talk to my partner about things that made me uncomfortable. I wish I could talk to my parents about the fact that I am dating and having sex. That would be the agency that I desire...I think the fact that I'm not able to say things even though I'm making the decisions seems like more a violation of my agency than just simply doing the thing.

Participants wanted to be seen, to breathe, and that therein lie their freedom, their agency. This ability to be heard and seen also impacts their ability to form deeper connections with their family and spouses, which they previously identified as an important aspect of agency.

Having knowledge and skills.

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of having the capacity and ability to communicate and exercise control over their environments and relationship and sexual experiences. This included communicating to be understood, to engender trust, to create boundaries, to be able to say no when necessary, and most importantly, to say yes when they wanted to. Tanya said:

> ...feeling like I have agency and ownership of my body and sexual choices...like creating healthy boundaries and stuff like that rather than just kind of seeing that certain things are bad or shameful or just not talking about them. I think that it would've been like really good for my self-esteem...my ability to kind of navigate social situations without feeling so isolated...

Among these 5 themes, having ownership, control and freedom to make decisions for oneself, and having the support to navigate the landscape of relationships and sexuality were the most prominent while the last, namely, having skills and knowledge was mentioned by fewer participants. It's possible that participants did not see their successful pursuit of relationships as a function of knowledge and skills but rather having the preparation and context that would empower them, both of which could ultimately be interconnected.

Creative Agency in Action

Aside from the ways in which participants understood agency in their cultural context, these young adults demonstrated agency through various acts of resourcefulness, negotiation, repossessing control over circumstances that were otherwise out of their hands, gently circumventing restrictions, directly defying rules, openly contesting ideas, and working with

patriarchal relations. At every stage of development, they made efforts to rework their conditions of existence while preserving their family support systems. Seven sub-themes emerged: Finding alternative sources of information, Selective identity performances, Leveraging Femininity, Reclaiming their bodies, Seeking out professional support, Challenging patriarchy, and Pushing for social change.

Finding alternative sources of information.

As discussed earlier, in describing how and what they learned about relationships and sexuality growing up, all but 3 participants indicated that their parents had never had any explicit conversations regarding these topics, with the exception, in some cases, of prohibitive messages and communication of behavioral boundaries. Some participants' parents relegated this learning to sex education classes in school while others prohibited their children from taking these classes at school, worrying that they would be corrupted by this information. For example, Sneha, who is 27 years old and Hindu said:

> So it's interesting. I actually remember a pronounced lack of communication about this. I was never told, you can't do this or no sex before marriage or things like that. It just was never talked about. [Once] when I was in my middle school and going through like a very militant feminist phase, I was like, 'I'm never going to get married", and my mom was like, "OK", So in terms of sex and sexual health, we didn't have a birds-and-the-bees conversation, didn't say that 'this is what you do or this is what you don't do' or anything. The most I remember is in elementary school we had to take a sex-ed class and we had to get a form signed by our parents. And I remember my mom being like, "oh yeah, this is important to know about", and that was the extent of it. I think when I went off to college

> the most I got was “be careful, be safe, take care of yourself.” Yeah, nothing was really explicitly laid out as I was growing up.

Although there was a palpable lack of information about healthy relationships and sexuality, even as children, participants demonstrated resourcefulness in seeking out information and identifying alternate sources of support. One way that participants gained more understanding about sexuality was by sourcing and reading books, magazines, using the internet and engaging in discussions about those materials with their friends. Here is what Anu, a 25-year-old participant who also identified as Hindu had to say about how she learned about sexuality:

> I started reading adult books by the time I was like nine or 10...I would say like most of my information that has come from novels...that's like an experience that I shared with a lot of my Indian American friends...we got most of our sex education from books...there's like the slutty books he read because everyone reads those. I probably read my first one when I was like 11 or 12, but then there are so many books that are written like Judy Blume... or Tamara Pierce...where you see a young woman growing up and you see them having these conversations with other people. I didn't feel like I really missed anything or even like I needed to talk to my parents about it because I had friends that I talked to and I had like these books that I was like very into.

Many participants also relied on talking to other family members and adults in their social network, mainly other women, and talking to and observing their non-South Asian friends’ relationships. Anu said,

> Some of my friends’ parents or my parent’s friends also were like a lot more open or a lot more liberal about things. And so I did talk to them about it too. Um, and so like for example, I'm very close with my mom's best friend and she's always, she's like a very

> liberal and open woman and so she is like much more open to like lots of types of relationships and is always encouraging me date.

That said, the South Asian collective family structure also seems to provide a functional advantage to South Asian girls, who often find support in their older female siblings, cousins and sisters-in-law, when present. Those who have such female companions in proximity demonstrate resourcefulness in seeking out assistance from these women even at an early age. For example, Jaan, a 27-year-old Muslim, said,

> I told my sister that I'm having this bleeding and I don't know what it is. And so she immediately took me outside because her kids were around...and she gave me all the details like, what sex is, how we're made, why two partners come together and decide to have an intimate relationship...And she let me ask her any questions I wanted, you know, gave me all the details...and just told me verbally exactly what's done and how it works

Selective identity performances.

Participants faced a lot of pressure to be 'good South Asian girls', to hide their bodies, their developing interests and curiosity, and their identities as sexual beings in their families and communities. This did not deter them from expertly navigating the systems in which they were embedded, all the while exploring, embracing and equipping themselves without sacrificing any part of their identities or their families. Among the participants in this study, some participants grew up in predominantly white communities with little exposure to South Asian peers while others had separate groups of South Asian friends (whom they met at religious settings like temples and mosques) and non-South Asian friends (whom they associated with in school or local neighborhood settings). At home and in settings which were predominantly occupied by South Asian friends and families, they omitted their sexuality and those of others, and while in

school settings, they sought out and observed friends who were able to date and learned from their experiences. They dance a delicate step by selectively presenting parts of their identity that would be most accepted in some spaces and reserving other parts of their identity for other spaces. For example, Sneha said,

> Right, at school my friend group was not South Asian. Um, I had one [South Asian] friend and then the rest of us were a mix of different people, but primarily, you know, I guess, yeah, primarily White American. And then at community functions *[translates to events]* it would still be like the same, uh, you know, group of South Asian kids that I'd known since I was a kid and our dynamic did not change.

Thus, they selectively shared certain parts of themselves with their parents, some parts with their South Asian friends, and some with their non-South Asian friends. Several participants pointed out that growing up, their lives were normalized by the experiences of their South Asian friends who also did not date, faced the same expectations from their parents and also never had conversations about relationships or sexuality. One participant also said that she had learned many cultural norms from her network of South Asian friends, even when her parents had never discussed them with her. This suggests that girls may be acquiring norms that parents may not intend to communicate at all.

Leveraging South Asian femininity.

As discussed so far, South Asian women are embedded in multiple, often incompatible systems which pose many challenges and barriers. To navigate some of these pressures and achieve their goals, participants sometimes complied with what was expected of them while maintaining a silent resistance. They fulfilled their roles as good South Asian women, and leveraged their relationships with her family, to be seen and heard. For example, Jaan wanted to

marry a young biracial Muslim man she had known for a long time. However, her parents wanted her to marry a distant relative in their home country. Here is how she described how events unfolded,

> She [her mother] convinced me that she will never change her mind about my cousin who was somehow related to us in some way, but he was highly educated, very well off and they convinced me somehow to get engaged to him. I had gotten engaged to him for seven months or so and I went back into my head. I knew this [relationship] wouldn't work but I just wanted to please my parents and I knew that something would happen and it would break off . After like six, seven months they (parents) realized that we didn't talk and I never met him. It was all over the phone and I would just kind of give like one-word answers. And then my dad realized like how much I didn't want it and one day just like, OK, obviously you don't want this and then broke it off.

As this participant describes, she acceded to her parents request but disengages as an expression of displeasure. South Asian women find various ways to coax their parents to see the validity of their choices. They keep an eye open for events that may support their cause, or thaws in their parent's opinions, and carefully open conversations at the right times. For example, the same participant, Jaan, said,

> I always was afraid that I'll just marry my cousin because she [my mother] really wanted that at one point. And I was really against it, I grew up here and want someone with that same mentality as mine. So, when I was like 16, 17 years old, I started telling her what my wants are in kind of like a casual way. Oh yeah, you know, I don't want to marry a cousin. And she would say, yeah, there's so many problems that comes with that.

In the above scenario, the participant is carefully observing her parents. She recognizes a possible shift in her mother's opinions based on the experiences of other family members and friends and uses the opportunity to advocate for her own choice of partner.

Reclaiming their bodies.

In the process of protecting young South Asian girls from early sexual activity, maximizing opportunities and socializing them to religious and cultural expectations, some parents sent messages that adversely impacted their self-esteem. Razia said,

> Growing up we were told, you grow up, you get married, you have children. I think the first thing is you have to be fair to look pretty. You have to be slim, your hair has to look a certain way. We have to act in a certain manner, um, know how to cook things and whatnot...Growing up my entire family would tell me I'm too fat to get married. So, I mean, I grew up with 15 years of this, not by just my immediate family members but other family members and my brother. Looking back at pictures, I wasn't that big but um, And so body image was a big thing...and you're not going to find a husband which was, which is essentially what you're there for. Teenagers, get a lot of mixed messages here...amongst friends who are like, no, you are pretty...so many mixed signals. A lot of self-esteem issues.

In this way, participants are subjected to restrictive messages about their bodies. Priya described being in a similar predicament,

> As a child, like I had to do a lot of like low carb dieting. There was a lot of, 'there's something wrong with your body because your chubbier'...I had to be very forceful with my parents and tell them, this is fucking me up...This is not okay. I'm not seeing myself

as an attractive human being. If you're going to accuse me of being desperate for male attention, don't put me in a situation where I don't realize that I'm not worth it.

Others identified struggling with self-image as a result of darker skin, thicker body hair, and generally not meeting mainstream American standards of beauty. While not everyone had this experience of body-shaming, even those who did not receive proper information about their bodies' basic functions like menstruation, experienced a lot of confusion about their bodies and how to feel about it. One participant identified her self-esteem issues as the reason she engaged in sexual activity as early as middle school. That said, they all strived to redefine their beliefs and scripts about their bodies in many ways.

Seeking out professional support.

Many participants talked about reaching out to mental health providers to seek assistance in working through trauma, cultural struggles, their readiness to be in relationships. Eight of the 20 participants had either experienced sexual abuse as a child or had been sexually assaulted in late adolescence or young adulthood. Four participants had been sexually abused by a male family member as children. Each had dealt with it differently and received a range of responses from parents, some affirming and some re-traumatizing. Priya said,

It actually took me about a year after it happened to tell them [parents] about it. I was suffering from PTSD and I started realizing like I can't keep this hidden away forever. I was talking to my parents about just how traumatic the situation had been as a whole without referencing to rape. And my father asked me straight up, you know, were you were, you raped? And I said yes. And it was just this terrible moment where he thought it was okay for him to ask how did it happen, and made me repeat my story for my mother because she hadn't heard it. He said something like, oh, I suspected it because you kept

> posting all these things about rape culture, on your Facebook. I think for after that initial conversation they said things like, oh, you're very strong, we'll let you heal the way you need to heal. But, you know, they also had some trouble processing. They didn't let themselves process it either. It took a whole another year before, um, before we had a sort of weird family breakdown and I actually demanded that they go to therapy to talk to somebody about their own feelings about it. And then after that it was just like great, like, you know, we became close again when I started writing about it. They were very skeptical and we're sort of like, you know, do you really need to keep talking about this thing? But then when they read my writing they were like, okay, you make good points and we're really happy you say the things you do.

Although much research has documented the stigma associated with therapy in South Asian communities, what we don't often talk about is how many young South Asians are seeking out professionals to help them and even encouraging their parents to do the same. However, not all participants had positive experiences. Tanya said,

> I've had experiences where I've tried to go to therapists...especially like with my last relationship since I was having a hard time with my family, you know, dealing with it. I've gone to therapists who are in mostly white and it always makes it seem like it's some sort of like cultural issues specifically that is making me have all these complicated things...kind of like a very reductive, you know...my culture is not the problem here...It's a lot more like layered and complicated than that.

Challenging patriarchy and heterosexual hegemony.

Compliance isn't the only way that women in this study reported exercising their voice. Several overtly challenged their parents' beliefs about gender identity, roles and sexual

orientation either through verbal confrontation or by breaking from the norm such as gaining economic and personal independence. Aditi describes such an incidence,

> So one really contentious point we had...several years after I had come out to my parents as bisexual, marriage equality was on the ballot in and we were watching the news and the same sex marriage referendum came up. I remember it was me and my mom and my dad sitting on the couch and my dad out of nowhere says, you know, if I was a citizen I don't really know that I would vote for same sex marriage and me and my mum turned to him and we were like "What?! What are you talking about?" And I got so upset and I was like, "you realize that you are saying that you don't think that I should be able to be married to whomever I want." And his excuse was, no, no, no, I think you should be with whomever you want, but, you know, marriage, like I don't know if I think that that word should be, you know. And I did really appreciate that my mom was my ally and that moment.

Participants demonstrated many incidents of standing up for their beliefs. Even as adolescents, participants described challenging dominant scripts of femininity like Norah, a 30-year-old Muslim describes here,

> I felt like the men [in the family] were running their wives and I would always voice it, I was always very vocal as a kid and I would be really upset and really angered by certain things that I would see...my mom and my aunt and everyone would always say like, eat, like just be quiet. You need to learn how to close your mouth. Like a woman has to be, (laughter), I still remember to this day, I think it's absolutely ridiculous, but my mom will be like, "women are like, water, you can fit in any container." (laughter) And I'd be like

"what the fuck are you talking about." So that, I mean that kind of stuff just really pissed me off. And I would always say something to my dad about it.

Pushing for social change.

The women in this study demonstrated an ongoing search for ways to combat the silence around sexuality, relationships and violence in South Asian communities. Almost all the participants took up the cause of social justice and women's wellbeing by pursuing professions where they could make a difference in women's lives, volunteering for organizations like the South Asian Sexual Health Alliance, or domestic violence shelters, or writing about their experiences as South Asian women and as survivors. Participants pursued professions like social work, counseling, law, teaching and student services in higher education, or artistic professions where they explored social justice issues. Several participants who had experienced sexual abuse in childhood or sexual assault in early adulthood (college age), identified those experiences as a motivating factor in their professional or voluntary endeavors as well as for participating in this study.

Discussion

In this study, I set out to understand the intricate relationships between South Asian immigrant culture in the United States and South Asian American women's agency with regards to partnering and sexuality. Analysis of results indicated that, first, there was a deep underlying foundation of heterosexual hegemony on which the community is built. Women's status in families and the power they wield varies greatly though most participants still fell into the same hierarchical structure. While religion did not systematically alter these dynamics, Muslim participants were more likely to associate it with religious tenets than others. This adds some

nuance to our understanding of the relative salience of ethnic and religious identities. While past research in South Asia suggested that the former typically supersedes the latter (Azim, Menon & Siddiqui, 2009; Mookherjee 2008), it seems that in this aspect, the experiences of South Asian Muslim diaspora may not align as closely with the experiences of those in the homeland and therefore warrants further investigation. Past research with both Asian and South Asian communities has typically documented extensive power differentials and patriarchal hierarchies within families (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Triandis & Suh, 2002) but I found that in the privacy of their homes there was diversity in power structures across families, though it seemed that in community settings, most (though not all) couples reverted to enactments of the traditional gender hierarchy as witnessed by their daughters. In the participants' own lives, they strived to find equality in their relationships.

Participant definitions supported the idea that agency is constructed and maintained in the context of socio-cultural realities (Ahearn, 2001). Consistent with the most fundamental conceptualizations of agency which associate it with individuals' power over their own lives and circumstances (e.g. Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007), participants in this study emphasized having decision making power and ownership over their own bodies in defining agency in partnering and sexuality. This seems to go against the grain of South Asian cultures, which, as other scholars have argued, could be attributed to familial and collectivist values which lead families to lean too heavily on women's behaviors to define their identity and success, thereby necessitating the regulation of their bodies. What separates South Asian women from such bodily autonomy is not just cultural norms which emphasize a singular pathway to marriage, but the deprivation of information, low exposure to interactions with the opposite sex, and ambiguous

negative consequences which promote a culture of fear and disempowerment. This is likely to leave them deeply vulnerable to abuse, coercion, exploitation and negative sexual experiences. As I noted earlier, while a majority of participants did not initiate sexual activity until late adolescence, a few did in fact begin sexual contact in middle school, several were sexually abused as children and a few others reported being sexually assaulted as young adults and entering ambiguous sexual scenarios even when they only had their first sexual contact in their 20s. Poor self-image and perceptions of oneself as unattractive emerged as battles they frequently had to fight, and has the potential to rob young women of agency in sexual interactions by creating a pressure to welcome any sexual advances even if the woman is uncomfortable or unsure of the pursuer. I found this was true in at least 2 participants' descriptions of their first and subsequent sexual forays.

Participants also emphasized the importance of maintaining connections and closeness with their families while simultaneously being autonomous in their partnering and sexual decision making. Family members, particularly parents, have the ability to enhance agency but because sexual exploration is taboo, consistent with prior research, participants are forced to keep relationships a secret (e.g. Shah, 2015). Therefore, opportunities for connection are reduced and vulnerability to coercion and exploitation increases. Both feminist definitions of agency as well as those taking into account collectivist notions (Gallagher, 2007; Allen, 2008), have typically built the idea of agency around resistance to dominant (and oppressive) narratives (e.g. Renold & Ringrose, Frank 2008; Isaacs, 2000), which was certainly present in participants' narratives. However, I found that there was no real precedence for moving beyond push-back to reentering the system and reestablishing the boundaries of close relationships on one's own terms, in the literature on agency. An additional challenge to establishing this connection while

also gaining greater autonomy over one's own body is being part of an immigrant community and essentially outside the dominant culture. The ability to present one's authentic self, in its own way a form of resistance to the suppression and denial of female sexuality, which was prevalent in participant descriptions of cultural messages, also emerged as central to agency. Bourdeau's (1992; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010) idea of the emergence of creative agency at the confluence of the individual and constraining systems lends itself to this idea. I saw this in participants descriptions of agentic practice in their lives in the form of cultivating alternative sources of knowledge, selective identity performances, how femininity is leveraged to forward one's agenda, the journey of reclaiming their bodies, seeking out professional support, challenging patriarchy outright, and pushing for social change by being the change, all of which emerged as the central avenues by which women exercised agency in their lives, particularly as it relates to forming romantic and sexual relationships.

In these immigrant families, some daughters were raised in more rural and mostly white communities with little contact with other South Asian families and peers and while others were raised in more diverse urban communities with greater contact with their racial and ethnic communities. Participants who had greater contact with both their racial & ethnic communities as well as the dominant culture, while acknowledging the significant cultural differences in expectations around dating and sexual development, described less dissonance and greater normalization and acceptance of their South Asian upbringing and exhibited distinct identities in different spaces, switching representations seamlessly. The impact of having an immigrant identity was also evident in the way parents intentionally distinguished 'South Asian culture' and 'western culture' in shaping their daughters' behaviors, thereby socializing them into South Asian womanhood.

Conclusions

The findings of this study should not be misconstrued as support for encouraging parents to have more permissive attitudes toward sexual activity in adolescence, nor for South Asian families to simply assimilate the dominant culture's narratives. Instead, it should be used as a tool to dispel unrealistic myths about South Asian women's sexuality and needs. Because South Asian women do in fact delay initiation of sexual activity, and because many keep both consensual and coerced sexual interactions a secret from their families, South Asian parents may harbor the false impression that their approach of *prohibition by omission* is an effective one. This study suggests that such an assumption is a fallacy. There may also be a misconception that acknowledgement of sexuality amounts to sexual permissiveness. This is also not true. In all likelihood, the extensive systems of monitoring behavior may be effective in delaying sexual activity while the lack of understanding, support and information may leave these youth vulnerable to future harm. It is also likely that parents try to insulate their daughters from the surrounding community to increase the likelihood of preserving their culture but an unforeseen outcome is that their sense of isolation may be further exacerbated.

As researchers and service providers, this study opens many doors for us to better support South Asian girls and women. First, we need to first create better resources to help young girls who may be experiencing intra-familial child abuse and sexual assault. Much of the research surrounding sexual health and sex education has revolved around school-based interventions. While this is indeed as essential tool and we do need to develop culturally informed school sex education programs, we also need to consider family-based interventions and programs that assist parents in promoting their daughter's sexual health while acknowledging their cultural roots. Specifically, women don't just need information, they need a space to make sense and

meaning of their religious and cultural identities. Additionally, engaging entire families in reexamining their cultural identities may help shift the burden away from women. Lastly, mothers emerged as the most important influence on a majority of these women's sexual health. We need to better understand their roles and promote their own sense of agency as their daughters' advocates and educators.

A few closing thoughts on this study: Because prior research addressing parent-child communication regarding sexuality has consistently shown disagreement in reports of parents and children, with parents being more likely to over-report frequency and range of discussions compared to children's reports (Miller, Kotchick, Dorsey, Forehand, & Ham, 1998), the retrospective reports of South Asian women in this study may prove biased. However, because most (if not all) of the participants were able to take their parent's perspective, empathize with their struggles and express understanding for their actions and choices, I feel fairly confident that their reflections and suggestions can be taken as a fair assessment of the dynamics within South Asian families. Further, because participants in this study were young adults, some single, some partnered and some recent parents, these are the next generation of mothers for whom any interventions developed will be most relevant and we should continue to explore and cater to their needs as mothers.

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CHAPTER THREE

Mother-Daughter Interactions Regarding Relationships, Sexuality and Violence in South Asian Families

ABSTRACT

Mothers have been found to be primary influencers of daughter's socialization into womanhood in multiple cultures and have a prominent influence on their relationship and sexual development. In this study, we set out to examine maternal socialization processes in South Asian families and its implications for violence prevention and promotion of safety and agency among South Asian adolescent and young adult women. Using in depth interviews, twenty South Asian women between the ages of 22 and 34 years were engaged in a cultural reflection to better understand their interactions with their mothers regarding relationships and sexuality and its role in their wellbeing. Findings suggest that South Asian mothers and daughters have rich and complex relationships with each other, involving connection, support, isolation and distance at various times. Although there was minimal direct communication regarding sexual development and relationships, mothers used a myriad of other culturally unique forms of communication to convey behavioral expectations and norms regarding relationships and sexuality.

Introduction

Multiple studies have documented the significance and closeness of the intergenerational mother-daughter bond across cultures (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Suitor & Pillemer, 2000). In South Asian immigrant families, mothers have been shown to have greater influence on adolescents' sexual and relationship socialization and in transmitting relationship and sexual norms than fathers (Gravel et al., 2016). The end of British colonization of united India (then including modern day Pakistan and Bangladesh), brought South Asian womanhood into focus as a core part of the nations' identities first as the anti-thesis of everything that was viewed as western and then as ... (Chatterjee 1989; De Alwis 2002; Jayawardena 1986; Niranjana 2007; Rouse 2004; Sangari and Vaid, 1990). Consequently, women in South Asian immigrant families face gendered expectations. First, as daughters, in preserving the family's reputation by meeting cultural standards of virginity and marriage and maintaining their marital relationships at all costs and secondly, as mothers socializing their daughters to carry on the tradition (Khanna, McDowell, Perumbilly, & Titus, 2009; Inman, Constantine, & Ladany, 1999; Kallivayalil, 2004; Passel, 2011; Tummala-Narra et al., 2016; Talbani, & Hasanali, 2000). Their execution of these roles carries deep implications for the family as a whole. Yet South Asian women often engage in a form of selective acculturation, willingly adopting host culture behaviors in academic and professional realms while in their personal lives, they demonstrate strong ethnic identity retention by adhering closely to cultural and religious tradition and upbringing and overtly rejecting perceived western values. This frequently renders the challenges they face in the realm of partnering and sexuality invisible.

Mother-Daughter Interactions in South Asian Families

Although mothers have been reported as primary influencers upon adolescent sexual behaviors in other cultures, the socialization processes and outcomes seem to be distinctly different (Feldman & Rosenthal, 2000; Gravel et al., 2016; Greene & Grimsley, 1990; Khurana & Cooksey, 2012; Phetla, et al., 2008). South Asian mothers and daughters have been repeatedly shown to have strong intergenerational relationships, characterized as being high in warmth, expressed intimacy, connectedness and mutuality compared to their European and Euro-American counterparts (Gilani, 1999; Deepak, 2004). However, past research indicates that South Asian mothers are less likely to engage in direct communication regarding dating relationships & sexuality with their daughters but they still demonstrate a high awareness of daughters' sexual status (Meneses, Orrell-Valente, Guendelman, Oman, & Irwin, 2006) and daughters demonstrate a clear awareness of mothers' expectations with respect to relationships and sexuality. As primary socializing agents in this highly gendered ethnic identity socialization process, South Asian mothers are predominantly represented as attempting to protect their daughters from the social costs of breaking these traditions (including social exclusion and ostracizing), by establishing highly restrictive boundaries around relationship and sexual behaviors prior to marriage (Gravel, et al., 2016; Kim & Ward, 2007; Talbani & Hasanali, 2000). In one study however (Deepak, 2004) the author found that South Asian Immigrant mothers demonstrated great variability in negotiating the realities of the dominant culture and their daughters' experiences, some restricting their daughters' social movements while others engaged in open conversation about dating and sexuality. Some daughters and mothers embraced a selective acculturation process embracing some mainstream and some traditional values related to dating and marriage, with mothers sometimes accepting western dating practices. Religion,

though frequently subsumed under culture and ethnicity (Stout, 1975), may also influence socialization practices of South Asian mothers, particularly since religion may become a more salient identity in immigrant families. There is some evidence that parental religiosity affects adolescent sexual behavior through its impact on parenting and adolescent peer affiliations (E.g. Landor, Simons, Simons, Brody & Gibbons, 2011). However, there is very little existing research (aside from theoretical conceptualizations) which demonstrate significant differences in socialization experiences for South Asian girls in religion or religious affiliation. Despite little evidence of direct and overt verbal communication regarding dating relationships & sexuality between South Asian mothers and daughters, these adolescents are most likely to delay premarital sexual debut and engage in lower rates of sexual intercourse in adolescence than other ethnic groups (e.g. Bradby and Williams 1999; Coleman & Testa, 2007; Griffiths et al., 2011). Although mothers in South Asian immigrant families establish highly restrictive boundaries around relationship and sexual behavior prior to marriage (Inman, Howard, Beaumont, & Walker, 2007; Jambunathan, Burts, & Pierce, 2000; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993) to protect them by delaying premarital sexual debut and resulting in lower rates of sexual intercourse in adolescence, it may also leave these young women unprepared to successfully negotiate intimate relationships once they enter a more independent stage of their lives, particularly in a bicultural context.

Relationship and Sexual Risk Among South Asian Youth

Research suggests that adolescents and emerging adults worldwide, and among South Asians in particular, are at a very high risk for intimate partner and sexual violence (WHO, 2013; Jejeebhoy, Santhya, & Acharya, 2013). This has lifelong consequences, suggesting that the prevention of violence in this population, particularly among ethnic minority groups, should be a

priority in the areas of sexual, reproductive and mental health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). The limited studies conducted with this population have indicated that they demonstrate a high risk for violence and sexual coercion by intimate partners, as well as exploitation by threat of exposure of pre-marital sexual activities, and threat of separation and abandonment from both marital and dating partners (Deepak, 2004; Shah, 2015). The occurrence of such violence is embedded within family and community responses (or lack thereof) based on cultural norms (Dasgupta and Warrier., 1996; Harris, Firestone and Vega. 2005; Yoshihama, 2009). It could be attributed, at least in part, to the responsibility placed on them to preserve family honor by preserving their virginity, fulfilling traditions of arranged marriages, and maintaining their marital relationships (Khanna, McDowell, Perumbilly, & Titus, 2009; Passel, 2011; Tummala-Narra, Deshpande & Kaur, 2016; Yang, 2011) and the high social cost of being sexually active outside of marriage.

There is a dearth of research on maternal relationship and sexual socialization processes contributing to South Asian adolescents' and emerging adult women's intimate relationships and sexual health. While prior studies have recognized the role of the intersection of multiple social identities upon South Asian Immigrant women's relationship experiences, none have examined how South Asian mothers influence daughters' construction of relationship and sexual schemas through maternal socialization processes. Further, current prevention and intervention approaches addressing relationship and sexual health and violence are largely Eurocentric and more frequently center on externally imposed interventions instead of familial interventions that tap into existing socialization processes and cultural assets.

Method

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to focus closely on the role of maternal socialization processes and its implications for violence prevention and promotion of safety and agency among South Asian adolescent and young adult women. In this qualitative exploration of South Asian women's experiences, individual interviews were used to engage participants in a cultural reflection to better understand their interactions with their mothers regarding relationships and sexuality and its role in their wellbeing.

Procedure

A purposive sample of 20 South Asian women ages 22-34 in the U.S. was recruited via community and social media outreach (i.e. fliers, snowball sampling, & referrals). Participants were included in the study if: 1) they identify as South Asian and trace their proximal origins to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal or Srilanka; 2) were between the ages of 22 and 35 years; 3) were first generation Americans (who have either emigrated to the U.S. themselves from a different country prior to the age of 18 or whose parents emigrated to the U.S.). The interview was conducted by the investigator, based on a semi-structured emergent interview format (Appendix B). Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 mins. Participants were offered a $20 gift card for their time.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using NVivo v11 and was analyzed using a three phase sequential coding process of critical ethnography (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Silverman, 2006) involving

familiarization by reading data and identifying codes that shared similar ideas, grouping codes with similar meaning into categories with constant comparison analysis (Glaser, 1978; 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987), and reducing data by regrouping categories into central themes. Specifically, we focused on participants' narratives about their mothers' communication, about relationships, sexuality and violence, and the challenges faced therein, and how it influenced interviewee's relationship and sexual experiences. Careful attention was given to conversational context and non-verbal cues (i.e. the "how" and the "what" of women's interactions with each other). To increase trustworthiness, coders engage in an on-going memoing process, met to code sections of interviews together to resolve discrepancies in coding, used of thick descriptions and direct quotations in final discussions along with researcher reflexivity.

Results

Sample Description

Twenty South Asian women (ages 22–34; average age of 29; median age of 27) signed up for the study via a dedicated website between January and June of 2018. Sixteen participants were born in the U.S. and 4 were born in South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), and moved to the U.S. as young children. Ten out of 20 participants had parents who identified as being from India (as defined by post-partition borders), and 4 from Pakistan, 3 from Bangladesh. Three participants had parents whose origins were from two different countries, India & Pakistan, India & Bangladesh, and India & Iran. Nine of the 20 participants identified as Muslim, 7 identified as Hindu, 1 as Agnostic (with both Hindu and Muslim parents), 2 identified as

Christian, and 1 as Jain. All participants were college educated and were pursuing professional careers or graduate degrees.

Summary of Findings

In exploring the role of mothers in South Asian women's narratives, the mother-daughter relationship emerged as rich and complex involving connection, support, isolation and distance at various times. Mothers emerged as the primary socializing agents and, despite minimal direct communication regarding sexual development and relationships, they were identified as the primary sources from whom daughters in South Asian communities learned behavioral expectations and norms regarding relationships and sexuality. Seven important sub-themes were identified that provide insight into the nature of maternal socialization in South Asian families, namely, Implicit and indirect messages, Monitoring behavior and promoting modesty, Emphasizing education and self-sufficiency, The Flip, Adapting to changing circumstances and needs, and Responding to abuse.

Table 4

Study 2 Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	**Sub-Theme**
Maternal Socialization Practices	Implicit and indirect messages, Monitoring behavior and promoting modesty Emphasizing education and self-sufficiency The Flip Adapting to changing circumstances and needs Responding to abuse.

Maternal Socialization Practices

Implicit and indirect messages.

The primary aims of socialization of women within many families seemed to be to delay or prevent romantic and sexual initiation prior to marriage, and to create norms and narratives that establish marriage as the expected developmental milestone for older adolescents and young adults. To accomplish this, families rendered the topics of dating, sexuality & women's bodies almost entirely invisible by rejecting all conversations about the sexual functioning of women, development of women's bodies and secondary sexual characteristics and any signs of women's sexuality including menstruation. We also found was that there were varying degrees of implicit and indirect communication of norms regarding romantic and sexual involvement and marriage from mothers. Although I refer to it as communication, it did not bear the intentionality that we typically associate with the term. From daughters' perspective, mothers seem to be part of a tradition of oral communication which includes storytelling, gossiping, reframing, and taking a stance in reaction to various situations and dominant discourses regarding relationship and sexual norms. For example, Sneha (age) said,

> I think maybe part of it was gleamed from the way my parents, especially my mom, not my dad so much, but certainly my mom, reacted to like news and events and pop culture. You know, like whenever they were like explicit scenes from movies or whatever, she'd be like, "oh, that's so, you know, unnecessary, that's so crass", things like that.

In this participant's narrative, her mother expresses a general distaste for dating culture or demonstrations of intimacy, affection and sexuality in media. Another mother responds with more specific messages about the age appropriateness of dating as narrated by Anu, a 25-year-old young woman,

> My parents were upfront about some things and not about others and this was one of the things that they were pretty clear about, that they wouldn't be okay with me dating. They did it subtly. For example, if there were like teenagers on a television show that were in a relationship, she [my mom] would always kind of get me involved in conversations where she'd kind of be like, oh, "aren't they too young to be dating" or like, "do they really know what that means?" Like, what's the point of dating at their age? So it wasn't subtle and I knew what she was saying, but that's kind of how it was addressed.

Messages about behavioral expectations around sexuality and relationships for women were also conveyed through conversation among adult women at family gatherings and community events through jokes, gossip etc. For example, Norah, 30 years old, noted,

> I have quite a few cousins and when the women would get together sometimes, you know, women would joke about getting married and they would joke about things like, oh, you have to learn to cook for your husband. Certain aspects of, you know, traditional relationships were discussed but nothing about sexuality.

Consistent with the emphasis placed on the private nature of intimacy, mothers not only disapproved of media and public displays of love but themselves restricted acts of affection to their bedrooms. Mahi, who is 22 years old and a Jain, said,

> And when my parents like, they'll cuddle a little bit, but they're not going to like kiss in front of me, that type of stuff...Kind of a weird story...when my brother was young, he came home and he was just like, "mom, my friend says that if you and dad don't kiss anymore, that means you're going to get a divorce, are you going to get a divorce?" And my mom was like, no. And then she kissed my dad like right in front of him.

This participant's experience reflects both the culture of privacy but also that while some families have more restrictive practices than others, South Asian women embrace intimacy between spouses but may not communicate or model this effectively to daughters in the early years. Here Norah explains what is behind the expression of affection in her family,

> Within my family, like growing up, we never saw... I had never seen my parents hug, I had never seen my parents kiss, I had never seen my parents hold hands, um, you know, let alone anything else, of course. And modesty was a huge part of the culture. So, even though you know, two people may be in a relationship, if you are at home and you know, your children are there, anyone is there, you know, it was always recommended that everyone stay modest.

Some Mothers also responded to their daughter's sexual behaviors in childhood more positively than others, though this was not the norm. Aditi (age) and Hindu, described the following incident,

> I think my mom might have had me like found me touching myself or something and this was one of those critical moments...And I remember my mom, came and gave me a body book and she was like, "Hey, I can tell that you were kind of questioning about these things. And that's very normal. And like maybe there's, you should read this book about how your body works and then like let me know if you have any questions kind of thing. And it wasn't, it wasn't about sexuality or women's bodies in particular. It was just like all of the body's systems and like reproductive system was one of the systems. But that sticks out in my mind as a very affirming way that they dealt with that moment.

Some mothers also engaged their daughters in instruction about healthy and unhealthy relationships and what to expect from their partners. Haifa, a 28-year-old and a Muslim, tells of how her mother draws on religious stories to teach her.

> My mom talked to me a lot about, like she would give me an example of the prophets and how they dealt with their wives. She also educated me on my rights as a woman in Islam because Islam gives women lots of rights, but sometimes even More so than men so that I don't unfortunately, I don't remember the details of all of that. I mean they happened over a period of many years. It's not like it was just one conversation.

In this way, mothers show an incredible amount of resourcefulness in coloring within the lines of familial and cultural boundaries of behavior as is expected of them to convey those same boundaries and expectations to their daughters by using every tool at their disposal.

The flip.

Participants' narratives suggest that the culture is built on a set of developmental life stages, each with its own milestone and at each stage, the relationship between mothers and daughters seems to evolve into something different. Partnering (marriage) and having children are critical milestones and two participants pointed out that their parents' success in their parenting roles is assessed against their children's achievement of these milestones. In the early years, while there is certainly a lot of nurturing, mothers also espouse a bigger role in disciplining and establishing boundaries. But as they get ready to acknowledge their daughters as women, they begin to have more open conversations (including talking about sex) form a closer bond. Most participants described this shift as a sudden and unexpected 'flip' while others described it as a more gradual

process. This is accompanied by a sudden shift in position from keeping daughters away from men to encouraging them to partner quickly. Here is how Norah describes this experience,

> I would say, up until high school we didn't really at least with my parents, didn't really talk about relationships, or anything of that nature. When I was in high school, my senior year, then my mom and I started talking more openly about things because at that point, you know, in her eyes, I was marriageable. So at that point we did have certain discussions. I was pretty lucky that my mom was open in terms of having conversations about sex, you know, like when I got my period and then what does it mean to have sex, what does it mean to, you know, like how are those things related? So those were some conversations that my mom had with me. But that was later on in high school. I would say before that, like there wasn't much discussion about it.

Although participants are sometimes surprised, once they have the opportunity to see this side of their mothers, there is most definitely a positive reaction toward mothers and a recognition of their humanity and womanhood, and a shift in the relationship. Sneha notes:

> Like I remember being embarrassed to tell her I was on my period even. I remember just yesterday or the day before I mentioned the Aziz Ansari – Grace piece to her and she is like, "you know, sex can be beautiful and wonderful, but it should feel right on the inside. And what she was trying to say was that it shouldn't be forced on somebody. But, it was so weird to hear my mom say that sex can be beautiful. And she said it in English too. [I was] very taken aback because it's not something I would have expected my mom to ever say. It's felt great! On the inside, I was like, I was very taken aback, and being her daughter, my standard response was "ma!" But actually I was, it felt liberating to hear her

> say that and I kind of saw her in a new light. When she talks about sex it's usually as a way to create a baby. It's not necessarily an act of pleasure, and I had never heard her speak of it in that sense before. Yeah, I mean, I love hearing that.

Emphasizing education and self- sufficiency.

Participants described their mothers as emphasizing the importance of education, self-development and independence early on and encouraging their daughters to arm themselves with the opportunities, particularly if they themselves did not have them. Additionally, all participants indicated that it was assumed that they would go to college, it was never an option. Rhea, a 32-year-old and Hindu says,

> I think first and one of the things that I learned from my mother was like, be independent and don't be afraid to speak your mind, but my mom is the one who encouraged me to get involved in speech and debate in high school. I mean, I think that really changed the way that I approached situations and also the way that I was able to speak. Um, and so I think that that definitely came in handy in terms of like speaking my mind.

In the early years of development, mothers don't just discourage attention to relationships and sexuality but redirect girls' attention to education consistently. Priya said,

> I think it was really brought up when I realized I had my first crush on a boy and this was sometime in elementary school and I think my mother's first reaction was to be like, you know, you're going to have tons of crushes, but they're not going to be worth your time. Don't waste your time, go study instead.

Monitoring behavior and promoting modesty.

Participants in this study reported that their parents closely monitored their movements and behavior and many restricted their movements to necessary activities outside the home particularly beginning around puberty. For example, Sana, a 27-year-old Muslim woman said,

> In school we were learning about the period and puberty, but it was a very positive approach to it, like you're growing and maturing. But for my mom it became a time for worry, like, "oh no, I, they're my daughters. I have to make sure that they are well respected and that means that they just can't be seen as easy going and they have to be more reserved." Without explicitly being told, we were being told were becoming sexual beings without the exact language.

It seems that preserving their daughter's image and respect in the community was at the center of these behaviors. To that end, parents attempted to restrict daughters' exposure to anything they thought could lead them to engage in sexual activity prior to marriage or to be perceived as such. Juvina, also 27 years old and Muslim, talks below about the use of this approach by her parents.

> So, you know, of course I tried dating when I was younger. I never really worked because I always get in trouble and I wasn't allowed to go out, like to go out with friends after school or things like that. Like the, all the kids go to the mall and I wasn't allowed to do that. So it made it, made it hard to try and have a, you know, a teenage relationship when you're not allowed to go out and do anything and all the other kids are doing it.

On a similar note, modesty is a big part of the culture across religions and mothers were frequently described as imparting the values of modesty to daughters by monitoring and regulating daughters' clothing and public presentation, particularly in the presence of men. This

was true in across religious groups and started quite early and like monitoring, became a more central narrative as participants neared puberty and began to develop secondary sexual characteristics. Jaan describes how she understood what her mother expected of her

> So maybe that's culture for us. You know, dressing in a kind of a modest way. Like you can, show skin and stuff, but it's how you show it...Wear a skirt, go for it, but not for the wrong intention. Wear it because you like that skirt, not because you want to show off your body, your body is not an object, you know. Things they never told me, but just expected me to cover up...but I never understood that until way later on. So I want my daughter to know those kinds of things.

Jaan talked about the need to cover her body and maintain modesty as a cultural tenet. However, another participant, Sana, attributed it to religion but also draws attention to what she now feels was a sort of hypervigilance,

> The way that I understand it now is, I'm a Muslim woman and the overarching tenet is to cover and dress modestly and to have healthy interactions with the opposite sex. Now I think my parents went a little overboard and not allowing me to go sit with friends whose brothers were in the room, for example, that was just their own paranoia I think.

Among our participants, the theme of modesty and parents' expectation that daughters dress modestly was applicable across religious groups.

Responses to child sexual abuse.

An important finding in this study that cannot be ignored is that 40% of participants had experienced sexual abuse or assault by the time they were in their early 20s. Half of them had reported being abused in childhood by a family member. Three out of the 4 child abuse survivors

reported that they were not supported or protected in any way even when mothers knew of their victimization. Below, Razia describes her experience of seeking help for being sexually abused.

> South Asian communities you have uncles, they're not really your uncle. So one of those would try and sexually harass me. He would try to like put his hands on my thighs and try and kiss me and try to like touch my breasts and stuff like that in private moments. And when I would tell my mom, um, she would say things like, well, did you cover yourself. I was 10. It happened for a couple of years...and when I told my sister, she would tell me that he was pulling similar stunts on her in that there was this one time she was sleeping and he would like, come in, touch her feet and say inappropriate things to her...And my mother was very much like, well, you can't control him, you can only control yourself, so cover yourself, keep the doors open and stuff like that.

This is an example of how cultural values of modesty are misinterpreted and used to justify placing the responsibility for abuse on children. However, other mothers responded in an affirming way. For example, Ishita describes her mother's response to her abuse by her grandfather below.

> So it was my grandfather who came from India and he was older. And the first time he tried to touch me I pulled away and I kind of like ran into my parents' bedroom. He was in the living room and then after that, um, I started sneaking into the house so that he wouldn't hear me coming in. And my mom came home that time and started questioning me. I felt like I was caught and I had to tell her. And she immediately confronted him about what was happening and he denied the whole thing. But my mom actually confronted him and that's not even her father, that's her father in law. So that situation I told her about, she was actually like, she supported me.

Yet another mother took an even more proactive approach to dealing with abuse by speaking to her daughter early on. Here is how Mahi describes her mother's efforts to protect her.

> I think my mom cared more about the safety of and also about like, um, kind of abusive situations. Like she would always be like asking like, oh, did you know, make sure you tell me if someone ever, you know, touches you inappropriately. She was very cautious about that and very open, like this is not something that people should do. So if anything ever happens you need to tell me. And so in that regard, like she was not hiding anything. My mom would just be like, hey, you know, it's your body. So like make sure you know, people aren't doing stuff that you're not okay with that type of stuff. Probably elementary more in middle school and stuff like that. But he would always, it's not like a constant reminder of like every once in a while. So you'd just be like, just check in.

Adapting to changing circumstances.

Participants' narratives indicated that parents were adapting and changing their opinions and expectations as circumstances in their environment challenged their children's survival and wellbeing. For example, Alisha, who is 31 years old and a Muslim said,

> Watching my siblings go through what they had to go through and watching our cousins go through failed marriages are like terrible risk stones are like abusive husbands are like hidden things that come out, like Greencard marriages. Um, their thing was, we don't want to see you go through this. We want you to be happy, but we also want you to be independent. And like independent in their mind wasn't independent, like live on your own because that's just not something that happens. It's be independent with somebody that you love.

As Alisha says, there are a plethora of challenges faced by participants as a result of being an immigrant group. Many of the systems that worked before are simply not working anymore and mothers recognize that and try to adjust their approach. Many of these interviewees' immigrant parents, a majority of whom had arranged marriages, seemed to recognize the need to adopt more creative ways of finding a partner, including encouraging their daughters to 'date under supervision'. However, one peril of the cocktail of silence, and the sudden 'flip' we discussed earlier, i.e. from no exposure to the opposite sex, to the expectation to find a spouse, is that it leaves women unprepared and confused about cultural expectations as well as how to form and navigate such relationships. Himani says,

> I think I'm in a very confused state when it comes to relationships and sexuality and whether it's good or whether it's that or whether I should explore how it connects to my religious beliefs because a part of me, I feel I relate peace with my religion, like being at peace when I'm fully practicing my religion. At the same time I feel guilty practicing my religion when I'm also engaged in a relationship or having sex. I just don't know. I mean I want to explore that side of me. I don't think that's necessarily bad, but then I'm thinking I'm very confused, very lost. And being 25 years old and lost about that... It's not the right place or where I should be.

Discussion

In this study, I extended previous explorations of maternal socialization of relationship and sexual norms in South Asian families. Prior research has indicated that South Asian mothers engage in very little, if any, direct communication regarding dating relationships & sexuality (Meneses, Orrell-Valente, Guendelman, Oman, & Irwin, 2006) which held true for parents of

participants in this study. It has also been previously pointed out that daughters in South Asian families tend to be aware of their mothers' expectations despite the lack of direct communication, which suggests that there are other communication processes at play. In research conducted with other Asian ethnic groups scholars have identified indirect modes of communication such as gossiping to be common ways of transmitting norms and expectations (e.g. Kim & Ward, 2006). Here, we explored communication between mothers and daughters in South Asian families further to gain insight into all the tools used by mothers to engage their daughters in this socialization process and how they go about inducting their daughters into the lineage of womanhood in their families.

Consistent with prior findings, a majority of participants reported that mothers were central to their socialization and carefully orchestrated their exposure to family and cultural norms. In early stages of development, mothers regulated daughters' exposure to sexuality by diverting their focus to education, overlooking their bodily changes, minimizing contact between boys and girls at a young age, regulating girls' clothing and practice of 'modesty' as they enter early adolescence and puberty, particularly in the presence of men. They used largely indirect modes of communication to establish these boundaries and frequently emphasized the separation between 'South Asian culture' and 'western culture'. This was consistent with findings of prior studies (e.g. Thapan, 2009; Inman t al., 2007) and it can be hypothesized from the comparisons drawn between Western and South Asian culture that parents saw these behaviors as cultural corruption (Almeida, 1996) and a threat to their cultural identity, though this can only be verified by obtaining mothers' perspectives. In a previous study, Mehrotra (2016) identified 'Witnessing other women's experiences' as a source of indirect messages. In this study however, participants described a wider range of implicit messages like general negative emotional reactions to media

(e.g. expressing disgust), and specific remarks regarding observed behavior, to make their position on issues of sexuality heard. The lack of visible acts of affection between parents was another way that women communicated a general rejection of intimacy. Unlike past research (e.g. Abraham, 1999) participants did not report hearing threats of ostracization if they broke from tradition. Although several participants mention mother's fears of or worries of daughter's not being respected or being seen as a moral and or unworthy only one participant mentioned that her parents threatened to disown her.

Lack of direct communication also seemed to be restricted to early years of development when mothers take a stance that they are not their daughters' friends but need to set boundaries and discipline them. As girls cross into puberty and come closer to marriage, or soon after becoming spouses themselves, mothers, to varying degrees, espouse a more equal position, like that of a confidante. This shift involves elder women in the family, especially mothers, welcoming younger women into the fold of womanhood and acknowledging daughters as women when they are seen as being ready for marriage. They use culturally sanctioned spaces such as a gathering of women, or in the privacy of their homes with their daughters and use subtle references to sexuality like humor and teasing, which are culturally acceptable ways for women to discuss these topics, to convey their messages. By doing so, they also induct their daughters into this culture and enactment of South Asian womanhood ensuring that their girls will be equipped to understand a culture characterized by indirect communication, non-confrontation, respect, piety, and acquiescence. They also use stories to convey lessons on healthy and unhealthy relationships and behaviors though none of it focused on safe sexual behaviors, consent, coercion etc.

Taken together all of these forms or methods of socialization and regulation also communicate a clear gender structure whereby women learn their roles and what is expected of them to be South Asian women. Unfortunately, one outcome of this process is that women and girls in South Asian families bear an excessive burden of emotional labor of interpreting others' behaviors and intentions and acting accordingly. This also impacts how mothers react to girls' reports of sexual abuse by male family members where the burden of avoiding the abuser may be placed on them. Similarly, the cultural emphasis on modesty may be misused as a way to blame girls for intrafamilial abuse. All this suggests that intra-familial abuse by men is an accepted reality for many women in South Asian families and the only way they see out of it is to accept it and prepare their daughters to navigate such dangerous terrain. That said, many South Asian mothers also embrace confrontation and a fierce protectiveness of their daughters. There is a critical need in the South Asian community to address child sexual abuse.

Lastly, many mothers in this community are embracing change. The participants in this study were themselves young adults, some single, some partnered, and some with infant children. They all expressed the desire to do more to prepare their own daughters (if they had any) to make choices and be more empowered. Most acknowledged right away that they needed and intended to have conversations with their children early in their development. However, it was not clear to most participants how they would go about it.

Conclusions

South Asian families show all the characteristics of an immigrant community struggling to navigate parenting and relationships in a world where their children seem to belong to a different world and culture than they do. Parents fall at various points along a wide continuum of

religiosity, conservatism and liberalism, and constraint and support their daughters to varying degrees. Communication about sexuality and healthy relationships (and unhealthy ones), in whatever way seems culturally authentic (e.g. storytelling), and promotes intergenerational connections are essential to South Asian women's wellbeing and must be encouraged. Direct information is not the only way to prepare women for the challenges they may face. Traditional modes of communication can be leveraged to create spaces where mothers can engage their daughters. South Asian adolescent girls in the U.S. need maternal role models and spaces to help them make sense of their developing sexual selves. The participants in this study who described their parents having discussions with them on these topics, even if in the form of stories, identified more incidents of leaning on parents for support in various situations. There is also a need to induct fathers into these intimate parts of socialization in order to share the weight of parenting and emotional labor involved.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Concluding remarks

In this study, I set out to understand the dynamic relationship between cultural discourses and socialization in the familial context, and South Asian women's experiences in intimate relationships and sexual encounters. More specifically, I wanted to understand how these systems influenced these women's roles as agents of their own lives. By understanding what women desire for themselves and by observing their expression of resistance as they walk their paths, we can better understand what is missing or not working in their lives and what they need. I also wanted to demonstrate what research frequently overlooks in describing marginalized populations: That they are not passive recipients of cultural messages but active interpreters of their own lives.

I took a graduated approach to analyzing the data by first taking a bird's eye view of these systemic influences on the women who participated in the study with an emphasis on understanding the family system, and then by looking more closely at what seemed to be the most salient relational and interactional mechanism by which these systemic influences were propagated. I.e. the relationship between mothers and daughters. This is not to say that fathers did not influence daughters at all, but in the realm of womanhood, sexuality and intimacy, mothers emerged as the primary influencers. Thus, in the second manuscript, I attempted to explain the socialization mechanisms which result in South Asian women understanding and exercising agency as identified in the first manuscript.

In the first analysis of women's sense of agency as well as in the second analysis where I examined how mothers interacted with daughters and what messages they sent them, it became clear that girls neither heard nor saw any acknowledgement of women's sexuality. I was

intrigued by the fact that while participants almost universally described their upbringing as lacking in any kind of communication about relationships or sexuality, they had all developed ideas about what was acceptable or not acceptable in their families and in their culture. It was in the second manuscript, where I was able to delve more deeply into the primary relationship by which participants acquired these messages, their relationship with their mothers, that the processes underlying the acquisition of relationship and sexual norms and expectations began to emerge. Most of what participants could recall was largely negative, indirect and implicit messaging from mothers in the form of negative emotional reactions to media, remarks regarding behavior, storytelling, etc. Behavioral monitoring and policing of girl's bodies and clothing further supported the message that sexuality was unacceptable in women.

In the absence of direct messages, it can be reasonably hypothesized that modeling becomes a salient mode of socialization which, in this study, was borne out in women's observations of the lack of visible acts of affection between parents, and mothers' practice of modesty and expectation of the same from other women in the family. The consequence of this culture of silence around the sexuality of women is that girls develop an internal struggle with their own sexuality, unable to easily reconcile their identities as South Asian women with their identities as sexual beings, unable to feel fully authentic because they feel the need to keep this part of themselves a secret. This secrecy forces women to choose between feeling connected to their families and retaining their autonomy, particularly over their bodies. In the first manuscript, being sexual as a South Asian woman, and expressing those desires authentically, were identified by participants as ways they conceptualized agency, both of which were made difficult as a result of the modes of socialization described in the second manuscript, which forces them to live inauthentic and sometimes isolated lives. However, participants were by no means inert

beneficiaries of this culture of supposed asexuality as we noticed in the first manuscript, where participants' creative acts of agency were described. They seek out alternative sources of information where they find their primary sources lacking and engage in selective identity performances to manage cultural and familial expectations.

Connection and a familial support system are critical to girls' sense of agency. It has the potential to mitigate the impact of trauma as well as offer protection when they are in dangerous situations. A strong tradition of community and unity among women in this culture was reflected in the second manuscript where participants described how women came together in various situations both connecting and socializing as well as reinforcing gender norms. It seems however, that this community of women is mobilized more often to keep women in line than to empower and support them. However, the fact that daughters in this community see a change in the way their mothers see and interact with them as they transition from girlhood to womanhood, and that they observe how mothers adapt their expectations as they better understand the contextual demands that daughters face as immigrants, suggests that there is not only a desire to promote connection, but a willingness to rethink prevailing ways of parenting, particularly motherhood. As it became clear in the second manuscript, mothers also sought to empower their daughters to be more self-sufficient, which likely contributes to the emphasis, as described in the first manuscript, that families placed on education in lieu of developing romantic and sexual interests.

Lastly, sexual abuse of children emerged as a prevalent problem in the first manuscript but in the second manuscript, we saw that mothers' responses to children's reports of sexual abuse frequently proved problematic and disempowering for girls, thereby contributing to the maintenance of this systemic violation of children. There may be multiple reasons for mothers'

adverse reactions to children's sexual abuse: internalized societal norms which hold women/girls responsible for sexual assault, mothers' lack of power in their families, their own histories of abuse and trauma, their fear of societal reprisal against themselves, their families and most importantly their daughters. It is also possible that mothers don't have the words to talk about sexual abuse as with other aspects of sexuality. To obtain a better understanding of mother's motivations and struggles, further research to gather mothers' perspective is warranted.

In terms of implications, the first manuscript brought to light the need for more communication with South Asian girls about sexuality, the need to provide greater support for relationship development, and the need for family-based interventions. It demonstrated that families have a strong influence on girls' sexual development and their safety in relationships and may be more easily structured and altered than peer influences. In the second manuscript, it became clearer that parents' behavioral monitoring may be the primary contributor to delayed romantic and sexual initiation, not their lack of direct communication. That's not to say that indirect modes of communication are unacceptable but that they need to be more intentionally leveraged to communicate with daughters about healthy sexuality and intimacy, to support reconciliation of multiple cultural identities and to reduce isolation. While we saw in manuscript one that increased engagement of families with American culture and parents' acknowledgement of daughters' engagement with the dominant culture can reduce their isolation, we were able to better understand the specific value of promoting connection between mothers and daughters in the second manuscript. Shared experiences between mothers and daughters can communicate to South Asian girls that they are not alone and are in good company in struggling with their identities. Mothers have the potential to help their daughters find their South Asian womanhood

in a supported environment because womanhood is intricately entwined with sexuality and intimate relationships.