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Sumi Holman  
The Unique Challenges  
Faced by  
South Asian American Social  
Work Graduate Students:  
Campus Community,  
Academics, and Field

### ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to explore the types of challenges faced by South Asian American social work students in all components of their graduate program, perceived to be directly related to their ethnicity.

Nine participants were recruited using a snowball method. Participants ranged in age from 31 to 76 years old and were currently attending, or had attended, an MSW or DSW program in the United States. A semi-structured open-ended interview was used to elicit participant response regarding challenges in the areas of social interaction with other students on campus, a sense of belonging, academics, and field experience with supervisors and clients.

It was found that participants did encounter similar challenges within their social work programs in relation to campus community life, academics and advising, and experiences in the field. Participant experiences fell into five major thematic areas: Challenges with Connection; Ethnic Isolation; Invisibility; Piecing Together Support; and Comfort with Cultural Diversity. An overlap of themes in many participant narratives was observed, which demonstrates the unique experience and challenges faced by South Asian American social work graduate students. Implications of study findings for social

work education, including the need for increased racial awareness among students and faculty in schools of social work, are discussed. This research opens the doors for further research to be done on the topic of race and racism as it pertains to minority students' challenges with education.

THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACED BY SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN SOCIAL  
WORK GRADUATE STUDENTS: CAMPUS COMMUNITY, ACADEMICS, AND  
FIELD

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2010

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work education, including the need for increased racial awareness among students and faculty in schools of social work, are discussed. This research opens the doors for further research to be done on the topic of race and racism as it pertains to minority students' challenges with education.



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

United States Schools of Social Work are committed to teaching students about cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity. In social work school we are taught to be respectful and mindful of our cultural experiences, as they may be different from those of our clients, but what about being mindful of the differing educational experiences of our fellow classmates in social work school? The field of social work is known for its social justice mission and its heightened awareness of issues of race and racism. This awareness must originate with the profession's dedication to learning about the varying educational challenges students face, and struggle to overcome, while obtaining their clinical training.

Although the field of social work does include peer reviewed literature about marginalization and educational challenges faced by African American, Latino, and occasionally Native students in higher level education in the United States, there is a paucity of literature exploring the educational challenges Asian students, and more specifically, South Asian American students face in higher education.

Much of the existing literature in other disciplines is focused on the educational challenges faced by undergraduate minority students. When examining the studies that were done to explore the Asian undergraduate experience, this researcher learned that the findings revolved around participants' struggle with social aspects of college life, dissatisfaction with their professors and advisers, and an overall feeling that the faculty

did not understand or appreciate Asian culture or values. Some students even reported perceiving racial segregation among the student body.

This prompted the researcher to question whether these students associated their social and academic challenges directly with their ethnicity and if so, how they felt they were being perceived by students and faculty. Studies that are dedicated to looking at the academic and social experience of minority college students open the doors and invite us to go deeper in the exploration of race and its role in minority students' educational experience.

Social work education, like training in other professions, requires students to learn in the field as well as in the classroom. This educational model creates a web of experiences with other students, professors, academic advisers, supervisors, agency employees, and clients. Few studies are dedicated to exploring this multifaceted experience and the educational challenges that may arise for students of color attending such a program. There is a small amount of literature dedicated to the challenges faced by students of color in social work school. However, often times this literature has chosen to focus on a single piece of the experience, such as cross-cultural supervisory relationships

This researcher conducted a study that involved facilitating open-ended interviews with South Asian American MSW and DSW students, as well as licensed social work professionals in order to obtain a rich sense of their graduate level challenges. It explores the challenges that the South Asian American social work graduate student experiences in relation to campus community life, academics and advising, and their field experience. This researcher hopes that this study's findings help

to better define and illustrate the different types of racial experiences South Asian American graduate students experience within their social work programs. Shedding light on the challenges this important student group faces will prompt further exploration of the South Asian American higher educational experience as well as contribute to the minimal existing social work literature on the South Asian American community.

It is further hoped by the researcher that this exploratory study on the South Asian American social work educational experience prompts others to study the unique challenges that other racial or ethnic groups face within social work programs. As a member of the South Asian American mental health community, I am proud to make a small contribution to an ever-growing pool of social work literature concerning the challenge of race.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Social work institutions in the United States are committed to teaching students about the importance of cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity in professional social work. However, the fostering of understanding and respect for differing cultural backgrounds and experiences of fellow social work students has received less emphasis. The question this researcher hopes to answer is: What are the challenges faced by South Asian American students in social work education in the United States? This research will focus on three different aspects of social work education: campus community life, academics and advising, and field experience.

The following literature review begins by tracing the history of curricular mandates and approaches to teaching about diversity in social work education in order to familiarize the reader with the concept of human diversity in the field of social work. Following this, it then provides a window into the life of minority social work students in order to understand their encounters with individualized and institutionalized racism. The concept of the model minority myth is explained as it pertains to Asian Americans in higher education. This discussion is followed by an exploration of the literature on Asian American students' experience in higher education. Finally, the unique experience of the South Asian American in higher education is discussed in greater detail.

This study will examine the challenges faced by South Asian American students in graduate social work programs in the United States that they perceive to be due to their

ethnicity. Social construction theory will therefore be used as a theoretical lens in order to shed light on how South Asian American students have constructed their own perceptions or belief systems based on their own subjective experience. Using this lens may also help us to understand how these students feel others perceive them, and how they are experiencing their social work graduate program.

### *Social Work Education and Diversity*

While the social work profession's mission statement includes the promotion "of conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally", as well as the expansion "of choice and opportunity for all people and groups" (National Association of Social Workers, 2009), like other professions functioning in the United States, social work has been shaped by deep-rooted institutionalized racism and is open to charges of racism (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992). In response to these oppressive dynamics within the social work profession, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has historically taken on the challenge of revising and updating curriculum standards for schools of social work. In 1978 the CSWE mandated that schools of social work make an effort to establish cultural diversity within their respective programs via enrollment of students, hiring of faculty, and the development of culturally diverse curricula (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992).

The concept of human diversity has changed over time. In the past, the term human diversity referred to race and ethnicity only (Kohli & Faul, 2005). More recently human diversity in social work education has taken on a much broader meaning that encompasses race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender sexual orientation, religion, physical or mental ability, age, and national origin (Kohli & Faul, 2005). Similarly, in the past

curriculum policy standards were more narrowly defined. Human diversity had previously been included under the Special Populations curriculum area (CSWE, 1984, in Yuen & Pardeck, 1998). While human diversity fell under the Special Populations area of study, Council standards mandated that course content focus on people of color and women. Programs could focus on other oppressed groups if they desired, but it was not required (Yuen & Pardeck, 1998). It was felt that this type of curriculum was tailored to fit the needs of the dominant, white, social work students (Yuen & Pardeck, 1998). It has been said that this unidimensional model of teaching created an atmosphere in which students were being taught to look at, rather than into, the lives of people of color (Yuen & Pardeck, 1998). It was concluded that a more enlightened view of human diversity was needed. Within the last fifteen years, social work educators have shifted from using a unidimensional model, where white social work students were being taught to observe the lives of minority clients, to using a cross-cultural model, where all students, regardless of their race, are taught to look into the lives of clients, and to be mindful of the implications their own race may have for their practice. This newer approach to human diversity education is designed to help students gain an understanding and respect for human difference and similarities (Yuen & Pardeck, 1998).

The CSWE accreditation guidelines as well as the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) continue to place emphasis on cultural competence and social diversity (NASW, 1999, in Kohli & Faul, 2005). Both CSWE and NASW place much emphasis on the expectation that clinical social workers bring to their practice a culturally respectful, mindful, and aware stance while working with clients from cultures that may differ from their own. Underlying the requirement that all

practitioners be culturally competent is the assumption that such understanding of human diversity enables social worker to contribute to the empowerment of clients from many cultural and social environments (Kohli & Faul, 2005). While such efforts are critical to helping majority social workers meet the unique needs of diverse populations, the literature is lacking in discussion of curricular efforts to address and explore the subjective educational and field experience of the minority student in a social work educational program. It is clear that individual and institutional racism, although subtle, still prevail in the social work educational system (Chung, 2006).

#### *Minority Social Work Students*

Within the past decade, social work educators have placed an increased emphasis on developing specific educational strategies to support the transition of students of color into the social work profession while still honoring their ethnic heritage (Chung, 2006). It is evident that racism affects the recruitment and retention of professionals in the field of social work (Longres & Seltzer, 1994). There are two levels of racism. At the institutional level, racism involves laws, policies, norms, and customs that give the advantage to the majority race and simultaneously place minority groups at a disadvantage. The concept of institutional racism provides the backdrop for understanding why minority students are attracted to social work, as well as why there are existing problems in communications between minority and majority students and faculty. On an individual level, minority social work students may feel uncomfortable because of their group membership in the educational setting. For example, Caucasian Americans increasingly attend higher-level education and work alongside professionals of color, but they continue to live apart from them, and do not enter into personal

relationships with them (Longres & Seltzer, 1994). Students of color are increasingly prepared to enter into higher-level educational programs (Longres & Seltzer, 1994), yet serious gaps remain concerning the ways in which cultural competence and social diversity issues are addressed in social work education programs (Le-Doux & Montalvo, 1999). Such gaps exist, as well, within the structure of the programs and scope of the materials being taught. The profession must also be able to identify how social work educational programs measure these competencies in their students (Le-Doux & Montalvo, 1999). Systematic assessments of the outcomes of the inclusion of human diversity in social work education remain insufficient (Yuen & Pardeck, 1998). A key measure that has been overlooked is that of the experience of social work students of color within social work educational programs. For example, how welcoming are the programs to these students? Are they helped to feel included in campus life? What has been their experience in the classroom and in the field? Clearly, there is still much work to be done in uncovering the answers to these and other critical questions addressing the experience of social work students of color.

The literature addresses concerns that African American, Native American, and Hispanic American students may be at a disadvantage due to the existence of both institutional and individual racism (Longres & Seltzer, 1994); however there is not often mention of Asian Americans when it comes to matters of disadvantage in social work education. In a review of the social work literature from 1980-1989, Asian Americans are almost exclusively written about in terms of individual intervention (McMahon & Allen-Mears, 1992). In a 1996 survey taken by seventy-five Asian American social workers, the NASW found that cultural dissonance and lack of culturally relevant training were



perceived as the most significant professional struggles (Chung, 2006). The Asian American community has been largely ignored in the research. Researchers have not yet taken a comprehensive look at racism or racial attitude among Asians (Kohatsu et al., 2000). What is the Asian American social work educational experience? Why is this large minority group often overlooked in the literature?

### *The Model Minority Myth*

In order for educators to understand minority students, we must consider the ways in which cultural factors, such as racial stereotypes, shape their college experience (Museus, 2008). One of the reasons for Asian American underrepresentation in the existing literature today can be attributed to a racial stereotype (Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, & Day, 2009). The model minority myth casts Asian Americans as the successful minority group of America (Kohatsu et al., 2000). This stereotype assumes that all Asian American students are universally academically successful (Suyemoto et al., 2009). The model minority myth classifies all Asian American students and professionals as over-achievers (Ngo, 2006). This stereotype also discounts the vast number of ethnicities and cultures within the Asian continent (Ngo, 2006). Likewise, the model minority myth does not take into account the diverse experiences within the Asian American population, or the social, emotional, and psychological challenges that Asian Americans face (Suyemoto et al., 2009). Embedded within the model minority myth is the assumption that Asian Americans will fully assimilate into American society within one to three generations (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992). This positive image has contributed to the exclusion of this group from race related research (Kohatsu et al., 2000). In addition, the relatively few Asian American faculty and graduate students in education and related social science

disciplines also has a limiting effect on the pursuit of academic research on the experience of students in their own racial or ethnic communities (Suyemoto et al., 2009).

Culturally derived and perpetuated stereotypes about minority groups can have distressing implications for the minority student's college experience (Museus, 2008). Although there is scant literature on the Asian American student experience, findings from existing studies indicate that Asian American students report more negative social experiences than African American students, and less desirable experiences in academics and social experiences than their Caucasian peers in college (Suyemoto et al., 2009). Asian Americans also experience more social isolation, self-segregation, and exclusion, as well as less satisfaction with social support than their non Asian American peers (Suyemoto et al., 2009). A study done by Sodowsky, Lai, and Plake in 1991 found that perceived prejudice in social, educational, and occupational contexts was a significant concern for Asian American students (Sodowsky, Lai, & Plake, 1991, in Rahman & Rollock, 2004).

Lack of scholarship on Asian American undergraduates can perpetuate the model minority myth that they do not experience challenges in college. This notion contributes to the lack of attention given to this area of research, thereby creating a cyclical process (Suyemoto et al., 2009). There is a continuing growth of the Asian American college student population, yet there is a paucity of research about these student's experiences; therefore, we run the risk of making the Asian American higher education experience invisible (Suyemoto et al., 2009).

### *Asian Americans in Higher Education*

Because the research on the experience of the graduate level Asian American is limited, the Asian American college experience will first be discussed in an effort to provide a window into the experience of the Asian American graduate student.

In an attempt to gain an in-depth look at the diverse experiences of Asian American students in higher education, a 2009 qualitative study was carried out using a two-part students-as-researchers design (Suyemoto et al., 2009). This design creates an empowering experience for the Asian American student researcher, and the Asian American research participant; each student is actively contributing to the research literature as well as the Asian American community. In one part of the study Asian American students asked other Asian American students about their college experience. Within the Asian American student perspectives of their college experience, five themes were found. Asian American students reported feeling socially isolated, feeling that making friends is a challenge, and that there is lack of a cohesive community. Asian American students also took note of racial segregation within their college community. They reported observing a separation between Asian American students and Caucasian students, as well as a division among Asian American students from different ethnic and generational backgrounds. Asian American students also expressed having difficulties in their interactions with faculty and a negative experience with advising. Students felt that the faculty lacked sensitivity to the Asian American experience and cultural values. Some students expressed the need for Asian American staff and staff with a greater understanding of their experience. Students felt as though their advisors did not care about or understand them. Lastly the students cited the importance of having Asian

American faculty and Asian American studies courses (Suyemoto et al., 2009). The authors concluded that more research is needed if we are to gain a better understanding of the diverse experiences of Asian American students in higher education (Suyemoto et al., 2009).

Although studies such as Suyemoto (2009) begin to give us a window into the experience of the Asian American college student, little attention has been given to the intracultural experience of the group we call Asian American in the existing literature (Rahman & Rollock, 2004). Additionally, there is very little research on the experience of Asian American graduate students in general, as well as their experience in masters-level social work programs in particular. The literature that does exist largely focuses on the topic of cross-cultural supervisory relationships.

#### *Cross-Cultural Supervisory Relationships*

Addressing cultural issues in supervision is crucial to the personal and professional development of students in the helping professions, especially those students who are of color (Duan & Roehlke, 2001). It has been recommended that the improvement of cross-cultural supervision can be achieved when supervisors openly discuss cultural influences, explore cultural countertransference issues that occur in supervision and counseling, and provide a safe environment for racial and cultural identity development with and for their supervisees (Duan & Roehlke, 2001). The supervisory relationship involves dynamics of power and control, acceptance, trust, and positive and negative perceptions about racial ethnic groups (Duan & Roehlke, 2001).

A 2001 study done by Duan & Roehlke examined the relationship between cross-racial supervision dyads. This study included white supervisors and supervisors of color,

as well as, white supervisees and supervisees of color. It was found that both supervisors and supervisees who provided or received supervision from an individual of another race generally felt satisfied with their supervisory experience. The results of this study indicated that it is important for supervisors to take a strong interest in their supervisee's cultural background. The results also show that supervisees generally perceived their supervisors to be trustworthy, expert, and helpful. These findings indicate that the participating supervisors and supervisees were able to form a successful relationship within a cross racial dyad (Duan & Roehlke, 2001).

Cross-cultural supervision is still a relatively new phenomenon and additional research is needed to understand how to provide culturally effective supervision to counseling students. This study's findings imply that trustworthiness, expertness, and helpfulness can only be gauged within the supervisee's cultural context (Duan & Roehlke, 2001). These findings also point to the importance of further research focusing on eliciting the reflections of Asian American social work graduate students about their experience in the field.

A 2006 study done by Chung looked at the difficulties that Asian American social work students faced during their professional training due to discrepancies between their cultural norms and values, and those of the social work profession (Chung, 2006). This small study was conducted at a major social work school in the Northeast, via tutorial group sessions, to identify and address common issues of Asian American social work students. Among the 10 Asian American students who took part in the study, common concerns were expressed related to their training. The students cited that they were not assertive in their academic work and at their internship. The students expressed that they

had difficulty speaking in class, making timely and appropriate responses to provocative or racist remarks made by clients, colleagues, and instructors, and advocating for higher grades and evaluations of their field performance. Each student was aware that their lack of assertiveness was directly linked to cultural traits contrary to Western norms (Chung, 2006). This group of Asian American social work students expressed their difficulty in relating to instructors and other authority figures in an egalitarian way because of their cultural upbringing, which emphasizes showing great respect for elders. Several students expressed their mixed feelings around disagreeing with their field and classroom instructors (Chung, 2006). Some students made reference to their discomfort and feelings of inadequacy brought on by interactions with demanding and patronizing elderly clients (Chung, 2006). The students felt a general lack of validation of their cultural differences by the social work profession. For example, students said that they were asked by instructors and field advisors to work on issues that dealt with their cultural traits such as being quiet, and being avoidant of the communication of strong emotions (Chung, 2006). Asian American students who worked with Asian American clients expressed feeling caught between following their cultural intuition about how to treat the client and their supervisor's Western values in their assessment and interventions (Chung, 2006).

Chung's (2006) findings point to the importance of the social work profession's need to explore and convey to others the Asian American social work student experience. It is through this process that we can better prepare faculty and supervisors in the social work profession for fostering the fundamental professional belief of respect for all people. Students who feel marginalized due to the lack of validation of their cultural norms during their educational experience will not translate this important belief into

their social work practice (Chung, 2006). Chung notes that achieving awareness and integration of one's thoughts, values, and behavior is an inherent part of the social work student's professional development (Chung, 2006). This period of development takes place throughout the educational process and may evoke feelings of inadequacy among those new to the profession. This may be particularly true for students of color, who face a degree of cultural dissonance during their learning process. Students of color find themselves faced with the challenge of developing and negotiating a bicultural identity (Chung 2006). A lack of sense of academic competence among students of color is a major obstacle in their process of achieving a positive sense of identity as social workers; in turn, this may contribute to the difficulty schools have in the recruitment and retention of student's of color (Chung, 2006). Asian American social work students encounter many differences in their educational experience due to their professional and cultural values and norms (Chung, 2006). Asian American students have to "shift their value systems and behavior patterns" (pg. 97), as they engage in social work classes and work with clients in the field based on a Western curriculum of intervention and theories (Ryan, 1981 in Chung, 2006).

*The Unique Experience of South Asian Americans in Higher Education*

While there may be less literature on Asian American students overall, there is even less that explores the South Asian American student experience. South Asians remain at the margins of scholarship and writing on Asian Americans (Kibria, 1996) despite the fact that the number of South Asians in the United States has increased dramatically in the past twenty years (Mathews, 2000).

The South Asian region of Asia includes the countries of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka (Mathews, 2000). In 2000, there were over one million, five-hundred thousand Indians, over one hundred thousand Pakistanis, over forty-thousand Bangladeshi, and over twenty-thousand Sri Lankans living in the United States (United States Census, 2000). The U.S. Census reports that South Americans are now the fastest growing ethnic group within the fastest growing racial category of Asian Americans (Patel, 2007). In the United States over seven-hundred thousand South Asian Americans have a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census, 2000). Therefore, there is a unique need to research their academic experience.

The experience of South Asian Americans is permeated with social and economic issues that directly affect their educational experiences and attainment (Ngo, 2006). The South Asian American feels multiple tensions throughout their educational experience. The tensions South Asians often experience are due to intergenerational conflicts that stem from family and gender role expectations, as well as racism (Ngo, 2006). Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, South Asian Americans have had to endure an increasingly hostile environment in the United States by those who perceive them to be Muslim and terrorists (Ngo, 2006). The South Asian American's educational experience in the United States makes the Asian American success story difficult to attain and the price of success is high (Ngo, 2006).

It should be noted that because of the collectivist nature by which South Asian American families approach life and education, there is tremendous pressure placed on students to do well, be successful, and create upward mobility for the family and community (Ngo, 2006). Throughout childhood children are taught and expected to be



obedient and bring honor to their families by exhibiting good behavior, having high academic achievement, and contributing to the well-being of the family (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002). Career success and educational achievements are highly valued by South Asians. South Asian American students may feel as though there is a familial expectation for them to bring pride and honor to their family by attaining a high level of academic achievement (Mathews, 2000). South Asian parents may have differing perspectives on education, limited understanding of the process of education, or they may be unfamiliar with the roles that they themselves, students, teachers, and other school staff play in a child's academic achievement. For example, it was found in a research study done with South Asian American students and their families, that South Asian parents rarely blame teachers or the educational system for their children's difficulties at school. These parents believe that learning is the child's responsibility (Ngo, 2006). This is a culturally differing perspective and should be respected; however, it should be kept in mind when interacting with a South Asian American student who is experiencing trouble academically.

Many South Asian American students' educational experience requires a balancing of pressure from their parents, school and friends (Ngo, 2006). These students may be asked to aid their parents for many reasons, such as lack of English fluency, lack of time, or lack of cultural knowledge, while simultaneously striving for academic success (Ngo, 2006). South Asian parents may ask their children to take on the adult role of caring work, for example, making dinner, or cleaning the house. This expected caring work can often be accompanied by feelings of guilt. If the South Asian American student fails to perform this work for the family, or tries to get out of having to do it this may be

perceived as a reflection on one's commitment to the family (Ngo, 2006). Caring work may negatively impact the South Asian American student's ability to perform well academically, and this too becomes their responsibility. It should also be noted that within the context of education, South Asian American women are faced with challenging cultural gender norms by postponing marriage and pursuing higher education (Ngo, 2006).

The education of South Asian American students is full of experiences of discrimination and alienation. Research confirms that Asian Americans experience verbal and physical harassment, pressure to be successful, and educators' minimization or ignoring of these experiences (Suyemoto et al., 2009). These students experience both covert and overt forms of racism; such experiences are simultaneously veiled and compounded by the United States model minority myth (Ngo, 2006). South Asian American students experience discrimination from non-Asian students as well as from other Asian students (Ngo, 2006). Often the process of racialization affects the way in which students of color view one another (Ngo, 2006). At times Asian American students may internalize the dominant message that they are inferior and different; therefore these students may form racial identities that distance themselves from the stereotypical images of Asians (Ngo, 2006). South Asian American students continue to be viewed as foreigners as well as an economic and political threat (Ngo 2006). It is clear that the educational experience of the South Asian American student is shaped by their social, cultural, and economic marginalization. More often than not, the challenges they face are exacerbated by the model minority myth (Ngo, 2006). For example, South Asian Americans may not be thought of as coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

However, minorities from middle class families are not likely to be on economic par with their white counterparts (Longres & Seltzer, 1994). South Asian American students may experience social isolation based on their minority group status. In addition to balancing cultural roles and studying hard, they are likely to encounter racist social norms around dating, friendship networks, and information sharing because they are a social minority on campus (Longres & Seltzer, 1994). Although relationships between majority faculty and South Asian Americans, as minority students, may be mutually rewarding, tension and strain may not be unusual (Longres & Seltzer, 1994).

In conclusion, feedback and support are needed to assure minority student groups' economic survival, a sense of academic competence, a sense of belonging, and positive self-esteem (Longres & Seltzer, 1994). Even within Asian American academic circles, it is not uncommon for South Asians to feel like outsiders (Kibria, 1996). There is a need for further research that explicates the social-cultural conditions that shape student educational experiences (Ngo, 2006), and a crucial need for more research on South Asian American education. The space of South Asian American students, as an Asian American subgroup, and their experience with the model minority image in educational settings need to be explored. It has been suggested by Ngo (2006) that there is a need for qualitative research exploring the "nuances of everyday, taken-for-granted experiences and understandings", (pg. 62) of the South Asian American educational experience. As previously noted above, a minority student's identification with the social work profession depends largely on the degree to which their ethnic heritage may be infused to their educational experience to provide them with a sense of belonging, positive self-esteem, and a coherent identity (Chung, 2006).

Given the above research, it is clear that being from a South Asian subgroup has implications for the challenges such students may face in their graduate social work experience.

*Theoretical Lens: Social Construction Theory*

The following quotes illustrate how research based on race or ethnicity can be seen through the theoretical lens of social construction. “An ethnic group is defined as a distinct grouping of people who share a historical and cultural heritage and who distinguish themselves as different from other groups” (Branch, 1999; Helms, 1996, in Chen, LePhuoc, Guzman, Rude, & Dodd, 2006).

“Ethnic identity is a psychological construct referring to how individuals relate their ethnic background to their self-concept” (Chen et al., 2006).

Social construction theory was originally formulated by Berger and Luckmann in 1966. Since then, this theory has been used in the realms of philosophy, sociology, psychology, and even political science to help us understand varying social phenomena. Social construction theory implies that our reality is socially constructed; therefore, each person’s reality is different. According to the tenets of this theory, every day we experience our own realities subjectively within a coherent world.

There are two base terms with which we must become familiar in order to understand this theoretical lens. One term, reality, refers to all the phenomena we experience that are independent of our own decisions; the other term, knowledge, refers to the certainty that the phenomena that we experience are real and possess certain characteristics. Social construction theory tells us that there are several varieties of knowledge and that each man has his own reality. According to this theoretical

perspective, the most important experiences for human beings take place in the context of face-to-face interactions with others. It is during such interactions that we begin to understand others' subjectively experienced realities and vice versa (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

According to social construction theory, while most organisms enter the world with a predetermined relationship with their environment, human beings' relationship with the world is quite unique. A human's relationship with his/her environment is characterized by "world openness" (pg. 45). The process of becoming an adult takes place in interrelationship with an environment. Developing humans connect to particular natural environments with a specific cultural and social order. It is these cultural and social orders that are then mediated to him/her by significant others as he/she develops. Therefore human development is socially determined (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

#### *The Social Majority*

Within the theory of social construction there is the possibility for "subuniverses" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pg 79). These subuniverses can be socially constructed by gender, age, occupation, religion, etc. The chance of subuniverses appearing increases when there is a progressive division of economic surplus. Thus, the creation of a society with cognitive segregation between humans is born (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

#### *Under-privileged Social Minorities*

Subuniverses are held together collectively as a group, which continues to create the implications for being part of the group itself. In short, a group begins to form its own objective reality about who can be included and who will be excluded. Conflict and competition may exist between such groups.

As the number of subuniverses increase and become more complex they become increasingly inaccessible to the outsiders. The increasing autonomy of subuniverses can easily become problematic. Outsiders must be kept out, or kept ignorant of the existence of the subuniverse. However, if the subuniverse requires various privileges and recognitions from the larger society then it becomes difficult to keep outsiders out and acknowledging the legitimacy of the subuniverse (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

### *Social Construction of Target Populations*

Social construction theory is important among social professions because it helps explain why some groups become more privileged than others (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The social construction of target populations refers to the cultural characterizations or popular images of the persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy. These characterizations cast groups in a positive or negative light through symbolic language, metaphors, and stories (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

### *Social Construction Theory & The Model Minority Myth*

Social constructions are stereotypes about a specific group of people that have been created by politics, culture, socialization, history, the media, literature, religion, etc. Positive constructions, such as the model minority myth, include images such as deserving, intelligent, hard working, etc. (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

Using a social construction lens for this research may shed light on how South Asian American students have constructed their own perceptions or belief systems based on their own subjective experience. Using this lens may also help us to understand how these students feel others perceive them, and how they are experiencing their social work

graduate program. Therefore, this theoretical lens will aid in the development of greater insight into how South Asian American students experience the social work education system.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

The purpose of this study was to learn about the educational challenges faced by South Asian American social work students in relation to campus community life, academics and advising, as well as their experiences in field.

It was hypothesized that South Asian American social work students may share common educational challenges in their social work school experience such as, in relation to their campus community life, academics and advising, as well as their experiences in field.

#### *Study Design and Sampling*

This study was exploratory in nature and used a cross-sectional, qualitative design. The research design that was selected addressed the research question most appropriately. By using a semi-structured open-ended interview the data was more rich and specific than if the data collected had been quantitative.

Participants were recruited primarily through use of a snowball sampling method. Initially a flyer (Appendix E) was created for the purpose of recruitment in local areas surrounding college campuses. However, this flyer was not used to recruit participants because the researcher relied instead on recruitment via email. All participants were recruited using an electronic plea (Appendix F) that was sent out to mental health professionals and friends of the researcher who had connections to South Asian American social work community. Potential participants contacted the researcher via email in order



to express an interest in participating in the study. They were then sent a copy of the informed consent to read and sign. Once the researcher received a signed copy of the informed consent via snail mail or fax, an interview was set up based on the potential participant's wishes. Eight of the 9 participants chose to participate using Skype because it did not require them to travel. Using Skype enabled the researcher to include participants that live outside of the D.C./Baltimore Metropolitan Area, and allowed the participants to take part in the study from the comfort of their own home. One participant chose to participate in a face-to-face interview at a local library.

It should be noted that the desired sample size for this research was 12 participants. However, given the specific nature of the inclusion criteria the researcher was unable to meet this recruitment goal using only a snowball sampling method. In the middle of the recruitment process the researcher obtained assistance in recruitment among students by administrative staff from a local social work school. However, this recruitment effort proved unsuccessful. Late in the recruitment process the researcher obtained permission from her social work program to post a recruitment plea (Appendix F) on the school's alumni of color list serve. This form of recruitment yielded one participant in approximately 2 weeks time. However, this participant did not end up giving an interview because the delay in their response did not allow sufficient time to schedule, complete, and transcribe the interview in time to meet the thesis deadline.

The first two responses to the electronic plea indicated interest in participating, however did not meet the inclusion criteria, which, at the time, called for currently enrolled students only. The researcher subsequently changed the inclusion criteria to include social work professionals who have previously graduated from a MSW or DSW

program. However, upon contacting the first two people to notify them of the change they did not respond.

### *Data Collection*

The researcher collected demographic information and carried out face-to-face or telephone semi-structured, open-ended interviews with each participant in order to collect data on their graduate or doctoral social work school experience. Each participant was asked seven open-ended questions about their campus community life, academics and advising, as well as their experience in field.

To minimize the risk of interview effects and biases that may accompany qualitative data collection, and to allow for maximum interview consistency, a scripted interview was used. Each participant was asked all seven open-ended interview questions using the exact same wording. The researcher was mindful that, since she also met the inclusion criteria for this research, she did not offer feedback during the interview about her own social work graduate school experience but used only simple probes to obtain additional information or to encourage a participant to clarify information that was already given.

A demographic sheet and an open-ended interview facilitated by the researcher were used to collect the data. All data was collected using a digital recording device. The two types of data that were collected were nominal and narrative responses to the interview questions in digital audio format. This recording device was used in Skype interviews online, as well as in face-to-face interviews. Skype is a free downloadable instant messaging program that allows people to talk, type, and see one another online via

the Internet. Interviews ranged in length from 10.5 to 40.5 minutes long. All Skype interviews were conducted using the researcher's laptop computer.

In the event that the participant was being interviewed via Skype, the participant was asked the demographic questions and the researcher recorded them. The demographic sheet was used to gather each participant's age, gender, ethnicity, the name of their social work school, and whether they were a full time, part time, or graduated student. In addition to their age and gender, participants were asked to identify their ethnicity so that the researcher could ascertain the participants' countries of origin as South Asian. Information about the participant's social work school including the region and whether the program operates out of a college or university was gathered by asking the name of the school attended. Further descriptive data gathered included full- versus part-time student status, currently enrolled versus graduated, and last date of school attendance. The open-ended interview included two items about the experience of campus community and sense of belonging on campus, three items about the experience of academics, racial dialogues inside the classroom, academic advising, and two items about field experience.

#### *Sample Characteristics*

This study had a total of 9 participants. All participants were American citizens. Participant were either currently enrolled in a master of social work (MSW) (N=1) or doctoral social work (DSW) program (N=2), or were social work professionals (N=6) who had graduated from a social work program in the United States. There were 8 female and 1 male participant. Participants ranged in age from 31 to 76 years old. The mean age for this sample was 45.5. Six participants identified as being Indian-American. Two of

these 6 participants used the “Other” option to further define their ethnicity. One of these participants listed “South Asian American”, and the other listed “Maliali, someone from Carola”. One participant identified as being of “Indian origin” and 2 participants identified as “South Asian”. Nine participants attended a total of 6 graduate social work programs located in the Northeast (4 participants), Mid-Atlantic (4 participants), and Northwest (1 participant), and Central (1 participant) regions of the United States. One DSW participant is obtaining their degree at a different school than where they obtained their MSW. The other DSW participant is obtaining their DSW at the same school where they obtained their MSW. Six participants had attended school full time and 3, part time.

#### *Data Analysis*

After the data was collected the researcher transcribed it. Data was collapsed into similar themed categories for analysis. The demographic data was then measured using central tendencies and descriptive statistics. The researcher began the qualitative data analysis process by reviewing raw transcriptions and recording repetitive themes and ideas. When the same theme surfaced in a different interview this further reinforced the researcher’s use of the theme overall. If new themes emerged that did not fit into an already existing theme, a new theme was created. During this process nine themes emerged: Challenge with connection; Ethnic isolation; Invisibility; Racism, Exoticism; Stereotyping; Paucity of academic material; Piecing together support systems; Cultural challenges; Comfort within diverse environment; and Conflict with faculty and supervisors.

These themes were then reorganized and collapsed again into five more specific themes and sub-themes: Challenges with connection (with sub-themes ethnicity,

nationality, and choice of career); Ethnic isolation (with sub-themes of exoticism, stereotyping, and lack of familiarity or intolerance for South Asian culture); Invisibility; Piecing together support; and Comfort with diversity). The researcher extracted quotes and/or noted participant descriptions of their experience that helped clarify and illustrate each theme.

#### *Limitations and Implications for Further Research*

This study's sample of 9 participants is smaller than what is usually required for a qualitative, exploratory study, further limiting the ability to generalize the findings. While broadening the inclusion criteria to include those who had graduated from masters or doctoral level social work programs helped with recruitment overall, reliance on the snowball method in the brief time period allotted for recruitment, proved unsuccessful in reaching the required sample size of 12 participants. Future research in this area should consider additional forms of recruitment to obtain a larger sample. Such forms of recruitment could include receiving permission to recruit on other social work program campuses and posting a plea on list serves that may yield participants with the desired inclusion criteria. In addition, sufficient time should be allowed to generate response to recruitment pleas.

Recruitment may also have been affected by listing as inclusion criteria the necessity for potential participants to "identify as South Asian American". It is possible that some who may have qualified for participation did not perceive this criterion as applying to them. In future research with this population it may be important to list the countries of origin that encompass this region in the inclusion criteria, rather than requiring that potential participants "self identify" as South Asian American.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This is an exploratory study seeking to answer the question what unique challenges do South Asian American social work graduate students face in the areas of campus community, academics, and field? Sub-questions include: whether participants encountered any challenges with interpersonal relationships on campus; whether they experienced a sense of belonging as a member of their student body; whether they have encountered any academic materials or classroom discourse about South Asian Americans; how they felt participating in classroom discourse about race and ethnicity; and whether they encountered any challenges in the field with supervisors or clients.

The findings have been organized into five major themes that emerged in the course of analysis. Several of these themes contained sub themes. These themes illustrate the similarities and differences between each participant's social work program experiences. These themes were: Challenges with Connection (with subthemes of Ethnicity and Class, Nationality, and Choice of Career); Ethnic Isolation (with subthemes of Exoticism & Stereotyping, Lack of Familiarity & Intolerance of South Asian Culture); Invisibility, Piecing Together Support; and Comfort with Cultural Diversity.

The proceeding section of this chapter will explicate each theme and subtheme in detail. Direct quotes from transcribed interviews will be used as further illustration of these themes. In an effort to protect participant confidentiality, due to the small size and nature of the sample, gender will not be attributed to participants' direct quotes unless

specifically relevant to the theme being presented.

In many cases more than one theme emerged within one specific experience. For example, the researcher discovered that many participant experiences were examples of both “Lack of Connection” and “Ethnic Isolation”, “Ethnic Isolation” and “Invisibility”, or “Ethnic Isolation” and “Piecing Together Support”. These overlapping themes demonstrate the unique experience and challenges faced by South Asian American social work graduate students.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the descriptive characteristics of the study sample. While characteristics will be presented in a descriptive format, no analysis of differences in thematic content by demographic characteristic was carried out.

#### *Sample Characteristics*

This study had a total of 9 participants. All participants were American citizens. There were 8 female participants and 1 male participant. Participants ranged in age from 31 to 76 years old. The mean age for this sample was 45.5. The modal age for this sample was 36. Six participants identified as being Indian-American. Out of these 6 participants, 2 participants used the "Other" option to further define their ethnicity. One of these participants listed “South Asian American” under "Other", the other participant listed “Maliali, someone from Carola” under "Other". Out of the remaining 3 participants, 1 participant identified as being of “Indian origin”, and 2 participants identified as “South Asian”.

#### *Student & Professional Status*

Nine participants attended a total of 6 graduate social work programs. Two participants had completed their MSW programs and were currently enrolled in a DSW

program. One participant is currently enrolled in an MSW program. Two participants are currently enrolled in a DSW program. Six participants were social work professionals who had already graduated from their respective educational programs. One participant attended one program for her MSW and is attending another program for her DSW. Six participants reported that they attended their social work program full time. Three participants reported that they attended their social work program part time.

Six participants attended their MSW or DSW program at a university. Three participants attended their MSW or DSW program at a college. Four participants attended MSW or DSW programs in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Four participants attended MSW or DSW programs in the Northeast region of the United States. One participant attended an MSW or DSW program in the Central region of the United States. One participant attended a MSW or DSW program in the Northwest region of the United States.

### *Challenges with Connection*

The majority of participants experienced one or more challenges with feeling connected to their campus, student body, and surrounding community due to the lack of South Asian community, lack of a South Asian community presence in the field of social work, perceived ethnic and class differences, and perceived differences in educational experience from non-social work peers. Participants used such phrases as “felt divided”, “felt uncomfortable”, and “didn’t feel like I belonged” when talking about their difficulty establishing a sense of connection to their social work program. All participants spoke about having experienced challenges with feeling connected to South Asian international students, other social work students, other students of color, students from the



surrounding community, or family. This challenge presented itself in several contexts, in the areas of participant ethnicity, nationality, and choice of career. Each of these subthemes will be explicated further, below.

It was found that 8 out of 9 participants experienced challenges with feeling connected to other students as well as to their program. Five participants expressed that they struggled with feeling connected to extra-curricular student groups on campus. Two participants commented specifically that the campus and surrounding area lacked a South Asian community, therefore they found their educational environment to lack an important social component.

The 2 participants, both over age 40, who indicated fewer problems connecting with others, stated that they were in a different part of life while they were in their graduate programs and were therefore not necessarily seeking this type of connection through their educational experience. These participants attended their MSW programs approximately 8-15 years ago. One of these participants explained that she was already married and working while going to school so she felt as though she did not have a strong need to socialize with other students in her class. The other participant explained that she was a commuting student and would spend most of her free time with her husband sightseeing around her community, rather than engaging with the students on campus.

#### *Ethnicity and Class*

One participant, age 36, spoke about challenges she encountered with feeling a sense of connection on campus and in the community where her school was located. She also spoke about her experience off campus in the surrounding city, describing the community as being “homogenous” (mostly Caucasian).

When I came onto campus, for me I had come from a big city where I had as strong community of friends, some of which were South Asian, were also Indian, were really my closest friends, and so that was the other piece, like okay where is there a store, like am I going to have an Indian community?

This feeling extended to participant experiences attempting to make connections with other ethnic groups. This participant recalled joining an organized minority group on campus and sensing competitiveness from other students about whether she was “Brown” enough to be included.

Another participant who currently attends the same MSW program expressed that it,

...doesn't necessarily have the different dimensions that I would like it to have... it would be nice to not have like just one Japanese person, one Indian person...there's this certain dimension of interpersonal communication I have if I'm in a non-White community that is different, and you know it's just the fact that I don't have that exposure.

Two participants felt a lack of connection to other students on their respective campus, as they perceived themselves to be different. One participant shared, “I used to feel okay, I'm different enough, that perhaps people don't wish to have lunch with me, which was totally something in myself, it wasn't coming from my colleagues or my classmates, so that was something I had to work with myself.” The other participant expressed that she took note that she was from a working class family and her campus was in a wealthy area, “I saw connections between different communities of color and had really done a lot of thinking about it. So I was more concerned with, like okay how do people perceive me?”

### *Nationality*

Two doctoral students, both in their 30's, noted that they felt as though they could

not relate to the experience of South Asian international students on their campus because they were raised in the U.S and had a different experience of racism and racial awareness.

One participant shared,

I grew up around White people, so I kept having experiences of racism my whole life and some of the international students who are here from South Asia who like maybe came last year to do this PhD or whatever, they don't have the same understanding of U.S. racism, because it's not been their experience, and I definitely have been in times in the classroom where my position on race feels much more consistent with other U.S. raised people of color from different backgrounds, Latinas, other Asians, African Americans, Native folks, than aligned with some of the more recent South Asian immigrants who may be don't have as critical a race analysis, just because of their location and what their experience has been.

#### *Choice of Career*

One participant who is currently enrolled in a DSW program talked about wishing there was a space to explore the unique challenges she experienced as a South Asian American social work graduate student. This participant drew connections between her South Asian identity and her choice in career. She also referenced the unique challenges South Asian social work students may have communicating with their families as well as their respective ethnic communities about their chosen profession.

You know what never gets talked about are challenges, you know what are the challenges you face as a student pursuing this? How does your family feel about this? Do people in your family even get what it is that you're trying to do? You know and it would've been nice to have a venue of like students who could get together and really talk about the social aspects of what it is that we're doing and what is it that we want to do.

Another participant, who is currently enrolled in a DSW program, spoke similarly about having a South Asian organization on campus but feeling disconnected from it because it was not social work oriented.

I think what some of my challenge has really been is on campus there's very much kind of a South Asian studies program, ... a lot of progressive South Asian folks are involved with that program but that program is really based in the humanities and it's not a practice oriented program at all, you know it's an academic program, and I've really felt a strong disciplinary divide with those folks, because I think social work is really different in terms of being a professional degree program, being practice oriented, having a social justice mission. There are a number of things that differentiate social work from a lot of other academic disciplines. So I've really felt divided from... the other South Asian graduate students by that.

Another participant, age 41, experienced a lack of connection with a South Asian group on her campus. She shared that at her school she was made fun of by other non-MSW South Asian students for pursuing an advanced degree in social work. "When they found out you know, when they would ask me what I was studying because it was a humanity design, I could see there was some sort of resistance or kind of a scoffing like 'oh you're in that sort of field'."

Only 1 participant, age 50, stated that there was an Asian American social work student group on her campus, she expressed however, that there were not enough South Asian students to form a South Asian subset of this group.

#### *Ethnic Isolation*

The majority of the participants experienced some degree of ethnic isolation on campus. Five out of 9 participants disclosed that they were one of few, if not the only, South Asian American student in their MSW or DSW program. Two female participants in their early 40's who had graduated from their MSW programs 8-15 years ago stated that they had been the only South Asian students in their class. Three participants who graduated within the last 17 years or who are currently enrolled in a program shared that they were one of the few Asian or South Asian students in their class, meaning that they

were one of no more than four South Asians students in their class. Two participants who spoke about feelings of ethnic isolation sought connection with a South Asian community off campus; this finding will be examined further under another thematic heading (“Piecing Together Support”). One out of 9 participants stated that she did not experience any degree of ethnic isolation.

For the majority of participants the experience of ethnic isolation created challenges with racism on campus and in the field for the majority of participants. These challenges with racism presented themselves in the form of stereotypes and exoticism. Six of 9 participants encountered challenges with stereotyping during their social work experience. Four of 9 participants talk about encountered challenges with exoticism. Many participants found that other students, faculty, internship staff, as well as clients expressed an interest in them because they were perceived as different or foreign.

Because the majority of participants experienced some degree of ethnic isolation, many participants expressed that they perceived the faculty and students in their social work programs to have a general lack of knowledge or intolerance for South Asian culture. Four out of 9 participants talked about how they encountered cultural challenges with faculty, students, and in the field where they felt the need to educate others about a certain aspect of South Asian culture, or felt unaccepted for not fitting into a Western cultural framework. These participants also expressed that voicing views reflective of South Asian cultural norms was not tolerated in classroom discussion – especially when these differed from the prevailing views of other students.

### *Stereotyping & Exoticism*

The male participant, who currently attends an MSW program talked about his experience with stereotyping.

It feels really strange because I'm always used to being part of a larger sample, set of Indians, so I don't feel as token in some way, like it almost makes it comical and irrelevant... I mean in college there was the ability to do something on a much larger scale, you know if you're one male Indian in a class, you know, it just makes it very difficult to act out, or do any kind of ethnic thing, because you're just an individual, and I don't think that makes it more than anything but token.

Five other participants, who attended four different social work programs, recalled encountering faculty, students, internship staff, and clients who held stereotypical beliefs about South Asians or South Asian culture. The exemplary quotes below illustrate multiple components of this theme. Assumptions were made about the way they interacted with clients, and the way they practiced social work. Generalizations were made about South Asian life style, socioeconomic status, and lack of marginalization in the United States.

One participant perceived some of the faculty to make assumptions about her diet because she was South Asian.

I think every now and then they would worry if I was eating properly, if I had any dietary restrictions. I think fortunately I didn't, so that it made it easier. They were concerned if the meals were to my liking, or something.

Some participants encountered clients and supervisors that held stereotypical beliefs about them or South Asian culture. Three participants described their experienced with stereotyping at their field placements.

The elderly, when I made a home visit, they thought I was an American Indian...And there was a tendency every now and then to compare you to Gandhi, that made me a little upset. It was the supervisor, because I was

psychoanalytically trained and if you don't talk very much, and maybe it's like a passive resistance, and I said absolutely not. Now with the clients... a ten year old who had lost his father, and the kid was going through some issue of grief, and he had a wonderful sense of humor, but with sadness he said to me, 'You believe in reincarnation.' And instead of lecturing on him, I said, "tell me what it means to you?"

We had several [clients] that were very paranoid with me, because they felt that I was a terrorist um, because they were so paranoid, and the government was trying to steal their thoughts and so they sent a terrorist to antagonize them so that they would give up their thoughts for free and so we had a few moments like that, and my field instructor thought that it was hilarious, um I wasn't amused... so it got to be a joke.

There was a doctor the first year who was like a team leader, and he was Indian, and again, now that I think about it he was very supportive and encouraging, helpful for me, continuing on with my degree. A lot of the clients would joke around and say "Is that your, you daughter's working here?" And he'd say no. You know they would try to make the connection because we were both Indian, you know they'd joke around about it.

One participant had to dispel South Asian stereotypes for her supervisor.

One of my supervisors, she went to see Monsoon wedding, and wanted to kind of explore that with me, and she was little bit clumsy which was surprising because she's a social worker, I would've thought that she would've have been a little bit more sophisticated, in her approach. [The movie] represents a demographic that's normally not seen in this country, you know middle class Indians, so it was a bit of a shock for somebody who thinks of India in terms of poverty and all of that... ignorant questions like that, I mean the bottom line is she was trying to generalize based on just one movie.

One participant perceived the faculty and students at her school to buy into the model minority myth.

You know I think that there's a perception that people from South Asian are smart, academically, brilliant, do well, so what's the problem? Why do we need to talk about them? The populations that come, the immigrant populations that are less skilled, okay they might face challenges but I think there's a misconceptions that South Asians have it made.

Several participants also perceived that they were given individualized attention from faculty, students, internship staff, and clients based upon the fact that they were

South Asian and therefore different, or exotic, as demonstrated in the illustrative quotes from 4 participants, below:

The staff on whole was curious about the dress, they wanted me to make sure before I leave the agency that I would demonstrate how to put the sari on. So I had two of them be on the table and I draped the dress.

I think that that goes back to this idea that certain people see South Asians as like, not that they don't see us as brown, but they see us as, oh you're kind of cool, you're exotic...I feel like some of my clients would be like 'ooh' as a way to connect, or really bring in the fact that like, 'ooh I love Indian food!', 'Are you Indian?', and they would go into a story they know, or how their best friend is Indian... blah blah blah.

Like I said, I took three classes with the teacher, she would kind of bate me a little bit, she would start to have the discussion and then it would sort of be so for those of you who have been out of the country, and it was like she was directing it at me, it was like 'So how would this be different?', and you know some students would start here and there, but if I didn't start, she could come right in front of my desk and be like 'Sooo, and I'm like, I didn't really want to talk today.

Like some of the women [clients] they just thought I was really pretty, they thought I had such pretty hair, so they just wanted to engage with me, so it was like, it worked in my favor. A couple of my male counterparts, my partner on the weekend was male, and he was like 'So I'm going to let you go handle that client, she likes you!'

It should be noted that some participants reported that being South Asian was an advantage in their class or internship because they perceived faculty members to take an added interest in them, or they felt they could form better rapport with clients of color at their internships.

#### *Lack of Knowledge or Intolerance for South Asian Culture*

Many participants encountered a lack of knowledge or intolerance by their professors and students surrounding South Asian identity and culture. This lack of knowledge and intolerance combined with invisibility promotes racial assumptions about South Asian ethnic groups.



Two participants, currently enrolled in DSW programs, talked about their frustration with different types of ignorance among the faculty toward South Asian identity and the implications of working with communities who may not fit into Western value systems.

The person who was assigned to be my academic advisor early on continually called me Southeast Asian for like you know the first year and a half, and I kept trying to say South Asian and I was like ‘God, do I explain this all to her? Do I go into a whole analysis of what South Asian is?’... I just don’t think that people actually know about our community and I don’t think that social work has been in relationship to South Asian communities in a very meaningful way... What I really struggled with is wanting to do work in the South Asian community and not feeling like I actually have advisors who can support me to do that...they really don’t have knowledge of the community or the experience. And I think it’s been hard for that to be true.

“Social work had its roots in the U.S... We’re very enlightened about social justice as long as the values that come out on top are our Western values.”

Two participants from two different social work programs spoke about moments encountered in either the classroom or their internship in which they had felt the need to educate staff or students about certain aspects of their South Asian identity or beliefs.

One of these participants, currently enrolled DSW student said,

Like we were talking about arranged marriage and it was funny because you know there was these three or four girls in the class who were going on and on and on about women’s oppression. And I was trying to explain that how can you tell someone they’re being oppressed if they’re not feeling oppressed because even though I was raised here I would consent to an arranged marriage...it went over everybody’s head.

The other participant, a social work graduate and current practicing professional shared,

So I remember it was interesting because it was probably one of the first times they [Jewish students] also met somebody who was Muslim, and in that discourse so to bring that experience in was eye opening for them ... There was, I mean, this was before 9/11 so there definitely even before more just um, myths about who Muslims were and what that was about, so helping to dispel that and having to bring that information.

One participant, age 36, talked about how a supervisor was not knowledgeable about South Asian identity. Therefore she did not know where this student situated herself among other communities of color. This led the supervisor to formulate her own racial assumptions about the student and incorporate the student into this framework.

I don't know whether she thought maybe being Indian or South Asian that I would sort of connect with her, so I'd have to keep coming out about being someone who is very supportive of, that I would have to challenge her racism, there was a way that I felt like she thought I was going to collude with the comments she was making like, that being an Indian woman, or a South Asian woman I was going to align with her White identity and really join her in saying things that were stereotypical [about African Americans].

One participant, age 76, who attended an MSW program over 40 years ago, experienced intolerance by a member of her school faculty for her decision to wear traditional Indian clothing to her field placement.

One of the faculty from my school suggested that I wear Western clothes since I was a student age 28, I said look I'm not wedded to my dress, you know I'm wearing this, but if you can identify that this interferes with my relationship to the clients, you know to adolescents then I would be most willing to. So they compromised. I think they really wanted me to be open in dialogue. And I said well if my supervisor could pinpoint in my recordings that this was an area that was causing some resistance I would have no problem. It was the faculty from my school, that made that suggestion.

This same participant, along with another participant in her 30's, experienced a lack of acknowledgement by field supervisors and faculty regarding participants' discomfort with certain social work practices, such as using confrontation with clients, or addressing and interacting with faculty and supervisors less formally.

I think they reacted to me not calling them by their first names, I was used to calling them Mr. Mrs., or Dr., and I didn't mind them calling me by my first name, so I think they were a little puzzled that I was formal. And I said, well it doesn't come easy to me to just call you by your first name, but that eased off. There's very much an expectation that you relate to professors in a certain way as peers, and it's not like even though I was U.S. raised there are certain things that

you know? Certain cultural messages I'm learning that we all have, and one of them for me is teachers as people that you deeply deeply respect and that you have a power relationship with. Right? They're sort of authority and stuff like that. And I think I've really struggled with that especially when I've come up against racism from teachers because it's really this weird thing, where a part of me feels like I need to be respectful, like these are my elders, their my teachers...not always knowing how much I can talk to them, like how openly I can talk to them because I don't see teachers as peers ...I think that some of that is cultural.

Two participants, age 31 and 42, who each attended two different social work programs explained that they struggled in a supervising or advising relationship and felt that this was directly related to their being South Asian American. As each participant spoke about their experience they portrayed that the racial component of their interactions was subtle and not overt. The 31 year-old participant explained that she eventually needed another faculty member to serve as a mediator between her advisor and her.

In terms of advising otherwise, I had a weird relationship with other advisor... everything had to fit into this little outlined pattern of what she thought every graduate student should be, and I didn't. So I could tell that it really disturbed her, at a very deep level, so we always seemed to have a conflict you know?

The 42 year-old participant observed that her supervisor got along better with the other intern with whom she worked because she was White. She also recalled that she had to work extra hard on assignments to satisfy her supervisor.

With the supervisor um, yeah it was interesting...I was placed with another student at the time who was a White woman and um, definitely their relationship was developing much more socially, and even afterwards. Um, I never kinda felt that with her. She had a lot of issues with my writing...I remember she had particular issues with it, and felt like I didn't care or wasn't. I remember feeling like, I'm working hard, but apparently what I'm offering you is not what you want, so I'm going to make it what you want I've been turning other things in and getting A's and no one has been giving me the feedback, so I'll get it to what you need it to be, but I remember she was definitely feeling like I wasn't up to par with what she had wanted or expected and they definitely took off into another social relationship so just feeling a little bit of that.

### *Invisibility*

The experience of invisibility implies that the South Asian American ethnic group was not acknowledged within a participant's graduate experience. It was found that the experience of invisibility was often closely tied or simultaneously experienced with ethnic isolation.

Participants experienced invisibility in several different ways. All 9 participants experienced a paucity of academic material related to the South Asian American population in the school or program's curriculum. All 9 participants revealed that they had not encountered any reading assignments or teaching material that specifically focused on South Asian Americans in the field of social work. This created a challenge for some participants who had wanted to do social work research on South Asian Americans.

Five participants spoke about experiencing invisibility in the classroom during racial and ethnic dialogues. Three participants said that when race and ethnicity was talked about in the classroom the main focus was on White and African American populations, and more recently, on Latino and Native American groups. Five out of 9 participants shared that unless they brought South Asian Americans into the discourse in their social work program, the South Asian American population went unmentioned even in classes that specifically focused on diversity. This creates a lone voice phenomenon, resulting in South Asian American social work students feeling as though their experience is not of value. Many participants felt as though South Asians have not been a part of the dominant racial and ethnic discourse in their social work program, South Asians are a minority group that is ignored, that the South Asian perspective and

experience inside the classroom becomes token or does not count, and that they are lumped together with other minority groups to make up “students of color”. This has led to feelings of frustration and anger among several participants.

### *Invisibility in the Program and Curriculum*

One participant perceived faculty members as being hesitant to suggest she take part in the school’s international social work opportunities for fear that she would think they were making the suggestion based on her looking foreign. She observed that the faculty was much more invested in recruiting White students to go overseas. She expressed that she felt as though there was an assumption being made that because she already had international social work experience prior to entering her DSW program that she would know how to pursue such opportunities without academic support. This participant spoke to feeling that her ethnic difference was purposefully overlooked by faculty in such a way to make her feel unacknowledged and invisible. She described this experience as “the elephant in the room”.

Other participants talked about the paucity of peer-reviewed literature and academic material that was available on South Asian Americans and how this created educational conflicts for them.

There’s a paucity of research available even when I was looking to do my own um, thesis and things like that...academically I didn’t come across any material or things, and I did want to do that as a research base but I wasn’t able to have a solid foundation to be able to pursue that.

Two participants shared that the only time South Asians were mentioned in teaching material is when they brought in their own case material or when they pursued peer-reviewed literature on their own.

I would say that from what I remember, like when you said academics, I was going to say that no I can't remember. I mean clearly I would bring myself into my papers... my second year I worked all year with a South Asian women, so I would write about her, so I would grapple with my South Asian identity in that sense because I was working with that case material...

Another participant shared that she found a textbook used in her program to teach about diversity and ethnic groups was full of stereotypes, she called it "training in stereotypes." One participant, age 36, recalled that in her DSW program there were some readings by South Asian authors, however the content was outside the field of social work.

Three participants mentioned that the reaction to events of 9-11 was the only context in which South Asian content was brought into the classroom. These participants noted that this topic provided the only means of beginning a dialogue on South Asians. Participants feel like the topic of 9-11 should, but often times has not, opened the door for discussion about racial discrimination and marginalization of South Asian Americans.

There was a reading about post 9-11 hate crimes against South Asians, but that is the only time I think I've seen a South Asian face in social work curriculum at all. I wanted them to have the same dialogue, not the slavery part of it certainly, but stereotyping, the ways in which South Asians might be marginalized, might be stereotyped, might not be included, especially after 9-11, of course that was after I graduated, but it's continuing. That of course has brought in a whole other dimension of prejudice.

### *Invisibility in the Classroom*

One participant who is currently enrolled in a DSW program stated,

I don't think we've made it into the dominant discourse of the field and people are so clueless...I don't think people understand anything specifically about South Asian experience, or maybe even where South Asian is.

One participant, in her 60's, stated,

I remember at the time thinking, so where are the South Asians? It was very African American, White, and Hispanic; Asians were barely mentioned as a minority, or as a diversity population that could actually suffer from discrimination, that could have feelings about not being part of the majority culture. So, absolutely, I remember being, we had to go to a group conference, and I remember thinking the same thing, wait there's me, okay? I don't fall into any of those categories, but that doesn't mean that we don't exist as a diversity population.

A currently enrolled DSW participant, age 31, shared that she felt as though a White professor in one of her classes was very receptive to the ideas of students who looked like the professor but felt as though this professor treated her differently and that her ideas were more easily dismissed or not perceived as a meaningful contribution to the classroom discussion.

It was very clear in class discussion that she responded differently to us than to, like the ones that were you could say who reminded her of herself at that age. You know? Like the pretty little White girls who were married, with little tiny kids... that was just consistent throughout the entire semester and the other South Asian student, you know it seemed like when we said anything it was just not perceived. So that did feel like a bit of a slight.

Another participant, age 36, shared that she felt like her school made a clear distinction between White students and students of color, therefore leaving her without a comfortable space to function as a South Asian woman on campus and in the classroom.

I was looking forward to having this like real conversation about the challenges that as a South Asian woman I experienced versus an African American, or a Puerto Rican, you know this sort of range of experiences. Because in my regular classroom, which would be like twenty White students and then three students of color, I felt like because there were three students of color you had this like, monolithic, you have to stick together, and you couldn't among the twenty people who are looking at you when you speak, I didn't, we didn't I felt like there was an unconscious pressure to have a unified front. You know what I'm saying? You didn't really challenge each other, you couldn't get into like differences. I talked about being South Asian, but it wasn't the same.

A currently enrolled MSW student shared that his program is structured in such a way that it mainly caters to privileged, more often White students, rather than to students of color.

Participants also talked about being the lone voice to bring up South Asian Americans during racial and ethnic dialogues,

You were one of the lone voices speaking because at the time again a lot of things centered around Black and White issues, so bringing that there was another experience here that again, which has largely been a part of the Asian experience of being invisible or being ignored or not counting has been something that was something that I felt I needed to bring up and bring into the discourse.

When I brought it up it was ‘Yes, of course, thank you for bringing that up.’ But then it really didn’t go anywhere. It was a bit infuriating.

The male participant shared that he felt conflicted about bringing himself into racial discourse, given his position as the only South Asian American in the classroom. “It feels really strange ...like it almost makes it comical and irrelevant.”

### *Invisibility in the Field*

One participant shared that she attended her MSW program in NYC during 9-11 and her internship did not acknowledge or stop to process how this may impact her.

There was a lot of the staff meetings, and the focus was on the ‘family dysfunction’ [agency dysfunction] there wasn’t much room and space to attend to how I was feeling about things. It would have been a surprise to bring up...they were so wrapped up in recriminations and anger, and it’s hard to describe but it was a very angry place, but as I said September 11<sup>th</sup>, and the fact that they were expected to be at work September 12<sup>th</sup>, they were pretty angry. But that’s the kind of backdrop against which I was working, so they didn’t have time for little old me.

### *Piecing Together Support*

Seven out of 9 participants spoke about piecing together a support system that involved one or more faculty members, people off campus in their local communities,



advisers, mentors, agency staff, as well as other students during their social work graduate experience. These participants utilized these supports both socially and academically. Six out of 9 participants found faculty, supervisors, mentors, and students of color to be of particular support during their social work educational experience. Two out of 9 participants recalled a White professor being particularly supportive of their MSW and DSW experience.

### *Faculty*

A participant, age 36, who currently attends a DSW program explained that her interest in working with and research South Asian American communities has created challenges to finding the appropriate academic support in her program.

I feel like it's kind of been that I've had to piece together advisor and faculty support much more so than other students. Just because I'm doing work that's in my community, I think if I were like doing work that was not South Asian specific it would be easier in some ways to find strong advising.

Four participants, ranging in age from 36-50, talked about the support they received from Asian professors at their schools. One out of four of these participants found support in a South Asian professor who taught in a different department.

There was one faculty member who was Indian and he was really supportive actually, we talked a lot about organizing trips to India, and after I left he actually started doing that. Taking kids to India and looking, and taking them out in the field, providing opportunities that way. I felt, he and I spoke and he was very supportive of me being there, and that made all the difference too.

There was a South Asian woman who was hired, but she was a lot older, so I looked to her as an auntie or something, so I would talk with her and connect with her, but I never had her for class.

She became my advisor just because of other reasons. She was Asian, so she brought a lot of sensitivity, in terms of ethnic, racial diversity issues, she made it a point to include that in her presentations... we talked about how to cope through fear, and you know being brown in an angry city [post 9-11], that kind of thing.

There was very real anger towards anyone who was brown. So I processed that with her, but not anybody else.

Another participant, age 42, shared that she received support from a White professor as well as an African American professor.

There was a wonderful professor who is a White woman, and another African American professor who kind of took me under their wing especially with the ethnographic study and helped me explore and find other ways to look for that. Actually even the dean of social work at the time, an African American male, just went out of his way to make sure to say hi and how's it going and stuff like that. And later he came on the board of a South Asian organization when we started because he knew that I was, that that was something that was important to me and he remembered me as a social work student.

### *Students*

While many students experienced challenges with feeling connected to student groups on campus, as found above, other participants indicated that student groups as well as off campus South Asian communities were a source of support.

Three female participants ranging in age from 36-50, who had attended three different social work programs, spoke about gaining the support a South Asian community on or off campus. Two of these participants talked about feeling socially supported by South Asian communities off campus. One of the three participants talked about gaining social support from an on campus Asian student group, and felt that South Asian students being well represented at her school. This student also was an active participant of her school's diversity program and found a sense of community through this experience.

One participant spoke specifically about having a tight knit group of friends who were also students of color.

My second year I had two of my friends, an African American women, who we ended up living together for my first year in Atlanta, and we were like tight, she was one year ahead of me. And then there was a first year student who is a Korean American women so I had my crew.

### *Field*

Two participants, ages 36 and 63, talked about receiving support from social work professionals of color at their field placement.

My second placement was at a multicultural center and I had a wonderful Iranian woman who was my supervisor, and that was just fabulous.

There was a South Asian woman who, actually worked at Multicultural services, so she became a really good friend... and the other thing is at the counseling center my second year all the interns would get a mentor ...so I got this woman, she wasn't the director, but she was in a pretty high level administrative position, so I would go to lunch with her and we would connect, she was an African American woman, so I felt like comfortable with her, I felt an affinity toward her, so it helped me feel supported.

### *Comfort with Cultural Diversity*

Four out of 9 participants, ranging in age from 35-63, found it to be a positive experience to work with a diverse client population or to work at an agency that was trained in cultural diversity. Three out of the 4 participants felt that their ethnicity was an advantage in working with a diverse group of clients.

Four participants, ranging in age from 31 to 50, who attended four different schools, used phrases that classified the school program or members of the student body as having some type of competence in diversity. These phrases included, "international focus", "very good diversity program", "progressive", and "White conscious".

My second placement was at a multicultural center...they of course, were set up to deal with diverse populations, so it was a very comfortable setting. At the multicultural center, I think they really tried to match me with Asians so I had Cambodian, Laotian, Pakistani, and Indian clients, I think they wanted to do that because they felt that we'd work better together, and I think that there was some truth to that.

I think it was an advantage in the place that I worked because most student that went there were students of color and I think they identified me as a student of color and it made it easier for me to work with them, so you know whether or not, so the practical thing is that it does make it easier because they open up more, you know.

It was such a powerful experience to have a South Asian woman, because she was literally like, I think she was a grad student so we were kind of the same age, and we were simultaneously having the same experience, the challenges she talked about with family, and you know trying to create her own identity, she was like dating someone who wasn't South Asian. So it was really interesting to have that experience...

One of my placements was specifically with refugees and people seeking political asylum and in that practicum it was actually pretty awesome, because I felt like a lot of people understood where, a lot of my clients actually totally understood where I was from, and none of them where from South Asia but they were not from the U.S. And I actually think that them understanding that I was from an immigrant community was an asset or a positive in terms of my connection with those clients, and I think added to the trust and rapport that we had, especially because it was a pretty White agency even though they worked specifically with refugee and asylum seekers... I think they [clients] were also happy to have a Brown face that looked a little more like them.

It is clear that participants took comfort in being surrounded by professionals who were familiar with and competent in diversity training in the field, as well as by clients who were from a diverse set of cultural backgrounds.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to learn whether there are any common challenges faced by South Asian American social work students in relation to campus community life, academics and advising, as well as their experiences in field.

It was found that South Asian American social work students do encounter similar challenges within their social work programs in relation to their campus community life, academics and advising, as well as their experiences in the field. In a qualitative analysis of the data from semi-structured interviews five major themes emerged: Challenges with Connection, Ethnic Isolation, Invisibility, Piecing Together Support, and Comfort with Cultural Diversity.

The themes of Piecing Together Support and Comfort with Cultural Diversity were unique in that they did not illustrate challenges experienced by South Asian American social work graduate students. These themes illustrated the trend for participants to use the support of many mentors to supplement their social work experience, and to report their work with a diverse client population or their work at an agency that was trained in cultural diversity as a positive experience. These findings also demonstrated the importance of maintaining ethnic diversity within the student body, faculty, and field of social work programs; as such diversity is given a positive association by South Asian American students.

The remaining three themes illustrate distinct challenges that participants experienced in their social work programs; however, it was found that participants' experience often incorporated more than one theme. For example, the theme of Challenges with Connection overlapped with Ethnic Isolation, and Ethnic Isolation with Invisibility.

Overall the combined experience of ethnic isolation and invisibility shaped the experience of the South Asian American social work graduate student.

#### *Reinforcing the Model Minority Myth*

This study's findings support those of previous studies indicating an underrepresentation of Asian American themes in the existing literature (Suyemoto et al., 2009) as attributed to the model minority myth. It was found in this study that South Asian Americans are underrepresented in the social work literature as well as in classroom discussion about race and ethnicity. In fact, in the experience of all study participants, literature on South Asian Americans and racial dialogue that included South Asian Americans was virtually non-existent. Additionally, the model minority myth does not take into account the diverse experiences within the Asian American population, or the social, emotional, and psychological challenges that Asian Americans face (Suyemoto et al., 2009). Several participants felt that there was no space provided for them to speak about their own unique experience with race and oppression as a South Asian American within classroom dialogues or in extra curricular groups, or if they did speak to their experience, that it was not fully acknowledged by faculty and other students. Some participants noted that their social work program chose to examine race and ethnicity by making a clear cut divide between White students and students of color. In the experience

of these participants, this approach discounted the unique experience of different ethnic groups, as well as the individual experience of each student.

The lack of literature and dialogue about South Asian Americans in the field of social work creates an identical cyclical process of invisibility as that observed in previous study of Asian American undergraduates (Suyemoto et al., 2009). Lack of peer-reviewed literature and classroom dialogue about South Asian American social work graduates perpetuates the model minority myth that they do not experience challenges in higher education. Therefore, the unique challenges of the South Asian American social work graduate student are not explored, and these students remain invisible.

*The Unique South Asian American Social Work Educational Experience*

This study's findings indicate that the South Asian American student group does indeed experience their own unique and complex set of challenges. Consistent with Suyemoto et al.'s (2009) study on Asian American college students, participants in this study also experienced challenges with connecting to other students and with isolation.

Similar to the Asian American college students in Suyemoto et al.'s (2009) study, the South Asian American graduate student participants in this study consistently expressed that faculty lacked sensitivity to the South Asian American experience and cultural values – a feeling most clearly demonstrated in the quotes used to illustrate the theme of Ethnic Isolation. Participants encountered various forms of racism such as exoticism and stereotyping, as well as a lack of knowledge or intolerance for certain aspects of South Asian culture by faculty, supervisors, and other students.

Suyemoto et al.'s (2009) study found that Asian American college students expressed the need for Asian American staff and staff with a greater understanding of their experience. These students also cited the importance of having Asian American faculty and Asian American studies courses. In this study a similar theme emerged: Piecing Together Support. Many participants reported that they received social and professional support from faculty, advisers, informal mentors, and supervisors of color, and at times such individuals were specifically South Asian. Having the support of South Asian mentors was particularly important when participants sought to discuss certain aspects of their own identity, racial aspects of social work practice with clients, and when they wanted to research a South Asian population. After the completion of their MSW programs, two participants who received such mentorship went on to teach courses on diversity that incorporated the South Asian population into the teaching material. For these participants, it is possible that the presence of faculty of color, and specifically South Asian faculty, provided a less isolating, richer, and more supportive educational experience, fostering participants' capacity to provide a similar experience for others.

The findings of this study are congruent with those discussed in Ngo's 2006 study of South Asian American students (Ngo, 2006). Ngo concluded that many South Asian American students' educational experience requires the ability to balance pressures from parents, school, and friends. Many participants in this study similarly encountered challenges related to connecting with family, extra curricular groups, and other students. Based on participant report of their experience, South Asian families may not fully understand the work involved with a degree in social work or its purpose and South



Asian American social work graduate students may experience ridicule of their chosen profession by non-social work South Asian peers.

In contrast with Suyemoto et al.'s (2009) findings that Asian American college students had difficulty making friends and felt that their student body was racially segregated, this study's participants reported that they successfully made friends with White students and other students of color. Participants frequently reported that their social work educational experience as a whole, including their experience with racism in the program and in the field, was more closely aligned with the experience of other American students of color than with the South Asian international student experience.

Unlike the Asian American college students in Suyemoto et al.'s (2009) study, the South Asian American social work graduate students in this study did not report feelings of racial segregation. Instead, they reported that they were the only South Asian American student in their class, that there were two or three other South Asian American students in their class, or that they were one of a small group of Asian students in their class. Participants also reported being concerned about their experience as a minority in a homogenous environment, not having a South Asian community on or off campus, and being perceived as different because of their socioeconomic status or ethnicity. The South Asian American social work graduate student participants in this study experienced extreme ethnic isolation in their social work programs, fueling the challenges they experienced connecting to other students, and promoting a feeling of invisibility.

In a recent study of cross-cultural supervision, Duan and Roehlke (2001) found that both supervisors and supervisees who provided or received supervision from an individual of another race generally felt satisfied with their supervisory experience.

Similarly, the findings of the present study underline the importance of supervisors' demonstrated interest in their supervisee's cultural background. Duan and Roehlke (2001) cite cross-cultural supervision as a relatively new phenomenon and note that more research is needed in this area.

Longres and Seltzer (1994) observed that the relationships between majority faculty and South Asian Americans, as minority students, may be mutually rewarding, but tension and strain may not be unusual. This study yielded similar findings. While some participants experienced little or no challenges with their supervisors, other participants reported lack of knowledge about South Asian Americans and South Asian culture as underlying supervisors' or faculty members' stereotypic comments about South Asian culture, or other racial groups. Such lack of knowledge was also felt to have led supervisors and/or faculty members to exoticize or even be dismissive of participants. Those participants who did experience one or more negative interactions with a supervisor or faculty member voiced that they were unsure how to approach the topic with them. Some participants were conflicted about whether to confront a supervisor or faculty member because they were uncomfortable confronting an authority figure whom they were supposed to respect. These participants cited differences in cultural values as an obstacle for them in these instances. Still other participants found themselves in a position where they felt as though they must educate supervisors, faculty, and students about certain aspects of their culture.

The experience of discrimination and sense of alienation, characterizing the educational experience of South Asian American students, has been widely noted in the extant literature (Suyemoto et al., 2009). This study's findings similarly point to the

experience of isolation, invisibility, intolerance, and division from their peers, faculty, and supervisors -- both on campus and in the field -- among South Asian American social work graduate students.

### *Social Construction Theory*

According to Berger and Luckmann, the most important experiences for human beings take place in the context of face-to-face interactions with others. It is during such interactions that we begin to understand others' subjectively experienced realities and vice versa. The process of becoming an adult takes place in interrelationship with an environment. Developing humans connect to particular natural environments with a specific cultural and social order (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Each participant in this study entered their social work program from a unique natural environment, having experienced unique interactions with family members, friends, and communities. Arguably, these environments surrounded the participants with South Asian people, community, and cultural experiences.

Upon entering their social work programs each participant entered a new environment with a different group of individuals and a different social order. Given that the numbers of South Asian Americans in social work are few, the dissonance between their own natural environment and their new school environment may have created experiences of isolation. The lack of interaction with other South Asian Americans paired with lack of exposure to South Asian culture may have led participants to gravitate toward other students and faculty of color for support, as surrounding themselves with diversity may be the closest replication of their natural environments of origin. These students may have felt more comfortable aligning themselves with other students of color

because they also perceive themselves to be students of color. However, choosing to align with other student groups of color places all ethnic groups at greater risk for invisibility. This type of social alliance to others must originate from a deeper societal notion that people of color will stick together in instances when faced with racism and be supportive of one another. However, in forming such alliances many participants articulated that their individual experience with ethnicity was often overshadowed.

Society creates a polarizing experience of racial identity even for non-Whites and non-African Americans. If we subtract these two dominant racial elements, what does it mean to identify as South Asian or as being part of any other ethnic group?

The social construction of South Asian American social work graduate students as a target population can be largely attributed to the model minority myth. Being the object of “model” stereotypes and exoticism creates a confusing experience for South Asian Americans. Society paints a picture of acceptance of South Asian people and culture, but when we examine it more closely we find that this acceptance is contingent upon adherence to the model stereotype and Western values. The model minority myth may be perceived by White Americans as a means to align South Asians and other Asian groups with White Americans. However, there is a tension and anger felt by South Asian Americans as they continue to experience ethnic isolation, invisibility, and racism.

It should be noted that some participants stated that they felt as though it was an advantage to be one of the only South Asian American students in their class or internship because they perceived faculty members to take an added interest in them, or they felt they could form better rapport with clients of color at their internships. This is an example of cognitively coping with an uncomfortable social environment.

### *Strengths and Limitation of the Study*

It was hypothesized that South Asian American social work students may share common educational challenges in their social work school experience in relation to their campus community life, academics and advising, as well as their experiences in field. The finding of five major common themes of Challenge with Connection, Ethnic Isolation, Invisibility, Piecing Together Support, and Comfort with Cultural Diversity lends support to this hypothesis.

The researcher utilized a semi-structured open-ended interview to collect the data in the hope that participants would give richer and more specific responses than if the data was collected using a quantitative method. This methodology proved to be effective as data from the interviews yielded strong themes and detailed examples of each theme.

This study also had limitations. The researcher relied primarily on a snowball recruitment method, which may have resulted in sampling bias. With a sample size of nine participants this study is not considered a representative sample of South Asian American graduate social work students. This study included many South Asian American social work professionals who are not currently enrolled in an MSW or DSW program and have graduated from their respective programs. Therefore, unlike that of participants who were currently unrolled in graduate programs, their discussion of their graduate school experience necessarily incorporated a reflective component based on the experience of intervening years. The researcher would have liked to improve the diversity of the sample, as all the participants were of Indian origin. If the study were to be replicated the researcher suggests the use of a range of recruitment methods to obtain a

more diverse sample, as well as clarity regarding the research question in terms of a focus on currently enrolled students versus graduates.

### *Reliability & Validity*

The researcher conducted eight out of nine interviews via Skype and one interview face to face. Given that 8 participants were in their home environments for the interview and one participant was in a public library, the setting of the interview may affect reliability of the data. In addition, no two interviews were exactly identical as the researcher used different probes with different participants to get them to elaborate or clarify their answers to the open ended questions. Given time constraints imposed by the thesis completion process, the researcher also did not pilot the data collection instrument prior to its use with study participants.

Because the researcher heavily relied on a snowball sampling method for recruitment the data may have been different if the researcher had not been as familiar with the sample being interviewed, or if the researcher was not also South Asian American. This could have led to potential biases in the interviewing process and in the analysis of the data. Because the data was analyzed by the researcher, and no one else, it is arguable whether a different researcher would have arrived at a similar analysis, understanding, and thematic organization of the data.

### *Implications of the Study*

This study provides the field of social work with a ground-breaking look at the educational experience of South Asian American students in higher education. The findings suggest that South Asian American students do combat multiple forms of racism and marginalization in their educational experience, both on campus and in the field.

The researcher found the experience of challenges with connection, ethnic isolation, and invisibility to be closely related as many participants encountered more than one of these challenges simultaneously. The themes of piecing together support and comfort with cultural diversity can be seen as coping mechanisms for such challenges. This has many implications for the area of social work education.

Study findings imply that maintaining the diversity of the student body as well as the faculty in social work programs is crucial. There is a need for social work programs to more diligently recruit South Asian American social work students, and faculty members. Without this diversity South Asian American students are at higher risk for experiencing isolation, difficulty with making friends, feeling as though they don't belong within their student body, and feeling discomfort due to being the only or one of the few South Asian American students in their social work program.

There is a need to reexamine our racial awareness of other cultures within the realm of social work education. Social work institutions and social work agencies must carry out this reexamination of racial awareness. It is crucial for social work programs to examine how to best address race and ethnicity within the curriculum as well as classroom dialogues. Professors who teach diversity and multicultural courses in the field of social work should be trained to address how the diversity, or lack thereof, in the classroom will impact White and non-White students, as well as how course content and its delivery may affect student participant in classroom discussion. It is the responsibility of all social work faculty and field supervisors to participate in training specifically for cross-cultural supervision and advising to lower the risk of stereotyping, exoticism, and other subtle forms of racism. Social work educators and professionals must be aware that

the experience of institutional and individual racism is different and unique for each ethnic group and for each individual. It is also important that they strive to achieve an awareness of cultural differences that may take place in advisory relationships with students of various ethnic backgrounds. This must be done in a thoughtful way as to not further stereotypes of certain student groups.

There is also a need to bring South Asian Americans into social work peer reviewed literature, social work texts on practice and diversity, as well as into racial dialogues within the classroom. Once a space is provided for this group in the field of social work feelings of invisibility will decrease and South Asian American social work students will not have to be the lone voice in their experience.

### *Conclusion*

Learning about the unique South Asian American graduate social work student experience has provided us with the opportunity to tease out and name important racial challenges that exist within higher-level education. Achieving greater clarity about some of the existing educational challenges that deal with race supports further exploration of the topic of ethnic isolation and invisibility as it pertains to other student groups of color.

This study has opened the doors for further research to be done on the experience of students of color at all levels of education, as this experience is unique. There is a need to further our understanding of the connections between the challenges minorities face in academia and their experience of race and racism. This is new research territory that needs to be examined not only by the field of social work, but also by the field of education.



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## APPENDIX A

### Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Sumi Holman. I am a graduate student currently attending Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts. I am carrying out a research study on the challenges faced by South Asian American social work graduate students within the campus community, in the classroom, and in the field. The research I am doing will be used for my MSW thesis. The findings of the thesis will be disseminated publicly to the Smith community and may be used in published materials.

Taking part in this study means that you will be asked to do one of the following; meet with me for an individual interview at a designated time and location, meet me online for a scheduled webcam interview, or receive a call from me in order to conduct an interview by phone. During this interview I will ask you some demographic questions as well as open-ended questions about challenges you have experienced, as a South Asian American, during your graduate program experience. The interview will take approximately forty-five minutes to an hour. Each participant will be interviewed one time. While I am listening to your responses I will also be recording what you are saying with a tape recorder, or a recording device on my lap top computer.

As with many studies, there are some risks associated with your involvement in this research. There is a chance that your reflection on the questions I ask may cause you to feel emotional discomfort. In the event that the interview causes you discomfort or stress, a list of referral resources for counseling options will be provided to you and are attached to this form.

By participating in this study you will be provided an opportunity to share, in a confidential space, your experiences and the challenges you may face in your educational experience as a South Asian American social work graduate student. Your participation will also contribute to research, the findings of which may open doors for further research on the South Asian American graduate student experience in the realm of higher education. Study findings could also help raise important questions about how South Asian American graduate students can be better served educationally. Finally, your participation will contribute to study findings that may enhance clinical and institutional awareness about the graduate experience through the eyes of South Asian American students and social work professionals.

The data collected for this research will be confidential. Names will not be used for data collection or analysis. Names and other identifying information will be stored separately from the data; each participant's interview, as well as information about the social work program you attend will be assigned a number code and during transcription all identifying information will be removed. In addition to me, my thesis advisor will have access to this data. However, my thesis advisor will not see the data until all

identifying information has been removed. Should you withdraw from the study, all materials relating to you will be immediately destroyed.

At the conclusion of the research I will be sharing my findings with other members of the Smith College faculty and other Smith graduate students. It is possible that in the results and discussion section of my thesis, as well as during my presentation I may use brief narratives or quotes that you have said, but they will be disguised carefully. Again, no identifiable information will be used. All electronically recorded data will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years as required by Federal guidelines. At three years time, this data will be destroyed.

The participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time before, during, or after the interview, or you may refuse to answer a specific question. To withdraw from this study you may inform me in writing by April 1, 2010. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your responses will be immediately discarded. After April 1, 2010 your input will be a permanent part of this study. If you have any additional questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to contact me at [sholman@smith.edu](mailto:sholman@smith.edu). If you should have any questions or concerns about your rights or about any aspects of the study, please contact me, or the Chair of the Smith College for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Thank you for your time and for taking interest in my study!

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Participant Signature:

Date:

Researcher Signature:

Date:

Please keep a copy of this form for your own records! Thank you for your participation!

APPENDIX B

Demographic Sheet

**Participant Code Number:**

**Gender:** (Please Circle One)

Male            Female            Transgender            Other

**Age:**

**Ethnicity:** (Please Circle One)

Indian-American            Pakistani-American            Bangladeshi-American

Sri Lankan American            Nepali-American            Other:

**Name of Social Work School:**

**Please Indicate if you are currently:** (Please Circle One)

Full Time Student    or    Part Time Student

## APPENDIX C

### Research Interview Instrument

The interview will be read and structured by the researcher as follows:

*I will begin by asking you about challenges you may have faced in terms of campus community life as a South Asian American social work graduate student.*

*Have you encountered any challenges with...*

#### **1. Interpersonal relationships with students and/or faculty, or extra-curricular involvement?**

*If yes, can you expand on that? OR Tell me a little bit more about that?*

*Have you encountered any challenges with...*

#### **2. Feelings of belonging or not belonging on campus as a member of the student body?**

*If yes, can you expand on that? OR Tell me a little bit more about that?*

*Thank you for sharing these challenges that you've experienced with me.*

*Next, I will ask you to speak to challenges you may have encountered as a South Asian American social work graduate student on the topic of academics and academic advising.*

*Have you encountered any...*

#### **3. Reading assignments, teaching material, or class discussions, that mentions South Asian Americans in your academic setting?**

*If yes, can you expand on that? OR Tell me a little more about that?*

#### **4. How have you felt being a part of these racial or ethnic dialogues in the classroom as a South Asian American social work graduate student?**

*Have you encountered any challenges with...*

**5. Your relationship with your academic advisor?**

*If yes, can you expand on that? OR Tell me a little more about that?*

*Thank you for sharing these challenges that you've experienced with me.*

*Finally, I will be asking you about challenges you have come across in your field experience as a South Asian American social work graduate student.*

*Have you encountered any challenges with...*

**6. Interactions with past or current supervisors in the field?**

*If yes, can you expand on that? OR Tell me a little more about that?*

*Have you encountered any challenges with...*

**7. Clients at your agency?**

*If yes, can you expand on that? OR Tell me a little more about that?*

*Thank you for sharing these challenges that you've experienced with me.*

*This concludes the interview. Thank you very much for your participation in this study.*

*\*In the event that a participant does not understand a question, needs further clarification on how to answer a question, or gives no answer...*

*I will use the following prompt:*

*Do you feel that [subject of question] has been overtly or covertly influenced by your ethnicity?*

*\*Throughout the interview I will use principles of interviewing such as reflecting and empathizing, while being mindful not to bias the participant's responses*

## APPENDIX D

### Participant Resources Sheet

#### **CHAI- Counselors Helping (South Asians)/Indians**

Razia Kosi

Executive Director of CHAI

(443) 615-1355

- CHAI is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide outreach, referral and educational services to the South Asian community on issues related to mental health and wellness in the Baltimore / Washington metropolitan area

[www.chaicounselors.org](http://www.chaicounselors.org)

<http://www.chaicounselors.org/resources/directory>

#### **South Asian Wellness Clinic at Johns Hopkins**

4940 Eastern Ave

Baltimore, MD 21224

Scheduling Appointments: Bea Robbins (410) 550-0019

- The South Asian Wellness Clinic is a specialty clinic run out of the community psychiatry clinic at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center. The clinic addresses the language and cultural needs of a South Asian client. The clinic can provide psychiatric, psychotherapy and substance abuse services. The clinic is open from 8am to 10am during the first and third Friday of every month by appointment only



\*Encourage Participants to seek their on Campus Counseling Services:

**Catholic University of America (National Catholic School of Social Service)**

**Counseling Center**

127 O'Boyle Hall

Monday-Thursday (9 a.m.-6:30 p.m.)

Friday (9 a.m.- 5:00 p.m.)

- **No fee** for up to **45 sessions** of counseling, psychotherapy, or psychiatric consultations for full-time students
- Part-time students are not eligible for individual counseling services, but may receive a one-time consultation to facilitate the referral process to an outside provider
- Part-time students are also eligible to participate in group therapy

<http://counseling.cua.edu/>

**University of Maryland (School of Social Work)**

**Office of Student Affairs**

Location: Louis L. Kaplan Hall - Room 2W14

Telephone: (410) 706-5100

- The Office of Student Affairs' (OSA) primary goal is to provide proactive services and counseling for students to ensure a smooth transition into the academic rigors of graduate study. Services include academic and personal counseling to students seeking guidance, referral to appropriate supportive offices as the need arises

<http://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/>

**Howard University (The University Counseling Service)**

**(202) 806-6870**

- The University Counseling Service provides a comprehensive range of mental health services to all students. These services range from screening to crisis intervention, psychological and psychiatric services

<http://www.howard.edu/schoolsocialwork/>

<https://www.howard.edu/StudentHealth/MentalHealth.htm>



## *Looking for South Asian American Social Work Student Participants!!!*

**Thesis Research Study:** “What are the challenges faced by South Asian American Students in Graduate Social Work Programs in the United States?”

**The Researcher:** The study is being conducted by a graduate social work student

**What:** Come participate in an open-ended interview and talk about the unique challenges you have faced as a South Asian American in Social Work School

### **Who Can Participate?**

- South Asian American Social Work Graduate Students
- Must identify as South-Asian American
- Must Be currently enrolled in a social work graduate program full-time or part-time
- Must Be an American Citizen
- Must Be over 18 years of age

### **Why Participate?**

- You will be provided with the unique opportunity to talk about challenges you have experienced while in social work school
- There is almost no existing literature about the South Asian American higher educational experience!!
- You can contribute and help expand the literature and research in the South Asian American academic community
- All interviews will be confidential!!!

### **Interested???**

**Contact: Sumi Holman, BA, MSW Candidate**

[sumishootingstar@gmail.com](mailto:sumishootingstar@gmail.com)

## APPENDIX F

### Electronic Plea Recruitment

Dear (Mental Health Professional) or (Acquaintance), \* Will add in name of recipient

I am currently in my second year at Smith College School for Social Work and conducting a study for my MSW Thesis. My research question is “What are the challenges faced by South Asian American Students in Graduate Social Work Programs in the United States?”

I am seeking participants who are willing to give an hour of their time in order to respond to a face-to-face open-ended interview concerning the above research question. Participants must meet the following criteria in order to take part in the study:

1. Identify as South Asian American
2. Currently enrolled in a post-bachelors social work program either full time or part time
3. MUST be an American citizen
4. MUST be over age 18

Please forward this electronic plea to any mental health professionals, social work graduate students, or personal contacts who may be interested in participating in this study or who may know someone who would be interested in participating in this study. I would be happy to answer any questions that potential participants may have about the nature of the study. To participate in the study or to ask questions about the nature of the study, please contact [sumishootingstar@gmail.com](mailto:sumishootingstar@gmail.com).

It should be noted that all participants in this study will be granted full confidentiality; therefore their names and identifying data will not appear in the thesis or be used in the dissemination process.

Thank you for your time, I am most grateful to you for aiding in my recruitment process.

Warmly,  
Sumi Holman, BA, MSW Candidate

## APPENDIX G

### Human Subjects Review Approval Letter

December 15, 2009

Sumati Holman

Dear Sumi,

Your amended materials have been reviewed and you have done a fine job. All is now in order and we are happy to give final approval to your study. I was interested to see that you decided not to include a demographic question about how long they or their families have been in the US. I would think it might be a very interesting piece of information. They could even be second or third generation. Wouldn't that make a big difference in their construction of reality? Most research does indicate that the length of time in the US makes a big difference. Of course, it is entirely up to you. It's a research issue, not a HSR issue.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your very interesting and useful project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Beth Lewis, Research Advisor