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The Lived Experiences of South Asian Same-Sex Attracted Women Residing in the United States

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Walden University

College of Counselor Education & Supervision

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Surinder Bal

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

The Lived Experiences of South Asian Same-Sex Attracted Women Residing in
the United States

by

Surinder Bal

MS, Walden University, 2011

BS, London University, 1980

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

November 2016

Abstract

South Asian same-sex attracted women in the United States experience discrimination and marginalization that puts them at an increased risk for mental health issues. Research shows their rates of counseling and psychotherapy use are low due to perceptions of stigma, lack of knowledge, and concerns about culturally insensitive treatment plans. Mental health providers lack the literature needed to inform culturally sensitive treatment plans to address these concerning gaps in services, and an extensive literature review found no studies on the lived experiences of this population. Guided by feminist theory, this research study examined how discrimination, oppression, and marginalization mold women's lived experiences; this knowledge aims to serve as a means to advocate for social and political change for this population. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of this population. An emergent hand coding analysis, using experiential anecdotes, of data collected from interviews of 10 participants generated 10 major themes and 25 subthemes of experiences. Themes included importance of cultural values; familial relationships; marital life plan; intersectionality; and discrimination from gender disparity, patriarchal hierarchy, and sexual modesty. The study contributes to social change initiatives by providing culturally and contextually practical information to mental health professionals, counselor educators, and educational institutions that provide services to this population.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the 10 women who so generously and courageously volunteered to contribute to the study. It truly has been a pleasure getting to know each one of you, and I sincerely feel privileged to have heard your stories. I am in admiration for each one of you -- your talents, your resilience, your passions, and your continuing ability to be empathic in the face of the challenges you have encountered. You all took a chance with me in the hope of making a difference for all the South Asian queer women who come after you. I hope I have managed to do some justice to your trust in me. You have already created positive social change for me. I believe our partnership in this endeavor will continue to create greater positive social change for other South Asian queer women. Thank you for your passion and dedication to creating positive social change for your fellow women.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Mental health providers increasingly view multiculturalism as essential to the delivery of effective and ethical mental health services (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; American Psychological Association [APA], 2010; Hays, 2008; Remley & Herlihy, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2008). There is a consensus that an individual's cultural beliefs and values play a prominent role in how an individual experiences, interprets, and expresses her or his world (ACA, 2014; APA, 2010; Brown, 2009; Hays, 2008; Jordon, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2008). Consequently, the mental health professions strongly recommend that care providers use approaches and treatment plans that reflect and integrate individuals' multiple cultural identities (ACA, 2014; APA, 2010).

As a part of this shift towards a multicultural treatment approach, the mental health profession has arrived at an understanding of how injustice, oppression, and discrimination impacts an individual's sense of wellbeing and responses to life challenges (ACA, 2014; Association for Multicultural & Counseling Development [AMCD], 2015; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009; Remley & Herlihy, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2008). This understanding has resulted in a growing body of literature on mental health issues among minority populations (AMCD, 2015). The goal of researchers is to promote multicultural competence among mental health care professionals so that they can work effectively and

ethically with these populations (ACA, 2014; AMCD, 2015; Remley & Herlihy, 2010). The AMCD (2015) describes multicultural competence for counselors as the skills and knowledge needed to understand counselor worldview, client worldview, and the impact of the intersection of these worldviews on the counseling relationship. Therefore, literature supporting different populations is critical for developing multicultural competence.

Despite the extensive body of literature on multicultural competence and minority populations (AMCD, 2015), many sexual minority populations remain relatively under researched [(ACA, 2015; Alimahomed, 2010; Choudhury et al., 2009; Inman, Devdas, Spektor, & Pendse, 2014), which may potentially compromise their level of care (ACA, 2014; AMCD, 2015; Hays, 2008; Remley & Herlihy, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2008). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals of South Asian descent constitute a relatively small but rapidly growing population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The U.S. Census Bureau projects the Asian population to double to 8% of the total population by 2050 and South Asians comprise a third of this population. South Asian same-sex attracted women in the United States face marginalization because of their sexual orientation and gender and so tend to be even less visible (Alimahomed, 2010). South Asian same-sex attracted women are at an increased risk for mental illness, according to Alimahomed, 2010; Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil, Robinson, Brewster, Wong, & Geiger, 2014).

There is a general lack of awareness on the part of mental health professionals of these women's cultural identity and experiences (Alimahomed, 2010; Choudhury et al., 2009; Ineichen, 2010). As Choudhury et al. (2009) and Ineichen (2010) noted it is imperative that mental health providers gain knowledge to inform effective and ethical practice when working with this highly vulnerable and underrepresented population. In this study, I sought to provide greater understanding of the lived experiences of South Asian same-sex attracted women and their unique therapeutic needs. I also wanted to identify more specific research questions for use in future studies on this population.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the rationale for the research, the research problem, the research design, and finally the steps taken to support research trustworthiness. Going forward, I will replace the terms *same-sex attracted* and *lesbian* with the term *queer* in an attempt to be inclusive of all women who are same-sex attracted, even if they do not identify themselves as lesbian. The rationale for this shift was supported by Better's (2014) qualitative study of 39 interviews with women aged 20-62. Better (2014) found that sexuality was fluid and flexible for these women and that they were using a new language to discuss and define their sexual experiences. The women described their sexualities along a broad spectrum; leading them to either create their own unique identity label or to adopt the more inclusive general term of queer as a more appropriate way to include their diverse identities.

Background

South Asians are widely considered a *model minority*, that as immigrants they have attained relatively high socioeconomic status while experiencing few adjustment or psychosocial difficulties (Gupta, Szymanski, & Leong, 2011)). As a result, until recently, they have been largely outside of the mainstream concerns of the mental health profession (Choudhury et al., 2009; Ineichen, 2010; Soorkia, Snelgar, & Swami, 2011). However, as South Asians have become more established in the United States, multiple generational immigration statuses, and their growing population has provided more collective communities, (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim, Ohmshi, & Sandhu, 1997), they have been more willing and able to publically explore mental health issues (Inman et al., 2014; Kumar & Nevid, 2010; Loya, Reddy, & Hinshaw, 2010; Masood, Okazaki, & Takeuchi, 2009). Furthermore, researchers are also increasingly studying mental health issues and concerns faced by South Asians (see Inman et al., 2014; South Asian Psychological Networking Association [SAPNA], 2015). Researchers have found a higher prevalence of mental health issues than was generally believed to exist (Inman et al., 2014; SAPNA, 2015).

Research also indicates a reluctance on the part of South Asians to seek mental health services even when they have access to them (Choudhury et al., 2009; Chu, Hsieh, & Tokars, 2011; Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sanghera, 2004; Gupta, Szymanski, & Leong, 2011; Kim & Omizo, 2010). This reluctance was attributed to a lack of understanding of mental

illness, stigma, and fears about the emotional and social repercussions of possible breaches in confidentiality (Choudhury et al., 2009; Chu et al., 2011; Gilbert et al., 2004; Loya et al., 2010; Kim & Omizo, 2010; Sandil et al., 2014). Choudhury et al. (2009) also attributed the lower rates of mental health treatment to a perceived lack of cultural competence among mental health providers.

South Asian LGBT individuals, especially South Asian queer women, are at increased risk for mental illness due to stigma and discrimination associated with their sexual orientation (Choudhury et al., 2009; Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Sinani, & Walters, 2011; Narui, 2011; Rusi, 2014; Sandil et al., 2014). Researchers have found that South Asian queer women are even more reluctant to seek help than heterosexual South Asians (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014). South Asian sexual minorities experience multiple levels of discrimination and marginalization from the general population, the mainstream LGBT community, and from within the South Asian community (Alimahomed, 2010; Choudhury et al., 2009; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown, Nelson, Anderson, Low, & Elford, 2010; Rusi, 20014; Sandil et al., 2014). As South Asians , they negotiate the challenges of acculturation and enculturation, racial and gender discrimination, and the pressures of conflicting cultural expectations (Clark, 2005; Inman, 2006; Iwamoto, Negi, Partiali, & Creswell, 2013; Kaduvettoor-Davidson & Inman, 2012; Kim & Omizo, 2010; Kumar & Nevid, 2010; Liang, Nathwani, Ahmad & Prince, 2010). The additive effects of multiple layers of discrimination and the reluctance

to seek help together contributed to South Asian sexual minorities' increased risk for mental illness (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014).

Culture influences how South Asian queer women are discriminated and marginalized. Within the South Asian community, queer women face discrimination based on their gender and sexual orientation (Clark, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gopinath, 2005; Inman, 2006; Liang et al., 2012; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). Within White lesbian organizations, South Asian queer women often find themselves on the periphery (Alimahomed, 2010). According to Alimahomed (2010), the unique issues of South Asian queer women were irrelevant to the White-centric goals of these organizations, and the authenticity of their South Asian queer identity challenged because for some South Asian queer women their sexual identity was not always their most important identity.

South Asian queer women experience further marginalization within the South Asian LGBT community. This is due in part to their relative small representation compared to South Asian gay men and due to patriarchy (Alimahomed, 2010). My personal observations in a large South Asian LGBT organization support these gender ratio disparities and a number of women expressed patriarchy was also a problem for them. According to researchers (Clark, 2005; Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Inman, 2006), South Asian women's gender and sexual orientation are tightly intertwined with their societal and familial roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers. Deeply ingrained values and beliefs of morality based on respect, honor, and shame work to perpetuate

heteronormative cultural norms through patriarchal power differentials (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gupta, Johnstone, & Gleeson, 2007; Inman, 2006; Ludhra & Jones 2009; Raval, 2009; Takhar, 2006). In familial contexts, South Asian women, who live with men, often adopt passive roles; South Asian men typically hold greater power as heads of their families (Deepak, 2005).

Challenging heteronormativity can be very difficult and risky for South Asian queer women, requiring a high level of agency and self-efficacy (Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gupta et al., 2007; Husaini, Waheed, & Husain, 2006). Gilbert et al. (2004) noted that the collectivist framework further exacerbates these systemic forms of oppression because individuation and self-efficacy are not valued or intentionally nurtured. Ultimately, South Asian queer women must manage their sexual identity in ways that may be different from the more open and assertive lifestyles of some of their White lesbian counterparts (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Griffin, 2011; Khan, 2011).

South Asian queer women describe adopting a dynamic approach to managing their multiple identities (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005). Based on context, situation, and the relative importance of these identities, some are more prominent while others are latent during different life stages (Clark, 2005; Durham, 2004; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Inman, 2006; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Narvaez, Meyer, Kertzner, Ouellette, & Gordon, 2009). South Asian queer women manage the intersection of these identities to build

agency, maintain valuable relationships within their various communities, and carve out relatively safe spaces within which to live their queer identities (Clark, 2005; Durham, 2004; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Inman, 2006; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Narvaez et al., 2009). Within this framework, South Asian queer women focus on identifying innate strengths that allow them to embrace their multiple identities (Clark, 2005; Durham, 2004; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Inman, 2006; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Narvaez et al., 2009). South Asian queer women's expression of her sexual identity is, therefore, a reflection of her unique cultural experiences.

In the absence of literature specifically supporting South Asian queer women, mental health providers working with these women must obtain cultural knowledge through indirect means, such as through the extrapolation and interpretation of existing literature on South Asians and South Asian gay men (Choudhury et al., 2009). Based on my review of the literature, adequate knowledge of the unique needs of South Asian queer women is lacking. With this study, I attempted to help fill this gap in the literature by providing a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of South Asian women. Descriptions and interpretations of South Asian queer women's experiences may result in greater multicultural competence of mental health care providers while providing a voice to this silenced minority. While the term *silenced minority* may be considered value laden and unwelcome in regard to the scientific rigor of a study, it, and similar terms, have been used in this report with respect to the feminist research goals underpinning this study

which stress the importance of highlighting injustices and oppression (Brisolara, Seigart, & SenGupta, 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009).

Problem

Mental health providers are increasingly aware of a gap in knowledge and expertise required to meet the mental health care needs of South Asians living in the United States. South Asians, and researchers who study this population, now recognize there is a higher prevalence of mental health issues than previously thought (Choudhury et al., 2009; Inman et al., 2014; Liang et al., 2010; Kumar & Nevid, 2010; Sandil et al., 2014). Studies indicate that South Asians significantly underuse mental health services, citing stigma and lack of knowledge about mental illness, among other reasons (Choudhury et al., 2009; Chu et al., 2011; Gilbert et al., 2004; Loya et al., 2010; Randhawa & Stein, 2007; Soorkia et. al., 2011; Time to Change and ReThink, 2010)). This suggests that mental health practitioners are currently underserving the mental health care needs of South Asians living in the United States.

This disconnect between service provision, service needs, and service access poses even greater repercussions for South Asian LGBT individuals living in the United States because of their higher risk for mental illness (Alimahomed, 2010; Choudhury et al., 2009; Rusi, 2014; Sandil et al., 2014). Issues of safety and inclusivity often deter these individuals from accessing appropriate mental health care services (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014). South Asian LGBT individuals are also concerned about

mental health providers' ability to provide culturally appropriate services (Choudhury et al., 2009; Gilbert et al., 2004; Kim & Omizo, 2010; Pilkington, Msetfi, & Watson, 2010). Fears about confidentiality and the far-reaching repercussions of possibly being outed within their familial and community networks are also concerns (Choudhury et al., 2009; Gilbert et al., 2004; Pilkington et al., 2010; Sandil et al., 2014).

South Asian queer women experience further layers of discrimination and marginalization due to their sexual orientation and gender (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Inman, 2006; Thaker, 2006). As a diasporic ethnic minority composed of multiple generational statuses, they face a wide range of challenges and have deep and pervasive experiences of discrimination and oppression (Clark, 2005; Inman, 2006; Inman, Howard, & Beaumont, 2007; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gopinath, 2005; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). They experienced gendered discrimination from within both their majority and ethnic cultures, conflicting messages about gender and sexual identities between these two cultures, and marginalization within organizations that serve sexual minorities (Alimahomed, 2010; Beharry & Crozier, 2008; Clark, 2005; Gopinath, 2005; Narui, 2011).

While the organizations serving sexual minorities inherently aim to provide affirming spaces, this has not been the experience for South Asian queer women (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005). Firstly, South Asian women do not see their unique issues represented in any of these organizations' agendas, and secondly they do not

experience an inclusive space that acknowledges their more complex sexual identity, which does not neatly fit Western-centric constructs (Alimahomed, 2010; Badruddoja, 2006; Clark, 2005). South Asian women are socialized to be highly relational and interdependent (Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004). However, stigma attached to same-sex sexuality, patriarchal power structures, and the pervasive use of shame, respect, and honor to regulate behavior undermine these women's agency to find an accepting space to be themselves within South Asian communities (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Khan, 2011; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Gopinath, 2005).

The responsibility placed on South Asian women for the continuation and perpetuation of traditional cultural values, through their gendered and heteronormative roles as wives and mothers, further weaken the self-efficacy and agency required to authenticate their queer identity (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). South Asian queer women, therefore, manage their sexuality and lived experiences through selectively promoting or suppressing individual identities in response to their different sociopolitical influences (Clark, 2005; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narvaez et al., 2009).

As the mental health profession addresses the disconnect between service provision, service needs, and service access for South Asians, it must be inclusive of the highly marginalized and silenced minorities within this population. This will require a better understanding of how South Asian queer women negotiate their multiple identities

and the meaning of their lived experiences (ACA, 2014; Brown, 2009; Enns, 2004; Jordon, 2009). While there is a dearth of literature to support the South Asian LGBT population, there is an absence of literature supporting South Asian queer women, as evidenced by my literature review, which failed to find any studies on the lived experiences of South Asian queer women. This gap in the literature poses a problem for counselor educators because without this information they are ill prepared as educators to train counselors to meet the needs of South Asian queer women.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of South Asian queer women and the meaning these experiences held for them. The study achieved this through a hermeneutic phenomenological methodological approach to inquiry.

Research Questions

I posed one primary question and five subquestions. My primary question was, What are the lived experiences of same-sex attracted South Asian women residing in the United States? My five subquestions were the following:

RQ1 How do South Asian queer women define their sexual identity?

RQ2 What do South Asian queer women believe to be their most significant challenges?

RQ3 What strengths do South Asian queer women most value in themselves in their lived experiences?

RQ4 How have their familial relationships influenced their sexual identity development?

RQ5 What support networks do South Asian queer women use or value most in their identity development and lived experience?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework determined the lens through which the study explored and answered the research question (Creswell, 2013). It defined what data to collect and how to collect, analyze, and report it (Brisolara et al., 2014; Creswell, 2013). A feminist theoretical framework guided this inquiry; using a constructivist approach to understanding how sociopolitical influences mold the lives of South Asian queer women (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). Specifically, feminist principles attend to the impact of power differentials, discrimination, stereotype roles, oppression, marginalization, and personal relationships on gender in the lived experience (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). Feminist theory proposes a multicultural approach to examining how these sociopolitical influences shape women's multiple identities including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation religion, age, disability, and education (Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009).

The aim of feminist theory is to highlight injustice and oppression and to advocate for social and political change at all levels to benefit women and other

oppressed persons (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). A review of the literature suggested South Asian queer women experienced many, if not all, of these sociopolitical influences and injustices. Feminist theory was, therefore, an appropriate lens through which to direct this inquiry. The feminist lens emphasizes the importance of understanding truth from the worldview of the participant (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). It advocates an ethical approach to research: respect for the integrity of the participant, safeguarding the safety of the participant, and minimizing harm by reducing power differentials between researcher and participant (Brisolara, et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009).

Nature of the Study

The study was founded on a constructionist approach to understanding knowledge and truth, recognizing that there are multiple ways of knowing and that truth and knowledge are social constructs (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009; van Manen, 2014). Feminist theory endorses an inductive approach to inquiry, using a qualitative research design (Brisolara, et al., 2014). The core principles of feminist theory are: a) goals that are moral, ethical, and action orientated, b) an intentional attitude to identify, and call for action to address, discrimination and oppression due to gender, sexual orientation, and race, and c) address power differentials that perpetuate injustice (Brisolara, et al., 2014;

Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). Feminist theory argues for these principles to permeate throughout the research design, and to inform the research goals. It also requires the researcher to use reflexivity to address researcher biases, to meet feminist research standards, especially towards minimizing power differentials in the researcher/participant relationship (Brisolara, et al., 2014).

Phenomenological methodology is an aim to understand the lived experience as experienced in the moment, while hermeneutic phenomenology aims to understand lived experience through the interpretation of descriptive texts of lived experiences (van Manen, 2014). The credibility of research is a measure of rigor incorporated in the research design; qualitative studies are evaluated on the fidelity and trustworthiness of the data and study outcomes (Creswell, 2013). Descriptive data by its very nature can be subjective and this can seriously compromise the integrity of the study (Brisolara, et al., 2014; Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2014). I incorporated a number of actions into the research methodology to address these concerns, to raise the trustworthiness of the study.

I, the researcher, acted as the instrument for collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data for reporting. Researcher subjectivity, in the form of values, beliefs, and biases, is a serious threat to data fidelity and the trustworthiness of study outcomes. It also creates a barrier to recognizing power differentials in the inquiry process (Brisolara, et al., 2014; van Manen, 2014). I reflected on my values, beliefs, and experiences to understand and disclose the potential impact I

may have on the research inquiry (van Manen, 2014). During the research, I maintained a journal to understand any *countertransference* that may arise during the collection and analysis of data. I took the insights gained from these reflections and acted to minimize their impact on the study.

Van Manen (2014) referred to this reflectivity as the phenomenological epoche; the barriers that prevent the participant's authentic truth from being "seen" by the researcher (p48). As the researcher puts aside her or his biases, the researcher is more "open" to seeing the participant's truth and knowledge as it is "lived through" (van Manen, 2014, p224). Therefore, central to phenomenological methodology is the *attitude* of the researcher for which an open and attentive attunement is essential to minimizing researcher bias. Van Manen also refers to the phenomenological process of reduction, which includes barriers that prevent the participant's truth from *showing* or disclosing. This involves the researcher taking steps to create an environment in which participants disclose freely and where a concentrated, rich, and accurate source of data capturing the participant's truth may be collected. Both epoche and reduction enhance the fidelity and trustworthiness of the study; I took steps to weave these requirements into all stages of the research design. Ethical practice, the ethical treatment of participants, has a direct impact on the integrity of the study.

Feminist theory and the ethical guidelines of the ACA (2014) and the (APA) (2010) endorse a beneficence and non-maleficence approach to protecting participant

rights and well-being. Participants should benefit through their participation in the study and experiencing no harm. Additional protection is required for highly vulnerable and marginalized populations, such as South Asian queer women. I integrated these considerations throughout the research design (Brisolara et al., 2014; van Manen, 2014).

Prior to formally recruiting each participant, I explained informed consent and asked them to assess their emotional readiness to participate in the study (ACA, 2014). I repeated these two procedures at each new point of contact with the participants (ACA, 2014; Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study, at any stage of the inquiry, and of their right to take their interview transcriptions with them (ACA, 2014; Creswell, 2013). As an additional safeguard, I informally assessed participants independently to ascertain their emotional fitness for continued participation to avoid harm to vulnerable participants (ACA, 2014; Creswell, 2013). To mediate for potential harm, such as trauma through recollecting painful experiences, I made available to all participants access to appropriate free or nominal-fee counseling services (ACA, 2014). I took care to safeguarding participant safety and confidentiality at all stages of the research.

I used purposive sampling to recruit participants who were a rich source of sufficient and quality data to answer the research question (van Manen, 2014).

Participants were women aged 18 years or older of South Asian descent who self-identified as same-sex attracted. I recruited participants through South Asian LGBT

organization listservs until the point of data saturation, when there were no new experiences (van Manen, 2014). Similar studies suggested this to be approximately 8-10 participants (van Manen, 2014). I collected data through semistructured face-to-face or video conferenced interviews that lasted 1-2.5 hours. I used open-ended questions to collect data that was inductive but concentrated and rich (van Manen, 2014).

I followed recommendations for phenomenological reduction to enhance data quality: built rapport and trust with participants, kept participants focused on experiential details, and avoided immediate interpretations while collecting data (van Manen, 2014). I was prepared to provide support and de-escalation to participants during the interviews if needed and to refer counseling services from an outside source if appropriate. I audiotaped and videotaped the interviews, and I transcribed the recordings in accordance with procedures outlined by Creswell (2013). I protected participant confidentiality with the use of pseudonyms from the start of data collection and the keys to these aliases was stored securely in a separate location (Creswell, 2013). I analyzed the transcripts to identify unique experiences that reflected a broad description of participants' lived experiences (van Manen, 2014). I then coded these experiences into themes to facilitate the interpretation process. I offered the opportunity to participants to review the analysis to authenticate these experiences (van Manen, 2014). I continued to use self-reflection through journaling to minimize my subjective biases and create distancing during data analysis and interpretation.

The task of interpretation and writing are an integrated endeavor in phenomenological methodology, as the purpose of both is to *allow* the truth or genuine meaning of the lived experience to *show* itself to the reader (van Manen, 2014). Language is very important in the interpretation process, as hermeneutic phenomenology involves the use of evocative language and anecdotes to create insight into the true meaning of the experience (van Manen, 2014). I organized the writing along themes, incorporating elements of injustice and power differentials due to gender and sexual orientation (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). The aim of the writing was to describe the lived experiences and identify, whilst promoting actions to address, forms of discrimination and oppression (Brisolara et al., 2014; van Manen, 2014). In an effort to authenticate my findings, I disclosed significant themes from my reflexive journaling so that the reader can interpret the research outcomes in the context of my lingering researcher subjectivity (van Manen, 2014).

Definitions

Acculturation: Acculturation begins when an individual encounters a new culture (Kumar & Nevid, 2010). It is the process of learning and adopting values, beliefs, and behaviors of a different culture. Cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors previously learned and adopted through enculturation are changed (Kumar & Nevid, 2010). A person may fall anywhere along a continuum of acculturation levels, ranging from total enculturation to assimilation (Kumar & Nevid, 2010).

Aunties: The South Asian culture values relational and hierarchical respect (Deepak, 2005). Older and more senior persons are addressed in a relational context; rather than by name, even if they are not related. Even strangers are addressed or referred to as sister, brother, aunt, uncle, and so forth. For non-related persons, one compares the person to oneself in age or seniority and then the appropriate title is used. As a generic group, middle-aged and older married women are called *aunties*. This generic use of the term can have an endearing connotation of wisdom, respect, admiration, and of someone who is indulgently caring and maternal, or it can have a negative connotation of someone who is matriarchal, interfering, judgmental, and a general community busy body.

Countertransference: Countertransference refers to a “therapists’ reactions to clients that are based on therapists’ unresolved conflicts” (Gelso & Hayes, as cited in Hayes, Nelson, & Fauth, 2015, p127). Awareness of countertransference can be useful, used constructively to understand the dynamics in the therapeutic relationship. However, if it remains subconscious then it can have a hidden destructive influence by distorting the nature of the therapeutic relationship (Hayes et al., 2015).

Desi: Desi is a cultural term used by Indians and Pakistanis; it refers to something, or someone, who is indigenous or local. Socially it refers to someone, or something, that is pure, genuine, or authentic. In terms of culture, it usually refers to individuals who reflect strong cultural values and beliefs, or those who have come

recently from India or Pakistan. The term is used either as an expression of pride and respect, or used derogatively as a form of insult, depending on the context.

Enculturation: The process of learning and adopting values, beliefs, and behaviors of the culture one grows up in, so that one is able to function in that culture (Kumar & Nevid, 2010). A person is considered more strongly enculturated if that person is more closely aligned to the culture of their family of origin (Kumar & Nevid, 2010)

Essence: The essence of a phenomenon describes the structures of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). These structures simultaneously describe what makes the phenomenon unique and what is essential for the phenomenon to be itself (van Manen, 1990). The essence, therefore, allows one to understand the phenomenon in a way not known before, it describes the very nature, the core, of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990).

Model Minority: The model minority label first came into use in the 1960s in the United States following publications highlighting the educational and economic success of Chinese and Japanese migrants (Gupta et al., 2011). These publications suggested this success was due to cultural values of hard work and family connectivity, and that these could overcome racial adversity (Gupta et al., 2011). The continuing success of the wider Asian population, along with few visible social problems, have reinforced these perceptions and so Asians have become stereotyped as a model minority for other minority populations. Because the label has positive connotations, there is an assumption

that it is a welcomed and an embraced stereotype; however, there is more awareness of its detrimental implications.. The label masks unrecognized underlying discrimination, loss of self-esteem for those not reflecting the stereotype, and challenges for those who have not enjoyed this overall educational and economic successes (Gupta et al., 2011).

Multicultural Competence: Cultural competence is the level of knowledge and skills required to work effectively with a person from a particular ethnicity or race (AMCD, 2015). The AMCD multicultural competency standards examine cultural competence from four constructs: counselor self-awareness, client worldview, counseling relationship, and counseling and advocacy interventions. In each construct, the competencies require an awareness of attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and actions with regard to working with culturally diverse person. Multicultural competence is the ability to effectively manage the intersection of these four constructs uniquely for each person of a given ethnicity or race. Multicultural competence is a skill developed over time working with a diverse population. .

Phenomenological Attitude: Van Manen (2014) describes this as a cognitive and emotional openness to seeing the phenomenon without the biases and interpretations of one's prior knowledge and values. This open and transparent attitude is like a blank white sheet waiting to be drawn (van Manen, 2014). The same picture drawn on paper with prior muted shades of grey may be similar but it will not be as pure, or clear, as it will be on the plain white sheet. This open and unfiltered approach, or attitude, to seeing the

phenomenon comes through the bracketing, or suspending of one's presuppositions (van Manen, 2014).

The "Lived-through" Experience: The lived-through describes the experience as it was experienced by the individual without being reflected on, without the individual observing himself or herself experiencing it (van Manen, 2014). The description describes the *in the moment* experience of the phenomenon through the subjective lens of the individual rather than an objective reflection of an experience in the past (van Manen, 2014).

Third Gender: South Asia has a long history of recognizing and embracing third gender; it is even acknowledged in the historical Kama Sutra texts. Historically, the third gender category included a diverse range of individuals: anyone who did not define their gender in the binary categories of male or female or their sexuality as heterosexual, and persons who did not procreate (Gay & Lesbian Vaishnava Association, 2015). For Example: third gender included gay men, lesbian women, eunuchs, intersexed persons, individuals who were sterile and unable to procreate, and even celibate persons (Gay & Lesbian Vaishnava Association, 2015). In recent history, however, third gender persons experience stigma and marginalization in these communities. With the influence of Western ideals of gender and sexual orientation categories, the popular, and sometimes legal, definitions of third gender have also become less inclusive and more fragmented. For Example: Third gender is more often now used to refer to transgender populations

only, excluding gay and lesbian sexualities (Gay & Lesbian Vaishnava Association, 2015).

Assumptions

I made a number of assumptions in the design of this study. While this population is difficult to access, I assumed that I could recruit sufficient participants for a trustworthy study because I had contacts for entry access and only a small sample size was required. I assumed that by building rapport and trust with the participants, they would be willing, and able, to share their experiences fully; that the experiences would not be superficial or a selective narrow range of experiential data. I made the assumption on the premise that participants will be sufficiently fluent in English. I assumed that immigrant status or age would not influence lived experience, and if it did, then it would only enrich the quality of data.

Scope and Delimitations

Data was collected till the point of saturation but this did not guarantee that all relevant lived experiences had been recorded because firstly the sample was not representative of the diversity of the population and secondly, there was no way to confirm participants had shared openly and fully. The sample was restricted to adults because as a vulnerable population, minors are at greater risk for harm and more difficult to access. The limitation to fluent English speakers may have influenced sample demographics and the nature of the lived experiences recorded. This limitation may have

excluded the more marginalized of this population whose experiences and agency to respond to their life events may be different.

Significance

The study represented an attempt to add to the limited body of literature for the South Asian population. Specifically, it attempted to make an important contribution towards filling the gap in South Asian LGBT research, which at the time of this study was relatively limited in of itself and primarily focused on South Asian gay men. Additionally, the study added to the growing body of LGBT literature focusing on multicultural knowledge and competence in LGBT issues and identity development.

The results of the study can be useful to all health care professionals serving the South Asian LGBT population and to health care professionals specializing in services to the wider LGBT community. Secondary schools and tertiary educational institutions can find the study useful for supporting their South Asian LGBT students, especially as they work with demographics of an age at which sexual identity develops. The study provided evidence-based knowledge to help South Asian queer women include their unique voices in the advocacy efforts of support organizations working within their various communities. Lastly, the study generated future research questions to promote new research in this field, thereby continuing to address this gap in the literature.

Summary

Chapter 1 included an overview of the study's literature review and the research design. A review of the literature showed that South Asians underused mental health services due to cultural barriers. It showed that there was a significant gap in the literature to inform the provision of culturally appropriate mental health care to South Asian queer women, a marginalized and vulnerable population. The purpose of this study was to provide an insight into the lived experiences of South Asian queer women and to contribute to the current literature to support multicultural development for mental health care providers working with this population. A qualitative research design, informed by a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology and underpinned by a feminist theoretical framework, guided the inquiry.

The research design incorporated the feminist research goals: highlight injustice, oppression, and power differentials due to gender and sexual orientation for political advocacy to support marginalized populations. These goals were included in the research questions and integrated into the research design. The research design included actions to avoid the perpetuation of these injustices, especially due to power differentials, in the researcher/participant relationship. The research design incorporated researcher reflexivity in response to feminist goals, greater awareness of the researcher's potential to perpetuate these discriminations. Researcher reflexivity was also an essential element of hermeneutic phenomenology, the suspension of researcher presuppositions in order to

capture the authentic experience and create insight into the genuine meaning of the experience. The research design addressed ethical issues, the protection of participant rights and safety, especially relating to confidentiality and psychological well-being.

The research design addressed issues of study trustworthiness. Data authenticated through recording and transcribing interviews, transparency of methodology, disclosure of researcher reflexivity, and disclosure of the limitations and scope of the research. In Chapter 2, I provide detailed discussions of the literature review supporting the research question and the rationale for the feminist theoretical framework. .

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

There is a gap in the mental health care services provided to, used, and needed by the South Asian population, especially the South Asian LGBT population. A small proportion of South Asians access mental health services, researchers have found (Choudhury et al., 2009; Loya et al., 2010; Soorkia et al., 2011; Randhawa & Stein, 2007). South Asians have received little attention from the U.S. mental health care profession (Choudhury et al., 2009), and many mental health providers lack familiarity with South Asian cultures and mental health issues (Choudhury et al., 2009; Pilkington, Msetfi, & Watson, 2010; Randhawa & Stein, 2007). Additionally, there is a corresponding lack of research on the mental health needs of South Asians. An analysis of psychological research in the United States focusing on South Asians conducted by Inman et al. (2014) generated only 133 articles published between the years 1980-2012. Inman et al. (2014) found that while the body of literature remained limited, there had been an increase in the number of publications over this time. There were five articles published in the 1980s, 23 in the 1990s, and 105 during 2000-2012 (Inman et al., 2014). However, Inman et al. (2014) pointed out this increase in the number of studies was not commensurate with the growth in population of South Asians in the United States.

Inman et al.'s (2014) analysis showed that only 1% of journals studied the LGBT population. Furthermore, my literature review identified that these small number of

LGBT-focused studies primarily focused on South Asian gay men. I did not find any literature concerning the lived experiences of South Asian same-sex attracted women. These findings illustrate the extent to which South Asian queer women have been invisible to, and inadvertently marginalized by, mental health care professionals. This is a serious concern because the extensive body of literature on ethnic minorities and LGBT populations suggests ethnic sexual minorities experience multiple layers of marginalization (Choudhury et al., Balsam et al., 2011; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narui, 2011; 2009; Sandil et al., 2014). This marginalization puts them at an especially high risk for mental health problems (Choudhury et al., 2009; Balsam et al., 2011; Sandil et al., 2014). The lack of research reflects a perception on the part of mental health practitioners and researchers that South Asian LGBT individuals do not have mental health care needs (Inman et al., 2014).

The ethical codes governing professional practice of ACA (2014) and APA (2010) reflect the widespread importance now placed on the provision of culturally appropriate mental health care services (Remley & Herlihy, 2010). I believe there is a serious risk of unethical professional practice when working with South Asian queer women, due to a lack of cultural competence among mental health professionals (Choudhury et al., 2009; Kaduvttoor-Davidson & Inman, 2012; Remley & Herlihy, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2008; Takhar, 2006) and a dearth in related research (Inman et al., 2014). A fuller understanding of South Asian LGBT identity development and mental health needs

is essential if the mental health profession are to serve this highly marginalized and vulnerable population. An inquiry into the lived experiences of South Asian queer women residing in the United States may generate much needed useful information to help fill this critical gap.

Chapter 2 includes a review of the current literature to provide a better understanding of the sociopolitical influences defining the lived experiences of South Asian queer women. From a review of the literature, I identify a gap in the research to inform the research question. I also provide an explanation of the feminist theoretical framework that guides the inquiry.

Literature Search Strategy

My literature review for this study was extensive, from multiple sources. I used the following databases and search engines: PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Academic Search Complete, LGBT Life with Full Text, Dissertations and Theses via ProQuest, Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, and SAGE full text collection. I accessed all of these databases through the Walden University Library resources. Key search terms used: *South Asian, South Asian gay, South Asian LGBT, South Asian lesbian, South Asian queer, Indian third gender, Asian LGBT, South Asian women, South Asian marriage, South Asian mental health, and South Asian acculturation*. I supplemented these searches with books about South Asian LGBT issues written by South Asian authors and I watched Indian films produced by South Asian artists addressing South Asian queer

women's issues. Lastly, I searched websites in India providing historical accounts of same-sex sexuality in the Indian culture.

The focus of the search was to collect research from the last 5 years but because the body of literature on the South Asian population is small, I went back further to adequately support this inquiry. Literature related to South Asian queer women was limited, so my search and use of literature to support the inquiry included literature for South Asian gay men, South Asians, and Asians.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for a study is the lens through which the research question is investigated, it determines what the inquiry explores and how (Brisolara et al., 2014; Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2014). Feminist theory predominantly attends to women's issues, using a multicultural approach to examining individuals' problems and mental health needs (Brisolara et al., 2014; Enns, 2004). The theory examines the impact of sociological influences and multiple identities in the lives of women due to their gender (Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). It recognizes that the impact of gender is different for men and women and this in turn determines their lived experiences over a broad range of issues, which includes health, power and self-efficacy, safety, identity, and life cycle development (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009).

Feminist theory uses a constructivist approach to understanding the individual; an individual creates knowledge and reality through her or his personal experiences

(Brisolara et al., 2014). In order to understand how the individual creates reality and knowledge, feminist theory examines the sociological influences and the multiple cultures that inform the individuals' experiences and body of knowledge (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). Sociological influences include, but are not limited to, political and legal policies, societal hierarchies, educational institutions, and socioeconomic statuses. Cultural factors include, but are not limited to, gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, and education.

Feminist research goals focus on women's experiences of discrimination, oppression, marginalization, loss of power, and limitations due to role stereotyping due to their gender (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). Consequently, the purpose of feminist theory is to value and advocate for social and political change to benefit women at the individual and macro level (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). Feminism recognizes the important role human relationships play in women's identity development. Feminist theory is concerned with how sociological and multicultural events are influencing women; enhance or diminish their capacity to develop these relationships. (Brisolara et al., 2014; Jordon, 2009).

A review of the literature to support this inquiry revealed that South Asian queer women experienced many, if not all, of the issues examined by feminist theory; therefore, feminist theory was a suitable theoretical orientation to guide this inquiry. Furthermore, Enns (2004) argued that since the 1960s, Asian American women already had a history of

using feminist theory as a relevant way to both express their identity and address experienced injustices. The theoretical framework of a study informs the process of how and what data is collected, how data is analyzed, and how the results of the study are reported (Brisolara et al., 2014; Creswell, 2013). The constructivist approach to understanding knowledge requires that the data collected reflects the unique experiences of the participants and that it is represented through the words of the individual (Brisolara et al., 2014). In order to understand how gender and sexual orientation intersected South Asian queer women's lived experiences, data collected for this study included an exploration of all their multiple identities, how these identities were negotiated, and the impact of power, discrimination, oppression, and stereotyped gendered roles in their lived experiences (Brisolara et al., 2014). Data analysis and reporting of results were orientated to identifying and communicating these social and political injustices, whilst taking care not to perpetuate them further in the process (Brisolara et al., 2014). As the researcher, I used reflexivity to identify and minimize power differentials and bias in the inquiry process (Brisolara et al., 2014).

Intersection of Identities

An individual has multiple identities; the lived experience is a reflection of how these multiple identities intersect in response to, and as a way to determine, the lived experience (Brown, 2009; Hays, 2008; Jordon, 2009). Identities shift in a hierarchy of prominence, which can change over time in response to life experiences and situations

(Narváez, et al., 2009). The valence, or significance, given to these various identities may also change with life experiences, situations, and stages of identity development, with high valence identities playing a prominent role in the performance of the individual (Narváez, et al., 2009). Different social contexts can create stress or build resilience in response to acceptance or rejection of certain aspects of self and these can encourage or suppress different identities (Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009; Narváez, et al., 2009). Internal conflict between multiple identities, even if the identities are positive, may also influence the selective deactivation of one or more of these identities (Narváez, et al., 2009). The South Asian queer diaspora experience a range of important sociopolitical influences related to their gender, sexuality, and culture, which in turn determined how they valued and negotiated the intersection of these multiple identities. These unique intersections lead to unique personal experiences; however, common sociopolitical influences can influence common strategies for managing them, thereby creating an overall common lived experience.

Background Information

While South Asians share some common cultural values and beliefs, they are diverse with significant differences in religion, language, and history. The South Asian region includes the countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Deepak, 2005; South Asian Psychological Networking Association [SAPNA], 2015). There are over 50 languages spoken amongst this

population including Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and Bengali, and the religions practiced include Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism and Zoroastrianism (Deepak, 2005; SAPNA, 2015). In the United States, the South Asian diaspora is also diverse in immigration status, levels of acculturation and enculturation, socioeconomics, and education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Approximately 70% are foreign born (Asian Nation, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). South Asians exhibit a bimodal educational and financial distribution; approximately 80% are highly educated and affluent, while approximately 8% lack a high school diploma and live below the poverty level (Asian Nation, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

A review of the literature supporting the South Asian population generated a number of important cultural indicators that were important in the lived experiences of South Asian queer women. An understanding of these cultural influences provides a valuable context for insight into the worldview of South Asian queer women. I provide a discussion below of these sociopolitical factors influencing the lived experiences and identity development of South Asian queer women.

South Asian Cultural Beliefs and Values

The South Asian collectivist culture is a hierarchical, relational, and patriarchal structure in which roles are highly defined (Deepak, 2005). Value systems within this structure promote interdependence; respect for the self, family, age, and community;

dignity; self-control; modesty; and humility (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Kay, 2012). Elders in the family are respected and honored; consequently, they expect to make decisions about the important events in their children's lives, such as career, marriage, and child-rearing (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997).

The importance South Asian culture attaches to marriage cannot be underestimated because family systems organize around marriage, continuity of family through procreation, and the care of parents in old age (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Inman, 2006). Marriage was not simply a union of two individuals; it was valued as the coming together of two families (Deepak, 2005). Therefore, South Asian parents believed it was their responsibility to find suitable marital partners for their children to marry. A failure to do this was experience as a personal deficit in not fulfilling parental obligations (Brar, 2012). There was a sense of shame associated with an unmarried child as they perceived, and experienced, community judgment (Brar, 2012). The perception of this judgment was that their child and the family were *not good enough* or stigmatized and this led to a perceived loss of face in the community (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005).

Within a relational world, this failure of duty led to a deep sense of loss for future grandchildren and the potential growth of the extended family (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005). Even for parents whose attitudes were more liberal and their children were allowed to find their own partners, parents struggled to find closure and contentment until their children were married and they could consider their *work* done (Brar, 2012; Deepak,

2005). South Asians traditionally measured their honor and sense of standing in society through a strong, secure, and convivial extended family (Deepak, 2005). As a result, South Asian parents had a strong, and almost intrinsic, need to see their children married.

Power within the family is hierarchical and gendered with the mother placed at the center of the family and the father at the head of the family (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Gilbert et al., 2004; Kay, 2012). Development of the individual was encouraged and valued only within the boundaries and context of the family; therefore, self-respect, dignity, self-control, and duty towards family loyalty valued and nurtured from early childhood (Ibrahim et al., 1997; Gilbert et al., 2004; Inman, 2006; Kay, 2012; Raval, 2009; Sharrif, 2009). Because interdependence was highly valued, strong relationships within the family, the extended family, and the wider South Asian community were both nurtured and maintained; many times even at significant cost (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Gupta et al., 2007; Inman, Howard, & Beaumont, 2007).

While these strong familial ties were protective factors for healthy functioning, they also played a central role in monitoring and controlling family behavior, dignity, and honor (Kay, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gupta et al., 2007; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). A cultural belief in *kismet*, fate, further reinforced the expectation that one must accept and manage one's life challenges appropriately without disrupting the traditional family system or compromising family honor (Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Raval, 2009; Sharrif, 2009). Collectively, these social structures have

perpetuated power differentials and stereotypical roles in which women are socialized valuing self-sacrifice and compliance, thereby perpetuating inherent systems of gender discrimination and oppression (Brar, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2004; Inman et al., 2006; Raval, 2009).

These findings are supported by Raval's (2009) qualitative study of Gujarati Indian women examining conflict between personal desires and others' expectations. These women reported feeling innately socialized to find ways to meet their desires without creating conflict with others, such as delaying fulfilling their desires until a time when there will be no consequences to others or that they find fulfillment through consolation in self-sacrifice. Raval (2009) concluded that while their willingness to be constrained by such limitations may not appear to exhibit a sense of agency from a Western perspective, these women nonetheless did employ a form of agency. They showed an unwillingness to forfeit their own desires, even if they must do so by finding solutions within the existing framework rather than through challenging or rejecting it. While diasporic South Asian queer women in the United States may exercise more freedom in their daily life choices, the study highlighted how deeply South Asian women were socialized to use alternative strategies to meet their desires, in ways that did not compromise their own sense of cultural connection. Consequently, South Asian queer women were more likely to experience a complicated and stressful path as they

negotiated their sexual identity. Similarly, perceptions of their sense of agency in doing this also may not reflect Western cultural expectations of agency.

The use of shame, *sharam*, and honor, *izzat*, was pervasive in traditional South Asian culture. These feelings were deep rooted in the South Asian identity; their impact felt intensely in all aspects of their lives (Gilbert et al., 2004; Kay, 2012). In their qualitative study exploring the impact of izzat, shame, and subordination on the mental health service use of South Asian women in the United Kingdom, Gilbert et al. (2004) found these feelings were a measure of respect and as ways to leverage control in order to maintain respect. Gilbert et al. (2004) found that shame was experienced both internally, through negative self-perceptions and feelings, and externally, through negative perceptions of how others think and feel about the self. Izzat, described as reflected shame and honor, was brought to others by one's own behavior, which in turn led to feelings of individual personal shame (Gilbert et al., 2004). Shame, honor, and respect, which are measured and maintained at the individual, familial, and community levels, are built and destroyed by the actions of the self, the family, and the community (Gilbert et al., 2004). A similar study by Kay (2012) exploring moral reasoning revealed the deep and pervasive nature of such internalized forms of stigmatization.

Kay (2012) explored the reasoning of personal and family honor among 128 first- and second-generation Indians in the United States. The qualitative study revealed that 91% of first- and 68% of second-generation participants believed extra-marital sex would

harm their family and group honor. Additionally, 87% of first- and 52% of second-generation participants believed marrying someone of another religion would damage their honor. A failure to conform to traditional cultural values and the loss of honor was as a personal moral failing. Furthermore, Kay (2012) found that judgments about moral failing were harsher when the protagonists were female. These findings provided an insight into how devastating the implications may be for South Asian queer women trying to challenge a far more sensitive and taboo subject such as sexual identity, whilst also negotiating their own deep-rooted socialized interdependence.

LGBT literature widely supports the notion that while sexual minorities experienced societal discrimination in the form of homophobia, many also experienced internalized homophobia as they dealt with their own ingrained socialized values that reject their queer sexual orientation (Choudhury, et al, 2009; Sandil et al., 2014; Rusi, 2014). The latter can significantly complicate acceptance of self, irrespective of other factors, and their ability to embrace a healthy lived identity. For South Asian queer women, these internalized feelings of shame, honor, and respect may act in a very similar way as they negotiate such strong cultural opposition in the process of both embracing their sexual identity and obtaining social acceptance for an openly lived identity (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014; Rusi, 2014).

The burden of maintaining familial and community respect lay disproportionately on the woman, inflating power dynamics in an already highly gendered society (Brar,

2012; Gilbert et al., 2004; Kay, 2012; Raval, 2009; Srinivasan, 2001). These power differentials were leveraged against women through community policing; women were watched, monitored, and judged against cultural and community expectations (Brar, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2004; Srinivasan, 2001). There is an expectation for South Asian women to be gentle, submissive, moral, chaste, self-sacrificing, devoted to family, and pure because of their gendered roles as keepers of family tradition and culture (Deepak, 2005; Durham, 2004; Gilbert et al., 2004). Failure to meet these expectations resulted in punishment in the form of social exclusion and/or limitations of freedoms (Brar, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2004; Srinivasan, 2001). As a result, South Asian women have become victims of socialized oppression through the control of their sexuality and bodies, which must always reflect appropriate familial and community respect (Brar, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2004; Srinivasan, 2001). Izzat, then, was also associated with fulfilling stereotypical role expectations, and a failure to do so would bring shame to oneself and the family (Brar, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2004).

South Asian parents raise their children to be interdependent; individual identities develop in the context of familial relationships (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Gupta et al., 2007; Inman, 2006). The development of a separated independent identity was neither encouraged nor desired (Brar, 2012; Gupta et al., 2007). In Gupta et al.'s (2007) phenomenological study exploring the meaning of separation, six second-generation South Asian women in the United Kingdom described how the transition from childhood

to adulthood was significantly different for South Asians from what it is in Western cultures. Western culture recognize the tumultuous rebellious adolescent stage as a natural chronologically determined developmental milestone that transitioned childhood to adulthood. The development of self-efficacy and independence during this stage is very much valued (Gupta et al., 2007). However, with an emphasis on collectivism, South Asian parents raise their children to be interdependent throughout their lifespan and they nurture their children to be emotionally dependent well into adulthood (Brar, 2012; Gupta et al., 2007; Inman, 2006; Inman et al., 2007; Sharrif, 2009).

Transition to adulthood was not directly related to age but happened incrementally as the individual progressed through the life cycle stages defined by the individual's familial and societal roles and responsibilities (Brar, 2012; Gupta et al., 2007). It was more closely associated to life events, such as marriage, occupation status, and living arrangements, rather than just chronological age (Brar, 2012; Gupta et al., 2007). South Asian women shouldering the responsibility of familial and cultural gatekeeping placed on them in the patriarchal South Asian culture, have been strongly discouraged from becoming independent or building self-efficacy in ways that could challenge the status quo (Brar, 2012; Durham, 2004; Thaker, 2006).

Acculturation/Enculturation and Cultural Conflict

South Asians living in the United States straddle two cultures that are significantly different in their values and beliefs. The majority Western culture is

primarily individualistic, which promotes independence, liberalism, and extroversion. The nuclear family system has less defined member roles and more democratic structures (Deepak, 2005). The South Asian collectivist culture on the other hand values interdependence, patriarchy, modesty, and the extended family (Deepak, 2005). Diasporic South Asians have attempted to carve out a mutually inclusive space born out of the need to cope with the constraints and opportunities offered by each of the two cultures (Beharry & Crozier, 2008; Deepak, 2005; Inman et al, 2007; Iwamoto et al., 2013; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Srinivasan, 2001).

They managed this through a process of accepting, rejecting, accommodating, and reformulating the two cultures (Deepak, 2005). However, the reality of achieving a healthy balance between acculturation and enculturation was not straightforward; it is a journey unique to each individual. These multiple identities were dynamic; responding to their environmental influences and the relative valences of these identities in those environments (Jordon, 2009; Inman, 2006; Inman et al., 2007; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Narvaez et al., 2009). The generational and socioeconomic diversity amongst the South Asian diaspora creates a broad continuum of acculturation/enculturation experiences amongst this population (Deepak, 2005; Kumar & Nevid, 2010).

In the past, acculturation has commonly been seen as a unidirectional process and positively associated with generation status, but with the growth of globalization and the widespread availability of the Internet the process of acculturation/enculturation has now become a more fluid and multidirectional process (Dhariwal & Connolly, 2013; Karim, 2014). Dhariwal and Connolly (2013) conducted a quantitative study of the westernizing influence of the media and friends on the romantic activities of 1316 youth aged 17-23 years in India and Canada. They found that transitional youths in India exposed to the Internet and telecommunications were more westernized than traditional youths in India not exposed to the media but less westernized than the Indian diaspora youth in Canada ($\beta = .23, p < .001$). Dhariwal and Connolly concluded that firstly, the influence of Western values on the youths progressively increased as their exposure and access to them increased and secondly, that youths living in India exposed to Western values through the media exhibited acculturation of Western values that influenced behavior stepping outside of traditional cultural norms.

Similarly, Karim's (2014) qualitative study examining Bangladeshi lesbian women's participation in both local and global Internet sites, found that sexual minority groups in South Asia in particular were using the Internet to find more open spaces within which to socialize and address injustices. These interactions created the opportunity for acculturation through the selective adoption of Western values and beliefs even without physically relocating to the United States. Because of their colonial history,

South Asians already have some exposure to Western values and to the English language; consequently, their navigation of the Western culture through the Internet was a relatively seamless progression (Karim, 2014). As a result, many first generation immigrants, especially the highly educated, already have experienced some level of acculturation even before they arrived in the United States.

Personal observations from my involvement in a South Asian LGBT group supported these studies. A significant proportion of the first-generation population had been motivated to migrate to the United States for the possibilities to live a more open sexual identity in a more liberal society as they had been by the economic opportunities. Many had already experienced similar exposure to Western cultural values and beliefs and had subsequently embraced a level of acculturation prior to arriving in the United States. They also valued the benefits immigration brought in distancing them from daily scrutiny and monitoring by family and immediate community members. This suggests the sense of agency and perceived marginalization the first-generation queer population experiences may be different from what the second- and third-generation queer population experiences and this may influence their overall experience of acculturation and enculturation.

In a discussion of the impact of the Indian diaspora on the Indian culture, Moorti (2005) identified a multidirectional cultural influence between the two groups, which he attributes to the rapid expansion of the Internet and globalization. Moorti argued that the

multidirectional influence has resulted in a more similar cultural identity between Indians and the Indian diaspora. Through an analysis of contemporary Indian popular culture, specifically magazines serving Indian women, Moorti described how the portrayed identity of the modern Indian woman seamlessly blends, and breaks down barriers between, the Western and Indian identities, giving rise to a new Indian identity that sits comfortably with both sets of values and beliefs. As a result, not only did Indians arrive in the United States already acculturated to some level, Indians living in the United States were experienced a process of enculturation, without actually relocating back to India (Deepak, 2005; Moorti, 2005).

This suggested that *culture shock* for first-generation South Asians may not be as great but the challenges of navigating a bicultural identity for second- and third-generation South Asians may be correspondingly more demanding. While the acculturation experiences of the South Asian diaspora in the United States may have posed different challenges, and offered different opportunities for the different generations, their overall level of acculturation and enculturation may not be so different within the fluid synthesis of these two cultures (Moorti, 2005). This leads to the possibility that the lived identity of the South Asian diaspora may now be more similar, even if the identity itself is more complex, than it is different across this diverse population. While this may superficially suggest a more stereotypical South Asian

identity, the underlying reality was a more complex and allusive identity demanding a more informed understanding.

However, despite the impact of globalization and irrespective of how well an individual may straddle both cultures, a body of literature suggested the process still entailed some degree of cultural conflict (Deepak, 2005; Durham, 2004; Gupta et al., 2011; Inman, 2006; Iwamoto et al., 2013; Kim & Omizo, 2010; Outen & Schmitt, 2015). This in turn called for a new form of self-efficacy and flexibility to help manage the dilemmas the process posed (Deepak, 2005; Durham, 2004; Gupta et al., 2011; Inman, 2006; Iwamoto et al., 2013; Kim & Omizo, 2010; Outen & Schmitt, 2015).

Immigrants sought to take the best of both worlds, but the reality was often less than ideal. For South Asian women, it has involved a sensitive navigation of conflicting values and beliefs relating to expectations for gender, power, culture and sexuality within these two cultures (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Inman, 2006; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). Parents sent a strong message about expectations through modeling and their parenting styles (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Inman et al., 2007). Parents faced with the dual task of negotiating their own acculturation and managing that of their children have adopted a selective and compartmentalized approach to managing their identity (Badrudjoja, 2006; Inman et al., 2007). Inman et al.'s (2007) qualitative study of

16 first generation Indian mothers and fathers found that parents emphasized the importance of maintaining an Indian core through adherence to cultural values and activities while adoption of American values was restricted just their professional lives.

Parents nurtured enculturation, related to a psychological and behavioral sense of belonging to the ethnic group, in their children through an emphasis on strong family ties and the requirement of an appropriate marriage partner to preserve traditional cultural values (Brar, 2012; Inman et al., 2007; Kay, 2012; Rusi, 2014). In the presence of a threat from a strong majority culture, South Asian parents have strived to maintain and perpetuate their cultural heritage and through this affirm their full identity. This has led to traditional practices to build a strong foundation to support cultural maintenance, which over time have become a fossilized form of their cultural values and beliefs (Badruddoja, 2006; Brar, 2012; Inman et al., 2007; Kumar & Nevid, 2010; Rusi, 2014). Religion, through endorsement of traditional behaviors, has played a significant role in both reinforcing cultural heritage and discouraging the natural evolution of cultural beliefs and values (Inman, et al., 2007). Not surprisingly then, second-generation South Asians have also learned to manage their own cultural conflicts through selective compartmentalization as the blending of the two cultures was seen as cultural dilution, and a loss of credibility within their cultural heritage (Inman et al., 2007; Kay, 2012; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Srinivasan, 2001)..

Since the responsibility for perpetuating and maintaining cultural norms fell more heavily on South Asian women, they became a litmus test to measure authentic ethnic identity (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Inman et al., 2007; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). South Asian immigrant parents arrived steeped in gendered values; which they perpetuated in their parenting style and approach (Inman et al., 2007; Srinivasan, 2001). South Asian daughters often experienced double standards due to gender disparity; girls experienced greater social restrictions, more stringent dress codes, and their behavior more rigorously regulated through monitoring and punishment (Brar, 2012; Durham, 2004; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Srinivasan, 2001; Thaker, 2006). For Example: daughters had more restrictions on dating than sons and if they rebelled, their punishment was often harsher than for sons (Inman et al., 2007; Kay, 2012; Thaker, 2006). When these expectations were layered over a base of deeply ingrained beliefs in shame and honor, South Asian women implicitly learned to monitor their own behavior in order to protect the honor of their parents (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Inman, 2006; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). Consequently, South Asian women who reported a stronger internal ethnic identity also reported greater intimate relations conflict and greater vulnerability to shame and guilt (Gilbert et al., 2007; Inman et al., 2007; Kumar & Nevid, 2010; Ludhra & Jones, 2009).

In addition to the expectations placed upon them at home, second-generation South Asian women have to manage cultural expectations and

judgments imposed on them by the wider majority society. Negotiating an identity within conflicting cultures places them at greater risk for stress (Beharry & Crozier, 2008; Kaduvettoor-Davidson & Inman, 2013). They reported heightened sensitivity to perceived incidents of racism, they felt pressured to compromise aspects of their ethnic culture in order to *belong* to majority culture, and they were left in a state of limbo without clarity of standards against which to measure themselves (Beharry & Crozier, 2008; Iwamoto, Negi, Partiali, & Creswell, 2013; Kaduvettoor-Davidson & Inman, 2013; Outten & Schmitt, 2015). This has led to feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem (Beharry & Crozier, 2008).

First-generation women on the other hand typically have a stronger ethnic identity and they feel more closely connected to their traditional values. However, they too were vulnerable to stress, they feared alienation from their community if they chose to adopt liberal behaviors such as dating or premarital sexual relations (Abouguendia & Noels, 2001; Inman, 2006). There was evidence to suggest that adherence to cultural norms could be a positive influence, such as building confidence in one's ability to deal with novel situations, building collective action and social creativity (Kim & Omizo, 2010; Outten & Schmitt, 2015). However, in the wider context of its association with detrimental judgmental evaluations, South Asian queer women may not benefit equally.

Sexual Identity Development

Current literature placed the management and intersection of multiple identities at the core of South Asian LGBT sexual identity development (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Karim, 2014; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narui, 2011). Gender, ethnicity, race, religion, immigrant status, and language interfaced with experiences of marginalization and cultural conflicts to shape the lived identity. Diasporic South Asian queer women must negotiate conflict between acculturation and enculturation and cope with the additive pressures of conflicting expectations and demands associated with a queer sexual identity in two different cultures (Alimahomed, 2010; Choudhury et al., 2009; Clark, 2005; Narui, 2011; Sandil et al., 2014). This has encouraged South Asian queer women to keep their multiple identities fluid, changing their prominence and importance depending on the environment, the relationships, and the situation (Narvaez et al., 2009). This enables South Asian queer women to make decisions about disclosing or hiding their sexual identity as a means to managing their lived experiences (Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narui, 2011; Narvaez, et al., 2009). As a result, South Asian queer women make very personal decisions about how to define their sexual identity; in fact, their sexual identity may not necessarily always be the most important identity for some of them (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005).

South Asian queer women valued inclusivity of all their separate identities, even if not simultaneously, and they wanted their identity understood and accepted within this holistic framework (Alimahomed, 2010; Beharry & Crozier, 2008; Clark, 2005; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). However, this seemed to leave them caught between what might appear to be conflicting messages of reinforcing existing oppression whilst asserting self-efficacy. On the one hand, South Asian queer women managed the fluidity of their multiple identities, their sexual identity, to meet societal expectations of their gender and sexual orientation. This kept them victim to their oppression. On the other hand, they demonstrated self-efficacy by taking control of defining their own identity rather than let other groups define it for them. In this case, they demonstrated agency. This is another example of how South Asian women inherently find accommodating ways to fulfill their desires without sacrificing their cultural roles and responsibilities – which again suggests an underlying strength that may easily be overlooked (Clark, 2005; Ravel, 2009).

In South Asian culture, gender intertwines with sexuality within heteronormative roles. Therefore, the South Asian queer identity threatens both the perpetuation and continuation of traditional cultural values and beliefs (Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narui, 2011, Rusi, 2014). A queer woman who does not marry raised questions about her gender as the role of the wife was associated with adulthood femininity (Deepak, 2005). Sexuality, in the South Asian culture, is associated with procreation; a failure to bear children

questions the woman's sexuality. Moreover, by challenging heteronormative values and bringing sexuality in the public and family space, South Asian queer women violate cultural feminine values of modesty, morality, chastity, and submissiveness (Clark, 2005; Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010).

The difficulty in finding a space, and language, to negotiate a nonheteronormative identity within such a rigidly exclusive domain reinforced a lack of power and marginalization associated with both their gender and sexuality (Rusi, 2014; Sandil et al., 2014). While some parts of South Asia have had a history of recognizing *third gender* sexuality, the population was highly stigmatized, feared, and systematically ostracized from mainstream society (Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association, 2015). These historically ingrained attitudes directly influenced the attitudes of parents dealing with their child's same-sex sexuality (Khan, 2011). Ultimately, same-sex sexuality threatens family respect and honor, bringing the fear of discrimination and judgment from within the community (Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Rusi, 2014; Sandil et al., 2014). Altogether, in a culture founded on marriage, there was no framework to find a safe space outside of conventional marriage (Brar, 2012; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Rusi, 2014).

Traditional South Asian culture considered the daughter a *temporary guest* in her family, knowing that when she marries she will move to her husband's home and family, which will then become her actual family (Brar, 2012; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). For South Asian parents, their unmarried daughter is in a state of limbo, there is a responsibility to arrange her marriage and settle her in her adult life (Brar, 2012). In the eyes of the parents and the community, an unmarried daughter has not yet fully transitioned into adulthood because she has not yet taken on the responsibilities of a married woman. As a result, she does not get her full adult rights and hierarchical power, which weakens her authority and self-efficacy in her family of origin (Brar, 2012; Thaker, 2006). There was shame and loss of *izzat* attached to even having an adult unmarried daughter, not least one that did not reflect traditional heterosexual norms (Brar, 2012).

In Brar's (2012) qualitative study in the United Kingdom exploring the experiences of seven South Asian women who had never married, participants said they felt marginalized and stigmatized. Participants felt pressurized, felt isolated, were viewed as a "deficit" (p60), felt they had tarnished their own and their family's honor in the community, and they felt they had experienced a loss of support and power within a society organized around "we" (p40). Consequently, in the case of a South Asian woman disclosing her queer sexual orientation to her family, the family may feel so tainted by the

disclosure that they fear the marriage opportunities of their other children will also be jeopardized by this association (Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010).

Parents experienced a deep sense of loss and shame. They experienced intense internal and external pressures to: repress it, deny it, oppress their daughter's queer sexuality, hide it from public scrutiny, or ultimately to distance themselves from *her shame* by ostracizing her from the family (Khan, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2004; McKeown et al., 2010; Rusi, 2014; Thakar, 2006). Maintaining a public *face* and remaining connected to the community was important for family integrity (Khan, 2011; Rusi, 2014). While South Asian gay men also experienced these challenges when disclosing their sexual orientation, the challenges were far greater for South Asian queer women. They are more marginalized because of their gendered roles and lower hierarchal positioning within the South Asian culture.

The increased pressure and severer consequences facing South Asian queer women when they disclosed their sexuality lead to greater internal conflict (Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Sandil et al., 2014). Consequently, the *coming out* experience was more difficult for South Asian queer women because they had more to lose (Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Sandil et al., 2014). As a result, coming out to affirm their sexual identity, above all their other identities, was not always the first priority for South Asian queer women (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Karim, 2014). South Asian queer women adopted an oppositional conscience to rigid

compartmentalized Western interpretations of queer identity (Alimahomed, 2010). They preferred more subtle ways to express their sexual identity, which was inclusive of their multiple identities and respectful of their traditional cultural heritage (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005). Having grown up in a relational world, South Asian queer women were less willing to abandon their unique South Asian cultural identities or their attachment to their family system. (Alimahomed, 2010; Mair, 2010; Raval, 2009). Instead, they were more willing to pay the emotional price that juggling complex multiple identities and priorities demanded (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Raval, 2009). When these important relational attachments were no longer available to them, when ostracized from their family, they actively sought to recreate compensatory familial kinships in accepting spaces that sat within cultural boundaries but outside of majority cultural boundaries (Badruddoja, 2006).

Discrimination

South Asian queer women experienced multiple layers of discrimination and marginalization leading to a high level of emotional stress, detrimental to their overall psychological well-being (Kaduvettoor-Davidson & Inman, 2013; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Sandil et al., 2014). South Asian women experienced gender discrimination in both their majority and ethnic cultures and discriminatory evaluations in the form of microaggressions that questioned or demeaned their bicultural identity (Alimahomed, 2010; Beharry & Crozier, 2008; Deepak, 2005). These microaggressions came from the

internal struggles of negotiating their positioning between the two cultures and from a form of racism related to stereotypical judgments that failed to appreciate their integrated identity (Beharry & Crozier, 2008). In a phenomenological study of six second-generation South Asian women in Canada, Beharry and Crozier (2008) documented a number of examples of this type of racism. For Example: One participant found herself the center of attention at a wedding reception merely because as a *brown* girl she could line dance so well. Beharry and Crozier (2008) pointed out that such indirect and unintentional forms of discrimination can be equally damaging as something overt and hostile.

South Asian gay men and queer women consistently reported feeling alienated from the majority LGBT community (Alimahomed, 2010; Badruddoja, 2006; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010). Their perception was that the predominantly White LGBT organizations promoted a rigid Western interpretation of same-sex identity, which did not accommodate the multiple identities South Asian sexual minorities negotiated as a part of their identity development (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010). The White LGBT identity has prescribed ways of *being out*; remaining closeted was viewed negatively and detrimental to healthy functioning. A closeted sexual identity was associated with feelings of shame; the credibility of that identity questioned because it was not valued as being authentic (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010). This made these

organizations exclusive to South Asian queer women because they failed to acknowledge that the coming out process for them was more difficult and that selective disclosure may be a vital part of defining their lived sexual identity (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010).

South Asian queer women and gay men believed the coming out process for White LGBT individuals was easier because their culture was firstly more accepting of same-sex sexuality and secondly, they often only had to negotiate one marginalized identity (Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010). Even mainstream lesbian organizations promoted a rigid Western approach to feminism, which again failed to understand the unique issues faced by South Asian queer women (Alimahomed, 2010). The focus of all these organizations' social and political advocacy primarily met only their unique agenda and the presence of minority gays and lesbians was irrelevant to the organization's overall aims (Alimahomed, 2010). Other lesbian organizations for People of Color also had agendas focusing on their unique needs and the relatively small presence of South Asian queer women again left them sitting on the margins of these groups as well (Alimahomed, 2010).

The growth of South Asian LGBT organizations over the last two decades has provided a much sought after safe space where South Asian sexual minorities can explore a fuller lived identity. These organizations were well situated to address their unique needs and challenges, however, here too queer women experienced another form of

marginalization that left them feeling like they were once more only on the periphery (Alimahomed, 2010). Because of their relatively small presence in these organizations and because of patriarchal gender bias and role stereotyping, issues specific to queer women were ignored (Alimahomed, 2010). LGBT organizations often reflect the cultural norms of their mainstream societies; therefore, South Asian LGBT organizations were also vulnerable to patriarchal hierarchies in which women's roles were culturally feminine and submissive. Inevitably, South Asian queer women found themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy in all their various groups and this situated them as outsiders even when nominally they were insiders (Alimahomed, 2010). These multiple layers of marginalization experienced at the hands of individuals who themselves were marginalized and in organizations advocating against injustice can be deeply damaging for South Asian queer women (McKeown et al., 2010).

Racism and stereotypical discrimination also rolled over into the domains of socialization and romantic relationships for South Asian queer women. Venues served exclusively to majority White LGBT populations (Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010). For South Asians socialized in extended families and relational environments, these mostly bar type social venues often failed to offer satisfying environments within which to develop meaningful relationships (Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010). South Asian queer women and gay men experienced racial stereotyping as potential romantic partners; they were often objectified, seen as exotic, judged to be less

attractive, and labeled as being feminine (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010). The latter specifically marginalized masculine gay men and butch queer women because neither of these two fit this feminine stereotype. Societal stereotypes of South Asians as a model heteronormative minority further reinforced the invisibility of South Asian sexual minorities (McKeown et al., 2010); they remained under the radar of the wider LGBT community, a case of *out of sight, out of mind* attitude.

The current body of literature to support South Asians and South Asian sexual minorities predominantly focused on discrimination, societal challenges, vulnerabilities, oppression, and general psychopathology associated with their minority status in the United States and in their ethnic community (Inman, et al., 2014). While it is essential to highlight such issues so that they can be addressed, and vulnerable populations protected, it is also important to recognize their strengths, resiliency, and self-efficacy that helped them to manage and overcome such injustices in their day-to-day lives. A failure to do so runs the risk of either labeling these groups as merely weak, marginalized, and helpless or simply contribute further to their already marginalized status. Even in the face of oppression, individuals display courage, agency, and self-worth as they develop adaptive coping strategies to deal with such challenges. Mental health counselors work from a wellness model with a belief in helping individuals from a strength-based philosophy (ACA, 2014). It was important then to also identify successful coping skills, as well as to

understand their challenges, as a basis for providing culturally appropriate services to them. Moreover, providing marginalized individuals the opportunity to share and validate their strengths, in of itself could promote self-efficacy, self-worth, and general well-being.

In response to feedback provided on Chinese lesbian websites indicating a preference for strength-based inquiries, Li, Johnson, and Jenkins-Guarnieri (2013) conducted a quantitative study of 439 Chinese lesbian women to understand the relationship between their sexual identity development and their subjective well-being. The study measured subjective well-being using the Satisfaction. With Life Scale, Adult Dispositional Hope Scale, and the Depression-Happiness Scale and correlated these measures to stages of identity development, defined by the Cass lesbian/gay identity development model. The results showed significantly higher measures of hopefulness, life satisfaction and lower measures of depression in later stages of identity development ($p < .001$). The results further revealed higher levels of shame and internalized heterosexism in earlier stages of identity development but higher subjective well-being with increasing integration of sexual identity and development of supportive relationships at later stages of identity development.

The outcomes of the study suggested that the participants either developed or used their innate strengths and resiliency during the process of identity development to overcome their earlier challenges resulting in a higher level of overall life satisfaction.

Chinese women and South Asian women grow up in similar hierarchical collectivist cultures in which women's gender and sexual identity intrinsically connect to their social roles as mothers and wives (Li et al., 2013). Similar to South Asian women, Chinese lesbian women faced social stigma related to their sexual identity and they too bore the higher emotional burden of the consequences their identity inflicted on their parents in the way of shame and dishonor (Li et al., 2013). Since South Asian and Chinese lesbian women shared similar cultural socialization and challenges, there is an assumption that South Asian queer women may also develop and utilize such strengths and resiliency to achieve a level of subjective well-being in their lived experience. While Li et al., (2013) did not explore these specific traits, the researchers acknowledged the value in doing so in their recommendations for future studies.

The South Asian culture discourages independence and self-efficacy in ways that would challenge traditional cultural norms, especially in women, and this has contributed to the oppression many South Asian queer women continued to endure as they navigated the development of their sexual identity (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gupta et al., 2007; Thaker, 2006). Deeply embedded associations of shame, honor, respect, and cultural conformity have been strong controlling mechanisms to deter South Asian queer women from challenging traditional norms (Gilbert et al., 2004; Gupta et al., 2007). In order to surmount such barriers and defy the pervasive stigma attached to a nonheteronormative sexual identity, South Asian queer women must dig deeper to find a

far stronger sense of agency to bring sexuality into the family and public space. (Badrudjoja, 2006; Gilbert et al., 2004; Narui, 2011).

However, there was ample evidence that South Asian queer women were building agency to validate and express their sexual and cultural identities. Their presence in South Asian LGBT organizations has been growing, albeit still relatively small, as evidenced by their public activity on multiple online LGBT websites. South Asian queer women have been creating open spaces for dialogue and pushing heteronormative boundaries through publication and media. They have created dialogue in traditional cultural spaces as insiders, rather than as outsiders belonging to a *Western lifestyle* (Gopinath, 2005; Lohani-Chase, 2012; Moorti, 2009). Role models with a strong sense of agency have been opening doors for others to follow (Gopinath, 2005).

Agency comes in many shapes and forms, so while some publically push traditional boundaries, many others continued to use alternative, often more conforming, strategies for managing their sexual identity (Alimahomed, 2010). Some have continued to conceal queerness through traditional heteronormative marriages or marriages of convenience with South Asian gay men (Choudhury et al., 2009; Khan, 2011; Rusi, 2014). Even those who were *out* were willing to compromise in order to maintain familial relationships and to find ways to define a culturally authenticated queer identity (Badrudjoja, 2006; Khan, 2011).

In a qualitative study of six South Asian same-sex marriages, Khan (2011) found the couples went to great lengths to protect their relationships with their families, especially in later years as their parents aged, because they found it difficult to break off all ties to these kinships. These couples demonstrated their desire to normalize their sexual identity and relationships within their cultural heritage by intentionally positioning their wedding ceremonies within authentic traditional cultural norms rather than arranging something that stepped away from them. The focus of agency for these couples was to mediate mutually acceptable cultural boundaries. Many first-generation South Asian queer women have used distance as a way to reduce conflict and manage disclosure and visibility without threatening familial relationships (Clark, 2005; Griffin, 2011). In her qualitative study of two lesbian women relocated outside their countries of origin, Griffin (2011) identified the liberating potential of displacement from one's sociocultural background to reject taboos and constraints within that culture.

South Asian queer women, therefore, find their own personal form of self-efficacy, but they shared a common unwillingness to discard or deny any aspect of their multilayered identity. Specifically, all these women demonstrated the importance they attached to relationships and the role these relationships played in defining their identity. This again confirmed the compatibility of the feminist underpinnings for guiding the exploration of South Asian women's same sex-sexuality (Brisolara et al., Brown, 2009; 2014; Jordon, 2009). South Asian women have historically valued feminist theory as a

suitable platform for addressing their specific injustices because feminism acknowledges the centrality of their relational world. This body of literature demonstrated the important role traditional culture and relationships played in the lived experiences and identity development of South Asian queer women; emphasizing the need to integrate these elements when working with this population (Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009; Narvaez, et al., 2009).

Mental Health Issues

There is still a common perception within mental health care that South Asians experience no or minimal mental health issues, but a growing body of literature is challenged this perception (Inman et al., 2014). There is increasing evidence of psychological and emotional stress due to cultural conflict, marginalization, discrimination, gender oppression, familial conflict, domestic violence, and sexual identity conflict (Choudhury et al., 2009; Inman, 2006; Loya et al., 2010; Rusi, 2014; Sandil et al., 2014; Sharrif, 2009). These stresses manifest themselves through a wide range of behavioral and mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, fragmented identity formation, substance abuse, eating disorders, suicidal ideation and attempt, and feelings of isolation (Choudhury et al., 2009; Ineichen, 2012; Liang et al., 2010; Masood et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2009; Time to Change & Rethink, 2010).

A review by Husaini, et al. (2006) of six studies conducted between 1976 and 2006 examining self-harming behaviors of South Asian British women found that all the studies consistently showed South Asian women at greater risk for self-harm, compared to White women (approximately 1.5 times higher) and South Asian men (between 3-5 times higher). This increased risk was commonly attributed to increased familial pressures, especially relating to marriage; an unwillingness to access mental health services which were perceived to be culturally irrelevant; social isolation due to less frequent contact with friends; and an under diagnosis of perceived risk when presenting for help due to stereotypical perceptions. These factors placed South Asian women at higher risk for suicidal attempts, as well as completed attempts (Husain et al., 2006).

This elevated risk arose because an emphasis on the collective-self, which stressed putting the family first, created more psychological stress while offering fewer problem solving options (Masood & Okazaki, 2009). At the same time, the internalized model minority stereotyping pressured them to maintain a façade of high social and personal morality, and a denial of their problems (Liang et al., 2010). Because South Asian women were inherently more vulnerable to guilt and shame, the façade deterred them from burdening others with reflective shame if they were to seek help, especially if they believed everyone else has no problems and were well adjusted (Gupta et al., 2011; Kumar & Nevid, 2010).

Sandil et al., (2014) examined the additive effects of multiple marginalization on South Asian LGBT populations. The quantitative study of 142 participants found each measure of minority stress (heterosexist discrimination, racist events, and identity outness) related positively and significantly with psychological distress ($r = .34-.49$, $p < .001$). Additionally, stresses related to perceived heterosexist discrimination, racist events, and internalized heterosexism correlated positively with additive links to psychological distress ($\beta = .21-.30$, $p < .05$ & $.01$). Contrary to White LGBT studies, and in support of South Asian's need to find alternative ways to manage their sexual identity, the study found higher levels of outness were associated with higher levels of psychological distress. Sandil et al. (2014) suggested this could be because keeping closeted about one's sexuality may be more culturally normal for South Asians due to modesty associated with the general topic of sexuality and that being out may expose the individuals to increased racism and heterosexist discrimination in their respective communities.

Balsam et al. (2011) found similar results in their three part mixed method study examining the impact of multiple minority stresses on LGBT People of Color (POC). The first part, involving a qualitative study with 112 LGBT-POC, identified experiences of racism in LGBT communities, heterosexism in racial/ethnic communities, and racism experienced in relationships and dating. In the second of the two follow up quantitative studies, heterosexism in racial/ethnic communities was seen to be strongly related to

interference and stigma sensitivity ($Z = -4.83, p < .0001$ and $Z = -3.48, p < .0001$ respectively). Balsam et al. (2011) concluded that this was associated with an increased awareness and sensitivity to external oppression and stigma rather than actual internalized self-rejection. They added that this would be particularly harmful for this population because LGBT-POC generally exhibited a greater reliance on their ethnic community for support, especially in the way of protection against racism. Under the circumstances then this may lead some to endorse their ethnic identity over their sexual identity, and this in turn leading to other forms of psychological distress.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services

South Asians significantly underused mental health services compared to their experience of mental health problems, even when they had access to mental health care, and this gap was significantly greater for South Asian sexual minorities (Choudhury et al., 2009). In a quantitative study of 94 LGBTQ participants, Choudhury et al. (2009) found that only 21% of the participants used mental health services, despite 70% having access to them ($p < .05$). The participants reported experiencing a wide range of mental health issues, such as depression, suicidal ideation, and anxiety. Their reluctance to seek help was reflective of their overall lack of trust and safety with regard to disclosing their sexual orientation. The study revealed that while 80% were open to friends, only 54% were open to family, 47% to coworkers, and only 18% and 17% to extended family and

community respectively (Choudhury et. al., 2009). South Asian sexual minorities only felt comfortable disclosing their sexual identity to a small group of trusted individuals.

A study by Time to Change and ReThink (2010) examining mental health attitudes of South Asians in the United Kingdom identified six key barriers for dealing with mental health issues: 1) shame, fear, and secrecy surrounded mental illness, 2) the causes of mental illness were often misunderstood, 3) the family deterred help seeking by being caring through providing support, and/or by isolating through distancing, 4) social pressure to conform to community expectations, 5) people with mental health problems were not valued, and 6) marriage prospects for the patient can be damaged by mental health. Trust and confidentiality issues were common concerns when contemplating seeking professional help (Choudhury et al., 2009; Ineichen, 2012; Husaini et al., 2006; Randhawa & Stein, 2007; Time to Change & Rethink, 2010). South Asians feared shame and loss of face if their use of mental health services became public (Loya et al., 2010; Pilkington et al., 2010; Soorkia et al., 2011).

The reality of this perceived fear of being ostracized was supported by Loya et al.'s (2010) quantitative study examining the impact of stigma on the attitudes of Caucasian and South Asian college students' attitudes towards seeking mental health services. The study of 128 participants, 54 South Asian, identified that South Asians expressed greater personal stigma towards persons with mental illness ($t(126) = -4.48, p < .001$). Results of the Devaluation-discrimination self-report measuring participant's

perceptions of discrimination and stigma faced by persons with mental illness showed there was a preference amongst South Asian students to exclude, reject, or distance themselves from persons experiencing mental health problems. The results supported the widespread fear within the community about social exclusion and stigma associated with mental health issues. The negative impact on the family was a significant concern that prevented seeking help; damage to the integrity of family, which could compromise marriage prospects for the individual and/or for the siblings (Loya et al., 2010; Pilkington et al., 2010; Randhawa & Stein, 2007; Time to Change & ReThink, 2010). South Asians were worried about language and cultural conflicts with mental health professionals who were not culturally competent, prescribing unrealistic solutions (Choudhury et al., 2009; Hussain & Cochrane, 2002; Husaini et al., 2006; Ineichen, 2012; Sandil et al., 2014; Time to Change & ReThink, 2010).

Alternative sources of help were also preferred, such as religious guidance and holistic mindfulness strategies; reflecting a need to take personal ownership of the problem, (Chu et al., 2011; Ineichen, 2012). Furthermore, South Asians underestimated the importance of their condition, preferring to use an explanatory model of diagnosis involving somatization of symptoms; consequently, they were more likely to consult the medical profession, rather than seek more appropriate mental health services (Chu et al., 2011; Karasz, Dempsey, & Fallek, 2007; Pilkington et.al., 2010). The perpetuation of the model minority stereotype often precluded South Asians from proactive offers for social,

educational, and other forms of services. There was an assumption they did not need these types of services, which again limited their exposure and possible access to mental health care services (Thompson & Kiang, 2010).

Summary

South Asian queer women navigated their sexual identity in a very complex and challenging environment and they employed a sophisticated set of strategies for controlling their lived experience. They did this to negotiate the conflicting demands and personal needs they experienced in their different cultures and communities, all the while operating in structures that directly and indirectly sought to discriminate, marginalize, oppress, and disempower them because of their gender and their sexual orientation. While South Asian queer women have become more vocal and visible within all their communities, they still largely remained a silent and peripheral presence, which further continued to perpetuate their marginalized status. The mental health profession has until recently generally paid little attention to the South Asian population due to a stereotypical perception that there was no need for services.

The dearth of current literature to support the South Asian and South Asian LGBT populations supports this perception. These oversights, coupled with this population's unwillingness to acknowledge mental health issues due to associated stigma, has resulted in an overall inadequate level of mental health care for them. Moreover, under such circumstances, vulnerable populations such as South Asian queer women, who have a

more pressing need for these services, fall further onto the margins of society as they sit at the bottom of the hierarchy in all their communities. Through this study, I attempted to make a positive contribution towards filling the gap in the scarce body of literature on South Asian same-sex attracted women, and to provide important experiential knowledge to mental health practitioners positioned to serve them.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of South Asian queer women and to understand the meaning of these experiences. In this chapter, I explain my choice of methodology to guide this inquiry. I also discuss the details of the research design, data collection and data analysis. Lastly, I explore ethical concerns and issues relating to study trustworthiness pertinent to this methodology and research design.

Research Design and Rationale

The design of a research methodology begins with a discussion of the ontological and epistemological traditions that underpin the inquiry process. The ontological principles define knowledge and truth, while epistemology describes how knowledge and truth are understood (van Manen, 2014). Feminist principles describe an overarching attitude and positioning in relation to the phenomena and person researched (Brisolara et al., 2014). Feminist research is a way of *thinking* about the evaluation, rather than as an actual *structure* for evaluation (Brisolara et al., 2014). Feminist principles and research goals permeate all aspects of the inquiry processes (Brisolara et al., 2014). Feminist research uses a constructionist approach to defining and understanding knowledge and truth; there is an assumption that there are multiple ways of knowing and that some ways are more privileged (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). Feminist

principles recognize the intersectionality of women's diverse identities and their multiplicative impact on discrimination and oppression. As a result, feminist research adopts a highly political and moral stance. It does this through research goals that foster empowerment and emancipation of marginalized populations; by giving voice to silenced individuals through highlighting gender inequalities and social injustices (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009).

A feminist theoretical orientation, therefore, places a strong emphasis on minimizing power differentials, including those inherent in the research process between the researcher and the researched. It is critical to address power differentials between researcher and researched to firstly avoid perpetuating existing societal injustices and secondly, as a necessary condition to facilitate the exploration of unique and accurate knowledge (Brisolara et al., 2014; van Manen, 2014). Knowledge is recognized as being socially, culturally, and temporally constructed, consequently, feminist research focuses on capturing it holistically as it is for the people who "create, hold, and share it" (Brisolara et al., 2014, p121). A number of different traditions have developed within the overarching feminist framework that offer different perspectives for approaching the inquiry process; I adopted a stand-point theoretical approach for this study. This approach places women's experiences at the center of the research because it acknowledges they are the ones best placed to understand their unique dynamics and concerns

(Brisolara et al., 2014). Only through their lived experiences can their power dynamics and marginalization be best understood (Brisolara, et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordan, 2009).

A qualitative research design is inductive and most useful for exploring complex topics, topics about which little is known, or for situations where existing theories do not apply (Creswell, 2013). It uses an exploratory approach to identify emerging themes from data that reflects the voices of the participants (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative research design offers the flexibility to minimize power differentials between the researcher and the researched (van Manen, 2014). An inquiry using a collaborative approach opens up spaces for silent voices to be heard and empowered through a telling of their stories (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2014). These properties made the qualitative research design a very suitable approach for pursuing this inquiry using a feminist theoretical lens. A number of methodologies compliment the qualitative research design; the research question determines which is the most appropriate. I considered three suitable methodologies and I now provide my rationale for my final choice.

Ethnomethodology examines cultures and societal structures to understand the rules, norms, assumptions, and values that define the structures that help the people living in them make sense of their everyday activities (Creswell, 2013; Siddique, 2011). It applies a holistic approach to conceptualizing these facets of lived experience by examining all sociopolitical influences that affect the individual and the group. Data is

collected over an extended time through direct observation and interviews while the researcher lives amongst the group under study (Creswell, 2013). The purpose is to define the common experiences within the group rather than the subjectively constructed singular experiences of the individual. South Asian queer women do not live or interact collectively as a group all the time, indeed some may interact very little within the group. Therefore, ethnomethodology was not an appropriate methodology for this study.

Narratology aims to understand the lived experiences of individuals through the narratives of their personal stories. This open and flexible approach allows the exploration of a wide range of topics or issues as each narrative is personal and unique (Creswell, 2013). Narratology may focus on the story of an individual, or it may include stories from a small sample of individuals with common experiences (Creswell, 2013). It allows the individual to describe both the lived experience and the meaning it holds for her or him. The aim of narratology is to provide an account of the narratives through restorying; rearranging the experiences in an order to tell a story or to highlight specific insights or interests of the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Because the purpose of this study is to understand and report the lived experience as authentic, narratology was not an appropriate methodology for this research.

Phenomenology concerns itself with the task of grasping the meaning, or essence, of lived experience. It aims to understand that what makes a phenomenon unique and so focuses on the core of the singular experience as it is lived through (van Manen, 2014).

Phenomenological research collects textual descriptions of lived experiences across the group in order to create insight to provide a fuller understanding of the lived-through experience of the phenomenon. The purpose of this research is to understand the lived experiences of South Asian queer women and the meaning these experiences hold for them. Existing literature describes narratives of individual life stories but it does not explain the unique meaning their personal experiences, relating to their sexual orientation, hold for them. Therefore, phenomenological methodology was the most appropriate framework within which to pursue this inquiry.

The aim of phenomenological methodology is to understand the phenomenon as it is experienced, in the prereflective lived-through; before it is brought to consciousness through cognitive, conceptual, or theoretical determination or interpretation (van Manen, 2014). Husserl (1952) described it as the pursuit of the exclusive singularity that gives the phenomenon its identity and makes it an *other* (van Manen, 2014). However, grasping the elusive prereflective experience is in practice impossible. As soon as cognitive reflection is applied, the phenomenon has already lost its original prereflective existence; it becomes distorted through that interpretation. Van Manen (2014) stated, “The present is already in the past. But the past is a present that never was. Never quite like this” (p 59).

Van Manen expounds to clarify that the *I* that experienced the phenomenon is not the same as the *I* that objectifies the *I* in that experience because the individual *in the experience* is unaware of the *P* experiencing it. Looking back on our experience is

different from actually experiencing it because in the former, we are objectifying the experience and in the latter, we are immersed in the experience and unaware of ourselves as observers. Furthermore, in order to capture the authentic experience of the phenomenon, the researcher must put aside, bracket, her or his presuppositions. This allows the *pure essence* of the phenomenon to be *seen* by the researcher without distortion from the lens of her or his worldview (van Manen, 2014). Heidegger (1962) disagreed; stating that the meaning of an experience is *situated* in a person's subjective world and so cannot be understood outside of it (van Manen, 1990; 2014). Gadamer (1976) extrapolated further stating that it was not possible for an individual to completely bracket her or his presuppositions, therefore, a researcher must instead understand how they are present and influencing the *seeing* of the essence of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990; 2014).

With that in mind, hermeneutic phenomenology introduces language and text to understand and illuminate the meaning of the lived experience of a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990; 2014). While phenomenology sought to make visible a singular and accurate description of the structures of the phenomenon, hermeneutic phenomenology aims to create insight into the *meaning* of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990; 2014). It achieves this using interpretive historically produced texts (van Manen, 1990; 2014). In so doing, hermeneutic phenomenology includes, rather than excludes, the subjective world of the participant, the researcher, and the reader of the report. It does this by: a)

creating a prior understanding of the participants historical worldview, b) creating transparency of the researcher's subjective worldview, and c) inviting the reader to have a dialogue with the text from his or her historical worldview (van Manen, 1990; 2014). Hermeneutics phenomenology recognizes there are multiple interpretations of the meaning of a phenomenon as the *horizons* of each of these three worldviews come together to create a unique meaning in each worldview.

The literature review and the data collected provide some account of the participants' historical worldview while researcher reflexivity provides an account of the researcher's historical worldview. This process of researcher reflexivity, referred to as the "reduction", requires a particular "attitude" or "reflective attentiveness" from the phenomenological researcher (van Manen, 2014, p52). The reduction forms the foundation for phenomenological inquiry. Firstly, it allows the researcher to minimize the distortion from her or his subjective lens to pursue the essence of the lived experience with an attitude of wonder and openness. Secondly, it discloses the remaining influences of his or her historical lens (van Manen, 1990; 2014). Reduction consists of two parts: 1) the *epoche*, or bracketing, which suspends or removes barriers that prevent the meaning from being "seen" in its pure form, and 2) reduction to remove barriers that keep the meaning "hidden" or "concealed", so that the meaning "shows" itself from itself (van Manen, 2014, p28).

The researcher's presuppositions and traditions of knowledge comprise the first category of barriers, those associated with the epoche or bracketing. The subjective lens of the researchee creates the second set of barriers. This process of suspending or disclosing presuppositions, collectively referred to as reduction, plays a central role in determining the trustworthiness and fidelity of a phenomenological study. In the following discussion, I provide an explanation of its role in enhancing research fidelity at each stage of the methodological process for the inquiry.

Phenomenological methodology is guided by a collection of activities that underpin the research process: 1) focus of the inquiry is the lived experience rather than the experience as conceptualized; 2) focus is on essential themes that make the phenomenon unique rather than on themes common to the phenomenon; 3) it describes the phenomenon through writing; 4) it maintains a strong orientation to the phenomenon, and 5) it uses a research context that makes the methodology transparent (van Manen, 1990). While the results of a phenomenological study are not repeatable, a methodology that is specific and transparent is repeatable and this adds rigor to the trustworthiness of the study and the results (van Manen, 2014). Hermeneutic phenomenological methodology aims to create insight into the meaning of lived experience that the reader will easily recognize and, therefore, consider plausible; this strengthens the confirmability

and transferability of the study (van Manen, 2014). The orientation of the researcher, especially the use of the reduction, further reinforces the rigor and trustworthiness of the study by authenticating the credibility of the study data and outcomes. The specific ways in which these were actioned in the study are included in the explanation of the different stages of the research design.

The Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I personally conducted all parts of this study; therefore, understanding my potential impact on the study was crucial to the trustworthiness of the study. My orientation to the study was that of a counselor, researcher and educator, and as a South Asian woman. As a counselor, I was an ally and advocate for the South Asian LGBT population; committed to supporting their lived sexual identity, their wellbeing, and helping to address injustices faced by them in their various communities. I took all steps necessary to safeguard the integrity of the participants and to avoid a conflict of interests between the goals of the study and the well-being of the participants.

As a counselor advocate, it was important to me that the LGBT population, especially South Asian queer women, have access to mental health care that appropriately meets their needs and that they themselves value the benefits of accessing mental health care to support a healthy lived experience. In my role of counselor researcher, I portrayed a positive image of respect, integrity,

genuineness, positive regard, and unconditional acceptance as a representative of the mental health profession, with the intention to break down perceived barriers in terms of their willingness to access mental health services. I took all steps necessary to safeguard the integrity of the participants and to avoid a conflict of interests between the goals of the study and the well-being of the participants.

As a counselor educator, I was committed to creating a better understanding of the lived experience of South Asian queer women amongst all stakeholders serving them, but especially the mental health care profession. I sought to do this by firstly helping to fill the serious gap in the existing literature and secondly, by promoting multicultural competence amongst mental health care professionals to effectively meet the health care needs of this population. I firmly believed in and so endorsed the feminist principle that education was the root to social change.

As a South Asian woman, I connected with the cultural norms that discriminated against, limiting the potential of South Asian women, and so sought to address such injustices by providing a voice to challenge the status quo. As a result, I had a strong motivation to protect the rights and wellbeing of the participants in the research and a personal moral obligation to put their wellbeing before any potentially conflicting needs of the research study. However, my strong personal and professional orientation to this population may at times potentially bias my objective orientation to the inquiry, so as a researcher I remained self-aware of when these conflicts of interest may manifest

themselves. I used journaling as a way to create this awareness to underlying thoughts and intentions and processed them with my dissertation committee chair if I were unable to resolve them personally.

One's subjective understanding of truth and reality is a reflection of her or his lived experiences. My lived experiences and outlook on life have had a significant influence on the nature of the inquiry and my positionality in the study. Over my lifetime, diverse cultural influences have shaped my ontological framework. As a result of migration at a very young age and growing up in a multicultural environment, my experiences amongst these different belief systems led me to believe that knowledge was socially constructed, thereby giving rise to multiple realities of truth. My subsequent experiences of moving abroad again as an adult and parent and experiencing other cultures that further challenged my now established values and beliefs have created deeper insight into my own taken for granted knowledge and how I embraced new knowledge. This has come about as I have negotiated the process of keeping a strong sense of self whilst being open to influences that offer new and different perspectives. As a result, I have a better appreciation of how my existing worldview determines what I selectively embrace and discard; therefore, my own epistemological perspective acknowledges that subjectivity is present and impossible to remove; that reality needs to be understood in context and time.

As I explored how my identity may affect my position with and access to my study participants, I referred to researcher reflections shared by Hall (2004) and Bhopal (2001) from their work with South Asian women. Hall and Bhopal examined their roles as group *insiders* and *outsider* in their respective studies of South Asian women in the U.K and the impact of situatedness on the research process. As a White English woman, Hall shared that she felt an insider as a women but sometimes felt an outsider due to her ethnicity. In her work with South Asian women to study their interaction with British immigration institutions and officials, Hall described how sometimes her outsider status worked against her by creating barriers to rapport and trust. Other times it facilitated trust because as an outsider of the community, she was less judgmental and the level of confidentiality she offered was more reliable. Despite her efforts to learn some South Asian vocabulary to build trust and rapport, Hall still found herself ostracized as an outsider sometimes. However, at other times her efforts to build bridges and offer assistance were helpful in building trust and rapport.

Bhopal found that in her work with British South Asian women experiencing domestic abuse, her shared ethnicity and dual cultures helped build trust. The participants were more willing to share their experiences because of a perception of “knowing”; that she implicitly understood their worldview, they felt less judged, and that there was less to explain (Bhopal, 2001, p284). Bhopal acknowledged that she too found it easier to understand their experiences through shared experiences, even if not with the issues of

domestic violence. While the physical identity opened access to the participants, Bhopal concluded that her personal experiences were of greater significance.

My personal experiences also situated me as both an insider and an outsider in my research with South Asian queer women. As a South Asian woman, I was an insider for both my gender and ethnicity. While born in India, I considered myself bicultural having grown up in the U.K. and these experiences helped me to build trust and rapport equally with participants born in India and the U.S. As such, I understood the implicit cultural pressures and expectations placed upon South Asian women whilst also understanding the challenges of negotiating two cultures that on the one hand can offer the best of both worlds, and on the other hand create tension in the process of negotiating conflicting demands. As an adult immigrant to the U.S., I shared some of the experiences of immigration, the challenges of adjustment and the emotional tugs of geographically dispersed close family ties.

As a heterosexual married woman who married within social norms, I appreciated the immense privilege this form of social acceptance gave me and the challenges facing someone who seeks to live outside them. As a mother of adult children, a daughter and son, I had an appreciation of expectations and aspirations South Asian parents may have for their children, while also experiencing both generational and cultural challenges of children who push my cultural and moral values. As a result, I could be an insider or an outsider. While I did not anticipate language being a barrier in this study, my fluency in a

South Asian language again helped to build connection through increased common understanding of South Asian cultural norms that might otherwise have been lost in translation. My involvement as an LGBT ally helped break down barriers, placing me as an insider, to help build rapport and trust as a researcher with genuine and long-term interest in their issues. My professional standing as a counselor contributed to my personal and professional credibility as a researcher, and my counseling skills assisted in helping to overcome barriers and concerns about sharing personal and difficult experiences.

As a heterosexual woman, I am an outsider and this posed barriers to firstly accessing the population and secondly gaining acceptance. The outward appearance of a *traditional* South Asian woman may have created the perception of someone who would not understand their worldview, resulting in a reluctance to share openly in interviews for fear of judgment. This was possibly more relevant for younger participants who might have been experiencing identity issues with their parents and so may be reluctant to meet with me by association. However, this might also have been an advantage as they may have seen me as a good sounding board to help them negotiate these very problems – just as Hall (2004) had found her outsider situation sometimes an attraction for some participants.

A greater awareness of my positionality as an insider and outsider brought about a better understanding of the power differentials that I needed to address as I worked with

my participants. As an outsider, I must overcome barriers to build trust and acceptance but as an insider, I was aware that I would already have some level of trust. This implicit trust came with the responsibility, discussed earlier, to be transparent with the participant. I endeavored to share with the participants these aspects of my history and the values that guided me, without unduly imposing myself on the research process, so that they may make an informed decision about participation in the research process and of what they may want to share with me. I also provided them with an opportunity to question and challenge aspects of these as they deemed fit in order to feel comfortable in their participation.

Methodology

Issues of Trustworthiness

A scholarly study is evaluated on the rigor and transparency demonstrated in its methodology and data. Qualitative research is specifically, evaluated on its level of trustworthiness, which is a reflection of its credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2014; Brisolara et al., 2014). Rigor represent the level of precision applied in ensuring alignment between methodology and the fidelity of data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 2013). The inductive and emergent nature of a qualitative research design inherently predisposes it to a high level of subjectivity, which can compromise the credibility and authenticity of the study data and results (Creswell, 2013). Because inductive inquiry attempts to answer the

research question from the worldview of the participant, the subjective lens of both the researcher and researched may compromise the quality of data collection, data analysis, and the reporting of the results (Creswell, 2013). It is essential then for a qualitative research design to incorporate measures to minimize the threats posed by this subjectivity (Creswell, 2013).

Feminist theory evaluates the rigor of a study on how consistently and thoroughly the feminist principles integrate into the research goals, research questions, and the research design. For Example: Reflexivity improves the quality of data, it helps to highlight inherent injustices and power differentials between the researcher and the researched, and it helps to avoid harm by minimizing the potential for silencing already silenced voices. Collaboration and the minimizing of power differentials improves the quality of data and it empowers individuals by giving them an advocating voice for how their information is used. The goals of feminist theory are to understand the lived experiences and to advocate for social justice. Therefore, the trustworthiness of this study depends on both the measures used to evaluate rigor of qualitative studies and accountability to the integration of feminist principles into the research design.

Study transferability and dependability are closely tied to a methodology that is specific, aligned, repeatable, and transparent (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2014). Transparency allows the reader to examine the rigor of the study for himself or herself. It allows the study to be repeated, so long as the methodology is specific and detailed

enough to satisfy following criteria: a) accurate replication, b) that the methodology is sufficiently well aligned to be dependable for providing the expected research outcomes, and c) that there is confidence that the methodology is practically repeatable (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2014).

Confirmability refers to the plausibility of the study outcomes; that they would be considered reasonable and realistic (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2014). Addressing these requirements strengthens the rigor of the inquiry, building confidence in a high level of credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2014). The overall trustworthiness of a study depends on the care taken to bolster the rigor and credibility of the study at all stages of the inquiry process in order to eliminate, or minimize, the impact of each point of weaknesses present in the research design (Creswell, 2013). This requires an awareness of the inherent weaknesses in the chosen research design and the specific actions that will help to minimize these threats to research trustworthiness. I identified threats to study trustworthiness and then took action at relevant stages of the methodology to resolve them (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2014).

A researcher does not come into the research process value-free (ACA, 2014; Brisolara et al., 2014; van Manen, 2014). The researcher brings her or his personal beliefs and values and a personal lens, framed by traditions and experiences, through which to understand truth and reality. In a phenomenological inquiry, which aims to capture the meaning of a lived experience from the worldview of the participant, the researcher's

subjective presuppositions pose a serious threat to the fidelity of the collection and analysis of data (van Manen, 1990; 2014). The researcher's subjective worldview can distort the way in which she or he *sees* or interprets the data. The ACA (2014) cautions researchers about harm caused to participants when researchers impose their own values and beliefs on them instead of respecting the worldview of the researched (A.1.).

Furthermore, phenomenological methodology places a heavy emphasis on the removal of researcher's subjective presuppositions so that the researcher's positionality allows for an open attitude to exploring the *pure* essence of the participants' lived experiences. Altogether, researcher's values and beliefs posed a serious threat to the trustworthiness of this phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990; 2014). From the feminist lens, researcher subjectivity not only compromises the objectivity of the data and analysis, it poses a hidden threat to reinforcing existing, or introducing new forms of, inequality in the research process that would undermine the study's capacity to genuinely advocate against injustice and oppression (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009).

Through reflexivity, a researcher becomes aware of his or her worldview, offering the opportunity to minimize its impact on the outcomes of the study (Creswell, 2013; Brisolara et al., 2014; van Manen, 1990; 2014). In practice, however, it is impossible to firstly identify all of one's subjective values and beliefs and secondly to suspend them consistently for the length of the study (van Manen, 1990; 2014). This is obstacle is

overcome by making the researcher's reflexivity transparent. The readers of the report may then make their own informed decisions about the researcher's influence on the research outcomes and the associated impact on the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990; 2014).

My values and beliefs reflect my biculturalism, combining both Western individualistic and Indian collectivist values. It is hard for me to separate them and articulate which part of me is Western and which is Indian, but I know from experience they are situationally and circumstantially dynamic. Humanitarian values and Western cultural mores inform my overall orientation to my outer world. Indian cultural traditions strongly influence my morals and beliefs guiding my personal life choices. As a first generation immigrant, I had uncomfortable experiences as an *other*, my later life experiences, however, were positive as I embraced my *otherness* as my *uniqueness*. As a counselor, I had a natural inclination to want to probe and understand the meaning and reasoning behind human behavior. A tendency for compassion and a desire to help or support individuals experiencing personal pain, injustice, or difficulties influenced how I related to others in such situations.

I had a cultural relationship to religion; I was not religious but fostered a strong spiritual connection. I believed all these influenced my interaction with the study participants, and I remained intentional to be self-aware in how they may distort the way in which I *hear* and respond to the data both in the interviews and in the analysis.

However, while I was self-aware to some degree, I appreciated that I knew myself best when I experienced incidents of countertransference in response to situations and events around me. These were particularly important, as they indicated that, for better or for worse, my personal values and beliefs had actively entered the research process. My counselor training and life experiences have given me a level of *in the moment* self-awareness, which helped me to understand my impact on the situation. I reflected through my journaling to understand its impact on the research process and the participants. If I assessed these responses to be relevant to the individual, I sought to be transparent with the participant so that they may have the opportunity to resolve it with me. The feminist lens considers the participants the experts on their lives, that they are a better judge of how others' values and beliefs affects their experienced marginalization (Brisolara et al., 2014). However, I accepted that some reactions remained subconscious, and so remained unaddressed.

I, therefore, kept a journal throughout this study in order to capture my responses to: a) understand my conscious reactions, b) identify underlying subconscious reactions, and c) create transparency in the data by disclosing subconscious thoughts and experiences that might have had an impact on the trustworthiness of the study. Bradbury-Jones (2007) demonstrates the use of Peshkin's *Is* as a way to create insight through journaling. Bradbury-Jones argued that while simply keeping a journal may illicit some degree of insight, a researcher would benefit from intentionally creating self-awareness

so that he or she can incorporate it into the research process while it is in progress.

Peshkin (as cited in Bradbury-Jones, 2007) suggested the voice of subjectivity takes on an *I* and that there are six discretely characterized *Is*: ethnic maintenance, community maintenance, E-pluribus-unum, justice seeking, pedagogical-meliorist, and non-research human. Bradbury-Jones (2007) demonstrated her own method of reviewing her previous journaling each time she wrote a new entry to help identify insights in relation to those six *Is* and to reflect on the impact they were having on her approach to the research process. She was then able to adjust her approach if required or make transparent if she could not. I used this method of reflexive journaling in this study. In addition, where needed, I triangulated my research findings, analysis, and assertions with my dissertation committee.

Ethical Procedures

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversees research applications to protect the rights of participants taking part in the study. It is particularly concerned with the protection of vulnerable and marginalized populations; South Asian queer women are a vulnerable and marginalized population. I provided the IRB with details of how my research design addressed the safety and confidentiality of my prospective participants and the measures that I would take to protect their rights. I included with my application a copy of my proposed consent form and the flyer for marketing the research. The IRB made some additional recommendations for participant safety; I applied these as

recommended. The IRB approved my application to conduct the study on 10.15.2015 and the approval number is 10-15-15-0073428. IRB approval also contributes to the integrity and trustworthiness of the study.

Feminist principles and the ethical codes of the ACA (2014) and APA (2010) emphasize the importance of beneficence and nonmaleficence when conducting research with human participants, especially when working with highly vulnerable populations. These ethical codes specify that while participants should ultimately benefit from their participation in the study, they should also not suffer harm. Feminist theory goes further, endorsing a moral and ethical commitment to addressing discrimination and injustice through political advocacy; it considers this an essential component of study trustworthiness (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). The rights of participants, r must be protected and steps should be taken to avoid harm or remediate impact of harm where it cannot be avoided (ACA, 2014; APA, 2010; Brisolara et al., 2014). The importance of these ethical guidelines particularly resonated for this study because South Asian queer women are a highly marginalized and a vulnerable population. Shaw (2008) went further and argued that it was not enough for the researcher to simply comply with these ethical codes, instead he states that a researcher had to go beyond them by taking responsibility to advocate for the participant. Shaw (2008) stated that the participant is a novice and as such may not have the prerequisite knowledge to ask the depth and breadth of questions appropriate, therefore, the researcher

must take responsibility to ask them on behalf of the participant to safeguard participant well-being.

Johnson and Altheide (as cited in Shaw, 2008) prompted even deeper reflection on the part of the researcher. They suggested there are five types of ethics that should inform qualitative inquiry: research ethics, intellectual ethics, professional ethics, corporate ethics, and personal ethics. Shaw (2008) stated that the last was most influential; one's personal ethics will determine one's response to other ethical decisions. In light of that, Shaw suggested that a researcher should reflect on his or her personal ethical behavior outside of research and then consider how that will affect her or his approach to research.

Feminist theory echoes these same principles as it asks researchers to take *responsibility* by adopting a moral and ethical stance to the process of inquiry and the aims of the research outcomes (Brisolara et al., 2014). It requires a researcher to practice reflexivity to make conscious and address her or his impact on the study and the research participants, giving particular attention to underlying values, biases, and power differentials that could harm the wellbeing of the participants. In a similar vein, phenomenology, too, requires a researcher to be mindful of his or her orientation to both the phenomenon and the participants in the study. Van Manen (1990) described phenomenological research as an attentive practice of thoughtfulness with a particular attention to a caring attunement. He further suggested that a researcher makes explicit the

way in which she or he orients to the phenomena because the interest with which the researcher comes to the study will influence her or his approach. In light of having examined the issues of research rigor and ethical practice important for the trustworthiness of this study, I concluded that the research question, principles of the theoretical orientation, and the research methodology were complimentary and so offered the possibility to conduct a rigorous investigation.

Summary

Hermeneutic phenomenological methodology informed the research design to study the lived experiences of queer South Asian women. Hermeneutic phenomenology uses descriptive texts of lived experience to provide insight into the meaning of that experience. This introduces a subjectivity, which threatens the trustworthiness of the study. Specific orientation and positioning of the researcher are essential elements of this methodology that contribute to the trustworthiness of the study. Hermeneutic phenomenology requires an open attitude and a suspension, or transparency, of researcher presuppositions; researcher reflexivity occurs throughout the duration of the study to understand the subjective impact of the researcher on the study outcomes. Feminist principles provide the theoretical framework to guides the inquiry. Feminist research goals focus on issues of women, especially discrimination, power differentials, oppression, marginalization, and the impact on relationships due to their gender. Feminist

goals require the researcher to take a moral and political stance to advocate, so the orientation of the researcher is again an essential element of study's trustworthiness.

The research design addressed ethical issues to avoid harm to participants and to safeguard their rights. It also incorporated requirements for study trustworthiness as dictated by the methodology and the theoretical framework. Lastly, the research design included steps to optimize data authenticity, quality, and reliability. In Chapter 4, I discuss the practical implementation of this research design, the collection and analysis of data, and the major themes that answer the research question.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of same-sex attracted South Asian women residing in the United States. A review of the literature identified a number of specific themes of possible interest. Related to these women's immigrant status, issues concerning acculturation, discrimination, and the intersection of multiple identities were a common underlying theme. Additionally, their South Asian cultural values and beliefs had a significant influence in molding their identity development and subsequent adult life experiences. Mental illness associated with these life stresses was becoming more visible in the South Asian population but the use of mental health services remain disproportionately low. In light of these findings, I developed the following subquestions to direct the inquiry process:

RQ1 How do South Asian queer women define their sexual identity?

RQ2 What do South Asian queer women believe to be their most significant challenges?

RQ3 What strengths do South Asian queer women most value in themselves in their lived experiences?

RQ4 How have their familial relationships influenced their sexual identity development?

RQ5 What support networks do South Asian queer women use or value most in their identity development and lived experiences?

Setting

In this chapter, I describe the strategies deployed to recruit participants for the study, data collection and analysis procedures, and the results of data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of data trustworthiness. All of these events proceeded to plan, as described in chapter 3 and the IRB document. There were no significant deviations to negatively impact the role or well-being of the participants, or the quality of the data and analysis.

Demographics

All participants identified themselves as being of South Asian descent and same-sex attracted. They ranged in age from 19 to 46. Five participants were born in the United States. Two participants immigrated to the United States with their parents at age two while the remaining three immigrated to the country with their parents in early adolescence. Most participants highly educated. One has a doctorate degree, four have Master's degrees, and one is a graduate student. Of the other participants, one has a Bachelor's degree, two are current undergraduate students, and one had opted out of her undergraduate degree. Sexual identity status ranged from being out to a few friends to being out to family and community. (See Table 1 for individual participant demographics.)

Table 1

Individual Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Education	Immigration Status	Identity Disclosure
Siya	Mid-twenties	Master's student	Emigrated as an adolescent	Out to friends, parents, and a few close extended family
Riya	Late-twenties	Did not complete Bachelor's degree	Emigrated as an adolescent	Out to friends, parents, and select extended family
Nargis	Mid-twenties	Master's degree	Emigrated as an adolescent, returned to Pakistan at age 18	Out to friends and parents
Lakshmi	19	Undergraduate student	Emigrated as an infant	Out to friends
Shreya	20	Undergraduate student	Born in the United States	Out to friends, parents, and a few close family
Seema	Mid-forties	Master's degree	Emigrated as an infant	Out to friends, parents extended family, and community
Amrit	Mid-thirties	Doctoral degree	Born in the United States	Out to friends, unspoken and not acknowledged but out to parents and close extended family
Saanvi	Mid-twenties	Undergraduate degree	Born in the United States	Out to friends, parents, and close extended family
Priyanka	Mid-twenties	Master's degree	Born in the United States	Out to friends and sibling
Joyti	Mid-thirties	Master's degree	Born in the United States	Out to friends, parents, and siblings

Data Collection

Following approval for the study from the IRB on 15th October 2015, recruitment for study participants was advertised on 19th October 2015 on the listserv of a large a South Asian LGBT organization and the listserv of a South Asian queer women's group. The invitation to participate included the criteria for participation; contact details; a copy of the IRB approved consent form; and a request to pass the information to other relevant groups or individuals who may be interested in, or fit the criteria for participation. This first advertisement of the study yielded five participants and a further two participants came forward through referrals from one of these five participants. In order to protect the privacy and rights of referrals and to avoid perceived pressure to participate as a result of a personal contact from me, I requested that my details were passed onto referrals and that they contact me directly themselves if they were interested in participating in the study. In early December 2015, I reached out again to the same two groups but this did not generate any additional participants. At the end of December 2015, I advertised the study in a national listserv of an Asian American Psychological Google group and this generated one participant. I recruited the ninth participant from within my LGBT circle, and a friend via email introduced the last one to me after she had agreed with him to participate in the study. In total, I recruited 10 participants.

All participants made their first contact with me via email. For their convenience, I again attached the consent form to my first email responding to schedule a meeting

time. All participants were comfortable participating in the study; consequently, these first meetings transitioned to first interviews for data collection once the participant had signed the consent form. I answered additional questions about the study and participation as requested by participants prior to them signing the consent form, but most participants had few if any questions or concerns. Some participants were interested to get to know me better and understand my motivation for pursuing this research. Again, these discussions occurred either prior to signing the informed consent or prior to the start of the interview.

I conducted the interviews in various locations including public spaces, private meeting rooms, participants' homes, and my home. A time and location most convenient and comfortable to the participant was set for all the interviews. In total, I conducted 16 interviews across ten participants. Twelve interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded and the remaining four took place via Adobeconnect video conferencing. With permission from the participants, all four of these interviews were video recorded. All recordings proceeded without problems except one in which the audio recording cut off after 11 minutes. I discovered this after the event but the participant kindly offered to redo the interview. Short delays in sound sometimes occurred in the video conference interviews sometimes; however, they posed no significant problems for communication or rapport during the interview.

Interview duration times ranged from one hour to two and half hours, although the actual meeting times were often longer than the recorded interview times due to social interaction, administration, and information sharing. The structure of the interview provided participants sufficient time to describe their experiences and adequate opportunity for follow up questions to obtain depth and clarity for each experience. While one participant was emotional during her two interviews, and others were emotional at certain points during their interviews, no participant visibly showed signs of, or verbally shared, experiencing any undue distress as a result of talking about their experiences either during or after their interviews.

Only one participant showed interest in receiving a transcript of her interviews. I provided these transcripts to her on a USB in a subsequent meeting arranged specifically for that purpose. However, she declined the opportunity to edit the transcript, citing a lack of time as her reason. There was a mixed response to the artwork part of the data collection. All participants expressed a keen interest in creating a personalized piece of artwork, however, due to prior commitments and a lack of time, only four participants provided a sample. These four artworks created valuable additional data that contributed to a broader and deeper understanding of their lived experiences. I incorporated data from these artifacts into their individual stories, but a separate discussion follows at the end of the final individual narrative that describes how the artifacts enhanced the data collected from these participants describing their lived experiences.

The feminist theoretical orientation places a strong emphasis on minimizing power differentials, including those inherent in the research process between researcher and researched (Brisolara, et al., 2014; van Manen, 2014). With this in mind, I paid particular attention to my orientation whilst interacting with the participants, In addition to the actions described early to safeguard their rights, and confidentiality, I gave particular attention to building rapport with each participant. This was extremely important as it firstly enhanced the quality of data, by breaking down barriers that inhibit disclosure, and secondly, it helped minimize power differentials in the researcher/researchee relationship.

I openly shared information about myself when participants were interested to know and this most often led to a realization of shared interests, both personal and professional, or common histories. This initial social interaction offered a comfortable way to build rapport and trust such that the interviews became privileged moments of intimacy with each woman as she shared her very personal life experiences. Consistently, the participants expressed their excitement about the study, reporting that they considered their participation worthwhile in furthering the well-being of their population. This, and their endorsement of the study as a much-needed resource to support their population, further smoothed the way to building rapport with the participants in the interviews. The interviews were mutually beneficial, many of the women expressed awareness of new personal insights and a cathartic consolidation of their sexual identity development as

result of revisiting current and past experiences. All participants were articulate, thoughtful, and they shared their experiences openly and extensively, providing valuable vivid examples to illustrate their experiences. I believe that, as well as the positive connection I felt with each participant during the interviews, suggests there was trust and rapport in these relationships and that I did address the power differentials between the participant and myself through these efforts.

I manually transcribed all the recordings of the interviews verbatim. While this was a lengthy and slow process compared to using a software application or sourcing it out to an agency, the methodical process provided valuable, quality time to immerse myself in the data. I believe this is what van Manen (2014) referred to as the *fertile environment* in which the researcher is wholly oriented toward the phenomenon, thereby creating a saturated and yet open mind for hermeneutic phenomenological analysis from which insights and meanings can sprout (van Manen, 2014). Listening intently to the recordings reestablished rapport with the participant, allowing for timely reflections as I became closer to both the participant and her data. As I worked through the transcriptions, I often had questions in response to the dialogue I was hearing and I was surprised to find that, most times, I went on to actually ask those questions next in the interview. This leads me to conclude that the process of transcribing did allow me to authentically re-experience the interview and again embed myself in the depth of

the narrative. I next discuss the individual narratives of the participants followed by the analysis of cross-participant experiences. I replaced participant identities with pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. The narratives include substantial in text quotes in order to bring out the authentic voices of the women.

Participant 1: Siya

At the time of the study, Siya was in her mid-twenties and a postgraduate student who had immigrated to the United States as a young adolescence. We met for two interviews in meeting rooms booked at her university, which Siya had kindly offered to do of her own accord. She presented as a confident, open, and friendly young woman, naturally facilitating rapport between us. Siya was keen to get to know me, and my motivation for the study. We spent some time enjoying this discussion and building rapport before starting the interview. Siya stated that she was excited about participating in the study, even though discussing her experiences brought up difficult emotions for her. Siya was still in the middle of navigating a difficult coming out process, many times during the interview she became tearful. The issue of confidentiality was important to her and I spent time reassuring her of the measures put in place to safeguard it. I began the interview by asking her about her South Asian identity. She stated that, "If I were ever to identify myself I would solely identify as South Asian.... I say I'm Indian but I'm a U.S. citizen." An integrated identity happened gradually over time:

I spent a lot of time washing away my accent um, trying to fit in, like trying to buy the right stuff.... and I realized this actually through my relationship with my current partner..... I can really *own* this because I have first-hand stories of celebrating these festivals and experiencing what it means to be Indian.... and I don't see any shame in that and why I have spent so long running away because you think that assimilation means that you leave behind what you, what was once yours but that's not the case anymore and I'm getting more comfortable with my *South Asian identity* again.

She defined her sexual identity as *queer*. Despite being in a committed relationship of 18 months with a woman, Siya could not completely discard any attraction to men. She stated that in her past relationships with men, she had not physically invested and this rationalized was “why it is difficult for me to completely hash out the possibility of me being sexually attracted to men.” Siya came to acknowledge and accept her queer sexual identity at the age of 23, which as she reflected on her early experiences, was ten years after her first attraction. She recalls feeling an instantaneous attraction to her school friend, which she “immediately disconnected from.” She described the unease these feelings created for her:

I actually broke off our relationship shortly after that because in that instance some part of me scared me so much that I was so *attached* to her.

Um, and that same instance kept happening with me with a couple of other female friends to where I felt like I was so attached to that person. Um, like, it scared me, but I never defined it as attraction so, in my head it was like this friendship is just getting too weird. And I do not need to be friends with this person anymore.

Siya shared that the first time her attraction to women fully resonated with her was during a conversation with her sibling about their romantic relationships; she found herself saying, “You love whoever you love.” The acceptance of this thought allowed her to share it with her best friend and the simple act of verbally declaring her attraction to girls gave her:

Just this logical coming to a conclusion.... It was like the most authentic moments I’ve had.... It was a truth that was knocking around in me for a long time, for ten years.... It was liberating to say it out loud. Um, a little bit scary, um, because I didn’t know what it meant. But it felt so good that any hesitation was overcome by this feeling of I’m *free*.

However, coming out to her parents has been a painful and conflicted process for both parties and their relationship was still strained at the time of the interviews. Prior to her sexual identity disclosure, Siya had enjoyed a close, loving, and supportive relationship with her parents, “my dad and I have been pals, my mum and I have also been like really good friends.” They had encouraged her to be independent and successful

in life and were happy to provide the support she needed to achieve this. It had been an open relationship, particularly between Siya and her mother, “I’ve always felt open to tell her everything what’s happening in my life, and while it was on safe grounds while I was dating men, I’ve never held anything back from her. I’ve had to from my dad, but not from my mom.”

However, when she came out to her parents, their reaction had been one of disbelief, “*what, no....* we’ll take you to a doctor and this can be fixed.... you’re not gay.” They seemed to think it was a choice that could be remedied as her mother implored her “don’t do this.... don’t go into *their* (emphasis added) world.... you need help because you have severe, ah, inferiority complex.” She received conflicting messages from her parents, “my mum still wants us to be a family.... her thing is like *please* come back to us.... and my dad’s thing is like, either you’re going to return to me the daughter I had a year ago.... or I have no interest.” Siya said she received “these ridiculous text messages” from her mother, “just a load of emotional blackmailing.... about how I’m going down the wrong path because of the people I’m getting advice from, about how she’s dying and she hopes not to die before her parents because they deserve better.” The stress of this emotional turmoil was taking its toll on her:

I’m kinda getting in this place where I’m kinda getting angry about everything and that’s not conducive any more. And that’s why I’ve, I think I just need to stay

away from home for a bit, which again they're going to see as like you are taking advice from the wrong people, why are you not coming home.

Siya initially rejected her parents' fears about telling her grandparents about her sexual identity, she told them "if they love me they'll be OK with this," but over time, she became more realistic:

That's a very American mentality, this is where you see a bit of the cultural clash right, this, it's this inability to, like inability to understand, or this naivety in completely discounting the response of, of the social backlash.... the conversation was basically I'm gay and you have to come to terms with this and my dad did not take that well at all.

Siya was desperate to make amends with her parents. She was willing to accommodate her parents to find mutually acceptable ways to integrate her sexual identity. At the same time, she did not underestimate her parents' resolve, "my parents see me as someone who is painfully selfish.... if I even realize what I am putting them through.... It's like you have chosen this this and you have chosen to make our life hell." The continued strain in their relationship left Siya ruminating. "In the same way that you don't think I'm your daughter I don't think you're the same parents that I had.... it's really hard to even remember what our relationship was before." When asked how she felt about her father no longer seeing her as the same daughter, she became tearful and replied:

I haven't been asked this question, so I've never answered this question even to myself. I think there's a level of truth to it that it's just really hard to come to terms with that, that like, your dad doesn't basically see you as the same person anymore and no amount of convincing is going to turn him around but his stubbornness and his inability to be a parent right now is so, *sad*.... Given the way they're acting towards me, it's easier to emotionally distance myself from them because they're not being parents.

In all of this turmoil, Siya considered her relationship with her girlfriend of eighteen months to be one of the most important and supportive. Friends have also been a valuable source of support during this time. While the majority of them are straight, her queer community, especially her South Asian queer community, has been particularly important for her sense of well-being. Syia reports that the South Asian queer community is not very visible, therefore, it was initially difficult to access but through it, she found her South Asian queer women's community. With the latter, she described it as "a really good place to get empathy.... I have these conversations and they're almost inherent that they get it.... there isn't this elephant in the room between us.... I know more and more I can be Indian *and* queer." On the other hand, in her interaction with non-South Asian queer groups:

There's a lot of times, it's like "Oh my God I can't believe you mom said that" (dismissive tone) and you're like "Of course my mom said that, put yourself in my mom's shoes for four seconds, but you can't."

Therefore, there is a lack of empathy because there is a lack of culture.

While Siya was out to a few selected extended family members who were supportive of her, there was some frustration with being closeted with the remaining community, "I would just like to be out but I can't out of respect to my parents," fearing judgment and loss of face for her parents through community gossip. This frustration has grown as she has experienced increasing pressure from within the community about her plans for marriage. This has put a further strain on her hidden identity; consequently, she has scaled back her involvement within the South Asian community. As Siya contemplated her conflicted relationship with her parents, her relative financial independence has been a source of some security in case the conflict did not get resolved, but she added:

My parents and family relationships are extremely important to me on all levels, um, my family has been extremely loving and supportive towards me for the last twenty five years.... I would like for that to continue, I would like for my kids to have grandparents.

Reflecting on her experiences in the two interviews, Siya stated that despite the emotional upheaval:

It's been a positive experience. That's the thing right, as you hear yourself say things out loud, it was like my coming out where it didn't really open me up until I said it out loud to somebody else.... every time I tell this story I consolidate it.... nobody has sat me down and asked me 'can you tell me in detail what it's been like for me in the last nine months and so that's why I think it's really helpful to revisit that.

Participant 2: Riya

At the time of the study, Riya was in her late twenties and working in information technology. She emigrated from India to the United States during her early adolescence. The first interview took place in a public setting and the second interview, for convenience and at her suggestion, took place at my home. I had previously met Riya a couple times in a group setting, so there was already some familiarity and trust for participating in the study. Riya presented as quietly spoken, unassuming, and thoughtful in sharing her story. As we discussed her South Asian identity, Riya stated that she "did not identify too much with it." She clarified this by saying that even as a young child in India she associated the Indian identity with stereotypical gendered roles in which "you're supposed to get married... supposed to have your *own* kids." Neither of these resonated with her and she did not agree with the stereotypical division of roles amongst married couples. However, she added that she did identify with the importance of family

and the shared experiences of immigration, “in terms of the struggle we go through or the expectations that our parents have with us.” So at this point, she was not sure how she defined her South Asian identity; it was still evolving.

Describing her sexual identity, Riya said:

I call myself gay because that’s the easiest thing to say to somebody.... not to drag a conversation out of it because then if I say I’m bi (laughs) then it’s “oh why aren’t you with a guy” and blah blah blah. I don’t want to go there. I am attracted to both men and women but another reason why I call myself gay is because I feel more emotionally connected with women verses men.

Since the age of 16, Riya had been in a seven-year heterosexual relationship, which was also her only dating experience. She first consciously acknowledged a same-sex attraction at age 23. She recalls it as an innocent gentle touch that “kinda what planted the seed, or, watered the seed that was already there... it felt like I could be *safe* in that”. Reflecting back on her childhood experiences, Riya remembered just two specific incidents. The first had been a strong emotional attachment, at age ten or eleven, to a teacher at school in India:

I’d just hang out there, just see all the teachers, I would see her, and that would just make my day, so I did that every single day. Um, all my female

friends knew that I was crazy about her and I basically said “Oh, I love her” but I didn’t know what that meant.

The second had been in eighth grade when a boy innocently teased her about her very short hair. Riya recollected thinking:

Wait, I think something is different about me and I don’t want people to know and I need to hide this, so I asked a guy out that very same year.... it was just like something very silly but for me it was like *Wow*.... I didn’t want to deal with it.

This experience seemed to have touched something uncomfortable, albeit unconscious, in her, which she instinctively felt the need to hide. That relationship, however, was very innocent lasting only one month; she said they “never even touched hands.” Arriving in the United States, she experienced just one crush, on a boy, which developed into the seven-year relationship.

Despite being with her boyfriend for so long, Riya believed, “(my) boyfriend and I were definitely not a good match but also it was like, I always felt like I had to try something, like I had to try to *feel* something.... This feels comfortable wasn’t there.” Whilst acknowledging the love in the relationship, she broke up with her boyfriend and started exploring her same-sex attraction. Her first contact in the queer community, a South Asian gay man, at a prominent LGBT bookstore in town introduced her to the South Asian LGBT organization and the gay social scene. Siya began exploring her

sexuality through casual encounters at bars, but “still wanted a more genuine experience.... I didn’t just sleep around, I wanted to have a real experience, like a real relationship experience but I didn’t know how to do that... I really didn’t know how to date, um, so it was really frustrating.” Feeling unsatisfied with the experience, she agreed to return to her ex-boyfriend to try again:

So we got back together and there was genuine love there but about six months in I started to struggle and started having feelings for women again. Um, very strong feelings and I told him about that but he was just like “yea it’ll pass” and I’m pretty sure he was coming from a fear place.... I cheated on my boyfriend while I was with him and um, I think I just created the situation where he was like he would have to break up with me.

Riya returned to exploring her sexuality. However; with only one queer South Asian friend for support, the psychological and emotional stress of the experience created an unstable time of abusing alcohol; eventually, creating a sense of spiritual dissonance:

Words come out my mouth... it didn’t sound like me, I was like trying to be like somebody else... wait who the f**k was this person... it was reality and reality became scary, because I didn’t know what it was... I didn’t know where I was going.... I would have to tell people, then this is

who I would *be*, then would I be treated differently and how would family react... Oh s**t, not, not me.

Riya reported significant conflict with her parents during her childhood; estranged from her parents for a few years by then. Now becoming emotionally and psychologically distressed, she felt she “just couldn’t go on with that. I just had to go back and fix it and make sure we had a harmonious relationship... it’s just difficult for me to be emotionally stable if, if things are not um, harmonious with people I care about.” Despite moving back in with her parents, her psychological and emotional health continued to deteriorate and she finally decided to check herself into a meditation retreat for nine months:

When I moved there I really felt like I wasn’t living my life, like the life I was living wasn’t my life. It was so, I just felt so disconnected from whoever I was at the core, I don’t even know who that was. Um, so living there meditating so many hours a day, um, and feeling, and hearing people, ah, caring about my opinions and whatever, my confidence just sort of felt, felt up, or built up for the very first time. Um, felt more in touch with myself, felt more authentic, I was more honest.

She came out to herself while at the retreat, at age 25, and she came out to her parents in the last year, mainly because she and her girlfriend of a year were planning to get married. Her parents accepted her coming out and since then had

made slow but intentional efforts to include her identity and her partner. When asked if she had been surprised at the time by their reaction, she said:

In a way yes, and in a way no. Um, yes because, I mean they're Indian (laughs). That's why yes, like 'wow, OK, cool' um, but no because we'd already been through so much together. Yea, I feel like they may be, well let's not create more tension, you know, let's work with what we have, that may be one aspect of it. Ah, another is I think they probably already knew, you know at some level. It's just like coming, just like putting it on the table now everybody gets to see it, our relationship has improved, like by the time I told them we were on good terms.

Furthermore, Riya believed that as a part of reuniting with her parents she "had set them boundaries multiple times, (and) they were starting to respect that. I think that also had a lot to do with it." As a part of this acceptance and their improved relationship, she acknowledged that her parents shouldered some of the burden of managing her coming out to extended family. Riya recognized that they shielded her against pressure from extended family and this made things easier for her. These were significant family members she did not want to deal with:

Kind of like hide behind them when it comes to coming out to certain people ... but my parents talk to these people... and so will they feel pressured to share this with these, you know, family members and people

of their generation and older generation.... And that's probably stressful... (I don't) know what's going on and they won't share it with me because they never do.

As a result, she is mindful of the challenges her parents have faced and the lack of support available for them. Riya recalls her father's frustrations:

I think it was coming from a bit of an angry place or a frustrated place or like a 'not knowing what the f**k I'm supposed to do' place. Ah, he was like so what are we supposed to tell people like, give me a script (laughs).

Riya had come out selectively to family in the United States and India.

Her decision to disclose was on her assessment of safety, the individual's ability to be accepting, and/or the relative impact of disclosure on that person. For Example: Riya believed her grandparents were too old to understand her sexual identity. In this case then she saw no reason to come out to them, to protect them from unnecessary distress in their short remaining life. Despite Riya's challenges along the way, and some continuing challenges, it was heartening to see her at such a comfortable and stable place with her sexual identity and positively embracing its continued integration.

Participant 3: Nargis

At the time of this study, Nargis was in her mid-twenties and she worked in the field of justice and advocacy for marginalized populations. This mutual

interest naturally provided a comfortable discussion for building rapport and getting to know each before beginning the interview. We found we had much in common in our respective areas of work. Having conducted research herself, she was keen to support the study. She was empathetic to the challenges of finding participants for such studies, especially as an outsider to the research population.

The first interview took place in my home, at the suggestion of Nargis, and the second interview to discuss her art project was in a public space. Nargis did not have the time to create original artwork but she provided a shot glass printed with *I Love Vaginas*. This opened up another interesting discussion of how she defined her sexuality and the ongoing questions that posed for her regarding both her sexuality and her gender. Nargis immigrated to the United States from Pakistan, completed four years of high school, returned to Pakistan, and then returned to the United States for college. She described herself as essentially Pakistani, stating that she connects most strongly with immigrants who have also experienced “the loss of a home” and she saw herself as being distinctly different from South Asians born and raised in the United States. She described this difference as:

I grew up back in Pakistan whereas a lot of the Desi folks here have grown up here but you know they went in the summers and traveled, tend to have those access points, and so they observe that.... it's (South Asian identity)

kind of like an accessory. So they whip it out when they want to use it.... otherwise they pretty much act like White folks.

That said though, her identity appeared a little more complex as she added, "I'm not sure how to define my culture." She said:

I will be Pakistani until I have lived in the U.S. for.... half of my life.... at that point I can say, I mean, I say I'm a Pakistani American officially, but then I'll be more accepting of the Americanness of my identity.... Then I won't be quick to say no actually I'm not, I have a passport but I don't consider myself an American. But it depends on who you talk to because my mother would say I'm, actually both my parents would say I'm American.

Nargis considered herself privileged, both when she was in Pakistan and in the United States because of her financial means and her independence. This sense of privilege has influenced how she has experienced her gender in the two cultures. In Pakistan, she was "raised as a boy. I was allowed to do things boys did... I think that was what the problem was because I was treated like someone of equal value." Consequently, her independence and raised power status made her masculine and privileged. In the United States, however, "depending on who I meet, I do sound privileged in the U.S. based on education, skin color, um, access opportunity, and economic standing." Privilege, in this case, was associated with socioeconomics instead of gender, in which

case her female gender was not under question. For Nargis then, she perceived cultural, gender identities changed simply depending on where she was, just because of the interpretation of her independence and financial means. Nargis described herself as a queer Pakistani American, cisgender and able bodied. She recalled that while she had varied experiences of attraction and experimentation with both males and females from the age of about six through to college, there had been no conscious recognition of her having a fluid sexual identity at any time during that period.

Acceptance of her fluid sexuality finally came at the age of 23, by which time she had been in a 3 year heterosexual relationship, engaged to be married for half of that time, and had had three short relationships with women - all while she was at college. Her heterosexual relationship, which had been abusive, ending badly. Her same-sex relationships had been brief, she had not connected well with the women, and this had led her to dismiss the possibility of being queer. The defining moment of acceptance for her came when she found herself strongly attracted to Ellen DeGeneres, a lesbian television personality.

Nargis stated her sexuality at this time was fluid and, therefore, complicated. It was hard for her to firstly understand the nature of her attractions and secondly to know how to define her sexuality. At different times, she had named herself heterosexual, pansexual, gay, and queer. Nargis has had relationships with cisgender men, cisgender

women, and gender fluid women. This fluidity in attraction has led to some soul searching:

I don't know, I think it's just trying to figure out who I am because I'm still wondering, is this still just a phase? Because how do you *know*, I feel the explanation that I like vaginas or I like how women feel is simple but it's not good enough for me.

Some of the confusion Nargis believed was due to that she was still exploring sex. While liking penetrative sex, she did not connect well emotionally to men. She knew she wanted more than binary because she connected emotionally to women. However, at the same time she was attracted mostly to masculine presenting women, her one long-term same-sex partner transitioned to a man. Trying to make sense of it, she said, "(I) realized I definitely want to be with someone who has a vagina." She has since used this rationale as a way to understand and define her sexuality. However, the complexity of her attractions has created uncertainty, which in turn has led to the "imposter syndrome." Altogether, this had culminated in some disappointment and confusion:

I understand eventually people change but I don't know if something so ingrained (sexuality) can change, or should change, or what it means if it changes. But sometimes I think life will be really easy if I just stay with a man... I can hopefully have kids, so not to have to worry about those other

issues, not to have to worry about people looking and staring and questioning my family and all that stuff.

When Nargis first came out to her parents two years ago, her mother responded with a dismissive “when it gets serious, we’ll talk about it.” Later when Nargis disclosed that she was in a relationship with a woman whom she wanted to marry, she caught her mother off guard, “Oh, I thought this was a phase,” and this quickly escalated to emotional outbursts in which her mother blamed others for leading her daughter astray. Emotional manipulation followed:

You’re taking up the cause of these gays.... what is wrong with you... why are you making your life more difficult... I will not accept it. If you get married to a woman, I will not accept you; I will not let you come to this house.... I will not be able to show my face in the community.... The family will not come to your wedding.

While Nargis acknowledged that her mother would not reject her completely, Nargis knew her mother would make her feelings known in other ways, “I know she will treat my partner very poorly.... and know that they will never be in the family.” Outside of the issue of her sexuality, Nargis had a very close and supportive relationship with her parents stating that, “my parents play a *huge* role in my life. So I know whenever they pass, I will have a total, full on breakdown.” With regard to her feelings about her

mother's reaction and in an effort to manage the conflict her disclosure brought, she stated that:

A lot of anger used to be around it but now I just am accepting, it is what it is. And sometimes it makes me really sad and then I wish, you know, what if I wasn't gay, or what if I won't be, just to make her happy.

When asked what it would mean to her to conform rather than validate her sexual identity, Nargis replied:

I copped out, a coward. I think that's why I fight for it so viciously. I don't ever want to say that I, like I'm listening to myself talk and this is not concrete stuff that I'm saying which is frustrating.

Her relationship ended not too long after her disclosure to her mother, therefore, for now:

It's become a non-issue, I don't push it, she doesn't push it. But there will come a point when it will become an issue again. But right now it's not; plus, I'm doing all the things she wants me to do.

Despite the challenges with her parents, Nargis was confident in expressing her identity. She had indirectly come out to extended family in Pakistan through her Facebook page and this resulted in them defriending her, "which is fine, I'm removed enough not to care. But it does sting a bit." However, Nargis acknowledged her privileges as straight passing, saying that she intentionally used them to manage disclosure with

regard to both her identity and her safety. Amongst the multiple identities Nargis juggles, her Islamic identity has always been important but she says, “A lot of people don’t believe I’m Moslem because I’m gay” and that “hurts.” Similarly, dating across ethnicities, she found that:

It’s more a question of race. It’s more like people saying why do you date Black people? Um, both from the Desi communities and Black communities. But once I said this is who I am, this is who I’m dating there’s been no question or if there has I just brush it off and forget it.

She has also found herself conflicted in another of her important identities, her political orientation. Nargis’s frustrations stems from feeling silenced around her gay identity on the one hand, “feeling this need in me to say no no look at me, I’m gay, I’m gay” and then on the other hand complaining “why do I have to explain I am gay, why does my sexual orientation need to be so public?” Our second interview, to discuss Nargis’s artifact, began with Nargis sharing, “since I last saw you a lot of realizations have happened randomly, so I’m just sitting here going like, I don’t know how to identify.” The introspections she shared in the first interview about her sexuality had taken on a more holistic dimension by the second interview to include her gender, especially in the context of socialized gender, roles, and privilege:

Growing up, I’m a girl, right, so this is what a girl should do and continuing this is what a woman should do, and I’ve never felt

uncomfortable with that. Um, and when I have felt uncomfortable, it's more because it's been oppressive than because it was because I'm a woman. So for me a woman is a mother, a caregiver, um, empowered you know, a multitasker, it's not an identity that is supposed to be oppressed.... But it's also seen as less than, you know, going out to work, so to speak.

Nargis is contemplative, reflective, continuously challenging herself to understand the complexities of her whole identity, her evolving identity. Trying to balance, or rationalize, these internal struggles with the constraints and demands of her culture and family seemed at times emotionally overwhelming. This evolving introspection was evident even between her first and second interview, suggesting it may continue for some time more. Amongst this uncertainty, the shot glass imprinted with "I Love Vaginas" may have been simple but it represented much needed stability for Nargis. The statement defined her sexuality when all other attempts and labels had failed. This was something tangible and meaningful that she could hang onto in the face of being "taught this is not what I want, so, therefore, this must be what I want."

Participant 4: Lakshmi

At the time of the study, Lakshmi was a 19-year-old undergraduate student. I interviewed with Lakshmi once, via a video conference. Lakshmi asked

questions about my history and then inquired after my motivation for the study. She then shared her own desire to pursue similar research in the future. Exploring these common interests built rapport and, since this was the first video conference interview, this casual exchange helped establish a comfortable rhythm to dialogue through the video connection. There were some initial problems with the screen freezing but this gradually resolved itself and Lakshmi was able to work through the initial difficulties. Lakshmi presented as soft-spoken and contemplative and she appeared at ease talking about her sexuality and experiences. She was an infant when her parents emigrated from India to the United States. Describing her South Asian identity, Lakshmi said she related most to her Indian and immigrant identity, even though it has not always been an uneasy relationship. Immersed in the Indian culture as a child, Lakshmi now states:

I don't feel like my identity is strongly Indian, I'm just starting to come round to it as I've grown up like, oh wait that's a part of my identity I want to reclaim. But most of my life I've very much been one of those people who, no I don't want to hang out with other brown people.... I'm really trying to work on it, I don't hold resentment to my South Asian identity but growing up immigrant and queer kind of thing. And I'm ready to kind of outgrow that thing but it's sort of hard. It's kind of weird.

She described her sexual identity as bisexual; explaining that “the queer part of my identity is something I hang onto more strongly in the way in which I present myself, think of myself.” Reflecting on her early same-sex experiences:

I think I had a lot of experiences that I chalked up as, straight people have those experiences too. I think there’s a lot of erasure with bisexuals where it’s like, no straight girls can get drunk and make out with each other and like yea, girls are pretty and we all think girls are pretty.

Lakshmi became involved in LGBT advocacy as an ally during this time, rationalizing to herself that it was just a natural extension of her growing feminist identity. Later, continuing to see herself an ally, Lakshmi interned with an LGBT law firm during her first year at college, but over time found herself uncomfortable with this role:

I don’t feel ethical any more like identifying as an ally, like having these feelings inside I can’t really brush them off any more... I thought I was lying for a long time. I was thinking, oh my God am I reverse justifying something, but then as I grew into the identity, I was like, nope, I’m definitely bi.

Despite this realization, some doubts remained about the authenticity of her identity. The identity fitted but the path of her identity development did not sit comfortably with her:

I actually came out before I was 100 percent ready and it's been kind of a process with like, I've never felt comfortable with: I was born this way and I kind of had a realization, because it feels like (it is) my *personality* (emphasis added) that's been cultivated over the years. It's like the part of me that's feminist, the part of me that's free spirited, part of me that's, I don't know, just being young, making mistakes and having a lot of friends in the queer community and for me that's what makes sense to me, that's how I identify and that's how I behave.

Lakshmi recalls feeling some anxiety around the validity of her sexual identity and some discomfort coming out to her friends:

Really nervous someone would maybe poke a hole in my story... I feel like the usual stories are that people will feel rejected but for me I was nervous because I was *fakely* trying to be accepted and I was like I don't want to invalid someone else's identity by *frivolous bisexual experimental phase*... I always felt I had something to prove, and I was like, I can't date guys, I can't date girls, I won't be properly bisexual, so for me it's like, what does this mean and how do I prove it to everyone.

Since the intersection of her identities did not fully match those of whom she saw as legitimate bisexuals, she found herself sitting on the periphery questioning the authenticity of her attractions. At this time, Lakshmi was still struggling with this internal

conflict with the authenticity of her sexuality, While Lakshmi was out to her friends, coming out to her parents was a very different matter:

The fact that they're not even OK with me dating guys is what precludes me from telling them I also date girls.... for me growing up in the West is dating White partners. That seems like a challenge enough for my dad.... I'm like, you're not comfortable with boys, you're not comfortable with race.... I can't even imagine the hurdle of settling down with a woman.... there's too much of a jump there.... It's kind of annoying because other than that I'm super close to my mom, she's like the person I run by everything and when I'm stressed she's like definitely the person in the world I'm most close to and I love and respect her.... and my dad's a supportive person too.

Lakshmi is sensitive to her parents' discomfort and general disapproval of anything related to sexuality. She said they perceived her dating outside of her community as just another bad influence that exposed her to a more liberal and promiscuous culture. Lakshmi recalled an experience in her adolescence that clearly illustrated the close connection that sexuality, shame, and honor have within the South Asian patriarchal culture. Later in her narrative, the enduring impact of such messages also becomes transparent. Lakshmi recalls that her extended family was very conservative and that, as a child, she desperately wanting to be Indian "enough" to be accepted by them, particularly by her older cousins whom she

dearly admired and wanted to emulate. However, in her innocence she secretly told her cousins about her first kiss with a boy. To her surprise, they became “super scandalized” by the revelation and they told her parents about it. Her mother then addressed this issue with her:

It was just an awkward thing and she was like mad.... I think she was embarrassed is what I think it was, it was almost like if I'd told her instead of my cousins she wouldn't have been mad.... a kind of super casual kind of thing and it came up and I remember being.... super embarrassed and it super sucked. And, I don't know, I feel like being embarrassed and my parents being awkward is a kind of like a good way to characterize how they are about me and sexuality in general.... I remember just being humiliated. I don't know, just knew my parents wouldn't approve, it was like, sexual activity.... there's clearly disapproval here and like, sexual activity is not good.

The humiliation had been so deep for Lakshmi that she went on to completely reject her Indian culture and distanced herself from the community. However, at the time of this study, Lakshmi was trying to reintegrate back into the South Asian community.

Looking back on this experience and her subsequent reaction to it, Lakshmi said:

I feel like I'm super angry about that because I went through these rebellious years and now I just *can't* make up the lost time, like I *can't*

reintegrate with my South Asian community, I'm so mad that I spent all those years, maybe people won't notice that I'm South Asian if I don't affiliate with stuff, maybe I can reflexively go far enough the other way (laughs). But that's so dumb, so sad.

Weighing up the odds of coming out to her parents, Lakshmi said she was in "no hurry to come out" to them. She was not in a committed relationship and she was still not fully comfortable in her bisexual identity. Being bisexual, her life partner might be a man, in which case she believed putting her parents through this ordeal might just be an unnecessary distress. If her life partner turns out to be a woman, then she would address it at the time. Protecting her close relationship with her parents was extremely important to her, she wanted to avoid any conflict that would jeopardize it:

I still subtly want to not offend them too much.... I would like for my end of the day home life, like when I a twenty eight or thirty to be something they can comfortably interact with and I basically don't see a way for that to happen and that sometimes stresses me out.

So unless it became a necessity, Lakshmi said, "it isn't the next burning step.... its twelve steps ahead of where we are." However, because of her LGBT activism, Lakshmi believed her parents did in fact have some sense of its real personal connection, "I don't feel like they're super mega in denial... (but) I think they're waiting with baited breath for it to happen." Lakshmi had a strong support network of heterosexual and queer friends but

none were South Asian, she said, “(I) never really talked about it (sexuality) in terms of my identity and how it like really hits close to home for cultural reasons.” With regard to her White LGBT spaces, “they are positive, I can talk to them about relationships and things and they’re good friends.” However, in the course of her conversations during this interview, she came to the realization that:

Man I never really get to talk to people about my parents not being comfortable with dating.... it’s really nice to share that stuff because I don’t feel my friend groups have time for that because everybody’s like, you’ve got to come out to your parents, it’s super important.

Lakshmi shared that, due to her experience in this interview, she had come to realize that she did not “have a space to talk about that stuff, where they intersect and maybe I’m missing that a little bit more than I thought.” Talking about her experience of the interview Lakshmi stated that she:

Thought it was really great. Um, whenever I have to convey something to someone else I start connecting the dots and like I have a lot of my dots connected through my queer life cycle just because I’m used to talking about it, but with this I started making connections, like my problems with my community, my apprehension with my parents and like an experience I had growing up and things like that.... I’m super glad that I had this forum to talk about it (laughs).

Lakshmi states that reconnecting to the South Asian community was one way to reintegrate her South Asian identity, but her experiences thus far suggested to her that it was not so easy and that the community was overly welcoming. She stated that the community had a “bad vibe” and that it was “intimidating” and “daunting” to approach.

Participant 5: Shreya

At the time of the study, Shreya was an undergraduate student. She was 20 years old and born in the United States. We had two interviews through video conferencing. In the second interview, Shreya discussed her poem, which touched on her sexual identity development. It was very touching to hear her passionate reading, conveying the strong emotions and meanings the poem held for her. After reading it, she expounded on her motivations and intentions behind the creation of the poem. Shreya is a passionate young woman; her passion reflected in everything that was important in her life. She shared extensively and easily and this made building rapport with her naturally easy. Shreya grew up with strong cultural influences at home, which included learning and performing classical Indian dance. Her South Asian identity has become increasingly more important to her as an adult, she said:

I’m so hungry and so curious to know more and to be more Indian and to learn Hindi.... I don’t feel satisfied with my knowledge and my

understanding of India ... and recognizing the person I am is shaped by American values as well.

Over time, Shreya had tried a number of labels to describe her sexual identity, including pansexual, bisexual, and queer. However, by this time she had abandoned the use of labels altogether, simply defining herself as *not straight*. She explained her reasoning for this:

People need to put you in a box to make sense, right, that's what people do. Like, so if I talk about a woman, oh she's lesbian, and if I start talking about men also and then, oh wait she might be bisexual, they like need to piece that together for themselves. And that's fine if that's what people need to understand things, um, I realize I don't care (laughs).... it actually really does not matter to me anymore and right now I'm in a relationship with a woman who I love very much. So to me right now that's what matters.

It was important to Shreya that, as a straight passing woman, her sexual identity was present as an integral part of how others experienced her. She, therefore, intentionally and subtly found ways to make that happen, whether through her dress or her language. For Shreya, both her Indian and sexual identities were equally important, but everything she heard in her family and her Indian community made them incompatible and mutually exclusive. She was desperate then to find some way to affirm

an identity that was both Indian *and* queer. To do this, Shreya turned to her Indian heritage:

Some of the things that I love about the Indian culture is that, um, historically it has been sexually fluid and I think that was really important to me as I began realizing... I don't have any immediate family members where I feel um, I can relate to specifically in this sense, so for me it's always been important to think about some ancestor who was, who wasn't straight, who did exist.... I am also the daughter of a long line of people who somewhere in there were not, not straight, dealt with this, and um, like I have thanks for them being here and I have them to thank for surviving.... I continue to pass on the legacy of my ancestors and of myself.... it was important to find as much information as I could to validate that.

As Shreya discussed her poem, she described the emotions she experienced at the time she came out to her parents. She described a deep emotional conflict. She spoke about the anguish of trying to reconcile the pain from her parents' rejection of her new identity with the strong attachment she shared with them as she stood her ground against them. The realization that this conflict changed everything she had taken for granted, everything she had grown up believing was unconditional, was a significant turning point for her:

I didn't feel at home, I didn't feel like going home, um, I stopped calling it home. I just referred to it as my parents' house and that's what I've been practicing since then because even though things have gotten better, I, I think it's important for me to recognize that might not be my home all the time, so it just didn't feel like, I didn't feel like a member of the family at all.

Shreya described how comforting it had been for her to acknowledge women ancestors in her family who were not straight, irrespective of whether they had been able to disclose or not. The fact that they survived gave her strength and a sense of belonging in her family. Culturally grounding the intersection of her identities gave Shreya the strength to weather the storm she had encountered when she came out to her parents. She had encountered conflict and strong opposition. Her parents struggled to firstly understand her sexual identity, secondly to deal with their own homophobia, and lastly to work out how to integrate her new identity into their lives. She had faced accusations of being selfish because she did not “understand what this means for the family... hurting multiple people... like this one thing you want affects a *lot* of people.” Shreya said of her father, “I think he literally was dumfounded, like I don't think he knew what to do with that information.... (he) doesn't understand me as a sexual being.” Of her mother Shreya recalled that:

She said she didn't believe, she didn't birth a daughter like this, that's not who I birthed, um, and that was painful for me to hear. But it was interesting because at the same time like, she was like I *love* you, I'm not giving up on you.

Shreya believed her mother had her own ulterior motive for this hope. Because Shreya is still very young, she said her parents saw her "in a relationship that's not going to last.... I wish they wouldn't talk about it like that because they'll just be like, hey when this relationship is over maybe you could try dating a man." Despite these concealed hopes, Shreya's parents had reached some level of acceptance of her sexuality by this time, but the process had been emotionally stressful for the whole family. Shreya said of the whole experience:

That's what it became, instead of I'm sharing an important part of my personality and my being... this is like some sexual kinky preference that I have.... A big part of my conversation before coming out was that I would finally stop lying to my parents, finally be free about this thing and it was almost like doesn't matter that I told them because um, it became this very shameful thing for my parents. And it was a secret that for my parents we don't talk about this. Like my parents absolutely refused to talk about it to anyone, I encouraged them to talk about it with their friends to help them and they *refused*, you know because they were, they were ashamed of it....

I was trying to become free in a sense and when I did it, it actually like trapped (me) in all these like notions of shame about what it meant to be not straight.

Altogether, Shreya found herself torn between herself and her parents, “I am my parents’ daughter and that made it really difficult but that’s also a really important relationship to me”. Throughout this difficult process, her sister had been a vital source of support, she:

Showed up every time, so she’s been very important in that sense.... she was never *not* supportive of me and she told me on multiple occasions, she said, look I’m on your side.... I didn’t want this to happen but she became sort of the liaison between my parents and I. Like I know my mom leans on her a lot, and she’s, she’s showed up every time.

Despite the emotional strain of managing her parents’ negative reactions, Shreya was concerned for the welfare of her parents and the obstacles they faced in navigating this journey. She had tried to provide support to ease their burden, she said:

Because my parents hadn’t told anybody, hadn’t tried talking to anyone if that would be useful, so I ended up talking to my parents and had a really long conversation with my dad about some of the big things that he saw as obstacles, well he was like, are you going to do adoption, how are you

going to have kids, you know like, how am I going to tell my parents, were some of the big ones.

This strong desire to find a place for the intersection of all her identities also drives her search for a South Asian queer women's community. She said:

At this point, I have very few friends that are not queer.... right now I'm on a search to find more South Asian queer women and to find that space.... that's never happened where I've been surrounded by them, that's my ideal situation If I compare at this point my relationship with like queer South Asian people they're obviously very different and fulfilling in an important way that my relationships with White queer people can never be, but I can't downplay how *incredibly* important those first few months were (with White queer women) in just my understanding of queerness.

However, simply being in a South Asian queer women's space was not enough: My politics is really important to me and people who are close to me we all have the same thinking as far as political and social justice issues.... there are other queer women of color in my life who aren't necessarily South Asian but are women of color who I feel really, really comfortable with in the same way.

Shreya's passion for an inclusive identity continued to evolve; as did her search to find spaces that affirmed the intersection of all her identities.

Participant 6: Seema

At the time of the study, Seema was in her mid-forties. She immigrated to the United States as an infant. Seema is softly spoken and gentle; the story of her lived experiences reflected her sensitive nature. Seema and I were already acquainted, having previously met a few times in group situations. The recording of her first interview cut off unnoticed soon into the interview but Seema was kind enough to redo the interview. Seema began by providing some context to her coming out experiences. She explained that when she came out, during the early 1990s, the LGBT and the South Asian communities in the United States were at different stages of their own development and that her narratives would reflect these histories. She recalled that growing up she identified most strongly with being Indian, rather than South Asian. In fact, South Asian was not a term she became familiar with until the latter part of her time at college, or perhaps even after that. There were few Indians where she grew up; so her school life and home life had been quite distinct. At home, they had maintained strong cultural ties, speaking only in her native Indian dialect. As a result she:

Had grown up very sheltered, so I was not like, even the things that normal kids would know, have done, like going over to their friend's house or hanging out, all of that, I had very limited experience of it

because I, um, my parents were so strict that I wasn't even allowed to go to slumber parties if my friends had a brother.

Seema said such a sheltered upbringing gave her a certain naivety about life experiences and relationships that significantly influenced her sexual identity development. The time of her formative years also had a bearing on her coming out experiences. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the LGBT community was not so widely accepted, especially being and it affected by its links to AIDS.

Seema identified as a South Asian queer woman, but added, "I don't feel like I fit in anywhere; there's no group that I feel completely comfortable in, I have not, I have yet to find that. I don't even know if it's really important for me to find it." For Seema, the labels were more a reflection of her politicization: South Asian because it was "both once inclusive but also recognizing the differences between," and queer because it took the political stance that "it's actually OK to not conform.... it's about actually challenging the ways these systemical pressures work." She stated that she also:

Like(s) to say queer just because I feel like those boxes are very confining in a lot of ways, and um, I do believe that sexuality is very fluid and at one point in your life you can feel completely differently in at another point um, so I don't, I don't want to predetermine for myself what I'll be in five

years or ten years, so far I've remained pretty consistent (laughs). I'm attracted to women but that does not mean, there are no absolutes.

Reflecting on her early same-sex attractions, Seema remembered experiencing strong attachments to friends, as early as second grade, and later even to an older aunt. While there had been some awareness that these attachments were different from those of her sisters, the feelings were more intense, she thought they were merely a reflection of her personality because:

As a baby I was very attached to my grandma and I thought it was something like that.... I would attach myself to one person, and that was it and that was my person... it was an emotional thing.

Struggling to find the words to name these attachments, Seema "thought that maybe the attraction I felt for women was cultural, like maybe American women weren't as close because, you know, in India like you see women are really, really close." However, by the last years of high school, "there was always some underground level of shame around it, like you know, somebody was going to make fun of me and somebody was going to find out, shame me in some way about it." This gave rise to a lot of internal confusion about how to manage these feelings:

I did go through a long period in my, in my early teens until my early twenties where I really tried to be straight, you know. But I just never felt um, like it never, I *knew* there was something different about me, like

knew that my sisters were having experiences that I wasn't having hanging about guys and you know, like that I was actually having experiences about, having feelings about women that didn't seem to be what my sisters were experiencing. And so I knew there was something different but actually I never had the words to describe what it was and, and I was so naïve and sheltered in my childhood that it took me till after college to figure it out.

At the age of 22, she “fell in love” with her roommate at college, but again “I still didn't have any words for it, and still really naïve.” It was not until another friend, to whom she had subsequently transferred her attachment, came out as lesbian that she thought, “OK, *maybe* I'm like her”.

In that moment, Seema remembered feeling “a lot of self-hatred, a lot of like shame.... that I was disgusting.... I knew I was really scared more than anything, I was like, OK, if that's how I am then what does that mean for me?” However, still not quite knowing who she was, she thought she must be bisexual, which she recalled was also a safer and less radical thing to deal with at that time. The emotional turmoil of trying to navigate this new discovery about herself took its toll on her well-being, she “remember(s) that year I was so depressed.... like I wouldn't come out of my room.” She was going through:

The whole grieving process itself. Well if I am this way that means I'm not going to have this, I'm not going to have the life my mother, like how am I going to tell my parents about this, am I going to lose everybody, you know. Um, I'm definitely going to lose this idea I had of myself, of my life, but I didn't you see, I was never one of these girls who had this idea that I was going to grow up and get married, you know that kind of thing, that was never a dream of mine. I knew, but I knew it was the dream of my parents and it was the dream of like my culture, my siblings, I didn't know how else to define myself even if that wasn't what I thought was the greatest thing for myself, I didn't know how else to define myself.

The journey from realization to acceptance of her sexuality has been long and difficult. Having decided she was going to live honestly, Seema came out to her mother in order to manage her mother's expectations for her, "she wanted me to get married, even trying to introduce me to all these guys.... I almost wanted to see what her reaction would be." Seema's sister told their father; her father's reaction was pleasantly surprising:

He was like, I don't have any information about this, I need you to send me some information... I sent him the PFLAG book.... he read it and said, well if that's how it is, that's how it is. I accept you as you are and you're still my daughter, I love you and, ah, it's like more than I could ever have

hoped for. My mother had a much, much harder time, she went in and out of denial.... I used to be really impatient with it when I was younger (but) having heard other people's stories and just like how easy mine has been, and with my family at least..... I have a lot more patience and space with my mom now than I ever did before, and she can take as much time as she wants; it's her process.

Contemplating her community's reaction, Seema remarks, "I do think my community has actually been much more progressive than I gave it credit for.... as far as the people that we were close to growing up they've been wonderful" and accepting. Most of Seema's battles then have been internal, with herself. Even after deciding to live authentically, Seema continued to date men for two to three years believing herself to be bisexual:

Well, I thought I was supposed to be (attracted to men) for sure, um, and when I was growing up I wanted to fit in like the girls around me.... it seems safer than saying full out I'm lesbian or anything that seemed more radical at the time."

A significant turning point came when a friend gave her the telephone number for a South Asian LGBT group, "I took the little number home and you know, three or four times I called and hung up (laughs), finally I got the courage to talk to the guy there." From the safety of this South Asian LGBT organization, which became her second

family, Seema explored her queer identity. She thought she had found her lifetime partner but the relationship ended after three years. Feeling “distraught” because of her “first divorce,” Seema again considered dating men because “more so like societal pressure, I didn’t want to disappoint anybody, and um, I wanted kids, so I was like it would be easier if I could just be straight.” Eventually she sought help to process her internal conflict, she:

Went to therapy and all that kind of stuff, um, it helped me not just with the sexuality part but it actually helped me become more of a whole person, you know, because I had to face a lot of the demons I never even knew I had.

Full acceptance of her sexuality finally came in her mid-thirties with Seema’s politicization in the campaign to legalize same-sex marriage. She finally embraced her right to be different. Looking back, she said, “I spent all my twenties trying to be sort of a conforming person, try to make my life fit some sort of like a norm that I thought was supposed to be.... yea, so anyway, it took me a really really long time to figure everything out.” Seema has been in a committed relationship of six years, she feels she is at a good point in her life, “I feel very centered now compared to where I was.” There was much laughter during our conversations as Seema talked about her early experiences, perhaps a testament to exactly how far she has come on her eventful journey.

Participant 7: Amrit

At the time of the study, Amrit was in her early thirties. She was born in the United States. Amrit worked in the field of mental health as a result her narrative naturally included insights garnered through her reflexivity. Our families originated from the same state of India, so we share common cultural experiences. This shared history and her easy open presence smoothed the way to quickly establishing rapport. I met with Amrit for one interview via video conferencing. Amrit wrote a heartfelt poem for her artifact in which she described her inner turmoil managing the intersection of her multiple identities. Amrit began by explaining that she grew up with a strong connection to her Indian identity and that she only became aware of the term South Asian when she went to college where she became aware of other South Asian subgroups. Amrit's family is very conservative family, she had been aware of her cultural norms:

From a very young age, because they came with mostly certain limitations and um, I think in my family there was a lot of gender discrepancy..... I was aware of gender from an early age, I would say from five or six, so I was already thinking about and questioning it. Um, and I think similarly as female, you know marriage was something that was talked about and encouraged pretty much from the same age. I can remember conversations about the need to have a marriage, have an arranged marriage.

These two themes, gender discrepancy and arranged marriage, were also important in Amrit's adult history and sexual identity narrative. Amrit states that there was significant gender discrepancy in her family; she had less freedom than her brothers had and early in her childhood expected to take on a caretaker role for her younger brothers. Conflict arising from these lingering gender disparities has also shadowed much of her adult relationship with her parents:

There's just a lot of gender discrepancy and there was always this expectation that I would kind of never be good enough and it would never, um, always there was an idea, I always needed to be doing more but yet I was doing so much more than everybody around me, and so, um, I certainly tried that and I went in the all or nothing direction, and cut off communication and um, even with my brother I think I had a number of arguments and really decided that I was not going to be a part of this family any more (laughs).

As a young adult, there were battles around these issues with her family but by this time "the relationship has shifted significantly since I've been able to um, put myself in a position where um, I mean I'm not in an arranged marriage.... they are at least aware of it. I wouldn't say they've come to accept it, but they understand it intellectually." These hard won but important new boundaries also allowed Amrit to manage her interaction with her extended family and Indian community because she now had:

More control over just what I do with my life but certainly in terms of what I do with my relationships and marriage.... certain things are not forced upon me. And I think prior to that I really, I think I had a period in my early twenties where I really resisted it, you know, I didn't want, if I could have somehow like snapped my fingers and not been an Indian woman I would certainly have taken that opportunity (laughs).... now it's much more of a choice of you know when I attend particular events or the amount of time I spend with them.... at the time, you know, everything was incredibly meshed, I would go home every weekend.... took care of my siblings growing up. Our family was very close and so a great majority of my time when I wasn't in school was pretty much spent at home with family.

Amrit described her identity as lesbian. She explained that within her family and community, she has been, and may at times continue to be, seen as masculine because from an early age she exhibited personality traits, and made choices, that in her community were typically associated with the male gender:

I sort of had career goals in mind and I have made certain sacrifices and moved away... I had a certain way of speaking up about certain issues that, whether it was in a mixed gender crowd or even amongst women, of calling out certain things as they were.... growing up I was interested in

politics, um, I was interested in um, sort of understanding things in a more intellectual manner. And just the conversations I would hold, I seem to have them with men and so that made people wonder.

The fight to free herself from these confining patriarchal heteronormative expectations has been Amrit's most overriding concern as an adult, so much so that for her sexuality:

It was just a non-issue if I was gay, it was such a big deal that I wasn't going to have an arranged marriage that it didn't matter what else happened.... it was more um, knowing that you're going to have this fall out with your family, that was a bigger problem.

With regard to coming to terms with her queer sexuality, she said:

It almost seemed like an intellectual process that I went through, that if I'm attracted to this person and I am sort of thinking about spending my life with this person, and this person happens to be a female, and there seems to be a formula here. And I think that's just also very much my style.... I try to figure out rationally.

Amrit remembers early same-sex attractions as an adolescent:

I certainly had a lot of female friendships that felt very strong.... there might have certainly been more of an emotional connection than women perhaps may have in just friendships. Um, there certainly wasn't any sort

of physical attraction but there probably was some sort of emotional or romantic attraction happening.... my family was incredibly conservative, um, I was never allowed to date, I was never even allowed to have male friendships growing up and so I don't think my mind just didn't really like, it had just shut down from that direction.

She construed these attractions as simple admiration, as deep friendships, or just as a desire to emulate them, "have bodies like them." She consciously became aware of her same-sex romantic attachments in graduate school. Her current partner, of seven years, has been her only romantic relationship. When Amrit accepted her romantic attraction to her partner, entering into a relationship with her was conditional, "I really have this strong value of having a committed relationship and having an exclusive relationship... those would sort of have to be the conditions and um, she agreed to that, said that she shared those values."

Within her family, there was an *unspoken understanding* about her sexuality, "so I would say it's definitely known, it's not talked about, we didn't formally sit down and have a conversation." Because Amrit's partner accompanied her for family, and extended family, events, her partner has been informally accepted and integrated. However, a level of awkwardness remains, Amrit attributes explains:

I think because there are so many gender disparities there are often times when women will do things together and men will do things together and that's often where um, my partner and I are still in the same group because we're both women. Um, and I don't think they quite know how to make sense of her role and I think even if I was to come out and say I am a lesbian I don't think that would help.

Amrit sensed this awkwardness also represented some level of denial, especially amongst the males in her family. Her rejection of stereotypical cultural roles also adds to the ambiguity the presence of her same-sex partner raises. While this arrangement had sufficed thus far, Amrit feels frustrated going forward:

I'm going to sort of come out and just let them know and then it won't be this unspoken thing between us because at this point it's ridiculous and it's not spoken, and a part of me just wants to say it because it seems everyone sort of knows.

However, her past confrontations relating to arranged marriage created a fall out with her family, resulting in Amrit distancing herself from them. However, after some time, she found that was not feasible long term, so despite continuing differences she reunited with her family:

I think it was just the build-up of not knowing what my life would be like without my family involved in it. Um, even though it has been difficult for

so long, it was just something I think that was familiar and I couldn't really picture what, I think I felt that I would be completely alone, and I think I was also really scared that, whether my relationship didn't work out or um, my career didn't work out, that I'd be alone, I'd have nowhere to go.

While she no longer feared not coping without her family, because she was now financially independent and more secure in herself, a sense of "sadness" had replaced it, knowing that the disclosure would most likely still lead to a repeat of earlier conflicts and the same breaking of ties, even if temporarily. The sadness came from a resignation that her family will not change; this was just how it will always be. In light of that, Amrit has weighed up the benefits and consequences of coming out openly and she has concluded that while what they now had as a family may not be ideal, it was still worth protecting. Even though her relationships with her family have not been comfortable, it was still important for Amrit to have her family in her life:

We don't interact with each other as much um, but the experiences we have um, we try to kind of find commonality and enjoy them and not bring up topics that we know will upset each other.... we try to respect each other's boundaries more.

In light of that, Amrit had decided to wait until she felt the moment was right for her to disclose without the risk of losing what she had manage to salvage in these relationships. While Amrit cannot be fully open in her family, she experienced no such barriers at work, partly she acknowledged because her field of work was by its very nature more liberal and accepting. Amrit had also developed a supportive feminist and lesbian community, an Indian community, and to some degree a South Asian queer women's community. What she lacked, and desired, was another space that integrated not only all three of these identities but also reflected her stage of life – specifically the long-term monogamous South Asian queer women's community.

While she had found one such friend, Amrit had found this community particularly difficult to access. As an introverted personality, she did not enjoy being part of large organizations; she preferred quieter one-on-one interactions. She found these large organizations somewhat alienating because, in her experience, they mostly attracted women who were in Pride, which again did not reflect how she presented her own queer identity. However, Amrit was optimistic that as she became more comfortable with *all* her different identities, especially her Indian identity, she would find these spaces in the future. She said, "I think being in that place is also helping and so I think that will lend to meeting, to expand that support system."

Participant 8: Saanvi

At the time of the study, Saanvi was in her mid-twenties. She was born in the United States. I had known Saanvi for two years but we had never discussed in detail her lived experiences as a queer woman, so her narratives provided a fresh light on how her personality had shaped her unique journey. At Saanvi's request, her two interviews took place at my home. In her second interview, she shared her artifact; a song she had written during her coming out. The song specifically touched on her battle with, and anger at, socialized heteronormativity and the injustices it held for queer women. She presented as quiet, reflective and yet confident and articulate. Her narrative suggested that Saanvi had processed much of her earlier difficult experiences but also that continued to address new unexpected obstacles in the integration of her sexual identity. Saanvi described her South Asian identity as:

My first and foremost identity and personal contribution rather would go to America.... but it's not a contribution to America that's void of any influence from.... India, and my parents, and their culture, and their values... not necessarily my connections to India, the connections that they've brought.... but the majority of my identity is more American than South Asian.

She identified as female and lesbian but in the context of: “I think all these, obviously all these terms are fabricated.... (so) the social term for being majority attracted to a woman is a lesbian.” Saanvi’s earliest same-sex attachment had been a friendship in high school. She recalled that while there had been no awareness of it at the time, it had “definitely been much more than just friendship” as she felt “extremely protective” of her friend. However, it was not until she was pledging to an Indian sorority in college, when she heard a sorority sister, as a police officer, talk about her involvement in the LGBT community that the first spark of a possible connection hit her, “but then it’s a small piece of information that’s surrounded by a bunch of straight Indian girls.” The spark went as quickly as it had come. Outside of this one initial reference to the LGBT population, Saanvi had found the sorority experience oppressive:

I think even joining the sorority even probably masked, or it helped mask, my sexuality even more. Being in an environment where there is a binary of the brother and sister of the fraternity and sorority, where half your classmates are dating guys in your brother fraternity and that’s what’s expected of you and really nobody else in your entire group of friends is gay or talking about anything gay, or venturing into bringing up the topic, you’re just expected to go with the flow and date a frat guy. Um, so being heavily involved in my sorority in my freshman year I didn’t even have

room to explore that. The parties were very hetero, the venues were very hetero, there was just a lot of South Asian hetero people there.

When asked if she would have approached the LGBT community on campus, Saanvi said, “completely out of the question.... I would never have done it.”

Subsequent attractions followed at college, but:

I can't tell you that any of those feelings actually registered. I think I felt them and remembered them of course but, but I don't think any of it registered into um, you know, the fact that I may not be straight.... perhaps I sheltered myself, I mean that might be a huge part of it because I just didn't go there, I didn't want to go there.

Looking back, Saanvi could identify strong homophobic feelings; she attributed much of her denial at that time to these feelings. The rest she attributed to a general lack of conversation and confidence to pursue these attractions, even privately, which she could easily have done. The turning point came at the age of twenty, at which time Saanvi had been dating her boyfriend for over a year and he proposed marriage to her. The proposal brought a dilemma to the forefront. Three months previously, she had finally started secretly exploring her attraction to women and the proposal pushed Saanvi to make the important life choice to face her sexuality. She refused the proposal and ended the relationship. Despite finally acknowledging her queer sexuality, she still found herself struggling with her internalized homophobia, which by then had surfaced to

consciousness as she remembered feeling “probably even disgust.... to me internally it was unthinkable, even to go there.... Fear of exclusion and judgment.” Saanvi attributed some of these continuing negative feelings to deeply embedded homophobia socialized in the highly conservative homophobic community in which she grew up and to a lack of sexual dialogue in her conservative family home. While Saanvi continued to explore her same-sex sexuality through casual encounters, substance abuse became a way for her to cope with the emotional and psychological turmoil they generated for her:

I mean I'm not proud of it but I drank a lot, I smoked a lot, I probably for 3 months did a lot of cocaine, and um, I, I just blocked it out. So I don't think I even accepted it.... yea, I absolutely did it under the influence.... There's some parts of me that regrets that because I don't think I had a, you know, people talk about their coming out experiences, and realizing and going through this relationship with a woman.... mine is very much under the influence.... It's not anything I'm particularly proud of.

Saanvi moved back home for the final two years of college. She remembered this to be a very difficult time. She turned into herself and became uncharacteristically moody and irritable, such that her mother asked her “what happened to me in college to make me to be so cold and bitter.” During this time, Saanvi recalls a number of homophobic encounters with her parents. One such incident was when her mother caught her secretly watching the television show *The L-Word*. Her mother's response was, “of course it

doesn't matter that there are lesbians in the world but it's also different if it's happening under my roof;" which she internalized as;

Even if I had put my toe outside the closet I was in, I mean that comment had me run back.... A few months progress, it was gone, *totally* gone... if you really break it down, there's you know, commentary on non-acceptance, as well as a commentary on ownership of where you live.

Another incident was a conversation at the dinner table when her grandfather voiced his opinions about transgender and same-sex sexuality, he said "I get how a person can feel like they're a man or woman and they're born in the wrong body but I don't understand this attraction between the same sexes." All these homophobic remarks have had a profound impact on her subsequent sexual identity development:

So then, like this was probably in the prime of when I was coming out to myself, so it was absolutely an awkward conversation for me to ever sit through.... at the end of it, there was nothing overly accepting about that whole conversation.

Saanvi finally came to accept her sexuality in her senior year before graduating and she has been in a committed relationship for the past two years. A part of accepting her sexuality was a commitment to living honestly, so about eight months ago she had come out to her parents. Saanvi was very surprised, at and extremely grateful, for the positive way her parents had accepted her sexual orientation. Their reaction had been in

total contradiction to her expectations and her coming out preparations. Saanvi described the experience of coming out to her parents:

I didn't by any means take a confrontational approach... I sent them a *huge* email.... I needed to talk to them about something and I needed them to put away an hour and half the next day and that their suspicions around my involvement with LGBT activism weren't wrong and that I'm gay.

Saanvi followed this by going over the following day to meet with them, "s**t scared and intoxicated already... and then I clammed upI mean they were asking questions as if they knew." She recalls that as soon as she got back home, she had a frightening panic attack. Saanvi said of her coming out:

That was my turning point and that was also my agreement with myself that I was going to be as honest as I can be with my parents, now that I'm comfortable being honest with myself. I think that was probably, if there was anything, I could not have been honest with anyone else before I was that way with myself first.

Since her disclosure, her parents had been intentionally inclusive and accepting of her partner, "yea, my parents, I have been blessed with parents that either knew or understood that, I don't even know what their process was". However, despite acknowledging the loving response of her parents, Saanvi continued to struggle with

unexpected internal conflict, which was significantly hindering her ability to move forward in integrating her sexual identity:

The fact that my parents' reaction was *great* is almost a, is almost a, you know, lack of disconnect for me.... I found myself still paranoid at some points, that there is a reaction coming down the line..... there's going to be some blow out at some point. Um, but then the other part of me is like wrapping my head around the idea that they are accepting. Which is way more difficult than I expected it to be..... I think the best comparison I can make is the concept of microaggressions.... there is still a very strong internalized homophobia for me.... I can't really tell you that I am processing them.... I don't know what I want.... I feel like they've showed up when they needed to show up, they've showed up, and I don't know how to handle it.

Saanvi still remembered her homophobic experiences at home prior to coming out. It was hard for her to rationalize her now accepting parents with her earlier homophobic parents. There was dissonance, since a conversation had not taken place to explain their transformation, which, for Saanvi, was manifesting as a lack of trust in the sincerity of their acceptance. Saanvi's personal journey has been painful and difficult and the coming out to her parents surprisingly far more positive than she could ever have

hoped for, but the process of integrating her identity continues as she thinks about how to process these unexpected obstacles.

Participant 9: Priyanka

At the time of the study, Priyanka was in her mid-twenties. She was born in the United States. She presented as a confident young woman who knows her own mind; she appeared to be very comfortable in her own skin. However, as the interview progressed, her narrative disclosed a sensitivity and a strong loyalty to the people important in her life. We met for one interview in a public space.

Priyanka readily engaged in the conversation and shared openly. She began by describing her South Asian identity:

To be a South Asian woman to me is to be a combination of successful and to be independent, at least how my mom has raised me, but at the same time being well cultured and sticking to like my roots and heritage, I consider myself religious.

Priyanka described her sexuality as South Asian, or Indian, lesbian, but added:

I don't need a title as much as people think you need a title to identify yourself. Like I didn't say that I was gay for a pretty long time like I still don't have comfortable notions of saying that aloud just because... I just don't think I need a logo stamped to my forehead, I hate to say.... The way I have been able to cope with it is not falling into a niche.

Priyanka first became aware of her attraction to women when she was in 8th grade. This awareness solidified by 10th grade when she moved schools. The friends she made in the new school were “older and they were different than I was used to and I think I used that as a way to figure out myself. To be allowed to be in like a weird situation, where I could be weird as well.” This progressive and accepting environment offered Priyanka the space and safety to explore, at least intellectually, her own attractions that sat outside the prescribed heteronormative framework. At the time, she also actively researched her sexual identity to get:

A little bit of an analytical perspective of it.... I started reading like literature and it started to take more and more and then at the very end of my year there, there was this girl I was friends with and um, I figured out that she was bisexual and we kind of had this weird first relationship and it wasn't like a relationship but it was a relationship where we both said we liked each other and that we would keep it a secret, and that kind of spun it along.

Priyanka had already known of her parents' strong conservative beliefs. About the same time she first became aware of her own same-sex attractions, a girl from her school came out as bisexual and her mother heard about it. She remembered her mother's reaction, her mother was:

Very adamant, she was like don't hang out with her, don't deal with her, etc., etc., and we've had discussions about, you know, things like same-sex marriage.... My mom's really adamant against it, she's like its wrong, it's against nature, etc., etc., it's against our religion it's a horrible thing.

Listening to this had been difficult for Priyanka but she was very close to her family, protective of her parents, and she had a strong sense of responsibility to look after them. Accommodating their limitations over her own needs in this case has been a higher priority for her:

It was really rough at the beginning, but I had already kind of told myself that I wasn't going to tell my parents. My parents are a lot older than Indian parents normally are, so I knew from a young age I didn't like want to disgrace them and didn't want to upset them, um, and I like stated that at a very beginning that it wasn't going to happen.

While Priyanka was comfortable with her sexuality, she had made the decision to keep it secret. However, at college she entered into her first relationship, with an older White lesbian woman. The relationship was affirming, opening the door to an alternative option to secrecy:

It opened up perspective because she was obviously with her family and very open in general and showed me that, that I could be like that with

people.... Showed me that I could be I guess comfortable in my own skin.

Um, and then I started telling my friends that I made in college.

During that time, Priyanka also made use of the “safe spaces” offered at her university to explore her sexual identity. In particular, she recalled that one of her Women’s Studies professors gave her the opportunity to explore her issues through her writing. These experiences combined gave Priyanka the confidence to come out to two of her closest friends from her childhood and their families. These again proved to be positive experiences, “I felt like a bit of a sigh of relief.”

Following these positive experiences, Priyanka unfortunately fell into an unhealthy relationship with an Indian woman; this relationship lasted two and half years. She described this stressful period in her life and the toll it had taken on her psychological well-being:

I knew that this was an interesting, a very bad idea because she didn’t understand the same things I’d gone through. She didn’t, like she didn’t want to tell any of her family or friends, and she didn’t want to tell any of our mutual friends, so I was lying to a lot of my mutual friends and we kept it that way for two and half years. So I lied to a lot of people and in the middle of this, I was really down and I was really upset, so I told my sister and that went very well.

It was difficult for Priyanka to come out to her sister; it took her several attempts before she finally plucked up enough courage to go through with it. The stakes had been high because she believed that if her sister rejected her, then once her parents were gone, she would be completely alone in the world. She said:

I already knew what my parents thought and she was the last person I had and she was the last person with the familial connections and I knew that if I didn't tell her and something had gone wrong, I would be basically screwed. Like I wouldn't have any family left, um, and so I asked her friends and I messaged a couple of friends and I was like what does my sister think about so and so, like LGBT life, and what does she think about same-sex marriage and all my friends were like, we don't really know. Like she's never said anything against it and she's never said anything for it, she seems to be like every other, like 21st century child, thinks it's OK. And so that gave me a little bit of courage but I still never, didn't know, um, but it was still just very nerve wracking because in the very end, like if it didn't go the way it was supposed to go, I would've just, I would have been heartbroken because I looked up to her a lot.... That is the one thing that has honestly kept me going.

From the first awareness of her sexual attractions, Priyanka had positively embraced her sexual identity. The most significant challenge for her then has been

coming to terms with not being able to come out to her parents. However, Priyanka states that she has been “getting more into control of it” and looking to her future. Going forward, she hopes to develop a healthy adult life, integrate her sexual identity, and eventually get married and have children – with a woman who is committed to a monogamous relationship, even if marriage is not feasible. Priyanka saw the possibility of perhaps coming out to her parents in the future, once her sister was married and happily settled. By then Priyanka believed she would have an established career and successful lifestyle. She hoped that these achievements would make her parents feel less anxious about the implications her sexuality may have on her ability to do well in life, and that her sister’s marriage would help to soften the blow to their expectations for her marriage. In the meantime,

As much as it’s eating me inside, I have no rush to like make my mom and dad upset, or to have them worry about, you know, what the rest of the community going to think.... they’ve given up a lot for me and my sister.

It’s like, my sister and I have looked at this as we owe them something, to be like who they want us to be, in as much as we can.

Priyanka’s other major concerns at this time were the challenges she faced in straddling her heterosexual and gay communities. Priyanka had a close group of heterosexual friends, her main circle of friends for socializing. She shared her

disappointment in these friends' lack of willingness to affirm and embrace her gay identity equally to their own heterosexual identity. Priyanka said her friends, of five years, would not even consider going to gay bars with her, consequently she was always the one to accommodate by going to their heterosexual bars. These heterosexual bars were a poor experience for her and she often found herself alone at the bar fending off propositions from men. She felt isolated and unfulfilled, especially as it also deprived her of the opportunity to connect with her gay community and to find a romantic partner. Furthermore, Priyanka had also become aware of underlying homophobic attitudes within this group and her friends' unwillingness to speak up against them:

Recently I dealt with a situation that one of my best friend's boyfriend found it uncomfortable for me to be near his girlfriend and I've been friends with her for five years and he's Indian, and she's Indian. And she told me about this and she clarified, she's like it has nothing to do with the fact that you're not straight, I said it's got everything to do with the fact that I'm not straight and you just don't see it. And she's like maybe we don't see it but.... that's just how society is, that's in her words, that's just how society is, and I'm like why should you fit to that, why can't you stand up for someone you've known for five years who's always stood up

for you, and she's like, that's just how it is and I'm like, that's a stupid answer.

The hurt and disappointment of finding herself marginalized within her close circle of friends forced her to reconsider where she wanted to invest her future emotional energies, she said, "my friends are slowly going to see that if it doesn't become like equal balance, it's probably not going to last very long". While her heterosexual friends were important to her, Priyanka was increasingly looking to her new South Asian queer women's community for her support and connection. She said:

I think that's a lot of the unhappiness that I have.... not being able to get that support that you want from friends.... the struggles of being South Asian and also being lesbian, they're like two very, very big struggles.... I can talk about it for days to my (heterosexual) friends but they don't get it.

Priyanka expressed her pleasure at seeing research on South Asian queer women because she had observed them being marginalized in both the South Asian community and in the LGBT community. She believed raising visibility would help reduce feelings of isolation for South Asian queer women coming out in the future. When thanked for sharing her personal experiences, Priyanka pointed out that it had actually been easier to talk about them to someone she did not know:

It's like the difference between telling you and my friend's mom. It's like a very large difference because it's like you don't know anything about me and you

aren't involved directly in my community, so there's no, there's no potential backlash.... yea, you can only do it in your bedroom for so long, you know, talk to yourself for so long, or you start to go mildly crazy.

Participant 10: Joyti

At the time of the study, Joyti was in her mid-thirties. She was born in the United States. She has a delightful little daughter, so for her convenience we conducted the interview at her home. Joyti is friendly, warm, and hospitable. Prior to the interview Joyti and I spent time getting to know each other through sharing our common histories. It was also an ideal time to get to know her chatty daughter, who at this time attended kindergarten, as she was also excited to get to spend time with me. Even during the interview, she came periodically for a little distraction and attention and we accommodated her comfortably as needed. Joyti identified as Desi or South Asian but also acknowledged her dual identity, feeling whole in neither. She stated:

I don't like to be American (laughs) to put it frankly, but I will say I'm Indian American because unfortunately I do like straddle identities as an American. When I'm in India I'm American, I'm not Indian. When I'm here I'm Indian , I'm not American, so it's both.

Defining her sexual identity, Joyti said "gay and queer resonate in the same way for me" but she was concerned about how people understood these labels. She questioned

who originally defined the standard for that label and why that label became the standard. Joyti said, “essentially, what they’re trying to figure out is, who do you have sex with?” These rigid boxes “speaks to the limitations of our, of our cultural norms around relationships and just like sexuality and gender” which she believed excluded her sexual experiences because she was “attracted to *all* different types of people.... (and) I like that I can be fluid with it.” Joyti grew up in a very conservative family affiliated to a strict spiritual organization. , Any sort of romantic or social involvement with the opposite sex was discouraged for young single persons. While Joyti remembered having particularly strong attachments to friends at school, there had been a lack of awareness at that time of what they meant. In her world, anything outside of friendship only began when people got married and these marital relationships mirrored the blissful heterosexual image of Bollywood movies. Her life change significantly when she:

Became dissolutioned with the organization. I became politicized.... I just developed as a person..... so I left, and I left in a big way, and I was like I’m going to date!.... this is like my second year in grad school and I kissed a boy for the first time, *very* randomly.

Joyti’s increasing political awareness and affiliation was a strong underlying theme that guided most of her subsequent life choices and goals. Reflecting back on her early same-sex attractions, Joyti now recognized that the conservative religious organization was a factor, but not the only reason, for her relatively late awareness of her

underlying sexual attractions. She speculates that asexuality may also have been a part of it. She recalls that “there was a time in my life where I believed I was asexual.... there was a good 3 (or) 4 years where I felt no sexual attraction.” Joyti believes that asexuality may be a part of her overall sexual fluidity and as such may have been active in delaying her sexual awakening. With Joyti’s increasing politicization, she rebelled against her patriarchal Indian community. In an effort to break away from gendered oppression Joyti began dating men outside her community. This and, more significantly, her unplanned pregnancy have been enormous challenges for her mother. With Joyti’s decision to continue as a single parent, her mother disowned her and promptly moved back to India to distance herself from her daughter. Joyti described her mother’s reaction:

How dare you use your body for sex, *before marriage*. Oh, yea, she wanted me to marry him immediately, I don’t care who he is, I don’t care, I don’t care that I’ve never met him, I don’t even know his name, marry him like *tomorrow*, and then we’re going to tell the family that the baby came prematurely.... I said no.... she harassed me for so long and the only reason she isn’t still harassing me about marrying him is because I came out to her. And now she’s harassing me about that.

While Joyti and her mother have reconciled since the birth of her daughter, the reflected shame of breaking cultural modesty norms had been too much for her mother to endure. Ten years ago, Joyti became involved with the LGBT community as a straight

ally. The purpose of her involvement was to support her gay friends, but over time, she became aware of her own attractions to different people. Joyti recalls acknowledging to herself that she too was not straight, but she had been reluctant to take it any further than that:

I didn't know what that meant, and I never pursued it for like years, so many years, but you know, but my attraction was like, you know, unearthed and so it just kept growing and I was just very drawn um, to so many different people.

Continuing to ignore these non-hetero attractions was easy, she:

Just brushed it off. I just ignored it I mean in the way that, that Indians do so well. I mean that comes second nature, that is part of the culture too, unfortunately, you can so easily ignore what needs to be ignored and you just move on for the sake of everybody's um, comfort levels, including your own internally and just completely ignore it.

Joyti conveniently put this new awareness of her sexual attraction firmly to the side until 18 months ago when she finally acted upon it:

I wasn't really out to myself until I was actively looking to date women and then I felt.... that must be legitimate, right?.... (then) my internal dialogue was, it will be legit once you have ex with a woman.... I felt like even I was saying to myself, how do you know?

At the time of the interview, Joyti had been out to her mother a couple of months. The motivation to come out to her had been a combination of firstly being in a committed relationship of nearly a year secondly, the desire to publically acknowledge her partner on her Facebook page and lastly to avoid harming her daughter. Joyti believed not being transparent with her romantic relationship would convey a sense of shame associated with it, which her young daughter would naturally also absorb:

I just felt like I didn't want to hide it... I just hate the idea of being closeted. She (daughter) knows my girlfriend, loves her and is building that relationship as well and you know, I don't ever want to sensor her. I feel like that's toxic in a relationship.

Despite being happy that she has come out, Joyti acknowledges that without these precipitating factors, she might have avoided coming out even longer. Joyti described her planned disclosure:

I think she knew, mothers know; it's just very interesting that at this age I was still dancing around the topic. It was very hard to say, look this is the situation, so I slowly kind of unveiled, to the point where she was like, if you have something to say, then just say it. And I literally could have told her right then but I just couldn't handle it, I just said yea, we'll talk

tomorrow. And then the next day, um, I, I told her the situation, you know, conveniently right before I was about to leave.

Joyti' states that her mother's rejection of her sexuality has been difficult, "now she says she's on antidepressants because of me, and um, harassing text messages and whatnot, it's all to be expected I suppose, um, at least she knows." Her mother told her that "it's not normal... it's not society approved... you're not normal, nobody, nobody, nobody that you love and respect is going to accept you, you know that right?" Despite the heartache of the coming out experience and the continuing conflict in her relationship with her mother, Joyti said she also found the experience affirming because in the process of defending her relationship, she believed she also affirmed her partner in the eyes of her mother.

Having a child has had an impact on all aspects Joyti's sexual identity and lived experiences. With regard to dating she said, "All the women I've dated have been more goal orientated when it comes to relationships. Um, and so it's complicated when it includes your child because you don't want to alienate people." At the same time, Joyti felt she had to protect her daughter. She was careful about who met her daughter and protective of her vulnerable daughter's attachments to any given partner. Joyti stated that her past partners had questioned the integrity of her queer identity because of her cis history: her past relationships with cismen, having a child naturally with a cisman, and having only come out recently with no prior same-sex encounters. Consequently, there

have been trust issues in these relationships; in her current relationship, exacerbated by the parental involvement of her daughter's father who inherently brought his patriarchal privilege into their queer women's space. Joyti said this "can bring up resentment, even for me." Going out has also been complicated for a mother who is also queer. Joyti stated that:

Moving forward, um, it's going to be really important to vet situations before I take her (daughter) there, or, just be willing to have the hard conversations to be, you know, confronted with bigotry. So if it's just me and her where people are perfectly fine assuming I'm straight, single mother and probably had a husband and he died or something. Now that's a comfortable story line, sad but comfortable.... But were I to go to some kind of gurba (Indian social) event let's just say, with like my girlfriend and daughter, you know, then that's more complicated. And so what does that look like?

For Joyti this had implications for the way in which she wanted to raise her daughter, how to prepare her daughter to manage such situations:

I inherently have a very easy time censoring myself at exactly the right moments when I need to because that's how I grew up; you know, like Indians know exactly how to sensor themselves or dance around a situation, just to make everybody feel comfortable. Quite effortlessly, but I

don't want her to have that quality.... I don't want her to feel like she needs to sense when she can talk about mommy having a girlfriend and when cannot.... she were to have two moms, I would never want my partner to feel like she would have to hide that.... I would never want her to feel like I'm the real mom and the other one is just like only a mom when we can say it.

As a mother and role model, Joyti “wanted her (daughter) to see me living a life that I would feel comfortable with her imitating and that would mean no hiding.” Joyti is keen to find a supportive community for both of them, one that embraces the intersection of her, and her daughter's, multiple identities. However, this has been challenging for Joyti. Firstly, there are fewer South Asian queer women with children and secondly, accessing the South Asian queer women's community has been difficult. Joyti states that because most of the queer women were straight passing, it was hard to identify and approach them outside of the LGBT organizations. Joyti's political affiliation played a prominent role in defining her identity and life goals, which has been somewhat of a problem in her search for a South Asian queer women's community. For Joyti, political advocacy meant being culturally open, but this is not the case for everyone in these communities:

I've felt so different from a lot of the women who were more like Indian immigrants.... Even though we have all of these other things in common,

unless we are on the same page politically, was what was different. Like the commonness was our Indian heritage and queerness, but politically we're not meshing and so I feel more uncomfortable around people like that than comfortable.... So I guess what I'm saying is being Indian and being queer is just not enough, like there has to be some other values like us, like you can be Indian and you can be queer,, and that seems like really progressive but you could still be in the dark ages with your politics. You could still be as racist as hell, classist as all hell.

Joyti also pointed out that as a mother, she was more conscious of environmental and societal safety. When she went out with her daughter, being straight passing, she did not feel threatened. However, if her partner accompanied them, then they became more visible as a same-sex couple, in which case she became concerned for her daughter's safety and the need to protect her. As a mother myself, I was very touched by Joyti's courage and compassion as she intuitively carved out this new life for them both and worked through the multiple challenges that come her way as a result of her sexuality - of which as a heterosexual mother I had been completely unaware.

Artwork Projects

Nargis, Shreya, Amrit and Saanvi provided artifacts. Each of these artifacts contributed important additional data to supplement the participant's

original stories. Specifically all four artifacts created the opportunity to explore deeper meaning and emotions behind the experiences discussed in the first interviews. Samples of these artifacts are available in Appendices B-E. These include copies of the original works for Nargis and Amrit but only excerpts of the discussions about the artworks for Shreya and Saanvi because publishing their actual artifacts would result in a violation of their confidentiality.

While Nargis's artifact was simple and to the point, but her explanation of why it was important to her led to a wider discussion of her introspections about her collective identity. Nargis is introspective, she said she wanted to know, or find, *herself*. In her first interview, she stated that vaginas were important in defining her sexuality because she found it hard to define her attraction in any other way. However, it was not until we had the discussion originating from the artifact that I fully understood the questions she had about her identity. In the process of questioning so many aspects of her identity, the act of presenting something so simple to define her sexuality seemed to be grounding for her.

With so many questions yet to answer, Nargis had found the answer to her sexuality and providing the artifact at this point seemed to consolidate it for her. This definition of her sexuality uniquely represented *her* and it came innately from *her*, rejecting labels defined by others or defined by cultural socialization. By this time, Nargis was questioning, "What does it mean to be cis?" She wanted

to understand the socialization of her identity, which part was and which part was not. She was asking what part of her socialized identity actually reflected *her* and what part simply reflected her socialization. It seemed like she was now going through the same process of exploration her gender as she had done with her sexuality; she was continuing to explore the person *she* innately was. This was an interesting and thought provoking discussion, providing a window into her less tangible emotional experiences. .

Shreya wrote her poem as she was going through the process of coming out to her parents. It, therefore, touched on experiences and emotions that were *in the moment*. Consequently, her discussion of the poem provided a much deeper understanding of that experience. As she explained the poem, she was able to reconnect closely with that time in her life. The poem, her intentions behind writing it, and the language she chose to express the important messages she wanted to share, all gave an invaluable window into the *meaning* of the experiences she had spoken about in her first interview. Shreya said the poem “represents my relationship with my parents and my relationship with coming out, but also just generally with my identity and community, the queer community in general.”

The poem, therefore focused on what was most important to her at that time, and continued to be at this time – this is what fueled her passions. It became

apparent that Shreya was intimately in touch with her emotions and that she experienced her relationships deeply. Shreya found the conflict of loyalty between her sexuality and her family debilitating, and writing her poem was her way of *surviving* it. In her poem, she speaks about reaching out to the queer women who were her ancestors and the comfort she derived from the knowledge that they survived. It seems then, that for Shreya her sexuality and coming out was about her survival – that was how she had emotionally interpreted the resistance she had encountered from her family.

Amrit and I did not meet to discuss the poem she wrote for the artifact, *Too Much, But Still Not Enough*. However, the message expressed in her poem was articulate and direct, so it was still very useful for understanding Amrit's lived experiences. In the context of her interview, it firstly provided an insight into the meaning of the experiences she had already shared and secondly, it contained a message I had not fully appreciated in the interview. Amrit is a highly accomplished and confident young woman, therefore, it was easy to simply focus on Amrit's strengths; confidence, assertiveness, and independence, and underestimate the full significance to her of the many challenges she had experienced with her parents to overcome gender disparity and patriarchal discrimination.

In her poem, she shared her vulnerabilities, and that her internal battles have not simply been with her Indian culture, she has faced them in all walks of her life. Too much and yet still not enough perfectly described the source of these vulnerabilities and challenges – her life long struggle of managing the intersectionality of her multiple identities and the conflicts between them. She shares her passion and her resolve to define herself,

How do I integrate feminism into my work?

By showing up. By being seen.

By standing strong.

By knowing this path is not mine alone,

I see beauty, I see peace, I gain comfort

Amidst conflict, in pain, in contradictions,

And together with others who walk with me.

Amrit shared what was important to her in her life experiences, a message that was difficult to capture when exploring specific experiences. She shared something that cannot be isolated to any specific experience and yet it is something that permeates all her lived experiences. It is who she is. I believe the poem gave an additional insight into Amrit's inner and private world.

A quiet person, Saanvi did not share her emotions easily. In her first interview, she shared openly about her battles with internalized homophobia and internalized

heteronormativity in the process of coming out to herself. While this was clearly a painful experience for her, she did not share much about how she finally overcame those barriers. Like many artists, it seems as though she finds it easier, or prefers to express her emotions through her creative work. As she played her song, which she wrote during that coming out period, her anger quickly became apparent through the language, the message, and the tone. Her message was articulate and to the point as she challenged the rights of society and culture to define, discriminate, marginalize, and oppress women and sexuality. Again, the song represented her emotions and frustrations of the *in the moment* experience of that phase of her life.

As Saanvi explained how she came to write the song, it became apparent that her Women's Studies class at college had been highly influential in helping her to process her internalized issues. Awareness of socialized behavior and women's rights allowed her to explore and understand herself better, "I think its very representative of me realizing everything (that) had been taught during that summer and accepting that it was, that it existed." Saanvi stated that, whilst she did not consider herself a feminist, she has embraced the philosophies of a number of feminists – this class and her follow-up readings played a very important role in addressing her internalized heteronormativity and homophobia and her overall sexual identity development.

Data Analysis

I manually analyzed all the transcriptions of the interviews to identify major and sub-themes of lived experiences. Van Manen (2014) emphasized the importance of being *immersed* in the data in order to create a rich fertile environment from which insights can emerge. I had extensive contact with the data over an extended period of time, which manual analysis inherently requires. I believe this helped develop the very conditions van Manen (2014) recommended.

During this analytical process, I found that understanding and insights occurred gradually, allowing for the unveiling of underlying meanings and significances of the lived experiences. I reflected on my personal reactions to the participants, the data, and the insights and through that better understood my evolving relationship with each of them. The analysis was as much about following a rigorous process as it was about my responsibilities as a researcher working through the feminist lens. While no longer physically present with my participants, I was acutely aware of my responsibility to honor their experiences and protect them from discrimination, judgment, and any marginalization that might occur in the coding, and more significantly in the reporting of the results and analysis.

The reporting is heavily laden with direct quotes with the intention that they will push forward the actual voices of the women so that *they* may be heard

rather than have their voices merely act to support my own voice. I took care to provide appropriate context within which to imbed the quotes in an effort to minimize the potential for misinterpretation. I was mindful of how precious these personal and sensitive stories were, and how that in of itself made the voices of these women powerful, while at the same time also making them more vulnerable. Throughout this process, I aimed to emphasize the first and minimize the latter.

The coding process began once all interviews were completed and transcribed. The transcriptions were systematically coded one participant at a time, completing the coding of all transcriptions for each participant before beginning coding for the next participant. The coding process identified unique experiences, which collectively described the full range of lived experiences. These codes represented the major themes. The experiences within these major themes coded again to identify subthemes. . The majority of the codes naturally aligned with the research questions. I repeated these analytical steps once more to, firstly identify experiences overlooked in the first analysis, and secondly to refine the themes to better represent the overall lived experiences. . This second analysis supported the first. . I then reviewed all the themes and subthemes, looking for insights to understand the meaning of these lived experiences. These insights guided the interpretation of the analysis. This last step of the analysis continued as an ongoing process with multiple reviews.

In total, I identified 10 major themes and 24 subthemes. (Table 2 lists a summary of these themes) A detailed discussion of each theme follows it. The coding did not specifically identify any themes of feminist focus, such as discrimination, marginalization, or power discrepancies, but the analysis revealed them imbedded in many of these experiences. I, therefore, discuss these themes in the interpretation of the results in Chapter 5.

Table 2

Major Themes and Subthemes

Major Themes	Subthemes
Patriarchy and Heteronormativity	Importance of Family; Marriage and Gender Discrepancy; Socialized Gender; Sexual Modesty
Identity	Biculturalism; South Asian: Not and Identity; Eschewing Labels
Coming Out	Latent Attachments; Validation; Acceptance; Loss and Grief; Isolation; Can't Come Out, Won't Come Out; Obstacles to Integration
Mental Health	
Relationships	Parents: Interdependence; Sibling Advocates; Others
Homophobia and Social Stigma	Holding Emotional Anxiety; Invisible Walls of Shame and Judgment; Misunderstood: It's a Choice, Fix It
Inclusivity Verses Exclusivity	Policing and Censorship; Molarity and Judgment; Passivity: Condoning Discrimination and Marginalization; Stepping Back and Out; Parents: Conflicted Responsibilities; LGBT Communities
Overcoming Adversity	

Hopes for Study

Intersectionality: Too
Much and Yet Not
Enough

Patriarchy and Heteronormativity

Importance of Family: All of the women in the study grew up enmeshed in their culture, family, and community; deeply socialized in traditional patriarchal heteronormative values. Growing up in close tight knit collectivist families and communities meant family was very important, playing a central role in their lived experiences. While the quality of familial relationships were not always positive, there was a common desire to remain connected to them over their lifetime. Some of the women reported very close loving familial relationships:

My parents play a *huge* role in my life, so I know whenever they pass, I will have a total full on breakdown.... I'm super close to my mom. She's like the person I run by everything and when I'm stressed she's like, definitely the person in the world I'm most close to and I love and respect her and she's super great and my dad's a supportive person too.... it's very important to me to be a good daughter and to be a member of um, the community... my family means a lot to me and that's a really beautiful thing that culturally family is so important.

For a couple of the women, there had been a period of estrangement from their family, but they also felt their sense of well-being was at least in some ways dependent on continuing these connections. Siya stated, “From what I understand it’s my own wanting to have a relationship with them, kind of comes from that core need that wants that core bond.... with my parents that I’m able to function better in life.” For Amrit, there was a sense of isolation and:

What my life would be like without my family involved in it. Um, even though it had been difficult for so long.... I think I felt that I would be completely alone, and I think I was also really scared.... I’d have nowhere to go.

Priyanka, on the other hand, felt a sense of responsibility to her parents, “I’m very close to my family, I’m very close to my mom and dad, and I care about them a lot, and I do a lot for them.” Similarly Joyti, tried to work at her relationship with her mother, even though it was strained, stating that “(it is) important to me because I have that sort of like, you know, Indian expectation to take care of her in some way.” Therefore, families remained an integral part of South Asian women’s lives because of the bonds they shared, their socialized roles and responsibilities, and their shared internalized value systems.

Marriage and Gender Disparity: Despite these close connections to their family and cultural roots, some women were particularly aware of the impact of gender

disparities in their early experiences. Amrit described some of her challenges relating to her gender:

I think in my family there was a lot of gender discrepancy, um. I have brothers and there is a lot of sort of differences in what was allowed based on gender. I was older and expected to help around the house or take care of my siblings um, and then definitely out of gender, I mean, the male siblings and cousins were not expected to help as much and had more time whether it was to, you know, whether it was playing or to pursue, they had more of a choice with what they did.

Riya makes a more general observation related to this:

I think that's the first thing that comes to mind when I think of being South Asian that I think there's this thing that you're supposed to get married and you're supposed to have your *own* kids and you do something for *your kids*.... My mom is independent but she still does the female things in the house.... I've seen that division in every couple that I've grown up around.

Women's socialization into caregiving roles, with the expectation to bear children, happens from an early age. Continuity of family is important because of intergenerational interdependence and because having biological children ensures the integrity of the family, purity of the heritage, and security of unbreakable ties.

Consequently, there is pressure to procreate, which in a patriarchal structure forces woman into the traditionally less empowered caregiver role. Adoption is a last resort, a failing, and often only desirable from within close family. In light of this, there is an unconditional expectation to marry and failure to do so can be stigmatizing. Amrit remembers hearing these messages, beginning in her childhood:

I think similarly as a female, you know, marriage was something that was talked about and encouraged.... I can remember conversations about the need to have a marriage, have an arranged marriage.... (which) were happening because of being a female or South Asian female particularly in my family.

Even for Siya, whose parents were liberal, she says of her father:

He's always raised me to be extremely independent and when I was 18, he laid out this life plan for me about how I'm going to get my bachelor's and do my master's and I'm going to work for a bit and, I'll start dating at 28 and I'll get married at 29 (laughs).

Seema, who grew up in a predominantly Caucasian area, recalled that "when we went to college is when we really discovered each other (other South Asians) and um, at that point there was a lot of pressure to find somebody and get married, or at least be dating someone," with a view to eventually get married. This is a very common life plan for most parents, which includes an understanding that marriage should take place in a

timely manner. With that in mind, along with the general observance of modesty, marriage becomes a purposeful task. Even when this does not entail an arranged marriage, dating and romantic relationship need to take place in a timely and purposeful manner. Again, the pressure on women is greater because in the South Asian patriarchal family, a woman's role is rooted in her family, whether that is in her family of origin or her marital family. This is another reason why the marriage window is more time sensitive for them and their parents. Parents are highly vested in this heteronormative life plan because they see the eventual marriage of their children, followed by the arrival of grandchildren, as successful markers in life. The community also plays its part in this process; when a person reaches marriageable age, attention from the community also grows.

From an early age, women implicitly begin to understand the expectations of this heteronormative life plan. They hear about it in their families and their communities. Internalized as the only story, it becomes the idealized dream. Joyti shared having had a similar vision for herself "I envisioned my life to be from a young child, I said marry a man, we're going to have kids and live in *absolute* bliss (laughs) and it's going to be perfect. Just like they do in the movies." In a similar way, Nargis also had a life plan for herself; in a conversation with friends, she evaluated herself against it:

I'm not married, I don't have kids, I'm not in a settled relationship like, I don't even know where my life is going, and when I said that they (her

friends) said well, are you disappointed? And I was like, *NO*, but yea, yea, I am, I'm actually terribly disappointed.... growing up, um, by at least 26 at least married, or in a very healthy relationship on the way to children.

Riya found the internalized heteronormative framework is not so easy to discard; it takes time to learn how to work outside of it:

We both have a hang-up around getting married; when we get married it will be a joke, like two girls getting married, hahaha. Somehow we both have that. OK, what else, um, it's like when I think about it, it's like that's not real, it's, it's like kids playing house, that doesn't sound real. Um, since I unfortunately, I have this in my head, she has a bit of it in her head, I think we project and think, other people aren't going to take it seriously either, um, I'm not really sure where that comes from, we're trying to figure that out.... Maybe, it also comes from that in India there, there's these double standards where the guy's supposed to take care of the girl.

While the story of this life plan may have now changed somewhat to include a same-sex partner, all the women still expressed the same desire to be married, or at least to be in a committed long term monogamous relationship if marriage was not possible, and in most cases to also have children. Their collectivist cultural heritage still heavily influenced their own life goals. Altogether, the importance of the prescriptive life plan in the lives of South Asian queer women cannot be under-appreciated.

Socialized Gender: The socialization of gender in the patriarchal heteronormative culture was also an issue for some women who challenged these stereotypical social norms. Growing up in Pakistan, Nargis explained the cultural interpretation of her gender, “I was raised as a boy, I was allowed to do things boys did.... I think that was what the problem was because I was treated like someone of equal value.” Later, returning to Pakistan after living in the United States, “Folks said you’re total American. I’m not an American, I just have the opportunities that.... I would have had as a boy living the same way in Pakistan.” In this case, independence and freedom were associated with either the male identity or it was associated with a more liberal Western culture, but not what was befitting a Pakistani woman. Amrit shared a similar experience living in the United States:

I think within my family, or within the Punjabi culture um, people often say that I have more masculine traits or that I act like a boy, I want to be a guy. Um, and I don’t (laughs) but I think some of the behaviors and choices that I’ve made have sort of aligned more with what would typically be expected of men.... I wanted to pursue a career.... I have made certain sacrifices and moved away.... I had a certain way of speaking up about certain issues that whether it was in a mixed gender crowd or even amongst women of calling out certain things as they

were.... growing up I was interested in politics.... understanding things in a more intellectual manner and just the conversations I would hold. I seem to have them with men and so that made people wonder.

Seema shared an example of her mother's discomfort with her gender presentation:

Now she struggles more with my gender identity than my sexual identity, um, she struggles with my short hair because even back then I had long hair.... I think she's had more trouble with that kind of stuff than, you know, I don't wear make-up, I don't wear dresses, and I don't like those kinds of things.... maybe that she can't relate to me, or maybe that like I'm too overtly gay and whatever, she would prefer me to be more discrete or not denounce my womanhood or whatever, of course that is whatever her idea of it is, she's very girly, she's very feminine.

Expectations of women were that they are subordinate, feminine, and marginalized, thereby perpetuating and maintaining the patriarchal hierarchy and all three of these women violated these expectations. In the South Asian patriarchal culture, stereotypical attributes of women are still widely held, and any deviation from stereotypical gender presentation is uncomfortable. South Asian women challenging these social norms, however mildly, have their gender, honor, and morality questioned

because the perception is that they are breaking delicate social norms that put them in male spaces.

Sexual Modesty: From an early age, women receive messages about the importance of modesty and morality. Parents take precautions, implicit and explicit, to protect their daughter's modesty and morality. Related to the gender discrepancy that allows boys to have more freedom, girls' freedom is intentionally restricted. Seema and Amrit shared how their socializing was restricted in order to avoid potentially risky environments:

My parents were so strict that I wasn't even allowed to go to slumber parties if my friends had a brother.... my family was incredibly conservative, um, I was never allowed to date, was never even allowed to have male friendships growing up.

To protect modesty, the topic of sex and sexuality is taboo; there is discomfort in raising it in these conservative South Asian households, or even in the general South Asian community. With parents themselves not having had these discussions in their families of origin, they lack both the language and the comfort level to have these discussions with their own children. As a result, despite what happens in the wider society, there is an implicit understanding, or belief, that their children will be abstinent until they marry, especially their daughters because of the gender disparity. Beyond discomfort, there is a fear, as Saanvi said:

These things that nobody is talking about on a grand scale in an Indian house. Um, I guess the fear of right, whatever the fear is that your kid's going to become promiscuous or become a whore and get STDs and chlamydia and die or whatever the case is.

The community reinforces these beliefs through stigma. The common belief is that sex, or sexual behavior, outside marriage is wrong and shameful. Lakshmi provided an example of how these values are subliminally learned and how the community plays a role in both monitoring and reinforcing women's behavior and beliefs about the self. She recalled an incident in her adolescence. Living amongst her very conservative extended family, she innocently shared with her cousins the very personal experience of her first kiss. To Lakshmi's dismay, "they were super scandalized and they told.... my parents." When Lakshmi's mother addressed it with her, she said:

It was just an awkward thing and she was like mad.... I think she was embarrassed is what I think it was, it was almost like if I'd told her instead of my cousins she wouldn't have been mad.... a kind of super casual kind of thing and it came up and I remember being.... super embarrassed and it super sucked. And, I don't know, I feel like being embarrassed and my parents being awkward is a kind of like a good way to characterize how they are about me and sexuality in general.... I remember just being humiliated. I don't know, just knew my parents wouldn't approve, it was

like, sexual activity.... there's clearly disapproval here and like, sexual activity is not good.

Lakshmi's experience demonstrates how closely modesty, shame, and honor of the self and of the family intertwine. Joyti's experience as a single mother illustrated just how deep this stigma runs as she described her mother's distraught reaction when she found out about her pregnancy:

How dare you use your body for sex, *before marriage!* Um, so um, oh yea, she wanted me to marry him immediately. I don't care who he is, I don't care, I don't care that I've never met him, I don't even know his name, marry him like *tomorrow*, and then we're going to tell the family that um, the baby came prematurely when you, when you have the baby. So um, I said no. She disowned me and left to India.

Women carry the brunt of the responsibility for maintaining familial respect and honor. Any association with sex or sexuality can trigger internalized feelings of shame, and this can lead to judgment and stigma. Priyanka recalled an incident when her mother learned of one of her friend's bisexuality, her mother's reaction was, "you should stop hanging out with her, you should stop you know, interacting with her like try not to deal with her" because there was a fear of being tainted by association. Entrenched in collectivist values, there is an expectation that the interests and needs of the family take precedence over the individual. There is an expectation for accommodation to protect the

honor of self and the other. Accommodation to avoid conflict and loss of face is a desirable quality nurtured to perpetuate compliance and humility. Joyti described this behavior:

I inherently have a very easy time censoring myself at exactly the right moments when I need to because that's how I grew up, you know, like Indians know exactly how to sensor themselves or dance around a situation just to make everybody feel comfortable. Quite effortlessly.... it's both men and women but women are expected to adhere to it. I think women feel the backlash when they don't. When men don't accommodate, there's little to no back lash.

While morality and honor are important across the board, gender discrepancy inherent in the patriarchal structure holds women up to a higher standard; judgments are harsher and they face severer consequences. Priyanka made such an observation:

It's even more men orientated when it comes to South Asians because you know, worst comes to worst, if like a man has those tendencies to say whatever he want and do whatever he wants, then there's the idea that a man's allowed to do that and it's not going to be a problem, but if a woman does it here, trying to challenge her stage, her status, her caste, or whatever, she's like ruined for the rest of her life.... men can bounce back, he's fine with it, but women, no.

Identity

The identities of these women reflected journeys that have involved considerable reflection, introspection, and negotiation. Fluidity and intersectionality lay at the core of their identity development. While these women had a strong sense of knowing who they were, they still conveyed an openness to a journey of discovery with an identity that was still a work in progress. The foundation of this orientation established early in their childhood, learning to negotiate different identities in different cultural values systems.

Biculturalism: Home and school were often two distinct worlds, Shreya said, “I think it was separated for me, like there was the person at school and the person I was the rest of the time.” At home, there was a strong cultural influence. Parents perpetuated cultural values, beliefs, and rituals as a way to preserve cultural heritage for themselves and their children. The boundaries around the family unit were strong and reinforced by intentionally situating the family within a close-knit community. Seema describes her childhood experiences, “my parents didn’t let us speak English at home.... I had grown up very sheltered, so.... even the things that normal kids would know, have done, like going over to their friend’s house or hanging out, all of that” was very limited.” Amrit also experienced a conservative and enmeshed upbringing, “our family was very close and so a great majority of my time when I wasn’t in school was pretty much spent at home with family.” Parents sought to reinforce and embed this cultural immersion by

building a close and supportive South Asian community around them. Lakshmi described her cultural experiences:

Everything I've experienced with the South Asian community throughout my life has been that they have rituals, they go to Batynam (Indian dance), listen to Gatynak music, they go to temple together, they like watch Bollywood movies and hang out together and I was like that when I was growing up.

Other families, such as Joyti's, affiliated themselves to conservative religious organizations as a way to protect their cultural heritage. Amrit described her family's cultural conservatism:

Our community here was pretty, predominantly Indian, it was a very closed off community, um, so people retained a lot of their cultural values and also, within my family, the first wave of immigration, as many immigrant families do, regressed back in many of the traditional practices to really hold onto the culture.

Fossilizing traditional practices and rituals is an effective way for parents to feel connected to their heritage and maintain cultural connection for their children. While all the women describe a strong cultural immersion, their identities also reflect the influences of the Western majority culture they experienced outside of the home. Joyti described the intersection of these two cultural influences:

I don't like to be American (laughs) to put it frankly, but I will say I'm Indian American because unfortunately I do like straddle identities as an American. When I'm in India I'm American, I'm not Indian. When I'm here I'm Indian, I'm not American. So it's both.

Her statement describes an identity that changes relative to her surroundings. She reveals an awareness of how her identities conflicted with those around her and a sensitivity to how that made her feel like an outsider. Joyti alludes to the difficulty of finding a space where both of these identities intersected in an affirming way. This suggests that most of her experiences were compartmentalized, requiring her to selectively activate and deactivate her identities as a means to fit in each of her environments. This can give rise to feeling not *enough* or not *authentic* in all environments, which can be alienating, potentially placing her as an outsider in all her communities. Seema shared this sense of *otherness*, "honestly I don't feel like I fit in anywhere, there's no one group that I feel completely comfortable in." While all these women shared a bicultural identity, each one positioned herself at different points along the continuum between the two identities, reflecting their individual levels of acculturation/enculturation between the two identities. These bicultural identities were complex and often fluid even for the individual. Nargis said:

I will be Pakistani until.... I've lived half of my life in Pakistan and half of my life in the States. At that point I can say, I mean I say I'm a Pakistani

American officially, but then I'll be more accepting of the Americanness of my identity.

On the other hand, Saanvi, who was born in the United States, has already reached her comfort level, "it's not like one is devoid of the other but the majority of my identity is actually more American than South Asian." However, Shreya, who was also born in the United States, stated that her identity had been changing, she said:

I've always been very proud and I've always known a lot about Indian culture because my parents have tried really hard to instill that in me and my sibling. As I've gotten older, it's become more and more important to me.... I'm so hungry and so curious to know more, and to be, to be more Indian and to learn Hindi and to do all these things I haven't.

Siya, who immigrated to the United States as an adolescent, has been working through her process of learning how to successfully straddle and integrate both cultures:

I spent a lot of time washing away my accent, um, trying to fit in.... because you think that assimilation means that you leave behind what you, what was once yours but that's not the case anymore, I think I'm getting more and more comfortable within my South Asian identity again.

Riya, who has similar immigration experiences, says, "I'm still figuring out who, what my identity fits in culturally." These very different responses to often very similar cultural influences highlight the importance of not making assumptions about

acculturation/enculturation from simple visible or tangible markers, such as length of time present in the U.S., presentation, age, or stage of identity development. It is a far more complex construction, based on markers that are very personal to each woman, and these markers may themselves also continue to be fluid over time. Related to their acculturation process was their experience of immigration. Many women identified with the experience of being an immigrant as a part of their South Asian identity, but the meaning of those experiences were different. While the literature review suggested that generation status might not be significant, because of the influence of globalization and the Internet, significant differences arose amongst these women. A number of these women have met with cultural barriers within their South Asian queer communities that they attribute to different immigration experiences. Because the South Asian queer women's community is small, it is diverse, bringing together all South Asian women who identify as queer. Nargis described her experiences:

I grew up back in Pakistan, whereas a lot of the Desi folks here have grown up here but you know, they went in the summers and traveled (there), (they) tend to have those access points.... it's kind of like an accessory.... (for me) there'll always be that nostalgia. This feeling of loss, like I live with this feeling of I've lost home, every day.... I think a lot of Desies born and bred here do end up belonging in some sense or form because this is the only reality they have.

Joyti provides another perspective as she described her experiences with foreign-born South Asian queer women:

It's harder for me to connect with Indians who are like straight from India. Even though we have all of these other things in common, unless we are on the same page politically, was what was different. Like the commonness was our Indian heritage, and queerness, but politically we're not meshing, and so I feel more uncomfortable around people like that than comfortable... being Indian and being queer is not enough.... you can be Indian and queer and that seems like really progressive but you could still be in the dark ages with your politics. You could still be as racist as all hell, classist as all hell.

It is important to note that whilst all of these women shared the experience of being an immigrant, it held a unique meaning for each of them because of the way that experience had shaped their identity. With regard to their immigrant and minority statuses, the differences were particularly noticeable in how they experienced and addressed injustice and alienation. However, all these women consistently stated that their South Asian culture was the most important in shaping their values and beliefs for many of their life choices. Saanvi described her identity as “from a physical identity standpoint I identify a lot with America but culturally, spiritually, religiously ah, that has a lot to do with my parents and their connection to India.” For Priyanka:

To be a South Asian woman to me is to be a combination of successful and to be independent, at least how my mom has raised me, but at the same time being well cultured and sticking to like my roots and heritage.

These women expressed their affinity to these cultural values in many different ways:

I think so much of our experiences are deeply rooted in our culture.... which has a slight overlap with religion.... I think I really have this strong value of having a committed relationship and having an exclusive relationship.... the way that people are given respect and also the way that they expect respect. You know, I think there's, there's something particularly Indian about that. Um, you know the way that I parent.

All of these experiences, and the fluid intersectionality of their multiple identities, are important considerations for understanding the identities of South Asian queer women. All of these women outwardly presented equally Westernized and all of them exhibited many of the Western behaviors of independence, career orientation, and assertiveness. However, their experiences suggested that it was their internalized cultural beliefs that were the most influential in terms of their sexual identity development. Consequently, these women consistently resisted defining their sexuality through what they considered were Western valued prescriptive labels.

South Asian: Not an Identity: While the South Asian identity was important to all participants, most regarded the term South Asian as a generic label of categorization rather than a label that described their cultural identity. South Asian is a category used in the United States to define populations from that geographical region. While they share similar cultural values and beliefs, South Asians are very diverse. Culturally they identify with their country of origin, or more often even with a specific region within that country, such is the level of South Asian cultural diversity. Nine of the ten participants in this study identified as Indian and one as Pakistani. Both of these countries have states and provinces that are themselves diverse in language, food, traditions, religions, lifestyles, and some will be more liberal or conservative than others.

These women also indicated a stronger cultural affiliation to the local region first, then country, and least of all to the term South Asian. Persons immigrating to the United States tend to retain that order of cultural identification, both in how they maintain their cultural values at home and as much as possible in the cultural community they seek out for support. Consequently, the *South Asian* identity each of these women have been socialized in and that they identify as *being* South Asian is actually the identity of their parents' regional identity. Despite a connection of shared values and beliefs, which are refer to as South Asian culture, each woman uniquely conceptualized her South Asian identity; of courses; those from the same regions will have more similar South Asian cultural identities. Amrit described her identity as:

I think in our community it was really the Punjabi identity, I don't think I really formally learned the term South Asian till college and really probably didn't even understand until college (laughs) that there were other subgroups of people because I was born and raised here and never travelled to India.

Therefore, South Asians only identify with this generic identity because they live in the United States; they would not use it outside of the United States. Only Seema specifically adopted the South Asian identity later in life as a part of her politicized identity "because that's a much more inclusive word, it's a political word.... both inclusive but also recognizing the differences between." These cultural nuances are important for those working with South Asian queer women; they must take the time to understand the finer cultural context of the individual.

Eschewing Labels: With the exception of one participant, all the other participants held no significant association to prescribed labels as an identifier of their identity. For Seema, the label she used to describe her sexual identity was important because it reflected her politicization: "identifying as queer, you're actually saying... it's actually OK to not conform.... A political stance" but for other nine women these labels represented how *other* people may understand their identity. It did not have any meaningful significance for how *they* themselves described their identity. They adopted labels either out of convenience, or as a logical convenient choice for what appeared

appropriate, or as a way to avoid being pigeonholed. Priyanka voiced some of her frustrations about labels:

It took me a while to figure out that I don't need a title as much as people think that you need a title to identify yourself... I don't think I need a logo stamped on my head.... I don't want to fall into a niche... its uncomfortable.

Saanvi also questioned their relevance for her, "all these terms are fabricated.... social term for being majority attracted I don't think it really matters to me". For Amrit it was just a logical definition:

I definitely thought about it but not in terms of sexuality, more so in terms of do I want to be in a committed relationship and so um, based on the fact that it's a female person I'm with and that is identified as lesbian, then that title seems to fit.

Shreya was more vocal, objecting to how these labels ignored her fluid sexuality that incorporated her multiple identities. She saw labels as:

A natural Western system of knowledge to categorize and I don't ever expect people to be able to completely abolish the system they've grown up thinking in. It can get frustrating because I don't think it's OK to put people in boxes.

While many participants were comfortable with how they defined their sexuality and were not confined by these prescriptive labels, for others the labels actually created a level of insecurity or uncertainty. When comparing themselves against prescribed notions of who that identity represented, two of the women had insecurities about the authenticity of their sexual identity. Lakshmi, who identified as bisexual, not only questioned her own right to adopt the label; she was also concerned the bisexual community would question her authenticity. Lakshmi said:

I felt like I was never enough. I was like, look at all these Trans women who are my friends or like gay men, people who are like really living their identity and look at me.... like validity is really important to me, I don't want to take up an identity or space in a group where I'm like, not supposed to be.

When identities were complex, fluid, or not yet confirmed, labels offered a way to manage ambiguity and uncertainty. While the labels offered a definitive identity, failure to completely or consistently meet those conditions, or perceived conditions, itself led to increasing disconnect and isolation over time. Nargis described her challenges of trying to fit in with a fluid identity:

Initially I said queer because I dated cisgender male identified men....I'm pansexual and I will date anyone and it doesn't matter what your anatomy

is. And then I realized it actually does matter.... I don't know how to identify.

Joyti adopted different labels with different people, according to how she believed they would understand them, and she was trying to make sense of the need to do this:

What I'm sort of pushing against internally is this idea of having to define yourself often in one way and what was that standard and who started it to begin with and why, why does everything from there on out emanate from this original standard that was built on like patriarchal power and privilege.

Altogether, labels and identity are not in of themselves an easy or comfortable fit for South Asian queer women. Given these women's history of fluid intersectionality, it is not surprising to find they placed little weight in the importance of label affiliation.

Coming Out

The experiences of these participants revealed that the process of coming out generally occurred over an extended time, and that sexual identity realization and acceptance most often occurred for these women in their 20s. . While the process of coming out to family was complicated and stressful, the time of internal preparation leading up to self-acceptance was generally far longer than the external preparation leading up to coming out to family. Saanvi said, "It took

me a long time to realize I was gay.... that process probably took the majority of my time,” and for Seema, “I spent all my twenties trying to be sort of a conforming person, try to make my life fit some sort of like a norm that I thought I was supposed to be.”

Latent Attachments: All participants could recall early attachments going back to their early adolescence, or even to childhood. With the exception of one participant, none recognized or acknowledged them for what they were at that time. With hindsight, they now knew those attachments were different from what would have been regarded as normal friendships at that age. They described these feelings as strong emotional attachments that were confusing. These attachments felt uncomfortable, they were not reciprocated with the same intensity, and even family could not explain them. Seema found that by high school with this discomfort and confusion, there was “always some underground level of shame around it (because) I knew it wasn’t normal, or not in whatever sense normal is, but um, it wasn’t like what everyone else was experiencing.” At the time, participants interpreted these attachments in a number of different ways:

This inherent need to make sure this person is OK.... I realized I sought her approval in a way that was more than a friendship.... it was an emotional thing.... I felt very protective towards them.... I had this sort of

territorial feel of her, I felt jealous when she was with other friends.... I wanted to have a body like her.

There was a general lack of awareness and understanding of these attachments. Given their strong cultural influences in the home, which set the tone for relationships, love, and affection, much of how they interpreted these attractions and attachments at the time would have occurred through the patriarchal collectivist lens. This collectivist framework positively nurtures interdependence and strong familial ties. In the gendered framework, close bonds amongst the same sexes are especially common and generally encouraged. Working from this benchmark, the intense same-sex feelings they experienced may not necessarily have appeared that unusual to them or it may also provide an explanation for their confusion and discomfort. Seema said, "In India like you see women are really really close.... I really thought it was a part of my personality," for Saanvi, "I don't think I felt any of the relationships were uncomfortable," whereas for Siya they were, "this friendship is just getting too weird and I do not need to be friends with this person." Modesty is important in the South Asian culture. There is firstly a lack of conversation in the home around sex and relationships and secondly, there are expectations to practice modesty with regard to the displaying of romantic affection, even between the parents. Altogether, this leads to a lack of language and awareness of feelings that could be anything other than what are experienced in their nuclear family.

Internalized heteronormativity was also influential in delaying awareness or acceptance of same-sex attraction. Shreya described her attractions:

I remember distinctly thinking I wish I was a lesbian so I could date a girl.

Throughout this, I was like I'm not, like clearly I'm still straight.... I was sure that all women went through these thoughts at some point (laughs)

Similarly, Lakshmi said she "had a lot of experiences that I chalked up as straight people have those experiences too.... straight girls can get drunk and make it with each other.... and we all think girls are pretty." In the context of all these cultural influences, it is reasonable to understand how these experiences may have been misunderstood or dismissed. With histories of denial or naivety relating to earlier attachments, realization of the underlying motivations for their attachments came much later. Seema said "going into college that's when you become much more aware."

Validation: Validation of sexual identity was important for most of these women. It was either accompanied the process of realization and/or was an integral part of coming to terms with accepting their identity. Because these women came from conservative families, they had limited opportunity, if any, to experience romantic relationships. As a result, they arrived at college relatively naive about *self-awareness*, with limited knowledge, experience, and general awareness around sexuality as it related to *her*. The freedom of living away from home, exposure to more diverse populations, and increased differentiation of the self, possibly offered the opportunity to become more in touch with

their emotions, which in turn created a greater willingness to explore and honor them. However, even that was often a hurdle in of itself, these women recalled a number of barriers to overcome, “I don’t know how to date... how do I even find a person?... in high school, I was not at all, like I didn’t do any sexual things. I had a boyfriend that I kissed, that was it.” With a lack of comfort around their sexuality, most of these women concluded that the only way to verify their sexuality was to test the attraction. One way to do this was to *confirm their attraction to women* felt right and that that was where they wanted to be. This happened through casual encounters:

Started exploring my sexuality with women and um, I started going to lesbian bars.... I think it was really useful to me to have that time period of just letting myself be free and if I met a girl I really liked to try something and not be afraid.... I *think* I am but don’t know, so I was toying with ideas and experiences and I didn’t know how to get the experiences that I needed to figure it out.... it will be legit once you have sex with a woman.

The other way, was to *rule out the attracted to men*:

I wasn’t sure what I was, right, so I was like maybe I’m just bi, maybe I’m, you know, I really tried to, I dated some guys, um, I even had sex with a guy to see if maybe that’s why because I’ve never done it before, um, none of these things were for me, or help me figure it out, no.

For Amrit, however, validation came through finding a partner to whom she was strongly attracted but who also fulfilled her requirements for what constituted a relationship:

I really have this strong value of having a committed relationship and having an exclusive relationship. And so, if we were to explore this further or to see where this would lead, those would sort of have to be the conditions and um, she agreed to that and said she shared the same values and so I think the relationship from there, it seemed like it went really quickly.

Validation was more challenging for the women whose sexual identities were more fluid. Since validation against a sexual identity was more elusive for these women, they sought validation through identification with or acceptance from their sexual community. Nargis, who continues to process and get to know her fluid sexuality, shared her challenges:

So if I'm not gay, or queer, or whatever, yea, I would have lied to everyone around and I will lose a lot of friends I know. And I will not be able to trust myself because here I am standing in my truth and saying this is who I am but you know, again if ten years I change again they'll say who the hell are you?

Validation was, therefore, important for all of these women in either helping them to accept their sexual identity or as a means to understand their sexual attractions.

Acceptance: For some women the moment of realization was also the moment of acceptance because the discomfort or confusion surrounding early emotions or attractions finally made sense. Siya describes her experience:

I'm free.... it was a truth that was knocking around in me for so long.... it just feels like it just fell into place and I haven't really had to process it or think about it.... I actually felt relieved and very happy because I had wanted it for so long.

For other women, acceptance of the self was a longer and more difficult process. It brought up questions and anxieties that reflected underlying internalized heteronormativity and internalized homophobia. Riya said "I was trying to process this new *thing* that had come up... gay people get killed still, or they were committing suicides.... suddenly I was *that* person... I didn't have anybody of course, where do I go for support." Seema thought, "I wanted kids so I was like it would be easier if I could just be straight," while Saanvi said she was "internally emotionally I was terrified because I didn't, I didn't know where to turn in terms of who would understand." Each of these women chose her unique path to finding acceptance. Riya felt disconnected with her core self; she removed herself from her chaos and booked herself into a meditation retreat for nine months in order to reconnect with her healthier inner self. Shreya turned to her

Indian heritage to validate her sexuality. It was important for Shreya to find her place as an Indian *and* queer, which she did by connecting to her ancestors:

I was thinking that me thinking about my ancestors and despite all these other things, I am also the daughter of a long line of people who somewhere in there were not, not straight, dealt with this, and um, like I have thanks for them being here and I have them to thank for surviving, and I was almost thinking about them coming to me and like giving me these things.

Seema accepted her sexuality after her politicization; at this point, she finally embraced her queerness and her right to be non-conforming. For Saanvi acceptance came when she saw possibilities of a future that reflected her own hopes. This happened when she met a lesbian couple who demonstrated that a happy, committed, stable, and monogamous relationship was a possibility for queer women. Joti stated that acceptance of her sexuality came from the need to honor her personal integrity, to be honest in accepting that she was intentionally only pursuing women dating partners. For Priyanka, acceptance came when she reconciled to herself that she could live with her parents not accepting her identity and that for the sake of their well-being, she was willing to keep the two lives separate. Riya articulates the question and fear that all these women had in coming out, irrespective of their identity development stage, “how would I tell this to my parents and how would *they* react, will I *ever* tell my parents.”

Loss and Grief: For some of these women, an overwhelming mix of negative emotions followed the realization of their sexuality. These emotions included fear, uncertainty, and self-loathing. Riya felt fear; suddenly realizing she was a different person, a vulnerable person:

Oh s**t, not, not me.... it started becoming a reality, it's, it became scary because then I would have to tell people, then this is who I would *be*, then would I be treated differently, and.... how would my family react.... I didn't have any gay friends, um, so I think it was just.... *unknown.... it was blank.*

Riya conveys feeling suspended in a state of limbo, having just lost one identity without another identity to replace it. Stepping out of this limbo state and crossing over to the unknown brought with it consequences. This ambiguous state triggered deeper feelings of internalized homophobia, especially for the women growing up in more conservative homophobic regions of the United States. Seema said she felt “a lot of self-hatred, a lot of like shame... probably even disgust” while Saanvi said, “to me internally it was unthinkable even to go there.... fear of exclusion and judgment... that internalized disapproval of these feelings.” These strong internalized feelings can compound the existing turmoil of uncertainty and easily quash any attempts to validate these attractions by subconsciously inhibiting the natural curiosity to explore readily accessible resources. Saanvi said:

I knew that gays and lesbians existed, um, but it was such a, it was just, to me internally it was unthinkable even to go there. You know, I didn't look it up on Google, which is probably the most private thing you can do on your own.... I didn't really go out of my way to find out a lot of information about where the parties were, where people were congregating.... even though I probably could have. Um, I didn't extend out to LGBT groups on campus.

Seema recalls experiencing a deep sense of loss of future dreams and hopes attached to a patriarchal heteronormative socialization:

Sad mostly, um, I had to grieve the loss of like whatever ideas I had about myself and my cultures ideas, my parents' ideas, and my family's idea you know, that I was going to disappoint them and somehow that I didn't know if I was ever going to have kids, you know, like all of these ideas that I had about who I was supposed to be.

Each of these women had their individual journey of loss, but all of them went through the process of coming to terms with the loss of the self, as she knew herself. There was a process of grieving before embracing a new identity, *Isolation*: All of the women stated that they felt isolated and lonely to some degree and at some time during their sexual identity development. A number of factors contributed to this sense of isolation. Prior to connecting with the South Asian LGBT community, many thought they

were the only South Asian queer person. This finding was quite unexpected. Given the ages and education of these women, it would be reasonable to assume they would be aware of LGBT populations. Furthermore, with prominent LGBT debates in the public domain and the widespread availability of LGBT resources, there is an assumption that they would, by inference, logically conclude there was a South Asian LGBT population too. However, on closer examination and considering the matter in the context of their early experiences, it does not seem quite so unreasonable.

The sense of isolation came from a combination of firstly not seeing any other South Asian queer persons in their immediate family, in the community, or even in the general media. Secondly, while there was an awareness of same-sex sexuality in the majority society, their history of compartmentalizing the two cultures possibly created dissonance for transcending such a connection across these two cultures. The South Asian LGBT organizations can act as bridges for transcending this disconnect but they are rarely, if at all, active and visible in the general South Asian community as an easily accessible resource. Rural communities with smaller South Asian populations are unlikely to have an LGBT organization, as these are predominantly located only in larger cities with large South Asian populations. In the context of these cultural influences, the realization of a same-sex identity can create internal turmoil that can easily lead to a deep sense of isolation:

I also did not know there were queer South Asians.... I mean I knew there were token ones.... I felt very alone, you know, very isolated and I didn't even know what to do with that.... the fact that both of us at some point thought we were the only queer Indian gays in the entire state.... you know statistically it can't be possible but you have no idea where to look for these people.

The isolation may also come from a sense of helplessness that comes from the realization that their current skills for managing intersectionality are inadequate to manage this new dilemma. Furthermore, they could not take this problem to their primary source of support, their family and their community, because they were the source of the problem. Isolation was not just an issue prior to coming out, the same challenges of intersectionality continued to be present at all subsequent stages of identity development. These latter stages of identity development can be equally isolating if there is not support from other close South Asian queer friendships. Riya's describes her struggles with a lack of support, "It kinda still feels like isolated, it's still the case.... I don't have other South Asian friends my age, ah, who are gay, and who I can share my experiences with." Naturally, the South Asian queer women's population is relatively small, so making close connections that translate into personal friendships can still be challenging.

Can't Come Out/Won't Come Out: The importance of the role parents and family play in the lives of these women also cannot be underestimated. Even when these familial

relationships were not positive, the ties were strong. Connection to family was a vital part of their overall sense of well-being. Consequently, coming out to parents was a pivotal event in the integration of their sexual identity. The decision to come out created a high level of emotional turmoil; evaluating the reaction of parents and planning to minimize risk from consequences. All of these women clearly understood the conflict their queer sexuality would create as they took it into the South Asian patriarchal framework. However, because of their family bonds, honesty and familial acceptance were crucial to their overall sense of well-being. As a result, the coming out process was long and tumultuous for all concerned. At this time, two of these women had made the decision to not come out to their parents, while the remaining women were at different stages of coming out. However, in all cases, their decisions and their actions reflected the importance of family and respect for their parents' cultural limitations.

The two women decided not to come out to their parents because, for these two women, the pain the disclosure would inflict on their parents outweighed the comfort disclosing would give them. This decision also reflected their parents' ability to accept a queer sexuality verses the harm disclosure would do to their relationship. For Lakshmi, who identifies as bisexual, her overriding concern was to protect her close relationship with her parents, "I think I still subtly want to not offend them too much. Like I would like for my end of the day home life, like when I am 28 or 30, to be something they can comfortably interact with." Lakshmi states that when it comes to her romantic

relationships, her parents are still struggling with far less controversial issues and she believes her sexuality will be far too radical for them to accept or process. She points out that:

They're still not even comfortable with me being sexual at all.... to me that's such a bigger and crucial hurdle that I actively don't have the time for resentment that I can't talk about my queerness with them... that's (disclosing sexuality) like 12 steps away.

Lakshmi sees disclosing as a fruitless exercise that will only lead to pain and conflict. Furthermore, because she is not in a committed relationship, she does not know the gender of her life partner; if it were to be a male partner then she believes it would be pointless to put her parents through this ordeal and unnecessarily risk the harm it may do to their close relationship. In Lakshmi's case, the risks and consequences for her far outweighed her current level of discomfort and need for openness. She was happy to put the decision on hold until, or even if, it proved necessary to make. The need to be open about her sexuality, irrespective of her life partner, as a way to affirm her sexual identity was not as important to her as was her relationship with her parents.

In a similar way, Amrit believed that her sexuality was not the primary issue she needed to address with her parents, "I think the conversation that was more important was the one where I said I'm not having an arranged marriage." For Amrit, addressing the issues relating to her gender identity, as a South Asian woman raised in the confines

of a conservative patriarchal family, were more important than her sexual identity. The impact of gender discrimination and loss of power were a more fundamental issue for her overall level of wellbeing. Her more pressing concern to address the arranged marriage issue was an important first step to renegotiating her boundaries with her family and gaining the right to choose her relationships, irrespective of sexuality, because without that right, her sexuality was irrelevant. If she did not push back on an arranged marriage, then whoever she married would be through her parents' approval, which of course then would only be a man. Amrit's experience uncovered a more fundamental issue that many South Asian queer women face simply because of their gender in a patriarchal culture. This lack of empowerment and voice already puts these women at a disadvantage, even compared to South Asian gay men facing the same issues of arranged marriage. For Amrit, empowerment was a more pressing concern and keeping her sexuality hidden from her family was not a significant ordeal because she said she has always "kept parts of myself from my family throughout my life." Given her priorities, Amrit was willing to wait for a more favorable time to be completely out.

From the moment Priyanka became aware of her sexuality, she decided she "wasn't going to tell my parents." Her rationale for this decision was that "my parents are a lot older....I didn't want to disgrace them and didn't want to upset them... (so) it wasn't going to happen." Priyanka's decision to accommodate her parents' limitations over her own need to affirm her sexual identity initially seems like a lack of agency, a

loss of power. However, Priyanka made her decision based on her priorities; she willingly placed her parents honor and emotional well-being over her own. Therefore, while there were compromises, for Priyanka accommodation was empowerment; the locus of control was with her. She understood and accepted their limitations, demonstrating her own internalized loyalty to family respect and family honor. It spoke to her placing a higher value on her identity of daughter over that of her sexuality. Despite the internal struggle accommodation created for her, she too was willing to wait for a more appropriate time for disclosure.

All three of these women had other identities that were, at that time, more important than their sexual identity. Therefore, for South Asian queer women their sexuality is but one of their many important identities. The relative risks and consequences associated with each identity determines which takes precedence at any particular time. The Western individualistic lens sees this negatively, as unhealthy, having a detrimental effect on the development of a queer identity. However, from the collectivist lens this alternative hierarchy of identities actually contributes to their overall sense of well-being and may not be detrimental to their queer identity development.

For the women who came out to their parents, precipitating factors prompted the decision; the need to live authentically, such as being in committed relationship. The decision to come out was at the risk of anticipated consequences, rather than that the consequences were less significant. Usually, their coming out preparations anticipated the

worst outcomes. Amongst these women, there was a common discomfort with lying to parents and a genuine desire to be open and honest within their relationship. These disclosures produced mixed outcomes.

Two sets of parents were able to accept their daughters' recent coming out and both have made varying efforts to include their daughters' partners. While both sets of parents were still working through their own processes to embrace their daughter's identity, the presence of a committed relationship appears to have helped make the identity real. The efforts to be inclusive of the partner have been a part of these parents' acceptance process. Seema has been out for a long time and she experienced a mixed response from her parents. While her mother had a more difficult time with the disclosure, she says of her father's reaction, "It's like more than I could ever have hoped for.... (he said) I accept you as you are and you're still my daughter, I love you." While Shreya's parents have become more accepting over time, Shreya states that since she is young, her parents still hope that her sexuality is just a phase. Furthermore, because she has a fluid sexuality, Shreya's parents are hoping that luck will be on their side and their daughter's final partner will still be a man. Because Nargis is no longer in a committed relationship, her mother's opposition has waned and they do not talk about her sexuality, her mother is holding until, or if, she actually has to address it. If in some way parents can rationalize holding off accepting their daughter's queer sexuality, they will take that

route, even if they do not articulate it openly, preferring to leave the door open and hope the worst never happens.

Preparations for coming out to parents were done on the basis that it will undoubtedly not go well and that it will inevitably result in a fall out. These women placed particular attention to addressing parent resistance to minimize the negative repercussions. Reaching a state of financial security was an important safety net, in case parents withdrew support for college tuition. However, despite these fears and the challenges some parents experienced in accepting their daughter's sexuality, none of these women reported withdrawal of financial support or reported being banned them from the home. Riya said, "I was pleasantly surprised at that, um, but at the same time I guess not so much because they are Indian parents and I guess Indians don't disown their kids."

Anticipating resistance, disclosure plans included steps to help parents cope with what they knew would be a traumatic experience for them. Saanvi says she gave them a "heads up so that they could formulate any questions that they had ahead of time and then I gave them two people that knew that I'd come out to that they could call if they needed consolation or whatever." Joyti "unveiled" the disclosure in stages to help her mother process something that Joyti knew she would consider too unpalatable to accept. Shreya had also planned to ease her parents in by first approaching the point of least resistance, "tell my dad first and get him tapped into the process, give him time to process it and tell

both my parents a couple of days later.” At this point, she had hoped her parents’ established support system would kick in with her father helping her mother process it. Riya prepared *herself* by first coming out to a conservative aunt stating that, “It was also practice for me telling her... I knew she would ask all the right questions.... that would prepare me (for how) to tell my parents.” Riya’s aunt had the same concerns her parents would have had but since she was one-step-removed, they were able to have a non-confrontational dialogue about it. As a result, when Riya came out to her parents she was able to anticipate and address their concerns proactively. In all these cases, the women stated that they made themselves available to answer their parents’ questions, referred family members to them for support, and, despite the emotional stress their parents’ reactions had inflicted on them, they continued to be there for their parents as they tried to grapple with the disclosure. None of the women indicated that they were comfortable just disclosing and walking away, leaving their parents to deal with the consequences. They considered themselves vested in the process. The underlying theme in these preparations for coming out were to ease the impact of the disclosure on their parents and to be there for them in the process of dealing with it.

Obstacles to Integration: Given the mixed reactions from the parents, and the participants’ different stages of coming out, the experiences post coming out were equally complicated. For the women whose parents were not accepting, a conflicted and uncertain situation presided where both sides were holding their emotional hurt while

also hoping to make amends and reconcile, Siya said “in the same way that you don’t think I’m your daughter I don’t think you’re the same parents that I had... it’s really hard to... even remember what our relationship was before.” Amrit has a delicate unspoken understanding with her family. Her partner accompanies her to her family events, “she’s fully immersed herself in some ways, so, um, so I would say it’s definitely known, (but) it’s not talked about, we didn’t formally sit down and have a conversation.... but I mean, they definitely know she’s around.” Despite this unspoken acceptance, Amrit was also aware of an unspoken awkwardness, which she believed came from the dissonance of trying to fit a same-sex sexual identity into a rigidly patriarchal heteronormative framework:

I don’t think they quite know how to make sense of her role and I think even if I was to come out and say I am a lesbian, I don’t think that would help them, there’s still confusion about, and it’s interesting because I think as a culture.... women are spending the majority of their time together and yet there’s something really uncomfortable that’s present when there’s more than just that, you know, friendship and emotional connection.

The challenges experienced by Amrit are not unusual because South Asian culture continues to be gendered within the extended family and in the community. Therefore, the rigid patriarchal structure will be a significant barrier

to integration for much of the South Asian queer population. Saanvi, for whom the coming out process has gone well, faced another unexpected challenge:

The fact that my parents' reaction was great is almost a, is almost a, you know, lack of connection.... it's very hard to process, like you expect something, so almost, like you're almost 100 percent sure it's going to happen and then it doesn't happen at all.... I still feel like it's going to happen at some point.... the other part of me is like wrapping my head around the idea that they are accepting. Which is way more difficult than I expected it to be.

When preparing to come out to parents, there was substantial psychological and emotional preparation for the anticipated repercussions and fall out. There was no planning for parental acceptance without facing conflict and resistance because either it was not going to happen or if it did, it needed no preparation. The lingering sense of unease and distrust that has followed her parents' positive reaction to her disclosure has then come as an unexpected hurdle. Saanvi attributed this to the unresolved microaggressions still lingering from the homophobic remarks she heard from her parents prior to her coming out to them. With regard to her sexuality, the parents Saanvi experienced before and after disclosure are at odds with each other, creating a level of uncertainty and distrust. Knowing that her friends have had far worse coming out experiences, there is a

sense of guilt that her feelings were unjustified. The guilt inhibits Saanvi's willingness to share her feelings with her friends, once again leaving her isolated and marginalized in her coming out process. Given South Asian women's history, it is reasonable to assume that most South Asian queer women will carry such microaggressions. Even hurtful remarks thrown around in the conflict of coming out can leave lingering microaggressions even after acceptance and reconciliation have taken place. However, few may feel justified to share them, in which case mental health professionals working with South Asian queer women may easily overlook their impact on these women's well-being. Almost a year after coming out, these feelings are still raw for Saanvi, "at the end of it, there was nothing overly accepting about that (those) whole conversation(s)."

Mental Health

The internal distress associated with exploring, validating, and coming to terms with their sexual identity inevitably gave rise to a range of mental health issues. All the women indicated at least feeling stressed and anxious. South Asian queer women come from an environment deeply socialized in modesty, respect, family honor, and shame. When these women move into a world of casual sexual encounters and experimentation in intimidating and risky situations, most of which are undertaken alone, there is a far greater risk for mental illness for South Asian queer women. They shared a number of anxieties related to these experiences, "I'm not a person who's good at having a lot of

casual sex... my mental health was being affected.... The life I was living wasn't my life... I just felt so disconnected from whoever I was at the core." Sometimes there was awareness and acknowledgement of mental health issues, such as depression, "I was so depressed, like I wouldn't come out of my room.... I lied to a lot of people and in the middle of this I was really down and I was really upset," but most often it went unrecognized and was only apparent indirectly in the narratives of their experiences – which increases the probability that she would not even think to seek out help for it. Substance abuse was one way to cope:

I mean I'm not proud of it but I drank a lot, I smoked a lot, I probably for three months did a lot of cocaine and um, I just blocked it out.... I absolutely did it (explored relationships) under the influence.... I was also abusing alcohol at the time.... I'm sure some of my mental health was being affected by it.

A number of the participants were more vulnerable and at higher risk for mental illness because they already had preexisting, although unrelated, issues from their childhood, "there was a lot of other things that happened in my life.... So I already had a lot of self-hatred and this just compounded it.... pushed me over the edge in terms of like my suicide attempt." These preexisting issues also eroded coping skills, "there was I think probably a serious lack of internal confidence... I didn't really succeed academically.... Externally I faked it... but it didn't have *anything* to do with the way I

felt inside.” Other mental health issues included stress and anxiety, and emotional and psychological distress was present at all stages of the coming out process. While some participants sought out support through counseling, college faculty, and even in the queer community, much of the traumatic experiences remained unprocessed. Of particular concern was the impact of additive stress. Different issues arose with different experiences at different stages of identity development, but not all of the issues were resolved along the way. Suppressing unresolved issues to cope with the next set of issues was one way of dealing with it. Consequently, whether acknowledge or not, there exists a significant need for emotional healing of one sort or another from past and current experiences. Amrit shared her observations related to their healing:

Certainly the women I talk to I think it’s healing that needs to be done from within the community of being an Indian woman and secondly on top of that of being a sexual minority. So I think it brings up a lot of pain but I think in this field that’s what we know will help, ultimately in terms of creating a story of healing is being able to talk about it.

This must be all the more important for women who do not have easy access to mental health support, such as the type available on college campuses. Given the pervasive reluctance amongst the South Asian queer community to access such resources, these women are most unlikely to seek help from hard to reach resources, even if they are available. As such, much of this population

remains extremely vulnerable and at greater risk from a growing package of unaddressed issues. While a number of participants did search out resources in order for this healing to begin, there were still signs of unprocessed trauma amongst the overall participant pool.

Relationships

Parents: Interdependence: The South Asian collectivist culture values interdependence. Parents are motivated to nurture strong familial attachments; they intend to be involved in their children's future success and life choices. The narratives of these South Asian queer women reflect identities deeply embedded in both their South Asian cultural values and in their families. Parents have had a major influence on molding their daughters' adult identity. This was evident in both their deliberations about coming out to their parents and in the actual process of doing so. All these women exhibited a strong desire to maintain their connection to the family. Riya saw her familial relationship as the foundation for her other relationships, "I feel like if that is flawed or injured, then that kind of affects all my relationships going forward because I don't trust people." Despite the continuing conflict with her parents since she came out, Siya said:

My parents and family relationships are extremely important to me on all levels, um, my family has been extremely loving and supportive towards

me for the last twenty-five, twenty-four years and I would like for that to continue. I would like for, for my kids to have grandparents.

Intergenerational connection was also important to all the women who expressed the desire to have children; they wanted their parents to be involved grandparents. At the same time, they also recognized how important grandchildren were to their parents and in some cases were willing to leverage this as a way to make their parents more accepting. Shreya recalled taking such a stand:

I said something like, oh yea if they're not on board with this by the time I have kids, they're not going to meet my kids, like, I'm not interested in taking my kids to meet their homophobic grandparents, who aren't OK with their, their parents relationship. Like that's not what I'm going to expose my kids to, and I think my sister may have mentioned that to my mom and I think it freaked my mom out and my mom realized how she was giving up, um, in choosing not to accept me.

While the differences over sexual identity may prevail, and acceptance may be a long drawn out process, the underlying interdependence on both sides ultimately needed these relationships to survive. Parental acceptance was therefore, important to these South Asian queer women, so much so that they were willing to compromise, negotiate,

or accommodate their parents' limitations in order to protect the continuation of these valued relationships. Amrit described how they have done this in her family:

My siblings and I have aged out of our childhood phase to where our parents can have different interactions with us.... kind of find commonality and enjoy them and not bring up topics that we know will upset each other.... now we have the choice to *not* spend time together, so I don't think that's what anybody wants and so I think we try to respect each other's boundaries more.

Amrit has accepted that openly disclosing her sexuality at this point would probably still result in a fall out with her family. While she no longer fears the fall out itself, her feelings have "softened into a sadness" that her family cannot fully accept her either now or in the future because of their own limitations. The sadness appears to be a resignation to compromise and accommodate in order to avoid the fall out. For Shreya, it became a painful emotional tug of war, "my family's always been a source of strength for me, (but now) it was being used against me" to encourage her to compromise her stand on her sexuality. Despite her differences with her parents, Nargis said she still felt innately connected to them, "because how do you separate the dreams they've instilled in me and distinguish them from the dreams I have for myself.... at least that's what I think in a lot of instances." Therefore, the impact of broken or strained familial relationships on the health of South Asian queer women was more salient than what might be for a queer

person from an individualist Western culture. The emotional conflict brought on by their sexual orientation often leaves them uncomfortably caught between *not being able to live with them and not being able to live without them*. Siya put this into perspective, “my parents are my biggest challenges because once you have your parents on your side in circumstances like this, everything else sort of falls in place.”

Sibling Advocates: Siblings have played a vital role in many of these women’s coming out experiences. All of the siblings have been “really positive,” they were either the first person, or the first family member, to whom these women came out. Siblings played different roles and offered support in a number of different ways. Shreya said of her sibling, “she became sort of a liaison between my parents and I... my mom leaned on her.... so she’s been very important in that sense.” Saanvi said her sister:

Was my rock during that entire process... I can’t tell you how much of an impact she had on, you know, my comfort.... she was supportive right off the bat... to be present in a supportive way and not just a reactive way, that was huge.

Priyanka had decided she was not going to come out to her parents, so coming out to her sister and obtaining her acceptance meant:

I had a person to go to that wasn’t just a friend, that familial connection is really important to me.... it changed a lot for me.... I knew that if I didn’t

tell her and something had gone wrong, I would basically be screwed....

that is the one thing that has honestly kept me going since.

However, while Siya's brother accepted her sexuality, he was unwilling to offer the support she needed to manage her parents' hostile reaction, she said, "siblings support is extremely important, they can really tip the scale" for how parents responded. Altogether, siblings can, and most often do, provided an extremely important and highly influential role in the coming out process.

Other Relationships: Seven of the 10 women were in long-term, monogamous relationships, stating that their partner was a very significant person for support, nurturing, and overall well-being. Women who were not in relationships expressed a desire to find a committed monogamous partner. Therefore, these women valued committed monogamous relationships over casual dating, irrespective of their age and stage of identity development. The importance of such relationships was perhaps a reflection of the strong collectivist cultural values they adopted from their families of origin. Extended family played an important role as a bridge for maintaining connection to the family. While no extended family member seemed to play any active role as mediators to resolve conflict between parents and daughter, they nonetheless provided valuable emotional support for these women. Riya describes the impact of her sexuality on her relationships with her extended family:

Since I don't call my family members so much, as often I would like to be in touch with them and like to know what's going on in their lives and vice versa, but I don't and that's kind of like putting a dent in their relationship and they're probably making, having opinions about it.... that's the big challenge.... especially with close, close relatives, people who are close to me by blood.... families is a strange relationship like even if you're not close you still talk.... it's like you're a constant part of each other's life without being a constant part of each other's life.... I think it's a nice gesture to call and just 'yea I remember you, I hear about you and that's why I'm calling you', um, so it's not necessarily that I'm emotionally close to them but because they're related by blood, I like to keep in touch.

The South Asian queer community, particularly the South Asian queer women's community, was highly valued as a safe place for the intersection of all their different identities. An inclusive space that affirms their multiple identities holistically. These relationships offered valuable support and friendship, especially when family relationships are strained:

You don't have to give that background, and then they're not trying to understand it from their head, they just know it with their heart. It's just the way things are and they totally understand you on an emotional

level.... it's nice to be able to talk to somebody about the struggles of being South Asian and also being lesbian. They're like the two very very big struggles you have to deal with and they suck a lot, for a better term.... I can talk about it for days to my friends.... White lesbian women are, even my South Asian straight women, they're great friends but they're not ever going to get it.

However, while these communities are essential resources for their overall well-being, all of the women reported that they were difficult to access in the first place. That said these communities are not without their own challenges and limitations. Joyti describes some of her frustrations:

Being Indian and being queer is just not enough, like there has to be some other values like us, like you can be Indian and you can be queer, and that seems like really progressive but you could still be in the dark ages with your politics.

So finding others who share their value system was important too. Joyti's experience illustrates the dynamics of shifting identity hierarchies as these women move between their different communities. Identity hierarchies may be stable within a community but they are not stable across communities. It appears that prior to finding the South Asian queer women's community, the South Asian queer female identity was the most important identity for Joyti and this was the primary motivation for seeking this

community. However, once in the South Asian queer women's community, her other identities that had previously been lower in the hierarchy moved up in importance, and they became a differentiating factor from the common identity. For Joyti, and a number of the other participants, this was their political identity. With this revised order of identity hierarchies, the South Asian queer women's community was no longer the comfortable fit anticipated. At this point, these women reevaluated their preferred hierarchy of identities and sought communities to better support it. They did this by changing communities, or by supplementing them with additional communities of support. Shreya describes how she manages this:

My politics is really important to me and people who are close to me, we all have the same thinking as far as political and social justice issues, so there are other queer women of color in my life who aren't necessarily South Asian but are women of color who I feel really really comfortable with in the same way.

Given that the South Asian queer women's population is relatively small and diverse, especially in the smaller cities, the probability of these women finding what they need in a single community is low. In that case, the need and ability to integrate across groups becomes more important. While all these women have a history of managing fluid intersectionality, there are additional stresses in transitioning between the various communities. Furthermore, the disappointment

in not finding that *one* community in which they feel a *complete* sense of belonging may lead to further marginalization where they find themselves as outsiders in *every* group. Seema describes such a feeling, “I don’t feel like I fit in anywhere, there’s no one group that I feel completely comfortable in, have not, I have yet to find that. I don’t even know if it’s really important for me to find it.” As a result, finding close friends and romantic partners may also be more difficult. In this case, the reality of overcoming isolation and loneliness may be more difficult than it might appear on the surface.

Homophobia and Social Stigma

Holding Emotional Anxiety: Even parents who were accepting of their daughter’s sexuality faced an uncomfortable personal journey navigating this unexpected and little understood path. Riya recalls her father’s frustrations, “I think it was coming from a bit of an angry place or a frustrated place or like a ‘not knowing what the f**k I’m supposed to do’ place.” There is a sense of helplessness about how to deal with their discomfort integrating this new identity, “ah, he was like so what are we supposed to tell people, like, *give me a script.*” Saanvi’s parents had also been accepting when she came out to them, exhibiting no outward displays of conflict. However, Saanvi recognizes that they are still working through internal angst, albeit quietly, “we don’t really talk about my sexuality anymore.” Their skirting around the issue of their daughter’s sexuality

by diverting the focus of attention to her partner, suggests a continued discomfort in processing her sexuality and/or their discomfort just discussing the topic of sexuality itself. In cases where parents are not able to accept their daughter's sexuality, a psychological and emotional tug of war ensued. A bombardment of emotionally charged text messages is common, which simultaneously aim to create guilt, manipulate emotional breakdown, keep their daughters engaged to avoid estrangement, and encourage a return home so that they can bring their daughter *back to her senses*. These text messages declared:

You're not normal, you're causing me to have depression, I'm on antidepressant medication now because of you.... all of this stress is killing me, I'm going to die soon.... she didn't believe it, she didn't birth a daughter like this.... please come back, this is not you.... how will I tell my, your grandparents.

The messages were loaded with themes of morality, loyalty to family, and the power of hierarchy and the extended family. Parents' emotional insecurities fueled by their general lack of knowledge and awareness of same-sex sexuality. Parents had misguided beliefs about its causes, believing that it was optional, "this is a selfish choice," and they could not understand how same-sex attraction happened, "how do you know you're attracted to her... it did not make sense to him." There was the notion that this was only about sexual behavior, rather than love and relationships, leading to

judgments about promiscuous behavior, “so you want to have sex with women.” There was some confusion between sexual and gender fluidity, “she told me she knew I was a girl, so I think she thought I was saying I was Trans.” Similar to their daughters, parents had had limited exposure to fluid sexuality. Personal inhibitions about sexuality prevented parents from exploring these discussions in their own families. With no visibility of same-sex sexuality in their South Asian community, there is a convenient assumption that it is simply a Western concern—same sexuality and South Asian culture remain compartmentalized and exclusive. At home parents are inherently vested in the prescriptive heterosexual life plan, therefore, the possibility that their child may present with a same-sex sexuality is not even on their radar; it is something they would not even contemplate.

Invisible Walls of Shame and Judgment: In addition to internalized homophobic and heteronormativity biases, parents’ resistance to accepting their daughter’s sexuality came in large part from the fear of familial and societal repercussions, much the same as their daughters’ early fears. Their daughters’ disclosure generated fears about their own coming out, “how am I going to tell my parents, your grandparents.” Many parents voiced these fears. It resonated disappointment, a sense of failure, judgment by others, and loss of face in the eyes of the elders and the community. Shreya described her parents’ reaction, “it became this very shameful thing for my parents, and it was a secret.... my parents

absolutely refused to talk about it to anyone... they were ashamed of it.” Coming out to others was a daunting prospect, not readily contemplated. Parents faced a complex set of barriers to coming out, weighing up the risks to themselves, their family, and their daughter. Parents were unwilling to open up to anyone, even for support, ultimately prolonging their coming out process. This led to loneliness and isolation, which in turn reinforced the very barriers that kept the LGBT population invisible. The parents’ reluctance to come out because of perceived stigma and the invisibility of the South Asian queer community becomes a self-perpetuating problem. Seema said her mother:

Felt isolated... she was just scared for me, she didn’t know who she could tell without the community gossiping and things. She didn’t want to close the door for me in terms of normal life. She didn’t want to tell anybody because if I decided later that I was going to be with a guy, she didn’t want to make it hard for me.... those were the protective things she had in her head.

The South Asian parents’ responsibility to protect their daughters’ reputation and honor, from shame and stigma, becomes an added burden in the deliberation to come out, especially if they still believed this might be a temporary fad or an ill thought out choice on the part of their daughter. Even reaching out for resources and support may permanently compromise their daughter’s reputation. The heterosexual prescriptive life

plan is too deeply ingrained to let go of completely. These fears about stigma are to some extent well founded. Priyanka described her mother's reaction when her mother found out about the queer sexuality of Priyanka's cousin, "my mom's opinion was very blatant that, that happened because her mom was a bad person, her mom didn't raise her properly." Priyanka's mother expressed reflected shame and blame for what is seen as a daughter's *digression*. Despite the heartache and conflict most of these women experienced in coming out to their parents, all of them had an underlying empathetic understanding of the challenges their parents experienced because of their queer sexuality. Riya shares her concerns for her parents:

For me it's like I had several years to think about it and I decided to be with a woman because this is what makes me happy and this is my life and what not, but for them it's just like, here you go here's your new life, deal with it. Um, yes so I'm a bit concerned about that, which makes me want to give them more time.... I still feel like my parents need support and I don't know where to get that support from.

Misunderstood: It's a Choice, Fix It: There is a general lack of knowledge about fluid sexual identities and about the differences between gender fluidity and sexual fluidity, especially amongst the older and more conservative populations. Shreya shares her observations of homophobic attitudes, "there is definitely a notion I think in general that maybe with South Asian people, that marks queerness as sexually deviant." Parent

reactions to their daughters' coming out often reflected the attitudes of the larger South Asian community. For Example: a) it is a misguided phase, "taking up their causes;" b) it is a sickness, "we'll take you to a doctor and this can be fixed;" c) it is a Western influence; "if we'd stayed in India this would not have happened;" and d) that it is a personal failing.

The extended family on the other hand, has been more liberal and embracing. In hindsight, Seema stated that her community had in fact been more accepting of her sexuality than she had credited them for in the past. As might be expected, there has been no overt homophobic hostility amongst the younger generation on college campuses either. However, while these positive reactions are encouraging, the experiences of these women revealed an underlying, often unspoken attitude that hinted at the subtle, but very important, difference between tolerance and acceptance. These women believed their parents' attitudes to queer sexuality were, "it doesn't matter that there are lesbians in the world but it's also different if it's happening under my roof.... you can do it in your backyard, just don't bring it to mine." These attitudes suggest there is tolerance if it involves someone else but there is still stigma if it happens to me or mine.

The shame and stigma felt by the parents and the liberal accepting attitudes of extended family illustrated this subtle difference between tolerance and acceptance. The parents understand this subtle difference; consequently, finding themselves on the wrong side of it, internalize the associated shame and stigma. Stigma attached to this type of

underlying shame may be even more damaging because it implies that this tolerance comes from the knowledge that one is immune to the taint of this shameful thing. The sense of superiority and privilege that may be associated with having liberal values further stigmatizes the struggling parents because their negative feelings may be seen as a personal failing. . This results in a double blow to these parents' sense of respect and honor, thereby creating even deeper levels of shame. This suggests underlying homophobic attitudes are still far more pervasive and stigmatizing than it might appear on the surface, which the parents seem to understand this very well.

College campuses reflected similar forms of passive tolerance. Priyanka said, "It's comforting that (with) this generation of South Asians I haven't felt that anyone's against it," but when it came to challenging homophobic or heteronormative attitudes, "it's just that there isn't anyone outspoken about it." Individuals were not only unwilling to speak up against homophobic behavior, they passively *condoned* homophobic attitudes, reconciling that "it's just how society is." With the South Asian cultural organizations on campus simply replicating their patriarchal heteronormative culture from home, there was a general lack of awareness of LGBT populations and their issues, they were just not on the radar of these South Asian college organizations. They were unaware of how their spaces may be intimidating or closed to LGBT persons. Consequently, there was no awareness or efforts made to provide an inclusive

space or to promote a safe environment for LGBT persons. Saanvi said of her sorority, “they were homophobic.... I think I probably became more homophobic during my first three years in college than I’ve ever been in my life.”

Inclusivity Verses Exclusivity

Policing and Censorship: While the rituals and celebrations were the enjoyable aspects of engaging with the South Asian community, the general perception of the community was that it was “very heteronormative and patriarchal”. The expectation to marry put pressure on women, especially during their twenties and early thirties, generally considered the optimum time for marriage. Invasive questions about marriage plans, or lack thereof, are the prerogative of all the community, especially the *aunties*, who consider themselves intrinsically vested in the family’s best interests. The community acts as a valuable pool for potential introductions to eligible partners. Riya said:

I can’t tell them *not* to bring it up because when I do, they have another counter argument which is “it’s just what you need to do, you’re a certain age to get married and there’s only so much time and then the time will go away and you’ll be single forever, and oh, my God that is so bad”.

The diasporic communities are small but often well connected. While these communities are sought out for the benefits that close knit communities provide, they also come with the baggage of small communities; oppressive in the way of community

judgment and policing. The behavior of the child, especially the daughter, reflects on the dignity and honor of the parents in South Asian culture, this forces personal censorship in this enmeshed and judgmental environment. Siya described one such incident:

This aunty who looks and smiles at me and looks over to my mom and she's like, pray for a nice son-in-law for next year.... I can't fully be myself in that sense and I can't fully expose my identity because my mom was standing to my left and I don't know who else this aunty is going to tell.... this is where social ties come in and what my parents are seriously struggling with, it's that sort of social layer.... I just have to put on a face, I can't truly be myself.

South Asian women experience censorship twofold. Firstly, there is the fear of judgment and stigma from the community, making being out uncomfortable. Secondly, South Asian queer women must censor themselves in order to protect the respect and honor of parents, even if already out to them. Because of gender disparity, repercussion from both forms of censorship are severer for women. Joyti says she can go safely into the community as a single mother, even under the protection of perhaps a fictional broken relationship, because it still fits the heterosexual framework. However, if she goes to a social event with her partner, "then that's more complicated" because their sexuality suddenly becomes exposed. Joyti believes there will then be a backlash and she is particularly concerned for her young daughter, but if he intentionally hides the

relationship, then she models negative messages potentially laced with connotations of shame. Joyti does not want her daughter to have to sensor herself in the community but then Joyti is also concerned about her safety in the community. Lakshmi describes the culture of the community:

I feel like everybody has a clear idea of what the *community* is, it's *so* clear. South Asians are always hanging out together, it's like a very distinct clique and people are always talking about how much gossip or judgment, and how aunties know everything, you know, there's an opinion of it and I just wish it was, I don't know, a less conservatively rooted group.... the South Asian community feels really inaccessible as a group.... the community itself is very intimidating still.... it's still very hard to find South Asian culture that's progressive.

Because the community is intimidating and conservative, there are few, if any, openly queer couples attending South Asian community events. Furthermore, queer couples can pass as straight friends if they avoid public gestures of affection because socializing in the community remains gendered. It is common for men and women to socialize in gendered groups, often even dancing in gendered, as well as mixed, groups. Collectively, these factors discourage the need, or desire, to be out in a community that is not accepting; it may be easier to pass as straight, especially when there is no safety in being open.

Morality and Judgment: The common perception that the community gossips was a sign of judgment about morality. Since sex is a taboo subject and modesty is valued, any kind of sexual activity would be immoral. Messages about morality and modesty come from parents and the community, often with one reflecting or reinforcing the other, as Lakshmi describes her experiences of dating:

I never noticed this parallel before, it's kind of like with my parents, my impression is that a lot of South Asian people would be offended at my sexual activities and having openness with like, I don't know, when I date people I have multiple relationships in succession or like just generally being someone who dates and also as someone who very much dates outside the community.... I feel that bisexuality would fall under the same umbrella as dating a lot of people, *oh she's slutty!* (emphasis added). I haven't heard anyone in the Indian community, in the South Asian community being very vocal about like, I'm against homosexuality. That's not something I've been confronted with but I've definitely been confronted with people being uncomfortable with sexuality generally. I feel like those two would be interconnected.

Gender discrimination was also apparent. Moral judgments are harsher for women than for men, so the pressure to use self-censorship was equally greater for women than men, Priyanka said, "women are expected to adhere to it.... I just feel like that is so

Indian and it's so patriarchal". Priyanka also pointed out that women's reputations and identities were more fragile than men's reputations because "men can bounce back, he's fine with it but women, no". Consequently, faced with these harsher judgments, women withdraw from the community more readily and so experience greater marginalization. Seema said she gradually stopped going to social events in the community because she feared "that people would gossip, that they would tell, talk about how my mom was a failure.... (then) because of my coming out.... I just never felt safe attending one of those things because I didn't want to have those experiences." This is yet another example of the subtle ways in which South Asian women are more vulnerable to marginalization because of their gender. South Asians can superficially appear progressive because South Asian women in the United States, especially the younger women generation, are generally equally well educated to men, pursue successful careers and can appear very independent. In reality, however, underneath this outward persona, patriarchal heteronormativity continues to marginalize them in ways that are not so easily visible.

Passivity: Condoning Discrimination and Marginalization: While one would naturally expect the younger generation to be more liberal and accommodating, experiences in the South Asian college campus community has been surprisingly not much different:

You'd think people would come to university and be away from their parents but our India club is the biggest culture organization on campus....

they're so cliquy and everybody knows who's dating everyone and everybody's like , this one girl, um, my friend is Catholic but he's Indian.... (she won't date him) because it would create too many waves with her family.... I don't feel I could be under the microscope all the time and appease some cultural values and be considered conservative *enough* to be thought proper.

South Asian students leaving their close-knit families and communities find comfort in replicating the same cultural environment while away from them at college; it is a safe space for the intersection of their multiple identities. The same collectivist patriarchal framework is then established on campus, Saanvi said of her experience, "there's an expectation that the sorority girls really need to hang out with the frat guys and dress up in a certain way and um, you know, like your entire existence needs to revolve around attracting a guy." g. Since college campuses typically provide liberal inclusive spaces, by inference then there is an assumption that students will also reflect these values. In the context of this general perception, the impact of these different cultural groups maybe overlooked, but for many students joining these cultural organizations, they could be a very substantial part of the individual's experience during those years in college. Therefore, the experiences of South Asian as a group does not appear to be much different on campus as it is in the larger community.

Stepping Back and Out: These women's participation in the South Asian community was limited and guarded. Because all of the women are straight passing, it was easier for them to manage the disclosure of their identity. While most were out to selective extended family members, few yet felt comfortable being openly queer with their partners in the South Asian community. The hesitation was partly dictated by their own level of discomfort and concerns about the community, but more importantly it was influenced by the impact their open participation would have on their parents – respect for their parents' discomfort with their identity. However, this willingness to accommodate the honor of their parents still came with regrets for what was lost as a result. In the early years of coming out, Seema distanced herself from the community because she was uncomfortable with patriarchal judgment and questions about marriage. Now that she feels integrated and comfortable in her identity, Seema has some regrets about losing that connection with the community:

I think in the end, at least at this point, I've somewhat distanced myself now from cultural things I don't really go to cultural festivals, I don't go to any of them. And it was sad for me because that was stuff I was very excited about and into when I was younger.

Seema says it hard to turn the clock back and reintegrate in the same way: what is lost is hard to recapture once it is gone. The general perception of the South Asian

community amongst these women was negative, even before sexuality came into the frame. The additional challenges associated with a queer sexuality simply consolidated their reluctance to want to be a part of it. As a mother and a queer South Asian woman, these challenges are greater for Joyti, and she is even less likely to see individuals like herself in the South Asian community.

Parents: Conflicted Responsibilities: Eight of the ten women were out to their parents, all of these parents at different stages of accepting their daughter's sexuality, but all of them struggled with coming out themselves in their community. Their interaction as parents of queer daughters was minimal, if at all. . Firstly, they shared similar personal struggles to their daughters, such as internalized homophobia, fear of the unknown, and the absence of a framework to work through it. Secondly, they felt isolated, just as their daughters did not see any other South Asian queer persons in their immediate community, their parents also cannot see other parents of queer children in their community.

Furthermore, parents were genuinely concerned for their daughters; it was not just about themselves, especially if they did not feel confident that their daughter's sexual orientation was genuine or permanent. Parents wanted to remain quiet to protect their daughter's future reputation and opportunities, particularly as a daughter's moral digressions may be less forgiven and harder to redeem in the community, should she want her to find a male partner in the future. Their continuing need to look after their

daughter's honor, and keeping the hope that she might at some time, revert to being heterosexual, is a demonstration of their sense of duty to see their children married and that they remain vested in the prescriptive life plan.

This reluctance of parents to come out not only marginalizes them and their daughters, it is a serious barrier to creating greater LGBT parent visibility in the South Asian community. Ultimately, it compromises advocacy of LGBT rights in the South Asian community. It is a self-perpetuating problem; parents do not want to come out because they feel stigmatized and they do not see other parents of queer children but then if they do not overcome their own feelings of stigma and come out, there will continue to be no visibility of parents of queer children. However, overcoming these challenges to come out individually requires a great deal of courage.

LGBT Communities: The participants reported mixed experiences with South Asian LGBT organizations. The unique intersectionality of each woman and her stage of identity development determined what she wanted from them. For Saanvi, entering a large LGBT organization was a positive experience; she found role models for positive identity integration and acceptance of herself without judgement. These affirming experiences opened the door to her own possibilities as a queer South Asian woman. For other women, the same characteristics were obstacles, Riya said, "People who were there already knew

who they were... I'm new I don't even know what I'm doing, ah so it just didn't feel like a good fit." Riya found the predominantly male environment alienating, "first of all I can't even identify with men" and with the women's group, "they were already in relationships and.... I felt like I was being a *burden*." Amrit, who said she is more introverted, was looking for smaller connections rather than large organizations:

People were much more in a state of Pride with their queer identity than I was and um, they identified more as being lesbian than I did, and so it was a larger part of their identity than it was for me and so, you know, they might have been lovely people and we might have been friends otherwise but it wouldn't necessarily have been something we would have connected on.

Some women were more sensitive to patriarchal privilege, and were looking to be politically active. Nargis said of the larger organizations, "it's too male centered.... its White gay men in Brown bodies.... it's all about socials, it's actually not doing anything." South Asian women's groups offered more connection, for Seema, "helping me to feel there's some other folks I can relate to.... it's like we've been craving the connection." For others, these organizations lacked a clear sense of purpose, "I don't know yet.... it's not as impactful yet I guess.... it's important for these places to be politicized.... we have to find a way

to exist out in society and that means connecting with other people of color.”

Therefore, as the South Asian LGBT population grows, these organizations will also need to think about how best to meet the increasingly diverse needs of their populations.

Overcoming Adversity

Experiences of external adversity, in terms of hostility or rejection from the community, were not significant, Joyti said, “I think because of my perceived straightness I don’t face as much adversity, I don’t think, um, but internalized adversity, there’s plenty of turmoil and stress.” Coping strategies to manage this internalized adversity included finding strength from religious beliefs, connecting with their South Asian queer heritage, following personal philosophies to life, and using personal strengths and coping skills. Relationships have played a central role, Siya said, “I think that human contact is the most important thing, um, being with others who can understand your situation” and provide emotional support. Individuals built supportive communities but also used existing supportive relationships, especially friends, siblings, and extended family. Safe spaces and faculty advocates at college were valuable resources for exploring identity and addressing internalized turmoil. Priyanka said, “there’s this one professor I had.... she’s a woman studies professor and she just like took me under her wing and like gave me the chance to really open up to her and really have a conversation with

her about where I was coming from.” Counseling resources, especially those available at college, have also been useful. Siya said they:

Helped me tremendously to reiterate or say out loud what I believed to be true.... I needed somebody who didn't know me to just sit down and, you know, like work through this.... entire experience with me and that I was no longer keeping myself mentally healthy... I didn't want this to be the only thing I talked about with my friends.... I didn't want to tire my friends out I had to keep my other relationships really healthy.

All of the women felt the need to connect with the LGBT community, especially the South Asian queer women's community, once they had come out to themselves and accepted their queer sexuality. At this point, connecting with others who shared the intersection of their identities was validating and extremely important to their well-being.

Hopes for the Study

All of the women were passionate about the study and excited at the opportunity to share their stories. They hoped the study would aim to support the community at various levels. A common thread was that the study would be a resource in of itself while also acting as a catalyst for the development of other much-needed resources to support the population. Most importantly, these women wanted their voices and stories heard, Lakshmi said:

I really like the idea of it being an academic paper.... it ever could be carried into South Asian spaces.... it would be nice if it was research used by South Asians.... it would mean so much to me if we could start a discussion with it actually in our spaces and maybe build spaces with it.... what I would like with this research is visibility.... because we're so hidden.

Priyanka wanted to help make the coming out process easier for those coming after them:

I hope that it helps people feel less isolated in reading people's experiences I think that maybe hearing other people's stories about how they navigated that would be helpful, especially for younger folks to know that it's possible to live a life authentically and with integrity.

Siya hoped this study would lead to initiatives aimed at:

Changing the level of thinking there (in the community) in order for people like me to emotionally survive and people like my parents to emotionally survive these environments, having been LGBTQ, been affiliated to someone closely who is that. You see, I think a tremendous amount of work needs to be done there.... a lot of work needs to be done on our parents' generation.

Amrit hoped it would promote the generation of concrete advocacy and support resources, such as counseling or intervention programs that promoted “healing that needs to be done from within the community of being an Indian woman and secondly on top of that of being a sexual minority,” or initiatives that specifically supported the youth population. In terms of creating general visibility, to have resources and information available through mainstream South Asian community communication channels.

Intersectionality: Too Much and Yet Not Enough

Intersectionality was the most consistent underlying theme that influenced almost all aspects of lived experience for all ten participants; negotiating multiple identities to navigated their life experiences and their life goals both before and after coming out. In almost all the major and sub-themes identified from the narratives, intersectionality either manifested itself directly or was present as an underlying force. As immigrants, or children of immigrants, these participants learned to manage the intersection of their identities between who they were, or needed to be, at home and at school. Intersectionality became more complex with the addition of new identities, such as a queer identity and a politicized identity.

The more complex their intersectionality then the harder it was to find *one* place which offered a safe and affirming environment. Consequently, these women straddled a number of different communities, their identities in a constant state of change between

them. The experiences of these women also showed that the hierarchy of these multiple identities changed as they transitioned through developmental life cycle stages, and as they responded to their diverse and evolving relationships. While these women became more comfortable with their intersectionality over time, their experiences of exhibited shared themes of not feeling “enough,” or not feeling “genuine” or “authentic,” creating the feeling of an “imposter.” This underlying theme of not *being enough* compounded for women who already had similar, albeit unrelated, pre-existing insecurities from their childhood.

These underlying feelings perhaps also reflect some childhood insecurities relating to living in two cultures. Always being in a position where identities are selectively activated and deactivated in order to fit into a given space or situation means there is rarely a time, if at all, when she is able to wholly fulfill the attributes of any given space or group, irrespective of what part of herself she included or excluded in that space. Amrit eloquently describes this in her poem *Too Much, But Still Not Enough*:

Too outspoken, too tall, too dark, too fat,

Too female to be seen,

Too female to be respected....

Too Asian to be a feminist....

Too much femininity to be a lesbian,

Too traditional to be gay,

How can I be too much, yet still not enough?

The narratives of these women showed that while they all embraced and affirmed their multiple identities, they were at different developmental levels for managing their intersectionality. Seema, having been out the longest of this group of women, had fully embraced the uniqueness of her intersectionality. Sitting on the periphery she has found her own compass, rather than try to follow those of others, she said “I feel very centered now compared to where I was, you know, all the Vyasna and all the yoga meditation I done has helped me quite a bit, and therapy itself. All the things I’ve done to push my growing edges.”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

As discussed earlier in chapter 3, the trustworthiness of a study is a measure of its rigor and transparency; specifically relating to the methodology and the results. I introduced steps in the methodology to minimize subjectivity and raise authenticity, particularly as they related to both the qualitative research design and the phenomenological methodological approach used. Studies informed by feminist theory measure trustworthiness of the study from the quality of the integration of feminist principles, especially those concerned with injustice, discrimination, and oppression. I conducted this study adhering to the standards put in place in the research design to build rigor and trustworthiness.

Credibility

I kept a journal throughout the time of the study, including the analysis and report writing. I regularly practiced reflexivity in an effort to increase awareness of my personal influence on the study. It was particularly valuable for maintaining a focus on my responsibilities as a researcher using a feminist lens, increasing my sensitivity to issues relating to discrimination, power differentials, and privilege between me and my participants. I took action in a timely manner to address any concerns that arose. I incorporated a heavy use of anecdotal quotes to authenticate participant experiences as a means to raise the quality of data analysis and the reporting of results. The data collected was rich and extensive, generating a large number of themes and subthemes to provide a substantial description of the lived experiences.

Transferability

The results include demographic descriptions of the sample population, thereby providing transparency for the scope of transferability. The interviews adhered to the research questions; therefore, data reflects the scope of the inquiry, which in turn provides parameters for transferability. A discussion of the limitations of the study further add to transparency of the scope of transferability. Lastly, the due diligence given to strengthening the credibility, dependability and trustworthiness of the study enhanced the transferability of the research.

Dependability: Data collection continued until the point of data saturation to capture the full range of lived experiences. I recruited ten participants, conducted 16 interviews in total, with six participants interviewed twice. With the exception of one follow up interview, all interviews were between 1.5 to 2.5 hours in duration. This provided sufficient time to explore experiences fully and clarify understanding. Twelve interviews were audio taped and four videotaped; the quality of the recording was high, generating reliable transcriptions of the data. All participants declined to participate in triangulation of data, to compensate for the loss of this quality check; I checked my transcriptions against the recordings twice to improve accuracy of data.

All interviews closely followed the research questions to ensure data collected was sufficient to answer the research questions.

Confirmability

The confirmability of the study results and analysis is achieved y firstly through providing a detailed description of the methodology and secondly, by describing in detail its practical implementation. An explanation of any deviations from the described methodology, or any shortfall in meeting the standards of the research design are included.

Summary

The main research question for this study was broad to capture the wide range of lived experiences for same-sex attracted South Asian women while the sub-questions

focused the inquiry on specific areas of interest identified from a review of the literature, identity, relationships, adversity and strengths. Additionally the feminist theoretical lens directed the inquiry to examine issues relating to injustice, oppression, and discrimination. Participant stories described lived experiences embedded in their South Asian cultural values. Data analysis generated ten major themes; Patriarchy and Heteronormativity, Identity, Coming Out, Mental Health, Relationships, Homophobia and Social Stigma, Inclusivity verses Exclusivity, Overcoming Adversity, Hopes for Study, and Intersectionality, and 25 subthemes.

These experiences revealed a long and difficult coming out process for both the women and their families. They all experienced stigma, isolation, marginalization, homophobia, and discrimination. The family played a central role in their lived experiences and in their overall sense of well-being. Because of their own internalized interdependence and loyalty to family, parental acceptance was important for the healthy integration of these women's queer sexual identity. However, coming out to parents most often created a rift in their relationship, with a compromised acceptance reached over time. Perceptions of the South Asian community are that it is not a tolerant and accepting space. Common strands running through these themes included the fluid intersectionality of multiple identities, discrimination and power differentials based on gender, and various points of injustice. I discuss these underlying themes more fully in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 also includes an interpretation of the study results, a review of the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of South Asian same-sex attracted women residing in the United States. My literature review revealed a dearth of research regarding this population (Inman et al., 2014), thereby supporting the rationale for my study. The literature review identified sociopolitical factors that may influence the lived experiences of these women, such as South Asian cultural values and beliefs, interdependence, and acculturation. Based on my review, I determined that it would be beneficial to examine the lived experiences in of these women in the context of these environmental conditions.

As a framework for my study, I drew on feminist theory from a stand-point theoretical approach, the focus of which is on how women's gender impacts their lived experiences, specifically how it exposes women to discrimination, oppression, marginalization, loss of power, and role stereotyping (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). Acknowledging the important role that relationships play in women's lived experiences, of interest also is how women's capacity to build relationships is either enhanced or undermined by their cultural environments (Brisolara et al., 2014; Jordon, 2009). Feminist researchers, therefore, adopt a highly political and moral stance; their aim is to provide a voice to silenced individuals and highlight gender

inequalities and social injustices within individuals' lived experiences (Brisolara et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009).

A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology supported this qualitative inquiry into the lived experiences of South Asian queer women. Hermeneutic phenomenology interprets descriptions of lived experiences to create insight into the meaning of those experiences (van Manen, 2014). Reduction, the suspension of researcher biases, is essential for firstly creating insight into the authentic meaning of the lived experience and secondly for building study trustworthiness (van Manen, 2014). Reduction requires the researcher to maintain reflexive journaling throughout the duration of the study (van Manen, 2014). The report of the results uses anecdotal quotes to authenticate the insights of these meanings (van Manen, 2014).

This inquiry generated a rich and extensive source of data for use in examining my research questions. Data aligned well with the feminist principles suggesting that the feminist framework was a fitting theoretical lens for this study. The analysis generated 10 major themes and 25 subthemes to describe the participants' lived experiences. The most significant of these themes are a strong affiliation to cultural values and beliefs, importance of family and relationships, intersectionality of multiple identities, and the regulatory impact of expectations for modesty and morality. Participants' experiences were rooted in the collectivist patriarchal cultural framework; many of the experiences

reflected underlying themes of discrimination and power differentials related to their gender.

Interpretation of the Findings

The interpretation of the analysis highlighted the importance of the feminist approach to look at women's experiences holistically. While the themes generated by the analysis describe the lived experiences of these 10 South Asian queer women, the most important insight gained was that these experiences are all interrelated. No one issue can be understood or addressed in isolation; doing so leads to the same culturally inappropriate solutions that currently deters much of this population from seeking mental health services (Brown, 2008; Choudhury et al., Hays, 2008; Jordon, 2008; Sue & Sue, 2008).

Failing to understand the cultural nuances of how these experiences are connected can undermine self-efficacy rather than build agency (Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). Addressing one issue out of a holistic context can harm other important aspects of these women's lived experiences; the consequences for a queer sexual orientation are greater for South Asian woman, so the potential to do harm in the absence of a culturally holistic approach can be equally greater (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010, McKeown et al., 2010). This ultimately perpetuates rather than mediates these women's existing experiences of discrimination, oppression and marginalization, thereby reinforcing the isolation that many of the participants in this study felt. In the following discussion of

these major insights into the lived experiences of South Asian queer women, I aim to highlight the connection between these experiences to create a more holistic understanding of the overall experience.

Theme 1 Cultural Values and Beliefs

My results support the findings of my literature review. Participants' early childhood experiences laid the foundation for their cultural frames of reference. Irrespective of their immigration status, all of the participants expressed a strong affiliation to their collectivist cultural values, Siya said, "I think so much of our experiences are deeply rooted in our culture." They identified these values as the most important influence on their life choices. These findings support those of Inman et al. (2007) from their study of first-generation South Asian parents. Inman et al., (2007) found parents used a compartmentalized approach to acculturation in which Western acculturation was isolated to values and behaviors allowing them to be successful in the majority culture, while their personal values remained rooted in their cultural heritage. The participants in my study demonstrated very similar acculturation patterns in descriptions of their identity and experiences, as illustrated by Shreya's experiences, "there was the person at school and the person I was the rest of the time." This intergenerational similarity of acculturation attitudes is not surprising, assuming that it would be natural for these parents to instinctively encourage and support the same compartmentalized approach in their children. These similar acculturation patterns also

demonstrate the strong influence of the family and cultural values (Inman et al., 2007; Srinivasan, 2001).

Interdependence and a hierarchal patriarchal respect for parents are the most salient of these cultural values (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Inman, 2006). Shreya stated that, “it’s really important to me to be a good daughter;” it is important then to understand how these values influence their life choices. Outwardly, these participants presented Westernized; independent, assertive, career orientated, and empowered through education. Their South Asian cultural values, such as interdependence and hierarchical respect, are not evident outside of their family environment. Consequently, it is easy to overlook the impact of these major influential factors (see Iwamoto et al., 2013; Srinivasan, 2001) when working with this population.

Theme 2 Importance of Family – Interdependence

Families are an integral part of these participants sense of well-being, Siya stated that, “my parents and family relationships are extremely important to me on all levels.” Seven of the 10 participants described close relationships with their parents; the other three described strained relationships. However, all 10 participants shared an innate desire to remain connected to their families. The close familial attachments described by these participants support the findings of Gupta et al. (2007) that parents intentionally encourage interdependence in their children as a way to ensure intergenerational closeness. A number of participants specifically expressed that familial relationships

were an important part of their identity (Brar, 2012; Clark, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gupta et al., 2007; Inman, 2006). My data from the analysis suggests that this underlying strong connection to their family and cultural roots is singularly the most important influence on their identity and lived experiences.

The health of these familial relationships had a direct impact on the development and integration of their sexual identity and their mental health (Khan, 2011; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narui, 2011). Treatment plans to support South Asian queer women must understand how these emotional ties create power differentials in their important relationships because these power differentials determine the type of agency South Asian queer women use to address conflicts in the integration of their sexual identity (Beharry & Crozier, 2008; Brisolaro et al., 2014; Brown, 2009; Gupta et al., 2011; Jordon, 2009). A failure to acknowledge this emotional interdependence and the power differential it creates leads to ineffective treatments and harmful consequences that simply exaggerate existing power differentials and reinforce alienation (ACA, 2014; AMCD, 2015; Brown, 2009; Choudhury et al., 2009; Jordon, 2009; Remley & Herlihy, 2010).

All participants demonstrated a high level of relational interdependence within their familial relationships. These relationships were a vital source of support for these participants, but for their queer sexuality, they became their most significant obstacle (Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narui, 2011). Dealing with her parents resistance to

accepting her queer sexuality, Shreya said, “my family’s always been a source of strength for me, (but now) it was being used against me.” The impact of this change in parent attitudes is far more powerful than just a loss of support and resistance. The identities of these participants’ are rooted in their families and South Asian culture, the loss of parental support threatens the core of these identities and their personal well-being. Parent resistance leveraged the power of attachments to multiple family members, cultural values, and the South Asian community to instill guilt and break down the agency of their daughters. Altogether, this created an overwhelming power differential against which the participant must act alone. Maintaining family bonds and establishing a queer sexual identity within the family framework was essential to the core of their well-being (Clark, 2005; Khan, 2011; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Sandil et al., 2014). Therefore, the importance of, and challenges to, parental acceptance cannot be underestimated.

Participants had the unequivocal belief that a queer sexual identity would be unacceptable to their parents. Furthermore, they anticipated that coming out to their parents would result in rejection. (Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narui, 2011). The decision to come out to parents, and to come out in the South Asian community, is not easy. Coming out in the community is dependent on parents’ willingness to come out in the community. Siya says, “I would just like to be out. But I can’t out of respect for my parents.... the community backlash,” loyalty to family and reflected respect and honor

hindered these participants willingness to be open in the community beyond their parents' level of comfort or acceptance. These participants were willing to accommodate their parents' limitations at the expense of their own need to affirm their sexual identity (Clark, 2005; Deepak, 2005, Ibrahim, et al., 1997; Kay, 2012; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010). The hierarchy of their daughter identity was in many cases higher or equal to that of their sexual identity.

These participants valued both their queer sexual identity and their identity of daughter Narvaez et al., 2009). Because of the belief that in the eyes of their parents the two identities are exclusive, there was an unwillingness to jeopardize the relationships as a daughter (Clark, 2005); Gupta et al., 2007, Inman, 2006; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Mair, 2010). These participants' narratives included multiple examples of how they made compromises to their own needs to accommodate their parents' limitations in order to make these identities inclusive for their parents (Clark, 2005, Khan, 2011; Mair, 2010; Narvaez et al., 2009; Ravel, 2009; Sharrif, 2009). For Priyanka this accommodation went to the point of deciding she "wasn't going to tell my parents....I didn't want to disgrace them and didn't want to upset them." While accommodation is common to some degree in most non-heteronormative identity development, the instinctive willingness of these participants, born out of hierarchal respect and loyalty to family, was far more pervasive and more factor in the integration of their sexual identity.

The power differentials in the hierarchical and patriarchal system encourages self-sacrifice for the honor of the family and elders above the individual (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Sharrif, 2009; Ravel, 2009). The expectation to accommodate is nurtured from childhood, Joyti said, “I inherently have an easy time censoring myself... that’s how I grew up.... just to make everybody feel comfortable. Quite effortlessly.” These experiences support the findings of Ravel’s (2009) qualitative study of Gujrati women’s conflict between personal desires and other’s expectations. Ravel (2009) found that these women did find ways to meet their desires without compromising family expectations. Despite differences with their parents over their queer sexuality, these participants empathically understood their parents’ struggles. Riya said, “I had several years to think about it.... but for them it’s like, here you go, here’s your new life, deal with it.... which makes me want to give them more time.” Consequently, accommodation becomes a realistic option to make their sexual and daughter identities inclusive.

The individualistic lens would see these participants’ willingness to compromise the integration of a queer sexual identity negatively. The accommodation of their parents’ homophobic attitudes maybe interpreted as a lack of agency or unhealthy dependence. Such a stance from the majority LGBT community would result in marginalizing this South Asian queer women further (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; MeKeowen et al., 2010; Sandil et al., 2014). A failure to honor the psychological and emotional dilemma this nuanced conflict of interests creates for South Asian queer

women hinders the provision of culturally relevant and effective support (ACA, 2014; Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009. Hays, 2008; Remley & Herlihy, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2008). A number of these participants experienced this form of marginalization in their mainstream LGBT groups. Lakshmi states that whilst her Caucasian groups were supportive, “there’s a cultural gap.... I never really get to talk about my parents being uncomfortable.... everybody’s like, you’ve got to come out to your parents, its super important, and I just don’t.”

Respect and accommodation for their parents also influenced these participants’ coming out process; it was more demanding and drawn out. The process included, referring empathetic extended family to their parents for support, persevering during the conflict to help parents work through the issues, and negotiating their terms for coming out. Shreya said, “Who cares if I don’t get to share with every single person, like my priorities have changed.... I will take the easiest route to stay with the person I love; it’s not about principles anymore.” These participants’ empathetic approach to working with their parents came from a position of strength, a form of self-efficacy for managing the intersection and inclusion of all their important relationships and multiple identities (Clark, 2005; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narvaez et al., 2009). This is what made it work for them.

Theme 3 South Asian and Queer

Upon realization of the queer sexual identity, all these participants instinctively knew it was exclusive to their South Asian cultural framework, as they knew it (Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narui, 2010; Russi, 2014). They recognized that queer sexuality and the majority Western culture were inclusive. Their history of a compartmentalized bicultural identity, in which the Western and South Asian identities were lived separately in different environments, initially impeded them from visualizing the possibility of being Asian *and* queer (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narui, 2010; Russi, 2014). Because the personal orientation and value system of these participants was rooted in the South Asian culture, it was not feasible to compartmentalize sexuality. Consequently, finding ways to be South Asian *and* queer was critical to firstly accepting the self and the secondly, affirming the lived queer identity.

Perceived challenges to integrate queer sexuality into the South Asian culture were daunting, Shreya said, “There’s no one in my immediate family, like my cousins, aunts, uncles, there’s nobody that I could *ever* (emphasis added) see as *not* (emphasis added) being straight.” The subtle message was that queer sexuality did not exist amongst South Asians. The alternative was to distance from family and the South Asian community but over time, that too was not an acceptable solution. Amrit had tried doing

this and then found “there was a part, an obvious part that was missing and I think I needed to have some kind of corrective or reparative experiences.” All of the participants expressed the desire to be inclusive of all their identities. Ignoring one identity for the sake of the other created a sense of otherness, of being different, incomplete, or too complicated for all their communities (Alimahomed, 2010). Amrit described these feelings as being “not enough and yet too much.” These experiences support those found by Alimahomed (2010) in her qualitative study of queer Women of Color, exploring experiences of oppression. In Alimahomed’s (2010) study, South Asian queer women shared their experiences of feeling an outsider on the periphery in all their different communities, including their South Asian LGBT organizations.

Finding this inclusive space was an essential part of their queer identity development. All of these participants were seeking, or had found, inclusive spaces that affirmed all their identities holistically. These were spaces in which there was a sense of feeling accepted, feeling understood from the “heart rather than the head” and getting “empathy” that came out of the common experience. South Asian queer women’s communities became an important place for support and affirmation for these participants (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005). This unwillingness to sacrifice any of their multiple identities appears instead to be almost an inherent *inability*, rather than a choice, to shed any of them, without losing a sense of self. Therefore, the integration of South Asian *and*

queer was an *essential* component of their sexual identity and their overall sense of well-being.

South Asian queer communities fulfilled a number of other important roles too, particularly for building agency. They provided role modeling and support for coming out issues (Clark, 2005; Narvaez et al., 2009). They provided valuable opportunities to socialize, Priyanka said, “I can talk about it for days to my (heterosexual) friends but they don’t get it... I feel happy that I have a group of friends that I don’t have to rely on people who don’t get it.” Raised in collectivist cultures, relationships are important in the lives of South Asian women. These South Asian queer spaces provide an essential space within which to build relationships for an alternative social network to avoid isolation and marginalization, especially if coming out to parents had resulted in rejection.

Theme 4 Fighting the Stereotypes

Participants placed little weight to the importance of labels or titles to express their sexual identity. Saanvi dismissed them as being irrelevant, “obviously all these terms are (just) fabricated”. A number of participants found their own unique label for how they defined themselves, rather than try to fit someone else’s interpretation of a prescribed label. Shreya, for example, defined herself as “not straight.” Four of the ten participants specifically expressed an aversion to being defined by what they believed were socially constructed labels. They objected to being “put in a niche” or “stereotyped” by others. Only one participant purposefully adopted the label of queer because of its

prescribed association with politicization and nonconformity. The remaining participants adopted labels either because they were seen as the *logical* label, which made it easy for others to understand them, or because it helped to keep the identity open and fluid, thereby avoiding being pigeon-holed by stereotypical judgements. This reluctance to fit into labels that do not adequately describe their identity is again representative of their multicultural identities and their sense of otherness in communities that do not embrace them (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Narvaez et al., 2009).

This oppositional attitude demonstrated by the participants in this study supports the oppositional attitude adopted by the South Asian queer women participating in Alimahomed's (2007) study of oppression. It also supports Deepak's (2005) construct of identity development in the acculturation process. Deepak (2005) states that in such a situation, a mutually inclusive space is born out of accepting, rejecting, accommodating, and reformulating the two cultures in a way that is unique to each individual. Given the complex nature of their identity, it is understandable then that prescribed definitions, rooted in Western ideals, would firstly not feel culturally relevant and secondly would feel controlling and marginalizing (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005).

The detrimental impact of trying to fit into these rigid definitions was born out by Nargis and Lakshmi. They struggled with feelings of not being "good enough" to be eligible and not feeling authentic, even if superficially meeting the criteria. This in turn created additional feelings of marginalization or *otherness*. Taking an oppositional stance

to these prescribed labels is a demonstration of agency and of self-efficacy against marginalization; a statement of their inherent strengths (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005).

There is a common perception in the South Asian community that queer sexuality is a “Western problem” and therefore only occurred because of the “Western influence,” therefore, it can be “treated” and done away with. Incorporating cultural flexibility to redefine queer sexual identity helps to bridge the divides between these participants and their families (Narvaez et al., 2009). Cultural flexibility can address stigma arising from a lack of awareness of queer sexuality in an effort to make the integration of it culturally acceptable and manageable (Alimahomed, 2010; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narui, 2010; Russi, 2014). For example: Amrit placed greater importance on a committed monogamous relationship than the gender of her partner and Saanvi valued aspects of the patriarchal structure, even though that may be seen to conflict with her queer identity. Distancing from rigid predefined identities founded on Western individualistic values helped minimize some of the obstacles that made an LGBT identity a *Western* issue.

Theme 5 Isolation

All of the women felt isolated and marginalized in many different ways during their coming out process, much of which was a lonely and confusing experience. These participants’ experiences illustrated both internal and physical isolation. Internal isolation, resulting from the breakdown of psychological and

emotional connection to supportive communities, was the more significant of the two (Choudhury et al., 2009; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown, 2010, Narui, 2011; Sandil et al., 2014). Prior to realization of their queer sexual identity, all of the participants had found their individual balance in successfully negotiating their bicultural identity. Within this balance, they had found their sense of belonging, albeit separately, in their two communities (Deepak, 2005; Ludhra & Jones, 2009).

The realization, or acceptance, of their sexual identity, immediately placed them outside of both of these communities without any alternative option for where they might belong in the future (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Sandil et al., 2014). Saanvi said, “You have no idea where to look for these people at all.” This type of isolation can be normal in queer sexual identity development, however, the intensity of these feelings appeared far greater for these participants and the implications more pervasive (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Sandil et al., 2014). Participants described feeling emotionally unhinged from their family. Dealing with the fallout from coming out to her parents, Siya said, “you don’t think I’m your daughter and I don’t think you’re the same parents that I had... it’s really hard to... even remember what our relationship was before.” South Asian women identify through their familial relationships. Embracing their sexuality threatens rejection and a loss of their own internal sense of belonging, even if their parents do not out rightly

rejected them. Consequently as South Asian queer women, they have far more to lose with greater repercussions for their psychological and emotional health (Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010).

Participants experienced physical isolation, largely due to a lack of visibility of, and access to, South Asian queer communities. Experiences in majority LGBT communities were culturally alienating and there was no visible or accessible presence of South Asian LGBT communities. The additive impact of these multiple sources of alienation and the cumulative effect of microaggressions experienced in their various communities resulted in a more pervasive and deeper sense of isolation and loneliness, especially in the early stages of coming out (Alimahomed, 2010; Mair, 2010; McKeown, 2010; Sandil, et al., 2014).

The impact of these intense feelings of isolation can be debilitating, leading to thoughts that may appear quite irrational and unrealistic to the objective observer. Saanvi describes how isolated she felt, “the fact that both of us at some point thought we were the only queer Indian gays in the entire state.” Five of the ten participants specifically reported having the same thoughts, that she was “the only one.” The narratives of these participants suggested that this sense of isolation contributed to a heightened vulnerability to internalized homophobia and internalized heteronormativity (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014). These cumulative stressors significantly complicated and prolonged the coming out process while also depleting self-efficacy for managing their

identity development (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014). The absence of a supportive community increased the sense of isolation, the isolation created a greater need for the community, together self-perpetuating an escalating level of internal distress and marginalization (Alimahomed, 2010).

There were different forms of isolation at different stages of identity development; it was not just isolated in the early stages of coming out. Despite the overarching benefits of South Asian queer spaces, participants experienced isolation and marginalization even within them. Participants found these spaces were disproportionately male represented with a patriarchal presence; there was a disconnect across different acculturation/immigration statuses; different levels of identity Pride status; and converting group connections to personal relationships was not always easy. Few South Asian queer women were fully out and integrated in the South Asian community, so the experience of integrating a queer identity was also a lonely experience with few role models. All these experiences of being *othered* at multiple levels again supported the findings of Alimahomed's (2010) study.

Theme 6 The Emotional Shackles of Shame, Honor, and Family Loyalty

Shame and honor, especially related to morality and modesty, was a major influence in these participants' lived experiences. None of the participants expressed any feelings of internalized shame relating to her sexuality. Once participants had reached acceptance, each had developed a wholesome attitude to

her sexuality. The role of shame in their experiences was primarily isolated to reflected shame; the perceived and experienced impact of their sexuality on their parents and extended family (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Kay, 2012; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). All participants grew up with messages about conformity and loyalty to family honor and shame (Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Kay, 2012; Sharrif, 2009; Srinivasan, 2009). These internalized values made them highly sensitive to the shame and related struggles their parents would experience when confronted with their sexuality. Priyanka was conscious of the reflected shame on her parents saying, “I don’t want to disgrace them.” Shreya on the other hand did sense the shame her parents felt when she came out to them, “it became this very shameful thing for my parents and it was a secret that for my parents; we don’t talk about this.”

Participants expressed considerable frustration with the irrationality of their parents’ feelings and attitudes related to reflected shame, honor, and stigma but their own internalized values and genuine respect and love for their parents instinctively brought out empathy and concern for their parents’ well-being (Deepak, 2005; Gupta et al., 2007; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Inman, 2006; Kay, 2012). Nargis’s mother’s reflected shame illustrates her fear of rejection from the community and her own expectations that her daughter will conform and make the right choices to avoid this, “why are you doing this to yourself, I will not be able to show my face in the community.” The fear of what others

will think; grandparents, extended family, or community, and the associated shame was an overriding concern for the parents of these participants. Parents also felt the shame the community may inflict on their daughters. The standards of expectations for morality and modesty are higher for women; therefore, bringing their daughter's sexuality into the public domain risked damaging her reputation in the eyes of the extended family and community. Seema explained how it was for her mother, "she was just scared for me....she didn't want to tell anybody because if I decided later I wanted to be with a guy, she didn't want to make it hard for me." This shame and stigma combined with their own made them more resistant to coming out as parents of a queer daughter (Brar, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2004; Kay, 2012).

Parents inflicted their shame on their daughters. The parents of three participants had, to varying degrees, accepted their daughters' coming out, however, these participants were still intuitively aware of their parents' unspoken discomfort due to underlying issues from internalized shame and stigma (Deepak, 2005). They avoided discussing the sexuality, diverted attention to other things, struggled to know how to come out. Parents struggling to accept their daughters' sexuality imposed their emotions directly onto their daughters in the form of emotionally charged threats. Siya said she received "*paragraphs* of text messages.... just a load of emotional blackmailing to almost like turn me around." Three participants made the decision not to come out to their parents. The *perceived threat* of the harm their parents would suffer from the shame and

stigma associated with their sexuality, was strong enough for these participants to avoid putting their parents through it (Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gupta et al., 2007; Kay, 2012; Ravel, 2009). In all these cases, countertransference activated these participants' internalized notions of shame, stigma, family loyalty and honor when parents in any way transferred their own feelings onto them.

Because of their understanding of reflected shame and honor and their own family loyalty and parental respect, coming out to parents and obtaining their acceptance was a precursor to coming out fully in society for all these participants (Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gupta et al., 2007; Kay, 2012; Ravel, 2009). The power of this reflected shame directly influenced the integration of their sexual identity because participants were reluctant to put their parents outside of their comfort zone (Clark, 2005; Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gupta et al., 2007; Kay, 2012; Mair, 2010; Ravel, 2009). Participants' emotional interdependence and hierarchical respect for their parents directly linked their own sense of well-being to that of their parents (Gupta et al., 2007). Consequently, the emotional distress of the parents significantly impaired the emotional and psychological well-being of their daughters, especially when their daughters lacked the means to help their parents overcome their personal challenges (Gupta et al., 2007; Inman, 2016).

Participants experienced some level of internalized or reflected shame, expressed as awkwardness when broaching of the topic of sexuality with their

parents (Gilbert et al., 2004, Mair, 2010, McKeown et al., 2010; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Rusi, 2014). Saanvi states that, “attraction or sex, (are) all these things that nobody is talking about on a grand scheme in an Indian house,” especially at the personal level. With a strong emphasis on modesty and morality in the South Asian culture, the issue of sexuality is almost irrelevant (Deepak, 2005). There is an unspoken understanding that premarital sex will not happen and perhaps even opening up a discussion may encourage it. It becomes a taboo subject associated with shame and embarrassment. Because there is a lack of conversation about sex, there is no comfortable language for bringing it up (Gilbert et al., 2004, Mair, 2010, McKeown et al., 2010; Ludhra & Jones, 2009; Rusi, 2014).

All of the participants felt a distinct discomfort in discussing sexuality with their parents, especially as the parents only understood sexuality as the act of sex, rather than understanding it in the context of love and relationships. Shreya recalls her father’s reaction to her coming out to him, “he was like do you want to have sex with women. And I was like I don’t want to answer that question, that’s really uncomfortable.” The underlying discomfort and shame, for both parents and daughter, in the process of an uncomfortable dialogue without an affirming language, hindered open dialogue and significantly impeded conflict resolution (Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Rusi, 2014). This barrier itself created significant emotional stress when participants were planning to come out to their parents, irrespective of their anticipated reaction (Khan,

1011; Rusi, 2014). These experiences demonstrated that, irrespective of their personal feelings, these participants shouldered a heavy burden for the reflected shame of their family (Deepak, 2005; Gilbert. et al., 2004; Kay, 2012). This naturally places them at greater risk for mental illness (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014). Over time, or in the most difficult scenarios, this may lead to internalized shame and stigma for these participants in terms of their sexual identity, especially if not sufficiently supported by a South Asian queer community (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014).

Theme 7 Accommodation and Compromise

The willingness to accommodate and make compromises in their lived sexual identity was evident in the narratives of all ten participants. In the collectivist culture, tending to the needs of the family, or others, is highly valued (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997). The ability to accommodate one's own needs for the sake of the other is encouraged from an early age (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997). In the patriarchal South Asian culture, women take on the role of caregivers. In these roles, they are *required* to be more accommodating and they often *need* to be more accommodating (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Ravel, 2009). Furthermore, traditionally women needed to be more submissive and amenable given that they typically moved to their husband's family and home on marriage and so had a greater need to *fit in* (Deepak, 2005). Therefore, South Asian women must meet their individual needs without creating conflict in the family (Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Ravel, 2009). Women who

challenge these stereotypes face harsher criticism for the same behavior (Brar, 2010; Kay, 2010; Ravel, 2009). Priyanka makes the observation that, “women are expected to adhere to it, I think women feel the backlash when they don’t.” This natural instinct to accommodate also manifests itself in their willingness to tailor their visibility in the South Asian community.

This internalized desire, or willingness, to compromise to promote, or protect, harmony in their relationships was another common thread running through these participants’ narratives. Much thought was given to: a) consequences for their parents in their decision to come out or not come out; b) easing the distress inflicted on their parents in the coming out process; and c) compromises to respect parent feelings for coming out beyond the nuclear family. In light of the stigma attached to same-sex sexuality in the South Asian culture, this willingness to compromise became a strength to find common ground in a highly conflicted relationship. Accommodation gave these women the flexibility to prioritize their various identities and situate the intersection of their sexual identity where it most felt comfortable or was most manageable for them (Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Narvaez et al., 2009). Making these accommodations could mean the difference between parental acceptance/rejection. It made coming out more manageable for parents because participants could better maintain important familial relationships, which may still be a vital source of support. The compromises were not easy, but the ability to accommodate again became a strength because it shifted

power to their internal locus of control. This reduced some of the power differential between themselves and their parents to define workable solutions.

Theme 8 Derailing the Prescriptive Life Plan

Marriage plays a central role in the South Asian patriarchal heteronormative culture. There is an expectation that everyone will marry in a timely manner and then go on to have children of their own (Deepak, 2005; Gupta et al., 2007; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Inman, 2006). Intergenerational interdependence is very important; this prescriptive life plan helps safeguard it (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997). Irrespective of the level of acculturation, the plan remains the same, Siya says of her father, “he’s always raised me to be independent (but) when I was eighteen he laid out this life plan (for me).” There is now more flexibility about the relative timing of when one marries but, there is still no question that one might actually *not* want to marry (Brar, 2012). If a child, particularly a daughter, does not marry, it is a failure, a profound disappointment for the parent (Brar, 2010; Deepak, 2005).

Six of the ten participants reported feeling pressured about marriage; the remaining four participants were not of an age when marriage is a priority life goal. Because of South Asians’ tradition of arranged marriage, even if more liberal now, the community is actively involved in the marriage interests of those in their extended family and known community (Brar, 2012). Consequently, expectations and inquisitions, about

the prescribed life plan go well beyond just the nuclear family (Brar, 2012). Over time, keeping a queer identity hidden becomes stressful, Seem said “it was more the pressure that I felt for getting married.... everybody would ask” (Brar, 2012). The stress from the negative attention around the failure to marry, and its reflective shame on parents, resulted in these participants withdrawing from the community; thus depriving them from full participation in the community. Seema said there was a “(fear) that people would gossip... how my mom was a failure.” These experiences support those of the participants in Brar’s (2012) study of never married South Asian women. Once marginalized, reintegration, especially with a same-sex partner, becomes even more challenging.

Marriage is often a precipitating factor for coming out to parents. The pressure to enter a heterosexual marriage becomes too much and many times coming out is the only way to manage it. The need to honor a committed same-sex relationship is another motivation to come out (Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Rusi, 2014). Marriage, or a committed monogamous relationship if marriage was not possible, was important to all these participants. Seven of the ten participants were already in these relationships and the other three participants expressed a strong desire to find such partners. Having children, and involved grandparents, was also important in that life plan. In essence, the prescriptive life plan was just as much an integral part of these participants’ life goals as it was

their parents; the key difference was that for the parents it could *only* exist in a heterosexual framework (Deepak, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Rusi, 2014).

Because of the importance of marriage and children in the patriarchal heteronormative South Asian culture, the failure to fulfill this expectation leads to a deep sense of mourning for the loss (Deepak, 2005). This loss and disappointment becomes another barrier to parental acceptance; denial becomes a way to cope with the grieving process. Shreya said of her parents, “I think they know that I’m pretty fluid in my sexuality, so they’re like.... when this relationship is over you could try dating a man.” Equally, participants felt they were “disappointing” their parents, and they were grieving for the “life plans they had for me.” There was a level of grief and loss for the loss of an identity situated in their cultural framework. Therefore, the expectations for a heterosexual marriage, which includes children, has a substantial influence on the lives of South Asian queer women and its role should not be underestimated either (Deepak, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010; Rusi, 2014).

Theme 9 Too Much and Yet Not Enough

The fluid intersectionality of multiple identities has governed the lived experiences of all these participants. Their multiple identities blended into their cultural identity in ways that uniquely represented how each participant managed

the dynamic interplay of the bicultural identity (Brown, 2009; Inman, 2006; Jordon, 2009; Kim & Omizo, 2010; Kumar & Nevid, 2010; Narvaez et al., 2009). Participants reflected a solid foundation in one culture, most often the South Asian culture, with an integration of the Western culture. These participants were comfortable in their cultural identities, suggesting the hierarchy of their multiple identities was now established (Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009; Narvaez et al., 2009).

The introduction of a queer sexual identity, however, rendered a destabilizing effect on these foundations, making their established strategies wholly inadequate to cope with the challenges it posed. In their study of intersectionality between ethnic, gender and sexual identities, Narvaez et al., (2009) found that the relative importance or prominence of these identities changed for multiple reasons, including over time, across social situations, across life events, with the introduction of new identities, and with maturity of any given identity. These influences partly explained the different histories of when and why these participants decided to come out and shift the relative hierarchies of their identities. The aim of coming out would be to equalize the hierarchy of the queer and South Asian identities. A conflicted coming out, however, left them still having to put one identity above the other, leading to a fluid, rather than a stable, lived identity.

Participants shared very similar identities, what made their identities and experiences unique was how each one managed the hierarchies of these various identities (Narvaez et al., 2009). For Example: While Amrit acknowledged there was a conflict

between her sexual and her ethnic identities, she believed she had adequate channels within which to express her sexuality. Gender disparity and arranged marriage were far greater concerns for Amrit; consequently, she placed these identities higher in her hierarchy of identities. Lakshmi had a stronger sexual identity, so, having rejected her South Asian identity as an adolescent, she was now raising the hierarchy of her cultural identity to integrate it with her sexual identity. Shreya on the other hand had a stronger South Asian identity and she needed to find ways to integrate her queer identity into that. For Joyti, her identity as a mother was strong and she was integrating her queer identity into that. Similarly, Nargis stated that becoming a mother was a very important role for her and it was irrelevant to her sexual identity. Therefore, the most salient identity for a South Asian queer woman may not necessarily be her sexual identity, her hierarchy of identities will be unique (Clark, 2005).

Intersectionality is an integral part of these participants' lived experiences, but it is a far more complicated construct than just the intersection between their South Asian culture and their sexuality (Alimahomed, 2010; Brown, 2009; Clark, 2005; Jordon, 2009; Narvaez et al., 2009). The complexity of the intersection of these multiple identities contributes to some of the lingering underlying feelings of isolation or loneliness these participants felt because this uniqueness of these intersections suggests there will be a low probability of finding someone just like herself, especially in a limited population pool (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010, McKeown et al., 2010). Finding a

sense of belonging with intersectionality can be challenging. A number of participants struggled to feel fully accepted in any of their various communities, especially as the number of communities multiplied, because there was always a sense of “never being enough” in any of them and yet at the same time just “being too much” in all of them (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005).

Despite these challenges, the skills these participants developed managing fluid identities have been a strength as they navigated the integration of their queer sexuality. This was apparent in many ways in their lived experiences, including pushing back on prescriptive identity labels that did not honor all their important identities, making accommodations in their relationships to smooth the process of coming out, and finding queer communities to fit them rather than fit into given communities (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010, McKeown, 2010). Therefore, Intersectionality both empowered and undermined these participants ability to form relationships that are so important to them (Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). Over time, however, there can be a comfort in embracing the very peripheral positioning intersectionality brings; Seema said, “I don’t feel like I fit in anywhere, there’s no one group that I feel completely comfortable in.... I don’t even know if it’s really important for me to find it honestly.”

Theme 10 Stigma and Invisibility

All of the participants described an uncomfortable relationship with the South Asian community. South Asian parents purposefully position themselves in

close-knit South Asian communities (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997). It is a way for them to replicate the support they would normally have derived from the extended family back home (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997). It is also a way for parents to offer an immersed cultural experience for their children in an effort to promote intergenerational continuity of their traditional cultural heritage (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997). Overtime these collectivist communities become a source for both perpetuating and policing these traditional values and beliefs, which includes respect, honor, and sexual modesty, within a rigid patriarchal heteronormative framework (Deepak, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Kay, 2012; Ludhra & Jones, 2009). The experiences of the participants suggested that both their parents and they themselves have a conflicted relationship with these confining communities. On the one hand, they were a vital source of support in affirming their identity, providing a much needed sense of belonging, but then on the other hand they were also seen as a form of oppression, being intrusive, judgmental, and exclusive (Deepak, 2005).

With a queer sexual identity, these women found the South Asian community to be unwelcoming and sometimes indirectly hostile. The policing role the community inherently develops, especially with regard to marriage, sexual modesty, and gender discussed earlier, manifests itself in the form of stigma, loss of face and honor in the community, and marginalization through

overt or subtle forms of rejection (Deepak, 2005). In the context of established systemic gender disparities, the policing role is more damaging to women (Kay, 2012). Priyanka said, “there’s the idea that a man’s allowed to do that and it’s not going to be a problem, but if a woman does it here, trying to challenge her stage, her status, her caste, or whatever, she’s like ruined for the rest of her life” (Brar, 2012; Deepak, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2004; Kay, 2012). None of the participants reported experiencing any overt hostility; it was the *fear* of these underlying subtle, but deeply damaging, hostilities that made these communities so unwelcoming and exclusive, Priyanka continues, “men can bounce back, he’s fine with it, but women, no.” Bringing queer sexuality into the public domain immediately associates it with sex, morality, judgment, and stigmatization (Brar, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2004; Kay, 2012).

The highly heteronormative structure provides no accommodation for integrating same-sex partnerships and so immediately puts a spotlight on nonconformity. The collectivist patriarchal values mean judgment, shame, and honor permeate collectively between the individual and the family. Therefore, judgement and stigma have far-reaching repercussions, and culturally parents are more sensitive to these judgments and to their standing in the community (Gilbert et al., 2004; Kay, 2012; Mair, 2010; McKeown, 2010). As a result, South Asian sexual minorities find it easier to withdraw from the community as soon as questions about sexuality begin to arise. Reintegration

back into the community with a same-sex partner does not happen easily, certainly not without thought for its impact on parents and their own safety (Choudhury et al, 2009; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010). Consequently, queer South Asian women tend to remain invisible in the South Asian community (Choudhury et al., 2009).

Because there is a lack of awareness, education, and visibility of South Asian LGBT identities, the population remains off the conscious radar of the South Asian community. When there is some awareness, it focuses on gay men because of their larger population size and because they are more visible (Alimahomed, 2010; Clark, 2005; Mair, 2010; McKeown et al., 2010). This further marginalizes queer women, even within the LGBT community (Alimahomed, 2010). Overall, the community behaves as though the LGBT identity only exists in the Western mainstream culture, denying that it applies to the South Asian culture. As a result, the South Asian queer community is both physically and psychologically *invisible*, giving rise to an *out of sight and out of mind* attitude. For the same reasons, South Asian LGBT organizations also largely operate under the radar of the general South Asian community. The South Asian community itself was not overly important to these participants; however, it had a significant impact on their lived experiences because of its controlling influence over their parents. Siya said, “I can’t fully be myself in that sense and I can’t fully expose my identity because my mum was standing to my left and I don’t know who else this aunty is going to tell.”

As a result, participants were always mindful of how their transparency in the community would reflect on their parents.

This loss of freedom to be open contributed to the feelings of isolation, discussed earlier, and it had a substantial impact on the coming out process. Parents had to deal with their own internalized heteronormative and homophobic attitudes, and face their fears of stigmatization and rejection from the community. Saanvi recalls her parents' reluctance to talk about her coming out, "I gave them two people that knew that I'd come out to that they could call if they needed consolation or whatever, which they didn't, needed, wanted or whatever." The invisibility of parents of LGBT persons in the community compounds these fears. The fears of the parents had a substantial influence on curtailing participants' access to the larger South Asian community. This marginalization diminished their opportunities to find and establish supportive relationships.

Theme 11 Overcoming Adversity: Strengths and Resilience

All participants were straight passing and selective with disclosure, none reported experiences of overt hostility from within any of their various communities. Their stresses was predominantly internal; associated with sexual identity development, acceptance, coming out to parents, and the integration of their sexual identity (Alimahomed, 2010; Choudhury et al., 2009; Narui, 2011; Sandil et al., 2014). All participants reported feeling emotionally and psychologically stressed, alienated, and

disconnected at some time (Alimahomed, 2010; Choudhury et al., 2009; Clark, 2005; Narui, 2011; Sandil et al., 2014). In addition to these overarching challenges, there were individual stressors, which included, parent resistance and emotional blackmail, sexual morality and guilt, internalized homophobia, heteronormativity and gender disparity, and patriarchal oppression. Some participants had unresolved, though unrelated, issues from childhood such as conflicted relationship with parents, conservative sheltered childhoods, and sexual abuse that further complicated the coming out process (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014). Mental illness from these issues manifested itself in the form of anxiety, depression, loneliness, substance abuse, psychological and emotional breakdown, sexual promiscuity, and even suicidal ideation (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014). A lack of readily accessible resources exacerbated these mental health issues (Choudhury et al., 2009; Sandil et al., 2014).

Parents were the main source of the adversity for these participants. Participants' collectivist values, especially interdependence, were a source of adversity and a strength for them (Deepak, 2005; Masood & Okazaki, 2009). Patriarchy provided a bedrock of its own challenges, outside of sexuality, which included gender discrimination, stereotypical role socialization, expectations for marriage, and stringent standards for modesty and morality. Biculturalism and the fluid intersection of their multiple identities brought additional challenges, but also provided valuable skills for supporting the complexities of integrating a minority sexual identity (Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009, Narvaez, et al., 2009).

These participants identified a wide range of resiliency skills and resources that helped them overcome these challenges. Four of the 10 participants used counseling, which Siya says helped her to explore “different levels of admitting truth” and normalized her emotions, “she helped me realize it was OK for me to be angry when I needed to be.” For Seema, it was holistic healing, “it helped me not just with my sexuality part but it actually helped me become more of a whole person, you know, because I had to face a lot of the demons I never even knew I had.” Resources, such as safe spaces at college, professor advocates, LGBT organizations, have all been useful, Seema recalled, “I sought out the help that I needed. I think I’ve been pretty good at that. I basked in any support that I got.” Other participants tapped into their personal strengths, such as their religious beliefs, philosophical attitudes to life, and resiliency skills developed through past experiences of being *othered* as an immigrant, Seema added, “the idea that there was nothing wrong with being different, that really helped me.”

For most of these participants, however, their relationships proved to be the most valuable to them. Their close-knit familial relationships and traditional family values provided a solid foundation for support and well-being. Their narratives reflected their desire and abilities to develop relationships in other aspects of their lives (Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). In various ways, participants found ways to *situate* themselves as a South Asian queer woman, to create a sense of belonging, to root their new identity (Brown, 2009; Jordon, 2009). They did this in a number of ways: reconnecting to a cultural

heritage of sexual fluidity; finding a South Asian queer community; finding other queer communities; bringing in siblings as confidants and advocates; and reaching out to close extended familial relationships for support and advocacy.

These participants demonstrated similar well-being patterns found by Li et al. (2013) in their study of subjective well-being and sexual identity development stage for Chinese women. Their overall sense of well-being improved with increasing identity integration, using their innate strengths and available resources to build resiliency to address the adversities their sexuality brought.

Limitations of the Study

The study provided valuable in depth data describing the lived experiences of South Asian queer women; however, the study has a number of limitations. The demographics of the participants has a direct bearing on the nature of the lived experiences recorded. Marginalized and vulnerable populations, such as South Asian queer women, are difficult to access; limiting the sample pool. All of the participants in this study were highly educated and their ages were heavily weighted; seven participants were in their twenties, two in the thirties, and one in her forties. With the exception of one participant, all the participants were of Indian descent. Given the religious and cultural diversity in the South Asian population, some caution needs to be used when applying the outcomes of this study to diasporic South Asian queer women populations outside of the scope of this demographic. Participants resided across three states in the

United States, most lived in the South. Population sizes, culture, and political climates are diverse across the United States, especially relating to LGBT issues, which will also influence the coming out experiences. A number of participants noted these points in their personal narratives.

Only four participants provided a creative project to supplement the data collected in the interviews. These four artworks provided valuable new insights; there is an assumption that other important experiences and insights from the other six participants may be missing in these results. Future studies can benefit from requesting a less time consuming creative projects in order to gain the benefits of wider participation. .

Researcher Experience

In the interest of researcher transparency, I share my personal experiences and insights in the role of the researcher. It was both a personally and professionally enriching experience, especially with regard to my new insights about how the subject of the research influenced my orientation to the study as the researcher. I found building rapport and trust as an outsider, was easier than I had anticipated. I believe this was partly due to the personal motivations of the participants, who assumed a level of trust in the process in their commitment to advocate for their profession. Politicization and their desire to be advocates for their population was a common thread running through these participants' stories. I also believe there was some trust because in some way or other I

was a known ally in the community. I did not find my age and status to be barriers, a number of participants shared that they found it refreshing to have someone like me as a nonjudgmental listener and advocating ally. My shared ethnicity was a valuable asset in helping to break down barriers to trust and building rapport.

With all the participants, I was aware of the closeness that an implicit understanding of shared cultural values and experiences creates. I was aware of feeling that bond in myself and I believed from what I observed and experienced from the participants, they felt it too to a lesser or greater degree. I believed this enhanced the nature and quality of the data collected. I was conscious of the risk this connection created for bias, of being overly familiar and confident in *implicitly* understanding their worldview my own, rather than truly trying to listen from their worldview, but overall I considered this shared history a significant benefit when coding and interpreting the data to find meanings behind these lived experiences. My experiences with the participants in this study supported the experiences of Bhopal, (2001), in her work with South Asian women.

On a personal level, I found myself caught between the world of the participants and the world of their parents, since I straddled both. Prior to data collection, I did not think my identity of a parent would significantly influence my orientation to the study. While I do not share their parents' perspectives about queer sexuality, as a mother I experienced some empathy and connection with the

parents; I could appreciate their dilemma. Many parents seemed torn between the love for their daughters and their helplessness in not knowing how to manage their own internal struggles that put them in conflict with them. I was aware that I too am similar to their parents, but my challenges are just on different issues. At the same time, as an ally, and through the lens of a mother, my concern for these women grew deeper over time; the vulnerabilities, the challenges, and the sense of isolation many had experienced. I processed these emotions and reactions throughout the inquiry process as a way to better understand these women's experiences and as a way to better understand myself as the researcher. I asked myself; if I was trying to grapple with a holistic understanding of their lived experiences, was that then influencing how I interpreted discrimination, injustice, and power differentials? Given the challenges and, often painful, experiences of the participants, I was struck by the personal strengths of these women and their ability to value and work at their familial relationships in the face of such adversity. Again as a South Asian mother, I was aware of the depths of these strong South Asian family ties and the level of unseen helplessness that can often accompany them. Consequently, while I began this research with a strong *motivation* to advocate for this population, during the analysis and report writing, I developed a stronger sense of *responsibility*, which sometimes felt a little bit of a burden because I was afraid of letting them down. It became increasingly more

important to share their stories and to have their voices heard. At this point, during the report writing, I found myself in a dilemma. On the one hand, I wanted to optimize the exposure of their stories, on the other hand I was conscious of the need to hold back to protect their confidentiality. There was much reflexivity in trying to find an acceptable compromise that did not compromise the study or the participants. As a qualitative feminist researcher, I have come to appreciate how very much I am a part of the research process and its outcomes, and how difficult it would be to do it without so being.

Recommendations

The participants in this study were highly educated, ranging from undergraduate students to doctoral graduate. Future studies would add to the body of literature through examining other demographics, such as women without a tertiary education or women for whom English is not their first language. Since this study shows that sociopolitical influences have a strong influence on identity developed, discrimination, and marginalization experiences, women lacking the privileges of education and access to the resources it provides will have important different experiences. These unsearched populations would be more marginalized and so will have an even greater need to be heard and their unique mental health needs identified. Nine of the 10 participants ranged in age from 19 to mid-thirties; there was a poor representation of older queer women's experiences.

The narrative of the one older participant in this study suggested different priorities and issues; future research to understand how identity, lived experience, and mental health issues change with life cycle development would add to the gap in literature. . One of the participants identified another invisible demographic, Indo-Caribbean women whose families have a history of indentureship. This population may not identify as South Asian, are often not acknowledged by South Asians, but their cultural values, beliefs, and rituals are still grounded in a very traditional South Asian heritage. Two of the ten participants had partners from this demographic.

This study showed that immigration status was an influential factor in identity development and lived experience, however, the participants in this study were primarily of first-/second-generation status, therefore, future studies should examine the experiences of South Asian queer women who emigrate to the U.S. as adults. While this is a relatively small population at this time, immigration trends suggest it is likely to grow and these women's experiences may additionally offer insight into the experiences of queer women still residing in South Asia. None of the participants were married, or had been married in the past, however, studies allude to, and it is commonly known within the South Asian queer community that, queer women do enter into heterosexual marriages, or marriages of convenience with gay men, or do come out after being in a heterosexual marriage. While these women are more difficult to access, they are also more

marginalized and invisible, so it is important to understand their support needs and challenges.

Most of these participants were in long term monogamous relationships and the remaining were looking for such relationships. Given the importance South Asian queer women place on their relationships, future studies should be guided to examining different aspects of these relationships, such as; dating, finding a partner, roles within the relationships, and problems and strengths. Additionally, given that most of the participants expressed the desire to have children, the population of queer women with children will grow, bringing with them their unique issues. This study included two participants who were parents and the story of one of them revealed that the parent and the children face unique and challenging issues. The potential diversity of parenthood, which can include natural children, adopted children, and blended families, offers considerable scope for inquiry for this population. Lastly, this study showed that these participants regarded parents and coming out to parents to be the most significant factors influencing their sexual identity experiences. Future studies examining the experiences and support needs of South Asian parents of queer women would be beneficial for this population. Given the dearth of literature to support this population, all of the above recommended research questions would significantly add to addressing this gap in research and offer substantive possibilities for directly benefiting the support provided to support this population.

The results of the study revealed opportunities for providing direct and tangible support to this population. Given the isolation many of the women and their parents felt, they would benefit from support groups providing safe and accepting places within which to process their issues and connect to a community within which to share the common journey. The narratives suggested an urgent need for resources, for all key stakeholders: queer women coming out, parents of queer children, mental health professionals, and those aimed at promoting education and awareness within the community with a view to building tolerance and acceptance of LGBT identity. Diverse channels of communication would create the needed impact; printed resources, media based resources, and in the different South Asian dialects.

As experts on their lives, these participants shared their suggestions for resources that would be effective for supporting their community. All of the participants reported benefiting from and valuing the telling of their stories. In light of their own challenges and experiences, these participants believed it was vitally important for the women coming after them to hear their stories so that they may avoid their distress of feeling like “the only one.” Disseminating personal stories of South Asian queer women through more widely accessible channels can create an impactful in the wider community.

Positive Social Change

The aim of this study was to help fill a serious gap in the dearth of literature supporting South Asian same-sex attracted women living in the United States. The rich data broadly describing the lived experiences of these women provides a significant foundational body of knowledge that will be useful to mental health professionals working with this population. The cultural nuances, including those specifically related to their gender, highlighted in the experiences can promote a more culturally sensitive approach to helping a relatively invisible and marginalized population. Specifically, the interpretation of the experiences in the context of cultural influences may provide much needed insight for counselors not familiar with the South Asian culture or the South Asian queer population. The study, therefore, aims to be a valuable contribution to counselor education in the training and development of counselor multicultural competence. As a foundational qualitative study with a broad scope, it offers a number of future research questions as a means for promoting a continued expansion of the body of knowledge in this neglected area. This study also aimed to provide a needed voice to a silenced minority. Presentation of the results and analysis was heavily laden with rich anecdotal quotes to bring out the original voices of the participants. Participants shared their support and advocacy needs, further empowering their voices, and promoting self-efficacy to direct relevant and effective initiatives to support their unique needs.

The concrete suggestions identified from the results of this study to support South Asian queer women can be useful to counselors working with this population and to advocacy groups in the community. Concrete recommendations are easier to implement, raising the potential for realizing direct positive social change. These multidimensional interventions reach out to different stakeholders working with this population, thereby promoting the opportunity for a more comprehensive approach to supporting South Asian queer women, which in turn increases the opportunities for creating a more enduring positive social change. The study will be useful to educational institutions, both high schools and tertiary colleges, since the narratives of these participants reveal that sexual identity realization and development takes place during the ages they are typically in these educational institutions. This is particularly important because South Asian queer women seek out and then make use of available support resources at this time, both from their teachers and the counseling departments.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

IQ1 What does it mean to you to be a woman of South Asian descent?

IQ2 How do you name yourself and define your identity?

IQ3 What was the moment of realization as you came to know yourself and your sexual identity?

IQ4 Which relationships are most important in your life, as they relate to your sexual identity?

IQ5 How do you cope with adversity, as it relates to your sexual identity?

IQ6 What are your hopes and concerns for the use of these research outcomes?

Appendix B: Artwork (Nargis)



Appendix C: Artwork Dialogue (Shreya)

Participant: Ok, actually it's a bit of an older poem because I wrote it right after I came out but I think it is to this day... single handedly the most important, still... the most representative thing I have of what I've created of what that experience was like and what it means to me now.... So I think I told you a bit about what my coming out process was like and what that was like with my family, so I think I specifically mentioned that I was not ever interested in *not* being a member of my family. I think there was a part of me before I came out that was angry enough that was like, well if they don't accept it I won't accept them, but um, the truth of it was I was interested in anything where we worked through as a family. So I wanted to be a part of my family, I wanted to, I want my parents to come to my wedding, and like I want them to meet my girlfriend and um, it's very important to me to be a good daughter and to be a member of um, the community. To me, I don't think I'm putting that in jeopardy because I'm not straight. These things are not mutually exclusive, um,, but while at the same time I was trying to recognize that I needed to be kind to myself and be true to myself and um, honor the love that I was trying to live by, so that's why that poem was recognizing that I am, I am my parents' daughter, and that made it really difficult but that's also a really important relationship to me. And while I am my parents' daughter I am also the daughter of this really important love, that's the metaphor I'm using, um, the

really important love I'm refusing to give up.... the poem almost became a bigger than just me in that poem in that moment when I performed it. And I was trying to make it so when I wrote it in the first place, like I was trying to make it about my personal connection and how that related to a bigger issue. But I think the poem really took on a new life, um, and opened itself to a lot of people, when I performed it in March. Um, I was thinking more about what it meant to be this person, to be myself but also to be this person in the universe and like the other people I was connected to. And that was lovely and really important to me.... I was really worried... if I'm not going to be able to connect as emotionally to the poem because things had changed with my family, and for the better right... which is good, need to be grateful for it, but I was interested in how that was going to like going to convey itself in the poem and turned out to be really wonderful because I was able to find this different and I think really really important connection. And that's sort of where the poem is now and how it represents my relationship with my parents and my relationship with coming out but also just generally with my identity and community, the queer community in general....

Researcher: No it will still be read the way you experience it, I think that's the way I'd like to hear it.

Participant prepares herself. Has a drink of water and then composes herself.

(First part of poem read out). Participant puts full emotion into reading her poem.

.... I think it was really useful to me... I'm remembering writing it and editing some of these lines which is interesting... the first stanza actually came to me um, because the day after I came out to my parents.... I was thinking every piece of my body, like physically and emotionally, it was just like not having it. And so that was really interesting, so that line came to me, and the poem sort of built off of it. That side of my dad, I don't know, it was interesting, it was a strange experience (laughs) so that's where that came. I'm just trying to think of anything else I want to add about the poem. I think the last, um, the last two sections is really where I was trying to expand on my experience to reach other people. Ah, I hope that happened, so ...

Researcher: Tell me a little bit more about that, the generational side of it.

Participant: Well, that's something that my mom would bring up a lot, she kept doing this thing where she was like, do you understand what you're doing to the family and you know, I think that's a common, um very general when people find themselves coming out, and I think especially with South Asian households because the family is so important.... I don't think my parents realized at all that first... it was hard for me to come out to them. I think they *completely* dismissed that because it was really about what I was doing to them. That's just what my

mom would bring up, do you understand what this means for the family, like do you recognize how this is hurting multiple people, how this one thing you want affects a *lot* of people, so like this is really selfish of you to continue to pursue this when you know it's hurting this many people. Don't you know this is not something that I can talk to my parents about... my mom had no idea how she was gonna tell my grandparents. Um, so I was thinking how family is *so* important to South Asian households and that means a lot to me. Like my family means a lot to me and that's a really beautiful thing that culturally family is so important, but in this instance that was literally working against me. And like this heritage, and like this importance of ancestors and through the generations my family's always been a source of strength for me, it was being used against me, it was like you need to stop being this way because of all the people in our lineage.

Researcher: Mmm, mmm, and how did it feel to um, have that put against you rather than to have that as something you've always thought of as a support.

Almost got reversed and...

Participant: it didn't make sense to me. I mean I remember my mom, the other thing my parents kept saying like, my dad especially, you know this is going to be hard for you. Do you realize how hard this is going to be for you because isn't going to be an easy choice or whatever. And I was like, if you, if you know this is going to be hard for me, shouldn't you be supporting me. To dissuade me from it,

is to be there for me. And that was really, it was, that was really hard, I didn't understand, like I know, obviously on some level I did understand why it was hard, hard for them to accept this and to be supportive but it didn't make sense to take this thing and see your daughter, family member, who matters to you. If I'm going through something, the first thought is to be there for them. So, it just it didn't make, make sense to me my parents keep saying, oh we're, like this is hurting everybody, because to me it was like well the family should be coming together at a time like this. Um, and I was talking about this last time, where I don't have any immediate family members where I feel um I can relate to specifically in this sense, so for me it's always been important to think about some ancestor who was, who wasn't straight, who did exist, because I know that happened but I just don't know them, so in that same sense for my mom to be like, you know this family and all these things it stands for. And I was like, *no*, there are people who dealt with this, who are in this family. So like, that happened. So, um...

Researcher: Yea, and so what was the experience like being a member of that family at that time?

Participant: Um, I really didn't feel like a member of my family for about a month after to be honest. Um, I think the first month after I came out was the worst because every time I'd go home I, it just felt different, like I could feel it, um and

I think at the end of the month I had a conversation with my parents where I was like, yea I know you not OK with this but we have to be nice to each other. Um, it got a little bit better after that but especially that first month, I didn't, I didn't feel at home, I didn't feel like going home, um I stopped calling it home, I just referred to it as my parent's house and that's what I've been practicing since then because even though things have gotten better, I, I think it's important for me to recognize that might not be my home all the time, so it just didn't feel like, I didn't feel like a member of the family at all. Um, my sister who I appreciate has been this really interesting medium between my parents and me and I know that when my mom has needed support, my sister has been there. But she would tell me about times like, the two of them would be together and my mom would just like, out of nowhere her expression would change, and she'd suddenly like switch moods and I was like, it frustrated me, I was like, I don't, I don't, I thought it was ridiculous they were responding that way. Like I was trying to be fair to them but I was also angry about their reaction, I was letting myself be angry too....

Researcher: What were you talking about in your "XXXXXX....", sorry I'm probably not reading it very well (laughs). Tell me about that.

Participant: Yea, that's like one of my favorite lines in the poem. It sort of came to me and I was like, yes this needs to be there. So the first part "XXXXX..." So I was thinking that me thinking about my ancestors and despite all these other

things, I am also the daughter of a long line of people who somewhere in there were not, not straight, dealt with this, and um, like I have thanks for them being here and I have them to thank for surviving, and I was almost thinking about them coming to me and like giving me these things.... I don't know where the line "animal" came from, it just came to me, like just poetically it fit and it made sense, but I was just thinking of these thing inside me and I was like, yea they've made it and I've survived just by continuing to talk about it. So every story you tell is an animal, I've continued to survive, I continue to pass on the legacy of my ancestors and of myself. That's what I was thinking about, it's definitely a more abstract line but I think it's actually one of the most important ones in the poem.

Researcher: Yes, what about connecting back to people who have come before you, that have had your sexual orientation and have experienced all these difficult, what is that connection for you, what is that experience like?

Participant: That's so, it's so *lovely* to me to be honest... it's such a source of *strength*. Um, because I felt very alone when I came out, I think it was very important for me to, do you remember that, and really not just when I came out but after, even after identifying as queer. I was already like, oh this is going to be really hard if I decide to come out... I think there's also a notion of the South Asian community being very homophobic, and of India being really homophobic.... I think there's something problematic in being in a Western

nation and condemning Eastern nations for problems that also exist in the West. I try not to participate in conversations that talk about how backward and conservative the Asian countries are.... (but) I'm not stupid that there are some really concerning things happening in India right now. So I think it was really important for me, as my identity as a South Asian person, to be like, *no* there absolutely are queer South Asian people, that I know, that I can talk to, that are also in my family line and like I feel related to.... that's what Indian parents always say, this is not a part of our culture, like this happened because you live in America, like when I said that my parents thought it was very much a part of the friends I was with and the fact that we lived here and, I'm sure they made that statement, I'm sure at least once they made this statement that if we'd stayed in India, this would never have happened, that they'd raised me in India, And it was frustrating like, no, these things aren't at odds, like I can be Indian and queer, and I know that because I know there are people like that over there. In India, there are people who grew up in like my family, I'm sure of it, who grew up in India and dealt with this and maybe didn't realize it, or maybe knew it and couldn't do anything about it. You know that, that was probably the case but, if, but they existed and that was like really important for me feeling like comforted, feeling their strength, and also remembering it was OK for me to be Indian and queer.

Researcher: Yes. OK... anything else in the poem that particularly um, resonates.

Um, you talk about shame, XXXXX of shame. Tell me a bit more about that.

Participant: I mean it was just one of those things where it was like, honestly coming out to my parents, on top of everything else, was really uncomfortable because I could tell, they didn't get *it*, and they thought it was, ah, I don't want to say they thought it was gross but, you know how there's this whole thing about coming out whether they accept it or not, at least it was like telling them the truth and you know not lying to them anymore and that was true but at the same time I was letting them in on this secret that they, not only did they not approve of, but literally didn't, didn't understand the lifestyle. So there was... definitely a notion I think in general, that maybe with South Asian people, that marks queerness as sexually deviant, right? So, so it's seen as dirty, and I think, had my parents really thought about it, they would've been grossed out, like they would've been disgusted. But I don't think, I don't think they *want* to spend enough time thinking about it where it would have got them to that point.... he took the conversation straight to sex, he was like so you want to have sex with women. And I was like, I don't want to answer that question, that's really uncomfortable. It just turned into this very crude thing and that was really frustrating to me because I was like, that's not what this is about.... instead of I'm sharing an

important part of my personality, and my being, and not just like, oh this is like some sexual kinky preference that I have. So that's what that is.

Researcher: Yea, yea.... what was the connotation of that word for you as you as you introduced it into your poem?

Participant: Um, I think just thinking about *that* and thinking about how like a big part of my conversation before coming out was that I would finally stop lying to my parents, finally be free about this thing, and it was almost like it doesn't matter that I told them because um, it became this very shameful thing for my parents, and it was a secret that for my parents, we don't talk about this. Like my parents absolutely refused to talk about it to any, I encouraged them to talk about it with their friends to help them and they *refused*, you know because they were, they were ashamed of it! Just sort of having to reckon with that and reckon with that I was doing this thing because I was trying to become free in a sense and when I did it, it was actually like trapped in all these like notions of shame about what it meant to be not straight.

Researcher: So the shame is related really much more to what they felt and so forth and how you were caught up in that. Yea.

Participant: Yea, I never felt ashamed of myself. That's something I told myself consistently I know I'm not doing something wrong.

Researcher: Mmm, good. And anything else at all about the poem that you would like to share?

Participant: (Pause) Yea, the last part was me thinking about trying to connect it, something that's always been useful to me if I find if I need to perform a poem and maybe not in the right head space for it because I don't feel connected to it, I'll think about, I was thinking about little girls in India who in a lot of situations might have far less resources than I did and I remember when the case first came out, the Section 377 when it first got passed, I was reading an interview and you know there was somebody talking about like, are you afraid to stand up to all those people and let them know who you are, and this guy was like, honestly what was scarier was being 15 and looking in the mirror and literally being like, who is that person, I don't want to be that person. I mean, being disgusted by yourself. That was so much scarier than anything I have to do now. And I was thinking about that and there are probably little girls and little girls in probably rural parts of India who don't even have the language for this, where people don't talk about it, right? And in the same way, how you're gonna have these feelings and not know what to do about it all. And that is *so* much scarier than anything I've had to go through. And I hope that in some way, um, I hope, you know I think about those girls a lot, I, I think about supporting them, I write this poem, every time I perform it, I sent it to them, and like I said before, I do believe in energy and hope

that some sort of warmth comfort is sent to them because that's terrifying and I really want to be there for those girls. And that's something if ever I end up doing work in India after this work, that's a huge deal to me. I want to work with young people in the queer community.

Researcher: Yea, What does it mean for you to connect with those girls on an emotional spiritual level in the way in which you are connecting with them? How does that play a part in your identity?

Participant: Like yea, I just think, um I'm a really good believer in solidarity and community, like the person I am, doesn't believe in like individualism at all, so it wouldn't make, it doesn't make sense to me and the way I exist in the world to think about this issue as something only I'm dealing with. And I think also, truly important for me to recognize that even in this situation like I don't have privilege of a straight person, because I'm not straight, I don't straight privilege, but within the queer community I'm more privileged than others because I'm, I'm, my parents didn't kick me out. They didn't cut me off at all, they were like, it was really hard for me but they were also made sure they told me consistently they loved me. And they, they were open to conversation, and sometimes that conversation was really hard, but they would talk about it if I wanted to talk about it. And, and in the end they have come over far away. I mean obviously they are not super, oh we accept it 100%, but they have some a far away and that's not

something everybody gets. So for me to be cognizant of that and to recognize in some places I am incredibly blessed, incredibly lucky, that's really important to me because as a person who cares a lot about social justice and activism, it's really important for me to continually check my own privilege. So to be aware of that and to constantly be using the power that I have to be giving to people who don't have that.

Researcher: Mmm, yea. OK, that's good. That seems to come out very strong in your um identity, it's come out strong in the whole of your story, so it's not surprising it's so strong in the poem as well, and not having seen the poem before but having talked to you before, yea, it's not surprising at all that it's there.

Participant: I appreciate that, thank you.

Researcher: It's a lovely poem and I'm looking forward to reading it again quietly and again going through it, so um, I really appreciate the time, well you sharing with me, no, yea, yea, it's lovely. OK, um, is there anything else you would like talk about the poem at all before we move on?

Participant: No, I think that's all I have at this point....

Appendix D: Artwork (Amrit)

Too Much, But Still Not Enough.

Too outspoken, too tall, too dark, too fat,

Too female to be seen,

Too female to be respected.

Too rigid, too professional, too strict, too serious,

Too Asian to be a supervisor, a teacher, a boss,

Too Asian to be a feminist.

Too much lipstick, too much jewelry, too domestic, too prude,

Too much femininity to be a lesbian,

Too traditional to be gay.

How can I be too much, yet still not enough?

My humanness, my worth, my identity, my intelligence,

Broken down to be rebuilt into what is comfortable,

Into what is expected, what is normalized, socialized,

Until I'm the right thing, for the right time, and the right context.

How do I integrate feminism into my work?

By showing up. By being seen. By standing strong.

By knowing this path is not mine alone,

I see beauty, I see peace, I gain comfort

Amidst conflict, in pain, in contradictions,
And together with others who walk with me.

Appendix E: Artwork Dialogue (Saanvi)

Participant: Yea, so I've brought, um, a couple of books of lyrics that I've written, and I mean it's pretty choker, I wasn't sure what you were looking for,

Researcher: Anything at all that you feel is reflective of your identity or experiences, anything you feel close to, even if it's a verse or anything...

Participant: Yea, sure.

Participant: OK, so just give me a second. (takes time to flick through lyrics in her note book to find what she wants to select) Yea, this is a snippet that encompasses quite well.

Researcher: Did you want to read it?

Participant: So there's a piece I put together that's kind of.... So, I made this track completely from start to finish in like on my own, hum,

Researcher: If it's on your phone, are you able to send that to me?

Participant: Yea, it's actually on website so I can send you the link.

Researcher: Ok, if you send me the link then I can pull it off.

Participant: I'll play it for you now anyways. (As the music is playing) It gets faster later so I'll send you the link to the lyrics. Yep, that's it.

Researcher: Amazing! Did you write this?

Participant: I did.

Researcher: Wow, that's just amazing! Can you send that to me the lyrics. When did you write them?

Participant: Ah, there are bits and pieces of it in here from probably late 2013.

(Gosh: Researcher) And then I think I put it all together in the middle of 2014.

Researcher: Amazing, excellent, it's really good. And um, where did you record it?

Participant: In my room (laughs)

Researcher: Really, so all the other bits, like the other voices in there, where did they come from?

Participant: Yea, so I sampled some tracks, there's a band that, they do a lot of ambient music and stuff and leaves a lot of room for interpretation or what not, so I sample bits and pieces of their track and pasted it.

Researcher: It's really good. So you talk quite a lot about your identity there, so what's going on there, how, how, what does that mean to you, that music and song?

Participant: Mmm, I mean, right before I fully produced that song, I finished my feminism 101 class. So it's all up on high scores about feminist literature and just started reading the philosopher Michele Foucault, if you haven't read any of his work, you would love it. It's a bit dense but it's not overtly feminist really, but he talks about all of these self-regulating practices that society kind of brings you up

within, and you kind of end up executing on yourself all, like a learned helplessness ideal, and ah, he has a lot to say about the prison system and um, what is it, I think his book is called, discipline and punishment or something, I can't remember, but he talks about the entire layout of a prison, where the entire, you're brought in thinking the center tower or the one way glass, is filled with guards all the time, so that somebody's constantly watching you. But you can't see if someone's watching you, so you act as if, you act under a regulated manner, as if you're going to get into trouble for acting outside. But there could be nobody in the tower, but you're still going to act like somebody's in the tower, your chances are pretty much 50/50 whether there's someone in there or not, but the fact that you can't see it, makes you regulate yourself in a manner that somebody else told you to. So it's all about that and the implications of that in the US and how it impacts women and, I mean Foucault was a huge feminist, so he um, he actually had this great debate with ... I can't remember now,

Researcher: So how does it um, reflect you?

Participant: Oh, um, I think its very representative of very representative of me realizing everything I had been taught during that summer and accepting that it was, that it existed. Um,

Researcher: What you were taught in the class?

Participant: it was completely intellectual, it was like this intellectual infatuation with each other that happened and we flirted all the time, but it was, it was so *passive*, so all of what I wrote in that track is very much geared towards the literature she gave us to read. Um, what I learned from it, um, when I say read the lyrics, describe to you line by line that I meant like, there are a lot of references to an article called, The New Jim Crow, which, it's a commentary piece on Jim Crow laws have just kind of shifted to exist within the prison system, um, and just the piece of I think, the thread throughout that entire thing is this self-regulating of existing within the capacity that you feel has been taught and is the right way. Um, whether that is, I don't know, going to, like existing in a prison system and doing what you're told without really being told, or being queer in a straight, in a straight upbringing, and doing what you're told really without being told to do it. Because nobody told you to go like guys really, nobody told me to do that, but somehow I ended up in a situation where I was nearly engaged to one. Not really because I thought about it, sat there and was like, yes this is exactly what I want to do, um, so, you know there's, I think I connected very much with, with the writings of Foucault because he talks about this self-discipline, this self-regulation, part but it's not necessarily in your best benefit to do that, you've lost the ability to think and analyze because everybody around you is acting in a certain way, in a certain manner, and reflecting that regulation that

you feel like you have to execute. Which for someone who's queer or questioning in a place where they're not curious to find out information for whatever homophobic reasons of their own and it's not being readily presented to them, um, you, I think there's a band wagon mentality, so you are kind of regulating yourself to act in a certain way, you kind of find some comfort in there, you could even be attracted to some guy maybe, finding little pieces to justify, but then as soon as you kind of turned a blind eye to what your internal needs could be, and then you haven't gotten there, um, especially in the last part of that track, it's very much about you being on this, you know, um, I don't know, like a, you're sincked, sincked up with everyone else and so your mentality is also sincked up with them and you're OK with banning gay marriage because it means nothing to you. You have no personalized, it's not humanized to you anymore and forget about maybe at one point in time you had a crush on a girl, like that, that part is even gone, like forget that you even felt that way. But, I think until you have a person that *you* know or you're associated with that has strayed away from this, like it's almost a mob mentality right, you are in this group of people that thinks a certain way, until you have someone who strays away from that it really means nothing to you. You can sign off on whatever litigation you want because it's not going to affect you. If you want to sign off on Monsanto buying genetically altered seeds and crops for miles and miles and miles, sure, (claps hands) why

because I don't live on a farm, it doesn't affect me. Um, yep. So um, very much tied back to Foucault. Yep. I was also reading a bit of Angela Davis's work during that time too, if you haven't read her work, you should read it,

Researcher: No I haven't

Participant: To be honest I'm not a big fan of feminist rhetoric because sometimes it gets too much. It's too oral longing, you talk about, ugh, I don't know, but kind of the philosophical side of it where you have the room to interpret, but those people call themselves feminist too.

Researcher: yea, I think those thoughts are profound really, it's amazing how much we cannot see what's out there and turn away from what's out there, until somebody shines a light on it and says right it's here and this is an alternative, or a possibility. You know, as they say, we don't know what we don't know, whether it's conscious or subconscious. But yea, I think it would be lovely to have the song with your kind of thoughts and interpretations. It is amazing just to hear these expressions and thoughts that are so complex and I'm just amazed that you can put them together, I could never come up with anything like that.

Participant: I can't really tell you that they were my thoughts entirely either, Unfortunately Saanvi had a commitment to go away for a lengthy period of time and the leave date unexpectedly got brought forward to a couple of days after this

interview and she did not have the chance to send additional thoughts and interpretations about her song.