

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

A Community Cultural Wealth and Critical Race Feminist Perspective of South Asian American

Women's Persistence in Higher Education

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Doctor in Education in Educational Leadership

By

Sangita Dube

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The dissertation of Sangita Dube is approved:

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Dr. Miguel Ceja

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Date

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Shelly Thompson, MA

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Date

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Dr. Dimpal Jain, Chair

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Date

California State University Northridge

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## Dedication

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## Abstract

### A Community Cultural Wealth and Critical Race Feminist Perspective of South Asian American Women's Persistence in Higher Education

By

Sangita Dube

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to explore how the community cultural wealth experiences of South Asian American women help or hinder their persistence through higher education. Although there is current literature regarding Asian Americans in higher education, there is not a strong foundation in the experiences of South Asian Americans, especially South Asian American women. The theoretical frameworks that were used to guide this study were community cultural wealth and critical race feminism. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify similar themes identified by South Asian American women regarding their persistence experiences. The interviews were conducted at a minority serving four-year public institution in southern California. The goal of the study was to help fill the gap in the literature regarding South Asian students in higher education along with providing recommendations for policy and practice.

The main community cultural wealth capitals mentioned by these women were familial as well as aspirational, but these women used their own drives to persist in their educational journeys. They all felt that their own motivations were the strongest components in their education. At the end, many of them mentioned that there was additional factor that helped them to continue in their education: the desire to not get married. Although this was not mentioned as a significant point for all of the women, it did come up enough to be considered significant for this study. The fact that these women were using their education as a means to avoid getting married and settling down was a factor in retention that has not been discussed in literature.

The recommendations for this study focused on discussions that came up in the interview as well as prospects for further research. The women interviewed all discussed a lack of “role models” in their everyday lives on campus. They felt that they did not have the best exposure to other South Asian American women not just in their classes, but in their specific majors. Even though all of the women were in STEM related fields, they did not feel fully supported because they did not find that anyone would be able to fully understand what they were going through on a daily basis. The institutional recommendations made by these women focused on the possibility of offering more courses related to South Asians in general and possibly a larger more noticeable presence in the administrative positions.

## Chapter 1

Retention and persistence are major factors when looking at the academic success of college students (Rendon, Gans, & Calleroz, 1998; Lang, 2007; Tinto & Wallace, 1986; Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). In recent years, more and more students of color are attending higher education adding to the diversity of the student body (Reddick, et al., 2011). According to The Chronicle of Higher Education's Almanac of Higher Education (2013-2014), the total number of students across the nation attending public higher education is over 20 million. Of those, the majority of students are White (54.6%); followed by Hispanics (13.6%); Blacks (13.1%); Asians (5.5%); Pacific Islanders (0.3%); and lastly American Indian/Alaska Native (0.8%).

Although there are a large number of students enrolled in higher education, not all students obtain the degree they sought upon entry and ultimately leave their institution. In particular, for those who are at four-year institutions, Whites earn the most bachelor degrees at 63.3%, Blacks with 9.6%, Hispanics with 8.8%, and Asians with 6.3% (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2015). What we see here is that White students are the most successful group in terms of attending and graduating from four-year institutions, with students of color drastically behind, including Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI's). This is despite the recent gains AAPI's have made in terms of overall population in the United States (Museus, 2011)

Notable AAPI education scholar Robert Teranishi (2010) states that, "between 2000 and 2010, the AAPI population increased at the highest rate of all major racial groups" (p. 17). According to the 2010 US Census, there was a 43 percent total population growth for Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders. This goes against conventional wisdom that promotes that Latino communities are growing at a faster rate than other communities of color (Museus, 2011). When

discussing the Asian American and Pacific Islander community it is important to note that this includes over twenty different ethnicities (Pang, Han, & Pang, 2011). In terms of examining Asian American higher education attendance as a disaggregated category across the nation, the breakdown is as follows: Vietnamese Americans are at 26%, Hmong American are 14%, Cambodian Americans at 13% and Laotian Americans are at 12% of college attendance at 4-year universities (Museus, 2011; Museus & Jaykumar, 2012). The largest number of Asian Americans in higher education are Chinese with 35%. What these numbers show is that although the number of Asian Americans in the United States is increasing (Teranishi, 2010; Park, & Chang, 2010) the number of students persisting to graduation is not as significant.

As the study was conducted in the state of California, it is important to look at the disaggregated data for the state. According to the California Department of Education: Educational Demographics Unit (2006-2007), the total number at the time was 182,993 students enrolled in a postsecondary institution of the 356,654 students who actually graduated from high school. The date from this site does not have anything past the 2006-2007 academic year, but they do offer a specific breakdown of students within each ethnicity identified. The table below shows the breakdown and reveals that there is no disaggregation of the data for Asians in higher education.

Table 1

*California Department of Education: Educational Demographics, 2006-2007*

Race/Ethnicity	Total High School Graduates <sup>(1)</sup>	Number Enrolled in CA Public Postsecondary Institutions <sup>(2)</sup>	Percent Enrolled in CA Public Postsecondary Institutions <sup>(3)</sup>	Number that completed 1 year of credit within 2 years of postsecondary enrollment <sup>(4)</sup>	Percentage that completed 1 year of credit within 2 years of postsecondary enrollment <sup>(5)</sup>
Hispanic	128,466	59,956	46.7 %	26,240	20.4 %
American Indian or Alaska Native Not Hispanic	2,867	1,206	42.1 %	468	16.3 %
Asian Not Hispanic	38,103	25,571	67.1 %	19,723	51.8 %
Pacific Islander Not Hispanic	2,385	1,177	49.4 %	537	22.5 %
African American Not Hispanic	25,736	11,653	45.3 %	4,933	19.2 %
White Not Hispanic	138,605	71,587	51.7 %	41,891	30.2 %
Two or More Races Not Hispanic	8,730	4,284	49.1 %	2,447	28.0 %
Filipino Not Hispanic	11,762	7,559	64.3 %	4,674	39.7 %
Total	356,654	182,993	51.3 %	100,913	28.3 %

Although there is no separation of Asians, there is an approximately 15% drop of students who start college and actually complete 1 year of college within 2 years after their high school completion. This then affects their retention and persistence in college.

For the purposes of this study, retention and persistence will be defined as students who have continued passed their first year. This definition is in alignment with the majority of notable retention literature (Tierney, 1999; Guiffrida, 2006; Liu, 2002; Metz, 2004). Throughout this study, retention and persistence will be used interchangeably as they have come to have similar meanings when discussed in practice.

Although the disaggregated information for Asian Americans is listed above, the fact remains that South Asian Americans are usually added into the statistics provided for Asian Americans as an aggregate. This study will be focusing on the retention and persistence specifically for South Asian American women, as there are a limited number of studies that examine the higher education experiences for this community (Aryan, 2010). This is important

because of the need for more research exploring the nuances of being South Asian American women in higher education.

### **South Asian Americans**

According to the US Census for 2010, there are over 3.4 million South Asians living in the United States. The South Asian population is disaggregated into the following groups on the 2010 census form: Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan and Nepalese. This population total shows a growth of 106% since 1990 (US Census, 2010). An even further investigation shows that 46% of the South Asian population is comprised of women (US Census, 2010). Finally, 35% of all South Asian American adults have a graduate degree, yet 59% of South Asian women do not have a high school diploma.

Considering the fact that there are over 3.4 million South Asians living in the United States, the number of women who are not completing their high school degrees is of great concern. The lack of information regarding why South Asian women are not completing their high school degrees and then moving forward to college is one of the reasons why this study was conducted. Moving forward in this chapter, there will be an introduction to the topic as well as the problem that is being addressed, along with the research questions, a brief overview of the theoretical framework and methodology, as well as a brief summary of possible limitations.

### **Problem Statement**

Central to the focus of the study is the notion of persistence and how it has been debated for decades within literature (Tierney, 1999; Tinto, 1988; Rendon, 1993). One of the key issues that William Tierney (1999) discusses with regards to persistence is that students from marginalized groups should not have to depart and abandon their home communities in order to succeed in college. This is in opposition to Vincent Tinto's work who is considered to be one of

the foremost retention experts in higher education scholarship (Guiffrida, 2006). In Tinto's (1988) model, the student's background can be considered a deficit and something that is to be mitigated when considering persistence. (Tierney, 1999). In this study, the purpose focused on the retention/persistence of a specific population within higher education, but rather than looking at it from a deficit perspective, the primary goal was to understand how community cultural wealth affected the retention of these women.

Deficit thinking refers to the idea that students of color, primarily low-income, do not succeed in school because of an internal lack of motivation, inadequate familial support and knowledge about the educational system (Valencia, 1997). For AAPI students, this refers to the perceived lack of knowledge on not just the transition to college, but also the lack cultural capital that students come into higher education with. In Tinto's viewpoint, these students need to abandon their backgrounds and assimilate into their new cultures in higher education in order to succeed (Metz, 2004). South Asian Americans can also face similar issues of the need to let go of past experiences in order to fully embrace their college experiences.

For this study, I examined the persistence of South Asian American women from a community cultural wealth perspective. Community cultural wealth is a theoretical framework that views traditional deficit notions as assets such as being from an immigrant family (Yosso, 2005). For most South Asian American women, receiving a proper education is important culturally in India (Prashad, 2000). Some women are expected to perform the traditional household duties of a woman, but also be able to get an education that will help them in their futures (Kibria, 1996). In more western cultures, although household chores might be commonplace, the level of expectations for the women are slightly different because they are not expected to always keep their futures in mind when working through their school and home-lives



(Roy, 1998). Therefore, the problem that was addressed in this study is how South Asian American women used their community cultural wealth to help them persist in higher education and still maintain their cultural values.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to understand how community cultural wealth experiences of South Asian American women impact their persistence in higher education. Tara Yosso (2005), a notable critical race theory scholar, formally defines community cultural wealth as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). Yosso’s (2005) conceptualization of community cultural wealth expands the definition of traditional and social capital into six different forms of capital which includes the following: aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, linguistic, and cultural capital.

Each form of capital was used in this study during the interview process, to help the South Asian American women identify which ones they used to help them persist in higher education. Specific definitions of each capital will be provided in the literature review. The overall purpose of this study is to contribute to the limited higher education literature that explores the experiences of South Asian American woman (Cao & Novas, 1996; Prashad, 2000; Mohanty, 2003) as well as to further contribute to the body of work related to community cultural wealth.

### **Research Questions**

As the focus will be on South Asian American women in higher education, the following research questions will guide this study:

1. What are the experiences of South Asian American women in higher education?

2. To what extent does community cultural wealth affect their retention/persistence?
3. How does gender impact their retention/persistence?

### **Theoretical Framework**

A combination framework was used to fully explore the issues relating to South Asian American women. The two frameworks that were addressed are community cultural wealth (CCW) and critical race feminism (CRF). Both of these theories stem from critical race theory (CRT) which is defined as a “framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of People of Color” (Solorzano, 1997, p. 6). CRT thus is a way to challenge the ideas in society that keep people of color oppressed such as deficit thinking and traditional notions of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Solorzano (1997) identifies 5 tenets of CRT in education as: 1) The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; 2) The challenge to dominant ideology; 3) The commitment to social justice; 4) The centrality of experiential knowledge; and 5) The interdisciplinary perspective. These five tenets help explore the institutional inequalities for students of color.

As stated before, community cultural wealth can help to identify key factors that help a student progress such as social, cultural, familial, and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). These forms of capital are then used to challenge traditional forms of capital that are based on the experiences of White middle class society. These factors then can be seen as positive impacts on student retention and persistence.

Critical race feminism was utilized to help focus the attention not just on the community as a whole, but specifically women. The definition that was used for this study states that critical race feminist theory “puts power relations at the centre of the discourse on gender, race, class,

and all forms of social oppression. Anti-essentialist in nature, it involves the examination of the intersections of social oppression and how their combinations play out in various settings” (Verjee, 2012, n.p.). This definition means that CRF focuses on all aspects of identity including race, class, social oppression, and especially gender. In other words, CRF is used to understand the ways that gender, race, class and other forms of oppression impact the livelihood of women.

As CRF centralizes the lived experiences of women of color, for this study it will allow for an oral tradition to pass along the stories that these women experience. “Also, using stories enables us to connect to those who do not understand hyper-technical” language (Wing, 2003, p. 16). Because this study engaged in ethnographic interviews, it was important to use a method that allowed the participants to feel safe to express their viewpoints. Both of these frameworks provided the background needed to identify the key ways that retention and persistence are attained by South Asian American women in higher education. The following brief introduction to the methodology will explain the process of this ethnographic study.

## **Methods Overview**

Understanding that this study used a critical race feminist and community cultural wealth framework, it was important for the methodology to align with these two theoretical approaches. As such, this study used a qualitative ethnographic multiple case study approach. This meant that each of the individual participants were looked at as an individual case. An ethnographic study is one in which a sample is studied to find a connecting pattern of behavior and/or customs within the sample to help identify common themes for the larger population (Creswell, 1996). This study used the commonality between the narrative accounts of these women to help connect community cultural wealth and critical race feminism to the retention and persistence of South Asian American women in higher education.

This study was conducted at a four-year public institution that has a population of approximately 40,000 students. The institution will be referred to as California University, West Coast (CUWC). The largest ethnicity at the campus self-identify as Hispanic and consists of 40% of the total population. The population breakdown is as follows: White: 26%; Asian: 11%; international: 7%; African American/Black: 6%; American Indian/Alaskan Native: <1%; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: < 1%; race/ethnicity not reported: 6%.

The breakdown of Asian American or South Asian American is as follows: Chinese and Korean at 1.4%; Vietnamese at 1.1%; Asian Indian at 0.8% and other ethnicities less than the 0.8%. The rest of the nationalities included: Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Hmong, Indo Chinese, Japanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Nepalese, “Other Asian”, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Tiawanese, and Thai (not in any particular order). All of these combined total the 11% according to the campus’ college portrait.

This campus also identifies as a minority serving institution (MSI), with it being officially designated as a Hispanic serving institution (HSI) as well as an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI). The gender breakdown for this campus is a 55%-45%, women over men, and 49% of all the students come from low-income homes.

In 2012, at CUWC, of the entire population who began their freshman year, only 77.9% persisted past their freshman year. That means that over 20% of students did not continue from year one to year two and left the university. Out of the Asian American freshman population for that year, there was a total persistence rate of 84.7%. Although Asian Americans appear to be persisting at higher rates than the overall student body past their first year, the university does

not provide a disaggregated view of the population so there is no way to tell which Asian Americans are persisting and which ones are not.

For degree completion, the data shows that in the 2012-2013 academic year, 6,885 students graduated with a bachelor's degree. When looking at overall graduation rates, the total number of students who began at this campus in 2007, 13.1% graduated in four years; 46.5% were still enrolled; and 22.7% were enrolled at another institution. This means that 16.1% of the total number of students who began in 2007, did not continue. There is no information that identifies exactly when these students left or why they left. Unfortunately, there was no specific data available for Asian American or South Asian men or women either. Due to gaps in data such as this, my study will hopefully be able to begin the process of this information becoming available.

For my sample, I identified South Asian American women who are currently enrolled or are recent graduates at the university. The criteria that I used to identify these women were the following: must have lived in the United States for at least five years; have attended or are attending the university within the past year; and can be any major. I selected 10 participants and conducted one-on-one interviews with them during the fall 2015 semester.

### **Limitations & Delimitations**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe, (2012), in a qualitative study, limitations are those factors outside of the researcher's control. Delimitations are boundaries that are set up by the researcher for the study; or things that are being excluded knowingly from the study.

One of the major limitations of this study was that the institution although an HSI and AANAPISI, does not have a wide range of services offered to the South Asian population. This was important because when it came time to ask the participants of what they would like to see

as resources for South Asian American women, they did not know where to begin making their suggestions. They felt that because the campus did not offer any resources that they thought were beneficial for them, they did not know how to add to this.

Another limitation could be that this institution is a MSI (minority serving institution). This is not necessarily a severe limitation, but can cause some answers to be from one type of campus climate perspective only. This can also be a strength because it could mean that the students might have a different campus context that can help them persist in higher education.

Finally, the size of the sample can be a limitation. Although a great deal of effort was given to recruit participants, considering the small number of South Asian students total at this campus, it was difficult to find women that fit the criteria. Since the size is small, it can be said that there was not enough data collected to deem the findings generalizable. While this may be true, the amount of time spent with each individual woman and the amount of follow-up that was conducted, I do believe that there was a substantial amount of information collected to provide significant findings listed in chapter four. The individual stories from these women were very detailed and provided a strong foundation for conclusions to be drawn.

A major delimitation for this study is the exclusion of the families when data is collected. Community cultural wealth in many ways is very inclusive of the family, the extended family, and the community as a whole. For this study, the primary goal is to discuss the perceptions of the South Asian American women who are or have experienced higher education here in the United States. Although the familial context is important, for this study, the focus will be on the individual women's perspectives.

### **Personal Connection**

As a South Asian American woman, I have had my own positive and negative

experiences in higher education relating to my cultural capital as well as my gender and ethnicity. Stereotypes such as the model minority myth are barriers that I have personally experienced and want to see if others have also. Although my mother did not get an opportunity to go to college and she did not attend any schooling here in the United States, seeing the challenges that she's faced because of her ethnicity and gender have inspired me to pursue this topic.

I also feel that the South Asian student population has been mischaracterized as the model minority and is often seen as superior to other students of color when it comes to higher education. This mischaracterization added a lot of pressures for me to perform at a certain level. Even as a child, I struggled with education, and when I got to higher education, many factors affected my own persistence. Therefore, this study is important to me because I feel that it is important to hear the voices of South Asian women who, like me, experienced various challenges and triumphs yet still persisted in higher education.

### **Dissertation Direction**

My study was a journey not just for me, but for my participants as well. I began by identifying the literature that created a strong foundation for my study. What I found however, is that there was little literature to date that examines the experiences of South Asian women in higher education (Kibria, 1996). Therefore, I focused my literature review on what was being said either about Asian Americans, or South Asian Americans generally, in higher education. Based on what I have uncovered, the literature addresses how South Asians interact within their own cultures and communities, (Ruzicka, 2011), but does not make the connection with how these cultural factors impact their persistence in higher education. This study hoped to provide an

opportunity to fill in a gap of the experiences of South Asian American women in higher education.

Chapter three is a discussion of my methodology, which goes into more detail about how I conducted my study and what specific methods I used. There is a discussion of the interview protocol as well as the process for the invitation and consent forms. I also provided any personal biases and connections with the topic and how I mitigated these issues. Lastly, I provided the methods that I used for transcription and data analysis to conclude this section.

Chapter four focuses on the women themselves and gave them an opportunity to discuss their experiences and how they dealt with their higher educational challenges. The chapter provides thematic findings based on the community cultural wealth experiences of these women. These findings then were connected back to the sparse literature about the experiences of South Asian American women in higher education and retention. The major findings were focused on two primary capitals: familial and aspirational capital. The chapter ends with a prelude into chapter five and the recommendations based on this study.

Chapter five revolves around the recommendations from this study. The major recommendations derived from the conversations with the women interviewed. They had specific institutional recommendations that they wanted to voice, and with respect to them, I made recommendations for the institution on how to improve the campus as a whole for these women. The second half focused on recommendations for future research in this field. Although this population may not seem in need of support, the data collected from these women shows that if South Asian American women are to be successful in a higher scale, then there needs to be more research done to make sure that they are supported on a higher level.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The purpose of this study was to identify the different forms of community cultural wealth that South Asian American women use to persist in higher education. In addition, the study also included how the model minority myth can be a factor that impedes South Asian American women from persisting in higher education. I began by identifying key factors that help or hinder the success of these women in higher education. Based on the research question provided, I explored at various aspects of gender, class, and ethnicity and how they help or hinder in persistence for these women. The purpose of this literature review is two-fold: 1) to provide background for South Asian American women with regards to how they function within their communities; and 2) to identify the gaps within the literature that can be filled by my proposed study.

Since the literature relating to the experiences of South Asian American women in higher education is sparse (Bannerji, 1993), this review will begin by focusing on access for students of color and then ending with South Asian American women in higher education. Organization in this chapter is as follows: historical perspectives of students of color; history of South Asians and South Asian Americans; followed by gender related issues for South Asian American women; and lastly, a discussion of the model minority myth and its impacts on South Asian Americans. The next step will be the discussion of the theoretical framework that connects both community cultural wealth and critical race feminism.

The guiding force behind this study is the idea that providing women a chance to be heard and express themselves is important (hooks, 1981). This study will be focusing on students of color who are traditionally seen as a population that have been falsely identified as not

struggling enough to warrant exploration: South Asian American women (Maker, Shah, & Agha, 2005).

## **Students of Color and College Access in the United States**

### *Historical Perspective*

Since the very beginning of the educational system in the United States, the restriction of who is allowed to learn and have access to education has been dictated by those who held the power, largely white individuals (Zinn, 2003). At that time, it was illegal for people of color to attend higher education. One historical exception were HBCU's (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), which have been in existence since before the Civil War and provided an opportunity for African Americans to participate in higher education during a time of high racial injustice (Albritton, 2012). After the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's, new legislation brought in opportunities for students of color to attend colleges and universities in places that they might not have in the past (MacLean, 2014). *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (Delgado, & Stefanic, 2012), began the ending of segregation in schools (Kaplin & Lee, 2007). Presently, higher education in the United States is an open market for any student to attend, regardless of their race, yet racial inequalities still persist (Smith, et al, 2002).

Educational pipelines help to identify how students of color persist throughout education beginning with elementary and continuing through doctorate degrees (Covarrubias, 2011). Educational pipeline scholars Covarrubias and Liou (2014) present a new pipeline that shows the number of students of color that graduate from college with a bachelor's degree. Their findings reveal that for every 100 Latina females, there are only 11 who persist through a bachelor's degree; whereas for every 100 Latino males, there were only 10. For American Indians the numbers show that there are 11 females and males that graduate out of every 100; for African

Americans, there are 14 females out of 100, and 12 males out of 100. For Whites, the numbers are a bit higher with 20 females and males out of their respective 100. Finally, the number of Asian Americans shows the greatest success with 33 females out of 100 and 30 males out of 100 will persist from elementary through bachelors (Covarrubias, & Liou, 2014).

There is no separation for South Asians or for Pacific Islanders in the pipeline provided. Even so, these numbers show us that although the number of Asian Americans attaining bachelor's degrees is higher than the other populations, if we were to attempt to identify a disaggregated list of Asian Americans, there would be a difference between which Asian Americans are doing well and which ones are not (Leong, et. al., 2007). According to Covarrubias & Liou (2014), having such a high number of Asian Americans getting their degrees does not mean that they do not experience racism and other issues relating to White privilege. They also found that there is a great gender disparity within the Asian community at the PhD level as well.

Another recent study conducted by Museus, et. al (2015), shows the most recent data relating to educational attainment. According to this, although Asian Americans “exhibit greater levels of achievement than other racial groups, these figures mask substantial disparities with this racial category” (Museus, et.al, 2015, p. 6-7). The findings show that among the Asian American population, there is a significant level of students who are not able to go beyond high school and complete their college degrees. Even in this study, the only time any South Asian ethnicity was introduced was for the annual income level. When the Asian American level of education data is presented, there is no representation of ethnicities deemed as South Asian based on this study, except for Sri Lankan (Museus, et al., 2015). This then perpetuates the ideas that Asian Americans, and more specifically South Asian Americans, are doing well enough to not be

considered and therefore can lead to the notion that they are a model representation of their population.

This refers to the impacts that the model minority myth stereotype may have on Asian American/Pacific Islander students. The model minority myth will be discussed in more detail later in this literature review. The model minority myth by its definition identifies someone as being a model when compared to other minorities (Tierney, 1999). For Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders this affects their academic performance because the expectations for them in higher education can be higher than other minority groups (Shen, 2015).

### **History and Culture of South Asian Americans**

South Asians have been in the United States since the mid 1700's (Han, 2006). Immigration of South Asians began as a workforce contribution, but limited to only that: working (Han, 2006). They were not allowed to own property or become citizens and therefore, getting an education was also not possible. According to Leonard (1997), because the migration wave were South Asian men (they could not bring their families), these men often ended up marrying women of other ethnicities and settling down in the areas that they worked in. There was then a high number of South Asians that immigrated in the 1940s as a result of the Filipino Naturalization Act and began holding positions that afforded them the abilities to send monies back home to their families (Han, 2006). The biggest difference between this group and the older group was the fact that this group was more educated and their socio-economic status was higher (Prashad, 2000).

Once the migration began, the flow of immigrants from Asia and South Asia did not decrease. Between 1965 and 1980, the number of immigrants increased from approximately 500 to over 20,000 (Han, 2006). Even with this new population of South Asian immigrants coming

in, there is no indication of the success of women who were able to persist in career or educational attainment. This of course does not mean that there were no women pursuing higher education, it only means that the documentation of this was not sufficient.

Even within the grouping of South Asians, there are significant differences in the ways that they live. Dasgupta (1998) states that for South Asian who are not in their home countries, they often try to hold true to their heritages and pass those experiences and lifestyles down to their children. Most South Asians who migrate to the United States try to pass along the historical and traditional value systems that they were raised with (Bhatia, & Ram, 2004). There are significant ties maintained within the first-generation of families that immigrated here to the United States (Dasgupta, 1998). Dasgupta (1998), states “These links are maintained physically through frequent trips to the homeland, while psychological closeness is maintained by reinventing [culture] on foreign soil” (p. 954; Mehta, 2002). Their culture and lifestyles are important to pass along and they see their connection to these values as a part of who they are, not just as individual families, but also as a community. The next area of focus will be to look at the role of gender and how it affects South Asian Americans.

### **Gender & the South Asian American Community**

Understanding that there is a significant lack of studies being conducted on the experiences of South Asian American women it is important to know that many researchers are making general statements that apply to the entire population, which encapsulates all South Asian American women (Agarwal, 1991; Hasnat, 1998). In this study, the focus was on the experiences of the South Asian American women who come from the following backgrounds: Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan and Nepalese. Going into the literature, there are two thoughts of study: one argument states that immigration has helped empower these women and

helped to break the stereotypical gender roles that they were experiencing back home; the other states that the move has created even more barriers for these women (Rayaprol. 1997; Kurien, 1999; Prashad, 2000).

Many of these immigrant women have opportunities to move up educationally and are able to become doctors, lawyers and other professional careers; while others end up being forced to work in their families and do not experience social mobility (Leonard, 1997). In a study, conducted by educational, political, and social scholar P.J. Kurien (1999) found that women were seen as being the ones who put all of their focuses onto their husband and children before themselves. Kurien (1999) also points out that there is a difference between the men and women who immigrated to the United States and their desire for educational attainment. Due to the cultural implications, South Asian women do not usually travel to different countries without the accompaniment of a male counterpart; those who do are seen as “un-marriable” (Kurien, 1999).

Many scholars believe that traditional roles with regards to gender are being experienced here in the United States among South Asian American immigrants (Agarwal, 1991; Kapadia, 2009; Inman, 2006). Agarwal (1991) reveals that many South Asian Women came to the United States expecting different pathways for themselves, yet found that “old-world gender roles are still rigidly being upheld for her” (p. 52). Some of these old-world gender roles are that women are home to take care of familial responsibilities as well as succeed in school and then marry when finishing high school or within a few years of college (Hasnat, 1998). Dasgupta (1998) continues her analysis of South Asian women “As keepers of South Asian culture and heritage in the U.S., the roles of second-generation daughters are therefore monitored more strictly than those of sons” (p. 957). Restrictions for sons is very different than for daughters; for example, daughters are often not expected to date and they are expected to be reserved and marry a man

within their culture (Agarwal, 1991). These kinds of restrictions are not just due to culture, but can also be attributed to religious beliefs (Dasgupta, 1998). Even though religion can be a product of culture, for this study, it will be seen as separate because South Asians have a variety of religious practices. Adding all of these pressures can definitely play a huge role in how these women succeed in their lives overall.

Roy (1998) shows that between mothers and daughters within the South Asian American community, daughters end up creating aspirations that align with the expectations of their families. One particular example in Roy's story is a Bengali woman who remembers wanting to be the "best student in the Bengali community and attend a good university; to please her parents with her academic success and gain approval from her community" (p. 99). This study focused on the relationship between daughters and mothers and was looking to identify how those relationships impacted girls success in higher education. In this particular case the daughter did not score high enough to go to a reputable school, and ended dropping out of college, and has lost connection with her community and rarely speaks with her parents. This type of experience can drastically impact ones persistence.

Due to the gap in literature relating to South Asian American women and higher educational persistence, the majority of the information will revolve around general ideas and research conducted on persistence and retention overall. The themes previously discussed- model minority myth, gender, and ethnicity- all impact persistence for South Asian American women in higher education. Understanding the experiences that Asian Americans have in higher education is important since their voices are often silenced in retention literature.

## **Asian Americans in Higher Education**

For this literature review, the 2010 U. S. Census categorization of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) will be used. In their census, the government identifies AAPI as having origins in the following countries: Cambodia, China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Pakistan (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and South Asians are seen as a subgroup of AAPI. The South Asian countries are identified as follows: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives (Uddin, & Singh, 2014). Culturally, it is assumed that these people all share the same ways of life; they all eat similar foods, live similar lives and experiences (Museus, 2008). Although there are some similarities, it is crucial to identify the differences among these cultures to be able to understand how these cultures function in the United States.

### ***AAPIs History in the United States***

Asian American migration began with people coming to the United States to work. Holding any kind of land or property required citizenship and in 1848, as people of color were not allowed to be citizens (Cao, & Novas, 1996). The Naturalization Act of 1790 allowed for individuals to apply for citizenship if they were a free white person, had good character and resided in the US for at least two years (Clement, & Katyal, 2015). This mentality of not allowing Asians the right to become citizens continued in the United States and began a chain reaction of racism and animosity towards Asians (Murjani, 2015). The overall flow of Asian Americans who were migrating to the US were those who would be useful for practical reasons such as farm and railroad laborers (Cao, & Novas, 1996). Later immigrants were high skilled and educated with advanced degrees in engineering and medicine (Bhatia, 2007; Takaki, 1998). Once Asian Americans began pursuing higher education in the United States, there was a shift in how



people viewed them (Bhatia, 2007). Although the phrase was not coined until the 1960's, Asian American's and South Asian American's were seen as model students in education when compared to other students of color (Han, 2006).

According to the CARE (Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education) Report (2010) for Asian American/Pacific Islanders (AAPI), although there is a significant number of educational attainment “large sectors of the AAPI population suffer from high secondary school drop-out rates, low rates of college participation, and low two- and four-year college completion rates” (p. 6). AAPI's also have the highest number of students entering college needing developmental courses, which also hinders educational attainment and persistence (CARE, 2010; Museus & Neville, 2012). Despite these indications of academic struggle, the model minority myth still persists.

### ***Model Minority Myth***

In 1966, William Petersen coined the term “model minority” in an article he wrote in the New York Times titled “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” (Peterson, 1966). In this article he states that a model minority is someone who is able to overcome the discrimination in the United States and become successful. Petersen (1966) goes on to compare the Japanese population to the other minorities in the US- Latino and African American- saying that the Japanese are more dedicated to their education and families stating that it is the “key to their happiness” (p. 34).

There are four major factors that contribute to the model minority myth: 1) there is a large portion of Asian Americans graduating from college; 2) socioeconomic status of these populations has been on a constant rise since the 1970s ; 3) Japan and other Asian countries

transformed into major economic powers in the 1980s; and 4) wealthy Asians immigrated to the United States due to immigration regulations in the 1960s (Murjani, 2015; Suzuki, 2002).

In today's society, the model minority myth is seen as a negative stereotype that does not portray Asian Americans accurately (Kawai, 2005; Murjani, 2015). "The model minority stereotype is argued by some to evoke negative implications such as racial hostilities and violence despite its seemingly "positive" image that it creates for Asian Americans" (Kawai, 2005, p. 110). This can affect the psychological and emotional well-being of Asian Americans. The added pressures of performance can lead to mental or emotional breaks (Das, & Kemp, 1997). The model minority myth can also create more issues of discrimination or animosity between other people of color and Asian Americans (Museus, 2008). The negative marker of this stereotype on Asian Americans has caused an increase of suicide and dropouts among students in higher education because it creates added pressures to succeed (Museus, 2008; Yoo, Burrola, & Steger, 2010). The ways that current students are internalizing it are causing more psychological problems than ever before (Yoo, Burrola, & Steger, 2010).

Pak et. al (2014) state that the myth shows Asian Americans as being "superachievers, not requiring special programs for recruitment and retention efforts, but at the same time, they face limitations in opportunities based on the assumptions of their overrepresentation, especially in relation to the more underrepresented Asian American ethnic groups" (p. 13; Hune, 2002; Teranishi, 2010). What this means is that there is an assumption by the academy that these particular students do not require extra support services in order to succeed, but they also face challenges because of their overrepresentation in comparison to other minority groups.

Kim (1999) also examined the model minority myth and stated that AAPI's were seen as "honorary Whites" and were thought of as above African Americans and Latinos. Due to this

identification, AAPI's are considered as non-minorities as Latino/a's and/or African Americans (Kim, 1999). This means that although AAPI are "ranked" above African Americans and Latino's, they will always be considered below Whites, just like other minorities. Researchers refer to this kind of separation as racial triangulation (Kurashige, 2007). Going from "honorary White", the AAPI population was given the title of "whiz kid" when referring to educational attainment (Brand, 1987). Going further, within the AAPI population, South Asians are considered the model Asian Americans (Murjani, 2015). The challenges of being considered a model within the larger community of Asian Americans is another factor that affects the persistence of students in higher education.

### **Persistence in Higher Education**

The definition for persistence that will be used for this study is by scholars Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) where they state that persistence involves students being able to move past their first year in college and continue on to their second year in college. One idea that has been foundational in the discussion of persistence and retention in higher education comes from Tinto's (1988) student departure model. In his model, Tinto suggests that there are two main aspects that affect student retention: academic and social integration. Within these, he identifies components that students utilize in order to continue with their education; for example: grades, personal development, understanding and enjoying subject areas, individual student roles, friends, student/professor relationships, and overall enjoyment of college life (Tinto, 1998; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). The idea is that if the student is not able to assimilate/integrate into the college or university, then the likelihood of the student continuing and finishing (completing) their degree is reduced.

Although this is one idea, there have been many criticisms to Tinto's work. Tierney (1999) states that Tinto's model is flawed because the goal of retention is not assimilation; it is to have students persist and complete their degrees (Rendón, 1993). Tierney (1999) identifies financial, social and academic integration, as being key factors that can either lead to success or prevent persistence. If a student does not have the proper financial support to be able to attend college, then they will likely choose not to attend (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; St. John, 1990; McPherson & Shapiro, 1998). With regards to social and academic integration, the idea that Tinto presents is that students need to completely disregard their past in order to fully immerse themselves into college life (Tinto, 1998, p. 96). Others argue, like Tierney, that students need the support of their past in order to be successful in their college careers and be able to give back to their communities (Spindler & Spindler, 1989).

### **Women of Color and Persistence**

Looking past the general retention of students, it is important to understand the needs of women of color and what their retention aspects are. According to Reyes (2011), some women of color, especially in the STEM field, feel that their retention is impacted because others on campus perceive they are not going to succeed due to their age, gender, and ethnicity. Such limitations can affect the way women of color view their own success. Other scholars have also indicated that the lack of support from the institution can also affect how well this community persists in higher education (Landry, 2003). From this perspective, it is important to understand the ways that the institution can provide support so that students of color, and more specifically, women of color can feel supported in higher education.

One key benchmark for retention is that students are able to persist past the first year. Research for persistence identifies key possibilities- such as institutional support, or lack thereof,

through first-year programs- which could lead to the attrition of students or success within the first year experience. In this manner, students need to feel welcomed and be provided the necessary tools to succeed (Tiernney, 1999). Providing students opportunities to get to know the campus and being able to feel a part of the college life is important. Programs such as SIRP's (student-initiated retention project) allow students the chance to feel a part of something that can ultimately help them succeed (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). SIRP's are programs that are available for first-year students to help with acclimating to campus life. In a study conducted at UC Berkeley and UW Madison, Maldonado, Rhoads, and Buenavista (2005) found that students who participated in SIRPs (student initiated retention projects) in their first year were more likely to succeed and continue into their second year (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005).

Other programs such as first-year experience courses can benefit student success both academically and psychologically. Purdie and Rosser (2011) conducted a study to identify key psychological issues that impacted student success and how universities can help with retention of these students. The idea is that providing first-year courses and other living learning communities helps students to build community and experience college as a unit rather than individually. For South Asian American women, this can be a benefit to have, but universities need to ensure that these courses and programs are culturally relevant for South Asian Americans.

The last area that can highly impact South Asian American women's persistence in higher education would be when they have role models in their day-to-day settings. Museus, Yee, and Lambe (2011) discuss the way that being a multiracial student in a monoracial campus can impact student persistence. What they define as monoracial is that the majority of the

campus is one ethnicity or race. For example: Predominantly White Institutions, or Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or Hispanic Serving Institutions. AANAPISI campuses are on the rise, but have not become as widely disbursed yet (Pak et al, 2014). Findings from the study conducted by Museus, Yee and Lamb (2011) found that campuses that provide more racial awareness training, or sensitivity training could help the overall campus climate. They also present the idea that campuses should embrace and offer more opportunities for multiracial student organizations to be present on campuses and have a stronger voice.

An example of this would be to have more South Asian American women faculty and staff visible for students to receive mentoring (Velez-Rendón, 2006). Creating a campus climate that is more inviting because of the people who are working there supports the ideas of those who would want to see students succeeding (Willcoxson, Cotter, and Joy, 2011). Providing support for South Asian American women in higher education is how to ensure the retention of these women in higher education. One way to continue a more critical examination of persistence is through theoretical frameworks that revolve around race and gender. Next, two theories will be discussed: community cultural wealth and critical race feminism.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I identify the frameworks that were guiding this study. Drawing from critical race theory (CRT), community cultural wealth (CCW) and critical race feminism (CRF) offer opportunities to study the social, gender, race and/or political oppressions that exist for women of color. CCW was used to help identify the key capitals that South Asian American women used to help them succeed in college. CRF was used specifically to identify the need to fill the gap in literature relating to South Asian American women. A combination of these two ideas is what has helped provide a strong background for the research question previously stated.

Although there is not a significant amount of literature connecting community cultural wealth to South Asian American women, there is some relating to Asian Americans (Museues, 2008). This was be the foundation for the framework and interview protocol. The discussion of community cultural wealth will come first followed by critical race feminism.

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

According to Santamaria Graff, et. al (2013), although there may be familial support to encourage minority populations to continue on to higher education, the lack of support from the institution hurts minority student retention in higher education. Community cultural wealth is a critical race theory challenge to traditional interpretations of social and cultural capital that hold White middle class structures as the norm (Yosso, 2005). According to Yosso (2005), those who do not have educated families look to formal schooling in order to find social mobility. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued that the lack of social and cultural capital needed for upward mobility, are what significantly hurt students of color. In this way, institutions use these “lacking” qualities as a way to show that this population is disadvantaged, which is what is considered deficit thinking (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977). The argument of theorists who support and value past experiences as forms of capital are ones who agree that these past experiences should not be seen in a deficit manner, but as cultural wealth or capital (Driessen, 2001).

Community cultural wealth looks at these capitals and identifies the ways that students use these to move forward in their lives. Yosso (2005), a noted critical race theory scholars states “In other words, cultural capital is not just inherited or possessed by the middle class, but rather it refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge skills and abilities that are valued by

privileged groups in society” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). Yosso identifies six different forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital.

Using Yosso’s (2005) breakdown of these capitals, social capital refers to community resources; familial capital is knowledge passed down by family members that bring forth a sense of wellbeing, history and memory; and aspirational capital is the notion that one is able to keep focus on the future even though there may be barriers.

**Forms of Capital.** Aspirational capital is when students, families, and communities aspire to hope and go beyond the current circumstances. This capital stems from the idea that Chicanas/os who are usually seen as having the “lowest educational outcomes compared to every other group in the US” are still motivating their children to look forward and strive for excellence (Gándara, 1982).

Linguistic capital refers to language attainment and skills that are learned through knowing more than one language. This capital puts value on bilingual education states that Students of Color come to school with skills that revolve around both language and communication (Yosso, 2005). These students are usually the ones who are asked to translate for their families (Faulstich Orellana, 2003). Linguistic capital also highlights the value of storytelling and being able to communicate using multiple forms of language including art, music or poetry.

Familial capital redefines traditional definitions of family by emphasizing the value of the extended family (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Family is meant to include extended family, friends and others in the community that we can learn more about “emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness” (Yosso, 2005). Therefore, the extended family can be involved in the decision making process.



Social capital refers to the resources that come about because of community links. For example, a student who does not have any immediate familial connection with college, can use their social capital to help them fill out college applications, or help to make final decisions on colleges, or even jobs. Communities of Color rely heavily on their social capital to help overcome adversity and challenges that might arise in their daily lives (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001).

Navigational capital refers to the ability of students of color to have skills that help them maneuver through “social institutions.” This capital highlights the fact that these students are able to persist in institutions where they may be seen as being at risk of “dropping out” (Alva, 1991). This capital includes the ability for those students to essentially learn from their experiences to be able to thrive in other similar situations (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000).

Finally, resistance capital refers to Communities of Color who teach children in the community to resist any kind of oppression or subordination (Freire, 1973; Deloria, 1969). An example is when during WWII Japanese communities resisted the racism that they experienced by “maintaining and nurturing various forms of cultural wealth” (Yosso, 2005). In this scenario they resisted the different types of negative stereotypes cast upon them because of the current war and were able to use their resistance capital to remain a strong community.

Although community cultural wealth examines different forms of capital, a gendered analysis is lacking in terms of how female students can experience and exercise these different forms of capital. Now that we’ve looked at the definitions and use of CCW, the focus will now move towards what role gender plays for South Asian American women in higher educational persistence. For this, the discussion will now be about critical race feminism.

## **Critical Race Feminism**

Evans-Winter & Esposito (2012) state that critical race feminism is the “legal and academic stratagem for studying and eradicating race, class, and gender oppression in educational institutions (p. 19). Initially, this theory was geared to explain the inequities that exist for Black women by stating that there are significant differences for women of color that vary from those of men of color and also White females (Carter, 2012). Currently, the theory has been expanded to center all women of color in its discourse (Wing, 2003). Wing (2003) goes on to say that critical race feminism is an “embryonic effort in legal academia that emerged at the end of the twentieth century to emphasize the legal concerns of a significant group of people—those who are both women and member of today’s racial/ethnic minorities, as well as disproportionately poor” (p. 1). This quote shows that CRF was born out of a concern for the lack of information available about women and helped to focus in on women of color. This then applies to higher education because if the people in politics and administration connected to higher education are not taking into consideration the issues related to women, then there will always be an imbalance. The next area of focus will be to identify the intersectionality of community cultural wealth and critical race feminism.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) define intersectionality as “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings” (p. 57). Using this definition, in this study I used Community Cultural Wealth and Critical Race Feminism to identify the key factors that help South Asian American women persist in higher education. The intersection of these frameworks allowed for a broader analysis of the women who were interviewed. This study focused on women of color and how they used the various forms of capital to persist in their higher educational experiences.

## **Summary**

This purpose of this literature review was to provide some insight into the experiences of South Asian American women in higher education. Since the literature is scarce on this topic, the basis of the review was to primarily identify the ways that Asian Americans and other minority groups persist in higher education and what are some possible causes of attrition. Although there are always unforeseen factors that impact attrition, it is the responsibility of the university to serve and retain all students who attend their college. The gaps in the literature also revolve around getting the firsthand voices for these women who have been through higher education and have persisted either past their first year or to degree attainment. This study aimed to provide more insight into the lives of these women by having identified South Asian American women who persisted at California University, West Coast (CUWC).

In the next section, there is a discussion of the methods used to attain this information. The methodology chapter discussed how participants were selected and provides background for how the study will be conducted. CCW and CRF will be used to help with the selection criteria and the interview protocol questions.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences for South Asian American Women in post-secondary education in relation to their family, gender, and ethnicity. The primary focus was to identify the capital(s) that South Asian American women use to help them persist in higher education. Understanding that the transition to higher education can be challenging for any student, the challenges that South Asian American women face balancing their familial expectations along with their education can be even higher (Das & Kemp, 1997). The expectations that are created by factors relating to their family and community can end up hurting their relationships in a college setting and thereby impact their success in the transition (Hussain & Bagguley, 2007). Connecting these issues to concerns of retention and attrition are important when interpreting cultural values and educational attainment. Rendón, et al (2000) discuss the importance of identifying the different retention needs of students of color versus White students and then go further by highlighting the need for more research in this area. They mention that “Researchers and practitioners alike tend to view issues related to the retention of minority students as similar, if not identical, to those of majority students” (p. 130). This then means that there needs to be more research conducted to disseminate the differences in retention so that institutions can fully support all students.

The gap in the literature is the lack of information relating to the specific experiences of South Asian American women and their higher educational achievement. This study provides information to help fill that gap through an ethnographic multi-strategic case-study approach to interview South Asian American women both currently enrolled and recent graduates of a four-year public institution. The following research questions helped guide this study.

## **Research Questions**

The study focused on the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of South Asian American women in higher education?
2. To what extent does community cultural wealth affect their retention/persistence?
3. How does gender impact their retention/persistence?

This methodology chapter identified and defined the specific research traditions, data collection procedures and analysis that were used to make this study successful. Each section will be broken into the respective categories and will help to answer the research questions stated above.

The sections are: research tradition and design, setting and context, data sources and sample, sampling strategy, data collection instruments, ethical barriers and solutions, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, researcher roles, and finally a brief summary.

## **Research Tradition and Design**

I used a single case study method because I interviewed South Asian American women in a four-year public institution. I focused on their experiences in higher education and how their community cultural wealth impacted their experiences. Using a case study approach allowed for a particularistic, descriptive and heuristic approach. According to Merriam (2009), the particularistic approach is used to focus on a phenomenon being studied; the descriptive helps to provide a case study that is a rich “thick” description of the phenomenon under study” (p. 44).

Schram (2006) states that the purpose of an ethnographic study is to observe what people do within a particular place or situation and how those people provide meanings to the things they do. Some basic principles are to look at human/social behavior, shared behavior, behavior that is neither “theirs’ nor ‘yours,’” and also looking to discuss people’s experiences with the phenomenon (Schram, 2006). This connected with my study as I aimed to identify the different

ways that these women faced the phenomenon of community cultural wealth and ultimately how their experiences related to their higher educational journeys. I looked to connect these experiences with their culture because I believed that a students' community cultural wealth played a significant part in their pursuit of higher education.

An ethnographic study focuses on the cultural aspect of research through its focus on anthropological background. Creswell (1996) states that "Culture is an amorphous term, not something 'lying about' but rather something the researcher attributes to a group as he or she looks for patterns of daily living" (p. 59). Spradley, (2012), says that culture is a "system of knowledge" that people identify with and create their own interpretations for. Something that may be culturally acceptable in one group, might not be in another. For my study, this was important since it allowed me the opportunity to see not just how the participants viewed culture, but also to help understand the true impact of culture on their experiences in higher education. I used community cultural wealth (CCW) and critical race feminism (CRF) to identify the intersection that South Asian American women use to help them persist in higher education.

This meant that the questions asked relate not just to the phenomenon of retention, but how they- the participants- interact with the phenomenon as women in higher education. At the end of the study, I was able to "gather artifacts and physical trace evidence; find stories, rituals, and myths; and/or uncover cultural themes" (Schram, 2006, p. 59) to help support the phenomenon of retention. This was a process that took place over a period of time and required multiple participants which is why I chose to use an ethnographic multiple case study approach.

## **Setting and Context**

### ***Site Description***

For my study, I chose California University, West Coast (CUWC) (pseudonym) a university in Southern California. The following information was all obtained from the College Portrait and the historical facts page on the university's website. This university is a four-year public university located in Southern California. The campus was established in the 1950's and currently sits on approximately 356 acres of land. The student population is close to forty thousand students of mixed ethnicity and gender. As of fall 2013, the population consisted of 55% women and 45% men in their undergraduate studies. The undergraduate race/ethnicity breakdown is varied, but the largest population is Hispanic and White. As stated in chapter one, the demographic breakdown is as follows: White: 26%; Asian: 11%; international: 7%; African American/Black: 6%; American Indian/Alaskan Native: <1%; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: < 1%; race/ethnicity not reported: 6%. About 49% of the student population (in undergraduate) are from low-income families. Next, I will be discussing the selection of my participants using a criterion snowball strategy.

### ***Data Sources and Sample***

For the purposes of my study, I used one data source: interviews with South Asian American women. All of the women were currently enrolled in a four-year public higher education institution and there was one woman who recently graduated. I wanted to see how the women who are currently in higher education persisted and how women who have graduated were able to complete their education. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. In this next section, the combination of sampling strategy of criterion snowball will be

discussed in detail along with the sample characteristics and the methods I used to protect the rights of my participants.

## **Sampling Strategy**

### ***Recruitment Process***

The first step in my recruitment was to attend meetings of the South Asian Club on campus. This provided me an opportunity to explain my research and how the participants would be able to help. After this I relied on the snowball method in order to spread the word of my study. I left flyers with my personal contact information for any South Asian American woman who might want to participate at the club meeting and also around campus after it was approved by Associated Students.

Once these women contacted me, I emailed them from my personal laptop. Using the snowball strategy, I was able to get other emails from the referrals of women. After they met the criteria, I sent them a letter stating my specific area of interest and how their stories would help in the development of this study. This was important because there was a level of “*buy-in*” that had to occur in order for the participants to feel that their voices and stories would not go to waste.

### ***Sample Criteria***

Considering that the sampling method I used was a combination of criterion and snowball, my participants had to meet the criteria in order to participate. I interviewed ten women and made sure they fit very specific parameters. The parameters (sample criteria) beyond being a South Asian American woman for my study were the following: between the ages of 18-40; attending the higher educational institution listed above or are a recent graduate; and are past their first year of college. I did not select any specific major because it was not relevant to my study.



### ***Snowball***

A snowball strategy gave me the opportunity to use referrals as a method of identifying my participants. A snowball strategy incorporates “knowledge of potential cases from people who know people who meet research interests” (Glesne, 2011, p. 45) I chose snowball as a second participant selection strategy because I felt that although this is a topic that will give South Asian American women the opportunity to speak up, there may be some hesitation because I brought up some personal issues that some women may have felt uncomfortable speaking about. These topics included questions related to family expectations and family history in education as well as personal obligations to family. This was important because I did not want to force any of my participants to feel obligated to speak with me and this helped to mitigate that.

### ***Data Collection Instruments***

For this study, a semi-structured interviewing process was used. I conducted interviews on a one-on-one basis, and therefore, it was important for me to be able to go in knowing exactly what I hoped to discuss. The semi-structured process is “based on the use of an interview guide” (Bernard, 1994, p. 209). Since this was a qualitative study, I used interviews as a way of understanding personal experiences and gaining access to specific viewpoints from my participants. As Morgan and Saxton (1991) state, interviewing is used to build connected experiences and allow for new knowledge to be experienced and shared. It also gives ownership to the people being interviewed. Along with this, both community cultural wealth and critical race feminism place high value in hearing stories from first hand perspective, therefore, conducting interviews helped provide the best opportunity to explore these frameworks.

### ***Research Invitation***

I sent out an email to all those who signed up to participate through a snowball method. The email consisted of my research purpose and responsibilities of both the participant and researcher. It was important for me to express my purpose in a way that connected with my participants because I wanted them to feel a connection to the interview and study overall. The email stated the confidential nature of this study and assurance of privacy. Assurance of any information collected on electronic devices was to be kept secure and password protected was provided. Once the initial email was exchanged, follow-up emails were sent to set up times and locations for the interviews. Participants were allowed to pick the locations and times based on their schedules.

### ***Informed Consent***

The informed consent document included information relating to the study and explained the responsibilities in more detail of the participant and the researcher. This document stated that the participant would be allowed to withdraw from the study if anything uncomfortable was experienced. There was information provided on locations to access counseling support if needed due to the possible personal nature of the study. The final part of this process included an interview protocol to help guide the study based off of the research questions.

### ***Interview Protocol***

An interview is more than just asking questions and getting answers. There are layers that fall into the process to help guide the study (Seidman, 2006). The first layer consists of being an active listener and really listening to the participant. The second is using language that is used by the participants. The last is to be aware of everything, not just the current interview-taking place. The time, the questions, the responses, everything must be considered and accounted for

(Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) goes on to discuss “exploratory” questions rather than the probing questions. Asking direct questions and then following-up with more detail or asking for a story or example in order to get behind just the initial conversation.

For this study, there were fifteen questions with follow-up questions when needed. The questions were built around ideas from community cultural wealth and the cultural capitals discussed by Yosso (2005). The questions and follow-ups can be found in the appendix but a sample is provided. This is an example of a question relating to community cultural wealth: “Growing up, did you participate in any cultural or community events?” The two follow-up questions for this would be: “If yes, how did you participate? If no, then why didn’t you participate?”

### **Ethical Barriers and Solutions**

Although I interviewed the women on personal matters, I needed to have my participants feel comfortable enough to open up to me. I used pseudonyms for all of my participants and followed all IRB rules and regulations about securing data. I used a personal laptop that was password protected and nothing was saved to any cloud arena. All hard data (paper/recording devices) were kept secure and under my supervision. My participants shared personal stories, and it was important for me to respect the voices of those speaking and build a relationship that allowed the participant to feel comfortable (Beck, et al, 2001). It was crucial that as a researcher I had to note that “research participants should be able to read, observe, or somehow engage with the art and discuss its representation before it goes to a wider public” (Glesne, 2011, p. 180). In this form, my study was the art and I provided my participants the opportunity to review anything to make sure I understood and allowed the right representation of their voices. I gave

them the opportunity to ask questions and review any part of the data collection and transcriptions.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In an ethnographic case study, the procedures involved should be interviews or focus groups in order to learn the cultural themes, or ideas that connect back to the main research questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In this study, the main source of information was from one-on-one interviews that involved asking questions that connect back to the larger themes of the research questions. As previously stated, I conducted ten one-on-one interviews with South Asian American women who had or are still in higher education here in the United States. Besides the recording device, I also kept detailed notes on responses since observations and field notes are part of the ethnographic process (Glesne, 2011). The next section discusses the format for these interviews by looking at the following three phases: pre-interview, during the interview, and post-interview.

#### ***Phase One: Pre-Interview***

As stated previously, the interview process began when I sent out emails as invitations discussing my research and the roles that my possible participants were playing. This email was sent out after IRB has approved my study. The email was written in a formal manner and included basic information about how the interviews would be conducted.

#### ***Phase Two: The Interview***

The actual interview was conducted one-on-one and was digitally recorded. At the beginning of the interview, I provided a consent form to each participant. We went over the consent and time for questions was allowed. I explained that even though the interview was being recorded, as per IRB, all information leading back to the individual participant would be

de-coded and de-identified so that there would be no traces leading back to the participant. Once the conversations were transcribed, I deleted the audio files along with any previous files and/or emails that may give way to who the participants were. I explained that I would be keeping everything in a password-protected laptop that only I will have access to. Nothing would be saved on any public computer and everything would be backed up on an external drive just in case of computer failure.

Once the actual interview began, I started off by asking my primary (main) questions then used follow-up and exploratory questions to get examples and details relating to my topic (Seidman, 2006). I allowed each of the participants an opportunity to be as detailed as possible, knowing that I had to keep track of time and not allow the interview to go off track. Ethical issues had to be considered on my part because I needed to be careful not to use leading questions. I had to make sure that I was asking questions in the right manner and not just asking things that might lead the conversation astray (Briggs, 1986).

The last factor during the interview process was to keep a journal and use reflexivity in order to maintain my distance. Journaling allowed me to identify any points where I felt that I was emotionally connected to my participants (Glesne, 2011). My field notes and observations helped me to avoid the traps- such as misunderstood comments- that might have occurred when conducting interviews (Carlson, 2010). Also, both community cultural wealth and critical race feminism encourage the use of self-reflexivity since topics discussed can become very personal. Another way that I did this was to use member checks; I checked in with my participants to make sure that I interpreted their information correctly in order to maintain a full understanding of their answers. All of this allowed me to continue onto phase three of the interview process.

### ***Phase Three: Post-Interview***

In this phase, I sent out thank you cards to all the participants with my contact information once again just in case they have any concerns or issues. I also provided a brief summary of our conversation to make sure that I understood the information provided to me correctly. I used my field notes and observations to de-identify my participants before I began the transcription process. All of the interviews took place in either an office, or a café, with additional member-checks done via email. There were a total of over 380 minutes of data that was transcribed and analyzed. Each interview was approximately 35-40 minutes in length. I used my member check-ins during this phase as well to make sure that I truly understood everything that the participants were saying to me. All of these features helped me formulate the following section within the methods which will be an explanation of the data analysis process.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Once I completed data collection, the next phase was to transcribe and code the data (interviews). Where transcription is writing up the interview, coding is “assigning alphanumeric system to segments of transcripts” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 135). In this way, I was able to identify key components that connected with my research questions. The coding allowed me to recognize trends and themes that emerged and my data analysis used those themes to create a cohesive interpretation. In this section, I am discussing the different methods of data analysis that I used for my study: preliminary analysis, which consisted of my transcription and coding systems; and my thematic analysis, which helped to connect the data to my research questions.

### ***Preliminary Analysis***

For my study, I recorded my interviews on an audio device, but I also used memos and observations to help with my data analysis (Glesne, 2011). Memo writing was beneficial to keep

track of momentary thoughts and ideas that sometimes leave us. I used a professional transcribing service for the transcriptions, and the memos helped me remember what was happening and why certain answers were given. Since I used an outside service for transcription, I checked some of the initial transcriptions to make sure there were no errors. Once all interviews were transcribed, I de-identified all personal information from the transcriptions and redacted anything that could lead back to my participants. In order to secure the information, I used three-digit identifiers and this provided my participants the assurance that confidentiality was maintained.

### ***Member Check-Ins***

Member check-ins was also very important for me throughout the preliminary data analysis process to verify any information that did not match with what I understood (Glesne, 2011; Bloomberg, & Volpe, 2012). I shared quotes and some of the transcriptions with the participants to ensure trustworthiness and clarity. The issue of trustworthiness was important in order to have my participants feel safe to share personal information.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

In my study, identifying themes that not only connected back to my research questions, but also helped to connect my participants together was important. The best way to help identify the key themes, or big ideas, was by repetition. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) say “Repetition is the most common theme recognition technique, and is based on the premise that if a concept reoccurs throughout and/or across transcripts it is likely a theme” (p. 139). The next phase was to create categories that these themes fell into in order to begin coding.

Coding required a systematic approach and I created a “coding legend” or “coding scheme” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) to help keep the data in order. Once coding was complete,

I re-read the codes and data to make sure nothing was missed. Creswell (2009) states that re-reading your data is important to keep your data analysis concise and thorough. For my study a total eight codes were used: 6-cultural capitals, one for gender, and one for institutional change recommendations. Since, the research questions focused on cultural capital and gender, community cultural wealth and critical race feminism were used as the two major themes I discussed in my thematic analysis. Once the information was processed and interpreted, the data could be presented. The findings and conclusions provide a full interpretation of the data collected. Everything was then connected to some recommendations in order to help answer the research questions and the overall purpose of the study.

### **Researcher Roles**

Being a first generation, South Asian American woman in the United States definitely impacted my research and study. Knowing where my participants were coming from and what they might be facing on a daily basis was a factor that I could not ignore. According to Glesne (2011), researcher roles are defined as things that are “situationally determined, depending on your philosophical perspective, the context, the identities of your participants, and your own personality and values” (p. 59). Thus it was important for me to identify my connection to the topic and why I was researching this topic to my participants at the beginning of my interview session. My personal experiences which are discussed in the following sections, are things that I tried to keep as secondary, but they did help to provide my connection and context. I also needed to keep in mind that my job as an academic advisor played a part in this process since in that role, I want to see student succeed in their education.



## ***Biases***

Of course within these factors there were biases and outside influences that impacted how I responded and reacted to the different responses that I received. Being aware of my subjectivity was important and there needed to be “control against and to mitigate its influence in research” (Glesne, 2011, p. 151). My study focused on how the participants related to the topic of community cultural wealth and their experiences within higher education because of their own community cultural wealth.

**Embodiment.** Embodiment in research means looking like your participants and how that can affect their responses knowing that the person who is interviewing them understands them on a different level (Ashworth, 2015). Throughout the data collection process, I interviewed people that looked similar to me and were of the same gender. I did not see this as a problem, and in fact, I saw it as being a way to personally connect with my participants. Because my embodiment was a connecting factor, it allowed my participants to feel that I could relate to them and it brought out a more fruitful conversation. This allowed the participant reactivity- the participant reacting negatively- (Glesne, 2011) to lessen and permit the interviews to flow more smoothly.

**Positions.** According to Glesne (2011) positions “include both ascribed characteristics (nationality, ancestry) and achieved characteristics (educational level, economic level, institutional affiliation, etc.)” (p. 157). For my study, my position on campus and my nationality were beneficial to my participants because it helped them connect with me and in that way, they lowered their guard when speaking with me. My job as a researcher was to make sure that my positionality did not impact how I interacted with the women and how they viewed me. In both community cultural wealth and critical race feminism, it is important to for the interviewer to

place value on their own experiences; however, I did not want to influence any answers and made sure to write my personal responses to the interviews in my journal to help mitigate my reactions. To help mitigate any uncomfortable feelings that might have come up, I conducted my interviews off campus at a location convenient to them.

## **Summary**

Throughout this entire process, I learned a great deal not just about the research process, but also about how my own personal experiences could affect my research. Beginning with the recruitment process, I had to learn to be patient since it took a significant amount of time to gather even just the ten women. With qualitative research, since a person has to open up about their lives, there can be more hesitation to participate; therefore, it took approximately four months total to collect all of the data. I met with ten South Asian American women who are currently enrolled at California University, West Coast and conducted an ethnographic case-study. The specific demographics for the women interviewed will be provided in chapter 4.

In chapters four and five, I have collected the data and provided a thematic analysis of my findings. I also provided a section for recommendations and for future research.

## **Chapter 4: Findings and Results**

The focus of this study was to understand the factors leading to the retention/persistence of South Asian American women in higher education. The study was conducted using an ethnographic approach which helps to identify a connecting pattern or behavior within a certain population to help understand the group as whole (Creswell, 1996). The following research questions were used to help guide the study: 1) What are the experiences of South Asian American women in higher education? 2) To what extent does community cultural wealth affect their retention/persistence?; and 3) How does gender impact their retention/persistence?

After interviewing these 10 women, the following three findings became apparent as they relate to community cultural wealth, South Asian American women, and retention. The findings are as follows: 1) the familial obligations students encounter when selecting a college and a major; 2) how students use aspirational capital to self-navigate through higher education; and lastly 3) how some women use college as a means to shelter themselves from marital expectations. These findings are both positive and negative although the women did have specific goals that they wanted to attain, they also had outside factors that helped them to persist in their educational journeys. Within these findings, there were specific themes that affected the decision making process for these women and helped them to navigate in college. When exploring the familial obligations of going to college, the major themes that emerged were the college choice process which then connected to their major selection. Looking at how students use aspirational capital to self-navigate through higher education, the major theme that was identified was the value placed on identity through aspirational capital. Finally, when the discussion of using college as a means of sheltering from marriage, the major theme was a sense

of resilience and determination to complete college. The focus of this chapter is to understand how the 10 women used their community cultural wealth to persist in their higher educational paths. All of the findings will focus on the main concern relating to this study: retention and how these women used community cultural wealth in their goals in higher education.

### Participant Demographics

The table below identifies the specific demographics for the women that were interviewed. The women were all interviewed in a time and location that was convenient to them. All of these women shared similar conversations about their college experiences and their names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

Table 2

#### *Participant Demographics*

Name	1)Anita	2)Tara	3)Devki	4)Rajni	5)Neesha	6)Jaba	7)Hema	8)Sai	9)Maya	10)Payal
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Indian	South Asian/Indian	Indian/Gujarati	Indian	Bangladeshi	South Indian	Indian	Pakistani	Pakistani	India
<b>Birth Country</b>	India	USA	USA	India	USA	USA	India	USA	Pakistan	India
<b>Language</b>	Hindi, English	English, Hindi	English, Gujarati, Urdu, Hindi, Italian	Hindi, English	Bengali, English, Hindi	Malayalam, English	Hindi, English	Urdu, English	English, Urdu, Hindi	Hindi, English
<b>K-12 Location</b>	All India	All USA	All USA	2-12, USA	All USA	All USA	9-12, USA	All USA	3-12, USA	8-12, USA
<b>ELL Classes</b>	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Family Make-Up</b>	Mother, Father	Mother, Father, Sister	Mother, Sister, Step-Father	Mother, Father, Brother	Mother, Father, Sister	Mother, Father, Brother, Sister	Mother, Father, Brother	Mother, Father, Sister, Brother	Mother, Father, Two Brothers	Mother, Father, Two Sisters, Brother
<b>Family in College</b>	Yes, cousins	Yes, cousins	No	Yes, cousins	Yes, cousins	Yes, cousins	Yes, cousins	Yes, sister, cousins	Yes, cousins	No
<b>Major</b>	Business	Kinesiology	Radiology	Public Health	Health Admin	Kinesiology	Chemistry	Comp Info Systems	Info Systems Business/SOM	Radiology
<b>Year in School</b>	4-year	4-year	5-year	4-year	3-year	4-year	5-year	3-year	4-year	6-year

From this table, we see that most of the women interviewed were born in the United States, and attended most of their K-12 education here. For those women who began their educational experiences at a campus outside the United States, the requirement was that they be here in the US for at least 5 years, and all of them fit into this category. All of these women have siblings, and all but one live with their immediate parents; there was one woman whose parents were divorced. Another interesting factor is that all of these women are in STEM related fields. Later in this chapter, when these women were discussing their college choice and major selection, they provide very similar answers as to why they chose these majors.

There was no significant difference in opinions between those who were born here and those who were not, and each of the women expressed similar experiences with regards to the cultural expectations from their immediate community. Each woman, had either a sibling in higher education, or they were expected to be the role model for their younger siblings. Out of the 10 women interviewed, 4 of them were first generation college students.

This chapter will provide insight into the experiences of these women and how they used two of the six capitals introduced by Yosso (2005) to persist in their college journeys. There is also a discussion of one concern that 3 women brought up which is a significant finding relating to marital expectations from their families and how they and others that they know are using college to avoid the pressures of getting married.

### **Familial Obligations of College**

Referring back to Chapter 2 and the discussion of familial capital, Yosso (2005) discusses this capital by placing value on the extended family and friends of the individual and states that students of color use their families as a means to succeed in education. For the 10 women in this

study, they all discussed how important family was to them. Although family was important, they discussed how their families helped and hindered in their persistence in college.

Each woman shared how initially they were all going to college because that was what was expected of them from their families. However, their families high level of support inspired them to go to college and pursue something that would make them successful in their futures. The first step then for these women was to look at their college choices and the selection process for college.

### ***College Choice***

The college choice process consists of distinct stages and decision making related to how a student selects what college to attend (McDonough, Calderone, Purdy, & Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2007)). Historically college choice focused on three factors: sociological, psychological, and economic factors (Bergerson, 2009). Today, college choice typically revolves around financial eligibility and equal access to the campus (Bergerson, 2009). In this study however, college choice centered on the familial expectations set for them, not financial affordability and/or equal access. For the women interviewed, picking the right college that was acceptable by their families was a big part of their retention. They felt that if they were able to find the right campus to pursue their education, then they would be fully supported by their families and this then would help them succeed in college.

Jaba, the first in her family to go to college, expressed how important it was for her to go to college as it was an escape from her family's current economic standing. She said, "I think the reason I chose to go to college was because of my family. You know, because they never completed college, so I'm the role model for my younger siblings. I had to go to college." She felt that her parents expected her to go to a university because that was what was more

acceptable within her community. She did not have the choice of going to a junior college because “what would outside people think?” Although this was said by Jaba, Hema echoed the same sentiment when she said, “My parents knew that community college was a cheaper option, but they didn’t want that for me. They said that no matter what, they would make it work financially because the community would think less of us if I went to a community college.” For Hema’s parents they would make sacrifices in other aspects of their lives in order to make sure that their daughter, and eventually their son, would be able to attend a university instead of a junior college.

Devki, a young girl who ended up attending a community college (junior college) because of a situation out of her control, said she knew that her family was disappointed in her. She shared the following story:

My first year of college was okay. I went to Sac State (Sacramento State University) and lived in the dorms. That was fine because I was able to meet new people who weren’t in my immediate neighborhood or high school. When I was in high school, I didn’t really have a lot of close friends, and somehow when I began college, I found that I became more social. My roommate and I would hang out all the time and do a lot of stuff together. We even got to the point where other people started to get to know us and we became the popular ones. It felt great. Then my second year hit and things were not that great. Bad decisions hurt my GPA and I ended up at a community college. Although my parents didn’t really say anything, I know it was embarrassing for them to have to go to our community and try to figure out an explanation about why I wasn’t at Sac State anymore. It was really difficult for them.

In Devki's situation, similar to the other women, community colleges were thought of as less than universities because they didn't offer a bachelor's degree. Their family's helped them decide which colleges to attend because that was something of a matter of pride for them.

Rajni, another young lady who is an older sibling, was in a similar situation when it came to the reasons why she was in college. She had the added challenge of having to work with family members who continuously compared her to an older male cousin who is currently in college at a university in California (UC). Not only did she get compared to him because she is not attending a UC and he is, but also because she has not figured out what her future plans were. For her male cousin, that was not the case. She said,

He is the 'perfect one' because he's about to graduate from a UC and I'm not. I mean, my parents don't directly say anything to me, but I can always hear them explaining to people in our family or their community friends about how the school I'm going to is just as good for what I am doing. But then they immediately have to say something like 'well, we don't know exactly what she's doing yet'. It's like they want to be proud of me, but they're not one hundred percent. They did say though that at least I'm not at a community college.

Neesha has a similar situation to Rajni as well. Her familial expectations of going to a university were ingrained into her way of thinking since her childhood. She discussed a conversation that she had with a high school counselor about going to college and shared the following:

My counselor actually suggested community college at first to save money. She said that I could get my GE's done there and then I could just transfer to a university. When I told



my parents that, they didn't want me to do that. They said that if they needed to, they would take out a loan against the house so that I didn't have to go to community college. Neesha's parents discussed with her the community expectations about college and how it would make them look in the community if she were to go to a community college for two years. This tied into the fact that there is a stigma and a sense of shame of a student attending a community college for South Asians.

Although these pressures seem to be negative, all of these women expressed that they did not see it as a negative; they felt that it was their duty to help their families reach the dreams of having the children go to a university as their college choice. When it came to picking majors, they had different opinions on what their families wanted compared to what they wanted. This then impacted their retention because if they were able to pick the route to college as they wanted, then they might not have been able to get to the point that they are now.

### ***Major Choice***

In my interviews, the participants were able to relate to each other without knowing it because they each stated that within their community and cultural backgrounds, they found that there was an expectation of which route they should go in college. They also stated that going to college was a cultural expectation. They knew that they would have to go to college after high school. The recommendations stemmed from families were based on identifying a major that would help them find the most financial stability. The challenge that some of these women faced outside their immediate culture was from those people who stereotyped South Asians and assumed that they should be in specific majors and/or career paths. The final challenge for these women when it came to major selection derived from a comparison between South Asian men and South Asian women. This will be discussed briefly in this section and will be expanded upon

in the third finding later in this chapter. These challenges affected their persistence in higher education because if the women had been allowed to pick the majors that they initially wanted, then they might not have had the support from their families.

**Financial Stability.** Each woman discussed how their families expressed concerns about which major they were going to select. No one discussed it in more detail than Devki. Recommendations from her mother had an immense impact on her discussion of where she is right now in her college degree as well as where she sees herself going with her future. Throughout my conversation with Devki, she worked through almost having an emotional breakdown while discussing her experiences. She discussed the fact that she thought of herself as being an obedient child because of the path her mother wanted her to pursue in higher education. Devki wanted to pursue law but her mother didn't approve. She mentioned that her mother would say things such as:

‘You know, I know this Indian woman and her daughter is a lawyer, and she is not making any money.’ She has all these stories-and she says these things every day. It was almost 3 or 5 stories and then finally I was like ‘okay, fine. If you don't want me to go law that bad, I won't do it.’

She went on to say that law was the “only reason that was keeping me going in life in general; that was the only passion I've ever had.” Her mother's words were able to convince her to go towards a career that would be more financially successful for her such as Radiology, even though she wanted to pursue something else. She later mentioned that the reason she chose law was because of her own personal experiences. Her parents were divorced when she was a child and had to deal with people in her immediate cultural community gossip and say and do things to

make her and her family as if they were not welcomed in the community any longer. This made her want to fight for children and eventually become a judge.

Since the community- according to her mother- already had another woman who was in law and was not doing well, any other woman who tried to pursue this would inevitably fail at it also. Devki shared the following impact her mom made on her choice of major:

‘Oh, you’re Indian and you’re a woman’ [her mother said] and I was very shy and soft-spoken. So she would always say that’s not something in your scope. You would never be able to be a lawyer and stuff like that. Basically making me feel as if there would be no way that I’d be good at it; because I was so shy and soft spoken. She said I needed to pick something where I would be able to make money and take care of myself.

Although this stopped Devki from pursuing her passion, it did not stop her from going to college and ultimately pursuing her current major Radiology. She did mention that she was okay with her current major, but it was not something wanted to initially pursue.

Another perspective regarding major was from Anita. She began by discussing the dynamics of her family and her experiences living in the US since she did not grow up here. She is an only child and both of her parents went to college. Her educational journey was also something that was instilled in her from a very young age and she spent most of her time working towards living up to the same level of education as her parents. Her parents both graduated from college with their masters (father) and doctorate (mother). Although she didn’t articulate it this way, she did say a few different times that she was concerned about making sure she got to the “same level.”

Anita discussed her passion of choosing her major and the fact that her family fully supported, and still support her decision to major in anything she chooses. She stated:

Somebody in college told me that maybe I chose medicine because my parents forced me to go to medical school or opt for anything to do with medicine but that's not true. Even though my parents never told me to do something, just the society I was raised in kind of like pushed me towards the field and since a very early age I wanted to become a doctor. I was like six when I started saying that I want to become a doctor and that was it, I kept on going until I realized how hard it is. Now, I'm a business management major because that's what I want to do; not because that's what my parents want.

Anita's support from her family might come from the fact that she is not a first generation college student. Her parents understand the value of allowing students to pursue what they want in order for them to find their own successes. Her father has a masters in Engineering and her mother has her PhD in Kinesiology. Both of them are professors at prestigious universities in India and have allowed their daughter to experience education and major choice in the way that suits her best.

Another woman's parents indicated to her that she should pick a field that allowed for financial stability, even though she was second generation. Both of Tara's parents attended college, but she found herself having to have discussions with her parents about why she did not want to go into medicine, but still wanted to go into something in the health care industry. She stated

My parents still don't understand my major. I'm a Kinesiology major and on an almost daily basis, (at least when they ask about school), I have to explain to them what it is and what I plan to do with it. They know that eventually I want to be a Physical Therapist, but they don't understand my immediate major. They also don't understand why I don't want

to go into medical school if I'm going to get a doctorate in physical therapy. I just end up telling them that physical therapists make a lot of money and then they stop asking.

Tara is the first of her siblings to go to college and this additional pressure to make sure she picked something that was going to provide stability definitely had her questioning her choices within her first year of college.

Neesha is a first generation college student and everything for her in her family revolves around making sure she has economic stability. She began college as an undecided major and spent the better part of her first year and a half of college exploring and trying to figure out what she wanted to go into. Both of her parents' work in "9-5" jobs and work to support their family (her and her sister). The biggest factor in her major decision was whether she would be able to help out her family when she began working in her field. Her decision to go into Health Administration came from her researching that being a hospital administrator would eventually allow her the possibility to move up to be the chief executive officer of the hospital. She shared "I have an uncle whose wife is a nurse at Kaiser. She said that the person in charge of the hospital makes a lot of money and gets to tell everyone what to do. That person is the one who actually runs the hospital." Her passion for pursuing this major is one that is rooted in making sure that she will be able to have a job in her future that will allow her to financially provide for herself and her family.

These women all felt that they were doing the right thing by following the expectations of their families with regards to finding a major that allowed for financial stability. The experiences they faced outside of their immediate culture or community were different because of the stereotypes that exist for South Asian American students.

## **Stereotypes**

The families of these women were able to instill a sense of responsibility regarding the importance of their major and career paths. This was not the case for some of these women with regards to how their outside communities treated their major choices. They felt that there was a set expectation regarding which major they should choose. The women stated that their peers made assumptions about which direction they were planning on going into and when that was not the case, the reaction was always very similar “oh really?”

Anita mentioned how stereotypes regarding being a South Asian female student have impacted her. She shared the following statements made by non-South Asians:

[they think] that I have been forced into going to medical school which is not true. I'm going to get forced into marrying somebody of my ethnicity, not true again. So it's very common to just getting asked that question that oh, 'what are your parents doing wrong to you' because they have this feeling that your parents must be doing something wrong to you just because you're South Asian and you're a woman.

This was an important issue for Anita to discuss. She felt that the ideas that non-South Asians have about family, college choice, and major selection, needed to be explored and discussed. She shared the following statement:

I mean, it's like they think that because our parents want us to go into medicine, that we're all being suppressed and controlled. The truth is that many South Asians choose medicine because it is a very respectable profession and it is a well-paid job. In India, doctors are held in really high respect, so if a family has a doctor, then it's something to be really proud of and the parents of that child don't need to worry about money. I don't

think it's ever bad for any parents or families to have some kind of high expectation for their children. That just means that they want the best for their kids.

Anita went on to say that from her perspective, these stereotypes are what confuse non-South Asians. "I think that the people who have these negative assumptions are the ones who should really think about why they have them." Anita's perspective on this issue was one that was shared by a few of the other women, but one woman in particular, Hema, had a very interesting perspective on the issues associated with identity and stereotypes.

Hema, came to the United States right before she began high school. Her transition here was very different from the other participants because of her age. She is the older sibling and has one younger brother. For her, dealing with the adjustment of high school in a new country where you have no experience of the culture, have any friends, and do not speak the language fluently was a challenge that many other students face. Hearing her story put into perspective how cultural stereotypes can impact a student in various stages of the academic pipeline. She stated:

My high schoolmates were not bad people. They just grew up here and never had to deal with too many people from other countries. I guess it's something that they weren't taught. For me, my parents taught me how to not judge others, but I guess the people I went to school with, didn't get that same education. That doesn't mean that they're not as educated as me-that's not what I'm saying- they just have different values that they were raised with.

Hema mentioned how other negative stereotypes had a lasting impact on her, she went on to say:

I would say [the stereotypes] that I did face, were dramatic experiences that many other teenagers go through... but not being accepted because I'm different color, different race I would say that was kind of haunting. I never held it against them though. I mean how

would I feel if someone who was completely different from me came to my school and was trying to adjust? I think it's human to sometimes have those thoughts.

For Hema, these experiences did not leave her afraid or feeling unprepared for college. She went on to discuss the fact that college is more than just having people judge you; she is a firm believer that identity labels are crippling and that we should try to move away from those labels. When asked about the types of labels, she mentioned only one example

Being called a South Asian American for example, that's a label. Why can't I just be a human? I'm not saying that we shouldn't have identities, but the moment you place a label on someone, there is an immediate assumption placed on that person. That person isn't just a person anymore; they are part of whatever that label is stereotyped to be. If we can't get away from these types of labels, then there's no way to move away from stereotypes.

Hema's passion for trying to identify herself as part of any group was one that was not shared by any of the other women. Even though Hema was very passionate in her beliefs, her ideals do not necessarily connect with those from a critical race feminist (CRF) approach. What she is idealizing is a color-blind approach to race, and unfortunately, CRF would not agree that people can just belong to the "human race"; we are all part of some kind of identity relating to our race, class, gender, and other factors (Wing, 2003).

For others, it was being able to in a way, prove the stereotypes wrong that kept them going. The experiences that Jaba discussed relating to stereotypes affected her major selection. The decision to pick a science based major was both something that she wanted, but also for her family. The stereotypes that she faced that came along with choosing this major was more from her peers. Jaba stated the following:



I mean, picking something in the sciences was not something I wanted to do from the get-go, but I knew it would make my parents happy. Now that I'm in it, I know it's something that I'm interested in as well. Sometimes, I do wonder though what would have happened if I chose something else. But when I would talk to some of the people in my major, they always just kind of assumed my future goals were to go into medicine. Like I was using my current major as a way to get there. They would say it without even asking me, they would say stuff like 'oh yeah, you're going to medical school right?' You know, just stupid things like that. Like I didn't have any other options for school.

This discussion with Jaba led me to understand that for many of these women, a lot of the stereotypes that they faced focused on what they would do with their lives in the future and that their peers had cultural misperceptions regarding their goals and career path. Along the same lines of the stereotypes being imposed on them, they also discussed the stereotypes and negative effects of the gender differences they experienced as a South Asian woman versus a South Asian man.

**Gender Differences and Major Choice.** Gender equity and issues related to gender stereotypes are matters that many cultures around the world face. Critical race feminism states that race, gender, ethnicity, and other factors, can all be used in acts of social oppression (Verjee, 2012, n.p.). In other words, CRF is used to understand the ways that gender, race, class and other forms of oppression for women intersect and affect the success of women in general in various settings. For these women, the differences in how they were treated regarding their major and career choices, versus how their male siblings or cousins were treated, was very obvious to them. Rajni shared the following sentiment:

I feel especially coming from, an Indian family, being a lawyer or a doctor or an engineer are the three, main things that people really highly look upon. So, I wanted to go that route kind of for my family and [I] thought that's what I wanted. But at the end of the day, that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to go the route of something like a teacher or something like that. But because my [male] cousin picked something that was okay for an Indian, I had to do the same.

Rajni's family tried to steer her into going into something in the medical field by saying that it was a matter of "honor and prestige" for her to pursue the path they wanted. She found that she began with that same passion, but ended up changing her mind and majored in Public Health.

When discussing the differences between her and her male cousin, she went on to say:

I know my responsibilities- I'm very independent I would say whereas he- he needs to be babied. So, I feel like he doesn't have that pressure to do something or be something successful because he grew up in India and he is a guy; he knows that he can just take over his dad's business. I can't do that.

When asked why she couldn't do the same as him, she explained that the professions her parents are in are not ones that she can "take over:" she has to make something of herself independently of her family in order to be successful. The independence that these women sought was also something that they discussed when pursuing their majors in college. Although these women all had different reasons for choosing their majors, they are all now in a place where they are thoroughly enjoying their majors. This helped with their retention because they wanted to pursue a field where they found their passion. Their major choice selection played an important role in their retention.

For Sai, her choice in major stemmed from the same place as Rajni's, but she did not mind the comparison. Sai's family immigrated here before she was born, and because she is the second of three children, she did not have to deal with the pressures that her older sister went through. She grew up seeing the restrictions that were placed on her sister and never questioned them. When it came to choosing a major, it was assumed that she would choose something that was in the computer science field because that would make the most money for her. Her parents went to college in Pakistan and they are both in the computer science field and are "well off" according to her. She said:

Well, why would I choose something outside of that? I mean, my parents did it and they're successful, so why wouldn't I want to? My cousin he's doing it too and he's got some really good stuff lined up for himself as far as internships. He's successful, my parents are successful, and so I know I will be too. I don't think it's anything to do with me being a girl or anything. I think it's just what my parents think will be best for me.

The problem is the gender discrimination that I faced in school because I was in a major that was filled with mostly guys. They were the ones that would make me feel like I didn't belong.

Sai's choices to pursue something related to a field that her parents are in and her male cousin is in, made her a little more accepting to the gender ideals set by her family. Some of the other women did not like the expectations set in their families to follow or be compared to their male counterparts.

One of the women made it very clear that her decision to go back to college was because of her kids, but her choice in field was heavily influenced by her brother and his line of work. Payal's life experience is completely different than the other women because she is a non-

traditional student. For this study, the definition of a non-traditional student is a person who did not go to college right after 12<sup>th</sup> grade; a person who is returning to complete their degree at least 5 years after finishing high school (Chen, 2014). Payal was married at a young age and had to become more focused on raising her kids instead of going to school. She moved to the US when she was 20 and has lived here since.

She is currently in school, but feels that because she is older than her peers, she sometimes wasn't sure if she made the right choice to come back to school. She stated, "I know that I needed and wanted to come back, but I just didn't think I could do it. Finishing for me is really important because I want to show that I can do it." She went on to mention that she's mostly going to school to prove the importance of education to her two kids.

I know that if I show them that I can do it, then they'll be able to feel that they can do it too. My family [referring to her relatives] don't understand why I'm doing this. They think that since I have a job, I don't need it; but I do. I have to show them and my kids that nothing is impossible when you put your mind to it.

Payal's experience with education is very different, but it is important to see that she still has that determination to get her degree. When asked about her choice in career paths, she stated:

Well, initially when I was in high school, we had to take this exam and see which way we would go: arts or sciences. I honestly wanted to go into the arts, but my brother had already been accepted into a college to go into the sciences, and my parents would always say to me 'oh look, he's doing the sciences. What do you think you're going to do with a college degree in the arts? You're a woman. If you went into sciences, then at least you'd have a chance.

She explained further by saying that she did not think her parents were being malicious or trying to be hurtful by their words, but that they were trying to help her to see what would be best for her in the long run. Shortly, after her exams she said that she “had to get married, so none of that mattered anyway.” The way that most of these women understood the desires of their parents and did not think of them in a negative light is important to identify. They, not only Payal, believed that their parents weren’t trying to ruin their lives and restrict their choices, but rather they believed that their parents wanted what was best for them in the long run.

After hearing these familial college expectations, it is important to remember that not all of the experiences were necessarily good; some of these women did not have the best experiences with regards to how their families supported them. The factor that remained and kept them going at the end is what the next finding will discuss in depth which is the aspirational capital that these women possessed to move forward with their degrees. They all wanted to complete their degrees for themselves and their aspirations ended up proving to be the main reason for their completion.

### **Finding 2: Aspirational Capital**

Aspirational capital focuses on the fact that family and community share in a desire for a student's success. Aspirational capital can be seen as the ability to go beyond limitations and dream of possibilities that might not seem attainable. It gives people an opportunity to have hope and to achieve in spite of structural barriers. (Yosso, 2005). In this study, the aspirational capital that these women discussed was related to their desires to continue their education not just for their families, but for themselves. On some level they continued their education for their families, but all of their responses came back to the fact that they knew they were going to complete their education because it was the best thing for them to do. While the women

discussed the value of education for their futures, they also mentioned how important their education was in the development of their self-identity. Before going into how the women utilized their aspirational capital, it is important to discuss their self-identity.

### *The Value of Identity*

The importance of one's identity is part of critical race feminism and for this study serves as a way for these women to understand where they are in their education and where they want to go. Identity in this study is being looked at from two perspectives: social and personal (Smith 2015). How a person develops these identities is just as important as where they end up. Traits that connect a person to a larger group are considered social, and those that help to separate a person are classified as personal traits (Smith, 2015). The value of identity for the women in this study was important because most of them agreed that a large part of who they were revolved around their social identities; even their personal identities were strongly formed through their social identities.

The aspirational capital for these women stemmed from their desires to follow what they believed to be their choices in life. They wanted to make very clear that although they began higher education because it was expected of them, that in this stage, they are continuing their education because of their own personal desires to persist.

In order to fully understand this value, it was important to see how these women felt about their own identities as South Asian American women prior to exploring what they valued as part of their persistence in their educational paths. Hema shared:

Yeah, I know that a big part of what I did was because I thought it was expected of me growing up. My family did what they thought was best for me; they listened to our community and our relatives. In Indian culture, you're not just raised by your immediate

family; you're raised by your community. It's inevitable that you're going to have a part of you that will always share your community values and beliefs. Anyone who says that they are completely detached, is probably not being honest with themselves, especially if they're Indian.

Hema ironically was also the same person who mentioned right after this (as previously stated) that she did not believe in labels. Hearing her make this statement then go on to show her annoyance with placing labels on people was an interesting twist. When asked about this, she stated, "well, I'm not saying someone shouldn't have an identity. I just don't think we need to have specific titles to those identities. We should just be whatever our names are. I'm [Hema]. That's all." Her "matter of fact" way of speaking about identity seemed very casual, but she in fact, was very passionate about this and discussed why she feels this way about identity. She stated:

Identity is not something that can just be thought up. A person has to truly know who they are and as someone gets older, their identity changes. They place value on different things and therefore their identity changes. They see things differently and so they become different.

For some of the other women, their identity formation was not so simple. For example, Maya felt that her identity was thrust upon her by her family and community. Maya is the eldest of three siblings and the only girl. Her family moved here when she was an infant and her two younger brothers were born and raised here. Her mother and father set very high expectations for her and wanted her to be a role model for her younger brothers. Her family related everything back to their community. Being a Pakistani-American in today's society was a challenge for her as she pointed out the following:

I mean, I know what society expects of; they think I'm a certain way or that I have specific beliefs since I'm Pakistani and I'm Muslim. But in my community, we never grew up thinking the way the extremists in other countries think. My community showed me the value of life and how to truly understand that everyone deserves a chance and is equal. Don't get me wrong, there's a long way to go to get full equality for everyone, but as far as what they preached, it was about equality. This idea is something that I definitely hold as part of my identity.

Maya struggled with how the media portrayed her community and how she was raised. She knew she did not identify with how her religion was being depicted as violent or extreme, yet she was conscious of this is how others may view her. As she continued, she mentioned

No, at the end of the day, I know that college will be benefitting me in the long run. I'll have a job; I'll be able to help my family and community and at the end of the day, it's what I want. I want to have a little bit of independence to really figure out who I am and what I want from my life. In my community we don't really get that. We kind of just follow along without questioning.

This connects with her aspirational capital because part of the ideals of this capital are to know that there are times when the community inspires the individual to want to go beyond what they expect of themselves. This connected also with her discussion of why she chose her major. She stated that her major was influenced by her family and community, but mostly because they felt that she would be successful in this field.

These examples go back to the two different categories of identity that Smith (2015) discusses: social and personal identity. These women all felt that they had a set expectation of their social identities because they had to follow what was set for them by their community. This



did affect their college experiences because they felt that they needed to fit into a specific category with regards to their major and their future life choices. Their choice to continue higher education was not something that was questioned, because they knew that they wanted to get their education, it was just a matter of deciding what they went to college for. Maya's story was very common throughout all of the interviews. The women felt that they began college to fulfill their parents' wishes and all had approximately the same comment of "it was never a question" of whether they would attend or not, but at the end of the day, these women all made it very clear that college was something that they wanted to do for themselves.

Another example of aspirational capital came from Jaba who discussed the barriers set within her community for her family and therefore affected her choices in college. She shared:

I know within my community, for some reason my family doesn't stand out. I guess it has something to do with the fact that my parents don't have high paying jobs and that we don't live in the lap of luxury. I mean my parents are pretty down to earth and it's not like we're struggling to put food on the table, but I guess that's not enough for our community. I would say that our biggest struggle is always trying to fit into our community since we're the 'outsiders'. My parents just want us to be the best that we can be and make sure we're able to move beyond the expectations of our community so that we can kind of not have to feel ashamed.

In this situation, the barrier is coming from within the community. Jaba's community's response to her family's standing is the challenge that her parents want her to overcome and move past. This still is a form of aspirational capital since her parents still have high hopes for her and her siblings to be more than what is expected of them from their community.

Their aspirational capital initially began with their communities and families, but then extended to them finding the strength to continue on their own and make something of themselves so that they can provide for themselves. Although, they did have the same intent, the length of time spent on their degrees was something they discussed very differently. Although they were persisting and continuing on the path to completion, they all had different reasons as to why they were prolonging their graduation or completion. One of the reasons that many of them discussed was that college was a way to keep themselves from getting married.

### **Finding 3: College as a Means of Shelter from Marriage**

In most South Asian cultures, marriage is seen as a family event. The extended family gets involved in the process because marriage is seen as something that affects the family as a whole. For most South Asian woman, marriage is a chance for the family to show pride in where their family is going with their future and these women hold their family's honor in their choice of marriage. Arranged marriages are not as common as most people think anymore, but for the women interviewed, they can still feel that extended pressure from their families.

Some of the women saw this as a moment to look forward to, and others expressed that it was something they did not want to think about until they were done with college. For this reason, those women who did not see arranged marriage as a positive stated that they were extending and taking their time to graduate. Those who were looking forward to getting married, were eager to finish their degrees. For instance, Sai wanted to be done so that she could go on to the next chapter of her life. Her discussion of marriage and the expectations that her family had of her getting married made it seem as if she had been waiting for this moment for a very long time. She shared:

I know that college is important and I know that I want to do it, but at the end of the day, I just want to be done. I want to go on to the next thing; for me that's marriage. I can't wait to be married. My family and I have been planning this forever. My sister did it, and now it's my turn. Pretty much like all the girls in my family did the same thing.

She continued by saying that she knew that her future husband would take care of her, so she didn't need to worry about it. When I asked what she meant by "worry about it" she said:

I mean, I don't have to worry about like money and stuff. I won't have to pay for stuff. If I don't want to, then I won't have to work. I mean I know I want to work, but I know my husband won't make me work. He would encourage me to do whatever makes me happy, and if working made me happy, then he would be fine with it; if it didn't make me happy, then he wouldn't force it.

Her faith in her relationship with her future husband was based on what she grew up seeing not just in her immediate family, but in her community as well. Her faith in her relationship with her husband affected her retention in college because she did not need to go to college, because she might not need the degree, but at the end, she chose to complete her degree so that she could get married. Although this is not a traditional means of retention, it was her reasoning for completing her degree.

For other women, the fact that they had to get married out of college was not something that they wanted to think about. One of the women wanted to continue her education as long as possible and is looking for master's programs just to avoid getting married. Hema was given a choice of either getting married or continuing her education. She chose to continue her education. She stated:

I know my parents want what's best for me, but at the end of the day, I think I'm too young to get married. I would rather take this opportunity to further my education as far as I can before I have to settle down and start a family. They understand that, but they end up having to deal with our community and they said that the community would be okay knowing that I'm in school. So, that's what I'm going to do.

She went on to say that she feels that many parents end up getting their children married because that is what the community expects them to do, not because that is what they truly want for their kids. Hema continued to share: "I mean, I'm not a parent, but why would a parent want to have their child be married at such a young age?" This was also the case for others, they wanted to prolong their graduation so that they could avoid marriage. In current retention literature, the idea that a person would want to continue their education to avoid marriage is not discussed. This is significant to this study since it was clear that although not all of the women were in this exact situation, they all had to think about the possibility of this and knew that if they continued their education, then it could postpone the likelihood of marriage.

Anita discussed how although her parents were not pressuring her, she currently has friends who are using school as a means of escape from marriage. She mentioned

One of my good friends is going through this right now. She's an international student and her parents are pressuring her to finish from India so that she can go back home and get married. The worst part of it is that they're the ones who are picking the person for her, so not only does she have to get married, she doesn't even get to pick the guy! I mean that's terrible. So, she's trying to extend her graduation so that she doesn't have to get married so quickly.

The fear that these women share is important to note because it does affect their retention. Although, the reasons for their retention from this lens does not coincide with other theories on retention, these women are being retained. The distinct difference here however is that they are employing a strategy that prolongs their time to graduation and allows them to persist by spending more years in college. For these women, the pressure to get married is significant enough that they want to continue their education.

Neesha's situation was a little more complicated because she is currently in a relationship with someone her parents do not approve of. He is not Bangladeshi and Neesha shared that he wasn't "her type of Muslim." She went on to state:

I mean, I'm afraid of what my parents will say. I'm more afraid of telling my dad more than my mom. I feel like she'll understand more. But my dad, I think he'll like freak out.

I don't know if [he would] disown me or just kick me out, but if he does end up accepting it I know it's going to take a really long time for him.

Her conversation went back to how this affected her experiences in college since her current partner does not attend the same campus as her. She stated:

I think I'm trying to stay in school as long as I can until my boyfriend establishes himself. Once he does that, then maybe my dad will see that he's not a bad guy. But, I know that as soon as I finish school, my parents will both be like 'okay, so let's talk about marriage' and I don't want to have that conversation. So, if I stay longer, then they won't ask me.

Although Neesha's experiences may not be shared by the other women, each one of them had some type of underlying statement about prolonging their education to avoid marriage. The only one who did not share in this same experience was Payal as she was already married.

Payal's experiences were very different than the other women with regards to marriage. Since she was married at a young age, she is now somewhat going backwards as she is trying to finish school for her family. Her marriage was arranged and she stated the following regarding her opinion on marriage:

It wasn't something that I was fully against. I grew up in India you see, and there during that time it was very normal for a girl to get married at a young age before she finished school. So, I just thought it was normal. So, why wouldn't I do it too? The question of my schooling was something that did not come up during that time. The man I married was educated and came from a good family, so there was no need for me to do it then. When my husband died and I was left with two kids, I had to make a decision, and although it was a huge sacrifice and my family and my husband's family didn't support it fully, I knew that I had to do it for my kids. I didn't want to just have some job that I couldn't be proud of. So, I went back to school and here I am today.

Her story was very inspirational and as she continued to share she reinforced the fact that her children are the ones that she is doing everything for. This thread of parents making sacrifices for their kids is one that continued throughout all of the stories. It was very interesting to see the perspective from someone who was a student as well as a parent.

## **Conclusion**

One common theme for the women is that they have persisted in their education and plan to continue and go further into higher education. Their persistence all stemmed from the same areas: familial and community expectations; their own aspirations to continue; and one area that was not very apparent in the literature, to avoid marriage. Although these women did not

experience all of the capitals discussed by Yosso, the two main ones that they did experience were familial and aspirational capital.

It was interesting to see the connections that the women had; their retention experiences were different, and yet they all are continuing their education to achieve their goals. In chapter five, there will be a discussion of the findings with relation to current literature on persistence and community cultural wealth. At the end of the chapter, there will be recommendations for future research as well as institutional recommendations.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion**

The three research questions that guided this study were the following: 1) What are the experiences of South Asian American women in higher education? 2) To what extent does community cultural wealth affect their retention/persistence? 3) How does gender impact their retention/persistence? Through my research, I found that the South Asian women that were interviewed shared very different experiences with regards to their retention, but they all had the same underlying tone: family and personal determination were the main reasons for them succeeding in college. The first half of this chapter will re-visit the findings and a discussion of the connection with the current literature relating to that finding; the second half of the chapter will relate to recommendations for further research and also institutional recommendations based on what the individual participants stated as resources for other South Asian women on campus. The findings from chapter four were as follows: 1) the familial obligations students encounter when selecting a college and a major; 2) how students use aspirational capital to self-navigate through higher education; and lastly 3) how some women use college as a means to shelter themselves from marital expectations.

After reading literature on student retention and how community cultural wealth can impact those experiences, I thought that the women I interviewed would share similar experiences. I thought that the stories they would tell would discuss how their community and their extended family were the biggest components in their persistence in higher education. I did not think that these women were negating the involvement of their extended families, however their family supported them more by creating a sense of urgency to graduate with the best major to ensure their future success. It almost felt like a competition for them and the rest of the people in their extended families and communities.



The other finding that amazed me was that a few of these women were using college as a means of avoiding marriage; and finally, one woman who was the only non-traditional participant, was completing her college degree because she wanted to prove to her family and her own kids that she could do it. Although all of these women had a slightly different angle on how they persisted in college, at the end of the day, the two most prominent reasons were because of their families (familial capital) and their own desires to graduate (aspirational capital). In the next sections, each of the individual findings will be discussed in relation to current literature about that topic and their relation to student retention.

### **Familial Capital and Retention**

The primary focus of this study was to understand how South Asian American women use community cultural wealth to help them persist in higher education. Their families impacted their retention in various ways, but at the end, each woman discussed how their families did influence them to continue their education. According to retention researcher Liu (2002), there are five different factors that can affect student retention: academic integration, social integration, institutional commitment, goal commitment, and the intent to persist. All of these factors relate to the student individually and do not include families. When examining the impact of family on retention, understanding community cultural wealth and how it affects retention is crucial. Espino (2014) builds off of Yosso's (2005) definition of familial capital in her study that examined the persistence of 33 Mexican American women who had finished getting their PhDs and how cultural capital affected their persistence. She stated that "Familial capital is nurtured through kinship networks and includes cultural identity(ies), as well as community history and well-being" (p. 554). This means that the parents and extended family and their community are there to help nurture the student in a way that ultimately will help them succeed in their lives.

The women in this study all felt that their families helped to shape their educational path. Maya stated “Yeah, I mean of course they want the best for me. I’m their kid. Why wouldn’t they want the best?” The idea that their families would not want them to succeed or go into a field where they wouldn’t be able to support themselves did not seem plausible to her. Rendón (1995) discussed this as well by focusing on how students felt as they transitioned into college and were forced to leave their families. Although she focused on non-traditional students, the retention efforts at the community college level to ensure their success, she does discuss the link between familial aspiration and both the college choice process and major selection. Looking further, the college choice process, as well as major selection, were also very important factors for the women as they discussed their familial involvement with their persistence in college.

### *College Choice*

With regards to college choice, it was easy to see that the negative stereotypes affiliated with attending a community college kept all of these women from beginning their college journey at this type of institution. Since the literature relating to South Asian American college choice experiences is limited, a broader reference is being used- Asian American college choice experiences. Shen (2015), a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Springfield, states that for Asian Americans there is a “significantly greater extrinsic (e.g. salary, prestige, status) and security (e.g., job stability and security) reputation that affects not only college choice, but career choices as well” (p.59). This means that for some Asian Americans, having a good job and a good salary is what impacts their major choice; the external reputation is significantly more important than finding something that is going to make you happy. She goes on to state that the parental involvement within the Asian American community regarding college choice is highly dependent on the reputation of the college/university and that

going to a campus which is not regarded as a “top notch” campus often has a negative impact on the family’s reputation in the community (Shen, 2015). Nguyen (2014) writes that because of stereotypes such as the model minority myth, Asian Americans are seen as being more “successfully assimilated into mainstream society” (p. 167). Reflecting on her own college choice process, Shen (2015) stated that “The university I chose to attend was an academically honorable one, but I still felt the failure of not attending a more elite four-year university, an expectation put on me by my mother, family members, peers, and society” (p. 168). The fear of being a disappointment to the immediate family and within the community put a great deal of pressure on the women interviewed in this study as well.

Devki’s experience of having to go to a community college hurt her psychologically because she felt as if she was letting down her entire family. She stated “I definitely wouldn’t like want that for anyone. I know that it added a lot of stress for me, so I don’t think it would be good for anyone to have to experience that. I know that I definitely don’t want my little sister to go through that.” Devki’s experiences were shared with many of the women since they all felt that they were currently at a campus that was “nice,” but not really that great. They made comments about how other South Asian Americans that they knew went to other more reputable schools. The negative stereotypes attached with community college and/or a campus that doesn’t have an intensive research focus impacted the women in this study because they felt an even stronger desire to succeed in their college careers.

Choosing a major on the other hand was not as difficult of a decision and did not have the same pressures since their families primarily wanted them to be in a field that they would be successful in. The choice in college affected the retention factors in this study because the

women picked their colleges not just based on what they wanted, but what made the most sense for them and their families.

### ***Major Choice***

The majority of the women in this study all ended up in majors related to the STEM field. When asked about why they chose their specific majors, they had very similar reasons that related to how their parents viewed their futures. The primary goal of their families was to make sure that their children had financial stability in the field that they chose to go into. For example, if their children chose something related to the medical field, then there would be a higher chance of having financial stability to take care of themselves in the future. According to Walton, Loge, Peach, Spencer, & Zanna (2015) there is a “chilly climate” factor that affects women pursuing STEM related fields. They stated that the “chilliness arises from explicit and implicit messages that convey to women that their gender could be a liability in STEM settings” (p. 468). This means that even before women enter STEM, there is often a climate that discriminates and excludes them from engaging completely with the field. Even with this, 9 out of the 10 women all pursued STEM related majors. The second factor impacting major selection was overcoming the stereotypes that many South Asians face relating to the major they either should be in or are currently in.

**Financial Stability.** The women interviewed discussed how their families helped them choose their majors and also the careers that were associated with their majors. What I found was that they all discussed how the main concern for their families was to ensure that they were financially stable in their major/career choices. Even though the women all agreed that this was what they wanted as well, the impression from some of the interviews was that they were choosing specific STEM related majors to please their families.

The one who stood out the most with this feeling was Devki. The pressure she felt from her mother to choose something other than law was what made her switch from her passion to the major her mother wanted. Her mother wanted her to pick a career and major that would provide the best chances for her to be able to be financially stable. Devki's reluctance in letting go over her passion in law to pursue something in the health care industry (Radiology) showed how influential families are in major and career selections. According to Simpson (2001) with regards to Asian American parents and major selection, "parents' socioeconomic status is an important determinant in the educational attainment of their children" (p. 64). This means that if a parent comes from a low socioeconomic background, then they ideally would want to have their children get into a major and career that would elevate them from the current standing of the parent, as was the case with Devki.

For the other women, they also shared the same types of experiences as Devki; they were told to pick a major that would be able to help them provide for their own families in the future. Neesha also discussed her parents' situation and then stated that her choice in Health Administration was strictly because of her parents telling her that she needed to be able to provide for her family. Considering that the parents of the women were encouraging their daughters to pick a major that would support them also means that they were being encouraged to pick something that would have a strong financial reputation. Unfortunately, some of the women felt that some of the model minority Asian stereotypes that were connected to their majors affected their selections as well. They were conflicted regarding the common myth that Asian Americans excel academically only in fields like math and science (Museus, 2008; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007).

**Stereotypes in Major Choice.** The women discussed how although their final decisions about their majors were not entirely influenced by the stereotypes, the expectations were there and did in the long run affect their choice in career paths and major selection. In a study conducted by Roysircar et.al. (2010), which explored 139 students at universities throughout the Northeast and Midwest, they found that there was a difference between the major selection of first-generation students and second-generation students. In this study, first generation was defined as “individuals who were foreign-born immigrants in the United States. Second generation was defined as individuals who were born in the United States to first-generation immigrant parents” (p. 330). They found that first-generation students, they were more inclined to choose majors that were science and math based; whereas the second generation students seemed to select majors that were more non-science and non-math based. Four out of the ten women in this study are first-generation students. They discussed how although there were the pressures of pursuing a major in science or math, their families wanted to ensure success. The negative stereotypes they felt often stemmed from people outside their own community.

Anita’s experiences with people assuming that she was going into medicine because she was Indian was very upsetting to her. She mentioned that these stereotypical comments usually came from those who did not understand why families wanted their children to be doctors, or lawyers, or engineers. She stated, “They want us to have a good job. So, why not those fields? They make really good money.” Her perspective was also shared with some of the other women, but when they discussed the major they chose, they ended up choosing the major that suited them the best.

## **Aspirational Capital and Retention**

Along with the familial connection to retention, the women in this study made it clear that they were also persisting in college as an individual choice. Each woman discussed how they began college because it was expected of them, but at the end, the discussions focused primarily on the fact that they wanted to make something of themselves. This focus and drive stemmed from the aspirational capital that is discussed in community cultural wealth. Matos (2015), explored the importance of cultural capital in student engagement and persistence of Latina/o's in higher education. This study focused at not just what was affecting students, but also what teachers' perceptions were in the success of these students. In the study Matos used aspirational capital to discuss the values that the students placed in their education and where they ended up. She stated that in aspirational capital "students are supported to sustain their hopes and dreams despite setbacks" (Matos, 2015, p. 439). This means that students with high aspirational capital can be more likely to succeed in their college careers as a result of their intrinsic aspiration. A part of the aspirational capital that the women discussed was the development of their identity. They felt that having a sense of who they were as individuals, not just through their communities and the set expectations of their families, helped with their pursuit of college degree.

## ***Identity Development***

Noted identity scholar Jean Phinney (1990) argued that people of color often come into their adolescent years with one of two forms of identity: a poorly defined self-identity, or an identity that is developed based on their parents. There are three phases of identity development in Phinney's theory which consist of: unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity search, and achieved ethnic identity. In the first stage, a person is not interested in their ethnic identity; in the second the person becomes completely engrossed in their own personal identity search and also

disassociates themselves from the dominant group identity; and the final stage consists of the individual becoming fully engrossed in their ethnic identities (Phinney, 1990).

Based on the three stages of identity that Phinney discussed, and the discussion of identity with the women in this study I believe that the women would fall into a mix of the second and third phases of identity. The women in this study discussed the importance of being a South Asian American women in today's society, but also how there were some parts of their identity and culture that they did not really want to be engrossed in. Their perception of who they were, and who they were supposed to be, was largely based on how they were raised. The specific question of "What does it mean to be a South Asian American woman to you?" was a very eye-opening question for the women because they all had to take a minute to process it. The women stated that being a South Asian American woman revolved around the fact that they were expected to go to school, be the dutiful daughter at home and in the community, and still be the role model for their siblings. Completing their degree was an expectation that they felt was part of their identity of being a South Asian American women.

Hema's sense of identity came from a place of thinking that she did not need to identify with any specific group because she felt as if claiming an identity to a specific group or ethnicity meant that she was attaching herself to something that pulled her away from her individuality. Hema's response to being a South Asian American woman was simple: "It means I am a woman who can do anything that she wants." She did not feel that South Asian women were any different than other women; they were just women from a specific country. She felt that this did not, and should not affect her identity and who she was planning to be in her future. She did acknowledge that being a minority woman with a mother who had never attended college was a very important factor in her college degree attainment. She wanted to make her mother proud



since her mother never went to college. This sentiment was one that many of the women shared. From the perspective of critical race feminism, the differences for women of color and White women is primarily based on the fact that although “White Americans also have a racial identity... it is rare that a White person has an experience that causes them to assess their attitudes about being a racial being” (Robinson, 1999, p. 88). This means that although White Americans do have an identity based off of their race, very rarely do they come across situations where they need to analyze their racial identity; rarely do they have to question their actions as being based off of their race.

The women who were first generation college students felt the need to complete their degrees to make their mother’s especially proud. Neesha was another woman who felt that since her mother did not get the chance to attend college that she would complete her degree to help fulfill that desire. Part of her identity was rooted in her mother being a South Asian woman and the restrictions that came along with that for her mother. She discussed how her mother had to marry young and was expected to just live the life that many South Asian women are often expected to live as a dutiful wife. Her mother’s lack of educational opportunity was what also pushed her to want to complete her degree.

In a study conducted by Dr. Linda Cooper (2013) interviewing 39 women total (18 mothers and 21 daughters), she found that mother-daughter relationships that are strong have a higher chance of allowing for success in higher education. She stated that the mothers all “wanted to give their daughters the ‘best start in life’. In all, cases, the mothers invested significant emotional capital in their daughters’ well-being” (p. 633). She went on to discuss how the mothers who had been to college themselves were able to provide a stronger desire in their daughters to complete their education. The mothers who had not completed their degrees were

not less inclined, but did not pressure their daughters as much. Another retention factor to consider for some of these women was the pressure of marriage. Some of the women discussed how they extended their graduation or were taking their time to graduate to avoid getting married too early.

### **College as a Means of Shelter from Marriage**

Recent studies have shown that although the practice of arranged marriages still happens across the nation, the involvement of extended family is slowly decreasing (Agrawal, 2015; Sabur, 2014; Kodoth, 2008). Dr Farha Ternikar discusses how arranged marriages are valued in South Asian American cultures today from the perspective of both immigrant parents and their children who were raised here in the United States. Ternikar (2008) discusses the fact that arranged marriages are considered “exotic” by Americans and the fascination of the process and traditions are things that are rarely investigated. Her qualitative study focused on fifty participants throughout Chicago that were involved with arranged marriage. In these immigrant families marriage was highly regarded; and who you married was essential in the family’s standing in the community. Ternikar (2008) stated “Married individuals are given a higher status in South Asian community than those that are unmarried. In addition, immigrant children are not looked at as adults until they have married, regardless of age and professional accomplishments” (p. 156).

This was an important connection with the women in this study since all of them are of immigrant families. One of the participants in Ternikar’s study mentioned “A woman’s ability to get married is inversely correlated with her age. It is almost a bad omen to have an unmarried female who is over 30 years of age living in a South Asian home” (p. 159). For the women I interviewed, the pressure of marriage was real enough that they were delaying their graduation.

Dr. Nicole Wilson discussed the importance of arranged marriages among South Asian community members in a study conducted in 2013. Over the course of six-months, Wilson followed the marriage process of a few South Indian women who were “bride-to-be’s”. The first was a woman who was set to have an arranged marriage. She mentioned that “Matchmaking in the twenty-first century south India entails a complex analysis of horoscopes, socioeconomic status, social capital, and outward appearance” (p. 37). On the flip side however, she acknowledged the existence of what some South Asians refer to as “love-marriage”. This is when the partners choose themselves without the assistance of their families or friends (Wilson, 2013). This was considered “modern” and “Western” to the people involved with this young woman.

Another perspective to understand is from those women who are trying to rebel against the expectations of their families in the arranged marriage process. Dr. Devika Chawla (2007) conducted a study which looked at the experiences of women who had gone through arranged marriages and what their experiences were with the marriage itself, but also how these women developed a sense of resistance to the concept of marriage and how they should behave in their married lives. She found that these women developed a sense of resistance in two forms: marital self-definitions and addressing the mother-in-law.

She interviewed 20 urban women from South Delhi and found that the women were putting up with the set expectations from their in-laws and husbands, and those who were beginning to understand that they wanted something more than what they had. She noted that even in the interview process she was met with was a form of resistance by these women. She stated that many of these women wanted to pursue or finish pursuing their education to gain financial independence since they were already married, but it was not something that was

considered “acceptable”; they had to rebel against these limitations. Another factor related to rebelling was that some of the women were also looking for an opportunity to live comfortably; this is where she said that the marital self-definitions came in. Chawla (2007) defined these marital self-definitions as being when married women begin feeling like they need to find comfort in their lives, playing wife, and being romantic for their spouse. The women in her study wanted to have a sense of their own identities in their relationships to their in-laws and new families.

After doing extensive research on arranged marriages, I found that the literature on retention does not discuss this as a barrier or a strategy, and my hypothesis is that it may not be experienced by a large number of students of color. Most retention literature discusses the effect of institutional neglect on student success (Tierney, 1999; Ricks et al, 2014); or of the lack of external support for the students to succeed in higher education. There is no connection between retention and the avoidance of marriage in any of the literature I found. This then has become my biggest finding. The women brought to light a perspective that other students of color in the United States do not often have to face: arranged marriages.

The intersection between marriage and retention for the women that I interviewed was complicated. It wasn't the case that the women's families didn't value their education as much as they valued marriage, however there was concern in how their communities would view their unmarried daughters. Arranged marriages still occur today in the South Asian diaspora, but this doesn't mean that a woman doesn't have agency in the process and can't pursue their educational goals. . It was clear that nine out of the ten women wanted to complete their degrees before marriage. They did not feel that their families were forcing them to get their degrees faster; they were just given an option to either continue their education or to begin thinking about marriage.

Although this may seem like the women were being forced to be a certain way, they understood that the pressures from their communities was the force behind their parents to set this kind of “requirement” for their daughters.

For most of the women getting married was something that they wanted to do, but not at the same pace as their parent’s desires. The idea was not to say that their parents did not value education as much, but that it was equally important to get married as it was to get an education. The pressures that were placed on immigrant families from outside their communities were significant enough that these parents all had discussions with their daughters about how important it is to find someone who will be able to bring pride to their family. Overall, although some women were utilizing their time in higher education to delay the conversation or probability of marriage, other women were looking forward to persisting so that they could finish their degrees and begin their path to marriage. The main point here is that current retention literature does not examine the intersection that some South Asian American woman experience between persistence and marriage.

For the women who participated in this study, getting married was something that they wanted to do, but not at the same pace as their parent’s desires. The idea was not to say that their parents did not value education as much, but that it is equally as important to get married as it is to get an education. The pressures that are placed on immigrant families from the outside communities were significant enough that the parents of these women all had discussions with their daughters (especially their daughters) about how important it is to find someone who will be able to bring pride to the family and not shame in a timely manner.

The concern at this point would be to understand the role of the higher educational institution in helping with retention. In the next section, the recommendations discussed are not

just from my perspective, but also from the perspective of the women interviewed. They were very insistent on making sure that their voices were heard in this section. The section will be broken into two parts: institutional recommendations and recommendations for further research.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

### ***Institutional Recommendations for Practice and Policy***

Related to the literature on retention (Tinto, 1988; Tierney, 1999; Maher & Macallister, 2013), institutional responsibility is key in ensuring students' academic success (Museus, 2011; Metz, 2004). Any large campus has certain mandated facilities that need to be present in order for students to feel supported; such as a counseling center, a financial aid center, an admissions office, and other resources (Henningsen, 2005). What many institutions do not always have is support centers for students of color (Clark, 2005). Throughout the United States, there has been a growing sense of the need for cultural centers for Asian Americans, to help this community feel supported and understood (Liu, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010). The women in this study were all asked the question "What kinds of support would you like to see at your campus to help with your success?" Each woman stated the same thing: more women that looked like them. The second item that they discussed was about possibly having a center on campus or a class that taught about the cultural differences for South Asians in order to help dismantle stereotypes.

**South Asian American Role Models.** Retention factors affecting students of color vary from institution to institution, but there are some overarching factors that can affect retention that an institution has control over (Palmer, Maramba, & Dancy II, 2011). One way that the women interviewed stated to help with retention of other South Asian American women was to have more faculty/staff who "looked" like them in the university setting. Dr. Kimberly Goff-Crews (2014) writes about the influences of the relationships between faculty and students of color. Not

only does she discuss character traits of the faculty, but also how the faculty also have to have a willingness to help students succeed. In another study conducted by Griffin, Perez, Holmes, and Mayo (2010), it is clearly evident that there are positive effects of having students of color find and connect with faculty of color throughout their college journeys. They discuss the significance of this especially in the STEM related field because of the highly competitive fields that these students have to go into. Having faculty of color who are able to relate and communicate with the students on a personal level provided more structure and opportunities for growth for the students in Griffin et al.'s (2010) study.

Coincidentally, since most of these women were all related to the STEM field, if there were more South Asian women in their majors as professors and/or mentors, then the women in this study felt that they would be able to open up more and be more socially engaged within their majors. Dr. Dawn Johnson of (2011) of Syracuse University discussed the importance of having women faculty of color in STEM fields to help young women entering the field feel supported. She discussed the importance of understanding how race and gender are important factors to consider in this field since primarily White men dominate it. She suggested that research about the experiences of not just women faculty of color, but also women students of color in STEM needs to be explored to help women feel supported and not discriminated against.

Considering most of the women in the study that I conducted were in the STEM field, it is important to understand what and who they saw as their resources on campus. Although they all have a diverse group of friends, for the women, getting involved in their campus with extracurricular organizations was not a major factor since they did not feel that the university was doing much to promote a South Asian support network. The one network that the women did mention was the South Asian Club that is available on their campus.

All of the women had an opportunity to join the club, but there were only two of them who were actually in it at the time of the study. When asked why the others were not in it, they felt that the club was not as supportive as they thought it would be. One way to help the club promote the involvement of women, would be to possibly have more guest speakers come in and discuss their experiences in their fields, not only in STEM, but in any field to help the women in the club have an opportunity to find a mentor.

The lack of support made the women felt disconnected and although it did not dramatically impact their academic success, it would have helped their overall experiences in college because of the lack of support in this area. One of the women discussed how at other campuses, since there is a larger faculty of South Asians in general, they felt that women over there were enjoying their college experiences more than at their own campus. The women felt that if there were more faculty and staff at their campus who understood the needs of South Asians and South Asian women specifically, then their determination to succeed could be enhanced.

Another aspect that the women mentioned was that within the counseling center, it would be beneficial to have more South Asian women who were counselors. Going to counseling within the South Asian community is often not highly regarded (Cheng, Kwan, & Sevig, 2013; Shen, 2015). In this context, counseling is being defined as related to mental health and not related to academics. With this in mind, the women stated that if there were counselors who were South Asian, then they might find more comfort in seeking help from them.

**South Asian American Courses.** The second recommendation came from the women because they felt that at their campus, even though the number of South Asians was growing, there was not enough knowledge on the culture of South Asians that could help with removing



stereotypes that negatively affect people. Anita stated: “When people think of South Asians, they immediately think of Bollywood. Well, I’m not Bollywood. There’s more to me than that.” Her sentiment was mirrored by the other women who also felt as if they were being placed into categories of what is portrayed in movies. Dr. Christine Sleeter, Dr. Myriam Torres, and Dr. Peggy Laughlin (2004) help to place value on the importance of ethnic studies and how students of color benefit from learning about cultures and other areas of social justice. Using Paulo Friere’s critical pedagogy, they promote an idea of having equal opportunities for students to experience cross-cultural education. They also discussed how important it is for educators to understand the frustrations that students of color go through when not just learning, but trying to adapt to the challenges of being of a different culture while still trying to be successful in their education.

The recommendation then for this study is to create either an ethnic studies course or department that revolved around bringing more awareness about South Asian Americans and then more focused on South Asian American women. Tara mentioned “I feel like being a South Asian woman is one thing, but then adding in the piece about being an American also puts it in a different light also.” Providing a support center where the women could go and find the support they need, they felt, would help other South Asian American women be more successful in their educational journeys. At the campus that these women are attending, there currently is nothing in place to help support South Asians or South Asian Americans specifically other than the South Asian Club.

Rajni stated “I feel like if there were more people like you [referring to me], who are South Asian American women, then I would want to come in and talk to them more. I would want to discuss what’s really going on and try to get more help with everything that’s going on.”

Rajni discussed how throughout her education so far, she had never come across a South Asian female teacher/professor. She also felt that the Public Health field she was going into did not lend itself to a significant number of teachers/professors who would be South Asian women. She felt a little more disheartened knowing that she might never experience this. Both of these recommendations follow what the women wanted to relay regarding the academic success for other South Asian American women. The recommendations from the women fall in line with my recommendations for further research.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Throughout this entire study, the most challenging part of the research was trying to find information that specifically focused on the needs of South Asian women and then specifically South Asian American women. Therefore, my recommendations for further research are geared towards ensuring that this community of women has an equitable voice in the field of education. This voice is important because understanding the needs of these women will help to ensure that the concerns that they have are not ones that they have to face alone. We can learn more about the personal struggles that South Asian American women face and how they overcome their challenges if more research was done on South Asian American women.

**Demystifying South Asians and Model Minority Myth.** The model minority myth as discussed previously is something that affects many Asian Americans in education (Murjani, 2015; Museus, 2008; Museus, & Kiang, 2009). Within the broad Asian American community, South Asian Americans can be considered even more of a model minority (Murjani, 2015). This can be so extreme, that some Asian Americans and South Asian Americans consider other South Asian Americans to be White (Murjani, 2015).

The women in this study all faced challenges relating to the model minority myth and never discussed any of it since seeking mental health services is not something that many South Asians promote within their community. Since most South Asians rarely discuss their personal issues with others outside their family, they are rarely seen as a group that struggles. There needs to be more research conducted on the psychological effects of the model minority myth on South Asian American women. The internal pressures that build up for these women can create self-esteem and self-doubt and therefore more tailored support needs to be provided.

Another aspect to consider are the issues of the model minority myth stereotype and the possibilities of it currently existing in curriculum. Conducting research that helps to break the walls of this stereotype within the literature that is being used in the classroom will help to understand how to break down this myth.

**Educational Attainment and Retention Gaps.** Much of the literature relating to model minority myth focuses on aggregated data that puts all Asians together (Parikh, 2009). If this were to be true, the within that category, South Asians would be considered the model, model minority since they are considered the ones who succeed the most among their peers of Asian Americans (Murjani, 2015). Looking at the data in a disaggregated manner would mean that there would be a separation between Asian Americans and South Asian Americans. This would be beneficial to research since educational attainment is different between multiple Asian ethnicities. Understanding the needs of the individual groups rather than connecting them all together is important since each individual group has its own culture, belief system, and expectations with regards to education.

Looking at retention gaps, it is important to look at the results from the data collected and identify the most important ones based on the interviews with the women. One of the most

significant findings in this study was the issue relating to arranged marriages and how some of these women were using their education as a means to avoid marriage. To truly understand the issues of educational attainment and retention for South Asian American women, there needs to be more research done on arranged marriages and the effects of that on women who are trying to get their educational degrees. The women in this study all knew that marriage was something that was going to come up soon; it was not a question of “if”, but “when?” According to Ternikar (2008), arranged marriages are still prevalent in South Asian societies, the difference is how they are being addressed.

### **Institutional Conversations**

Within the campus setting, the major people who need to be involved in the conversations needed for change relating to the success of South Asian American women fall into the following categories: faculty, advisors, counselors, student affairs professionals, administrators, and of course students. The conversations need to include South Asians and more specifically South Asian American women, in order to understand the needs in relation to the retention of this population. The purpose of different groups together to meet would be to identify the factors that impact the retention of South Asian American women. It is important to have this discussion since many of these women probably feel isolated in their lives and believe that no one else can/will understand them. Providing that additional support is important to help with success for this population.

The different members of this group can all provide additional support and/or information needed to help South Asian American women with their retention in higher education. The most important one not only based on the literature, but also based on the interviews conducted, would be having more faculty/staff that were South Asian women that can relate to the experiences of

the women trying to get their college degrees. If there were more faculty/staff that could be role models, then the South Asian American women would feel that there was someone who would be able to help them on a more personal level. Although this would not be an easy task, one effort that could be productive would be to explore STEM related fields and promote recruitment of South Asian American women to apply to positions in the field.

## **Limitations**

As discussed in chapter three, there were three major limitations to this study with regards to the data collection: not enough resources for Asian Americans and South Asian Americans; the fact that the campus where the data was collected was a four-year Minority Serving Institution; and finally the size of the sample. Although these are limitations for the data collection, there were other limitations that needed to be addressed in the findings. In that respect, the following limitations can be problematic: the findings are based on the experiences of the women interviewed only and do not include the perspective of the families; the location of the campus and the specific population of students who attend; and finally, the timeframe of the study.

### ***Lack of Familial Context***

Not meeting with the families and getting that perspective is one factor that can be seen as a limitation because the women are giving their opinions about what their families expect of them. Having that perspective would provide the opportunity to see whether what the families truly expect are the same as what the women think. There are always differences from one person to the next and therefore, it can be said that what the families expect is different than what the women interviewed are portraying; there could be a miscommunication within the family

structure. Future studies could also include interviews with different family members related to the main participants.

Although this might be the case in some of the instances, it is important to remember that the purpose of this study was to identify what South Asian American women who are currently enrolled in higher education feel are important to their retention/persistence in higher education. From that perspective, it is not important to understand the intentions of the family and know where they are coming from. All of the women felt that their families supported them throughout their education, but felt that the reasons and some of the expectations of the family were not aligned with how they saw their futures in education.

### ***Campus Location and Population***

Since this study was conducted at a campus that was in Southern California, the expectation might have been that there would be a significant amount of diversity and opportunity to have more South Asian American women participate in the study. Although this was the assumption, unfortunately, it was not the case. The campus was a very diverse campus with regards to ethnicity and gender, but in relation to South Asians in general, the population was not that significant; and the number of South Asian American women who attended this campus are not significant enough to have a large sample to select from.

The other reason for the sample to be so small could have been also because the campus is what is known as a “commuter campus.” This means that the majority of the students do not live on campus. Since some South Asian women come to college already with limitations of what they are allowed to do by their family, many of them did not live on campus and therefore, the connection was not as significant for them. They would often just come to class and not get involved with campus activities since they did not live around the area. This caused a problem

since most of them were not involved in any clubs or organizations. Even finding women who were part of the South Asian Club on campus was difficult at this particular campus. Other campuses where students live in the dorms or around campus, might have been easier to identify more South Asian women who would want to participate.

### ***Timeframe of Study***

Without knowing the challenges that I would have to face with regards to recruitment, I thought that my initial timeline would fit and I would have enough time to reach out to more women. This also, unfortunately was not the case. Since my approval to begin my study took a significant amount of time, I was not able to begin recruitment right away. Therefore, this affected my overall recruitment because once the semester began, students became preoccupied with their schooling. This affected my data collection since I was not able to get responses from as many women as I would have liked. If I had more time to dedicate, then the recruitment process would have been more extensive, yet the issue of a lack of available South Asian women to speak with on this campus may not have alleviated the time issue. I would've liked to also branch out to a few more campuses to be able to meet other South Asian American women who are going to different schools to hear about their experiences in higher education. Having a broader spectrum of women to meet would have given me more opportunity to see if my ideas about community cultural wealth and retention were accurate.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this entire study, I realized that there was a lot of information that I thought I knew about South Asians and South Asian women in general since I am a South Asian American woman. I did not realize that there were so many similarities, but also so many differences in the college experiences of these women. My own retention within higher education has affected my

perception of what other South Asian American women must be going through. It made me question my own educational attainment and whether I continued my education because I wanted too, or if I did it because it was expected of me. I can now reflect on my own journey and really try to understand how my aspirational and familial capitals affected my college choice, my major choice, and ultimately my life.

My own personal recommendations for future research would be to really try and understand the psychology of South Asian American women in college. The experiences that this population of women goes through is not easy and since most South Asians are seen as model minorities, they are usually not considered as needing assistance. This is definitely not the case; this population should be studied more and allowed to voice their opinions on their lives and how they want to live their lives. Not only do most South Asian women face the challenges of a gendered society, they also have to face cultural challenges and trying to fit into a Western culture while at school and in the outside world, while still trying to balance their own lives. Researchers should continue doing qualitative studies to get the first hand experiences of these women, but also conduct focus groups and surveys to find common themes if they exist. Finding out what kinds of support systems should be in place to help this South Asian American women is important since they do not typically seek help from others.

This study also helped me to appreciate my culture more than I already did. The women in this study were amazing in the routes they wanted to pursue and the directions they were going. It made me realize that South Asian women are not as submissive as some parts of Bollywood portray us to be. Beginning with first generation students, to students who want to just get married, and finally to those who are getting their degrees because they want their own children to be proud of them; all of these women are going to make strong contributions to their



fields and communities. The dedication that these women all had to their education, regardless of their reasoning, showed me that nothing is impossible and that they possessed a level of self-determination and resilience that was incomparable.

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Appendix A

**CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE  
SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION  
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

I will be sending a formal email to South Asian American women who have lived in the United States for at least 5 years and have experienced higher education here as well from my @my.csun.edu email account.

Dear Ms./Mrs.,

I am writing to inform you about a dissertation study that is being conducted at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) regarding the experiences of South Asian American women here in the United States. Sangita Dube, a doctoral candidate, is conducting the study as part of the Ed.D. degree requirements.

The purpose of Sangita's dissertation study is to explore how class, gender, and ethnicity impact persistence of South Asian American women in higher education. This study will add new knowledge draw the connection that these three factors play in these experiences for this particular group of women. Your role in this study would be to participate in one 60-minute one-on-one interview.

Any personally identifiable characteristics, such as your name, age, current work location, college/university, will not appear in the study. Participating in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

Your time investment in this study is greatly appreciated. If you would like to participate, please contact Sangita at [sangita.dube@my.csun.edu](mailto:sangita.dube@my.csun.edu) or 818-458-3909. Thank you in advance for considering participation in this study.

Best,

Appendix B

**California State University, Northridge**

**CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

**A Community Cultural Wealth and Critical Race Feminist Perspective of South Asian**

**American Women's Persistence in Higher Education**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. A Community Cultural and Critical Race Feminist Perspective of South Asian American Women's Perspective in Higher Education, a study conducted by Sangita Dube as part of the requirements for the Ed.D degree in the Michael Eisner's College of Education. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding if you want to participate. A researcher listed below will be available to answer your questions.

**RESEARCH TEAM**

**Researcher:**

Sangita Dube

Department of Education

18111 Nordhoff St.

Northridge, CA 91330-8265

818-458-3909

sangita.dube@my.csun.edu

**Faculty Advisor:**

Dr. Dimpal Jain

Department of Education

18111 Nordhoff St.

Northridge, CA 91330-8265

818-677-7895

dimpal.jain@csun.edu

**PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this research study is to understand how the community cultural wealth experiences of South Asian American women impact their persistence in higher education.

**SUBJECTS**

**Inclusion Requirements**

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are a South Asian American woman who has lived in the United States for at least five years and is attending or has attended higher education in Southern California.

**Time Commitment**

This study will involve approximately 45-60 minutes of your time in one day.

## **PROCEDURES**

The following procedures will occur: You will be asked to complete one 45-60 minute interview.

## **RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with the procedures described in this study may include: mild emotional discomfort and/or embarrassment. Given the purpose of the study is to focus specifically on cultural and gender background and experiences, the questions will be personal and sensitive. You may feel uneasy about answering some of these interview questions. You may elect not to answer any of the questions with which you feel uneasy and still remain as a participant in the study. All of your information is will kept confidential, pseudonyms will be used, and all of the data will be stored in a password-protected computer. Ultimately, this study involves no more than minimal risk. There are no known harms or discomforts associated with this study beyond those encountered in normal daily life.

## **BENEFITS**

### **Subject Benefits**

You may not benefit personally from your participation in this study. The possible benefits you may experience from the procedures described in this study include understanding how your culture and gender have helped or hindered your higher educational experiences

### **Benefits to Others or Society**

This study may benefit South Asian American women who are in higher education, or are thinking about pursuing higher education in the future.

## **ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION**

The only alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

## **COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT**

### **Compensation for Participation**

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

### **Costs**

There is no cost to you for participation in this study.

## **WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY AND CONSEQUENCES**

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. **If you decide to withdraw from this study you should notify the research team immediately.** The research team may also end your participation in this study if you do not follow instructions, miss scheduled visits, or if your safety and welfare are at risk.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

### **Subject Identifiable Data**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Names will not be used in the reporting of findings. Every effort will be taken to ensure your confidentiality as a participant in this study. If you consent to participate, you will be assigned a pseudonym to protect you. No identifying information will be used, and your institution and/or program will not be identified by name in any published report.

### **Data Storage**

All research data will be stored on a laptop computer that is password protected. The audio recordings will also be stored in a password protected laptop, then transcribed and erased as soon as possible.

### **Data Access**

The researcher and faculty advisor named on the first page of this form will have access to your study records. Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not include identifiable information about you.

### **Data Retention**

The researchers intend to keep the research data indefinitely.

### **Mandated Reporting**

Under California law, the researcher is required to report known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such information, she may be required to report it to the authorities.

### **IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS**

If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the research team listed on the first page of this form.

If you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Research and Sponsored Projects, 18111 Nordhoff Street, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA 91330-8232, or phone 818-677-2901.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT**

You should not sign this form unless you have read it and been given a copy of it to keep.

**Participation in this study is voluntary.** You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your relationship with California State University, Northridge. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions that you have about the study.

**I agree to participate in the study.**

I agree to be audio recorded

I do not wish to be audio recorded

---

Participant Signature

---

Date

---

Printed Name of Participant

---

Researcher Signature

---

Date

---

Printed Name of Researcher

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol

#### Background Questions

1. What is your ethnicity (specifically, what country is your family originally from)?
2. Were you born in the United States?
  - a. If no, then where were you born?
  - b. How long have you lived in the United States? Southern California?
3. Do you have any siblings?
  - a. How many siblings are older or younger than you??
4. Are you the only woman in your family?
5. Did you attend any part of your K-12 education here in the United States?
  - a. If yes, what grades?
  - b. What high school did you attend?

#### Community Cultural Wealth Questions

1. Social: Growing up, did you participate in any cultural or community events?
  - a. If yes, how did you participate?
  - b. If no, why didn't you participate?
2. Familial: Do you live with any extended family?
  - a. How often do you meet with them?
  - b. How involved are they in your educational lives?
  - c. Do you talk to them about your college experiences?
3. Navigational: Do you have any older siblings that attended higher education?
  - a. Do you have any extended family that have attended higher education?



- i. If yes, how have they helped you pursue your higher educational goals?
- 4. Linguistic: Is English your first language?
  - a. How many languages do you speak?
  - b. Did you have to participate in any kind of English as a second language class?
    - i. If yes, how did this affect your decisions to go to higher education?
- 5. Resistant: What were/are some of the barriers you've faced while attending college?
  - a. Can you please provide a specific example?
  - b. Did these barriers affect how you performed between your first to your second year?
- 6. Aspirational: Who inspires/inspired you to attend higher education?
  - a. If no one inspired you, then how did you form your aspirations to attend and continue in higher education?
  - b. Why are you continuing your education?

**Critical Race Feminism and Model Minority Myth**

- 1. Do you have any women in your family/community that have attended higher education?
  - a. If yes, how far along did they get with their degree attainment?
  - b. If no, do they work? What do they do?
- 2. As a female in your community, what were the expectations for you?
  - a. How did this impact your views on getting a college degree?
- 3. Did you face any stereotypical issues within your major from your peers? Teachers? Society? Community?
  - a. How did this make you feel?
    - i. Can you give an example?

## **Persistence**

1. What challenges did you face from year one to year two in higher education?
  - a. Can you please give an example?
  - b. Were they related to your education, or to your family/personal life?
2. Has there ever been a time when you wanted to leave higher education?
  - a. If so, why did you stay?
  - b. If no, then what has helped you to continue your education?
3. Does your college campus provide any resources specific to your needs as a South Asian American woman?
  - a. If not, what would you like to see?

Thank you for sharing your responses. Please remember that everything is confidential. Do you have any questions or any additional comments you would like to share at this time?