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Viraj S. Patel

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Challenging the Monolithic Asian American Identity on Campus: A Context for Working With South Asian American Students

Viraj Patel

As one of the fastest growing Asian American populations, South Asian Americans have a noted presence on college campuses. Coming from a variety of backgrounds, students' ethnic identity development is constructed and challenged through participation in both historically White institutions, such as the Greek system, as well as ethnic student organizations. This article explores immigration histories and racial constructions of South Asian Americans, the relationship between South Asian American ethnic identity and Asian American racial identity, the impact of the Model Minority Myth, and notions of ethnic authenticity in South Asian American student organizations. The article also includes three models of identity development to consider when working with South Asian American students and concludes with recommendations for future research.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, South Asian Americans (people who claim heritage from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives, and Bangladesh) were the third largest Asian American group, falling behind Chinese American and Filipino American populations. Among the specific Asian groups shown in the census, median incomes of Asian Indian and Filipino households were about \$10,000 higher than the median income of all Asian households and about \$8,000 higher than the median income of non-Hispanic White households. Of the five major racial groups, Asians, of which South Asian Americans are a subgroup, have the highest attainment of college degrees. With the election of Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal and the emergence of high-profile entertainment stars such as Kal Penn and Mindy Kaling, South Asian Americans are gaining visibility. They are accruing economic capital and becoming a part of American popular culture.

Student affairs literature concerning Asian American student populations often refers to an "Asian American" ethnicity, which blurs the lines between ethnicity

Viraj Patel is a first-year HESA student who received her B.A. in English with a minor in Asian American Studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2009. Her identities as a South Asian American and Indian American, combined with her passion for popular culture, greatly influence her research interests. She loves working with students and hopes one day to be a faculty member.

and race. Because Asian American identity is multidimensional, it is important to consider individual subgroups and their unique histories (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997; Museus, 2008). There are many ethnicities (such as Korean, Indian, Pakistani, Japanese, etc.) that compose Asian America, and each carries their own distinct histories and cultures. While this serves a positive purpose in terms of coalition building, it also means some important cultural and historic facts get lost in the search for a common story. While South Asian American students are identified racially as Asian, and do share some common immigration and social histories with other Asian Pacific American (APA) populations, “The use of Asian American as an umbrella category... can obscure demographic differences that need to be addressed” (McEwen, Kodoma, Alvarez, Lee, & Liang, 2002, p. 18). This article will give a brief history of South Asian Americans in the United States, address issues facing contemporary South Asian American college students, and glimpse into South Asian American student organizations on college campuses. This article will also discuss the ideas of “Indianness” and “Desines” and how these concepts fit into racial and ethnic identity formation for South Asian American college students as well as the impact of the Model Minority Myth. Finally, the article will conclude with recommendations for future research.

History

The first South Asian Americans arrived from the Indian state of Punjab around 1900. Mostly farmers who settled in California, these men married Mexican women and remained part of the agrarian working class. While there are many direct descendents of these workers, further immigration was heavily tempered with legislation such as California’s Alien Land Law of 1913 and the Barred Zone Act of 1917, among others. These pieces of legislation directly targeted Asians from being able to own land and enter the United States, respectively (Leonard, 1997). However, the landmark Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 opened the gates to privileged and highly educated Asian immigrants. The immigration laws favored white-collar professional workers such as doctors and engineers who, upon settling in the United States, were quick to attain economic success. Because the first generation had achieved the “American dream” as a result of education, their children, who benefitted from their parents’ privilege and of growing up in high-income households, were members of communities where college was financially and culturally attainable and expected (Leonard; Shankar, 2008). Now, particularly on the West Coast, it is common for colleges to have APA enrollments of nearly one-fifth to one half of the overall undergraduate enrollment (Inkelas, 2004). With such high enrollment figures, “APA students’ potential interaction or lack of interaction with students of other racial/ethnic groups on these campuses could have a significant impact on whether or not the promise of interracial contact can be achieved” (Inkelas, p. 286). As colleges rap-

idly add a commitment to diversity to their mission statements and even general education requirements, learning how Asian Pacific American students explore identity may impact the way university missions are enacted in terms of diversity education.

Since so many Asian Pacific American and, in particular South Asian American students, are attending college in the United States, it is crucial to consider how racial and ethnic groupings must be disaggregated when working with different populations. The relationship South Asian Americans have to the racial category of Asian is a complicated one. In the United States, South Asian Americans have been referred to on the U.S. Census as Hindoos [sic], Indians, White, Asian, and most recently, as Asian Indian. Koshy (2004) stated:

From the early 1900s until 1923, the courts offered contradictory rulings on the racial identity of Asian Indians. In 1923, in the case of *The United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, the Supreme Court ruled while Asian Indians may be Caucasian by scientific precepts, they were nonwhite in the “common understanding” and that popular opinion should serve as the determining criterion of their racial identity. (p. 9)

Aside from state-imposed racial identification, many other groups of people whose ethnicities fall under the “Asian” racial category have participated in in-group disagreement for inclusion or exclusion from the APA category as well (McEwen et al., 2002). The histories of inclusion and exclusion support the need to disaggregate what is traditionally thought of as a homogeneous APA population and to consider the needs of each subgroup.

Model Minority Myth and “Desiness”

On August 31, 1987, *TIME* magazine printed a picture of six Asian American children posing in a classroom surrounded by textbooks with a tagline that reads “Those Asian-American Whiz Kids.” This headline perpetuates the Model Minority Myth, the notion that Asian Pacific Americans have overcome all racial barriers and have “made it.” The term insinuates that the APA community is the “model” for all other racial and ethnic groups, which can negatively affect cross-racial relations as well as inter-group assessment of social issues (Kotori & Malaney, 2003; McEwen et al., 2002; Park, 2008; Prashad, 2000). Another side effect of the Model Minority Myth includes the belief that Asian Pacific Americans are psychologically healthy and therefore not in need of counseling services. However, research indicates that, in addition to experiencing pressure due to a need to succeed and live up to the image of the model minority, cultural influences also inhibit Asian Pacific Americans from seeking counseling services on their own (Choi, Rogers, & Worth, 2009) and can result in serious unaddressed

mental health concerns for APA students.

In a study on Asian American women in sororities, Park (2008) noted how the Model Minority stereotype affects the way students navigate Greek-letter organizations at a predominantly White institution:

A colorblind narrative...would argue that since sororities dropped formal exclusion policies decades ago, such groups are open and bias free. Within this narrative, Asian Americans are cast as model minorities that do not face discrimination, capable of assimilating into sororities and campus life. (p. 109)

However, as Park's study later showed, sororities are not a place free of bias and racism. Park found that some Asian American females reported that they did not join because they felt self-conscious about their race. Additionally, many White students blamed the lack of Asian American sorority members on Asian American students since they are not “legally” barred from joining. There are two major factors that were not taken into consideration when statements about lack of participation made by White students about Asian American students being “their fault” for not joining Greek organizations. First, the legacy of the Greek system's history of racial exclusion was ignored, indicating an assumption that history does not have a direct impact on the present. Second, the bicultural background Asian American students live in, where being a part of a Greek organization is not a family tradition, was not taken into consideration. As a combination of the aforementioned factors, and unlike many White students who grow up with exposure to Greek culture from their parents and other family members, many Asian American students do not hear about Greek culture.

As South Asian Americans are considered part of the Asian racial category and the Asian Pacific American subculture, they are also victims of the perpetuation of the Model Minority Myth and its effects. The Model Minority Myth has also adapted itself in unique ways to the South Asian American community. In her ethnography on South Asian American college students at New York University in the 1990s, Maira (2002) interviewed several youth who expressed a preoccupation with ethnic authenticity. One student, Radhika, defined herself as an American with an Indian cultural background, to which Maira responded:

Her insistence on positioning herself within the nation-state, as an “American,” and her uneasiness about claiming an unqualified “Indian” identity, were strikingly different from the stance taken by most of the other youth I spoke to, who embraced the label 'Indian' more eagerly than even a hyphenated “Indian American” identification. (p. 3)

The discussion of authenticity ties to an abstract concept called “Indianness” or

“Desiness” (Baljali & Nair, 2008; Maira, 2002; Shankar, 2008), which refers to a quantitative in-group assessment of the degree of Indianness or Desiness. While the term “Indian” is unique to people who claim heritage from India, “Desi” refers to people from the South Asian diaspora. Overall, “Desiness” refers to an ideal of what a model South Asian should act like a mythical nostalgia for the “good old days” that must be recreated. Students in Maira’s ethnography cited that some of the ways “Desiness” and “Indianness” surfaced through pressure to join ethnic-specific organizations in college and to have only friends of South Asian descent. “Indian American youth experience early in their lives the ways in which the different social spaces, or cultural fields, they occupy are associated with particular notions of generationally appropriate behavior and ideologies of citizenship and ethnicity” (Maira, p. 92). While the pressure to accommodate “Indianness” and “Desiness” is instilled well before college, it affects the way many South Asian American students experience college.

One of the ways students approach attaining “Indianness” and “Desiness” is by joining an ethnic-specific organization. Common college student organizations are Indian Student Associations (ISA), Pakistani Student Associations (PSA), and South Asian Student Associations (SASA), although there are many variations such as an Indian American Student Association, etc. There are also a plethora of similarly-related student organizations that address a South Asian identity but separate themselves from ethnicity, such as Hindu Student Councils, Bhangra dance teams, and South Asian a cappella groups, among others. These communities create networks that stretch across the nation and connect South Asian Americans as a cultural group. For example, many universities have Bhangra, Raas, and/or Bollywood dance teams that compete both regionally and nationally. These competitions build community as well as provide opportunities for South Asian American students to come together on the basis of performing, consuming, and embodying ethnic identity.

Ethnic student organizations can foster a heightened awareness of ethnic identity as well as create community and membership on college campuses at predominantly White institutions. There is “...evidence that racial/ethnic minority students express their cultural and racial identities through their participation in ethnic student organizations” (Museus, 2008, p. 571) and that “immersion in one or more campus subcultures positively influences the likelihood of those students’ successful adjustment to, membership in, and persistence in college” (p. 573). For South Asian American students, participation in ethnic student organizations provides a venue for students to explore what “Desiness” and “Indianness” are within a social setting.

The implications for this exploration can both be negative or positive, depending on the culture of the organization and upon the individual student. Inkelas

(2004) found, from a sample of 184 students out of which approximately 25% were South Asian students, that participation in an Asian Pacific American organization led to increased awareness of APA issues and awareness of ethnic identity. Inkelas acknowledged, “Thus, ethnic club organization/involvement may be a positive influence on APA students’ long-term civic and cultural engagement, which would imply that participation in such organizations is important for democratic citizenship” (p. 297). Research also indicates that being a part of an ethnic organization can influence the ethnic identity development of students as well as create a community. The more involved a student is with an ethnically-based organization, the more likely they are to explore ethnicity outside of the classroom (Guardia & Evans, 2008; Inkelas).

While exploration of ethnic identity is encouraged within South Asian American student organizations, the ideals of “Indianness” and “Desiness” are also internally policed within the organizations and can inhibit identity exploration in other realms. For example, one ideal of “Indianness” and/or “Desiness” is for women to remain chaste and for individuals to be heterosexual. There is an abstract quantitative measure for how authentically one expresses their South Asian ethnic identity. Maira (2002) explained:

Nearly all the youth I spoke to said their parents were uncomfortable with, if not opposed to, the idea of dating...Both youth and parents discussed dating with the underlying presumption of heterosexuality; none of the youth in this study identified as queer, although this does not mean that all of them were heterosexual...I was told at a workshop on sexuality that I facilitated at NYU that no one in Shruti [the Indian student group] knew of an Indian American who was visibly “out” on campus. (p. 154)

The internal policing and defining of South Asian American identity can inhibit exploration of other identities, such as sexual orientation, because heterosexuality is seen as integral to ethnic identities. By coming out or admitting to dating, South Asian American students would be seen as less “Indian” or “Desi.”

Ethnic Student Identity Development Models

A helpful model to consider when exploring the impact of “Desiness” and/or “Indianness” with South Asian American college students is Astin’s (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) Model. The I-E-O Model addresses both the student’s background upon entering college (Inputs) and the student’s actual experiences during college (Environments). Together, they determine the student’s development upon leaving the institution (Outcomes). When examining a student’s relationship to “Desiness” and “Indianness”, preexisting notions about ethnic identity, in combination with each organization’s culture around internal

policing, impact the way students interpret their ethnic identity upon leaving. Shankar (2008) alluded to this model when, as an ethnographer working with Desi high school youth, she was pressured by parents to “teach” their children about proper study habits, what defined “success” and, especially to the young women, the importance of maintaining “respectability.” These notions and cultural pressures influence what values students equate to their ethnic identification.

Another useful model is Astin’s (1984) Model of Student Involvement, which suggested that student involvement directly affects student development. According to this model, student involvement “extends far beyond memberships in clubs and student organizations. Spending time on campus, living and participating in residence hall communities, interacting with faculty ... and socializing with peers about academic matters and nonacademic matters are all included in Astin’s definition” (as cited in Harper & Quaye, 2008, p. 187). When working with South Asian American students, it is important to consider not only the impact of involvement with ethnic student organizations, but also the other environments the student operates in and how that affects the student’s holistic development.

A third model to consider is Phinney’s (1991) Model of Ethnic Identity Development. Divided into three stages, the model asserted that a student progresses by initially showing little to no interest in ethnic identity, then exhibiting a search for ethnic identity, and finally arriving at a place where ethnic identity is achieved. While one criticism of this theory is that it is all-encompassing of all ethnic identities, Harper and Quaye (2008) suggested “an ethnic specific theory... could potentially lead to misguided generalizations and insufficient engagement strategies” (p. 187). Phinney’s model is useful for analyzing the way South Asian American students can develop their ethnic identities and how that development is impacted by involvement on campus.

Research Recommendations

One large gap in the literature about South Asian Americans and the challenges with “Desiness” and “Indianness” is consideration for how these terms are defined. While members of the group may identify with the terms, there is no definitive piece to refer to for those who are not members of South Asian American populations. While canonical works (Maira, 2002; Prashad, 2000; Shankar, 2008) refer to these concepts, there is no working definition for how the terms are interpreted and their impact on South Asian Americans. In order to gauge how populations define the terms “Desiness” and “Indianness”, the sample interviewed must be a diverse group comprised of but not limited to, members from different immigrant statuses, cultural backgrounds, gender identities, age, and different levels of involvement with ethnic organizations (Ibrahim et al.,

1997).

Another research recommendation is to consider the ethnic identity development of South Asian American students who do not fit the heteronormative ideals that are enforced through ethnic student organizations. If students do not feel comfortable joining the student group, or are driven out for violating “Indianness” and “Desiness” notions but still possess a strong sense of their ethnic identity, it is pertinent to address what other campus resources, if any, influence their exploration processes.

Conclusion

Overall, it is important for student affairs practitioners to acknowledge that South Asian American students face different community issues than other APA populations. For effective advising and counseling, histories of APA subgroups must be separated from one another. While ethnic student organizations do serve a positive purpose for many, cultural influences such as the Model Minority Myth and protection of a heteronormative ideal can also damage identity exploration for South Asian American students when pressured by notions of ethnic authenticity. Student affairs professionals will benefit from critically analyzing both the positive and negative aspects of ethnic student groups as well as supporting the continued ethnic identity development of their students.

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