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To Live So Boldly: Portraits of South Asian American Women's
College Decision-Making Processes

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Education

by

Sarayu Sundar

2022

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2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

To Live So Boldly: Portraits of South Asian American Women's

College Decision-Making Processes

by

Sarayu Sundar

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Patricia M. McDonough, Chair

Due to the highly stratified nature of American higher education, student outcomes vary widely by institutional type. Therefore, the college decision-making process merits close examination to understand how students select an institution that will shape their collegiate experiences and post-college opportunities. However, South Asian American experiences are largely absent from this literature, either omitted entirely or obscured by over-aggregation. Within this broader gap, there is also a need to focus on South Asian American women, who are found to be unequally burdened (compared to men) by their immigrant community's cultural expectations. To address these needs, this dissertation examined how South Asian American women's gender and cultural identities manifest and then influence their decision to attend either a community college, public state university, or elite private university.

Using Lawrence-Lightfoot's method of portraiture, this study focused on the experiences of 11 women across the three institutional types, with data created from a series of three interviews with the participant and a participant-led interview with the family member she identified as having played a pivotal role in her decision-making process. Largely guided by a combination of Bhattacharya's Par/Desi Framework and Perna's Conceptual Model of Student College Choice, this study's findings underscored the powerful influence of cultural and gender identities. The similarities among the women's decision-making processes included feeling a sense of uncertainty in the initial decision-making process, bearing the weight of South Asian stereotypes, recognizing the role of performativity in their decision, and relying on family involvement. The differences included a contrast between prioritizing pragmatism versus prestige in the search process and the variations in traditional gender role expectations. Additionally, the themes that emerged across the differences in their decision-making process mirrored the differences in their ongoing perceptions and experiences of their institution.

Overall, this study's findings illuminate the nuances of South Asian American women's college decision-making processes and point to key implications for research, theory, and practice. Most importantly, the study contributes to the field's understanding of how South Asian Americans in particular and immigrant communities more broadly engage with the American higher education landscape.

The dissertation of Sarayu Sundar is approved.

Cecilia Rios-Aguilar

Teresa L. McCarty

Kakali Bhattacharya

Patricia M. McDonough, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

DEDICATION

For my mom, with whom I share half my brain and my whole heart.

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VITA

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SELECT PRESENTATIONS & PUBLICATIONS

- Lehman, K.J., Newhouse, K.N.S., **Sundar, S.**, & Sax, L.J. (2022). Nevertheless, They Persisted: Factors that Promote Persistence for Women and Racially/Ethnically Minoritized Students in Undergraduate Computing. *Computer Science Education*, 1-26.

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Lehman, K.J. & **Sundar, S.** (2022). *Courting the uncommitted: Recruiting undecided students in introductory computing courses to computing majors*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Research in Equity and Sustained Participation in Engineering, Computing, and Technology (RESPECT), virtual.

Sundar, S. (2021). *Three stories of South Asian American women's college decision-making processes*. Paper presented at the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) pre-conference for the Council for Ethnic Participation (CEP), virtual.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As a first generation Indian American, I cannot say that my identity is better described by the Indian or the American half of the term. Throughout my life, Americans have invariably considered me Indian, while Indians considered me American. I recognized this tendency from a very young age, and I arrived at the conclusion that I, too, needed to follow suit and only define myself through half of my identity at any given moment. Either I could be Indian or American, but embracing the complexity of my identity as an Indian American was ostensibly not an option. So, I settled on what in my child's mind seemed to be an efficient solution. I decided there would be an Indian and an American version of nearly every aspect of my life, whether as meaningful as the pronunciation of my name (suh-ruh-yoo or "Sara plus you") or as mundane as my favorite movie (*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* or *Sleepless in Seattle*).

This system served me well. Like sorting laundry into whites and colors, there seemed to be a natural path for something to land either in the Indian pile or the American pile. In the following years that turned into decades, I continued to curate my identity in this way, careful to erase any ambiguity about what or who I *really* was. But, in life as in laundry, I soon discovered that I could not always maintain a perfect separation between the two. Just as an errant red sock would transform a load of whites into pink, I realized I could never fully separate the Indian from the American of my identity.

For me, a particularly bright red sock was tossed into my life during my senior year of high school when I was faced with making the decision of where to attend college. My sorting system had reached its limits – I could not choose an Indian version and an American version of the college I would attend. A combination of familial expectations and a cultural aversion to taking out even a modest amount in student loans precluded me from pursuing a degree at my

dream school. Instead, my Indian side prevailed and I decided to attend the University of Houston on a full-ride scholarship. In the ten years that I spent at the University of Houston, first as an undergraduate student and later as a student affairs professional, I was fascinated to see my experience mirrored in the journeys of so many South Asian women, who routinely referenced cultural and familial expectations as key factors in their decision to attend UH.

However, when I became a doctoral student at UCLA, I soon realized that research in higher education was only partially examining this issue. Certainly, the field acknowledges the deeply consequential nature of the college decision-making process, as it not only identifies the setting for the student's collegiate experiences but also plays an arguably outsized role in influencing post-college opportunities (Carnevale et al., 2013). Moreover, due to the highly stratified nature of the American higher education landscape, students face vastly different experiences and outcomes, based on the type of institution they choose to attend (Anderson et al., 2015).

Recognizing the importance of the college decision-making process, many scholars and researchers have focused on developing a better understanding of how this process varies by specific student characteristics, such as racial identity or generational status (Cho et al., 2008; Hurtado et al., 1997; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). In addition to these identities and characteristics, scholars have also examined the role of social capital in this process and consistently found that social capital is strongly linked with the type of institution students decide to attend and the types of outcomes they ultimately achieve there (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Harper, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005; Ryan & Ream, 2016). However, South Asian American students and South Asian American women in particular are absent in the literature on college decision-making. Indeed, higher education research rarely

considers South Asian American students as a distinct group that merits closer examination. Instead, South Asian American students are aggregated within the broader category of Asian American, which is often aggregated further still with white students, on the basis of their similar household incomes and educational attainment patterns (Nakanishi, 1995; Teranishi, 2002).

Rationale for the Study

The current literature on college choice falls short of fully considering the needs and experiences of South Asian American students in several crucial ways. First, South Asian American students are rarely examined as a distinct population and are instead broadly viewed as Asian Americans. However, beyond capturing geographic contiguity, the category of Asian American does not represent a cohesive unit and therefore does little to provide meaningful insights that furthers theoretical or practical knowledge of a specific student population. Moreover, the breadth of diversity among South Asian American subgroups is lost when aggregating students into the Asian American category. Focusing specifically on the South Asian American experience is important to furthering college choice research, to add necessary nuance to this literature, which has routinely pointed to the weighty influence of racial/cultural identity in this choice process (Ceja, 2001; Maramba et al., 2018; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Poon & Byrd, 2013). An additionally necessary step would be to focus more narrowly on the college choice experiences of South Asian American women, whose navigation of this process is arguably circumscribed by the double bind of cultural and gendered expectations.

Despite being among the fastest growing immigrant groups in the U.S. (Budiman, 2020), South Asian Americans and their unique needs are not adequately explored in the current body of literature on the college choice process. In fact, they are typically aggregated within the Asian American category, which is then routinely combined with white students, based on similar achievement patterns and average household incomes (Nakanishi, 1995; Teranishi, 2002). When

Asian American students are included separately from white students, they remain aggregated, effectively obscuring the true breadth of experiences among this group (Hurtado et al., 1997). Moreover, even when various subgroups within the Asian American community are disaggregated, the South Asian American experience is either omitted entirely (Teranishi et al., 2004) or obscured by a sample not proportionally representative of South Asian American students among the broader Asian American context (Poon & Byrd, 2013). Centering South Asian Americans would be a step toward addressing this pervasive tendency of over-aggregation in college choice literature.

This over-aggregation is especially concerning because of the ways it masks inequities among South Asian American subgroups. For example, Rahman and Paik (2017) found that when compared with Indian Americans, nearly twice as many Bangladeshi Americans and Pakistani Americans indicated a high school diploma or less as their highest educational attainment. These within-group differences are also reflected in socioeconomic status. As of 2015, 24% of Bangladeshi Americans were living in poverty, compared to 16% of Pakistani Americans and 8% of Indian Americans (Pew Research Center, 2015). Given the strong influences of both parental education levels and household income on college-going (McDonough & Antonio, 1996; Wells & Lynch, 2012), these stark differences underscore the need for disaggregation, to not only disentangle South Asian Americans from Asian Americans but also to examine the unique needs within the South Asian American community.

Perhaps most importantly, college choice research has not sufficiently examined the interplay between gender roles and ethnic and cultural identities (Ceja, 2001; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Smith & Fleming, 2006), particularly among Asian American subgroups (Surla & Poon, 2015). However, research in fields outside of education consistently finds that

South Asian American women are doubly disadvantaged, by facing racial discrimination from American society and gendered oppression from within their cultural communities (Bhatia & Ram, 2004; Khaleque et al., 2015; Sandhu & Madathil, 2008). Indeed, South Asian American women are burdened in ways that their male counterparts are not, because their behavior is closely scrutinized and viewed with the expectation of upholding South Asian values (Bhattacharya, 2016; Dasgupta, 2002; Gowda Ferguson, 2021). Moreover, South Asian American women's educational experiences are fraught with racial tensions and intergenerational conflict arising out of family and gender role expectations (Gibson, 1988; Maira, 2002; Ngo, 2006; Verma, 2004). Therefore, additional research is necessary to understand how the complexity of South Asian American women's gender and cultural identities influences their college decision-making process.

Defining "South Asian American"

By narrowly focusing on the experiences of South Asian American students, this study seeks to complicate the prevailing notion of Asian Americans as a monolithic group whose experiences need only be considered in the aggregate. However, in doing this work, I do not want to inadvertently portray South Asian Americans as a monolithic group within the broader Asian American context. The following overview is offered to orient the reader to key definitional and demographic characteristics of the term South Asian American and their direct relevance to this study. Chapter Two provides a more detailed explanation of the multiplicity of geographic, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversities that can be included and obscured through the use of this term.

The term South Asian is used to refer to those with roots in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, or Sri Lanka (Shankar & Srikanth, 1998). Among these, Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis constitute the three largest ethnic groups (Rahman & Paik, 2017).

However, few characteristics beyond geographic contiguity unite these countries. Rather, the region's ongoing geopolitical and socioreligious strife leads South Asian Americans to more closely self-identify with subgroups within their home country. Therefore, it should be noted that the term South Asian is merely a politicized construct (Shankar & Srikanth, 1998) that does not share the same power of minority consciousness as reflected by those who, as an example, self-identify as Black or Chicano (Shankar, 1998). However, the term Desi does span across the region's pan-ethnic identities. Derived from the Sanskrit word *desh* (meaning country or homeland), Desi is a colloquial term in multiple South Asian languages that transcends nation-specific affiliations to unite the South Asian diaspora (Mishra, 2016).

South Asian Americans represent a rapidly growing segment of the U.S. population. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the South Asian American population in the United States was estimated to be about 3.86 million. Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis comprised the three largest ethnic groups, with dramatic population booms from 2000 to 2015. Indians grew from 1.9 million in 2000 to 3.9 million by 2015. Over the same period, Pakistanis more than doubled from 204,000 to 519,000 and Bangladeshis more than tripled from 57,000 to 188,000 (Pew Research Center, 2015). As of 2017, US Census data indicated that Indians were the second largest group among Asian Americans.

In addition to these population figures, U.S. Census data on South Asian American students' educational attainment further underscores the need to more closely examine their college decision-making processes. All three of the largest South Asian ethnic subgroups (i.e., Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis) were found to earn more bachelors and graduate degrees than whites, Asians, and the overall U.S. population (Rahman & Paik, 2017). Yet, there is little to no research that might explain how these groups navigated their entry into the American

higher education landscape. Additionally, these rates of success are especially notable, given that they are occurring against a backdrop of ever-increasing racism and violence against Desi Americans (Prashad, 2012; Mishra, 2017). Despite frequently facing discrimination and alienation (Ngo, 2006), Desi American students are overcoming these obstacles and outpacing their peers in key student outcomes. Taken together, these findings point to the necessity of more closely examining the experiences of South Asian American students' navigation to and through college.

Research Questions

My primary goal in undertaking this study was to address the underrepresentation of South Asian American experiences in college choice literature. I was especially interested in understanding this experience through the lens of South Asian American women as their gender identities would render a more acute awareness of the cultural expectations of this community. Therefore, I posed the following questions:

- 1) How do South Asian American women's cultural and gender identities manifest and then influence their college decision-making process?
 - 1a) What, if any, are the similarities among South Asian American women's navigation of this process?
 - 1b) What are the differences in this decision-making process that lead to varying types of higher education institutions (i.e., community college vs. large, public state university vs. elite, private university)?
- 2) How does the decision-making process influence these women's ongoing perceptions and experiences of the institution?

Significance of the Study

I argue that the college decision-making process is particularly important to examine for several reasons. First, because of the stratified nature of higher education in the U.S., the college decision-making process requires the student to choose not only *where* she will attend college but also *how* she will experience college. Much like a child playing with Russian matryoshka nesting dolls, the prospective college student expects to simply choose a college but included with that choice is also the likelihood that she will earn a degree within four years (Causey et al., 2020), the quality of faculty-student interaction she can expect (Chang, 2005; Cox et al., 2010), the amount of debt she might accrue on average (Craig & Raisanen, 2014), and of course, the types of post-college opportunities that she can expect to have available to her (Wolniak & Engberg, 2019). These elements vary from one institution to another, but differences across institutional types are especially stark. For example, a December 2020 report from the National Student Clearinghouse found 76.7% of students who began their postsecondary education at a private, four-year institutions completed their degree within six years, compared with only 40.3% of students who began at a public two-year institution (Causey et al., 2020). By understanding how South Asian American women decide to enter a specific type of institution, we can additionally gain insights about the collegiate experiences of South Asian American women.

The college decision-making process is also typically assumed to function as the catalyst for a fundamental shift in longstanding family dynamics. Among many families, the college decision-making process is the first time that parents meaningfully include their children in discussions of the family's finances (Flaster, 2018; Hall et al., 2012) – what can the family afford and where does that mean the prospective student can reasonably expect to go to college? Moreover, the widespread media representation of “going away” to college imbues an

expectation of independence, of the child breaking away from the family to pursue higher education. Indeed, “U.S. colleges expect, socialize, and reward *independence* as the cultural ideal” (Phillips et al., 2020, p. 2, emphasis in original). Although a growing body of research critiques the ways that “going away” to college is a dated assumption that overlooks the needs and values of those outside of typically white, middle- and upper-class contexts (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Jehangir, 2010; Vasquez-Salgado, 2015), the messaging around college-going has remained consistent in highlighting this expectation of independence (Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Kim & Sherman, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012). Although families would necessarily negotiate these expectations in their own unique ways, the college decision-making process is undeniably a key inflection point in the parent-child relationship and one that is especially important to consider within specific cultural contexts, including among South Asian Americans.

Furthermore, although this study is necessitated by the dearth of literature on South Asian American students as a result of their over-aggregation among Asian and white students, it is important to consider the ways that the findings can potentially apply to populations beyond those included in this study. In addition to the Asian American category, South Asian American students are also an important subgroup within another burgeoning population in American higher education: immigrant-origin students. According to a recent report from the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute, immigrant-origin students account for 58% of the increase in U.S. students pursuing higher education over the past twenty years (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020). These students grew from 20% of all students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in 2000 to 28% in 2018, or more than 5.3 million students (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020). As of 2018, immigrants and U.S.-born children of immigrants comprised 85% of all Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students enrolled in U.S. postsecondary education. These figures further

underscore the importance of understanding how South Asian American women's cultural identities are incorporated into their higher education experiences, including the college decision-making process. Indeed, the findings from this study stand to offer useful insights to better understand the growing population of immigrant-origin students pursuing higher education in the United States.

While these points illustrate the broader significance of contributing greater nuance to the extant body of work on the college choice process, I additionally argue that the college choice process is uniquely important for South Asian American women. Within the Desi community, there is an oftentimes tacit (and sometimes explicit) expectation for a Desi woman's actions and behaviors to reflect the values and ethics of her family and the broader community. Indeed, this expectation is a seemingly enduring feature of the Desi community, spanning millennia and apparent in everything from ancient scriptures to 21st century pop culture references. Alongside these expectations of virtue, the Desi community doggedly prioritizes the economic wellbeing of their Desi daughters. Indeed, the combination of these expectations are brilliantly illuminated in Piyali Bhattacharya's (2016) award-winning anthology of personal essays titled *Good Girls Marry Doctors*, the title itself alluding to both the ways women's behaviors are scrutinized and deemed as *good* (with all its attendant implications of goodness and chastity) along with the paramount concern for women's economic wellbeing (secured by marrying a presumably rich doctor).

I argue that the college decision-making process is simply a modern, more socially accepted way of upholding these expectations of Desi women's virtue and wealth. The college that a South Asian American woman chooses to attend reflects her family's socioeconomic status and serves to reaffirm community values. For example, a woman who chooses to attend an

institution close to home would naturally fit the “good girl” archetype (Bhattacharya, 2016). In a similar vein, a South Asian American woman might be pushed to attend a more elite institution, to signal the family’s class status to the broader community. Indeed, both phenomena were apparent in the two pilot studies I conducted in preparation for undertaking this dissertation study. The findings from these studies combined with my own lived experiences and intimate knowledge of Desi community mores suggest the importance of better understanding how South Asian American women’s cultural and gender identities influence their navigation of the college decision-making process.

Overview of the Study

Chapter Two provides the historical and empirical grounding for this study. The chapter begins with a brief discussion that contextualizes the importance of college choice alongside college access and college completion. I then provide a broad overview of the various disciplinary approaches (e.g., economic, sociological) to college choice research followed by a more detailed review of the various choice models. Mirroring the structure of Perna’s (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice, the remainder of the chapter reviews empirical findings on the ways individual, school, and higher education factors influence the college choice process. The latter half of this chapter opens with a historical overview of South Asian Americans and traces the three major waves of immigration through which South Asians arrived to the U.S., including in the early 1800s, the post-1965 wave, and the third wave beginning in the 1980s. Understanding these immigration patterns and the broader sociopolitical forces that shaped these waves is key to understanding the present-day demographic differences among the larger subgroups (i.e., Bangladeshi Americans, Pakistani Americans, and Indian Americans) among South Asian Americans. This understanding is then supplemented with a brief overview of the diverse geographic, linguistic, and religious identities that are included within the Desi

diaspora in the U.S. These identities partially serve to explain the ways women's gender expectations mediate their cultural expectations. I present key findings from research in fields beyond education, including counseling, sociology, and psychology, to underscore the ways gender and cultural expectations converge to create a unique set of challenges for South Asian American women. This portion of the chapter ends with a review of the extant literature on South Asian American students within the American higher education landscape.

Chapter Three presents an explanation of the specific frameworks I identified to serve as the theoretical underpinning of each of the key elements of this study's research questions. To address the key tensions of the lived experiences of South Asian Americans, I relied on Bhattacharya's (2019) set of ontoepistemologies as outlined in the six tenets of her Par/Desi Framework. Because this work does not set out to directly address the influence of gender identities, I additionally relied on Cecilia Ridgeway's application of expectation states theory. This theory was useful in understanding how gender status beliefs can "shape behavior in a self-fulfilling way" (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999, p. 200). Moreover, Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin's (1999) pivotal work on the role of interaction in reifying gender systems was a useful way of understanding how South Asian American women might have been socialized to understand gender identities. Given the uniquely weighty influence of gender within immigrant communities (Das Gupta & Das Dasgupta, 1996; Espin, 1995; Kallivayalil, 2004), Ridgeway's use of expectation states theory provided a valuable lens through which to understand how explicit and tacit messages Desi American women receive about their nested gender and cultural identities can ultimately shape the ways they approach their college decision-making process. To address the college decision-making process itself, I employed a combination of Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice along with Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory.

Chapter Four includes the details of my methodological decisions, descriptions of the three institutions representing the different institutional types, along with my data collection and analysis process. Using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Seidman, 2013), I conducted three interviews (Seidman, 2013) each with 11 self-identified South Asian American women across each of the three institutional types. In addition, the participants conducted interviews with the family member they identified as having been pivotal in their college decision-making process. Taken together, I analyzed 43 in-depth interview transcripts for this study. As this work was strongly motivated by my desire to increase the representation and understanding of South Asian American women's experiences, I relied on Lawrence-Lightfoot's method of portraiture, which she describes as a way to "go deeply into this individual's story...[to] capture more universal themes" (2016, p. 22). Moreover, portraiture's key tenets of honoring the complex relationships between participants and researcher, illuminating goodness, and considering the ways research findings can be read and used outside of academia aligned with the theoretical and epistemological framing of this work, which sought to illustrate the nuances of South Asian American women's college decision-making process in ways that uplift those within the Desi community and invite those outside the Desi community to thoughtfully engage with these experiences.

Chapter Five comprises the eleven participant portraits. Given the detailed nature of the portraiture methodology, the participant portraits were crafted in a way that intentionally went beyond simply addressing the study's research questions. Instead, the portraits were designed in such a way that would allow the reader insights into the totality of the women's lived experiences. In doing so, I aimed to offer a more nuanced understanding of how and why the

women's cultural and gender identities influenced their eventual college decision-making process and collegiate experiences in the ways that they did.

Chapter Six presents an analysis of the eleven portraits in order to directly address the research questions of understanding how South Asian American women's cultural and gender identities manifest and then influence their college decision-making process, in terms of both similarities and differences that could explain their choice of three distinct institutional types. The similarities among the women's decision-making processes included feeling a sense of uncertainty in the initial decision-making process, bearing the weight of South Asian stereotypes, recognizing the role of performativity in their decision, and relying on family involvement. The differences included a contrast between prioritizing pragmatism versus prestige in the search process and the variations in the expectations for the women to fulfill traditional gender roles. Additionally, this understanding of the women's decision-making process and the themes that emerged across the differences in their decision-making process revealed a strong thread that bound the women's initial decision-making process with their ongoing perceptions and experiences of their institution.

Chapter Seven connects the study's findings to the theoretical framework that guided this work. The chapter begins with a discussion of the key takeaways of this study and the ways that these findings aligned with theory. I additionally highlight the differences in explanatory power yielded by the Par/Desi Framework (Bhattacharya, 2019) as compared to Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice and Social Capital Theory more broadly. The chapter concludes with considerations for the ways that these findings relate to implications for theory, research, and practice, followed by a final discussion of this work overall.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Given this study's focus on the influence of South Asian American women's cultural and gender identities in their college decision-making process, there are several threads of existing literature that inform this work. I begin by establishing the significance of the college choice process and then review the various disciplinary approaches (e.g., economic, sociological) that have informed theoretical models of the college choice process. From this review, Perna's (2006) multi-layered model emerges as a comprehensive model that is particularly relevant to the needs of this study. I then present key empirical findings as they relate to each of the four layers of this model (i.e., individual, school context, higher education context, and policy context). In addition to these broader findings, I highlight studies that examine these elements as they relate to Asian American students. Through this review, the critical absence of South Asian American experiences in college choice literature becomes readily apparent.

To address this absence, I first trace the history of South Asian Americans, including their immigration patterns and current demographic trends. Following this historical orientation, I use empirical findings from psychology and sociology to illustrate the connection between cultural values (particularly among immigrant groups) and gender role expectations. In doing so, I underscore the need for higher education research to consider Desi American experiences, particularly Desi American women's experiences, distinctly from Asian American experiences. I conclude the chapter with a review of the relatively scant higher education literature that focuses specifically on Desi Americans. Much of this work comes from doctoral dissertations that address a wide range of issues, but none currently examine college choice. I conclude the chapter by summarizing the historical context and empirical findings that support the necessity of this study.

Contextualizing College Choice

Before reviewing the vast literature on the college choice process, it is useful to contextualize the significance of this body of work alongside other complementary topics of focus, such as college completion and college access. The importance of college completion is widely acknowledged both within and beyond the field of higher education. Indeed, college completion became an especially prominent national priority in 2009, when President Obama set a goal for the U.S. to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Obama White House Archives). The goal addressed economic prosperity both in the collective for the nation as a whole and for individual Americans and their families. In addition to securing the country's position as a leader in the global economy, increasing the number of degree-holding Americans was a necessity, as the job market demanded a more skilled, educated workforce. For example, Carnevale et al.'s (2018) analysis of U.S. Census data found that job opportunities for bachelor's degree holders more than doubled between 1991 and 2016. Moreover, an October 2020 analysis from the Brookings Institution found the average lifetime earnings of bachelor's degree holders to be more than twice that of those who had never attended college (Broady & Hershbein, 2020). Certainly, these findings point to the critical need to focus on college completion. Yet, therein lies the importance of the college choice process: before there can be college degree holders, there must first be college entrants.

It is additionally important to note that while these economic concerns illustrate the need for and advantages of pursuing a higher education, the paths into and out of these institutions are deeply inequitable. Therefore, a review of college choice literature would be premature without first acknowledging the disparities in access to higher education. Specifically, students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students continue to face greater barriers to pursuing higher education than their counterparts (Bragg, 2013; Clayton & Means, 2018; Ma et al., 2016;

Perna & Kurban, 2013). For example, although low-income students' enrollment increased by seven percentage points from 2005 to 2015, their enrollment rates still lagged considerably behind those of wealthier students (Ma et al., 2016). Moreover, the vastly uneven landscape of U.S. higher education further exacerbates these demographic inequities. Referred to as institutional stratification, American higher education institutions tend to be defined by various institutional characteristics, such as mission or selectivity (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Posselt et al., 2012; Roksa et al., 2007). The net result, then, is a higher education system that has wealthier and white students concentrated in highly selective institutions, while students of color and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately represented in less selective institutions (Anderson et al., 2015). This pattern is all the more concerning in light of data which suggest that students who begin their higher education journeys at community colleges are less likely (compared to students who begin at a 4-year institution) to ultimately earn a bachelor's degree (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Long & Kurlaender, 2009). Thus, the inequities in college access come full circle to result in inequities in college completion.

These inequities, both in terms of college access and college completion, are precisely why the issue of college choice is critically important. The stark differences among students' understanding of their own college-going potential combined with the widely varied outcomes across the stratified American higher education system amplifies the importance of the college choice process. In fact, many scholars aptly suggest that the so-called "college choice" might not be a *choice* at all (Bergerson, 2010; Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Iloh, 2018), as there are myriad background characteristics and experiences that influence students long before they formally begin to consider whether and if so, where to begin their postsecondary education. For this reason, I favor the term "college decision-making process" rather than "college choice," to

disentangle the privilege that is inherent in the term “choice.” While these terms may signal subtle differences in the orientation to this work, the overarching fact remains that the topic of college choice demands attention and careful examination.

Various Disciplinary Approaches to the College Choice Process

The “college choice process” tends to function as a catchall term to refer to the ways students understand their place within the higher education landscape. However, this broad usage belies the distinct ways that this term can be understood through the lens of various field perspectives, including economics, management, and sociology. Recognizing these differences is necessary to understanding the various approaches to college choice process research and understanding why this study followed the sociological approach.

The economic approach frames the college choice process as a seemingly straightforward decision of weighing the costs of college attendance against the benefits of an earned college degree. This perspective is certainly a useful one, as empirical findings have consistently found that financial concerns are acknowledged as a key factor in the decision-making process of students and their families, particularly those outside of the wealthy and upper-middle class circles (Flaster, 2018; Kim, 2004; Lillis & Tian, 2008; Paulsen & St. John, 1997; Perna, 2006). However, by reducing the college choice process to a simple pecuniary decision, the economic perspective obscures the role of social forces and various forms of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, among many others) that influence the ways students and their families perceive this decision.

The information processing approach (Park & Hossler, 2014) similarly essentializes the college choice process to one key driver. Just as the economic approach centers on money, the information processing approach is defined by the availability, quality, and comprehension of college-related information. This approach is useful, because it spotlights a key element within

the broader college choice process. Indeed, decades of research has sought to understand how students' college choice processes are influenced by various sources of information, including viewbooks (Hartley & Morphew, 2008), rankings (McDonough et al., 1998), college counselors (McDonough, 1997, Robinson & Roksa, 2016), and parents (Perna & Titus, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008) and siblings (Ceja, 2006; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Goodman et al., 2016), among others. The information processing approach frames the college choice process as a question that the student must answer in a relatively limited timeframe (i.e., within the final years of high school). However, this approach does not fully consider how early experiences might shape students' access to and understanding of college-going information.

The sociological approach is a comparatively more comprehensive way of understanding the college choice process. Similar to the economic approach, the sociological approach casts the college choice as one that emerges from weighing educational aspirations against constraints (Park & Hossler, 2014). Yet, this approach moves beyond this equation of status attainment to additionally consider how students' access to and utilization of various forms of capital (e.g., social capital, cultural capital) shapes their understanding of college-going behaviors. In this way, the sociological approach seems to reject the idea that the college choice process could be adequately explained by a simple cost-benefit analysis. Moreover, rather than taking a myopic view of the college choice process and assuming that the decision is exclusively driven by direct factors (e.g., college-going information), the sociological perspective takes a more expansive view and instead frames the college choice process as one that begins long before the choice itself is a consideration. In this way, the eventual choice is ultimately shaped by long-held identities (e.g., class status) and their attendant levels of social and cultural capital, which in turn, mediate information access and cost-benefit analyses. While the economic and information

processing approaches to the college choice process could be thought of as a simple machine, such as a lever that hinges on money or information, the sociological approach to the college choice process would then be a complex Rube Goldberg machine, with myriad mechanisms and possible pitfalls, depending on the ways in which it is manipulated. Given this study's focus on identifying and understanding the influence of cultural and gender identities in South Asian American women's college decision-making process, this study was largely informed by research that views the question of college choice through this sociological lens.

College Choice Process Models

Alongside the preceding descriptions of field perspectives that provide a bird's eye view, college choice models provide a ground-level view of identifying and organizing the details of the college choice process. Many of these models are predicated on Hossler and Gallagher's 1987 model that operationalizes the college choice process into three distinct cognitive stages of predisposition, search, and choice. In the predisposition stage, students bring nascent attention to the process and consider whether they envision themselves pursuing a college degree. The search stage refers to gathering information about institutions students might attend. The choice stage involves narrowing down the list of institutions that were considered in the search phase to the one institution they intend to attend. Nora and Cabrera (1992) supplement this three-stage model by adding specific timeframes for each of the three stages, with the predisposition beginning as early as seventh grade and the choice stage culminating in the student's final year in high school.

Although this three-stage model continues to serve as the underlying foundation of much of the work on college choice, several scholars (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Iloh, 2018; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006) have worked to bring additional nuance to the field by putting forth models that illustrate in greater detail the nuances of students' college choice processes. For example, Cabrera and La Nasa's (2000) model depicts a complex web of interconnections

between myriad elements of the process, ranging from the student's academic ability to parental characteristics to cost. While this model offers a striking visual of the quantity and complexity of variables that the college choice process encompasses, it does not offer insights into which variables might have greater influence relative to the other variables. Similarly, while Iloh's (2018) Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories is also predicated on Hossler and Gallagher's model, her model casts the student's decision as one that is based on three elements – information, time, and opportunity – which are notably nonlinear, in stark contrast to the three-stage model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989). This is an important conceptualization and powerfully challenges the assumptions of privilege that are often inherent in other choice models. However, in focusing on these three elements, the model does not delineate the specific elements that are necessary to understanding the choice process.

While these models make key contributions to moving the field forward in understanding the college choice process, Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice is especially useful because as Gildersleeve (2010) describes, the typically disparate elements of choice are meaningfully integrated within this model. Perna's model nests the cost-benefit analysis at the center of a larger four-layer model that illustrates the ways that students' choices are shaped by their own background characteristics and experiences in addition to their school and community context, the higher education context, and the social, economic and policy context. Because of its comprehensive nature, this theory also serves as the theoretical anchor for understanding students' college choice process for the purposes of this study, as described in greater detail in the following chapter.

The following review of college choice literature highlights the ways that the extant literature informed the development of, and supported the necessity for, this study. Mirroring the

structure of Perna's (2006) model, the following sections are crafted in a way that invites the reader to identify the lessons learned from existing empirical work and additionally consider how these findings may or may not be inclusive of the experiences and needs of the South Asian American community, which is conspicuously absent in much of this existing work.

Individual, Community, and Higher Education Factors in the College Choice Process

A key motivator of much of the work on college choice is the assumption that students' college choice processes are influenced by their individual identities and characteristics (Paulsen & St. John, 2002), such as socioeconomic status (Cho et al., 2008; Cox, 2016; Koricich et al., 2018; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995), generational status (i.e., first generation college student), gender, and race (Freeman, 1997; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; McDonough et al., 1997; Hurtado et al., 1997; Squire & Mobley, 2015; Tobolowsky et al., 2005). In addition to these personal traits and background experiences, there has been significant research (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Harper, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005; Ryan & Ream, 2016) devoted to understanding the influence of students' cultural and social capitals as they relate to their navigation of the college choice process.

McDonough's (1997) pivotal work on college choice made a landmark contribution to the field by illustrating the interconnectedness between background identities and experiences (e.g., household income, parental education) and Bourdieuan concepts of cultural and social capital and habitus. Following twelve white women's paths into higher education from four different types of high schools, she revealed how the students' college choice processes were largely driven by the ways their social class status mediated their access to and utilization of cultural capital which then mediated their choice to attend a specific higher education institution. In the decades since, scholars (Griffin et al., 2012; Palardy, 2015; Nora, 2004; Acevedo-Gil,

2017; Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010) have continued to build upon this foundational work.

The cumulative power of these empirical findings is evident in Perna's (2006) four-layer model, which names habitus as the foundational layer upon which the entire model rests.

Racial identity is another individual characteristic that is widely acknowledged as having a strong influence on students' college choice processes and is also included within the first layer of Perna's model. Extant research has consistently underscored the importance of examining cultural influences in the choice process, both through examinations of specific racial groups, such as Black (Contreras et al., 2018; Freeman, 1999; Smith, 2009; Smith & Fleming, 2006; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008) or Latinx (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Cuellar, 2019; Kurlaender, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2010) and through work that examines differential patterns across several racial categories. For example, both Hurtado et al. (1997) and Perna (2000) used NELS datasets to identify differences among racial groups' choice processes using logistic regression on these nationally representative datasets. While Hurtado et al. included all available race groups, Perna's (2000) study was limited to differences between Black, Latinx, and white students. Given the scope of the NELS dataset, the absence of Asian students in this analysis is notable. Despite this omission, both studies found significant differences based on racial identity that suggest white students navigate the college choice process with greater ease than students of color. However, Perna's (2000) controlling for differences in cultural and social capital resulted in comparable college-going among white, Black, and Latinx students, suggesting that racial identities are important to examine in tandem with these Bourdieuan constructs. Indeed, Perna (2000) writes that "future research should explore racial/ethnic differences in the contribution of social and cultural capital to educational expectations" (p. 136).

While these types of studies establish a pattern of differences based on students' racial identities, a subset of this work focuses specifically on understanding how Asian Americans navigate the college choice process. Similar to Hurtado et al. (1997) and Perna (2000), Teranishi et al. (2004) also used a large, national sample of students only to conduct quantitative analyses focused specifically on Asian American groups. However, their analyses were limited to Chinese American, Filipino American, Japanese American, Korean American, and Southeast Asian Americans. The authors did not provide any explanation to address the absence of South Asian subgroups, including Indian Americans (thereby eliminating the possibility of this omission having been determined by a limited sample size). However, this work does provide valuable insights into the differences between Asian American subgroups. For example, among students whose parents' annual income was under \$25,000, significantly more Chinese American and Korean American students were represented at highly selective institutions than their other Asian American subgroup peers, suggesting that cultural identity superseded the influence of household income in these students' choice processes.

This study was especially relevant to this dissertation research for two key reasons. First, these significant differences would be impossible to identify when running analyses on an aggregated Asian category. The authors arrived at these findings by using disaggregated categories of Asian subgroups. Second, these significant differences suggest that racial identity vis-à-vis immigrant identities are a particularly salient predictor of college choice, as they emerged as significant even as household income was held constant. Indeed, Teranishi et al. (2004) suggest that "future research should examine the impact of culture, generational status, immigration history, and other factors that differentially impact different communities of APA subpopulations" (p. 546).

Additional work that narrowly focuses on Asian American groups further supports the necessity for this study. For example, Poon and Byrd's 2013 study reveals important differences not only among various Asian subgroups but also differential patterns by gender and generational status. Their quantitative analyses revealed that women's college choice processes were significantly more likely than men's to be influenced by family approval, parent's opinions, and siblings' opinions. Moreover, their interviews also found that women were more likely than men to be influenced by their interpersonal relationships. While this study reveals important insights about the ways that cultural and gender identities converge and influence Asian American women's college choice processes, more work is needed in this area. In particular, South Asian American students need greater attention, as Poon and Byrd's sample did not proportionately represent South Asian American students relative to South Asian Americans among the overall U.S. population.

In addition to racial identity, extant literature also points to the importance of examining the influence of other individual-level characteristics, such as generational status in college. For example, several studies highlight the extent to which historically underrepresented students, and largely first-generation students, rely on informal networks, such as siblings and community members, to navigate the college choice process (Perez & McDonough, 2008; Teranishi et al., 2004). There is a well-documented pattern among students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds tending to rely more heavily on information gained from within their own social networks, rather than information disseminated from official channels, such as school administrators or institutions (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). While existing work has largely focused on historically underrepresented minority groups, this

study seeks to determine whether these patterns hold true among subcommunities within the South Asian diaspora, particularly within lower-SES communities and families.

The second layer of Perna's model is additionally predicated on McDonough's (1997) work which introduced the notion of "organizational habitus" to understand students' college choice processes. While habitus was previously outlined as being a personally held characteristic, organizational habitus extends this notion of mediating class-based expectations and behaviors through an organization, such as a student's high school. In doing so, the influence of the school in shaping students' aspirations for postsecondary education becomes readily apparent. For example, students who attend schools that promote a college-going culture are more likely to envision themselves not only pursuing higher education but doing so at a prestigious four-year university. However, students who attend schools that do not similarly promote college-going behavior would likely not aspire to (or perhaps even be aware of the possibilities of) attending these types of institutions.

Stanton-Salazar's (1997) seminal work in this area underscores the importance of institutional agents in the college choice process and additionally highlights the ways that working-class minority students are potentially shortchanged in this information exchange. In continuing to build on this work, several scholars (e.g., Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; Holland, 2015; McHugh et al., 2013) have highlighted the importance of cultivating trust between students, families, and those staff included within Stanton-Salazar's umbrella term of "institutional agents." As this work has primarily focused on Black and Latinx students' experiences, the present study stood to potentially contribute valuable findings on the ways additional communities perceive and pursue these relationships.

Finally, although higher education institutions are inherently involved in the outcome of the college choice process, they are also an actor within the third layer of Perna's (2006) multi-layer model. While the focus of this dissertation study largely centered on the first layer (i.e., individual characteristics of racial and gender identity) and considers to a somewhat lesser extent the influence of factors nested within the second layer (i.e., organizational habitus), it is important to recognize the ways higher education institutions can themselves influence students' college choice processes. In particular, the role of a campus in cultivating students' sense of belonging is an important element of the college choice process. Nora (2004) suggests that students' choices will be influenced by their own sense of whether they can envision themselves fitting in within the student body of a particular campus. In other words, students will likely attend an institution where they feel more secure, even if the institution may not be one that perfectly aligns with their academic or professional goals.

While campus climate is an arguably passive way that higher education institutions shape students' perceptions of their college choice process, admissions and recruitment activities are a comparatively more active way that these institutions influence the process. Wolniak and Engberg (2007) found a positive association between universities' visits to high schools and the high school students' eventual college attendance. Yet, these visits were often concentrated within a limited social sphere of private high schools and public high schools in well-resourced districts. More than a decade later, a similar pattern emerged in an examination of recruitment activities of eight, public flagship universities, with more visits to out-of-state students in more affluent areas (Salazar et al., 2018). These patterns together point to the role of the "invisible hand" of universities' revenue-driven motives in influencing students' college choice processes.

Finally, in addition to the direct marketing tactics of on-campus recruitment visits, universities also manage students' perceptions of their potential pathway into their institutions through their indirect marketing efforts, including curating their social media platforms and institutional websites. Holland and Ford's (2021) recent review of 278 universities' admissions webpages discovered telling differences, with the most selective institutions (classified as Barron's 1) found to be more likely to promote compositional diversity on their websites despite having smaller proportions of minoritized students, compared to the less selective institutions. Importantly, the authors recognize that this pattern suggests that "the racialized habitus of universities appears to be...operating from a White normative perspective" (Holland & Ford, 2021, p. 23). Therefore, for the purposes of this study examining South Asian American women's college decision-making processes, it seemed crucial to examine how these practices shaped their perceptions of belonging within these institutions.

Three Waves of South Asian Immigration

To understand the experiences of South Asian American women, it is first important to understand the history and arrival of Desis in America. Indeed, the diversity of the Desi American diaspora is not only explained through the varied cultural roots of their home countries but also through their immigration patterns. South Asian immigration to the United States has occurred in three major waves. The first and smallest of the waves occurred during the late 1800s through the early 1900s, when a few thousand men arrived and worked in lumber, rail, and agricultural industries along the West Coast of the U.S. and as seamen and traders along the East and Gulf Coast. Rampant anti-immigrant policies prevented the men from emigrating with their families, owning land, and gaining citizenship rights (Purkayastha, 2005). This wave of immigration was then legislatively curbed through the passage of the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone Act, which prohibited entry to immigrants from Asia and Pacific Islands (Mishra, 2016).

The passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 then marked the beginning of the second wave of immigration (Sandhu & Madathil, 2008). As in the first wave, the immigrants came to fill roles that matched the nation's current economic concerns, which in this case centered on the Cold War demands for science and technology experts and the newly created Medicare and Medicaid programs that required greater numbers of healthcare professionals (Prashad, 2000). Therefore, this wave of immigrants largely comprised highly educated and skilled professionals and their families (Purkayastha, 2005). It was during this time that Asian Americans, including South Asians, began to be positioned as the model minority (Purkayastha, 2005; Verma, 2008), as the combination of strong academic achievement, diligent work ethic, and perhaps most notably, quiet compliance, converged to create an image of an ideal minority (Rahman & Paik, 2017). These seemingly ideal minorities leveraged the family reunification element of the 1965 Immigration Act to precipitate the third wave of immigration during the 1980s.

The third wave of Desi immigration brought with it significant demographic shifts. As the highly educated and well-established second-wave immigrants sponsored their family members, these immigrants were often less educated and less fluent in English than their second-wave predecessors. Unlike the second wave which occupied highly skilled jobs and had settled into middle-class white neighborhoods, the third wave worked in less skilled roles (e.g., cab drivers, store clerks) and settled into urban ethnic enclaves (Bhattacharya & Schoppelrey, 2004; Verma, 2008). Most notably, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis were more heavily represented among the third wave of immigration, which serves as a potential underlying explanation of their lower socioeconomic statuses as compared to their Indian counterparts (National Asian Pacific American Community Development Data Center, 2005; Rahman & Paik, 2017).

Immigration & Education

Understanding the waves of South Asian immigration is a necessary starting point to recognizing the diversity within this community. The stark distinctions between the second and third waves of immigration in terms of the jobs that they pursued, the neighborhoods they lived in, and the resulting differential patterns of acculturation are initial indications of the diversity enveloped within the broader Desi diaspora. In addition to this historical context, it is also important to consider the current demographic trends within the South Asian community.

When using 2010 U.S. Census data to examine the educational trends, all three of the largest Desi ethnic groups are found to earn more bachelors and graduate degrees than Whites, Asians, and the overall US population (Rahman & Paik, 2017). However, examining within-group differences among Desis yields some useful insights. For example, the percent of Bangladeshi and Pakistani graduate degree holders is almost half that of Indian graduate degree holders. Moreover, the lowest educational attainment categories indicate similar differences, with 18% of Indians indicating a high school diploma or less as their highest educational attainment, compared to approximately 34% of Bangladeshis and 31% of Pakistanis.

Similar disparities emerge when examining the household incomes of these three ethnic groups. For example, as of 2015, 24% of Bangladeshis were living in poverty, compared to 16% of Pakistanis and 8% of Indians (Pew Research Center, 2015). These patterns were also mirrored in the median annual personal earnings of full-time, year-round workers among the three groups. Indians earned \$75,000, while Pakistanis and Bangladeshis earned \$50,000 and \$40,000 respectively (Pew Research Center, 2015). Recognizing the strong influences of both parental education levels and household income on student outcomes (Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007; McDonough, 1997; Walpole, 2003), these stark differences just within the three largest Desi ethnic groups further underscore the need for disaggregation efforts, to not only disentangle

South Asians from Asian Americans but also to more closely examine the unique needs within these diverse Desi communities.

The impetus for immigration is also an important dimension to understand when examining immigrant and immigrant children's educational outcomes. Ogbu (1991) theorized about the differences between "voluntary" versus "involuntary" minorities in the U.S., with the former referring to those who willingly emigrate from their home countries in search of better opportunities and the latter referring to those who arrive unwillingly due to slavery, war, persecution, or other negative external forces. Voluntary immigrants are thought to have a more optimistic view of educational pathways, while involuntary immigrants are comparatively more pessimistic about their chances of success in a country they did not choose for themselves. Understanding how various South Asian subgroups may be categorized within these constructs is additionally helpful to understanding how they may understand and view their place within the American higher education landscape.

Additionally, immigrant and immigrant children's awareness of the discrimination and scrutiny they face might serve to explain their higher education aspirations across various identities. For example, Goyette and Xie (1999) found that all Asian subgroups included in their study (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Southeast Asian, South Asian, and Other Asian, compared to white students as a reference group) uniformly expected to achieve higher levels of education than their white peers, despite the stark variations among cultural values and immigration histories. Goyette and Xie (1999) suggest that this homogeneity in educational aspirations could be attributed to a shared need to overcome racial discrimination (Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Xie & Goyette, 1998; Goyette & Xie, 1999).

Desi American Student Experiences

Although these historical and current economic considerations necessitate focused work on the trajectories of Desi American students in American higher education settings, relatively scant literature addresses these needs. However, a broader survey of literature in the fields of counseling, sociology, psychology, among others, reveals consistent themes that informed the present study. In particular, the ways in which gender and cultural expectations converge to create a unique set of challenges provided valuable insights and support to the necessity of this work. For example, Sandhu and Madathil (2008) explain how South Asian American women must not only navigate racial discrimination from American society but also face gendered oppression from within the Desi community (Bhatia & Ram, 2004). This double-bind is further highlighted in a 2015 study of acculturation among Pakistani American immigrant parents and children which found that women were more likely to have lower levels of American cultural orientation compared to men, potentially as a function of the comparatively restrictive ways in which women are able to experience American culture (Khaleque, Malik, & Rohner, 2015).

These findings and themes can also be found in Desi-specific literature within education. As Ngo (2006) explains, although the academic achievement of South Asian American students is relatively high, their education is also fraught with tensions from intergenerational conflict arising out of family and gender role expectations as well as racism (Gibson, 1988; Maira, 2002; Verma, 2004). Moreover, in examining the experiences of Southeast and South Asian students, Ngo (2006) found that the widely held assumption of Asian American success obscures the extent to which these students face economic, social, and cultural challenges along their educational journeys. Ngo's work reveals the many ways students are "learning from the margins," with their needs and challenges often overlooked as a result of the notion of Asian American success.

Recognizing this need to provide more nuance to the ongoing narrative of Asian American and South Asian American educational success, several doctoral dissertations have focused on the experiences of South Asian American college students (Ruzicka, 2011; Hamid, 2007; Nakiboglu, 2005; Accapadi, 2005; Traxler, 2009). Covering a range of topics from identity development in college (Ruzicka, 2011) to the process of major choice (Traxler, 2009), all of these studies focus on students' experiences after entering higher education institutions. A consistent theme among these findings is the salience of South Asian cultural influences (e.g., familial relationships or community expectations) within the students' collegiate experiences. A natural extension of these studies, then, is to consider how students' South Asian identities might influence the institutions they eventually attend. Therefore, this study sought to illuminate whether, and if so, how students' South Asian identities shape the way students are initially exposed to college-going expectations, then perceive the viability of their college options, and ultimately decide which higher education institution to attend.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was designed to understand South Asian American women's navigation of pathways into various types of higher education institutions. While the research questions that drove this study addressed specific elements of the women's background and experiences, the key points of inquiry could be broadly summarized as person (South Asian American women) and process (college decision-making). In addition to the empirical work described in the preceding chapter, I drew from several theories to support this study. The person-level theories included Bhattacharya's (2019) Par/Desi Framework to address matters of cultural identity and Ridgeway's (2011) work on expectation states theory for gender identity. The process-level theories to address the women's college decision-making included a combination of Bourdieu's (1988) social capital theory and Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice. I begin by tracing the intellectual journeys that led me to identify these four theories as best suited to support the aims of this study. Then, I provide an overview of the relevant concepts from each of the theories and explanations of how these theories served to support my work. I conclude with a discussion of the utility and necessity of combining these theories.

Rationale for the Theoretical Frameworks

This study was predominantly guided by Bhattacharya's (2019) Par/Desi Framework, a set of ontoepistemologies borne out of Bhattacharya's decades of empirical work about the Desi diaspora. As ontology refers to the ways of being and epistemology refers to the ways of knowing, and my own identity as a Desi American woman shapes my view of both, the Par/Desi Framework was then ideally aligned with my orientation to this study. Moreover, the influence of Bhattacharya's framework (and by extension, the larger body of her work that centers the same communities that I center in this study) was prominent throughout the study, as its six tenets encompass currently unparalleled nuance about Desi American experiences.

Given the rich foundation in which this framework is situated, Bhattacharya's (2019) Par/Desi Framework served as the lens through which I sought to understand the women's cultural and gender identities. The decision to rely on this framework for this purpose was in itself a statement of my approach to this work. While the previous chapter noted the relatively scant higher education literature on Desi American students, these studies' theoretical frameworks largely mirror much of the work that specifically examines the role of racial and/or ethnic identities. These studies often rely on rigorous and widely cited theories, such as Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) or Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). These theories put forth crucial, foundational notions that are implicit in the design of the present study, including the assertion of race as a "significant factor in determining inequity in the United States" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, p. 48) and that Women of Color tend to be marginalized within dominant resistance discourses (e.g., antiracism, feminism) (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1243). Therefore, I want to recognize and honor the work that has paved the way for me to be able to craft this study, while simultaneously acknowledging that these theories did not provide adequate analytic support in understanding the experiences of Desi American women.

Similarly, higher education researchers and scholars routinely draw from widely cited sociocultural and developmental theories (e.g., Museus et al., 2013; Renn, 2012) when undertaking studies that center the role of students' racial/ethnic identity. However, implicit in my decision to understand Desi American women's cultural identities through the lens of the Par/Desi Framework was my contention that these identities are forged in the crucible of competing tensions between Desi and American norms and expectations. Rather than relying on a theory that frames Desi identity as developing against a backdrop of the prevailing norms of whiteness, I recognize that both identities (Desi *and* American, hence Par/Desi) rightly belong to

these women. By anchoring this study with the Par/Desi Framework, I intended to center the role of the women's constant negotiation between their Desi and American identities (and attendant expectations) as they navigated educational structures and systems that are ultimately rooted in whiteness.

While these considerations support the use of Bhattacharya's Par/Desi Framework in my exploration and understanding of the role of Desi American women's cultural identities, there were also potential limitations in the scope of this framework in addressing the women's gender identities. As outlined in the previous chapter, the literature persuasively describes the myriad ways that gender identities can be shaped by cultural identities (Deepak, 2005; Kallivayalil, 2004). However, it was also potentially useful to recognize that gender expectations may supersede those of cultural expectations. Therefore, I additionally relied on Ridgeway's (2011) work on expectation states theory as it more directly served to explain how women's gender role expectations could influence the experiences and outcomes (i.e., college decision and collegiate experiences) that I explored in this study.

Ridgeway's (2011) application of expectation states theory was useful in understanding how gender status beliefs can "shape behavior in a self-fulfilling way" (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999, p. 200). Moreover, Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin's (1999) pivotal work on the role of interaction in reifying gender systems was a useful way of understanding how South Asian American women might have been socialized to understand their gender identities. Given the uniquely weighty influence of gender within immigrant communities (Das Gupta & Das Dasgupta, 1996; Espin, 1995; Kallivayalil, 2004), Ridgeway's use of expectation states theory provided a valuable lens through which to understand how explicit and tacit messages South

Asian American women receive about their nested gender and cultural identities could ultimately shape the ways they approached their college decision-making process.

Moreover, as I was interested in understanding the experiences of South Asian American women's navigation of their college decision-making process, I required a theoretical grounding not only of the women's experiences, but also the process itself. To that end, I drew from Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice and Bourdieu's (1988) social capital theory. While the college choice literature reviewed in the previous chapter highlights empirical findings on key factors that shape the college choice process (e.g., high school settings, financial considerations, among many others), I relied on Perna's (2006) model to illustrate the interconnectedness of these factors. Her comprehensive approach bridges two schools of thought (economic and sociological) to create a multi-layered model that includes 1) the individual's habitus, 2) the school and community context, 3) the higher education context, and 4) the broader social, economic, and policy context. Within the habitus layer, Perna (2006) includes three subcategories of demographic characteristics (i.e., gender and race/ethnicity), cultural capital (defined for the purposes of this model as cultural knowledge and the perceived value of college), and social capital (or, information about college and assistance with college processes).

Although social capital is nested within Perna's (2006) model, its theoretical utility could be extended beyond the model to encompass all three foci (cultural identity, gender identity, and college choice process) of the study. While several scholars have advanced increasingly nuanced definitions of social capital (as discussed later in the social capital theory section of this chapter), Lin (1999) steps back from these nuances to broadly define social capital as "investment in social relations with expected returns" (p. 30). Given the well-documented patterns of homophily among immigrant groups (Portes & Manning, 1986), social capital was a useful theory with

which to understand potential differences among the study participants' perceptions of and access to pathways into higher education, based on their cultural identities.

Overview of Par/Desi Framework

Bhattacharya (2019) describes her Par/Desi Framework as a set of ontoepistemologies which she organizes into six central tenets. Bhattacharya's naming of the Par/Desi Framework is itself a statement and a preview of the complex tensions that are inherent to the Desi American experience. Desi, as explained earlier, is a precolonial Sanskrit term derived from the word desh (or homeland) and is widely used to refer to a person with heritage from any of the South Asian countries. The Hindi word *pardes* can be literally translated then as "other land" or a foreign land outside of and away from South Asia. A person from this foreign land is referred to as a *pardesi*. As Desi Americans, we are often caught between these two worlds and identities. Bhattacharya intentionally visualizes this blurred duality by writing it as Par/Desi, as a means of representing "a Desi person who shuttles between multiple subject positions, crossing borders to move between and occupy both 'First and Third' world discursive realities" (Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 183). Grounding this study with Bhattacharya's Par/Desi Framework centered not only the experiences of the participants but also further acknowledged the author's positionality and epistemological approach to this work. The following overview of the framework's six tenets provides further context along with brief explanations of how each served to relate to and potentially support the analysis of these women's college decision-making process.

Tenet 1: Re-membering Desh

This tenet refers to the way Desi Americans often view the homeland, or Desh, with a sense of nostalgia. In my interpretation, this tenet is broadly conceived to refer both to the first-generation Desi American experience as well as the experience of the later generations of Desi Americans. For the first generation in particular, this tenet seems to be a Desi-specific

consideration of the concept of “cultural freeze” (Dabby, 2007; Mukherjea, 2010; Bonus & Vo, 2002; Warriar, 2002), or the tendency among immigrants (of all backgrounds, not exclusively South Asian immigrants) to adhere to the values of the homeland as they were at the time of their emigration, rather than reflecting the ever-evolving nature of culture and societal norms. In so doing, these new Americans become more rigid and ethnocentric (Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, 2020; Kallivayalil, 2004). The ripple effect of this cultural freeze on later generations of Desi Americans is a unique lack of a sense of belonging. In having to navigate the expectations of the perceived homeland (i.e., their parents’ home country) alongside the expectations of their assumed homeland (in this case, the United States), later generations of Desi Americans struggle to belong within both of these communities.

This tenet is particularly relevant to this study, as it highlights not only the way that the participants might have understood their place within broader American society, which in turn, would likely affect the ways they navigate the college decision-making process. It also highlights the extent to which the women were likely expected to uphold the values of their parents’ home countries even through their pursuit of higher education. This tenet influenced my approach to both the data collection and analysis phases of this study, as I sought to understand how the participants’ (and their parents’) perceived relationship to Desh shaped the ways they approached the college decision-making process.

Tenet 2: Par/Des(i): The More Desirable Other

Alongside the first tenet’s tendency to romanticize the homeland is the second tenet of placing the pardesi on a pedestal. Rooted in a colonial mindset, the pardesi is perceived to be better than Desis. This internalized assumption of the pardesi’s superiority has several ripple effects across Desi culture, that range from deeply harmful (e.g., colorism, or the pernicious practice of associating lighter, or “fair and lovely,” skin tones with goodness) to somewhat

superficial (e.g., valuing “foreign” brands over Desi goods). Desi Americans also face an additional layer of complexity in navigating this perception of pardesi superiority, as Desi Americans are often perceived as pardesis themselves in the eyes of those who remain in the homeland. As Bhattacharya (2019) explains, Desi Americans are somehow thought to be a cut above Desis in the homeland, “simply because of our proximity to the more desirable other, Pardesis” (p. 188). Yet, we are simultaneously acutely aware of the ways that we are not, in fact, truly pardesi, as we do not have access to the same privileges of the dominant class.

This tenet underscores the need to consider how the women may have been driven to take certain actions during the college decision-making process that might have minimized the unique needs driven by their Desi American identities. This tenet echoes other work on the role of whiteness within higher education. For example, Stewart and Nicolazzo’s (2018) recent study on high-impact practices highlights the extent to which academia typically values and incentivizes behaviors that are rooted in whiteness. Similarly, the widely held expectation of going away from home and integrating into the college campus is one that has been critiqued for its omission of the influence of students’ cultural identities (Guiffrida, 2006). This tenet serves to explain the underlying cultural impetus for pursuing paths that may seem at odds with the participants’ Desi values and expectations.

Tenet 3: Home is Permanently Deferred

The tensions of the first two tenets converge to create the third tenet, which highlights the lack of sense of belonging that Desi Americans (regardless of generational immigration status) tend to feel. They are not usually viewed as fully Desi among those in the homeland. Yet, they are also not viewed as truly American, due to their phenotypic makeup being at odds with the mainstream image of a typical American. Regardless of claiming to be American, Desi Americans are often asked where they are *really* from.

In my interpretation of this tenet, this lack of sense of belonging could be extended to consider the ways in which Desi American students may potentially weigh the criterion of sense of belonging when navigating the college decision-making process. For example, this tenet potentially suggests that Desi American students may have an even greater need for a sense of belonging within a college environment, compared to their non-Desi peers. Desi Americans might specifically (perhaps subconsciously) consider the appeal of an institution that could minimize this lack of belonging, rather than attending an institution where they were one of only a few Desi American students. I aimed to address this tenet during the second participant interview, by asking participants to explain how important an institution's compositional diversity was in their ultimate decision-making process.

Tenet 4: Beloved and Problematic Communities

While the prior three tenets illuminate tensions arising from immigration, the fourth tenet identifies a tension specific to Desi Americans. Namely, our (beloved) communities can simultaneously function as sources of strength and as (problematic) sources of oppression. This tenet describes the sense of belonging and kinship that is formed through the bonds of the Desi identity. Yet, much of this belongingness is derived from deeply problematic systems, such as casteism, as an example. Moreover, there are myriad problematic beliefs (including misogyny, anti-Blackness, and homophobia, among many others) that run rampant among Desi communities. This tenet reminds us that an unbridled celebration of Desi culture would be premature as there is much resistance and justice work to be done within the community.

For the purposes of this study, I further extended this thinking to the ways that the women's innermost community – their families – could also wield these dual forces of love and oppression. Examples of this tension abound in popular media, both in Hollywood (e.g., Hasan Minhaj's *Homecoming King*, Mindy Kaling's *Never Have I Ever*) and Bollywood. An especially

vivid example of this duality is found in a personal essay included in the award-winning anthology edited by Piyali Bhattacharya (2016) titled *Good Girls Marry Doctors: South Asian American Daughters on Obedience and Rebellion*. In the story, a twin brother and sister are weighing their college options. While the family's love for both children is obvious, they approach the college search process in vastly different ways for each child. The family road trips across the country to visit campuses for their son to consider but does not do the same for their daughter. Instead, they expect her to stay close to home under the family's watchful eye. Moreover, this culturally mediated form of misogyny was a consistent theme in both pilot studies I conducted in preparation for this study. While I could not necessarily directly address this concept through my data collection, I did account for it in my analysis process. In particular, I coded for this tenet as I analyzed the interview transcripts by using versus coding (Saldaña, 2015) to illuminate the tensions between the beloved and problematic in the women's experiences.

Tenet 5: Commodification of Multiculturalism and Diversity

Nearly an inversion of the second tenet that places the *pardesi* on a pedestal, the fifth tenet spotlights the tendency to “reduce Desi folks in the imagination of the *Pardesi*, informed by the centering of whiteness and the exoticization of the Other” (Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 193). The effects of this tendency are felt in myriad ways, including cultural appropriation and microaggressions.

I expected this tenet to likely be most salient in the search phase of the college decision-making process. I sought to understand how the women perceived the compositional diversity of the institutions they were considering. I additionally reviewed the websites of the universities that the women mentioned having applied to, in order to identify any tokenism in recruitment materials. I also listened for this tenet in the final interview with participants, by asking the

participants to reflect on how compositional diversity and/or multiculturalism was portrayed to them during the college search process and how that depiction might have then compared to the reality of their experiences at their institution.

Tenet 6: Prioritizing Communal Healing

These tensions and challenges ultimately converge in a need for communal healing. As we navigate destructive internalized oppression alongside these more overt forms of external violence, communal healing becomes a deep-seated necessity. I additionally extend this tenet to the need to address and heal intergenerational chasms, divides that are often borne out of competing cultural expectations.

This tenet encompassed my overall approach to this work. The influence of this tenet was perhaps most obvious in my research design, wherein I asked participants to conduct an interview with the family member whom they identified as having played a pivotal role in their college decision-making process. In doing so, I hoped to encourage the women to begin or continue the practice of engaging their families in meaningful conversations that explored their shared vulnerabilities and ultimately moved towards a place of healing.

Par/Desi Framework Summary

Taken together, the six tenets of the Par/Desi Framework illuminate the unique experiences of Desi Americans, caught between two worlds of norms and expectations. While some tenets lent themselves well to the data collection phase of the study and others were better suited to aid in analysis, the overall work was useful in guiding my own focus and approach to this study. As this framework underscores the multiplicity of sociological forces that can serve to shape Desi American women's understanding of their cultural identities, I intended to ensure that this multiplicity was addressed in the data collection, examined in the analysis, and appropriately and fully narrated in the findings. Moreover, by applying this framework to understand Desi

American experiences of a specific higher education process (i.e., navigating the college decision-making process), I hoped to add additional nuance to this framework that would be potentially useful for future higher education research that centers the Desi American community.

Overview of Expectation States Theory

Alongside Bhattacharya's (2019) Par/Desi Framework, I additionally relied on Ridgeway's (2011) work on expectation states theory and the role of interaction to provide a specific theoretical lens through which to understand the influence of gender identity in the participants' navigation of the college decision-making process. Certainly, I recognize that Desi American women's cultural and gender identities are interwoven, so much so that they cannot be discretely examined. Indeed, in their foundational work on gender and interaction, Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin (1999) also acknowledge that "gender is always enmeshed in other identities and activities" (p. 193). Moreover, they explain that "gender is a background identity that modifies other identities that are often more salient in the setting than it is" (p. 193). Therefore, following this line of logic in the context of this study's exploration, the influence of Desi American women's gender identity would likely be mediated by and best understood through their cultural identity.

However, Ridgeway's body of work is especially useful in highlighting the extent to which gender is a uniquely powerful identity. Described as a "master identity" (Stets & Burke, 1996), gender is continually evoked, even when there are additional identities or roles that are potentially more relevant to the context. Moreover, gender is distinctive from other similarly defining identities, such as race and class, because of the frequency of interaction with outgroup members. While people tend to interact in racially and socioeconomically homogeneous groups,

cross-gender contact is far likelier (Blau & Schwartz, 1984; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). Ridgeway (1997) points to this frequency of cross-gender contact to underscore the importance of interaction in sustaining the gender system as a whole (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). Because of the unique salience of gender, our understanding of self and others is therefore continually evoked and reified through interaction.

Ridgeway then applies the significance of this interaction to expectation states theory. Berger et al.'s (1977) conception of expectation states theory argues that people organize their interaction in goal-oriented settings based on their status beliefs. Ridgeway (2011) then extends this to gender status beliefs, writing that “when gender is salient, gender status beliefs shape the expectations actors form for the competence of men and women in the setting” (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999, p. 200). Therefore, when gender status is salient, women will behave and make decisions in ways that align with this status.

Expectation states theory serves as a necessary complement to Bhattacharya's Par/Desi Framework in understanding Desi American women's gender identity. Given that Desi American women will be making their decision to attend college within the context of their identity as daughters, their gender identity will likely be salient (as alluded to in my explanation of Bhattacharya's “Beloved and Problematic Communities” Tenet above). I attended to this theory both in the data collection and analysis phases. As appropriate, I made it a point to ask participants to consider and/or elaborate on experiences they shared that suggested that gender might have been particularly salient. For example, in an interview in the first pilot study I conducted for this project, a participant described her extended family's habit of referring to her as “[father's name]'s daughter,” which then precipitated an intense pressure to meet the expectations implied by this moniker. With that in mind, I aimed to rely on expectation states

theory to understand how the women's gender status beliefs influenced their college decision-making process.

Overview of Perna's Conceptual Model of Student College Choice

The four layers of Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice provide a comprehensive understanding of the multiple social and structural forces that students must navigate in order to ultimately decide how and where to pursue postsecondary education. In addition to illustrating the interconnectedness of the key elements of the college choice process, the design of the model relies on the key assumption that the college enrollment decision reflects the student's "situated context" (Perna, 2006, p. 116). Therefore, the model's construction is based on the idea that there is not just one set way to engage the four layers of the model; rather, various permutations and combinations could yield a myriad of possible ways to pursue higher education. Ultimately, the model's design acknowledges that the decision to attend an institution is highly individualized, based on each student's engagement with the various stakeholders included in the model (e.g., family, school, community). Given my focus on understanding specific contextual influences (i.e., cultural and gender identities) which then would lead South Asian American women to pursue higher education at three vastly different types of institutions, these assumptions seemed well-aligned to support the present study. Indeed, Perna (2006) underscores this point by explaining that "the proposed model will likely be especially useful for understanding differences across groups in college-choice outcomes" (p. 120).

The first layer of habitus is predicated on McDonough's (1997) foundational work on applying French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus to the process of college choice. While her empirical findings have been reviewed in the preceding chapter, it is relevant here to consider McDonough's (1997) definition of habitus as "a common

set of subjective perceptions which individuals receive from their immediate environment and which is shared by all members of the same social class” (McDonough, 1997, p. 106). Tellingly, this concept forms the base from which the remaining three layers of Perna’s (2006) model build, because the common perceptions of habitus serve to explain the development of individual aspirations (McDonough, 1997). In other words, an individual’s engagement with choice stakeholders (such as college counselors in their high school, as an example) is determined by the student’s own understanding of their potential to access higher education.

Within the first layer of habitus, Perna (2006) includes three subcategories of demographic characteristics, cultural capital (defined for the purposes of this model as cultural knowledge and value of college attainment), and social capital (defined for the purposes of this model as information about college and assistance with college processes) (p. 117). Within this layer, Perna (2006) also nests the human capital investment model, which frames college choice simply as an economic decision of weighing the potential costs of college attendance against the expected benefits. By including this model within the first of four layers, Perna (2006) illustrates that there are several stakeholders that influence students’ cost/benefit analysis, which ultimately results in their college choice. Importantly, Perna underscores the highly individualized nature of college choice, by including demographic characteristics such as gender and race, along with cultural capital and social capital. The inclusion of these characteristics in the model further aligns with the approach of this study, which was rooted in the assumption that South Asian American women’s cultural and gender identities would be powerful influences in their navigation of the college decision-making process.

The second layer of school and community context is also predicated on work by McDonough (1997) and her concept of organizational habitus, which she defines as “the impact

of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behavior through an intermediate organization" (p. 107). In this model, Perna (2006) frames the student's school and community as this intermediate organization through which college choice is either facilitated or impeded. Within this layer, Perna (2006) includes the type and availability of resources along with structural supports and barriers as examples of markers of the influence of the school and community context. Similar to the first layer of individual habitus, this second layer of organizational habitus is well-suited to support the aims of this study. Given the tendency of the South Asian American diaspora to organize into homogeneous enclaves (e.g., Afzal, 2014), this layer is useful in considering the differing levels of access to college-related information across various South Asian American sub-communities.

The third layer of higher education context acknowledges that the institutions are not simply the outcome of the student's college choice but also an actor within the choice process. Perna's inclusion of this layer recognizes that higher education institutions can influence students' choice outcomes in both active and passive ways. Examples of passive influence include the higher education institution's location and geographic proximity to students' homes (McDonough et al., 1997) while active efforts include direct recruitment activities, including mailers and on-campus information sessions (Salazar, 2019). Within this layer, Perna also cites Nora's (2004) finding on the tendency for students to prefer institutions that align with their personal and social identities, as another example of how the higher education context can shape students' choice process. Perna's connection to Nora's (2004) work is especially relevant to the aims of my own study, as I was particularly interested in understanding how students perceived the alignment between their cultural and gender identities and their chosen postsecondary institution.

The fourth and final layer of social, economic, and policy context completes the model. This layer recognizes that there are direct and indirect ways that broader forces can shape an individual's decision to pursue higher education. As demographic characteristics are included at the first (individual) level, the model comes full circle by including the social context in the final layer. While students' demographic characteristics initially influence and shape their higher education aspirations, there are also social forces that shape the choice process. For example, students' sense of safety or sense of belonging at a given institution is a function of both their individually held identities and the broader social context, based on the institution's geographic location and the sociopolitical leanings of that community. This layer is especially important to consider within the scope of this study, in order to connect South Asian American women's identities to both the micro (or, Perna's first layer) and macro (Perna's fourth layer) levels of their decision-making process.

I planned to draw from Perna's (2006) model both during data collection and analysis. For data collection, my interview protocol (see Appendix B) for the second interview was built around understanding students' experiences of specific elements of this choice structure. For example, I sought to understand the school and community context (the second layer of Perna's model) by directly asking about various elements of these contexts during the second interview (e.g., part three of section ii). Additionally, I planned to gain valuable insights into the students' habitus by understanding how the participants' parents understood their daughters' navigation of this process. Finally, during the analysis phase, I aimed to code the transcripts with the goal of unveiling themes that addressed this model. In doing so, I hoped to not only answer the stated research questions but also glean valuable insights as to the ways South Asian American women's (and by extension, increasingly diverse college-going students') navigation of the

college decision-making process may or may not be fully understood through the lens of Perna's (2006) model.

Overview of Social Capital Theory

Alongside Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice, I additionally relied on Bourdieu's (1986) Social Capital Theory to understand the navigation of the decision-making process. Perna's (2006) model includes demographic characteristics in the first layer and then includes social context in the fourth and final layer. In doing so, she seemingly acknowledges the ways that these concepts (e.g., individual racial identity and organizational inclusivity) are interconnected and operate at both a person and system level. I extend this logic to the role of social capital within the college decision-making process. Perna (2006) includes social capital within the first layer of the model, as a means of denoting the role of information gained through social networks in determining individual aspirations and perceptions of college choice. I argue that social capital operates beyond this level and instead should be viewed as the overarching mechanism through which students engage with the stakeholders in all three remaining layers of Perna's (2006) model.

The role of social capital theory in education research can be originally traced to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986), who defined social capital as "the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 286). This definition has become increasingly varied through the work of several scholars, including Coleman (1988), Portes (2000), Lin (1999), and Putnam (1993). While a detailed discussion of the nuances of each of these scholars' contributions is beyond the scope of this work, it is relevant to note a fundamental difference between Coleman and Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital. Coleman's perspective emphasizes social capital in terms of norms, while Bourdieu's focus is on

the access to institutional resources. For the purposes of this work, I based my understanding of social capital on Bourdieu's definition, because of its emphasis on unequal access to these resources (Dika & Singh 2002; Lareau, 2001).

Indeed, this emphasis on unequal access seemed especially relevant to this present study, as theoretical and empirical literature point to inequality in social capital, based on gender groupings and racial/ethnic groupings (Lin, 2000). Crucially, Lin's (2000) review of this work found that "the evidence is consistent and significant that minority groups and females tend to be embedded in social networks deficient in resources or in social capital" (p. 789). While the use of the word *deficient* here is necessarily concerning, Lin does not suggest that minority groups or females are themselves deficient. Rather, the social capital typically found within these homogenous networks collectively lack the same potential for advancement.

Stanton-Salazar's (1997) seminal work extends Lin's findings specifically to education and highlights the ways that social capital is raced and classed in ways that exclude working-class minority groups. Taken together, these implications suggest for the purposes of this study an additionally important focus on the influence of social capital beyond its relatively minimal inclusion within Perna's (2006) model. The pervasive inequality embedded within the concept of social capital suggests that the women's navigation of all four layers of Perna's (2006) model (rather than only the individual layer) would be shaped by their access to and utilization of social capital.

I drew from two different metaphors to better distinguish between the conceptualization of social capital as it is included in Perna's (2006) model and as the additional layer within which is contained Perna's (2006) entire model. For the social capital that is included within Perna's (2006) model, I viewed social capital as the function of the women's location within

their social network, which then shapes their individual aspirations for and understanding of higher education. For the additional layer, I drew from Bankston and Zhou's (2002) work which frames social capital not as a good to be held or amassed by an individual, but instead as "processes of social interaction leading to constructive outcomes" (p. 286). This differentiation was helpful as an analytic tool, to consider the ways that the women's social networks might have either shaped their individual aspirations or influenced the ways they engaged with various higher education stakeholders. By coding transcripts so as to distinguish between these two conceptualizations of social capital, I hoped to be better able to illuminate the pervasive influence of South Asian American women's social networks in their college decision-making process.

Summary of the Theoretical Framework

This study aimed to understand how South Asian American women's cultural and gender identities influence their college decision-making process. To ensure adequate theoretical grounding for the key concepts of this study, I relied on two sets of theories to address what I referred to as the person- and process-related foci of this study. Complementing Bhattacharya's (2019) Par/Desi Framework with Ridgeway's (2011) work on expectation states theory as it relates to gender identity allowed for a theoretically comprehensive understanding of the ways that nested gender and cultural identities could influence the women's college decision-making process. This decision-making process itself was understood through Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice, which categorizes the key college choice stakeholders into four layers. Although social capital is included in this model, I additionally conceptualized social capital as its own layer within which the four layers of Perna's model are contained. Given the homophily among immigrant groups (Portes & Manning, 1986), social capital theory would suggest that these groups would be accessing and using resources in separate, siloed networks.

Therefore, the influence of Desi culture would reverberate at every level of this process. The women's Desiness would then serve to explain cultural and gender identities *and* access to and utilization of resources that shape their understanding of their college-going options.

By weaving these four theories together, I aimed to be able to create a strong theoretical foundation for this study. While Bhattacharya's work predominantly influenced the research design, I planned to rely on all four theories at various points in the data collection and analysis phases of this project. In doing so, I aimed to illustrate the utility of putting these four, seemingly disparate theories in conversation with one another with the goal of illuminating the influence of South Asian culture in South Asian American women's college decision-making process.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The Power of Portraits

Like many children of Indian immigrants in America, I spent several of my summer breaks during my school years visiting extended family in India. The tickets would be booked months in advance, and I counted down to our departure day with the same giddy excitement of a child waiting for Santa to arrive with Christmas presents. The too-few weeks spent at my grandparents' home in Bengaluru offered the kind of fleeting bliss that could only be enjoyed in childhood – long before any awareness of interpersonal and intergenerational conflicts would transform the trips from delightful cakewalks into a delicate dance of tiptoeing on eggshells (just a metaphor, of course, we don't eat eggs!). But, as an only child with no extended family nearby while I was growing up, I was keenly aware of and grateful for the simple joy of being surrounded by so many dotting family members – grandparents, aunts, uncles, and especially cousins. The time would pass in a blur, shuttling from one relative's house to the next, offering prayers at local temples, shopping for new ghagras that reflected the latest fashion trends.

I cannot remember how old I was the first time I found the closet filled with old photos. I do remember carefully turning the delicate, yellowed pages of an album as I marveled at my secret discovery. Look at that debonair young man in the suit! How could that be my old, gray Thatha? And, look at that woman standing next to him! Who knew my bent-over Aiji, whose spine had been increasingly ravaged by osteoporosis, had once stood so tall, so proud? Of course, my initial fascination with the photos sprang from my childlike awe in seeing the youthful versions of all the “old people” in my life. But, each time we returned to India after that visit, I would rifle through that same closet, pull out all the photo albums, and spend an entire evening looking at each of the photos with an almost meditative reverence.

Although the photos themselves remained just the same as they were the very first time I saw them, I found that they told me new stories with each passing year. The tight-lipped smiles of brides in old wedding photos told a different story as I developed a greater understanding of the complexities of Indian femininity. As I learned more about family lore, the nondescript blur of faces I had looked at for years would snap into sharp focus – there, the woman who would later run away from home with the husband she chose for herself, a love marriage!

During one of my most recent trips back, I found myself gazing yet again at a favorite black-and-white photo of my then five-year-old mother and three-year-old uncle possessively clinging to their grandmother. I suddenly realized I had never seen a photo of her alone; she exists on film only to support the family members she cared for her whole life. While the main characters in the story of that photo had long been my mother and her brother, I reconsidered this photo's story with my great-grandmother cast as the heroine, a brilliant woman with a notoriously sharp wit making the most of her life in a society and time that demanded her only role be that of a caretaker. I was left wondering what story the photo would tell me when I next looked at it through the eyes of a newly-minted Dr. Sundar.

Indeed, it was because of my training to become Dr. Sundar that I was already able to see yet another layer of meaning nestled within these photo albums. As a doctoral student, I often struggled to make sense of esoteric research terms, such as ontology and epistemology. Similarly, while methodology and positionality were easier terms to define, they seemed to hold such a vast universe of concepts and possibilities within them, that I wondered how I would be able to make sense of these ideas within the scope of my own research agenda. Now, as I designed and undertook this study to understand how South Asian American women's cultural and gender identities manifest and then influence their college decision-making process, I

realized that all of these terms could be understood through my relationship with these sacred photo albums.

In the following chapter, I discuss the various methodological decisions made in answering the study's research questions, which are: 1) How do South Asian American women's cultural and gender identities manifest and then influence their college decision-making process? 1a) What, if any, are the similarities across South Asian American women's navigation of this process? 1b) What are the key differences in this decision-making process that lead to varying types of higher education institutions (i.e., community college vs. large, public state university vs. elite, private university)? and, 2) How does the decision-making process influence these women's ongoing perceptions and experiences of their institution? I begin by explaining my rationale for designing this qualitative study around the portraiture method and the ways this method aligned ontologically, epistemologically, and theoretically with my approach to this work. I then provide a description of each of the three institutions (i.e., Houston Community College, University of Houston, and Rice University) where the participants decided to pursue their postsecondary education followed by an overview of my recruitment process and a brief description of the participants. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of my approach to data collection and analysis along with the limitations of these methodological decisions.

Research Design: Portraiture

This study was broadly situated within the realm of qualitative research¹. A qualitative approach was appropriately suited to address this study's research questions, as Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain that qualitative research is fundamentally seeking "answers to questions

¹ As the researcher, I made the decision to take a qualitative approach to this study. However, it is important to note that this decision was somewhat of a *fait accompli*, as there are currently no large, nationally representative surveys that capture data on students' college choice with disaggregated race/ethnicity categories to be able to conduct a study of South Asian American students' college choices.

that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning" (p. 8, emphasis in original).

Under the broad umbrella of qualitative research, I situated this study within narrative inquiry. In Clandinin's (2007) *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry*, Pinnegar and Daynes explain that "narrative inquiry begins in experiences as expressed in lived and told stories" (p. 5). As this study's research questions centered Desi American women's very personal (and likely ongoing) negotiation of gender and cultural identities, I expected this process to be best understood in their own words, through their stories. To further elevate the importance of storytelling in this endeavor, I situated this study within the portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997) method of inquiry.

Developed by Harvard sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, portraiture (like narrative inquiry, ethnography, and case study methods) is centered on "developing a narrative that is both convincing and authentic" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 14). However, she differentiates portraiture from these comparatively traditional qualitative research methods by combining "systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science" and in so doing, "capture[s] the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 3). Because this study was driven in large part by my desire to increase South Asian American women's representation in higher education literature, I found that portraiture seemed to be the method best suited to accomplish this goal. Rather than relying on a method that would require me to clinically compress the women's stories into data excerpts that served to support my voice, I hoped to honor their experiences by creating for each of my eleven participants a portrait that would capture as fully as possible the intricacies of their lived experiences. I was also keenly aware of Lawrence-Lightfoot's emphasis on *authenticity* in developing this narrative. While South Asian American women's

representation may be scant within higher education literature, there are certainly stereotypes and assumptions that abound both within and beyond the Desi community. In detailing the nuances of these women's lives and the multiplicity of their identities, I aimed to challenge and hopefully expand the notion of who is an *authentic* South Asian American woman.

As Lawrence-Lightfoot explains in a 2016 interview about her method, “the idea [of portraiture] is to get people interested in thinking about important questions in complicated, grounded, thoughtful ways” (p. 20). By creating “intentionally provocative” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p.20) portraits, I hoped for this work to be able to serve as a mirror for the South Asian American community, to see their own lives reflected back from the nuances of these eleven women's lives. I additionally wanted readers outside the Desi community to be drawn to these stories and compelled to consider what is lost when stories just like these are obscured by current norms and practices, such as over-aggregation of Asian subgroups or an overreliance on the model minority myth.

Beyond this objective of blending art and science, portraiture is further differentiated from other similar qualitative research methods in three key ways. First, portraiture is explicit in its “recognition of the use of the self as the primary research instrument²” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 14). Second, portraiture focuses on identifying “the origins and expressions of goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 9) rather than following the staid social science pattern of documenting failure. In other words, portraitists intentionally aim to take an asset-based approach, rather than identifying deficits and engaging in victim blaming. Finally, portraitists begin with a goal of “speaking to broader audiences beyond the academy, thus linking inquiry to

² Although I was appropriately wary of the positivist term “instrument” here, I aimed to honor the spirit of this principle by making explicit my own orientation and biases, even as I took a constructivist approach to this work, as described in the following section.

public discourse and social transformation” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 14). The following sections outline the ways that these three principles align with this study.

Echoing the Self

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) explains that “With portraiture, the person of the researcher – even when vigorously controlled – is more evident and more visible than in any other research form” (p. 13). She then delineates six ways the researcher or portraitist’s voice is woven into the work. *Voice as witness* makes explicit that the researcher is placed within the scene with the purpose of becoming fully aware of all of the elements within the environment. *Voice as interpretation* further underscores this concept, by recognizing that it is through the portraitist’s eyes that we are making sense of this environment – the “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) emerge from her interpretation. *Voice as preoccupation* makes explicit that the portraitist’s perspective, interests, and understanding of the literature will function as the lens through which she makes sense of the environment she is studying. *Voice as autobiography* then acknowledges that the portraitist herself will be reflected in the portrait, though Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) is careful to caution that “[the portraitist] must not let her autobiography obscure or overwhelm the inquiry” (p. 95). *Listening for voice* is a subtle yet powerful statement about the researcher’s relationship with the participant. Rather than passively listening *to* a story, the portraitist listens *for* a story, which highlights her agency and comparatively more active engagement with the participants. Finally, *voice in dialogue* further underscores the collaborative, communal nature of the researcher-participant relationship in portraiture. In reflecting on the deeply personal motivations that animated this particular study, these elements of voice further reinforced portraiture’s alignment with my positionality and orientation to this work. As a Desi American woman representing the experiences of Desi American women, I remained keenly aware of the

ways that my insider identity would at times allow me to more carefully understand and amplify the participants' voices.

Illuminating Goodness

Portraitists approach their work with an intention of illuminating goodness. In doing so, we are not oversimplifying the complexities of participants' experiences or disregarding the negative elements of participants' experiences. Rather, in looking at the full breadth of participants' experiences, we should expect to see both the light and the shadows, the feats of strength and moments of weakness. This prescribed approach to portraiture was especially appropriate given my relationship to this work. As a Desi American woman, I was necessarily acutely aware of the ways that my own cultural and gender identities shaped my college decision-making process. Therefore, by taking what Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) refers to as both a "generous *and* critical stance" (p. 143, emphasis in original), I found it possible to highlight the strengths of each of the individual women while also identifying the ways larger structural and/or societal forces (e.g., Desi American community norms) could be transformed, with an eye toward social justice and equity.

Looking Beyond Academia

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) finally sets portraiture apart from other traditional forms of inquiry through its focus on appealing to audiences beyond the academy. This not only translates to the ways that findings are framed but also in thinking about the litmus test the portraitist applies to this work. Rather than using reliability and validity as standards to which to hold the work, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) instead advises an emphasis on authenticity. This concept is further supported by Bhattacharya's (2019) recommendation to "imagine your participants and communities as your primary audience" (p. 198). This methodological and theoretical framing again aligned with my goals for this work, in that I was seeking to not only write a dissertation

that would meet the academic requirements for earning a doctoral degree. I was also seeking to see myself and my community better represented in higher education literature. To extend the portraiture metaphor, my hope was that the gallery of the eleven portraits that emerged from this work would be viewed by those both within and beyond academia.

Ontology, Epistemology, & Theory

The three defining characteristics of portraiture align ontologically, epistemologically, and theoretically with the broader framing of this study. My ontological approach was one of relativism, which perceives reality as being multiple and “dependent for their form and content on the individual person or groups holding the constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110-111). Moreover, my epistemological orientation to this work was rooted in constructivism, which assumes the researcher and participants are “interactively linked so that the ‘findings’ are *literally created* as the investigation proceeds” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111, emphasis in original). In terms of the voice of the researcher, constructivism assumes that the researcher will take on the role of the “passionate participant” which echoes the elements of voice as outlined in portraiture.

While the preceding description accurately reflects the ways that I had come to understand these ways of being and knowing through my formal training, I found it additionally important to note that these are concepts rooted in Western ideologies and philosophies, which ultimately incompletely described my orientation to this work. As a Desi American woman crafting a study to increase Desi American women’s representation in higher education literature, I was additionally guided by Bhattacharya’s (2019) Par/Desi Framework. As detailed in the previous chapter, this framework is a set of ontoepistemologies that underscore the ways that my lived experience of shuttling “between multiple subject positions, crossing borders to move between and occupy both ‘First and Third’ world discursive realities” shapes my orientation to

this work (Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 183). Moreover, in bringing forth this framework, Bhattacharya (2019) exhorts the researcher to “give up your will to know” and instead prioritize the agency of the participants. She invites researchers to reconceptualize their understanding of the data collection process as conversations that are “bidirectional and emergent” (p. 197). Taken together, these concepts substantively supported the methodological decision of using portraiture for this study.

Setting the Context: Houston

In designing this study, I planned to interview South Asian American women who were currently enrolled at three different types of higher education institutions located in Houston, Texas, the fourth largest city in the United States and often cited as an example of how diversity will look across the country by the year 2050 (Kotkin, 2010). According to a 2015 report by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), Houston is the most diverse, rapidly growing major U.S. metropolitan area. Over the past 20 years, the Latino and Asian shares of the area's population nearly doubled; as of the 2010 Census, no one racial or ethnic group formed a significant majority of Houston's population (Capps, Fix, & Nwosu, 2015). This finding was particularly relevant to this study, as none of the immigrant groups within the South Asian diaspora had formed a majority within the greater Houston metropolitan area. Any social capitals that might have been afforded unequally to a dominant immigrant group was not a concern, as all the groups were in relatively similar positions.

However, the MPI report also reveals some stark differences within Houston's South Asian immigrant community. For example, in analyzing the median household income of various immigrant communities by national origin, Indians were among the highest with \$93,000, well above the U.S. born median of \$61,000. By contrast, the median Pakistani household income was found to be \$52,000 (Capps, Fix, & Nwosu, 2015). Given the widely documented

correlation between household income and higher education (Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007; McDonough, 1997; Walpole, 2003), these trends further support this study's objective of examining college decision-making across widely varying contexts.

Alongside these quantitative considerations, I also chose to locate this study within the Houston context, because of my own personal relationship to the city. I was born in Houston and lived there for 28 years, until I moved to Los Angeles to pursue my doctoral studies. I then spent the final two years of my doctoral studies in Houston again, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, I was aware that my study participants would likely view me as an insider within their community, as I am also a South Asian American woman living in Houston. However, in order to truly be an insider, I knew I would need to share a cultural shorthand with my participants, demonstrating an ability to understand and appropriately respond to culturally loaded terms (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019). To that end, I felt that I was best equipped to establish this type of rapport with study participants who considered Houston home, as I do.

With these personal and quantitative considerations in mind, I chose Houston as the site for both pilot studies I conducted in preparation for this dissertation study. My experiences from these studies further confirmed Houston as the optimal site for this work. For example, for the first pilot study, I conducted nine interviews with three first-year students at UH who considered Houston their home. Throughout these interviews, I recognized several instances when my insider status was tacitly acknowledged in the ways participants responded to my questions, through their use not only of various culturally loaded terms (e.g., an unspoken assumption that I would understand the phrase "Indian mentality") but also several location-specific terms within the city of Houston.

My identity as a native Houstonian also functioned as a proxy to insider status in instances when I did not share certain identities (such as religious affiliation) with my participants. For example, I previously interviewed Muslim women whose lives, by their own accounts, were strongly shaped by their faith. As a Hindu woman, I am an outsider to many of their faith-based experiences (e.g., making the decision to wear the hijab). Similarly, my outsider status was apparent when interviewing three Malayalee Christian women who participated in my second pilot study. However, with both the Muslim and Christian women, my ability to demonstrate familiarity with these communities using Houston-specific references (e.g., naming specific mosques or referencing sub-sects of Malayalee Christians that are heavily represented in the Houston area) allowed me to further reinforce rapport and trust with the study participants. In doing so, I was better able to maintain the fluidity of the conversation and ask more specific questions, which likely would not have been possible had I been conducting these interviews with participants with similar identities but in a different geographic context.

Three Institutional Types

In addition to these considerations, Houston was logistically well-suited to serve as the site of this study, because it is home to a wide variety of higher education institutions. To address the research question that focused on understanding how differences in South Asian American women's gender and cultural identities led them to pursue their postsecondary education in different types of institutions, I recruited study participants who were enrolled in an elite, private research university (Rice University), a large, public four-year university (University of Houston), and an open-access two-year college (Houston Community College). The following sections provide a brief orientation to each of these sites. Appendix A includes additional information about enrollment demographics and cost of attendance.

Elite, Private University: Rice University

Rice University's 300-acre tree-lined campus (Rice University, n.d.) is a perfectly manicured oasis that immediately looks distinctly set apart from its workaday surroundings of the bustling Texas Medical Center. Initially chartered in 1891, the locally nicknamed "Harvard of the South" opened as The Rice Institute in 1912. At the time, the founding president, Edgar Odell Lovett "called for the establishment of a university 'of the highest grade'" and exhorted the campus community to "keep the standards up and the numbers down" (Rice University, n.d.).

This ethos of prestige and exclusivity continues to be reflected across the institution today. Consistently ranked among the nation's top 20 universities by U.S. News and World Report, Rice currently boasts a 6-to-1 undergraduate student-to-faculty ratio and a median undergraduate class size of just 14. As might be expected, this exclusivity is curated through highly selective admissions practices. For example, among the 18,063 students who applied to Rice University during the Fall 2017 application cycle, only 2,864 were admitted, leading to an acceptance rate of just under 16%. Yet, Rice's undergraduate demographics are somewhat unique from its peer institutions in that just over half of their domestic students are Texas residents, unlike similarly competitive institutions that enroll students more evenly from across the entire country.

Large, Public University: University of Houston

Originally founded in 1927, the University of Houston was created in response to a small group of working-class high school students who were eager to pursue higher education. They held classes in local churches and area schools until legendary oilman Hugh Roy Cullen made a donation that enabled the construction of today's UH campus. As he did so, Cullen declared that "I have only one condition in making this gift. The University of Houston must always be a college for working men and women and their sons and daughters. If it were to be another rich

man’s college, I wouldn’t be interested” (Davis-Jones, 2010). In the decades since, the University of Houston has largely heeded this call, and the compositional diversity of its current student body makes UH the second most diverse public research university in the country.

Although the campus is a public institution with a mission to serve all students, UH operates at a significant disadvantage compared to the two larger statewide higher education systems, University of Texas and Texas A&M, which are protected by the Texas constitution to receive what are known as “Permanent University Funds.” Predictably, this lack of resources limits the ways UH can serve students and therefore, college-bound students in Texas tend to favor UT and Texas A&M as their top choice schools. However, the current UH president, Dr. Renu Khator, has tirelessly worked during her 12-year tenure to change the perceptions and potential of the campus. Actively working to move the institution away from its “Cougar High” image (in reference to UH’s cougar mascot), Khator has made several key strides, including shepherding the institution to earning Tier One and “R1” recognition from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and successfully completing a billion dollar capital campaign (Fickman, 2019). Yet, these changes have not fully shaken UH’s core identity as an underdog within the Houston and Texas higher education landscape.

Open-Access College: Houston Community College

In 1971, Houston Community College was created as an extension of the Houston Independent School District. In 1989, it separated from HISD and three years later restructured into a multi-college system. Today, the HCC system comprises 18 campuses across the Houston area. Located in the tony Houston suburb of Bellaire, the West Loop campus is one of five campuses within HCC’s Southwest College. A now-defunct big-box store Incredible Universe was converted in 1998 to house the current campus. In addition to awarding several types of associate degrees (Associate in Arts, Associate of Arts in Teaching, Associate in Science,

Associate in Applied Science), HCC also offers training in certificate programs, core curriculum, and occupational skills.

Locating the Three Institutions

The preceding descriptions are crafted to draw attention to the specific ways that these institutions typify their respective institutional types. However, I additionally want to highlight a key characteristic that all of the three campuses share, which is their relatively similar locations within the city of Houston. Rice, UH, and HCC's West Loop campus are all located in the heart of the city and within a short drive from Downtown Houston. Additionally, the distance from UH to Rice and Rice to HCC is about a 15-minute drive. (As in many other sprawling urban settings, distance between locations in Houston is better measured by drive time rather than in actual miles.) I include this detail to further emphasize the ways that potential differences in the women's collegiate experiences can be ascribed to the institutional type itself, rather than the location of the institution.

Participant Description & Recruitment Plan

I began my recruitment process with the intention of ultimately working with between three to five self-identified South Asian American women who had been continuously enrolled at each of the three institution types. I intentionally specified "continuously enrolled" to ensure that I would be able to trace their college decision-making process directly to that institution, rather than including women whose higher education journeys involved transferring from one institution to another. Although I recognized the increasing prevalence of "swirling" (McCormick, 2003; Taylor & Jain, 2017) in many students' paths through higher education, including this criterion and excluding transfer students from this study allowed for greater clarity in addressing the study's research questions, particularly as they related to tracing differences in institutional types.

In addition to having been continuously enrolled at their institution, I sought to recruit women who were enrolled in their final semester immediately prior to graduation. In the first pilot study that I conducted in preparation for this study, I recruited first year students, because I wanted the college decision-making process to be as recent as possible in the participants' memories. Yet, I found the third interview to be the most fruitful in generating data that most directly addressed my research question about understanding college choice processes. The women shared how their current experiences (as first-year students who were a few weeks into their second semesters) connected to and affirmed their decision to attend UH. In light of these findings, I chose to recruit women students enrolled in their final semester before graduation for the second pilot study that I conducted prior to this study. Although this timing naturally meant that the participants were more removed from the college decision-making process itself, I found the women to be better equipped to reflect on the ways this decision had shaped their lives, both in terms of their collegiate experiences and their post-graduation plans. Additionally, my decision to include this criterion was further predicated on my assumption that working with participants who were closer to graduation would result in more nuanced and insightful conversations between the participants and their parents during the participant-led interviews (as described in the following Data Collection section).

Given the various pathways out of community college, particularly in terms of transferring into a four-year institution, I realized that the "final semester prior to graduation" criterion severely limited the potential pool of participants who thought they might be eligible to participate in this study. Therefore, I revised my participant criteria for the community college participants and asked for participants to have been currently enrolled in HCC and to have done so immediately following high school (i.e., without any gaps in their educational history or

having transferred from a four-year institution to HCC, etc.). With this change in my participant recruitment criteria, I was able to engage with two HCC students who were completing their first year at the institution after having graduated from high school the year before.

In addition to criteria pertaining to institutional affiliations, the participant recruitment criteria also specified that I was seeking out students who self-identified as South Asian American women and had attended middle and high school in the United States. By including these criteria, I hoped to ensure recruiting participants who would have been immersed (at least beginning in middle school, if not sooner) in American culture during their formative years. This timing seemed crucial, as it would have been relevant to milestones that would influence the women's navigation of the decision-making process, both from a personal (e.g., puberty, awareness of gender norms and expectations) and academic (as extant literature suggests that the choice process begins as early as seventh grade) perspective. Therefore, this approach ensured recruiting participants who could speak directly to experiences of having had to negotiate their cultural and gender identities amid both Desi and American expectations.

In terms of the recruitment process itself, the process varied widely given my different relationships with faculty and staff at these institutions. I had the strongest connection to UH, as an alumna and former staff member. In addition to relying on the same staff members within the Bauer College of Business who had shared my recruitment materials for my two pilot studies, I additionally expanded my search through the College of Education, Asian American Studies, the School of Communication, the UH Honors College, and the Office of Undergraduate Research, in addition to reaching out to South Asian student organizations. I ultimately worked with two students who were referred through their advisor as Honors business majors. Three others connected with me through the email they received from their Undergraduate Research listserv.

Despite efforts to recruit a wider array of majors, all of the UH participants were either business or STEM majors.

At Rice, I reached out to various staff members I was connected to through my professional network and former student affairs colleagues. I was connected to potential participants both through faculty members and student organizations. Ultimately, the four Rice participants who joined the study did so after having received my recruitment flyer in an email sent to the entire South Asian Society undergraduate student organization. Despite having all been recruited from the same organization, the Rice students had the greatest variety, in terms of majors.

My recruitment efforts were most challenging at HCC, due to a cumbersome IRB approval process that restricted my recruitment to posting recruitment flyers on campus. In addition, the flyers themselves had to receive approval for posting from each campus manager. I ultimately visited four campus locations, and one student filled out the recruitment flyer intake form. After we completed our first interview, she then asked her friend to join my study. Both had met through their coursework, given their shared goal of eventually pursuing a career in medicine. However, one of the participants later indicated that she planned to pursue a major in Art History instead.

Data Collection

After I received the participants' interest form via Qualtrics (which was linked on my recruitment flyer) I scheduled a brief phone call to discuss additional details of study participation and answer any questions. During these conversations, I explained that I was a doctoral student at UCLA working on a dissertation that was exploring the experiences of South Asian American women. I also reiterated all of the criteria for eligible participants, to make sure that they met all of these requirements. I had several phone calls with participants who filled out

the Qualtrics form but did not, in fact, meet the study criteria, at which point I thanked them for their time and interest and ended the call. For those who were eligible to participate, I then explained the four elements (three interviews with me along with the participant-led interview) of data collection. Once I had answered their questions about myself and my work, I either scheduled our first interview or, whenever possible, all three. All of the women received a \$100 Tango gift card once they completed their participation in the study. I chose to use Tango cards rather than offering cards from a specific company, because the Tango card allows recipients to select the retailer(s) where they would like to redeem the funds and I wanted to offer the participants that level of flexibility.

I ultimately worked with two women from HCC, four women from Rice, and five women from UH. I interviewed all of the women three times and received recordings of the participant-led interview from all but one participant, for a total of 43 interview transcripts. The interviews ranged in length from about one hour to two hours. The participant-led interviews had much wider variation with some lasting as little as three or five minutes and others lasting an hour.

As Lawrence-Lightfoot emphasizes the need to understand participants' contexts to create compelling portraits, the first interview focused on discovering as much as possible about the students' early experiences leading up to the point of applying to colleges. During this interview, in addition to the conversational questions, I used the twenty statements test, wherein I asked participants to complete the statement "I am _____" twenty times as an elicitation device to better identify the women's salient identities (Jennings et al., 1986). As this test developed from the symbolic interactionism school of thought (Spitzer, 1976) which also serves as the basis of Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin's work on gender, this instrument aligned well with the theoretical framing of the study and allowed the participants' salient identities to naturally

emerge. Participants completed the activity during our Zoom call, as they took anywhere from about five to fifteen minutes to fill in the blanks. They then emailed their completed statements back to me and we discussed both what was included and perhaps omitted from the list. After reading through the participants' completed statements, I was able to ask questions not only about the identities and designations they included on their list but also some designations that were conspicuously missing from the list. For example, in previous iterations of this study, several participants did not include "I am a woman" on their list. Asking about this omission would then lead to fruitful conversations about the extent to which gender norms and expectations were so deeply ingrained within them – so much so that they did not even feel it was necessary to include this identity on the list. In other words, they felt their gender identity was so pervasive that including it on the list would have been redundant or unnecessarily stating the obvious.

In addition to understanding the identities through which the participants define themselves, the first interview's protocol was designed to identify the initial point at which the women recognized higher education as a possibility for themselves. While students from wealthier households (with greater social capital) typically cannot identify a particular instance when college-going expectations were instilled in them, students from less privileged backgrounds who ultimately attend college can often point to an influential figure in their lives who catalyzed their desire to attend college (McDonough, 1997). This first interview aimed to clearly elucidate the college-going culture and expectation within each participant's community.

The second interview examined the entirety of their college application process. I intended to not only understand the nuts and bolts of their process, such as the schools they had considered and eventually applied to and how (if at all) they approached preparation for college

entrance exams, but also the interpersonal and familial dynamics that may have also factored into their decision-making process. Given the depth of data needed to create compelling portraits with the portraiture method, I was additionally interested in understanding the more subtle nuances of each woman's navigation of this process. For example, were they emotionally swayed by what peers at school were saying about their college choices or perhaps were there members of the community whose opinions on which they placed potentially outsized value? Understanding the relational and emotional contexts of their navigation of the application process was important to ensure that the portraits that eventually emerged from these interviews would portray as fully as possible the women's experiences.

At the conclusion of the second interview, I asked each participant to reflect on their college decision-making process and identify the family member who had played the most pivotal role in this process. Typically, their choice was obvious to me based on all of the experiences the women had shared with me until that point. Nearly all of the participants chose to interview a parent, with the only exceptions of one participant who interviewed both parents together and another participant who chose to interview her brother. I emailed a set of questions to the participant but reminded them of the healing tenet of the Par/Desi Framework and encouraged the women to keep the interviews conversational in nature and to simply follow their own curiosities.

To ensure greater comfort for both the participant and her selected family member, I chose not to be present for this interview and instead simply asked to receive an audio recording of the conversation. This participant-led interview was a necessary element of the broader research design of this study, as it was both methodologically and theoretically relevant. In explaining the key elements of portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) emphasizes the role of

triangulation in constructing emergent themes. Hearing the parents' view of their daughters' college decision-making process helped serve this purpose. Additionally, Bhattacharya's (2019) final tenet of the Par/Desi Framework emphasizes the need for healing. I aimed to enact this tenet by asking the participants to engage in these candid conversations with their family members.

In both prior iterations of this study, I consistently found that all of the women's college decisions were emotionally fraught and underscored the need for healing. For example, one woman had applied to and been accepted by her top choice school. Yet, she had never shared any of this information with her parents, because she assumed they would not allow her to attend that institution. Mere months from graduating from UH, she still carried the burden of the secret and its attendant regret. As I described Bhattacharya's healing tenet in my explanation of the participant-led interview, this participant was emphatic in her agreement for the need for healing within her own life and by extension the Desi community. I hoped to similarly engage the participants of this study in identifying and exploring the spaces of their lives that could potentially benefit from these acts of healing.

The participant-led interviews varied widely in terms of their length and depth. Some of the recordings were as short as three and five minutes a piece, while others lasted a full hour. The differences in this process were itself a revealing factor, as there seemed to be a strong correlation between the student's academic profile and the length of the interview, with all of the Rice women's interviews being among the longest. The depth of the interviews also varied, with some women feeling more comfortable in asking additional questions based on the interviewee's responses, while others chose to only ask the questions that I had provided.

The final interview focused on having the participants reflect on the meaning of their experience, as students considered how their college decision-making process had shaped the past four years of their lives and had set the stage for what would follow after their graduation. Additionally, the final interview allowed the women to reflect on and process their experience of interviewing their family member(s) about their college decision-making process. Because portraiture necessarily emphasizes the importance of understanding the physical context, the third interview was designed to be conducted as a walking interview through the participant's college campus. Prior work using walking interviews (Harris, 2016) suggests that this method would also allow participants to more naturally reflect on their decision to become a part of their campus community. Despite only being able to meet with participants via Zoom, I kept the questions the same and simply asked the participants to talk me through where they would have taken me, if we had met on campus.

Creating the Portraits

The initial phase of the data analysis process occurred in tandem with data collection, as I documented my thoughts in impressionistic records, which are described as the “ongoing dialectic between data gathering and reflection” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 188). These reflections served to support the data collection and analysis process in several ways. At an individual level, by documenting my immediate reaction to each interview, I was then able to accordingly tailor my next meeting with each participant. At a broader level, I was also able to begin to document my initial perceptions of emergent themes by reflecting on ways that the women might have been overlapping in their responses to specific questions. Finally, I was also able to reflect on and document my own personal thoughts that might have been influencing my understanding of the women's stories, which would then further guide me in considering

additions to the interview protocol (e.g., adding clarifying questions) and being mindful of tempering these views as I moved further into analysis.

After writing impressionistic records immediately following each interview, I then focused on the transcription process. I used Otter.ai, an online transcription service that integrated with the Zoom platform, to produce a transcript in real time. Following each interview, I listened to the playback recording of the interview while reading this machine-generated transcript. I made any necessary corrections to the transcript and additionally added relevant notes about participants' nonverbal communication that would further facilitate later analysis.

I listened to the recording of the interview and took additional notes to prepare for every following interview. For the second interview, this meant listening to the first interview. For the third interview, I listened to the parent interview, second interview, and first interview. I also listened to the parent interview separately and wrote an impressionistic record to mirror the process of having actually conducted the interview myself. I then made notes about additional questions with which to begin the third interview. In many cases, due to rescheduled interviews and scheduling conflicts, I often listened to several interviews multiple times in preparation for conducting additional interviews.

Once I had completed the final interview, I then engaged in voice-centered analysis, which aims to maintain the complexity of participants' narratives and requires the researcher to read each interview transcript four different times (Gilligan et al., 1989). Gilligan et al., (1989) describe the four readings as "four soundings" (p. 99) through which the researcher listens for distinct layers of the narrative. For the purposes of this process, I treated all four interview transcripts as one cohesive unit to read through four times. First, I would read to establish the

main arc of the narrative, then I would listen for the self (or, the speaker's role within the action), and with each subsequent reading, I would focus on identifying each layer's function within the overall story. Recognizing that the ways in which participants choose to tell their stories is a reflection of their own consciousness (Vygotsky, 1987), I hoped to use each of the four rounds of readings to fully immerse myself in the many layers of each participant's experiences.

Once I had "mentally lived with" the data (Seidman, 2013, p. 128) by completing the voice-centered analysis, I then coded the transcripts by following the process that Lawrence-Lightfoot refers to as "constructing emergent themes" which has five elements beginning with identifying 1) *repetitive refrains*, 2) *resonant metaphors*, and 3) *cultural and institutional rituals*. Then, the portraitist focuses on 4) *triangulation*, or looking for convergence among various data sources. Finally, this process culminates in 5) *revealing patterns*.

As the term suggests, repetitive refrains are those concepts that participants "persistently articulated" (p. 193) because they are a core element of how participants understand themselves and their environment. In my first pilot study, one such "repetitive refrain" would have been "Indian mentality," which the participant used throughout all three interviews in a variety of contexts, ranging from her approach to cooking to her mother's insistence on taking the SAT exam until she achieved a near-perfect score. Similarly, resonant metaphors are those ideas that participants share that are especially symbolic of a specific perspective or experience. In my second pilot study, one of the women referred to the "bell jar" (from Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*) to describe the ways she felt stifled by her parents' overprotective tendencies. To identify these repetitive refrains and resonant metaphors, I used in-vivo coding, which "prioritizes and honors the participant's voice," by creating a code with specific words and short phrases in the participant's own words (Saldaña, 2013, p. 295). To identify important cultural

rituals, or “expressions of values” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 201), I used values coding (Saldaña, 2013).

The perspectives shared in the participant-led interview were coded for points of triangulation. In addition to keeping an eye toward this type of convergence of ideas, Lawrence-Lightfoot also emphasizes the importance of identifying points of dissonance (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). To address this need, I used versus coding, to identify dual, competing forces or concepts (Saldaña, 2013). In both pilot studies, I used versus coding to examine how participants’ views of UH contrasted against the other schools they had considered attending, which ultimately allowed me a deeper understanding of their college decision-making process. Moreover, versus coding was useful to illuminate tensions outlined in the Par/Desi Framework (Bhattacharya, 2019), such as the tenets that refer to beloved yet problematic communities and balancing Desi values with an American upbringing.

While the portraiture methodology provided guidance on the data analysis approach to this point, I also additionally relied on the theories outlined in the previous chapter to develop themes from the codes. Using these themes to structure the narrative, I then worked to craft a meaningful portrait of each of the eleven women (which comprise Chapter Five). Once I had crafted all of the portraits, I then read all of the portraits from each of the three institutional types as one cohesive unit and repeated the process of the voice centered analysis. I then used this analysis to shape the analysis that emerged to more directly address the study’s research questions (as laid out in Chapter Six).

It was especially important to me throughout the analysis process to carry the whole for as long as I possibly could. While I knew that the portraits that I crafted would necessarily offer a narrower or more curated view of the women’s experiences than was included in the entirety of

the interview process, I wanted to make sure that I was not prematurely condensing these stories for the purposes of my analytic process. Therefore, rather than creating codebooks, when I refer to coding, I refer to the ways that I made notes, in narrative form, with each reading of the transcripts. In doing so, I was better able to see the overlaps between the principles of portraiture (e.g., repetitive refrains), the types of codes I drew on from Saldaña's (2013) work, and the tenets of Bhattacharya's (2019) Par/Desi Framework. Keeping myself immersed in the entirety of the transcripts also helped me ensure that I was keeping the participant's voice at the forefront of the analysis process, but alongside my own thoughts and understandings as reflected in my notes.

This narrative form of analysis also helped me to make key ethical decisions about the ways that I was choosing to represent the women's experiences in the form of these portraits. While I aimed to provide the reader with the sense that they had truly come to know these women almost as well as I had, I also knew that it was important for me to protect my participants and the communities to which they (and oftentimes, I) belonged. With that in mind, I intentionally omitted the more traumatic experiences that the women shared with me. Although these experiences painfully highlighted the hardships wrought by their cultural and gender identities, I preferred instead to make this point using less fraught examples from their experiences, so as to not exploit these traumas merely in service of an academic argument. In a similar vein, it was important to me to avoid having my participants' stories seem as though they were echoing common South Asian tropes, such as arranged marriages. However, to not include any references to these concepts (when they were organically emerging in my conversations with all eleven women) seemed to be erasing or ignoring what was important to the women themselves. Therefore, I read the transcripts with an ear for the stories where these themes were

more integral to their experiences and where these themes were merely asides in a larger conversation. The references that I chose to include felt appropriate to me in striking a balance between honoring the participants' experiences while also protecting them from the white gaze. While I cannot assume that I have struck this balance perfectly, I hope that approaching this work with this mindset yielded a more thoughtful portrait than if I had simply ignored these cultural constraints and nuances.

While these portraits were focused on each woman's individual experiences, they were meant to come together to address broader influences and phenomena. As Geertz (1973) explains, "small facts are the grist for the social theory mill" (p. 23). Therefore, by creating these intimate portraits with careful attention to details, I aimed to provide the readers not only with answers to the study's research questions but also invite them to consider the broader implications of these findings. Through this nuanced understanding of South Asian American women's experiences, what do we additionally learn about Asian women's experiences, immigrant children's experiences, women's experiences? Ultimately, it is my hope that by understanding the individual, we discover the universal.

Limitations

As is true for any research study, there are several limitations to be mindful of when reading this study's findings. Moreover, while all social science research and qualitative research in particular is inherently shaped by (and a reflection of) the time and place in which that work is conducted, the ongoing COVID-19 public health crisis requires a heightened acknowledgement of this fact. Indeed, the logistical constraints precipitated by the ongoing COVID-19 crisis meant that several aspects of this study fell short of their ideal form. First, COVID-19 restrictions meant that I was severely limited in the ways that I could recruit participants, and I had to rely solely on emails with my recruitment flyer as a means of generating interest in my study. As a

result, all of the participants from Rice University were members of the South Asian Society student organization, which was the only organization to share my recruitment materials. I might have gotten a broader range of perspectives, perhaps from students who did not identify as strongly with their South Asian identity, had other means of recruitment at the institution been successful. My recruitment efforts at UH were similarly limited in their success and all of the UH students heard about my study through their affiliations either with the UH Honors College or the Undergraduate Research Office. Finally, my recruitment process was most challenging within the community college setting. Only one student saw and responded to my flyer and she then referred her friend to participate. Again, I likely would have gained a broader range of perspectives from the community college participants had I not relied so heavily on snowball sampling to generate interest in my study. Future research could build on the findings of this study by taking a more intentional, thoughtful approach to participant recruitment, so as to ensure that a greater breadth in the representation of South Asian experiences.

The COVID-19 crisis also resulted in my inability to meet with students in person, which meant that I was unable to get a more complete picture of their fullest selves as I only met with the participants via Zoom. The nature of the interactions was necessarily shaped by this platform and its associated limitations, such as “Zoom fatigue” (Sklar, 2020). However, I worked to build rapport and made sure to talk with all of the participants informally as we would have, had we met in person, before beginning to record the meeting. The difference in the quality of interaction was most notable in the third interview. I would have liked to have been able to complete the third interview as a walking interview as I had originally intended, rather than doing a “virtual tour” where the women simply described the various places on campus we might have visited together in non-pandemic times. Certainly, I acknowledge that conducting the

entirety of this study on Zoom had its advantages, in terms of scheduling, cleanliness of transcripts (due to cleaner audio recordings, as compared to recordings from in-person conversations), and perhaps a sense of ease from being in familiar surroundings of their choice (i.e., bedrooms, dorm rooms, etc.) that would not have been possible if I had met with them in person. However, the fact remains that I was unable to engage with participants in the manner I had intended when initially envisioning this study.

Beyond the issues stemming from the constraints imposed by the pandemic, there were additional limitations as a function of the research design. Due to the limited time and resources available for this project, I was limited in the number of women I could work with at each institution, which in turn limited the variety of South Asian American experiences I was able to highlight. I imagine with a better approach to recruitment, I would have been able to better illuminate the class differences among the South Asian American diaspora, beyond the ways that they subtly emerged from the existing participants.

Another non-pandemic related challenge related to the timing of the interviews. I had ideally hoped to collect all of the interviews during the spring and summer of 2021. I expected to complete the whole data collection process within a four to six week period, to give participants about a week or ten days between each interview, along with some additional time to complete the participant-led interview. However, most of the participants completed their interviews across a much longer timeframe, with the longest span ranging from a first interview in October 2021 to a final interview in March 2022. I would have liked to have drawn stronger comparisons between their final interview remarks. However, the inconsistency of timing made this work far more challenging and, in some cases, impossible.

Despite these shortcomings, the findings from this study stand to make a useful contribution by understanding the experiences of an oft-overlooked group. Moreover, the sampling limitations should make clear the need for further research to not only nuance our understanding broadly across the South Asian American community but also the diversity of within-group experiences. As an example, for the purposes of this study, Indian American students' experiences were considered in the aggregate. However, these experiences likely vary widely in light of India's linguistic diversity (22 official languages), geographic diversity (29 states), and religious diversity, among many others. Ultimately, this study should still be viewed as a meaningful contribution to literature within this field.

Summary

Using Lawrence-Lightfoot's portraiture method, this study aimed to understand how South Asian American women's cultural identities manifest and then influence their college decision-making process, with a focus on understanding both the similarities in their processes and the differences that led them to enrolling in three distinct types of institutions across the selectivity spectrum, including Houston Community College, University of Houston, and Rice University. I engaged with 2 women from HCC, 5 women from UH, and 4 women from Rice. We created the data reflected in this study through a series of three interviews along with an interview that they conducted on their own with a family member that they identified as having played a key role in their college decision-making process. By analyzing these data with an eye toward the five elements outlined by the portraiture methodology (i.e., repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, cultural and institutional rituals, triangulation, and revealing patterns), I aimed to craft portraits that provided an in-depth understanding of not only the women's college decision-making processes but also simply of the women themselves. To that end, the following

Chapter Five includes all eleven portraits of the participants. I then offer an analysis of these portraits in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER FIVE: PARTICIPANT PORTRAITS

The portraiture methodology served as the foundation for this work. For reasons previously detailed in Chapter Four, portraiture aligned with my desire to not only render a complete picture of each of my participants' lives but to also weave my own voice into these stories, thereby acknowledging my active role as a researcher in shaping your understanding of these women's experiences. In addition to Lawrence-Lightfoot's metaphor of the portrait, I would like to add an additional metaphor to contextualize the narratives included in this chapter and the analyses included in Chapter Six.

One of my favorite places in Houston is Smither Park, which houses a "400-foot memory wall, each adorned with elaborate mosaic work created out of recycled and found materials and designed by local artists as well as community members interested in exploring their own creative potential" (orangeshow.org/about-smither-park). Although this is the space's official description, it is, in fact, impossible to properly describe the beauty of this artwork. In the summer of 2017, as the wall was still being assembled, I happened to visit the park when an artist was crafting part of her mosaic. She enthusiastically showed us the various "raw materials" she was using to create her artwork. I remember marveling at an especially beautiful saucer from a tea set she had found at a garage sale and then being momentarily horrified as she struck it and shattered it into several pieces. My horror quickly turned back to awe as I watched her place a few pieces of the now-shattered saucer into a design within the broader mosaic she was creating. While I had enjoyed the beauty of the completed mosaics I had seen along the wall until then, witnessing this artist's creative process deepened my understanding of and appreciation for this work. There was a beauty to be appreciated in the whole saucer, a different beauty in the pieces of the saucer, and finally a different beauty still in the pieces of the saucer placed alongside other elements of the mosaic.

I hope to emulate the example of this artist in sharing with you the following narratives of each of the participants. I intend for these narratives to give you as complete of an understanding as I was able to gain through the four conversations I shared with these women (three one-on-one conversations via Zoom and a listening session of their conversation with their family members). I imagine each of these narratives as the saucer, whole and a complete story in itself. I imagine my work as a qualitative researcher akin to the artist shattering the saucer, breaking down the whole and identifying small fragments to which to draw your attention. Chapter Six, then, functions as the completed mosaic, with pieces of each of these women's stories being brought together to form a new story, shaped by each of these women's individual experiences, but ultimately a story all its own.

Overview of Participants

As I recruited participants from all three institutional types that I hoped to represent in my study, I asked to work with students who self-identified as South Asian American women and had enrolled in their current institution immediately upon graduating from high school. Given my focus on understanding the decision-making process, I thought it best to exclude students who may have transferred from another institution into one of the study sites. The following section includes portraits of four participants from Rice University, five participants from the University of Houston, and two participants from Houston Community College. With the exception of one Rice participant whose debilitating mental health challenges prevented her from completing the family member interview as she had initially planned, all of the participants completed all four parts (three one-on-one interviews with me and one participant-led interview of a self-selected family member) of the study.

Broad demographic characteristics of the participants are included in the table below. The names reflect the pseudonyms that I asked each of the participants to choose for themselves at

the end of our final interview together. Additional information about the relevance of these names to the participants is included in the footnotes of each of the portraits. The parent occupation category reflects the ways that the participants themselves offered this information during my first interview with them. The variance in offering a specific job title, an occupation, and a company name seemed to be a subtle indicator of class differences, but also simply reflected my reluctance to ask the participants to narrowly define these characteristics within set parameters. In some cases, I am intentionally vague so as to ensure that I am protecting the participant's identity.

As much as possible, I attempted to craft these portraits in such a way that fully reflected the shape and nature of my conversations with each of the participants. With that in mind, issues related to culture and gender were more prominent in some participants' stories and less so in others. However, it should become clear that while each of these women had unique understandings of the ways that their cultural and gender identities affected various experiences, the overarching sense remained that these identities were powerfully influential forces in each of their lives. Finally, I intentionally chose to make minimal, if any, references to other participants within the scope of each of the portraits, as I wanted as much as possible for the individual portraits to exclusively focus on the lived experiences of each participant.

Table 1: Student Demographics

| | Age of arrival to U.S. | Birth order | Parent occupation/industry and highest education completed |
|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------|--|
| Keerthana UH | 4 | First of 3 | Mother: Nurse (BS in India) Father: Postal worker (Some college in India) |
| Poorna UH | Birth | First of 2 | Mother: Healthcare admin (MBA in U.S.) Father: Software engineer (MS in U.S.) |
| Jasmine UH | Birth | First of 2 | Mother: Homemaker (BS in India) Father: Military contractor (BS in U.S.) |
| Aradhana UH | Birth | First of 2 | Mother: Finance (MS in India) Father: Engineering (BS in India) |
| Sadaf UH | 7 | First of 3 | Mother: Stay at home mom (AA in U.S.) Father: Family business (BS in U.S.) |
| Suchitra Rice | Birth | Younger of 2 | Mother: Oil and gas (MS in U.S.) Father: Oil and gas (MS in U.S.) |
| Marie Rice | Birth | Third of 4 | Mother: Homemaker (BS in India) Father: Oncologist (MD in U.S.) |
| Maya Rice | 4 | First of 2 | Mother: Jewelry business owner (BS in India) Father: Oil and gas (MS in India) |
| Deepika Rice | Birth | First of 3 | Mother: Pharmaceuticals (BS in U.S.) Father: Tech business (MBA in U.S.) |
| Saira HCC | 11 | Second of 3 | Mother: Medical coding and billing (BS in Pakistan) Father: Health care supplement sales (MS in Pakistan) |
| Sara HCC | 9 | First of 3 | Mother: Housewife (High school in India) Dad: Telecomm (BS in India) |

Portraits of University of Houston Participants

Jasmine

Jasmine³ was a unique participant of this study, in that she did not fill out my Qualtrics form straightaway when she learned about this research opportunity. Instead, she sent me an email and explained that she self-identified as a South Asian American woman (as my recruitment flyer had indicated) because her mother was from India, but she was half white. She felt unsure of her eligibility and wanted to know whether I might be willing to include her in my study. I happily assured Jasmine that her self-identification as a South Asian American woman was enough to be included in my study, and we made plans to discuss her participation shortly thereafter. This initial interaction was emblematic of an ongoing theme in Jasmine's life, as she continues to question whether she is Indian enough to be accepted in what she refers to in her own words as "the brown community."

A native of the southern Indian city of Hyderabad, Jasmine's mother Chitra emigrated to the U.S. in the mid-1990s as a response to her family's mounting insistence on entering into an arranged marriage. Eager to avoid these pressures, Chitra moved to northern California where one of her sisters was living at the time and found work with the Computer Science bachelor's degree she had earned in India. Meanwhile, Chitra's sister created a profile for her on a Christian dating website that led her to meeting and ultimately marrying Jasmine's father Frank, a white man who grew up in the Midwest.

Frank dropped out of high school at 17 to join the Army, thereby continuing a military tradition and following in the footsteps of his father, a Navy veteran who had served in Vietnam. He later became the first person in his family to pursue higher education when he began his

³ Jasmine chose this pseudonym simply because it was a name she had always loved, but it did not share any connection with her given name which reflected her South Asian heritage.

bachelor's degree at Missouri State University, which seemed in Jasmine's recounting to have been a positive experience for him, noting his membership in a fraternity. But, he dropped out again to join the Marines and was stationed in Japan. His time in Japan coincided with a time in his life when he was struggling with addiction, and he credited his introduction to a particularly regimented sect of Christianity as the reason for his ability to overcome this problem. Notably, Frank's intensely personal and longstanding connection to this faith would later heavily shape Jasmine's family life and understanding of her own identity. Frank ultimately returned to the U.S. and completed a degree in Computer Information Systems at Oregon State University.

As he was nearing the end of his time at OSU, Frank married Chitra and welcomed Jasmine to their family within the following year. Jasmine described the financial strain her parents faced in her early life, as her father was still a student at OSU. But, he soon graduated and found a job through a career fair hosted by OSU. Referencing the dot com boom of the era, Jasmine explained that her father was easily able to secure a job in his field in Idaho, where Jasmine was born.

I remarked on the unlikely nature of Frank and Chitra's union, to which Jasmine immediately concurred and marveled at her parents' meeting on what she anachronistically referred to as a dating app that they matched on, using terms that mirrored her own contemporary experiences. When asked about any pushback her parents might have faced from their families at the time, Jasmine explained that the news of their union was only greeted positively. She credited the family's emphasis on Christian identity and values and her mother's age as the primary reasons for this ease. At 29, Chitra was deemed to be concerningly old to get married, so her nuptials were a cause for great relief among her family. Jasmine contrasted this open-hearted acceptance with her own fraught experience of bringing home a boyfriend of whom her mother

strongly disapproved. Referring to the tension as one of their larger fights, Jasmine explained that her mother's adherence to finding a partner within their Christian faith community was so strong that she threatened to stop talking to Jasmine altogether, if she continued seeing her Muslim Pakistani boyfriend.

Chitra and Frank continued to move across the U.S. from state to state during Jasmine's early childhood and her younger brother was born when Jasmine was four years old. Her father began his career in the private sector but was laid off from a job. His unease over the relative precarity of employment in the private sector led him to his current, decades-long role as a military contractor, with the hope that the various military security clearances he had gained through his prior service would ensure job security. This fear of joblessness and a desire for a good job largely explained Frank's understanding of the importance of a college education. Jasmine noted that her father's college degree enabled him to move beyond the financial struggles and lower middle-class life that characterized his own upbringing. Jasmine explained that Frank framed a college education as a way to be successful and "probably the best way to get out of whatever situation you were in before," referring to his shift to a more comfortable middle-class lifestyle. Indeed, Jasmine identified a laundry list of stark differences between her father's family and their own nuclear family unit that she attributed to her father's college education, including living in a mobile home, never having traveled outside of the U.S., wearing different kinds of clothes, and holding different values.

I wondered whether Jasmine's mother perceived a similarly strong correlation between a college education and financial security. She acknowledged that financial security was an element of her mother's prioritizing Jasmine's pursuit of higher education, but the greater motivator might have been what she referred to as the social expectation. She explained with a

laugh that “I think for her if her kids didn't go to college, it would probably be embarrassing for her in some way or something. I think it was a social expectation as well as an economic expectation.”

At Frank’s request, Chitra quit her job as soon as she learned she was pregnant with Jasmine to become, in Jasmine’s words, a homemaker. Jasmine described her deep appreciation for her mother’s constant presence in her early life, fondly recalling afternoons spent with her at the park and the local swimming pool and being shuttled to the many extracurricular activities that filled her childhood, including karate, gymnastics, and ballet. Yet, Jasmine also pointed to her mother’s limited work experience outside of their home as a potential reason for another source of tension in their relationship, with her mother minimizing or altogether not understanding Jasmine’s experiences as a woman of color navigating predominantly white spaces. She imagined what it might have been like to have had a mother who worked outside the home and therefore better understood her own feelings of alienation and the attendant desire for belonging. This disconnect between Chitra’s and Jasmine’s experiences as women of color in the U.S. was especially stark in their assessment of Jasmine’s potential college choices, with her mother seemingly exclusively prioritizing prestige and the institution’s academic profile without any regard for the overall quality of Jasmine’s college experience or her sense of belonging.

Jasmine’s K-12 schooling experiences varied widely both in terms of the academic rigor and the diversity of the student body (as she attended by my count a total of eight different schools across the U.S.) as her family continually relocated for her father’s work. She recalled the noticeable contrast in climate between the elementary schools she attended in two different towns in Arizona, with the first offering a much chillier reception than the second. Although she described the second school as located in a very small town with a total population of maybe

10,000 and she good naturedly quipped that “me and my brother made up the one Indian person at that school together,” she fondly recalled a sense of belonging and acceptance within that school’s community, citing various ways she felt included from having won the talent show with a Bollywood dance to being photographed wearing a sari for the town newspaper’s coverage of the school’s Culture Day. Although she deeply valued the inclusivity and kindness of the community, she already knew the level of education was not up to par, remembering her sixth grade math class in which the focus was on learning or reviewing basic concepts of addition and subtraction. She felt as though she was able to coast through school, because of the school curriculum’s lack of rigor and her parents’ emphasis on education within their home, including assignments in workbooks that her mother brought her from India.

The relative social and academic ease that Jasmine enjoyed in Arizona came to an abrupt end when her family moved from Arizona to Florida midway through her sixth grade year. Suddenly, she found that she could no longer coast but instead had to sit down and study really hard, “because I didn’t have anything else to do, because I didn’t have a lot of friends.” These efforts paid off and she recalled doing really well at the time, which made her parents proud. “They didn’t know how much I was struggling, because I didn’t tell them,” she explained. She blamed her faith identity as the primary reason for her being cast as an oddity among her peers. The family’s strict adherence to their faith meant that she was not allowed to wear pants or jewelry, cut her hair, listen to secular music, or watch TV. “I definitely looked weird,” she admitted with a laugh. Unlike her classmates at her small, close-knit former school who had been aware and seemingly understanding of the constraints necessitated by her religion, the students in her new school lacked that context and Jasmine struggled socially because of it. She made a conscious decision in the next middle school she attended to try and fit in by dressing “a little

more normal,” and sardonically explained that “I thought getting Vera Bradley would solve all my problems, because everyone had Vera Bradley, but I think I was still a little quirky.”

Although she continued to struggle socially at the second middle school, the church her family newly joined at that time gave her a strong sense of community, and “I felt like I had friends at church, even if I didn’t feel like that at school.”

While she continued to excel academically through seventh and eighth grade, she explained that she “just kind of fell off there in the end...I ended up getting a boyfriend for the first time.” These changes also coincided with Jasmine beginning to question her adherence to the tenets of the faith that had so heavily defined her life. These shifts together naturally led to a particularly tumultuous period in her relationship with her parents. She declared that she simply stopped trying towards the end of eighth grade, especially once she knew she had received admission to an International Baccalaureate magnet high school, “So I was like, ‘oh, I’ll just try then,’ like ‘I’m already done with middle school’...and I was super ready for high school.”

Her initial excitement about starting high school quickly waned as she was riddled with insecurities. The school offered a summer “boot camp” to prepare students for the rigors of the IB curriculum, including sitting through history classes, annotating a text for an English class, and practicing Socratic seminars, “basically like mock classes...and I was like, ‘damn, is this how it’s gonna be? It’s really a lot.’” The competitive nature of the high school extended beyond the classroom to extracurricular activities as well. The summer of the boot camp also included rehearsals for the school’s show choir, which required a \$1,000 fee to join, “which I could not believe because it’s a public school, right? And, I just remember feeling so guilty...but they paid for it, they let me do it.” Although Jasmine enjoyed singing and she was working hard in her classes throughout her first year, by her sophomore year she explains that “I think I stopped

caring about school at that point. I would still do my homework...but I basically stopped trying to really study and learn.” This decline in her academic diligence was potentially explained by the harassment and bullying she was facing at the time. Eventually, she explained that she “started questioning why anyone would go to school at all, because I hate it here.” She eventually transferred for a fresh start to the local high school located just five minutes away from her home. She recalled liking the AP classes and doing well in them, but continuing to struggle with math classes.

Despite having consistently been in academically rigorous programs throughout high school and listened to her peers consistently refer to places like Stanford, Georgetown, and Emory as their dream schools, Jasmine explained that “I never had any dream colleges. I never thought I could be like an Ivy League or anything, because I didn’t feel like I tried hard enough in high school, like I already had that idea in my head.” Her sole motivator in pursuing higher education came from the tense relationship she had had with her parents for the past several years. A college admission would be her ticket out of her parents’ home, finally giving her the freedom she deeply craved.

Her family moved to a small town in Texas just as Jasmine was set to begin her senior year of high school. She experienced culture shock many times over, from the “95% white” high school to the Texas-specific elements (e.g., the Texas top 10% rule) of the college application process. She characterized the school’s counselor as being an outright racist who blatantly lied to her about the college admissions process and claimed that she was too late to apply to any colleges, despite all of the major deadlines being several months away. The counselor also refused to meet with Jasmine’s mother and only later agreed to meet with Jasmine’s father. The meeting did not assuage Frank’s fears and instead left him “freaking out.” He urged Jasmine to

apply to as many colleges as possible in Texas and promised to pay for every single application. She applied to a wide variety of state institutions including the flagship and several satellite campuses of the main state school systems. Even at the point of applying to schools, Jasmine did not care deeply about any particular college, though she thought that she preferred the University of Texas at Austin more than any other school. Once the acceptance letters came in, Jasmine was not elated to choose a school. She apathetically told her parents to just pick a school for her to attend and she would attend their chosen institution, as long as it was not in the city closest to the small town they were living in at the time.

Rather than simply choosing a college sight unseen, Jasmine's parents insisted that they visit all of the campuses where she had been admitted. Despite her interest in UT, she found that neither the institution nor Austin more broadly met the expectations she had built in her own mind. She was instead pleasantly surprised by the beauty of the UH campus. She was especially enthusiastic about the inclusivity and belongingness she felt just within the short time of the campus visit day, where she made friends "which was amazing to me because up until that point I'm in this high school where I literally have no friends."

She left the visit day enthusiastic about the prospect of attending UH, gushing that "the tour guides were really cool, they fed us, they took us on a tour, they showed us a bunch of cool stuff...and that day I was like yeah, I'm definitely gonna come here." Both her mother and aunt (who had moved from California to Houston decades earlier) were displeased with Jasmine's decision to attend UH. Her mother insisted on Baylor for its academic rigor and particularly for its Christian values. She was also strongly encouraging her to consider Texas A&M University for similar reasons. It was Jasmine's father who insisted that UH was likely the better choice for Jasmine. "My dad was like, 'She's not gonna be happy at A&M, she's not gonna like it,' it's just

a thing that he knew. I wouldn't like it." Indeed, Jasmine cited her alienating experiences at her most recent high school as the key reason why "I was super ready for the diversity stuff!"

Despite her palpable enthusiasm about UH, I asked her why she had limited her search to schools within her current home state of Texas, given that her desire to leave her parents' home was one of her top motivations in her college search process. She admitted that UH was actually the perfect choice because it was "not home, but close enough to home." She pointed to her cultural and gender identities as the reason behind this seemingly oxymoronic desire to be away but nearby, saying that: "I don't feel independent. And, I don't feel like I have a sense of independence. And, I don't feel like I can function in the world without a really good support system. And I think if I was a guy, it wouldn't have been a problem, and they would have raised me to be more independent because of that. And I think if I was a guy, I would feel more confident, like in my own judgment, I feel more confident to be by myself...I think they would have raised me differently, like I see [they did] with my brother." As she considered her own words, she wondered aloud if she'd been a guy whether "maybe I would've felt more empowered to go farther away, [or] maybe I would have been empowered to stay home because I wouldn't have had so many expectations on me." Certainly, Jasmine's seemingly lifelong tension between loving her family and being at odds with them and their wishes largely served to explain her decision to attend UH.

Ultimately, Jasmine's experience at the University of Houston seemed to have been mostly positive. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she worked as a campus tour guide throughout her time at the university. The reality of her campus life also largely seemed to meet her expectations, with her first year in particular vividly animated with sex, drugs, parties, all enjoyed with the sizeable Brown community for which UH is known. Yet, these highs were tempered by the lows

wrought by a major that she struggled with but endured at her parents' insistence. Despite being weeks away from earning a bachelor's degree in a STEM field, Jasmine explained that she did not see herself as a STEM person and shared several snapshots of the back-and-forth she engaged her parents in to consider letting her pursue English, Political Science, or Psychology as potential majors to then pursue a graduate degree in Law. Her father was especially unequivocal about those majors not being worthwhile and Jasmine's mother insisted that Jasmine leave room for the possibility of becoming a doctor. Despite these ongoing challenges, Jasmine characterized herself as someone who was ultimately pleased with her decision to attend UH.

Poorna

Over the course of conducting this study, each participant claimed her own piece of my heart for different reasons. Poorna did so through her distinction of being the very first participant I interviewed and the very last participant whose portrait I crafted. In looking back, I realized that I had subtly shifted my own orientation and approach to the interview process with each additional participant with whom I engaged. Although these portraits only began to take shape in my mind and on paper long after the data collection process had concluded, the benefit of hindsight would make clear that I was becoming increasingly more aware of how I would eventually share these women's stories. Perhaps because of that, I found Poorna's portrait to be particularly challenging to craft, as her experiences were shared with me in the rawest iteration of the eleven data collection processes that would eventually come to comprise this study. Yet, listening to Poorna's recollection of her experiences lit the first match that illuminated several of the themes that would ultimately come to define the key takeaways of this work. Her participation paved the way for the rest of this work to unfold as it did. Like many participants, Poorna left the choice of her pseudonym up to me. Given that the work of this chapter began and

ended with her, I chose the pseudonym Poorna, a Sanskrit name that denotes wholeness and a sense of having come full circle.

I first Zoomed with Poorna in early May 2021, just days before she was set to graduate with her bachelor's degree in business. The timing of this first meeting was also significant within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as vaccines were slowly becoming more widely available and there seemed to finally be a sliver of hope and optimism peeking out from behind the heavy cloud of lockdowns, isolation, and human suffering that had loomed over the preceding 14 months. Certainly, the unprecedented nature of the times we were living in was inherently apparent throughout all of the interactions I shared with all of the participants in this study. Yet, the particularly unique mix of the emotions of this exact time period was especially apparent in my first interview with Poorna.

As we discussed Poorna's responses to the "I am" activity, I noted that she did not include any descriptors of her gender or cultural identity. Instead, the only descriptor of her person was simply "I am human," a statement that she explained that she chose because "I continuously have to remind myself after everything I've been through, I'm still here." Curious to know what some of those things might have been, she described the roller coaster experience of her undergraduate years, including landing a coveted internship that was suddenly canceled in the wake of the pandemic. The pandemic also figured heavily in Poorna's explanation as to why descriptors like "I am a woman" or "I am Indian" were conspicuously absent from her list. She explained that "Those words aren't the first thing that comes to mind, because I've been home for a year, so I know nothing but my family, my culture...if I were at UH and somebody asked me...[I would say] yeah, I'm Indian, I'm Gujju⁴. I love my culture, [but] at home it's the

⁴ Gujju is a colloquial version of the term Gujurati, referring to the ethnolinguistic group that traces their heritage to the present-day western Indian state of Gujarat and speaks the language Gujurati.

norm...it didn't even occur to me that I'm a woman, I'm Indian...but I really identify with it a lot...I just forgot about it, because I've been at home for so long."

This admission was especially noteworthy given how hyperaware Poorna had been of these identities throughout her childhood years, as she grew up as in an overwhelmingly white exurb of Houston. She recalled that "I was the only Indian person or one of the three people there...In elementary school and middle school, there was nobody else who was Indian, nobody else who was like me...I was basically the only Indian person growing up. I felt like I couldn't really relate to anybody." These experiences were all the more remarkable in light of Poorna's family's immigration history, which rendered her a third generation Texan. Her maternal grandfather had emigrated from the western Indian state of Gujarat in the late 1960s on a student visa to study engineering. Her maternal grandmother followed him to the U.S. a few years later with Poorna's then nine-year-old mother. Poorna's grandfather soon shifted his focus away from his engineering studies and bought a motel that would function as the family business for decades to come. Both Poorna's mother and maternal uncle had grown up in the area and had attended the University of Houston. Yet, despite this long history and connection to the place where she had grown up, Poorna's childhood and teen years were largely characterized by her feelings of otherness.

Indeed, when I asked Poorna how she identified herself (expecting to hear something along the lines of Indian or Indian American), she said that "I would go with the term ABCD, the American Born Confused Desi." She went on to explain that "I think there are times when my culture clashes with where I was born" and described how different environments and issues rendered one identity more salient than the other: "It just depends on the situation...sometimes it'll be American, sometimes it'll be Indian, sometimes it'll be neither." Seemingly conflating

her Indian identity with having been raised within the Hindu faith, Poorna explained that one example of when she considered herself “neither” was on the issue of Islamophobia – a rampant issue both among Hindus and broader American society. She vehemently disagreed with both groups and underscored the need for greater tolerance and acceptance of Muslim people both within the South Asian community and the wider world.

Poorna brought a similarly critical lens to her view of the expectations that “Brown culture” tended to place on women. She described her perception of the tacit expectation for women to be solely charged with running the household and seeing to all the domestic responsibilities. She passionately explained how “That’s something I really fight against because I didn’t spend years going to college, about to get my master’s [degree]...to be a home wife or for me to be the only one cooking...I think running a house is a 50/50 thing. It shouldn’t all be on the woman.” Her vehemence on this topic seemed to apply to womenkind writ large, but especially to the aspirations she had for her own future. Her mother had returned to India after earning her bachelor's degree from the University of Houston to marry her father. The pair then settled down in the U.S. in the same neighborhood as Poorna’s maternal grandparents. Poorna explained that the prospect of her own marriage had become an increasingly frequent topic as she neared the end of her undergraduate studies. She reiterated her insistence that “quitting my job to raise my kids...that’s something I’m not in support of” and explained how “that’s recently been a fight [between herself and her nuclear family] about what I’m gonna do.” Yet, she softened as she continued to talk about this hypothetical future family and simply left it as “something I’ll deal with when it comes.”

This air of nonchalance about her future personal life stood in stark contrast to the specificity with which she had thought about and worked toward her goals for her future

professional life. Poorna recalled how “I always wanted to be a doctor – never, never thought twice about it.” She repeatedly said the phrase “white lab coat” with a tone of reverence and described how “While growing up...I saw my mom in a white lab coat. I wanted to be that person in a white lab coat.” A self-described “overachiever,” Poorna detailed the many steps she took to keep herself on track to an eventual career in medicine, from taking all honors and AP classes throughout middle and high school, including writing an AP Research paper on uses of stem cells in treating Alzheimer’s, joining student organizations related to the medical profession (like HOSA in high school), and even volunteering in hospitals as early as middle school.

In addition to her own intrinsic drive and valorization of the “white lab coat,” Poorna described how she felt an external pressure to excel in her academics, particularly in science and math classes, because of her racial identity. She explained that “Since I was Brown, people inherently assumed that I was smarter at science or smarter at math. So, based on that assumption, I was like, ‘I should do med school, since I’m so good at science.’” The power and weight of these stereotypic assumptions powerfully shaped Poorna’s understanding of herself and her academic trajectory. She recalled having taken and struggled in high school courses related to her medical career aspirations, including Anatomy and Physiology and Medical Terminology. Yet, she didn’t allow herself to consider what it meant that she was not doing well in those classes. She explained that “The pressure was insane...I wasn’t good at science, but I believed myself to be, because everybody around me was like, ‘Oh, you’re good at science.’” Indeed, despite her lackluster performance in these courses, Poorna kept on with the medical track because “They had such high expectations of me. I felt like I had to be good at science, otherwise I’d let them down and show that I’m not really good at science or I’m not truly

Brown,” therein explicitly underscoring her view of being Brown as being synonymous with being good at science.

Given Poorna’s nearly lifelong intention to pursue a career in medicine, it was unsurprising to hear her describe her view of college as an expected next step beyond her K-12 educational journey and that “it never occurred to me that I wouldn’t go.” Indeed, higher education was the norm among her family, and both of her parents earned master’s degrees (an MBA for her mother and a master’s in software engineering for her father) in the U.S. Yet, Poorna described feeling “confused” about the specifics of the college-going process and had an unusually narrow view of what she considered to be potential colleges to attend, which only included the University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University in College Station, and the University of Houston.

She explained that “These three were the most often talked about, so to me, those were the only three options. I didn’t do my own exploring or research into different colleges. I assumed that was it.” She recalled hearing about older students in her Indian classical dance classes going off to college at various schools across the state, but this information did little to shake her perception of these three being the only colleges in her mind. Feeling certain that she had heard of or considered other colleges, I asked whether she had known of Harvard or Yale. She admitted that “They were there, of course. Harvard, Yale, Rice, Princeton, they were all there,” but described her perception of these schools as being beyond her reach. She said that “If I applied to Harvard, I wasn’t going to get in. If I applied to Rice, I wasn’t going to get in... What was the point of me applying to a college that I knew for sure I wasn’t going to get in?”

Poorna’s filtering of potential college options based on the certainty of her acceptance was likely a function of the Texas legislation commonly referred to as the top 10% rule, which

guaranteed admission to state-funded universities for students who graduated among the top 10% of their high school class. In light of this policy and the knowledge that her academic performance to date ensured that she would likely graduate within that threshold, Poorna felt that she was “already admitted” to UT, A&M, and UH as early as her junior year of high school. Noting that class ranks continue to fluctuate into senior year, I asked Poorna whether she might have been concerned that her automatic admission status might have shifted between when she first learned of the top 10% rule and when she would actually apply. But, she explained that “I was pretty high up there. I only went up after that, so I didn’t doubt that at all.” Despite this confidence that her academic rank would enable her to be automatically admitted into the three schools that she was seriously considering, Poorna was not complacent about her college search. She still chose to engage sincerely in the application process, including opting to enroll in an elective course at school that focused on SAT preparation. But, she admitted that “I wasn’t stressing out as much as I would have if I didn’t have automatic admission.”

Of the three schools, Poorna described UH as her “last choice” and instead she “actually wanted to go to A&M.” She described her desire to attend A&M as a reaction to her feeling that “everybody” went to UH, where “everybody” referred to both her high school classmates and her family, with both her mother and maternal uncle having earned their undergraduate degrees there. She described UH as being a typical choice among students who graduated from her high school for a variety of reasons including that it was “closer to home,” “cheaper,” “and it’s easier to get into UH, compared to UT Austin and Texas A&M.” Among these factors, Poorna noted that cost was perhaps the most important driver in her high school peers’ decisions to attend UH. She explained that “It wasn’t like people weren’t well off, but compared to the tuition costs of

A&M and UT, they're relatively high, and it wasn't something that many of those students who went to my high school could afford, like their parents could afford."

As it turned out, cost was also a major factor as Poorna considered her acceptances from UH, UT, and A&M. She recalled how "The shock really came when my financial aid came in for both UT Austin and A&M, and I saw that they weren't giving me a scholarship." She went on to explain that "When you look at the tuition for A&M, it was like \$40k per semester or something like that, and I was like, 'That's really high.'" Despite her desire to attend A&M, Poorna knew that the cost of her college attendance would have to be considered alongside the fact that her sister would also begin her undergraduate studies in just two years. With that in mind, Poorna quickly realized that "I couldn't be stubborn." She described her shift from considering A&M as her top choice to opening up to the real possibility that she would most likely attend UH as one that "wasn't a complex process." She said that, "It wasn't tumultuous or anything like that. I didn't stress over it...I really did understand that I needed to go where it was cheaper for my parents."

In understanding the cost of her college attendance, Poorna also knew that college loans were not an option, because of her family's aversion to the idea of taking out a loan. This understanding went beyond just an implicit awareness of cultural norms but was instead an explicit conversation she had had with her father. He explained his view to her that "For college, we don't want you to take out a loan," instead noting his preference for her to simply choose a college that her parents could more readily afford. By opting for a college that was more comfortably within the family's means, Poorna recalled her father's insistence that "There's no point in you going and taking out a loan, and taking more pressure on yourself to pay back that loan." As she recounted this conversation, I voiced aloud my understanding that Poorna's view

of loans was seemingly heavily shaped by her father's view of them. She quickly confirmed that I was correct and shared that "If it was only up to me, I probably would have taken out a loan, gone to A&M, and been in severe debt." Struck by this admission and the notable phrasing of "if it was only up to me," I asked Poorna who, if not herself, was her decision ultimately up to then? Without a second thought, she immediately said "My dad. It was ultimately up to my dad where I went. I was lucky enough that I agreed with his decision."

As Poorna described her initial entry into UH, she again used the phrase "if it were only up to me," this time to describe her process of choosing a major. She shared that "If it were only up to me, I would have chosen pre-med, done Bio [majored in Biology]" and noted that she had been accepted into UH with her first choice major of Biology. But, as she was registering for courses at her orientation session, her mother urged Poorna to reconsider this plan and instead opt for a business major. She recalled their conversation at her orientation session where "My mom was like, 'What if pre-med doesn't work? It's good to have a backup plan...You should do business instead.'" Given their warm, close relationship, it was unsurprising then that Poorna explained that "I switched from bio to business literally on my orientation day."

Despite having declared her major in business, Poorna still planned to eventually pursue a career in medicine and enrolled in Honors courses that would still allow her to be a competitive applicant for medical schools. She was insistent that "My main goal was to go into pre-med." Yet, by the time she actually began completing these pre-med courses, she soon realized that she was struggling. She was initially reluctant to recognize the reality of her situation and explained how "I kept trying to convince myself that medical school won't be like this: 'This is just the science classes, and medical school is completely different.'" However, she eventually had to admit to herself that "It wasn't working out no matter how hard I tried. I couldn't get As in my

classes and, at that rate, I wasn't going to get into a good medical school." Poorna decided to simply focus on the business major she was already pursuing and "just dropped pre-med completely, and surprisingly, my life was so much better...I was much happier."

I silently marveled at Poorna's mother's foresight to have so deftly steered her daughter in the major selection process. It was only later when I listened to Poorna's interview with her mother that I learned that it was not simply foresight but a function of her own painful experiences that motivated her insistence on Poorna having a back-up plan. In her interview with Poorna, her mother revealed a decades-long pain she continued to feel over her own rejection from post-graduate studies in the medical field. As she tearfully recalled this chapter of her life and the ongoing pain she suffers from this time, she explained that this experience had motivated her to ensure that "my girls wouldn't have to go through that" and thus ensured Poorna's "backup plan" to major in business.

Despite Poorna's mother's and father's notable influence in her initial transition into UH, her experience once there was entirely her own. She described her slow progression from keeping to herself and spending most of her time in her on-campus apartment to becoming involved in various student organizations and developing a close-knit group of South Asian friends. She also credited her leadership roles in student organizations for helping her to become "more secure in who I was...more confident." She highlighted her involvement in a business student organization that coincidentally had an officer board that was entirely comprised of South Asian women that was particularly instrumental to this transformation.

Perhaps most importantly, Poorna shared her feeling that she was glad that she had not gone to A&M, where she imagined her experiences would have been similar to her K-12 experiences as the only Indian girl at school. She marveled at her own ability to have overlooked

the importance of the campus culture and the student body makeup when she had previously favored A&M. Instead, she noted that “if UH didn’t have the culture that it did, I feel like I would still be in the same place as I was in high school, feeling like an outsider, like other people couldn’t understand what I’m going through.” Instead, she attributed her attendance at UH to her having developed a stronger sense of self, her increased self-confidence, and her deep joy of knowing she had found friends who “I know will stick with me for the rest of my life.”

Keerthana

As I sat down to my first interview with Keerthana⁵, I imagined the way the interview would begin. Having worked exclusively with business majors in my prior two pilot studies, I expected Keerthana to follow the same pattern of answering my *tell me about yourself* question with the elevator pitch spiel that is drilled into business majors through years of visits to the career center. I would gently have to remind them that while I appreciated learning about their interest in their major and the kinds of work they planned to pursue in their careers, I hoped to get to know their true, fullest selves – what really makes you *you*, I would ask. Yet, within just the first minutes of talking with Keerthana, I quickly realized that my expectations could not be further from the way she would engage with me. She naturally wove her understanding of herself within a larger fabric of history, placing herself and making sense of the opportunities and oppressions she had faced in context with prior generations of women in her family and womenkind writ large. This deeply felt understanding informed the ways that she navigated decisions small and large, from what clothes to wear to what career to pursue.

Born in the Thrissur District of the southernmost state of Kerala, Keerthana spent her early childhood raised by her maternal grandparents as her parents worked to support the family.

⁵ Keerthana left the choice of a pseudonym up to me. I intentionally chose a name that was reminiscent of the meaning of her given name.

When I asked about her parents' educational and occupational histories, Keerthana offered up a mini-history lesson that detailed Kerala's shift to becoming a communist state in the late 1950s, which served to explain the evolution of the accessibility of educational opportunities within her family dating back to her great-grandparents' generation. She explained that her grandparents were the first to be able to pursue an education, because both sets of her great-grandparents were able to make a living and acquire funds to educate their children as a direct result of the newly instated communist policies. Both her maternal grandfather and her maternal grandmother were the first in their families to earn a college degree and both went on to become schoolteachers. Despite this employment, Keerthana explained that her maternal grandparents were poor, "what we consider poverty," so her grandfather pursued a "side hustle" of buying and reselling land at a profit. To Keerthana's understanding, her grandfather "struck gold" which allowed him to be able to then send all three of his children to college. Keerthana's mother, the oldest of the three children, became a nurse, while her younger brother and sister both went on to become engineers. In contrast to the details that she shared about her mother's family's history, Keerthana explained that she was less familiar with her father's family. She simply explained that her father was the youngest of six siblings. Although he was able to briefly attend college, financial difficulties prevented him from continuing his education and he ultimately never earned a college degree. Undeterred by this obstacle, Keerthana's father was determined to provide a good life for his family. "His ambition was to come to the United States," she said and with a knowing look added that "You know how America is viewed to the rest of the world, like you come here and you automatically become rich and successful. So, that's the vision that he had and that's the life that he wanted for me and my younger siblings, even though we weren't born

at the time.” Keerthana contextualized her own understanding of her educational and career trajectory as a continuation of this longer generational arc.

Indeed, this almost reflexive contextualization only became more pointed as we continued our conversation and began to focus on her parents and even her own early childhood. She explained that her mother and father married through an arranged marriage just as her mother completed nursing school at 20 years old and her father was 28 years old, and she was born eight years after her parents got married “which is unusual for brown people.” Although she was quick to note that she would never say anything that would “dis” her parents’ relationship, she pointedly remarked on the inherent inequity in her parents’ experiences and rued the lack of independence that her mother was able to enjoy before becoming a wife and then a mother. Having just recently completed her undergraduate studies then placed Keerthana at the same point in her life as her mother was when she got married, and she acknowledged that her own marriage was a topic of increasing interest for her parents. Yet, she was unequivocal in her desire for independence and by extension a desire to avoid any conversations with her parents about her marriage. “Let me just yeet ⁶ myself to DC [where she will begin her career] or like Puerto Rico [where she had once tried and failed to receive permission to vacation with friends] and then we can talk over the phone where I can hang up on you.” In nearly the same breath, she acknowledged that her parents love her and would never want her to do anything that she did not want for herself, but, “When you’re a brown kid, when your parents want you to do something, you feel a lot of pressure. It’s not just your parents, it’s all your relatives coming at you like

⁶ According to a recent article on Merriam-Webster.com, “Yeet is a slang word that functions broadly with the meaning “to throw,” but is especially used to emphasize forcefulness and a lack of concern for the thing being thrown. (You don’t yeet something if you’re worried that it might break.)”

‘Why aren’t you doing this, you’re a disgrace to your family.’” She acknowledged that nothing like that had ever been explicitly stated to her, but “That’s the general kind of emotion that’s kind of thrown out.” Indeed, this seemingly lifelong exposure to and keen awareness of familial expectations was a key component in making sense of Keerthana’s navigation of her college decision-making process, as she attempted to balance the competing needs of her own desires alongside her parents’ expectations.

Keerthana was initially raised in Kerala by her maternal grandparents, while her mother pursued additional nursing training in New Delhi and her father worked a wide variety of “odd jobs” in Saudi Arabia, including as a line cook and as an air conditioning technician at a hospital. The nursing program housed in New Delhi included an “American exchange program” which led to the family emigrating to a Texas border town when Keerthana was four years old. She recalled the emigration and acclimation process as a particularly difficult time as “The reality of America is nothing like the propaganda. Once you get here, basically everyone is against you, honestly.”

She contrasted the struggles that her parents were facing with her own relative ease in making the transition to life in the U.S. Through a combination of her grandparents’ at-home efforts and the formal education that she had begun at the age of three, Keerthana was able to read, write, and speak three languages including English at the time she emigrated. Although she began attending kindergarten based on her age, her parents later insisted that the school reconsider this decision and favorable test results allowed her to skip the second grade entirely and instead move from first to third grade. She looked fondly on this time as when she discovered the joys of learning, particularly through the enticing points and prizes system of her school’s Accelerated Reader program and wryly joked that “Little Keerthana was like ‘Hell yeah, I want that huge stuffed animal, let me read these books so I can bring that home!’ So, this

very capitalistic way of encouraging kids worked with me, so I got those prizes and, in the process, I fell in love with reading.”

The ease she enjoyed at school and in her academic pursuits stood in contrast to the abiding unease she began to develop about her family’s financial stability. She recalled her parents working long hours and the attendant sense of loneliness she felt as her parents’ attention was seemingly exclusively focused on making ends meet. She described the gradual evolution of her family’s socioeconomic status, from somewhat precarious in their early years in the U.S. to a more stable place once the family moved to San Antonio when she was in fifth grade and more comfortable still in recent years. Keerthana’s deep respect for both her mother’s and father’s work ethic was unmissable, as she made several references to it in all three of our conversations together. While she clearly admired their tenacity and was grateful for all that their hard work had been able to provide for her and her siblings, this knowledge also seemed to be a burden in Keerthana’s psyche, as she explained “I was super aware of how our financial situation impacted my parents...I picked up on how stressful it was.”

With that in mind, even as a young child, Keerthana looked for ways to make her parents’ lives easier. She recalled helping care for her brother and sister (who are seven and nine years younger than her, respectively) because “I was conscious of the work burdens that both my parents had, so I would pitch in as much as possible to help raise my siblings...looking back, that was a lot of responsibility for a 10, 11, or 12 year old kid, but it was something that I did.” In addition to these more obvious ways of making her parents’ lives easier, she also developed a habit of filtering information for her parents, to ensure that their time was only used for the most pertinent, important decisions. In particular, she made a habit of preemptively opting out of activities that she assumed would present a financial strain. Although these habits were

developed in early childhood and many years before she would engage in the college decision-making process, these nearly lifelong tendencies nevertheless largely explained the ways that she navigated this process.

The academic ease Keerthana had enjoyed in her early elementary years continued through middle school until she got to high school, when she suddenly felt a new type of educational pressure and a need to study to be able to keep up with the challenges of her coursework. But she soon found her footing and “figured out [her] equilibrium in terms of how much to study versus getting a good grade.” She attended a magnet high school that specialized in health professions and it was there that her thoughts about college began to crystallize. While her peers and classmates seemed sure of their future plans, Keerthana was unclear about the paths ahead of her and explained with a laugh that “High school me was a really big hot mess. I didn’t know what I wanted to do.”

Although she had grown up with the expectation of attending college, she and her family had seemingly never discussed this process beyond the abstract. Keerthana only began to think about identifying specific options for herself when she heard her friends talk about their own college-going plans. “Friends would come up to me and be like ‘Yeah, I want to go to Stanford, I want to go to Harvard, or MIT.’ And I’m like, ‘what are they?’ ...Even those common colleges that everybody in the U.S. knows, I didn’t know for the longest time.” She amusingly recounted hearing the phrase “dream school” bandied about by her friends and peers and thinking to herself, “Wait, what’s a dream school? Why would you want to dream to go to school?”

As she began absorbing as much information as she could about the college-going process, she noticed a theme that once again left her feeling like an outsider. When asking peers about their dream school choices, she realized that their preferences were often predicated on

institutional legacy, with students favoring places where various family members, ranging from parents, siblings, and even aunts and uncles, had previously or currently attended. She recalled a sense of alienation as she identified this pattern and considered how her own experience stood in stark contrast: “I’m a first generation American. In my family, no one’s gone to college here. I wish I had an older sister...that way I can just pick, like ‘look, this is the college I’m going to.’” I offered a hypothetical scenario in which her older sister had attended UT and asked if she would have then automatically done the same. As Keerthana considered this, she admitted that she would have still engaged in her own research, but would have liked to have had the sense of security that she missed by not having her own legacy option.

Indeed, Keerthana’s college search process was a tenacious but largely solitary pursuit. During the summer before her senior year of high school, she landed an internship in downtown San Antonio that she took the city bus back and forth to (“because my parents couldn’t have time to drop me off and pick me up”) and she happened to be looking for places nearby where she could hang out until it was time for her to catch her bus. Her quick Google Maps search revealed that Café College was nearby, and she remembered having learned about this organization’s resources at school. She ended up spending a couple hours there every single weekday researching colleges, programs, and majors throughout the time of her summer internship.

She did extensive research at Café College and made several key decisions along the way. She was unequivocal about the fact that cost was a “major, major, major factor” and once she understood the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition, she quickly limited her search to colleges within Texas. She also decided that although she had identified Stanford as her choice of a dream school, she did not even want to apply, in order to avoid paying the \$75 application fee when she feared that she wouldn’t get in. She ultimately applied to the University

of Houston, University of Texas at Dallas, and Trinity University. I voiced my awe for Keerthana's fastidious approach to the search process and for her having spent countless hours on a daily basis at Café College. I then wondered what the conversations around the dinner table might have been like during this time – was she providing a report of her latest findings and discoveries each night? True to her habit of filtering information, Keerthana ventured that she rarely, if ever, shared her Café College activities with her parents.

Indeed, it was only at the point when she has received acceptances from all three schools that she shared this information with her parents, who then supported her by taking family trips to visit both UH and UTD. While she seemed to seriously consider all three options, it is important to note a key difference between the institutions. While UH and UTD are comparable, Trinity is a small, private, liberal arts school that is a sister institution to Rice University. She decided to apply there, because of the potential for a generous scholarship package and its location just a short drive from her family's home, which appealed to her parents who preferred her to stay as close to home as possible. Once she learned that the final offer package from Trinity would only be a half-ride, rather than a full-ride as she had initially hoped, she quickly eliminated Trinity from the running and instead focused on deciding between UH and UTD. Having received similar scholarship offers from UH and UTD, Keerthana ultimately chose to attend UH not only for its cost-effectiveness but also its location (closer to home in San Antonio, and home to extended family who could support her as needed) and her own sense of comfort on the campus.

Having listened to Keerthana describe her laser-focus on cost throughout her search process, I was then surprised to hear cost and finances rarely mentioned in her participant-led interview with her mother. Instead, her mother referenced "Indian culture" as the reason why

Keerthana's entry into higher education was a foregone conclusion in the family, with the expectation that her parents would support her in earning a college degree, without any hesitation or caveats in terms of financial constraints. I mentioned this noticeable contrast to Keerthana and asked whether she then felt in hindsight that she might have disproportionately factored in cost to her decision-making process.

Yet, she remained steadfast in her thinking and again balanced her deep gratitude for her parents' work ethic and support of her education while also recognizing their limitations, in terms of their financial status and their relatively lacking knowledge of the American higher education landscape. She referenced an excerpt of her interview with her mother and explained that "I think my mom straight up said she had no idea how the system worked here and [my parents] had no idea how much, how costly it can be. And my parents, bless their hearts, are not exactly the most financially savvy and they hadn't set up any kind of college fund or any savings." She went on to put the weight of this decision in more dire terms as she said, "I knew when I was picking a college that it had to be relatively affordable. My parents are already working an extreme amount and [if I chose an expensive college], they're going to work even more, like how is that going to impact their mental and their physical health?"

She additionally reflected on the ways that not only her parents but also her siblings influenced her decision to attend UH. She again shared her feelings of gratitude for everything her parents were able to provide for her throughout her childhood and described her desire for her siblings to enjoy the same. She explained that "I had it good growing up. My parents gave me what I wanted, and I didn't want [my college decision] to take away some of the privileges that I had growing up for my siblings, because they're my babies, too."

Although Keerthana agreed that her college decision-making process was largely a “one-woman show” in which she did the bulk of the research and thinking on her own, she ultimately opted to attend UH with her parents’ and siblings’ needs in mind. This decision for the good of the collective also proved to be a beneficial one for her personally. She was proud of everything she had been able to accomplish and shared her excitement for the professional opportunities that awaited her as she planned to move to Washington, D.C. to begin her career as an analyst for an executive department of the U.S. federal government. She also described the profound gratitude she felt for the deeply meaningful friendships that she made along the way at UH, without which she felt like she “would be a completely different person.” In particular, her friendships with other South Asian American women allowed her to reconsider her own identity and sense of belonging within this community. Growing up in San Antonio, she described feeling disconnected from her identity and culture, because she never felt like she was like the other girls – “I just felt very uncomfortable...I personally didn’t relate to them, but I feel compelled to kind of fit the mold, so to speak.” She was overjoyed, then, to arrive at UH and meet other women who also often found themselves navigating a balance of “making our parents happy, but kind of reaffirming each other as well that it’s also important to be happy yourself.”

Sadaf

At the time of my third interview with Sadaf⁷, the final participant I worked with at the University of Houston, I had thought that she would be the final participant altogether in this study. With that in mind, I found myself reflecting on my initial vision for this study and my intent to illustrate the multiplicity of identities and experiences that could be contained within the label of South Asian American. While all of the women in this study had underscored this point

⁷ Sadaf chose this pseudonym for herself after a distant relative whom she had admired throughout her life.

in their own unique and myriad ways, I imagined that if I had had to choose only one woman to make this case, I would look to Sadaf.

In many ways, Sadaf's experiences hewed to familiar lines, from assuming her role of the "eldest daughter" in such a way that her two younger brothers viewed her as a "second mom" to remaining close to home for college to honor her parents' wishes. However, there were just as many examples of ways that Sadaf challenged the status quo. As a devout Muslim woman, Sadaf explained that "Religiously, I'm not supposed to be dating or anything." However, she chose to date and at the time of our interviews was engaged to a fellow UH student whom she had met while volunteering at her masjid. She was also vocal about her disagreement with gender norms that were viewed as typical within her community. For example, "Usually, when a guy gets a different job, the whole family moves with [him]. So, my thing is if the girl gets a job, that guy should also move at the same time, you know, like, it should be equal." It was perhaps unsurprising, then, that Sadaf described her culture as one that "isn't as Pakistani...it's more of an American Pakistani culture".

Sadaf's connection to the University of Houston was established long before she was even born. Her father left his hometown of Karachi, Pakistan to pursue an undergraduate degree in business at the University of Houston in the early 1990s. After earning his degree, he returned to Karachi, where he married Sadaf's mother who had completed her "matric," which Sadaf explained as being "equivalent to community college over here." They lived in a joint household with Sadaf's three uncles and their families, and Sadaf warmly described the close-knit bonds among the ten cousins who grew up together "like siblings," adding that "We're very close to each other, and we're very protective about each other." Indeed, Sadaf so strongly identified with

her connection to her family that the first item on her “I am” list was the name of the house where they lived together.

Although Sadaf’s nuclear family unit emigrated to Texas when she was seven years old, she maintained her connection to her extended family with weekly video calls and annual summer visits. In addition to the love and joy that characterized her close bonds with her cousins, the members of this household played a key role in shaping Sadaf’s understanding of her identity and her longer-term aspirations for her life. In a conversation about her cultural identity, she consistently referred to her values and choices as somehow standing in contrast to those of her cousins and particularly her aunts. She explained that “When I’m talking to someone not in the Desi community, I would say [I am] Pakistani American, because I was born there, so I still identify myself as Pakistani. But, compared to my cousins or my aunts back home, I’m definitely more American.” She was quick to note that this was not indicative of “losing my Desi values” but instead embodying “a mix of both.”

I noticed that Sadaf repeatedly referred to her aunts and wondered whether gender differences could be implied in Sadaf’s description of the differences she perceived between American and Desi values. Indeed, she explained that her aunts were “all stay at home moms and...they don’t really want to go out and work...like, they enjoy being stay at home moms”. By contrast, Sadaf declared that “My thing is I don’t want to be a housewife.” She later shared that her goal after graduating with her undergraduate degree in Biochemistry would be to eventually pursue a doctorate and contribute to research in the field. Sadaf additionally highlighted the difference between her aunts and herself, as she explained that “If [my aunts] want something, they won’t really speak too much about it versus me, I’ll tell my dad to his face like, ‘no, you want me to do this, but I don’t want to do it’ versus my aunts would never do that.” Without any

prompting, she then went on to compare herself with her uncles and said that “I feel like I wouldn’t really identify with [my uncles] just because I feel like they’re even more Desi than my aunts are.” She explained that although her behavior and personality might not perfectly mirror those of her aunts, they were supportive of her whereas her uncles held comparatively more rigid expectations for her. “[My uncles’] values are much more traditional, and they’re not as flexible as I would be.”

Amid these nuances in her understanding of her cultural identity, Sadaf was keenly aware of instances when she had felt more and less affirmed in ways that others might have overlooked entirely. For example, Sadaf vividly recalled the elementary school that she began attending when her family first moved from Pakistan to a suburb of Houston. In addition to its being “really nice, because there [were] a lot of Desi kids there,” she explained that “I remember in the front lobby, they had a bunch of flags of a lot of different countries and Pakistan was up there...I had just moved, so you know, seeing your flag is like, ‘Okay, you’ll be accepted here.’” She attended second through fourth grade there, but attended a new school in a Houston suburb with a comparatively smaller Desi population where her family had moved as she was beginning fifth grade. She found the absence of the flag display in her new school’s lobby to be an apt metaphor for the level of inclusiveness she felt at the school and explained that “the [first] school was much more diverse than the [second] one and the kids were much nicer as well.”

After her notably different experiences at these two elementary schools, Sadaf began attending sixth grade at the private school where she would remain until she graduated from high school. Sadaf explained that “My parents didn’t want me to go to a public middle school...they wanted me to go to [this] Islamic school.” Sadaf described the school as having an academically demanding curriculum, with AP and dual credit classes, and exceptionally talented math and

science teachers, and she emphasized that “a lot of people come to that school because the teachers are really good.” Aside from the smaller class sizes (there were four students in her graduating senior class) and the mandatory Quran revision and memorization classes, Sadaf did not describe notable differences between this school and the local public middle and high schools she might have otherwise attended. Although she explained there were comparatively fewer extracurricular activities available, Sadaf was very involved and participated in the Islamic club, science fair, debate club, and the Muslim Interscholastic Tournament (MIST), a competition among Muslim Student Associations from area public schools. In addition to these activities, Sadaf excelled academically and was the valedictorian of her graduating class.

Alongside these accomplishments, Sadaf’s attendance at this Islamic school provided her with a close-knit peer group, as her classmates were also the people she worshipped alongside at her masjid and the people she socialized with together with her family. Her place within this peer group did have a somewhat counterintuitive role in further shaping her Pakistani American identity. She described herself as having been “more American in high school than I am now in college” as she had not necessarily felt the need to work to maintain her Desi values when she was surrounded by Desi peers. By contrast, once she arrived at UH, she felt that “being surrounded by American people makes you more Desi, because it’s like you, of course, want to keep your culture or not let it go.” She additionally described the conversations she would have with friends about the family expectations specific to being the “eldest daughter.” She recalled the support she felt from being able to talk with fellow eldest daughter friends about the responsibilities and expectations they faced, particularly as it related to caring for their younger siblings. This peer group also served as an important source of college-related talk. She described the perception among her friends that “everyone goes to UH.” She added that she had

the most exposure to UH not only through these conversations, but also through a group of her father's friends who met monthly and reminisced about their shared experiences as UH students, and the MIST tournaments that were hosted on the UH campus.

Even with all these factors in mind, Sadaf did not view UH as her first-choice school and went so far as to say that "I did kind of not want to go to UH, just because people say all Desi people go there, so I wanted to go to UT Austin." She added that "You would basically just hear that [UH] is not as good of a university as like UT," particularly as it related to the post-graduation "hiring game." Although these were seemingly anecdotal remarks, they seemed to have powerfully shaped Sadaf's perceptions of her college search process. Curious as to what other resources Sadaf might have relied on to understand the college-going process, I learned that she "mainly used [Google]" and described "just googling it" in reference to everything from how to apply to colleges to how to write a good essay.

Given the size of the school, I wondered whether she might have had access to a college counselor. Sadaf explained that although they did have counselors on staff, "They weren't really that helpful." For example, during an information session that happened to only be attended by girls in the high school, one counselor advised that "You should make sure your education is really good, because what if you don't get married?" Appalled by this line of thinking, Sadaf and her friends wrote off that counselor as "really weird, so we kind of stopped talking to him."

With this in mind, I was surprised to learn that Sadaf ultimately ended up applying to four schools – UH and UT Austin along with Harvard and Cornell. She explained that "My parents really wanted me to apply to Ivy Leagues. I told them I wasn't gonna get in, especially because I went to an Islamic school,...so we wouldn't have like a lot of ...stuff that would make you stand apart for those types of schools." Curious again as to how she arrived at this

assessment of her admissions prospects at these schools, I again heard a similar refrain – “I looked online.” She explained that this search led her to feel like “There’s nothing in my application that’s even making [Ivy League admissions officers] be like, ‘Oh, she would be a good candidate for our university’ ...I personally thought I shouldn’t be wasting time knowing that it’s not something for me. But, I just did it for my parents.” She admitted that managing her parents’ expectations was a particularly challenging element of her college application process. “That part was difficult, though, to explain to my parents that it’s not just ‘Oh, your daughter is smart’ ...you have to offer a lot more than just being smart.”

Beyond this desire for Sadaf to attend a prestigious university, her parents seemed to have had relatively minimal involvement in her college search process, a fact that I found somewhat surprising given her parents’ educational and occupational histories in the U.S. The family initially emigrated, so her father could focus on expanding the American arm of the family business, for which he had laid the initial groundwork during his time as an undergraduate at the University of Houston. Although Sadaf’s mother did not work outside the home during Sadaf’s childhood, she earned an associate’s degree in Business Management from Houston Community College and worked in recent years as a substitute teacher. Sadaf recalled that her dad would often say “Oh, you’re really smart, you should become a doctor” but did not seem to have strong preferences beyond that. When Sadaf mentioned having taken the SAT exams twice, I wondered whether that was at her parents’ insistence. She shared that they were not aware of her decision, and she simply chose to do so “on my own” and “just to see if I could get a better score.”

After applying to two Ivy League institutions and two public state schools, Sadaf received acceptances from the latter two. She described the decision between UT Austin and UH

as a rather straightforward one. She was admitted to UT Austin under the auspices of the Texas law commonly referred to as the top 10% rule, but was not admitted under her first choice major of Neuroscience, a field that she already thought of as *my* major. UH did not offer “my major” and she instead applied and was admitted as a Biochemistry major. Sadaf’s disappointment over this was almost palpable. Between this and the fact that “[my parents] preferred me to stay in Houston,” Sadaf decided to attend UH.

Sadaf had initially planned to complete her core classes at UH in the first two years and then transfer to UT and indeed maintained that mindset throughout her first year at UH. Then, as she was taking the notoriously difficult Organic Chemistry course during her sophomore year, she had a change of heart. “If I think UH is so hard, definitely UT is going to be harder, so I was good with UH.” I was quite surprised to hear this kind of thinking from Sadaf, whose drive and exceptional work ethic had been obvious throughout our conversations. She explained her thought process as such: “I just thought it wasn’t gonna be worth it, because I would be so focused on getting good grades that I wouldn’t really enjoy college or have fun.”

This decision to strive for a balance between academics and social life seemed to have largely panned out for Sadaf, and she seemed to be pleased with the ways that remaining at UH had worked in her favor. She credited her involvement in the Honors College in particular for having enjoyed her time as a student at UH and gushed that “I feel like the professors are like really, really nice and they like really care about you.” She additionally admitted that the ease and sense of belonging she felt on campus was a huge asset – “You do see a lot of hijabis.” Sadaf also explained that she typically did her prayers in the basement of the library “where most people pray,” but went on to add that “but, if I’m in a rush or something, I still feel comfortable, like praying like in a little corner somewhere, so I feel like that was also really nice about UH.”

She then shyly admitted with a smile, “And, the whole meeting my fiancé also makes me happy that I stayed.”

Aradhana

Aradhana⁸ was among the last participants I had the opportunity to work with at the University of Houston. As I prepared for the first session with her, I was thinking about how all of the participants so far had made explicit references to various archetypal expectations associated with the South Asian American community, yet none actually followed the patterns and norms they described. I was beginning to wonder how I might contextualize these comments, without a participant whose life experiences fit this mold. As if on cue then, Aradhana joined the study and I was fascinated to listen to her describe her various life experiences, from being the daughter of a software engineer from India to growing up in the Bay Area in California to unquestioningly pursuing a STEM degree. Our first two conversations and particularly her hourlong conversation with her father were rife with references to the pervasive societal and familial expectations often levied on South Asian American children. Yet, by the end of our final conversation together, I was delighted to discover how Aradhana found ways to meet these expectations while also fulfilling her own desires for herself. As I reflected on our final conversation, I was reminded of the subtitle of Piyali Bhattacharya’s book – *South Asian American Daughters on Obedience and Rebellion* – and struck by the ways that Aradhana ultimately embodied both qualities.

Years before she would enroll as a chemical engineering major at the University of Houston, Aradhana explained that she “always knew that I would do something in STEM...because that was kind of the only thing I knew I could do.” She attributed that certainty

⁸ Aradhana chose this name for herself based on the title of a 1960s Bollywood movie.

of her eventual career pathway to her parents who had placed a lifelong emphasis on the importance of a good education. Indeed, not only were her parents instrumental in supporting her studies, her extended family also reinforced this support, as she recalled her maternal grandmother, a math schoolteacher, reminding Aradhana's mother to "Put Aradhana in all these courses, she needs math" and telling Aradhana herself that "You need to be good at math, math is extremely important."

She recalled the "rigid" atmosphere of the very first school she began attending in the Bay Area and explained that her parents "wanted me to be in a really good school at the beginning" with the understanding that building a strong educational foundation early on would allow Aradhana to flourish in her later academic pursuits. In addition to attending schools known for their academic rigor, Aradhana also spent several years in various academic enrichment programs outside of school (e.g., Mathnasium, Singapore Math) that focused on drilling math skills. Aradhana unquestioningly followed the path set before her and credited it for the strong sense of academic self-confidence she developed along the way. "It kind of shapes you in a way, like you have to do those things and you end up becoming good at math and science and school in general." While she acknowledged that some of her peers viewed their parents' insistence on completing these programs as unduly onerous, Aradhana took a comparatively equanimous view of these expectations and simply explained that "I'm very studious...it comes naturally to me, so I was like, 'I'm good at this, so why wouldn't I do it?'"

Aradhana's participation in these enrichment programs not only provided her with concrete academic advantages (like being able to skip algebra and go straight to geometry in eighth grade) but also served as a key venue for her to develop a sense of her own longer-term academic trajectory. She animatedly recalled a particularly influential recent college graduate

who worked at the Mathnasium that Aradhana attended in eighth grade. She explained that “It was just very fun talking to her because she was Indian, and it was kind of like seeing who I would be in the future.” She went on to describe how “She would talk about her brother who was a petroleum engineer and he was making \$90K off the bat, so she was...explaining how it’s worth it to do engineering.” Aradhana paused to reflect on this exchange and then realized, “Now that I think about it, I’ve had a lot of those [types of conversations] growing up, so...there was no other clear path other than get some type of STEM job, and just try really hard to get into a good college, so I can succeed.”

As I heard this, I was instantly curious to hear what Aradhana’s definition of success might look like. I was particularly wondering whether the allure of engineering (and its potential for an immediate \$90,000 annual salary) was rooted in a desire for financial stability or whether she felt more compelled to enter this field for the ways that it would be positively perceived by her community. In my own mind, I assumed it was more likely to be the latter than the former, given the comfortable, upper middle-class lifestyle she had always known, as a result of her father’s career in software engineering and her mother’s career in finance. My hunch proved to be correct as Aradhana explained “There’s always the worry in the back of my head, like, if I do certain things, what will the community think? It’s just smoother when you’re able to say you’re doing something in STEM and they can be like ‘Oh, nice.’ It just feels smooth, like they approve or whatever. It’s just always easier to feel like you’re not being judged, you know?”

A combination of this pursuit of community approval and what she referred to as an internally motivated “personal pressure” drove Aradhana to constantly compare herself to others and hold herself up to exceptionally high standards. Indeed, she often referred to herself as “an AP kid,” apparently drawing a strong sense of self from her academic identity. This identity was

briefly challenged when she made the transition from her small, private school in California to her new public school in Austin, where she moved with her family as she was beginning seventh grade. Her status as one of the smartest kids in her previous school “was something that made me stand out, and something that I just thought I know about myself, this is just how I am and this is how I’ll always be.”

It came as quite a shock, then, upon her arrival to her new school in Austin to discover that, “There’s a whole group of people who were doing the same things as me, like working extremely hard and studying very hard, and suddenly it wasn’t as easy or didn’t seem as easy.” These initial feelings of alienation continued to fester and never seemed to fully dissipate throughout her middle and high school years. Instead, Aradhana described the domineering “AP clique” that seemed to occupy a coveted spot within the social ecosystem of her competitive high school, and she detailed the ways she felt excluded from the group, which had formed even before she had moved to Texas. These frustrations with her social life led her to double down on her academics instead, as she noted that “The social life thing isn’t really going so well here, so I might as well just focus on school...I want to do well, so I can get into AP classes and AP classes will lead me to a good college.”

Her dogged pursuit of excellence in her academics kept her focus on “getting a high GPA, great rank, so I would get into great programs afterwards” but also left her feeling “extremely stressed.” Her approach did work in her favor, as she was ranked in the top ten people in her class by the end of her freshman year. But, she slowly began to burn out, and by her junior year she realized that “I was always hardcore focused on studies, but I was like, I can’t be this competitive to the point where I’m considering, oh, if I don’t make an A on this, what would it do to my rank? So, I kind of stopped being that way.” Even with the comparatively lax

approach she tried to take, Aradhana graduated among the top 25 students or the top three percent of her senior class.

Her laser focus on eventual college applications was also apparent in the way she engaged in extracurricular activities in high school. She explained that she joined “the typical orgs like HOSA [Health Occupations Students of America] and DECA [DECA Inc., formerly Distributive Education Clubs of America, a student organization focused on marketing, finance, hospitality and management]”. She joined HOSA in ninth grade and discovered a natural talent for the extemporaneous essay track of the HOSA competition and “ended up placing pretty highly for that.” Although she soon realized that she was not interested in pursuing a career in the medical profession, she remained an active member of the club all four years, because “It’s good to show that you did these competitions, and you’re a good student, and you placed and stuff like that.”

Aradhana also applied to a similar type of logic to her engagement in a summer research program at the University of Texas. She described having been given the option to choose from various labs that were participating in the program. She explained that she chose to work with a well-known professor who had won a Nobel Prize. In addition to this element of prestige, she explained that she opted to join this lab for the summer because “It’ll be a good reason in college apps to want to do chemical engineering, like they’ll ask, so I need some type of basis for whichever one I pick.” Ultimately, she did look fondly on this experience and credited it for reinforcing her desire to pursue a chemical engineering degree.

Aradhana’s Bharatnatyam classical dance classes seemed to be a notable exception to her tendency to consider the utility of activities through the lens of their potential value for her college applications. Having begun lessons as a second grader, she continued lessons after

moving to Texas. In contrast to the sense of alienation she felt from the cliquishness at her new school, her new Bharatnatyam dance studio gave her a sense of belonging. Aradhana's trademark tenacity was also exemplified in her completion during her senior year of high school of her arangetram, the notoriously challenging senior recital completed by Bharatnatyam classical dance students. Beyond the accomplishment of completing this capstone requirement, Aradhana greatly valued the experience for having "upped [her] confidence a lot." She additionally credited her arangetram preparation process for "distracting me from the stress of the first two years of high school where I didn't really feel like I fit in...and also, all of that stress [of being ranked highly among her graduating class], it distracted me from that."

The ways that Aradhana described the stress of her high school experience and her constant need to compare herself to everyone around her seemed all too familiar to me, yet I was curious to hear whether she might have had a sense of where this seemingly reflexive need to compare herself might have come from. "I don't know where it came from, honestly" she admitted. "I feel like that's something that I just inherently do. I'm not sure, maybe it did come from the way I was raised or the people I was surrounded with or how all the people I was surrounded with were AP students, so we all had the same goals...there's competition in classes, and that kind of stuff just happens."

In addition to explaining Aradhana's tendency to hold herself to these high standards, pervasive yet seemingly unspoken expectations also served to explain Aradhana's understanding of college-going and career plans. "I never thought about the option of not going to college and doing something else, like I wasn't really exposed to that." She attributed this assumption not only to her family and her parents' expectations for her, but also to her Tamil identity. She explained that "I feel like with Tamil people...most parents go into STEM and a lot of their kids

just end up going into STEM...so that was just the clear path to me, too.” Aradhana’s understanding of her Tamil identity and the norms and expectations within this community came not only from her parents and extended family but also her neighborhood, which she estimated as having been 70% Tamil, along with another nearby neighborhood, where her best friend and many of the families that her family socialized with lived. She described the seemingly constant focus on academics among the neighborhood as: “Basically, all the parents will be asking kids who are slightly older than their kids about college, AP classes. What are they taking? When should they start preparing for the SAT? What prep school should they go to to prepare? That’s the culture of my neighborhood. Like, there’s literally this one mom who people try to avoid, because if you see her, the moment you see her, she’s across the street, she’s gonna start asking you about APs and college, like I’m not even joking, that’s what she does...all the parents are always talking about it, all the kids are always talking about what the other kids are doing.”

With this near constant focus on college-going in the years before she engaged in the search process in earnest, I expected that Aradhana would approach her search with military precision. I was surprised, then, to hear her reflect a sense of uncertainty and confusion in navigating many elements of the process, going so far as to admit that “The whole college application thing in general was not as structured of an approach as it should have been.” While her dad was heavily engaged in her search process, she explained that they were simply “going off of ones that maybe were well-known, or we had heard about other people doing chem-e or just engineering in general in those schools and doing well.”

The interview Aradhana conducted with her dad echoed these similar sentiments, as he described a sense of confusion at his lack of familiarity with the American higher education system and noted the existence of these feelings despite his and Aradhana’s mother having

earned college degrees in India. He additionally seemed to suggest that this sense of confusion in navigating seemingly standard processes was simply an expected element of the immigrant experience. He poignantly recalled the many American systems and norms he did not initially understand as a newly-arrived immigrant from India – “It was a big mess. You have to learn many things on your own. Even applying social security card was such a confusion, opening bank account was such a confusion. I didn’t know the concept of credit history. Nobody explained to me about that, before I came here.”

Even as I noted this sense of uncertainty about the search process, I was especially surprised to learn that Aradhana did not have a dream school in mind, despite being sure that she would immediately attend college after graduating from high school. She instead talked about how she felt less concerned about going to any specific school and was instead focused on making sure that she would be able to gain admission into a good engineering program. She explained that she developed this mindset from her dad’s oft-voiced perspective that “He didn’t really care as much about what school I went to,” with the assumption that an engineering degree from any school would ensure future job prospects. Aradhana also described feeling a lack of support and guidance in how best to prepare for the SAT and ACT exams. Her parents enrolled her in a test preparation program, but she explained that she did a less intensive version of the program than her peers. She expressed a fleeting sense of regret for having not followed this path, but also explained that by the time she was taking these exams, her full-tilt approach to her schoolwork had left her feeling burnt out.

Perhaps most surprising of all, Aradhana added the University of Houston to her college application list not for the ways that it would potentially support her academic goals but her social goals. During her junior year of high school, she “just randomly” happened to find an

Instagram account of a current UH student and began following her on the social media platform. “She was Indian, and she was in a sorority, and she seemed very cool and popular and just like she was living her best life, and I was like, ‘I want to be her. I don’t want to be high school me.’” I was fascinated that such a powerful influence in her college search process had emerged through happenstance. I wondered aloud whether Aradhana might have been similarly influenced by an Instagram account of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed sorority girl at UH, instead of an Indian girl. Without any hesitation, Aradhana immediately confirmed that “I probably would not have thought twice about it, if she wasn’t Indian. The fact that she was an Indian girl and she was...living her best life. I was like, ‘I want to be her.’” As Aradhana continued into the college search process and began considering schools across the country to apply to, she explained that “She was someone who was in the back of my head, like, this girl goes to UH and she seems to be having a lot of fun. If I go, I’ll probably have the same experience.”

Aradhana ultimately applied to a wide variety of public and private colleges across the country, ranging from Ivy Leagues to top-tier public research universities (e.g., Georgia Tech) to less competitive public universities (e.g., Arizona State University) along with prominent state schools, like University of Texas and Texas A&M University. The family traversed the country to visit many of these campuses, but once the stark differences between in-state and out-of-state tuition rates became apparent, the range of serious contenders narrowed to University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University in College Station, University of Texas at Dallas (UTD), and the University of Houston.

While she was less impressed with UTD and felt a vague sense of discomfort with Texas A&M, she recalled “really liking walking around UH” during a campus tour for engineering majors. In addition to her own satisfaction with the prospect of attending UH (“I just really liked

what I saw”), a full-ride scholarship made it the obvious choice – “My parents were like, ‘You’re going. You have to go.’” In addition to these straightforward criteria that made UH appealing, Aradhana’s parents seemed to favor UH for its location (closer to the family home in Austin) and all that the city of Houston would provide. In his interview with Aradhana, her father specifically named Hillcroft, a shopping district in Houston that is synonymous with South Asian restaurants and grocery stores, as an advantage of choosing UH over any of the other colleges that Aradhana was considering. While Aradhana admitted that at the time she had not thought that these would be important elements of her college life, (“I just wanted to leave home and gain new experiences, so I was ready to eat dining hall food”) she admitted that she did soon realize that “I do enjoy having Indian restaurants nearby.” She was also glad to be able to maintain her connection to the Indian community through UH’s diverse study body, explaining that “I feel like I always end up gravitating towards Indian students,” due to a combination of the approachability and comfort she felt among them.

Once at UH, she was determined to do things differently and break the patterns she had grown used to during her high school years. She joined a sorority and admitted that “Studies were definitely not the priority.” She recalled with a laugh the many conversations during her first year when “My parents would call me and be like, ‘Are you studying at all?’” Yet, she gleefully remembers her first year as a time when her expectations of UH and college life were “met and exceeded...I was extremely happy at UH and I was like ‘College is the best, best time of your life,’ like it really is.” While this beatific perception of college life was inevitably tempered when her grades suffered to the point of potentially jeopardizing her ability to remain an engineering major and maintain her full-ride scholarship, she eventually found a healthy balance between her academics and her desire for a vibrant, fulfilling personal life. As she

looked back on her time at UH, a blur of tailgating parties, sorority events, research opportunities, and internships with notable companies, she declared “I don’t think I would do anything differently. I’m happy that I ended up at UH.”

Portraits of Rice University Participants

Suchitra

While this study and both of the pilot studies that preceded it all shared the same through line of “me-search,” I had not felt both the profound weight and joy of this concept until my conversations with Suchitra⁹. She and I shared startlingly many similarities in our life experiences. Both tracing our heritage to the southern Indian state of Karnataka, we took pride in our Kannadiga identity despite our admittedly limited proficiency with our mother tongue Kannada and the attendant teasing that ensued from our extended family. We both felt a similar sense of belonging within our two hometowns of sorts, Bengaluru and Houston, with the former claiming “a small piece of my heart” and the latter simply “always a comfort,” in Suchitra’s words. As seniors in high school nearly a decade apart from one another, we aspired to the same dream school of New York University, which remained only a dream for us both due to financial constraints. Suchitra was especially struck to discover how similar our experiences of our first year of college had been, with both of us awash in a never before felt loneliness and uncertainty about the path ahead.

Yet, for as much as I saw of myself in Suchitra, I also saw a more universal picture of the second generation Indian American experience reflected in her story. Her experience of having been born in America but lived and attended schools in both India and America afforded her an unparalleled ability among all the participants in this study to articulate the feeling of “not being

⁹ Suchitra left the choice of pseudonym up to me. In a nod to our shared Kannadiga identity, I chose a name that was reminiscent of my mother’s best friend’s name.

American enough for Americans and not Indian enough for Indians,” a perfect, unknowing hat tip to the Par/Desi Framework’s overarching premise. Ultimately, my conversations with Suchitra powerfully reminded me that while the initial motivator of this work might have once been “me-search” I was now entrusted with the responsibility of “we-search” as I sought to find answers to my research questions.

Like many at the time, Suchitra’s father emigrated to the U.S. in the late 1980s to pursue a master’s degree in Computer Science, after having earned a bachelor’s degree in Engineering in India. He returned briefly to India to marry Suchitra’s mother who had also completed a bachelor's degree in Engineering. She then earned a master's degree in Computer Science after joining her husband in Texas. While these were obvious markers of the ways that education had long been prioritized by her family, Suchitra saw her family’s influence in developing her love of learning far differently. Instead, she recalled some of her earliest childhood memories, as she would read books with her mother and older sister. With a palpable joy, she described her sister reading an Amelia Bedelia book and explained that “I think it was my first memory of a book, because I was absolutely fascinated by it. It's basically this book about this housekeeper who just takes everything literally, it's a bunch of idioms and like, twists of words. And I just found the way that they used the English language in such twisty turny ways was so fascinating.” Indeed, this moment remained so pivotal for Suchitra that it served as the basis of the college admissions essays she would write decades later.

In addition to these formative experiences within the home, Suchitra’s early experiences in school seemed to have also formed lasting habits. She recalled the sticker chart system that was used in her preschool class and explained that “I was obsessed about getting perfect green stars every single day. I think one time I got a yellow star, and I was upset the entire day...So

yeah, you could say I was a perfectionist from a small age.” Indeed, some combination of Suchitra’s genuine love of learning and her tendency to perfectionism paved the way for her to eventually earn the top spot of valedictorian of her graduating class at her suburban Texas public high school.

While Suchitra began and ended her K-12 educational journey in a suburb of Houston, she attended second through seventh grade in India. She continued to do well academically throughout these transitions, but admitted that the vast differences in the pedagogical styles of the American versus the Indian school system, which places a heavy emphasis on rote memorization, made for an initially challenging adjustment period for her. More than shaping her education, the experience of attending school and living in India for this extended time left a seemingly indelible mark on the way that Suchitra understood her own identity. “They always call us ‘ABCD,’ because you’re an American Born Confused Desi. I will say because of that, you kind of do feel like you don’t really belong...you kind of find it hard to fit into both places...because you don’t feel fully American or fully Indian.”

The extent of the influence of occupying this liminal space extended beyond what Suchitra was perhaps conscious of herself. I noticed that she specifically reached out to and relied on Indian American women for their insights on her college search process and later her internship options. “I don’t know if it was a conscious decision to search out for Indian American girls...I guess part of it is the fact that because we have a similar background...if they tell me how their college experience is, it’s like ‘Okay, would this kind of be how my experience would be?’...There is this degree of more trust when it comes from an Indian source.”

This mentality also seemed to be a natural reaction to Suchitra’s particularly acute experiences of being othered when she resumed attending school in Texas in eighth grade. She

detailed how kids at her new school pointed out her thick Indian accent (“I didn’t think I had an accent”) and even marveled at her ability to speak English at all. She recalled an essay assignment in her English class that year that she used as proof of her belongingness. “I worked hard on that essay...I’m so proud of that grade, I got a 102 on it. I literally tried to show it. I wasn’t bragging, but I made it visible because I was like, ‘Hey, I might not be from here, but I know my frickin’ English!’” She additionally recalled the struggles of adjusting from Indian to American norms and expectations and simply “not feeling American enough.” She identified a wide range of stark differences in cultural expectations, from the nature of student-teacher interactions to the emphasis on dress code, but remembered being especially stunned by the differences in academic culture among her peers in India versus in America. “In India, they don’t have a GPA system. They don’t even give you a grade, but everybody works their asses off in India, because for some reason, everybody cares about doing really well in that class. But it was so weird to come to America, and the fact that even though they’re giving you a grade, some people just blatantly did not care. To me, that just boggled my mind.”

In addition to acclimating to these new cultural differences, Suchitra also recalled her initial transition back to American school as an eighth grader as a time when she had to actively work to catch up to her peers’ knowledge of college-going expectations, from what she noticed both through informal interactions and structured classroom activities on the topic. She described her bewilderment as she listened to the neighborhood kids she began carpooling to school with having taken what she referred to as the “practice SAT” as seventh graders. “I remember being like, ‘Oh, is this something I need to think about?’ Like, I hadn’t even heard much about the SAT, much less the practice SAT. So, I remember googling after that...and after that I was like, ‘In high school, everything becomes make or break.’” In addition to these passing conversations,

goal-setting activities in her advisory class also prodded Suchitra to begin thinking about her approach to her eventual college search. “What do you think your job might be? What do you want as a minimum income? Do you want to go to college? What do you think? What are you willing to pay for that, and so there's like all these questions about do you want to go to private or do you want to go to a local college? And it's like, questions as an eighth grader, at least for me, I wasn't even prepared to answer. But at least it got me thinking and I was googling a lot after that.” While she hadn't given much thought to long-term academic plans as a student in India, these interactions led Suchitra to the perspective that “When I came to America, it felt like you had to plan every step to college. That's basically what your entire high school leads up to, like you're getting good grades, you're keeping your GPA high, you're doing your SAT, all to get into a college that's gonna set you up for a career. Like, it's the end game.”

With that mindset firmly in place by the time Suchitra began high school a year later, she was ready to focus on making sure that all of her curricular and extra-curricular activities aligned with her eventual goal of attending a good college. She described herself as having been “a typical Asian kid that's doing all AP classes” and her sister, two years ahead of her in school, advised Suchitra to get involved as early as possible, so she joined HOSA, Model United Nations, and Business Professionals of America. She also started her own student organization, a book club where students would gather to discuss the group's book of the month and also collect children's books to donate to a local charity. “It was really fun! We got to eat snacks and just discuss books. It was a really chill thing that we did.”

This balance of seemingly genuinely enjoying herself while working hard towards her goals seemed to extend to Suchitra's overall high school experience. She repeatedly described herself as “obviously” being academically-minded and “pretty focused on studies, AP credits, the

whole shebang,” but she also fondly reflected on hanging out with friends, going to get boba with them, and “just trying to relax whenever I can.” Her close-knit friend group, comprised of five South Asian and Southeast Asian girls, was a key element of Suchitra’s sense of belonging during this time. Moreover, she attributed this friend group as the reason for having enjoyed her time in high school – “I spent most of my time studying, but I did have a good time in high school, at least with my friends.”

Suchitra assumed that this balance would continue into her college years as well, with an expectation that college would be an opportunity to be “a part of this intellectually rich community, and you’re part of this group of like-minded individuals, and you’re part of all these activities. It’s what people mean when they say ‘It’s gonna be the best four years of your life.’” In addition to this somewhat abstract criterion of finding an intellectually fulfilling community, Suchitra weighed potential college options based on their academic merit. She was especially focused on schools with strong programs that were highly ranked in the fields she was considering as potential majors, including Cognitive Science, which she ended up pursuing at Rice. Beyond these two aspects of her college experience, Suchitra seemed open to a wide range of possibilities. Curious about the thought process that led her to identifying which schools to apply to, I asked about what I expected to be a methodical approach. Instead, she admitted that “I wish I could say there’s a rigorous process, but it was really random.”

Although branded as “random” by Suchitra, the universities that Suchitra applied to would uniformly be viewed as top tier institutions. She then seriously considered her acceptances from the University of Texas at Austin, University of California Los Angeles, New York University, and Emory University, in addition to Rice University. Among these options, she recalled being most enamored of NYU for a myriad of reasons and especially liked the flexibility

it afforded her to explore her interests beyond STEM fields. “I always really wanted to go there. I just really loved the different classes offered in NYU...I was interested in maybe picking up a double major in something like English-related, and I know if I did that, NYU would obviously be the better choice. Of course, NYU has better opportunities.” However, NYU’s steep cost of attendance required Suchitra to set her sights elsewhere. A lack of financial support from UCLA also took it out of the running, which left UT Austin, Emory, and Rice on her list. Although UT Austin offered a scholarship to all Texas high school valedictorians, this support still fell short of the generous funding packages she had received from Emory and Rice, so she narrowed her focus to those two institutions.

Suchitra felt that finances played “a really large role...around 50-60%” in her decision-making process, given that her older sister would still be in the third year of her undergraduate degree as Suchitra was beginning her time as a college student and their parents were providing financial support to both daughters. However, Suchitra also traveled with her entire family to several campuses across the country in the months prior to her senior year of high school. In addition to these visits, Suchitra also attended visit days for admitted students at each of the three campuses that she was seriously considering. Ultimately, it seemed that these visits and the conversations Suchitra had with the Indian American women she was connected to within her community were particularly weighty influences, perhaps even beyond financial concerns.

The perceptions of the institutions that Suchitra developed over the course of her visits to both Rice and Emory, and the ways that these perceptions compared to her desire for her college experience to happen among an intellectually fulfilling community, seemed to have largely shaped Suchitra’s decision to attend Rice University. She recalled her visit to Emory and being put off by the student culture she encountered among the newly admitted and current students

alike. “It seemed like everybody was too focused on their GPA...it felt like these people were just worried about their GPA, not really about the material they were learning. I think that’s what was getting to me, because I really wanted to learn at that point...I couldn’t let something like my GPA prevent me from taking classes that weren’t interesting and challenging.” By contrast, she enjoyed meeting newly admitted and current students at Rice and recalled that “I met some really interesting people, which is why I thought I’d vibe more here and why I chose [Rice].” She additionally explained that once she had narrowed her decision to Rice or Emory “because of financial reasons,” she felt that both institutions were equally strong in her proposed majors, which meant that “what I was looking for was mostly about where did I think I could fit in the most, and I thought at the time, that it could be Rice.”

In addition to her own positive perceptions of Rice, the final consideration was the external perceptions of her decision. She recalled that “a lot of people said [Rice] had a better prestige. I mean, to me, prestige wasn’t really that big of a deal, but whenever I tell people that I go to Rice, I guess it’s a big deal.” Her mother seemed to echo this mindset of Rice’s prestige making it the obvious choice for Suchitra – “My mom was like, ‘You got into Rice. Why wouldn’t you go there?’”

Although Suchitra was initially pleased with her decision to attend Rice, she was soon forced to reckon with the weight of these external expectations (and the ways that she had internalized these expectations), and therefore characterized her entire first year as a Rice student as a “rough time...when I was second guessing my pre-med decision, so I was having like a career existential crisis. I was waking up every day and being like, ‘what am I going to do with my life?’ I feel like I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Although she had grown up with the assumption that she would one day become a doctor, Suchitra began to question whether she could really see herself pursuing this path. “Everybody grows up to that question, you know, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ and my answer always was always doctor, and I don’t even think I knew why...I can’t even say that anybody put it in my head, because it wasn’t like anybody did. It was just that it was there.”

Yet, despite her description of her medical career aspirations somehow materializing from nothing, Suchitra also identified several avenues through which she likely absorbed the understanding of the significance of a medical career. She broadly described the traditionally narrow mindset of potential career options among Indians – “You can only become like either a doctor, lawyer, or engineer.” Moreover, Suchitra recognized how much her parents approved of her intention to become a doctor and described her short-lived decision to not pursue this career path as “a big point of contention.” She explained that “Obviously, I knew my mom wanted me to be a doctor, but I also knew that [she] couldn’t force me to, so I think the point of contention was the fact that I didn’t know what I wanted to do.”

She vividly recalled having read Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* during this time when she was grappling with these questions and uncertainties about her future and recalled how much the novel’s central themes resonated with her. The idea that someone could have “achieved their quote, unquote dream, and they still have that struggle of figuring out what they want to do with their life...was just very evocative to me.” Making sense of that time in her life now three years later, she explained that “I think part of that was just me trying to figure out, okay, do I want to just keep going down the path where I just follow what everyone else is doing, which is just going down the medicine route?...Or, do I want to just at least try something out and kind of wade through the deep end and I think I kind of had to make that decision.”

Suchitra did make the decision to take a leap of faith to follow her non-STEM field interests and went so far as to drop all of her pre-med classes. She then did an internship in publishing and another in television production. She was quick to point out the ways that she felt supported in exploring these new arenas, particularly through connections from within her family's diasporic community. "It's kind of how the Indian network works. It's like, 'Hey, can my daughter talk to yours?' It was like how people within the Indian community hook people up with each other, and I didn't realize how extensive it was until like that year. And I've even had an uncle like, during my internship search, I had an uncle tell me, 'Hey, I know someone who works at Disney. Do you want me to hook you up?' And so, it's really interesting how helpful the Indian community is when it comes to like, the jobs search or the college search like they're willing to help you with everything which is honestly amazing." Yet, she also remembered this as a challenging time as she faced resistance from both her family and the broader Indian American community, in response to her decision to drop her pre-med classes. She recalled struggling to describe the nature and purpose of her publishing internship "at those Brown gatherings" referring to the close-knit community within which she and her family regularly socialized. Despite these challenges, Suchitra was committed to her decision, because "I just wanted to escape...and just try something completely different."

As Suchitra neared the end of her time at Rice, she had once again decided to pursue a career in medicine, but seemingly on her own terms. Her summer internship in publishing seemed to have soured her view of that industry and instead led her to a "small rekindling of interest in medicine," so much so that she described spending time watching YouTube videos of surgeries and suturing techniques. She described herself as interested in exploring what a career in medicine might look like while also remaining open to other career options in fields

completely unrelated to medicine. She neatly summed up both her college experiences and the unknown path ahead thusly: “I feel like a lot of it, even consciously or unconsciously, was based on...taking into account what my parents thought about it. Whether I agreed with it or not, I was always checking into what they thought about my major, what they'd think about going to this college, whether they could afford it... I guess a lot of it was how much of it is wanting to please our parents while also trying to follow our heart, which sometimes can go together, but sometimes it feels like pulling on opposite strings. So, it's like trying to find that balance.”

Marie

By the time I met with Marie for the first time, I had grown used to seeing parts of myself and elements of my own experiences reflected in the stories my participants shared with me. Although the same was true for Marie as well, I quickly realized that she held a unique distinction among the participants. While they each had shown me parts of who I was or am, Marie represented the person I wished I could have been when I was in my senior year of college. Perhaps as a result of her Political Science major or the various South Asian Studies courses she had completed during her time as a Rice student, Marie possessed an unparalleled ability to not only vividly describe her past experiences but to additionally reflect on these experiences with the knowledge and perspectives she had gained in the intervening years.

Marie considered her hometown to be the small Midwestern college town – “imagine cornfields and cows, population of about 20,000 or so” – where she had spent her whole life until she moved to Houston to begin attending Rice University. Her father had emigrated to the U.S. to complete his medical residency after having initially started his medical training in India. Marie’s mother earned a degree in electrical engineering but had not yet begun working when she got married, and did not work outside the home even after joining her husband in America. Marie described her mother as having been “a homemaker all her time in the States.” In

reflecting on this chapter of her parents' lives, Marie identified both the micro- and macro-level factors that paved the way for their migration. She pointed to her paternal grandparents' failing health at the time, which led to her father's desire to "provide for his family" with the "viewpoint that there was opportunity to be had overseas" and ultimately his hope of pursuing "quote unquote, a better life." She then also mentioned the 1965 Immigration Act, which she had recently learned about in a South Asian Studies course at Rice, and considered how this landmark legislation also helped make her parents' entry into the U.S. possible – "I was trying to map together, hearing in classes about the post '65 generation, and thinking about how my parents fit into that story."

Marie brought this same deep thoughtfulness to understanding her own identity. While completing the "I am" activity during our first session together, she identified herself as a daughter of immigrants as well as a second-generation immigrant. Curious about what she perceived to be the distinction between the two, I asked her why these seemingly synonymous identities merited two separate spots on her list. She carefully explained the nuances of how being the daughter of immigrants referred to her "pride in the fact that my parents have a story of struggle that they've gone through, that's rooted in their migration to the States...and just try[ing] to fit in and not stir the pot, in terms of moving into white suburbia...They have made it in spite of discriminatory policies or anti-immigrant rhetoric." She went on to explain that "saying I am a second-generation immigrant, I think it's more my unique identity, having the life experiences that I've had, knowledge in two different cultures."

She similarly articulated her distinct understandings of the often-conflated identities of South Asian, Indian, Brown, alongside Woman of Color. She described her view of South Asian as a term that reflects "a shared history that unfortunately comes at the hands of colonization...a

shared oppression but also rich culture...of beautiful foods, beautiful music and dance that I take part in” and was careful to recognize that “being Indian has come to dominate a lot of situations, so I try to be considerate of the fact that they [South Asian and Indian] are not one and the same.” She credited the friends she had made through Rice’s South Asian Society for offering their insights and experiences that helped her develop this viewpoint. She additionally noted that in the past “I didn't feel Indian, growing up in a predominantly white community” and again credited the friendships with Indian women at Rice for helping her to feel more comfortable claiming this identity for herself. She explained that she used the term Brown “because my sister uses it” and “I do sometimes say that I’m part of the Brown community” recognizing that it is a term that is often used colloquially, particularly among the younger generation of South Asian Americans. Yet, she was cautious about using a term that could be seen as reductionist and attributed her training as a Political Science major to her concern about using the word Brown as a synonym for Desi when there is “a lot of coalition building within saying ‘Brown bodies.’”

Marie’s ability to wield such a nuanced grasp of these identities, particularly as a result of her curricular and personal experiences as a Rice student, was especially poignant when she later explained that she wrote her college admissions essays about her experiences as the only South Asian girl in her high school. She sheepishly described how she crafted these essays in such a way that she used “diversity as a selling point, but I didn’t even know then what my South Asian identity was.” Indeed, she recognized now that the experiences she had described in her essays may not have been particularly unique and pointed to her connections and conversations with South Asian students at Rice for helping her gain a more meaningful understanding of her place within this community. She underscored the ongoing nature of her learning, as she continued

“taking aspects of my childhood and piecing it together with other people’s experiences here...I think there’s always like a beautiful aspect of it that I’m still exploring.”

Although her parents are Malayalee, hailing from the southern Indian state of Kerala, she did not lay claim to this identity for herself “because I don’t have very many Malayalee friends, so I think there’s still time to dissect what that means to me.” She instead emphasized the sense of solidarity that stemmed from her identity as a Woman of Color. She referred to the “white gaze that’s put on Women of Color” and admitted that this was a concept she had become more cognizant of in recent years – “I didn’t realize in my childhood how people might have looked at me as a Woman of Color, because I think I adopted whiteness.” She additionally describes that her most salient identity in her formative years in her Midwestern hometown was that “I saw myself as a smart student, without considering what my identity meant to me.”

Marie’s inclination to “attribute whiteness to myself” and view herself “first and foremost” as a student is seemingly a natural outcome of having grown up in “one of the only South Asian households in a predominantly white town.” Moreover, Marie’s father’s role as the town’s only cancer specialist meant that “A lot of people knew us; we were well respected.” Marie referred often to the attention that she and her siblings were accorded because of her father’s prominent role within the community, and the attendant pressure she felt to meet the always assumed (and often explicitly stated) expectations of excellence.

As the third of four siblings (including a sister who is eight years older than her, a brother who is two years older than her, and a brother who is four years younger), Marie described the pressure she felt to follow in her siblings’ footsteps and maintain a legacy of excellence. She simultaneously described how her siblings “never explicitly say we’re competing against each other, but we are” and yet are also her “best friends.” She described a similar duality for her

family overall, sweetly gushing that “I feel like there’s so much joy that I’ve gotten from my family” while also matter-of-factly explaining that “My parents expected us to do well in school, get good grades, set a good example, or set a good name for the family, because my dad was well-known in the community.”

While her parents uniformly held all the children to the same standards of excellence in education, Marie described how she and her sister often “rant about how expectations for us are different from my two brothers, where [our parents] don’t have the same expectations of like, just in terms of marriage, or in terms of how they have to look or dress.” She wryly explained that “It’s funny, my sister will always say that it’s ‘Indian Son Syndrome,’ where they get a little bit more air and attention.” In nearly the same breath, she was quick to assert that “My parents are very much, I think, as egalitarian as Brown parents can be, but there were always discussions about why my mom would need me or my sister to come help do the dishes and not the boys.” She praised her sister for having “gone through a lot of the trials and tribulations and having tough conversations with my parents, so that I don’t have to” and added that “I often say she walked so I could run.”

I asked Marie whether this gender dynamic might have had any effect on her educational experiences. She did not seem to explicitly connect this dynamic to any inequities in her education, but did offer that “There’s a lot of discussion within the South Asian community about only seeing pathways that are being a doctor, lawyer, or engineer, and I don’t think I ever felt so much pressure to have to pursue this path, I think probably because my sister chose that path.” She described her feeling that “education was my own pathway” though she relented that “I don’t know how well English or Art History would have gone over” with her parents. She explained that “I’m still grappling with what they expect from me, because I do still say that I’m

pre-law, but I don't know if I want to be" adding that "I've always had in my heart that they just want the best for me, and they want me to be set up for success."

Marie's parents' expectation of her success had seemingly been synonymous with an expectation of going above beyond to be singularly exceptional. In my view, she had met these expectations throughout her educational journey, beginning as early as elementary school, when she was enrolled in the school's gifted program as a first grader, a year earlier than students typically tested into the program. She credited both her siblings ("probably my siblings had set the standard") and her parents ("our teachers were cognizant that my parents wanted to push us in those ways") for her ability to do so. Marie also recalled that "elementary school was also the time of spelling bees." She explained that her sister advanced as far as the national Scripps bee, which then set the standard to which the rest of her siblings aspired. She recalled that "So much stress came from that time, but it was just expected that we do it, and we did." She vividly described a "devastating moment for me in my formative years" when she placed third in the school bee that only advanced the top two winners to the next round. "I remember crying as soon as I left the school gym, and my dad was there, and he said 'Don't cry...don't let people see you'" as she went on to recall how painful the loss felt because "I made my parents upset, even though they weren't upset, right? They were, I mean, disappointed, maybe."

Marie applied that same dogged pursuit of perfectionism to her studies throughout her early years of school and explained how she was "always expecting to see 100% at the top of my papers. If I ever didn't, it was embarrassing to me... 'Oh my gosh, I have to throw this paper away before it comes home, before my parents see it.'" Despite this seemingly draconian standard to which she held herself, Marie explained that "Performing well was just an expectation, but it didn't come with stress, I would say."

As she moved on to middle school, Marie continued to strive for excellence in her schoolwork and her participation in various activities including spelling bees, science fairs, and the school's gifted program. By this point in her life, she had fully internalized the expectation that she must go above and beyond what her peers and classmates might have been working on and instead focus on her own individual achievements. "It was less about how am I performing at school and more...talking with my parents and my siblings, like while everyone else is worried about this test, I need to be working on spelling bee or I need to be doing things on my own."

As she looked back on her social circle during this time in her life, she realized that "I had a friend from Kenya, a friend from South Korea, a friend from Jamaica, and a friend from El Salvador, so we were all Women of Color" and wondered aloud if "We all came together from a feeling of a little bit of isolation or otherness, compared to the other students." She recalled that they were similarly academically-minded and supportive of one another. Given Marie's constant references to her father's stature within the community as being a key motivator for her to do well in school, I wondered if her friends' parents attracted a similar kind of attention from the wider community. She explained that none of her friends had a similar background as hers and even recalled one friend getting off the school bus at the apartment complex "across the railroad tracks on the other side of town" with all that such a phrase might imply about class differences.

Upon hearing this characterization, I wondered whether Marie had ever thought herself as a rich kid, as the daughter of the town's highly regarded oncologist. She explained that she never developed that mindset, because she was preoccupied by making sure she behaved in a way that was reflective of the respect afforded to her father. Moreover, she noted how important it was for her family to not make their relative comfort seem conspicuous, as that would have just been an

additional differentiator when their family was already highly visible. “To be the brown kid was one thing. To be the brown kid who had something that other people didn’t would [have been] another entirely different thing.” She then described how the kids in her school who had a “comparable lifestyle” as hers were the “mean girls of our high school, and they felt like they had something to prove.” By contrast, Marie explained that “for me, what I had to prove was being the excellent student that my parents expected me to be.”

Marie continued to meet this goal in every imaginable way, from taking math and science courses at the local high school while she was still in eighth grade to then continuing her active involvement in the high school’s gifted program and taking on leadership roles in various extracurricular activities, including Scholars’ Bowl, the debate team, and tennis team. The precedents set by her older siblings continued to loom large, as Marie’s older sister advanced to the state championship during her time in the Scholars’ Bowl and her older brother excelled on the debate team. Marie explained that she participated in these activities with the knowledge that they would eventually figure into her college applications. “It wasn’t just about getting good grades, it was about having something to talk about [on college apps]...My siblings had found their areas to excel, and I was like ‘Oh, I need to find mine’...to set myself up for college apps and things like that.”

Marie once again met this lofty goal and in an especially spectacular way. She became involved in the journalism club and worked her way to the role of editor in chief of the school newspaper. Her cover story exposé about a newly hired school administrator was picked up by the town’s local newspaper. The story continued to gain attention and eventually was featured in major national outlets, including the Washington Post, Boston Globe, and the New York Times. Marie did spots on National Public Radio and Good Morning America, and later attended the

White House Correspondents Dinner. She was rightly proud of her work on what she referred to as a “once in a lifetime experience,” and seemed especially pleased with the ways that this achievement was received by her parents and their diasporic community. She recalled her father receiving congratulatory phone calls from members of the Malayalee church that her family sometimes attended in the neighboring city two hours away from their hometown. “My dad’s friends in [the city] would call and be like ‘Wow, this story is so crazy! Look at her, you know, representing basically the Desi community.’”

This same desire for excellence combined with a desire for her actions and achievements to be positively viewed by the broader community largely explained Marie’s approach to the college search process. She described the standardized tests that were required as part of the application process as “our high school spelling bee, in terms of that pressure [being] different from other kids in high school. They thought of it as just a test to take, [my siblings and I] thought it was something you had to excel in and strive for that 36 or 1600,” referring to perfect scores on the ACT and SAT, respectively. Indeed, when Marie’s older sister scored a 36 on the ACT, this achievement was recognized with “a whole spread in our local community newspaper...with the headline ‘Perfect.’” She explained that her brother also ended up scoring a 36 when he took the ACT but did not receive the same laudatory treatment. Marie referred to her own score of a 35 as merely being a “‘close, but no cigar’ kind of thing” but fondly recalled how “It was just amazing how [my sister] set that standard and was viewed like that in the community, so whenever my older brother or I had similar accomplishments, people would still hear about it” and explained that “There were people in our community who were rooting for us in ways that even we didn’t know, because they were close to my dad.”

Although earning a college degree was an ever-present expectation, Marie recalled not seriously considering her own path to college until she was about midway through high school. Marie was in middle school when her sister began attending the state school located in the city two hours away from their hometown, but explained that “I don’t think I really processed that she’d left. I just got my own room, like that’s all that meant for me, and she would still come visit on the weekend.” It was only when her brother began going through his own college search process during Marie’s sophomore year of high school and she saw “He was getting the pressure from my dad of being like..., ‘What do you want to do with your life?’ And I [was] like, ‘At least the pressure is not on me right now’ ...but I knew that it was on the horizon for me.”

After some preliminary “Google searches of top universities,” Marie began her search process in earnest. Without any prompting, she declared that “We ruled out community colleges, because I think there’s an expectation that we could do better. At least a four-year college was like a safe school for us.” Similarly, after having taken courses during high school at their hometown’s college, she and her siblings “knew that we could do better than that” and accordingly set their sights no lower than the state school that Marie likened to the University of Texas at Austin. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Marie emphasized that prestige was one of the key considerations in her search along with rankings.

I was once again curious to hear how she differentiated seemingly similar concepts, in this case prestige from rankings. Marie admitted that any institution that her parents would have considered prestigious would have then also met her bar of prestige. She explained that as long as a school was well known by name or she could mention it to Indian uncles at a party then it would be considered prestigious. By contrast, rankings didn’t rely on these subjective perceptions and were simply the straightforward lists, and she named *U.S. News and World*

Report as one such source for this type of information. She additionally noted that “I don’t think I ever looked at the financial packages...I was very fortunate in not having to take that into consideration, because where I went, my parents would support.” Yet, perhaps in continuing with her tendency to shun the path set for rich kids, she described not wanting to go to any Ivy League institution out of concern that those schools would have had too much of a cutthroat environment for her to have been able to thrive there.

As had long been the case for Marie, her siblings were deeply influential figures throughout various stages of her college search process, both through what she passively observed and what they directly shared with her. She recalled how her sister’s process (which required meeting her parents’ rigid expectation that she know exactly what she wanted to major in as she entered college) differed from her brother’s process, as he “had a little more flexibility...he could decide what he wanted” – a difference that Marie once again chalked up to “Indian Son Syndrome.” She credited her sister’s influence (“She said, ‘I just see you being a good fit for law’”) for pursuing a Political Science major with the eventual intention of attending law school. It was her brother who prompted Rice University to be added to Marie’s list of schools to apply to, after he attended a debate tournament there as a Northwestern University student. “I was so open to anything, I didn’t know where to go or what to do...He put Rice on my radar and I took that and ran with it.” Her Rice application was then added to her applications at American University, Washington University in St. Louis, Pomona College, Vanderbilt University, along with the UT-like in-state school that her sister had attended.

Perhaps as a result of Marie’s self-described tendency to indecisiveness, she did not winnow down her various options as she began receiving decision letters from her schools. Instead, she broadly considered all four of the schools where she had been accepted, although

she seemed to consistently favor Rice on the basis of several different factors. She found a ranking that identified Rice as the “number one happiest school...I don’t know why I took that as so important, but it was important to me.” She also liked that Rice was offering her a generous merit-based scholarship. Recalling her earlier declaration that “money was no object” in her college search, I voiced my surprise that a merit scholarship could have swayed Marie so much. Rather than for the financial support, Marie viewed the scholarship as a vote of confidence from the institution – “I was worried about being able to be a student that was even in these prestigious universities and for [Rice] to say, you know, we want you here...was something nice to hear.”

In addition to Rice’s scholarship offer serving as “just an extra boost to try to pull me in” and “a little pat on the back,” it also alleviated her concern about how her parents would view her college decision. Although her parents were fully supportive of her brother’s decision to attend Northwestern “and they were able to support him financially through that whole process” she recalled that they would often comment on the steep price tag and “the little asides that they would make about like ‘Oh wow, it’s so expensive’ things like that.” Wanting to avoid these comments about her own college decision, Marie seemed relieved that she was able to have lowered her overall cost of attendance in this way. She explained that “[my parents] don’t show emotion outwardly so much as they give a nodding approval...that made me know that that decision was the right one.” Indeed, as she reflected on her time at Rice which would come to a close mere months after our final conversation together, Marie simply said that “I know this was the right place for me. I don’t regret it at all.”

Maya

As a first generation American and daughter of Indian immigrants, I felt an intuitive sense of familiarity whenever the women in this study shared stories that described their

experiences of occupying that liminal space between a fully American and a fully Desi identity, paradoxically observing each community from a distant remove while also being deeply rooted within both. As I listened to Maya¹⁰ describe her life experiences, I became aware of so many more instances in her life (and also my own) when she played a similar role of observer-participant – when she moved from India to Houston at the age of four and tried to make sense of the customs of her old and new life, when she was shuffled back and forth between regular and Gifted and Talented-centered classrooms throughout her elementary and middle school years, when she listened to her white peers emphasize family tradition and legacy in their search for a college while their Asian counterparts emphasized prestige. It was just as poignant for me to realize that as I listened to Maya talk about her experiences as a Rice student, she was no longer characterizing her experiences from a place of versus, but simply what was. From meeting senior students who helped her feel empowered to claim her identity as a queer Woman of Color to discovering interests and talents in fields she had never previously considered, Maya’s time as a Rice student helped her develop a more authentic sense of self that reflected her passions and personality, and ultimately led her to unequivocally declare “I was glad to be here.”

Maya arrived to Houston from Maharashtra, India when she was four years old. She and her then two-year-old brother emigrated with their mother, in order to join her father who had arrived a few months prior to begin his new job as an engineer. Both her parents had earned degrees in Engineering in India, but Maya explained that she didn’t think her mother, who at the time of our interview owned her own online jewelry business, “actually ever used her engineering degree” and remembered that “Mom stayed home to take care of me and my brother when we moved to Houston.” She reflected on how her understanding of that time in her life had

¹⁰ Maya thoughtfully chose this pseudonym for its meaning in Hindi – illusion.

shifted into sharper focus as she had grown older. “I think when we came over [to the U.S.] my parents didn’t really have much money, but it wasn’t very obvious to me or my brother, because I think my parents did a really good job of making sure we were never aware of it. It never felt like money was that much of a concern, when it definitely was for a large part of my childhood.”

Maya recalled that her father’s initial job in the U.S. was “for a position in Houston where they were basically hiring a bunch of Indian engineers, because I think they realized they could pay them less, which is a little sketchy, now that I think of it” and the lack of stability her family felt as a result of these business practices. She described a slow progression over the course of her elementary school years as her father changed jobs until “things were more comfortable...and helped my family feel more financially secure” so as to be able to remain in the U.S. and not return to India as they had potentially considered a few years after their arrival. Although Maya recognized the steps up the socioeconomic ladder that her family was able to take over this time, she still maintained only a relatively tenuous understanding of her family’s financial status, which later added an additional layer of confusion in her college decision-making process. “I feel like money was always a weird conversation with my parents. Because they were always like, ‘Oh, if you get into a good school, we’ll pay for it.’ But also they were like, ‘Oh, but, if it’s like Columbia [University] level fees, we can’t pay for that,’ you know? It was very confusing...I think that made the college application process harder.”

In addition to the eventually lucrative economic opportunities, Maya’s parents also hoped to remain in the U.S. for the American education system, which they thought to be better than India’s. “I guess they thought there would be better benefits for me and my brother living here, so we decided to stay.” Indeed, there was a particularly tight connection between Maya’s education and Maya’s father’s work when the family first arrived in Houston. Maya explained

how the company her father worked for at the time hired many people from India who ended up living in the same apartment complex, and everyone's children attended the same elementary school upon the recommendation of one colleague who deemed it to be "really good." Maya held warm memories of this time growing up with "a bunch of Indian kids, we would play with each other after school and ...carpool to elementary school together" and added that "it was a very strong community, in school and outside of school." Although they later moved from this apartment complex and bought a house in a nearby suburb, Maya's family remained closely connected to these friends they made during their initial years in Houston. She pointed to this community as where her father in particular "got a lot of his ideas of raising an Indian kid in the American education system." Moreover, just as a member of this community's initial recommendation had determined the elementary school Maya attended, this same community's focus on prestige seemed to have heavily influenced Maya's college search and drive to select a school that would meet their exacting expectations.

Maya credited her early experiences at her first American elementary school for laying the foundation for a lifelong love of learning. She warmly recalled lessons from her ESL kindergarten class and her first grade teacher as having been influences that "made me like school and like learning." She recalled having been a voracious reader and finishing her homework as quickly as she could, so she could get back to whichever book she was reading. The centrality of academics to Maya's identity at the time was further cemented through the school's gifted and talented program. She continually referred to herself throughout all three of our conversations as having been "a GT kid" for whom school was "the place where I [could] excel with low stress" throughout her K-12 school years.

Alongside this sanguine view of school, however, Maya also noted the ways that her GT-

centric education might have had some unintentionally negative repercussions for both her social and academic development. She recalled being pulled from her mainstream classroom for one day a week to attend her middle school GT classes, where she thoroughly enjoyed doing “fun little projects” on a variety of niche topics, such as “medicine, law, ...all prestigious fields.” As much as she enjoyed these classes, she also explained how “There [was] this weird distinction between the GT kids who got to do these classes and then the non-GT kids who were just in normal class.” She additionally described the ways that her perceptions that “the populations [were] very different” also led to feeling “very awkward” in her mixed GT and non-GT classes, because “I [didn’t] know what to talk with them [non GT-students] about.” Maya’s description of Rice’s residential college system served as an almost perfect foil for these early experiences. “My residential college...had a common room and this kind of huge dining hall where, in the evenings, especially during pre-COVID times, it would be completely filled with students until like 2am. You could just like [sit] at a table and like [do] work with other people and it felt very nice because it’s like everyone was kind of like in that mindset, like, ‘Oh yeah, we’re all working’ and like, you know, you could goof off and stuff and hang out, and it was very communal space.”

In a similar vein, Maya described a school policy that allowed students to “test out of different math subjects, and that “I somehow was always testing out of them, even though I didn’t know the math” explaining that “I just knew it conceptually, but not like actual practice.” Rather than remaining in class, students who tested out were simply sent to the school library to work on “random PowerPoint projects on math...and I was always confused, because I definitely [didn’t] know the math.” She seemed to rue the lasting effect that these kinds of educational practices had on her. “I feel like I never learned how to be in a real classroom, because I was

always put in these GT classes where we did weird projects and things like that, so going into college and being in real classrooms was really difficult for me, because I was like, ‘I don’t know how to do this! I don’t know how to learn or do homework on time and do things like that.’” Despite this initial struggle to feel at home in Rice’s classrooms, Maya soon found her stride and reflected on how she “really did appreciate, like in college, being able to find different ways to learn and think and do topics that I was much more interested in.”

Maya’s perceptions of the stark differences between the GT and non-GT populations also extended beyond curricular and social aspects to include what she referred to as a “big distinction” between the two groups’ college aspirations. Noting the suburb where her middle and high schools were located as having “a huge white community,” Maya remembered feeling a strong culture around “UT Austin and A&M rivalries, and the kids really cared for some reason.... I never understood college rivalry, so I was like ‘I don’t know what’s really going on.’” In addition to this sense of alienation, Maya described a sense of confusion around what element to prioritize in the college search, as some students emphasized “family culture,” or attending schools that their own parents had attended while the “overachiever” students (that Maya more closely identified with) prioritized prestige above all else. She mused that “We’re overachievers. I think just other Asian kids, I think we all kind of pressured each other into thinking that...we had to go to these [Ivy League] schools, or it was like those schools or bust kind of, you know, and I think there was just a lot of pressure built around that as a concept.”

Perhaps as a result of the lofty goals pushed by her own peer group, Maya admitted that she struggled to make sense of students who seemed happy to simply attend whichever state school their parents had attended before them. “I was thinking like, ‘You’re smarter, you can go to a school that’s better than this school or better than that school,’ and balked at students’

seemingly blind allegiance to their parents' alma maters. This apparent expectation of a student's chosen college to function as a direct correlate of the student's prior academic achievements also seems to parrot the kind of college talk that Maya had likely heard from her family and the Indian community. Indeed, in her interview with her father, he described the Indian college admissions process as a cut and dried one where "You just score, apply, and get the admission. That's it. It's primarily based on just the test score." It seemed likely, then, that Maya subconsciously absorbed this "Indian mentality" of viewing test scores to be the sole, or at least the overwhelmingly most important, determinant in the college admissions process.

Maya's (mis)perceptions of the importance of test scores or family legacy reflected her loose grasp of the overall college admissions process. Although Maya grew up with the tacit knowledge that she would attend college immediately after finishing high school, she explained that her understanding of the entire system of higher education was admittedly fuzzy. "Not understanding college for a really long time was definitely difficult, because I think even though I knew I was going to college, I didn't really understand what college was. She went on to add that "Even though my parents did go to college...the Indian system is very different than the U.S. system, so I think I just didn't really understand what it was as a concept and how different it is in the U.S." Yet, Maya also noted several ways that she had ongoing exposure to college-related talk and behavior, that ranged from the inane (a palm reading from an aunt who declared that a then elementary school-aged Maya would pursue a career in research at Cambridge University) to the precocious (an eighth grade independent research project that led Maya to being mentored by a Rice University professor). Perhaps through these experiences and the additional peer pressure of her "overachiever" friends at school, Maya seemed to center prestige in a way that eclipsed any other relevant factors in her college search, as she explained that "I

was always like, ‘Prestigious school!’” like there’s prestigious schools like Harvard or Yale or something that you need to strive for.”

Alongside this centering of prestige, Maya recalled her earliest perceptions of college having been shaped by both her Indian community and her parents for whom “going to college was like your ticket to an actual career, like a real career that could make money and be fulfilling... Well, I don’t really know if fulfillment was any real part of it, but I think definitely, if you want to be successful in America, you had to go to college.” In second guessing her own mention of fulfillment, Maya betrayed an ongoing tension she seemed to perceive within the Indian community and her parents’ college-going expectations. Rather than a means to cultivate new passions and interests, college was instead narrowly viewed by them as a stepping stone to a career, ideally one that would again be defined by its status and prestige. “There’s just always the expectation that...you’re gonna be an engineer or doctor or like some other prestigious sort of field, and you have to go to college for that.”

Maya recalled the tacit approval she enjoyed in her early childhood when she enthusiastically embraced the idea of a future career in a STEM field – “I really thought I was gonna be an aeronautical engineer or an astrophysicist.” She recounted her annual trips during summer breaks to visit the Johnson Space Center where “[my dad] was always talking about Kalpana Chawla, like the one Indian astronaut.” Maya nostalgically described how her parents “wholeheartedly supported” her interests and career aspirations, because they fell under the umbrella of the prestigious and therefore acceptable field of engineering. Yet, by the time Maya was in high school, her interests in these fields had waned. “I didn’t really enjoy math and science” but she recalled having felt obligated to continue taking AP STEM classes and remain in extracurricular activities like Science Olympiad and Mu Alpha Theta (a national mathematics

honors society).

In addition to feeling beholden to the idea of an eventual career in STEM, Maya also felt compelled to continue her participation in these activities for the purposes of college applications – “I just felt a lot of pressure to be involved in everything and stay involved in it. I didn’t feel like I could quit.” This feeling was then compounded by peers and teachers who reiterated the importance of involvement. Maya’s orchestra director “would keep saying ‘Oh, you need to show colleges that you are committed and involved in things and that you have a breadth across different fields.’” Her peers were similarly influential in motivating Maya to stay involved, as “I had friends who were overachievers, and we all were like ‘Oh, we all need to be in this [club]’ ...it was just a lot of pressure on each other to be in all of these clubs and be involved.”

By the time Maya was ready to consider applying for colleges, she had come to terms with the fact that “I don’t want to do STEM” and had instead set her sights on a career in law. She felt unsure of what to major in or what programs she might specifically be interested in to lead her to law school and described her college search process as having been largely driven by perceptions of prestige and having curated a list of schools to apply to based on “what my friends were saying were prestigious.” She even went so far as to say “I think I did a really bad job of this [college application process]. But I think a lot of the reasons why I picked certain schools is because my friends were applying to those schools.” She thought of Columbia University as her dream school, but admitted that “there was very little actual deep thinking around my college decisions, which I honestly really regret.”

Maya additionally explained how her parents’ expectations added an additional layer of pressure and confusion to her search process. Because Maya achieved a perfect score on both the SAT and the ACT exams, her parents were convinced that she should only apply to the most elite

institutions in the country. “I think it really made the college application process a little bit more stressful, because my parents were like, ‘Oh, you have such high scores, you need to apply to only the top schools’ and I put a lot more pressure on myself because of that.” Now five years removed from this part of the process, Maya recalled with a laugh how she thought her perfect scores meant that “it was gonna be an easy shot to Harvard...I was very deluded.”

After initially considering all of the Ivy Leagues institutions, she eventually applied to Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University, Harvard University, and UT Austin, where she knew she would be automatically admitted under the top 7% rule. She received acceptances from UT Austin and Rice, thereby rendering her decision to attend Rice almost a foregone conclusion, given Rice’s superior status and comparatively generous financial support.

While she was unequivocally glad to have attended Rice and seemed to have flourished there academically and personally, Maya did share that “I was very disappointed in the fact that I didn’t get in anywhere outside of Texas, because I think I probably would have picked one of those schools instead.” This sense of disappointment reverberated throughout Maya’s interview with her father, who lamented that “If we just go by the test scores, I was expecting much more than what you got.” When Maya asked if he and her mother felt well-equipped to help her navigate the college application process, he immediately replied with a resounding “no” and explained that “Because I never went through this process, this was the first time someone in the family was going through this process, so definitely whatever research was done was definitely not up to mark” and went on to share his certainty that a parent who had attended college in the U.S. would have been better equipped to support their child. He and Maya reflected on the ways that her process paved the way for her brother (a current University of Southern California

student) to have had a comparatively smoother experience in navigating this process, as the family hired “professional help” to help him craft his admissions essays. Maya’s father framed this decision as a necessity to address the “holistic process,” an element of the overall process that he repeatedly voiced a palpable distaste for, as “They say that it's holistic process and no one knows what happens at during actual admission process. A lot of things are unknown because they say that it's a holistic process.”

Yet, alongside these regrets and frustrations, Maya’s father’s deep affection and pride for his daughter shined through, as he even declared at one point in the interview that “You’re definitely smarter than your parents!” Yet, he seemed to me to be somewhat blind to the sense of pressure that Maya felt throughout her time in high school, as she kept tirelessly striving to meet the lofty expectations set out for her. Maya agreed that her parents never seemed to understand the role they played in raising the stakes of an already stressful college search process. But, she also empathized with their perspective and offered that “[my dad] doesn’t think of it as pressure, it’s more like nudging...it’s more of like a encouragement, or a motivational thing rather than putting pressure...and that being a stressor.” She shared her past experiences with having tried to have conversations with her parents to explain how their well-intentioned remarks could have unintended consequences. But, these conversations seemed to have had limited effect, which she chalked up to her parents’ immigrant identity – the “high stress situations” they had faced and their attendant desire for their children to be successful.

This desire for success seemed to have largely panned out for Maya, as she said that “I’m very glad about going to Rice...it gave me a lot of freedom to be able to explore different intellectual fields and be able to study abroad, and do all these other things” including internships and extracurricular activities that unknowingly paved the way for the job in a tech start-up that

she began immediately after graduation. In addition to these traditional markers of a successful college experience, Maya also developed meaningful relationships with her fellow Rice students that help her gain a deeper understanding of her own various identities, a successful achievement in its own right. Through meeting queer Women of Color through an intramural sports team, she received the long-sought affirmation she needed to claim this identity for herself. Having previously held a subconscious view of queerness being inextricably linked to whiteness, she recalled a sense of both wonder and relief at meeting queer Women of Color and especially a queer South Asian woman. She similarly credited the upperclassmen South Asian women within her residential college for helping her grapple with difficult questions, like how to navigate the Rice campus as a South Asian student (since, “Rice is also kind of white”) and how to explain her career plans to her parents, implying that those plans might not have perfectly aligned with the typical fields that they might have found acceptable. Given the fruitful development Maya was able to enjoy personally, academically, and professionally through her time as a Rice student, it was unsurprising, then, to hear Maya contentedly declare “I got very lucky at Rice.”

Deepika

When I initially envisioned the data collection process for my dissertation, I assumed that I would have the final of the three one-on-one conversations with each participant within a few weeks of the first, just as I had done in my first two pilot studies. While the ongoing challenges of completing this process during pandemic times meant that many students completed the four parts of the study across a slightly wider range than I had anticipated, the time between sessions was by far the longest for Deepika who first met with me at the end of October 2021, then again at the beginning of December 2021, and had her final session at the end of March 2022. The

resulting effect of this scheduling pattern meant that I almost felt as though I had gotten to know three distinct Deepikas.

The first Deepika had a quiet, reflective quality about her. Having very unexpectedly lost her father mere months prior to our first conversation, she took extra care in answering questions about his journey to America and her own early childhood, while ruing that she could no longer talk with him about the details of these stories. Indeed, his loss was deeply felt throughout the conversation. As she described her plans to apply to medical schools with all its attendant anxiety and trepidation, she imagined how hands-on her dad would have been throughout this process and explained that “He very much cared about the decisions I was making in my life, it seemed like he had a personal stake in those decisions, whereas my mom is more hands-off...like, ‘You’ll do that for yourself,’ because that’s how she was raised.”

The final session’s Deepika seemed a world away from the first session’s. Secure in the knowledge of having been accepted to attend a top tier medical school, she seemed to have already begun viewing her time as a Rice student as a chapter from her distant past, with that vantage point then allowing for deeply thoughtful reflections on her college experience, including the lows (“I wish I wasn’t a biology major because I have my whole life to do biology, but I wish I took advantage of all of the opportunities Rice has in terms of the humanities”) and the highs (“I didn’t come to Rice to find the cultural community – it being here was definitely a big part of the reason that I’ve come to enjoy Rice”).

Deepika’s parents’ separate journeys away from the northwestern Indian state of Gujurat point to the notably different factors that prompted Indians to emigrate to the United States. Deepika’s mother arrived to the U.S. as a seventh grader in the early 1980s, when Deepika’s maternal grandparents decided to follow other relatives who had emigrated earlier and

established a family business. Deepika explained that “Relatives were starting to move, so they wanted to move to be with them. That’s what first brought them here, and then I think the whole American dream stuff they brought into is what kept them here.” By contrast, Deepika’s father came to the U.S. on his own decades later, because “He just wanted opportunity in the U.S....and I think education is what kept him here.” Having earned an undergraduate degree in chemical engineering from a top tier Ivy League-like institution in India, he received a scholarship to pursue a master's degree in engineering at a U.S. university. He later went on to earn a second master’s degree, an MBA from Cornell University.

Deepika was keenly aware of how these differences in emigration patterns could partially serve to explain the stark contrast between the ways that education was viewed and valued on her mother’s and her father’s sides of her family. While her father attended a highly regarded institution synonymous with prestige and excellence, she described her mother as having attended a New Jersey institution that “is not even like a state school, like a very small like unranked kind of school” where she earned her bachelor's degree in chemistry. Deepika understood her mother’s undergraduate education as having simply been a means to an end, as she explained that “She was just doing it to have a job to support my grandparents and everything like that. She never got higher education.” Deepika’s own views of education were apparent in this description, as she often used the phrase “higher education” to refer to graduate or professional studies, such as pursuing a master’s or medical degree. She viewed college, then, not as a form of higher education, but simply an expected continuation of the K-12 path.

In addition to her own mother’s educational background, Deepika also shared her mother’s brother’s experience as an additional example of the utilitarian role that a college education was expected to play within her maternal side of the family. She explained how her

uncle had gotten accepted into an Ivy League school, but her grandparents' strong aversion to taking out any loans meant that he attended the flagship campus of the state school system ("which is still a great school") on a full scholarship. She said that "They didn't want to contribute any extra money towards his college, because my grandparents were like 'What's the point? College is college.'" In nearly the same breath, Deepika underscored the contrast that she saw between this mindset and "my dad, who went to [prestigious Indian institution], his whole family valued education as the path to success."

Deepika admitted that the value that she placed on her own education was in some ways a reaction to this history. She especially credited her father for having been instrumental in imparting his views on the importance of education and striving for excellence. She therefore found herself not only valuing education itself but also "taking to heart this privilege I have...and genuinely valuing that I am someone who gets access to these opportunities, because my uncle likes to shove it in my face all the time that I get to go to a private, elite college and he didn't get that opportunity. Not that there's anything wrong with [Uncle's state school] or anything, but [I am] appreciative for the opportunities that I do have and the sacrifice that was made."

Deepika's clear-eyed acknowledgement of the weighty role that privilege had played in her educational journey was perhaps unsurprising when considering her early childhood experiences. Deepika described the suburb where she lived until she finished fifth grade (what I refer to here as Fairview) as the place that "feels like my home" and nostalgically shared scenes from a warm, happy childhood – "grandparents picking me up from school every day," "walks in the park," "my grandma cutting mangoes." Yet, she also recognized that this was a time of relative hardship for her family, as "money was a lot tighter when I was growing up" and their

family of five “lived in this tiny two-bedroom apartment that’s smaller than the apartment I live in now, as a college student.” She recalled that even throughout that time “my dad really wanted us to move for better schools,” which they did as Deepika was beginning sixth grade. They eventually bought a house in this same neighborhood (what I refer to as Greenville) when Deepika was a sophomore in high school.

With the benefit of hindsight and also perhaps her academic training through coursework in the Poverty, Justice, and Human Capabilities program at Rice, Deepika recognized the stark class and race differences between Fairview and Greenville. While she recalled greater socioeconomic and racial diversity in Fairview, she described Greenville as “extremely privileged,” and described how “a lot of people in that area work on Wall Street...they work at Goldman Sachs and are VP of whatever and making absurd amounts of money.” She admitted her unease over this disparity and her feelings about her own place within this community – “I just had not seen that [level of wealth] before or been friends with people who had houses like that. It made me nervous, like I never had them over at my house.” Given that Deepika assessed the wealth differences between the two neighborhoods in such unambiguous terms, I was surprised to note, then, that she did not extend this recognition to the differences in school culture and educational expectations. Instead, Deepika’s remarks seemed to suggest that she simply accepted the school culture in Greenville as normal, despite it being far from what could reasonably be assumed as average or typical. While this competitive atmosphere likely explained the source of Deepika’s tenacious drive to excel, it also seemed to have profoundly distorted her perceptions of her own academic abilities and accomplishments, from as early as kindergarten through her Rice experiences.

As she began recounting her K-12 schooling experiences, Deepika immediately drew a comparison between her elementary school in Fairview and the kind of rigor that she imagined she would have experienced had she attended elementary school in Greenville. She mused that “I think the elementary school I went to wasn’t as necessarily competitive as an elementary school in [Greenville]” and then implied that it was only because of this presumed inferiority that she “was probably the best kid at math in that elementary school.” She additionally credited her participation in the Kumon math enrichment program, which she began attending as a kindergartener, as a reason for why she was able to excel in math. She wryly recalled that “I hated it so much, but my dad made me do it...in the summer, when other people would be having fun, I’d be forced to do my Kumon.” Although she enjoyed the academic advantages that it afforded her (“all this Kumon [was] worth it because I was able to do things more than other people”), she admitted that she continued the program until sixth grade “only because my dad wanted me to do it...he always wanted us to be good at Math and Science...that was important to him.” She did note, however, that she preferred English and Reading more so than Math. The die was cast with these early childhood patterns, and Deepika continued to grapple throughout her time at Rice with balancing her own passion for the humanities with her parents’ preference for her to keep her focus within the STEM fields.

Deepika’s transition from her Fairview elementary school to her Greenville middle school challenged her self-perception of her own academic abilities. While her participation in Kumon allowed her to excel in elementary school, she quickly discovered that her friends at her new middle school were not only also attending Kumon sessions but notably outpacing her in these lessons. She described having a “striking realization” that “I didn’t feel like I was that smart. I was just one of the kids who always got into accelerated classes, but was not one of the

super, super smart people that everyone talked about.” This self-perception seemed to me to have been at odds with her actual academic performance, her involvement in several extracurricular activities, and even her hobbies, like reading. She recalled how much she enjoyed reading in middle school, so much so that “I checked out the most books in my library for two years straight, so the librarians right now still remember me at the middle school.” Yet, these objective markers of her academic mindedness did not seem to dispel the notion that Deepika was somehow lesser than her accomplished peers.

This perception endured as Deepika began high school. She described the exceedingly competitive atmosphere of the school, where students were expected to test into AP classes rather than simply being allowed to enroll in them if they so chose. Deepika described how this system predictably “very much bred this very competitive nature in high school...I don’t consider myself to be super competitive, but high school, you just kind of buy into that as the accepted standard.” This mindset then led Deepika to question her longer-term academic trajectory beyond high school. “I never really stressed about getting into the APs, but in the actual performance of them, I was never the best at chemistry, the best at math, the best at English, the best at anything. And, I think in terms of my academic journey, it just made me realize like, ‘What do I even want to do? I’m not super good at any of these things.’” This self-perception again ran contrary to her objective academic performance, as she was ranked among the top five and ten percent throughout her time in high school.

As I listened to these descriptions, I felt compelled to try to address some of my own confusion over the notable gap between Deepika’s self-perception versus the reality of her academic abilities. She immediately admitted that “I definitely had good grades” but quickly added a caveat that “but [I] maybe was not the person you could rely on to get a good grade, if

that makes sense.” She went on to describe an annual tradition in the school’s AP Physics class wherein the teacher would post the top four students’ names and grades in order to create a “fantasy physics” game where students in the year above would make up a draft of their winning team and place bets accordingly. She explained that “I think people spent a decent amount of money on me expecting me to be way better” and even recalled one student she did not know accusatorily telling her “You’re letting me down!” for not having performed as well as he had expected. She lamented that “It was a very toxic school environment, for sure.”

The intensely competitive atmosphere of her high school left Deepika eager to find a more collaborative environment in her college experience. This desire was further cemented through the experiences that she enjoyed at a residential summer program hosted by Johns Hopkins University, which Deepika attended nearly every summer beginning in sixth grade. She credited the program as being “one of the most formative places for me” where “I’ve never felt more loved by the people around me.” While billed as a program focused on academics and offering a full day of classes for the three-week duration of the camp, Deepika most enjoyed the camp for its fun traditions and strong community culture. She initially began attending at the suggestion of her friend and recalled that “my mom really didn’t want me to go – my dad heard ‘educational camp’ and got really excited.” Whether for the academics or the community, Deepika’s involvement in this program had a lasting influence on her. She says: “Even though we were taking a lot of classes throughout the three weeks..., to me, the class was less important. But even in the class, it was a very positive learning environment, because I guess you weren’t trying to learn for school. So, I took a creative writing class one year and...that was just so fun for me to do and ...having everyone just be excited about this class in some aspect, too. It was something that I really valued about [this program]. I think that played into my decision and

ultimately made me choose Rice over schools that may be more prestigious to people around me.”

Although Deepika knew that she wanted to replicate these positive experiences in her college experience, she was also heavily influenced by the competitive culture of her high school, where prestige was seemingly prioritized above all other college search criteria. Indeed, she noted that the weight of her peers’ expectations even superseded those of her family. She explained that “my parents always expected that I would go to college” and again highlighted the contrast she saw between her dad’s side where education was highly prized compared to her mom’s side where “most people went to college nearby or commuter college, it was much less associated with this idea of prestige.” She therefore ventured that “I would feel a lot less stigma from family than I would at school, if I chose not to go to college.” She explained that everyone in her high school had gone to college and “nobody went to community college. It was a four-year university for everyone.” Deepika’s need to meet these expectations seemed to have been a key driver in her search process. She recalled how “Everyone [at school] knows your business” particularly as it related to Early Decision (ED) admissions decisions from Ivy League institutions. “I knew on ED day who got into Harvard, who got into this...so, before I even started looking at colleges, I just had an idea of like, ‘Where’s the best college that I can get into?’”

Deepika described the extent to which performing for the audience of her peers shaped her navigation of her initial search process. “ED [Early Decision] is the big thing, and everyone assumed I would do Cornell, because my dad went to business school at Cornell, and that was like my presumed vibe.” But, she felt skeptical of Cornell being the right choice for her, because it seemed to her to be just as competitive as her high school – precisely the kind of environment

that she was hoping to avoid in college. Instead, Deepika thought of Yale as her dream school for its house system (akin to Rice's residential college system) and because "It just seems super positive but also obviously, it's a great school." She explained that "my biggest factor for me was...finding the one where I would be the happiest, and that's why I EA'd [Early Actioned] to Yale, because I genuinely believed that [I would be happiest there]."

Deepika described her college search as having begun in earnest by her sophomore year of high school when her family began visiting various colleges across the country, including Harvard, MIT, and UC Berkeley. She again described the role of peer pressure as she was preparing to take the ACT exam her junior year. "People at my school take it so early for no reason, so I was stressing about it. So, I hit the prep class and then I just did fine on my first one and then it was done." Given Deepika's tendency to downplay her accomplishments relative to her peers, I was curious to hear whether this assessment accurately reflected her score. I learned that a near-perfect 35 constituted a "fine" score.

She admitted that this score was "reassuring" to her, in that "Once I got that score back, I was able to affirm to myself [that] I have the score that will get me into a lot of these top schools." Deepika ultimately applied to 25 schools ("a lot of the schools in the top 20") across the country, along with the flagship campus of her state school system. Even with Deepika's exceptional work ethic, I wondered at the motivation required to complete 25 college applications. Her answer reflected the burden she felt at the time from her peers' expectations and also the sheepishness she then felt in hindsight for allowing these expectations to factor so heavily into her process. "The motivation was not something that was that great. It was the fact that I wanted to go to a good school, because everyone was going to a good school, and so I wanted that, too. Or, I didn't want to waste my potential, waste all the hard work I had done, I

hadn't gone through all this for nothing. It's kind of like, 'Oh, I want to get into a good college just to have something to show for everything that I worked for.' And now, as I'm being honest here, that logic grosses me out. But, that's the truth of what I was thinking."

As I recalled the role that finances had played in her uncle's college choice process decades earlier, I wondered how finances might have figured into her own process. Deepika explained that "Honestly, I don't think [finances] figured into it, like absolutely at all because I was so privileged by the time that I was applying to college. Everyone in my town, it was an assumption that your parents were going to pay for your college, and I just had that assumption as well. I think that's something especially upon coming [to Rice] that I'm super lucky to have had that lack of pressure."

With these criteria in mind and a slew of acceptances in hand, Deepika began the process of considering her options. Having been deferred from Yale, her decision ultimately boiled down to Washington University in St. Louis, Emory University, Carnegie Mellon, and Rice. Emory and Carnegie Mellon were quickly eliminated after unremarkable campus visits at both. She described her visit to Wash U in glowing terms and explained that "I found people that could be my best friends within like two hours." Yet, she described her thought process that "College is the time for me to push myself a little bit out of my comfort zone" so despite not feeling a similarly positive, immediate connection during her Rice visit, she opted for Rice largely on the basis of its residential college system "because you're forced to interact with so many different types of people." She added that her parents "were definitely pushing towards Rice," because of its strong engineering program and its proximity to the Texas Medical Center, in hopes that she would pursue a STEM-related major. Her paternal uncle's family living in Houston was an added bonus in their view as well.

Even with these criteria in place, she described her decision between Wash U and Rice as an agonizing one that she debated until the last possible day. While she was ultimately pleased with her decision, she claimed that all of her closest friends “arguably went to better or higher ranked schools than me” and rattled off Harvard, Northwestern, and UPenn as their chosen institutions. When I balked at this characterization and reminded Deepika that Rice is often referred to as the Harvard of the south, she relented that “I know, but it just didn’t have that reputation [where I grew up].” Even so, Deepika explained that “I think my gut was saying that Rice is a good fit for me.”

Indeed, that gut feeling was soon “affirmed by O-week,” Rice’s immersive orientation session that Deepika described as “the quintessential Rice experience.” She was especially elated by the similarities she felt between O-week and the activities she so enjoyed during her time at the Johns Hopkins summer program. During her time at Rice, she became an advisor for O-week and relished “the chance to be on the other side and give back to the freshmen.” She additionally described her involvement with a South Asian dance team as having been an integral part of her student experience and having helped her reconsider her own South Asian identity. “In high school, I was surrounded by a lot of other Indian slash Asian people, but it wasn’t a point of pride at all...I feel like our town was definitely whitewashed in a lot of ways.” She contrasted these experiences with what she encountered at Rice, where “The seniors on our [dance] team were so proud of their South Asian heritage...and it was something really special that I [hadn’t] experienced.” She explained that joining this dance team then “led me to a group of friends who understand my culture.”

Even with these positive experiences at Rice, where Deepika proudly proclaimed that “The community here is better than anywhere else I can imagine, because people are so much

nicer,” she noted that there were some elements of her experience that she second guessed. She wondered if she might have had a tight-knit group of best friends had she attended Wash U, rather than the broader network engendered by the residential college system. She additionally rued not having been better informed about the flexibility she had in choosing a major that would pave the way to medical school. She recalled a conversation with her parents at the end of her freshman year when she thought she might want to major in English (“because I just really love English classes at Rice”), but her parents strongly dissuaded from doing so (“they’re like, ‘Why would you ever do that? That’s such a waste?’”). She agreed with their logic, as if she had not gotten into medical school after having majored in English, she felt as though she would have been left without a path forward. All things considered, Deepika seemed glad to have attended Rice, a school that provided her with “opportunities that would lead me to have a good future.”

Portraits of Houston Community College Participants

Saira

Although I referred to my data collection process as consisting of a series of “interviews,” a more apt description of the process might have been to refer to it as a series of tours. I imagined myself being invited in to a personalized tour of the Museum of the Participant, and the participant herself patiently guiding me through each gallery – here, we see the early childhood experiences; in this wing, we see the high school experiences. As we neared the end of each tour, we would view a series of paintings that depicted the possible futures that might unfold beyond her undergraduate years. While each of the women’s museums were inherently unique, I felt a sense of ease and familiarity as I made my way through them, not unlike how I feel when I visit the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Saira’s¹¹ tour, then, felt more akin to my

¹¹ Saira chose this pseudonym to share some qualities with her given name, including its connection to her Islamic faith.

visits to the Contemporary Arts Museum, where everything felt a bit less familiar, less expected, and therefore demanded a different quality of attention.

Yet, it was precisely this sense of disconnect that reaffirmed my belief in the importance of this study, as Saira exemplified the breadth of possible experiences among the South Asian American diaspora. Moreover, while there could have been many potential explanations for why I felt this sense of disconnect, it is perhaps useful to recognize some of the ways that Saira was notably different than the other participants in this study, in terms of age (at 18, she was the youngest participant in this study), immigration status (she had spent approximately seven years in the U.S., whereas all the others were either born here or arrived here in their early childhood), and socioeconomic background (while many participants noted brief or sometimes prolonged periods of financial hardship, this hardship seemed to be most dire and ongoing in Saira's case). While the following portrait might look and feel different than the rest of the portraits (perhaps a Jackson Pollock painting where the others have been Degas's ballerinas), her experiences nevertheless underscore the importance of understanding the great variety of ways that the South Asian American identity can be held and then wielded in the college decision-making process.

Saira was born in Karachi and first emigrated to Abu Dhabi, where her father had worked for several years in the oil and gas industry and had saved enough for his family to join him there by the time Saira was three years old. Shortly thereafter, the family settled in Dubai, a move that was meant to prioritize Saira and her older brother's education. She explained that "In Abu Dhabi, the schools over there were way out of the expense bound, like hella expensive...I think maybe Dubai schools had it much better and much of a decent price, so we moved" even though it meant that her parents had much longer commutes to Abu Dhabi for their jobs as a "petroleum manager" and a substitute teacher in an elementary school, for her father and mother

respectively. Saira acknowledged the toll this took on her and explained that “It was very lonely at times, because we will always come home and our parents wouldn’t be there until nighttime, so me and my brother definitely kept a lookout for each other.” Yet, she also looked back on her time in Dubai fondly and considered it to be her hometown because “that’s where I created all of my core memories.” She additionally described the sense of ease she felt as a direct result of living in a predominantly Muslim country. “I grew up around the surroundings of halal food, of mosques...of being around Muslim people every day, and you know, not feeling scared or bad about being a Muslim, because it’s a Muslim country, so it felt nice living in Dubai.”

However, when the family’s visa application to the U.S. was accepted when Saira was in sixth grade, there was no question that they would move to America – “We can’t just not take this opportunity, because it’s a once in a lifetime type of thing.” Saira further emphasized the way that she understood the prospect of coming to America as a rare, unmissable opportunity as she explained that “My dad decided to take this opportunity of having a visa and we got moved to America for that reason, because if you don’t accept it now, you can’t accept it later, like it’s not like ‘pause,’ there is no pause and like, ‘I’ll think about it,’ so that’s why we just moved.” While she understood the impetus for the move having been centered on “better education, more job opportunities, and just the whole economic thing,” she additionally recalled her own sense of youthful idealism about life in America. “I really thought I would be living it up, because all those...movies I saw, like, ‘Oh my God, I’m gonna be like those popular kids, wearing cool ass clothes, having a whole group of friends’...I had a huge expectation...I’m gonna live it up.” She tersely summed up the reality of these expectations with a simple “Nope, I did not.”

Indeed, the initial transition to America was difficult in nearly every imaginable way. In terms of her home life, Saira’s family lived in a motel for the first several months following their

move from Dubai to Houston. Her mother's job as a teacher's aide at a preschool was the only steady source of income for the family. In terms of her schooling, Saira began attending a Title I middle school, where she struggled to keep up with her peers academically. She characterized her educational experiences in Dubai as having been subpar and even went so far as to say that "The worst part is I never learned anything in my six years in that school." She described her Dubai experiences as "all just a blur, I remember maybe being in class and doing the work, but I don't remember ever recalling any information...[the teachers] never did anything so it can stick in my head."

Without a strong foundation from which to build on, Saira detailed the many academic challenges she faced at her new school. She additionally seemed to have lacked ample support at home to have been able to adroitly navigate these challenges. For example, she recalled that "We just started algebra...and I was just lost, I was in a whole confusion, that's when we started using X and Y terms, and I was so lost, I was like, 'I don't get it.' And, I asked my parents and they're like, 'We don't get this either.' And I was like, 'if you don't get it, I don't get it,'" as she trailed off into silence and simply waved her hands to emphasize her feelings of helplessness. By the time Saira had to take the year-end statewide standardized tests in Reading and Math, she explained that "I was like, 'What is this?' and I'm not ashamed of it, I failed it, I failed both of them, because I don't blame myself. It was a whole new environment, I moved to a whole new country. I never learned any of this, because the teachers back there weren't good to me. They didn't teach me anything that stuck to my mind, so I didn't blame myself too much. And, I went to summer school for it."

In light of this academic performance, Saira was enrolled in ESL courses for the following school year. She credited this change as a positive one, but admitted that she continued

to find herself struggling academically. “The teachers in seventh grade were just phenomenal, but thinking back through the education process, I think it’s the same thing. They were really sweet genuine teachers, but nothing ever stuck to my mind,” she explained. Saira also had a hard time making sense of the disciplinary measures in the school. She recalled that “There was always this one kid who was always rowdy, making noise and everything, and my teacher was like, ‘If he doesn’t quiet down, you guys are all getting detention’...so she gave us detention every single day. And my dad was like, ‘I don’t get it. You didn’t do anything? Why are you getting detention?’ And, I was like, ‘Baba, I do not know. I don’t know what to do about it.’”

Frustrated by these interactions, Saira’s father decided to move the family to an apartment complex in a Houston suburb, a move that was seemingly made possible by Saira’s mother’s newly earned certification and job in medical coding and billing. It was also at this time that Saira’s father began a company to sell health supplements. Saira compared her old neighborhood to her current one, which she described as “definitely a nicer area” and her home itself being “much bigger, much better.”

Unfortunately, these positive changes stood in sharp contrast to the intensely negative experiences that Saira detailed throughout her time in the new middle school. Unlike her previous middle school where “The environment was definitely really sweet,” her new middle school was a place where “I didn’t have the best peers around me...I got bullied bad.” Saira went on to detail several encounters that underscored the severity of the situation. She also noted the ways that she thought her South Asian identity was partly the basis of this treatment, as she explained that “My old bully...she only targeted People of Color”. She recalled that “She was racist towards me as well. I remember there was an event in Pakistan...a bus attack...and she brought up that bus attack and she was like, ‘You know, those damn Muslims, like they always

have to attack everything’...and in my head, I was like ‘What the fuck? Like, who? Like, how? Oh my God, how could you be so racist and say that so bluntly’...I just couldn’t handle it.” Perhaps most distressingly, Saira shared that “I didn’t talk to anybody about this, because I just was not informed well, that I could reach out to people about this...of course, I had my mom and dad to reach out to, but...I couldn’t reach out to them. And then teachers, I don’t want to be a bother or burden, so I never reached out to them either.”

In looking back on this time, Saira made minimal reference to her studies, as the negative peer interactions seemed to have eclipsed all other experiences. However, she did note that by the time she was in eighth grade, she noticed a shift in her academic abilities. She explained that “I always had bad grades, so I was like, ‘Maybe I should focus more’ because in this school, they actually had things that would stick in my mind, like my brain was processing everything, so I could understand things and I would actually get good grades.” Recalling her previous enrollment in ESL coursework, I was curious what level of coursework Saira was in by this point in her educational journey. She was quick to dismiss the idea of any kind of advanced or honors coursework, as she explained that “I was still new to everything, I didn’t know what pre-AP class was, what AP class was...if only I had somebody who would tell me like ‘You should do this,’ but I didn’t have anyone, so it was definitely like a self-exploration type of thing.”

As Saira described her transition into high school, she expressed a profound sense of relief over the markedly different peer interactions she experienced. “Thank God, no more bullying, all the bullying was done in middle school...and that definitely made everything like 20 times better.” She described a close-knit group of friends that she credited with getting her involved with “K pop, K dramas...everything that was the hype back then...and I’m so grateful for them, because it was such a fun era.” In addition to a thriving social life, she also recalled

doing well academically, as she explained that “I’m pretty sure I enjoyed being a student during that time.”

It was also during this time, during her freshman year of high school, that she watched her brother navigate his senior year of high school and consider his options for higher education. His transition into HCC had a limited impact on Saira at the time, as she explained that “I was still living it up and everything, I didn’t care about college at that time.” However, she described having always grown up with the expectation of attending college, “[My parents] were definitely like, ‘You guys are definitely going to college, you gotta go to university, you’re getting that degree.’ And so we always just had that mindset stuck in our head that we’re gonna go to college, we’re gonna get our degree, we’re gonna have a job, and that’s how the flow is gonna go.” Yet, she additionally noted that beyond this expectation, she only had a vague understanding of what this path might entail: “All I knew was...college is something you do after high school. I didn’t know any names of colleges, maybe Harvard, I probably only knew that since that’s like the most popular thing...But I did not know much about college.”

With this sense of confusion coupled with this lifelong expectation to attend college, I was curious as to whether Saira might have had a dream college. She explained that “I think from seventh grade, I was focused on University of Houston,” as she recalled a visit from a UH admissions staff member. She explained that he had mentioned the bowling alley in the Student Center, and Saira emphasized that this information was the sole basis for making UH her “dream school, like literally, I think the bowling alley was my little like peak. I was like, ‘Oh my God, I’m going there.’” She explained that UH’s status as her dream school went unchallenged, because “No other college ever reached out to us in middle school or high school. If they did, I would have for sure looked into other options and everything.”

Despite this long-held view of UH being her ideal destination after high school, Saira became less convinced that UH was the best option for her as she began her senior year of high school. She made efforts to begin a UH application, including prepping for and taking the SAT. She described her prep process as “I did everything...my brother gave [his prep book] to me. He borrowed it from a friend. And the little prep books, I always looked into that as well.” She also began applying for scholarships, “I remember writing essays and everything to get a scholarship, and then I find out that I need my citizenship, and I was like ‘Wow, like, I have a green card, but I’m not a citizen yet.’”

As Saira gained a clearer picture of the financial burden of attending UH, her brother counseled her on the merits of attending HCC. “My brother was like, ‘I suggest you go to HCC, it’ll save you money.’” She additionally recalled that he had gotten “help from counselors at school, and they said that you should go to community college for two years, because that’s just going to help you up more. It’s just going to help you like ten times better and everything.” Beyond these thoughts, Saira explained that “I really wasn’t thinking too much about [my college search] senior year. I don’t know why...I was like, ‘I don’t want to think about this right now. I’m just a little too scared.’” She went on to add that “But when I did think about college, my brother reassured me, he’s like, ‘You should just go to HCC’ and I was like, ‘Okay, you’re right.’” Ultimately, she explained that her brother was “the one who really guided me to going into community college.”

Given this perspective, it was unsurprising, then, that Saira opted to conduct the family member interview with her brother. Throughout their brief conversation, he repeatedly emphasized his view that “everyone” goes to community college. Indeed, Saira’s decision to attend HCC was largely well received, given that “a lot of his friends, a lot of my friends from

the masjid, the ones who are in college, they go to HCC.” I then wondered how the family member interview might have sounded had Saira chosen to talk with one or both of her parents, instead of her brother. She explained that “They’re not very much educated on American schooling. I don’t think half the questions that I asked my brother that they would know the answer to...of course, they were involved when talking about college, but not as much, maybe 10%? My brother was like the big major thing about ‘Okay, where do I go to college? What do I do?’ ...He was my big help.” She went on to contrast the different perspectives that her father and brother had on her educational trajectory. She praised her brother’s comparatively logical stance that “My brother was the one who persisted, he was like, ‘I think it’s best if you just do HCC for now, and then you can transfer later on’” whereas her father “was like, ‘You should go to UH, you should go to university’. I know that he was mostly looking at it...in a way to impress people, you know, like ‘Oh, my daughter goes to university, she goes to this university’...impressive.”

Indeed, Saira seemed keenly aware of how her decisions would be perceived by her extended family, diasporic community, and faith community. Although she seemed pleased with her decision to attend HCC and noted the many ways that this had been a largely beneficial path for her, she described her decision to switch majors from pre-med to Art History as a particularly harrowing one, as she worried about the potential fallout from these various audiences. She recalled her mother’s pride and enthusiasm when she had initially planned to pursue a career in medicine: “She was overly excited. She told everybody she knew. My daughter’s gonna go into this. My daughter is doing that, she’s so smart. She’s doing all this and that.” When she broke the news to her mother that she would instead be pursuing an Art History major, Saira lamented that “Now she has to tell everybody, ‘Oh, she’s not a doctor anymore.’ It’s heartbreaking...It must be

heartbreaking for her to tell everybody that my daughter's not going to be a doctor anymore.” She particularly underscored her family's tendency to one-upmanship that made this switch particularly wrenching. “My dad's side of the family...they're really high achievers...you have to one up them in any step or stage. And then when you tell someone, ‘Oh, my daughter's gonna be a doctor’, I one-upped you. And now you have to tell them, ‘Never mind, she's not’. So, that was definitely hard.”

Despite this difficult transition, Saira was enthusiastic about her future coursework as an Art History major, as she explained that “Now that I've switched my major, I'm definitely going to be more engaged for sure.” Additionally, she voiced a sense of contentment in her decision to follow her brother's advice and attend HCC. She especially appreciated how being an HCC student was “very suitable to how I am right now, because I definitely have a lot going on in life.” Indeed, she explained that “I do have a lot of responsibilities. I take care of the house, I take care of cleaning and take care of cooking. I take care of [my 8-year-old sister], I take care of my own studies, I try to take care of everything.” In describing a typical day, she explained that she would return from HCC to prepare a meal for her younger sister, complete her afternoon prayers, make tea for her parents, attend a Quran lecture online, and then start on homework. She described the “Ramadan edition” of her daily routine involving her role as a youth volunteer at her masjid, which meant that she was there every evening until 2am. Indeed, Saira's Islamic faith seemed to serve as a cornerstone of her identity, as she explained her aim to “continue to be a good Muslim...hopefully pray everyday, pray all five prayers, In shaa Allah, go to Mecca, do prayers, do Hajj, and just be a good Muslim.”

Yet, for as much strength as she seemingly drew from this identity, her identity as a Muslim woman also partially explained her hesitance about transferring to the University of

Houston from HCC. She seemed aware of the campus's sizeable Muslim population and seemed somewhat wary of what this might mean for her own social interactions and the ways that she could potentially be perceived. She explained that "I don't think UH is too ideal...if you're very talkative and talk to dudes, you're just going to have rumors started, you're going to have rumors flying, you're going to have stares and all of that. It's just not too ideal. But, if I do go to that school, I would just not join those Muslims, like not join those Desi clubs...I would just move away from those."

Just as she was aware of how her cultural and gender identity rendered the University of Houston a potentially fraught campus for her, she additionally acknowledged how these same identities made HCC an ideal choice for her. "I know that a huge population of People of Color go to community college, so it does, in a way, make me feel more safe, knowing that people of my background, people of my culture, and my religion, are there in that college, so I definitely had a sense of safety picking HCC." Indeed, she contentedly summed up her view by simply saying "It's just a great, friendly environment, which definitely made me think that HCC was definitely the right choice...a safe and smart move to take."

Sara¹²

In the minutes before each interview, as I sat staring at my own reflection in an otherwise empty Zoom room, I would invariably find myself teetering between feelings of excitement (thrilled that the data collection phase of my dissertation process was finally underway) and anxiety (terrified that the data generated from these interviews would somehow fall short of allowing me to write the dissertation of my dreams). I addressed both feelings by reminding

¹² The participant's choice of this pseudonym reflects the importance of her Islamic faith to her identity. With linguistic roots in Arabic, Sara (pronounced Saa-rah) is the name of the wife of the Prophet Ibrahim.

myself of Bhattacharya's (2021) sage advice to "humbly accept what the participants choose to offer, even if it differs from our predetermined path of inquiry" and instead focused on building meaningful relationships with each participant "with a sense of curiosity, discovery, wonder, and unconditional positive regard, without taking these relationships for granted or crossing certain boundaries for the sake of inquiry" (p. 374).

While this quote was universally applicable to my conversations with all of the women who participated in this study, the reminder to not cross certain boundaries for the sake of inquiry proved to be especially relevant in my conversations with Sara, who described several challenging experiences she had faced in only the broadest terms and whose description of her college decision-making process was mere minutes compared to the hourlong discussion I had come to expect from past interviews. Additionally, I noted that I held an "outsider" identity relative to Sara in many respects, particularly in terms of the centrality of her Islamic faith ("My biggest role as a person is that I'm a Muslim woman") and the hardships wrought by her transition to life in the U.S. ("[Being an immigrant] was honestly one of the hardest things for me, even more than like wearing hijab"). Yet, she was also the participant who was most vocal about her assumption that she and I viewed her experiences through a seemingly identical lens, as she used the phrase "you know what I mean" a whopping 76 times over the course of our three conversations together. Ultimately, by approaching these conversations in the spirit Bhattacharya (2021) suggested, I was able to marvel at Sara's strength, resilience, and ambition.

Sara was born in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad where both her parents grew up but she felt as though "I never lived in India, neither did my parents" since all three left the country at what she considered to be very early ages. Sara's father emigrated to Dubai at the age of 18 to finish the Finance degree he had begun in India. He briefly returned to India two years

later to marry Sara's mother, who eventually emigrated to Dubai at the age of 17 with a then four-month-old Sara. While Sara's father ultimately earned his degree in Finance and had secured a job in his field by the time his wife and daughter joined him in Dubai, Sara explained that her mother "is just a housewife. She didn't really get to finish her schooling because she got married so young, so she just has her high school degree, that's it." This dynamic seemed to have had a profound influence on Sara's views of her own educational trajectory, as she explained her longstanding desire to pursue higher education. "I always knew that...I want to go to college, that's what I'm going to do. I don't want to depend on anyone else. I'm not going to depend on my husband. I'm going to work for myself."

The expectations that Sara had for herself were also echoed throughout her extended family. She explained that "Education was a big thing in our family" and although Sara's mother did not pursue education beyond high school, "Everyone in my mom's side of the family is a doctor...when everyone's a doctor, they expect you to be like somewhere close to them, too." While Sara appreciated their encouragement and support, she noted the stress that also arose from the demands of these high expectations. This combination of gratitude and pressure was perhaps most apparent in Sara's description of her father's expectations of her. She explained that "My dad is super strict on education...that's his top priority" and went on to describe how she had constantly felt "a lot of pressure from him to always do good...like it was never enough for him, he always expected more and more and more."

Yet, despite these exceedingly high expectations, Sara's descriptions of the eight different schools she attended over the course of her K-12 schooling only minimally referenced her academic performance or her identity as a student. Instead, her recollections of her educational journey seemed to largely focus on her lack of sense of belonging and the oftentimes

intensely negative peer interactions she faced, the lasting effects of which continue to influence how Sara navigated her pathway to and through the American higher education landscape. She described the very first school she began attending in Abu Dhabi as “this Arab school and all my teachers were Arab and they would speak Arabic, and I’d just be lost.” She then moved to Dubai and began attending a British private school (with English instruction that meant that Sara did not require ESL instruction upon her move to the U.S. as a fourth grader). Beyond recalling her co-ed classrooms becoming single-gender classrooms starting in third grade, Sara explained that “I just don’t remember my school life in Dubai, besides my one friend,” referring to a Desi girl who was “one of my only friends at that school.” Sara additionally shared that “I’ve basically just hung out with Desi people my whole life...like, I never had diverse friends.”

Eager to provide a better education for Sara and her then five-year-old brother and three-year-old sister, Sara’s parents decided to move from Dubai to Katy, Texas. Sara recalled her initial excitement about the move “I would go on my iPad and look up the school and see pictures of the school, I was so excited...that’s the place everyone always wants to go to, America! And I was finally going there!” But this excitement evaporated almost instantly once she arrived, and she looked back on her elementary school years in America as a time when “I hated my life.” She explained that “I was the only Brown girl in the entire school. I remember there were two other Arab kids, so I wasn’t the only Muslim kid. But, I was the only Brown girl in my entire school. There was no Brown people at all.” She recalled the cruel remarks that she was constantly bombarded by like, “Oh, you’re so hairy” and “Why do you smell like curry?” These painful experiences seemed to have had a permanent influence on Sara’s personality, as she explained “It taught me a lot, because now whenever I see someone being alone, I go up and talk to them...I get that feeling.” In addition to making Sara more inclusive and empathetic,

these experiences also had a lasting impact on Sara's current educational trajectory, as she described her plans to transfer from Houston Community College to the University of Houston "because they do have a good Muslim and Brown community and I would fit right in." When I wondered aloud whether she was specifically seeking out this type of campus environment (with a sizeable Muslim and Brown community) because of her past experiences with bullying, Sara's immediate response was an emphatic "100%" and she admitted that "It'd be much easier for me now compared to like fifth grade, but I still think I would prefer to be around my type of people...I think that's just the Brown in me."

Sara explained that "I'm really rooted to my culture, compared to people that I know...I think my parents made it a priority for me to stay in touch with my culture, especially when you move to America, they don't want you to become whitewashed and they didn't let me do that." Sara was not only expected to maintain these cultural connections for herself, but also to serve as an exemplar for her younger siblings. "My parents were always like 'If you're praying...if you're speaking Urdu, they will too because you're doing it, they want to follow you.'" Although she admitted that the burden of these expectations "was just kind of annoying growing up," Sara now saw her 12-year-old sister emulating her behavior and felt glad to serve as a positive role model for her. Among these positive behaviors, Sara highlighted how she has deepened her connection to her Islamic faith in recent times, as it had shifted from being something she practiced simply because her parents wanted her to do so to learning to "love my religion...for myself and for the sake of God, not for the sake of my parents anymore." She explained that "Being Muslim and being a woman, it's hard because we have so many different rules, different guidelines that we have to follow, but it's all for a reason...and I just loved that I learned it for

myself” and noted that she had recently made the decision to become a hijabi on her own rather than at her mother’s behest.

Sara’s experiences with bullying ended when they moved from Katy to Sugarland to begin sixth grade at a new middle school, where she enjoyed a notably different school atmosphere. She happily recalled how her school was “filled with Brown people, so when I went there, I automatically had all these friends because they were Brown and I was Brown” and gleefully declared that “I had a lot of friends there, like I was pretty popular in middle school, I liked middle school.” But, she transferred schools again and began seventh grade at a private Islamic school “because my parents wanted me to stay in touch with my roots and religion.” With only 11 students in her entire class, Sara shared that she “hated my [Islamic school] experience so much, I feel like it was just so bad for me,” due in large part to the fact that “I was used to having a lot more friends.” Her parents then had her transfer towards the end of her seventh grade year to a different neighborhood public middle school, where “I’d meet all these Indians in my pre-AP classes...and we were all friends, because we didn’t fit in with everybody else.”

Noting that Sara’s descriptions of her schooling experiences had almost exclusively focused on her peer interactions, I tried to shift the conversation to academics – were you excited to go to school? Did you enjoy it? Would you consider yourself a good student? Sara shared that “I don’t think I enjoyed going to school for learning. I think I enjoyed school for the social aspect of it...I wouldn’t say I was a bad student...I don’t think my parents would’ve let me be a bad student, but I was just a normal kid that hated school, hated learning, hated doing homework.”

The importance and influence of Sara's peer relationships was perhaps most significant in her first two years of high school, where she was "being influenced with [my] friends to try smoking weed and all that stuff." She noted that the emotional strain of difficulties in her home life combined with the pressure to maintain her grades left her feeling desperate for some type of outlet. She was also quick to add that "It wasn't even like I was in a bad crowd, all my friends that were in pre-AP, AP classes, like the smartest kids of the school, they were doing it, too" and that simply "Everybody was smoking, doing all of this stuff, partying and all that, like it was such a normal thing to be around." Once Sara's parents inevitably discovered these illicit activities, they moved her out of this school to a different high school, a move that Sara characterized as having been "really, really good for me" as she then made it a point to "focus on myself, rather than having a lot of friends and focusing on them." Once Sara transferred to her new high school, she began prioritizing her academics with AP and dual credit courses, and she also became involved in various student organizations, including DECA, Red Cross, and the Muslim Student Association. These shifts also coincided with a greater focus on college.

Sara recalled that it was around this time that her uncle advised her father to ask her to start studying for the SAT. She noted that this uncle was a particularly key source of college-going information for her father, because he had three children who had all successfully navigated their way into four-year universities. His oldest daughter attended a community college for two years before transferring to UT Dallas, his middle daughter attended a community college for a year before transferring to Texas A&M, and his son directly attended UT with a generous merit-based scholarship. There was a seemingly pervasive perception among her extended family and her faith community of the great financial benefit of attending

community college before transferring to a four-year institution – “it’s the same classes the first two years and you’re saving money.”

Although Sara understood the utility of first attending a community college, she had hoped to attend a four-year institution immediately after graduating from high school as she explained that “My dad was like, ‘Your cousins went there, it’s smart to go to community college,’ but I was like, ‘No, I want to go to university.’” More specifically, Sara thought of Texas A&M as her dream school because of her cousins’ attendance there and “I [wanted] to be like my cousins, like they [looked] like they [were] having so much fun.” Sara reflected on how this idea of a dream school did not take into account the kind of environment she now knew that she was seeking in a college experience and said that “I look back and I don’t even know why I would want to go there, like it’s filled with white people.” She continued on to say that “I just [don’t] want to go there anymore,” because her cousin and her friend joined “a cult that they had for Muslim people to convert to Christianity” which led Sara to summarily declare “Oh, that’s not the school for me.”

Determined to attend a four-year institution, Sara began working on her applications to the University of Houston, Texas A&M, UT Austin, and UT Dallas. In the months leading up to this time, Sara and her father were having ongoing conversations about her higher education plans and his desire to navigate this process successfully was apparent in his interview with Sara. He recalled that “It was little challenging for me to understand the process of the college and understand how to get into that, but thankfully we have good family members around us, and we have a good community, friends who has really advised me, and Google is the best way to search for requirement of the college. I’m sure I didn’t do a best job, but I always try to look into that, and I talked with many peoples about your education.”

Given these concerted efforts and her father's significant involvement in her search process, I was surprised to hear her describe a quick and seemingly unilateral decision to attend Houston Community College, as she simply said that "I never actually finished my application for those colleges because I just decided, 'Okay, I'm going to do community college for a year.'" She then explained that her father's chronic illness and the attendant financial concerns made her confident that initially attending a community college was the best option for her. She admitted that "It felt like kind of a joke, because I worked hard in high school and then ended up going to community college...like, why did I do all of that?" Yet, she remained steadfast in her decision particularly because "Med school is really expensive, like why should I not save my dad's money...I don't want to put him through that stress."

When she delivered the news to her father, she described him as having had "mixed feelings" about her decision, but explained that ultimately "He supported me, because he knew what I was doing was to think of him and...to save his money." In addition to the financial benefits, she explained that she wanted to remain close to home to stay close to her siblings ("I love my siblings, so I don't want to leave them alone") and to help care for them in various ways, from picking them up from school to helping them with their homework each night. She also explained that remaining at home with her family was a decision that was connected to her desire to be a devout Muslim. "Everything I want is connected to my faith...I have a stronger faith, but I also need my parents to help keep it strong."

This same mindset also served to make sense of her plans to attend UH as a commuter student beginning next fall and her eventual goal to attend medical school. Her father echoed these dreams for his daughter as he said "My dreams are always there to send you to the best college...I want you to do your best in your studies, best in your career, I want you to work

somewhere where the community can get benefit out of that and everyone should be proud of you. As a father, I'm very proud of you.”

Summary of Participant Portraits

These eleven portraits were crafted with the intention of providing an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the ways that these South Asian American women navigated their college decision-making process, with a focus on understanding the role of their cultural and gender identities in this process. These portraits were purposely crafted in such a way that each woman's experience was viewed and understood on its own and without any reference to comparisons across the women within a particular institution or across the entire study, so as to understand what we might learn about the college decision-making process from each individual experience. The following chapter then offers an analysis of these portraits that weaves the disparate threads of these experiences into a cohesive understanding to directly address the study's research questions. I would caution against referring to this as the findings chapter, as it is my intention for Chapters Five and Six to both contribute to the overall takeaways from this work.

CHAPTER SIX: ANALYZING THE PORTRAITS

The following chapter presents an analysis of the participant portraits to address the research questions that guided this study. The first question focused on understanding how South Asian American women's cultural and gender identities manifest and then influence their college decision-making process. Within that, I aimed to parse out the similarities shared among the women's navigation of this process *and* the differences that could explain why they attended the institutional types represented by Rice University, University of Houston, and Houston Community College. The second question considered how the decision-making process then might have influenced these women's ongoing perceptions and experiences of their institutions. The portraits in the previous chapter were crafted with the intention of addressing all of these questions and reflecting as much as possible of the entirety of each woman's journey to and through higher education. The following analysis is meant to complement these portraits, by highlighting the broader themes that emerged across the women's experiences.

The similarities in the women's navigation of their college decision-making process are reflected in four themes. First, the women expressed in varying ways a sense of *uncertainty, compounded by confusion and isolation* as they engaged in their college search and attributed these feelings to their identity as the children of South Asian immigrants. Second, the women acknowledged bearing the weight of *South Asian stereotypes*. These experiences existed on a wide spectrum that ranged from women who felt pressure to adhere to the tacit expectations of these stereotypes to women who felt they had been somehow granted permission to operate beyond the confines of these expectations. Nevertheless, the mere existence of these stereotypes shaped the ways the women made sense of their navigation of the search process. Third, there was an element of *performativity* in the ultimate decision that each of the women made. They viewed their selection of higher education institution as just another in a lifelong series of

decisions that were made with the assumption that the decision would be scrutinized by various audiences, including their extended family and their diasporic community. Finally, the women's decision-making process was uniformly defined by *family involvement*, whereby the final decision was one that was made collectively as a family unit, rather than individually by the student herself.

The differences in the women's navigation are reflected in two themes. First, the differences in immigration impetuses seemed to explain differences in the relative importance of *pragmatism versus prestige* in the women's decision-making processes. Those women whose families emigrated with greater economic security (e.g., leaving their home country for the purposes of completing medical training) prioritized prestige and gaining admission to institutions with name recognition. By contrast, the women whose families emigrated simply in search of better economic opportunities (e.g., leaving their home country due to a lack of job prospects) prioritized pragmatism and viewed college admissions through the lens of eventual job security. Second, the differences in the *salience of traditional gender roles* paralleled differences in institutional types. The women who attended community college had greater expectations of adhering to gender roles (e.g., caretaking, cooking, etc.) and balancing the competing demands of family responsibilities alongside their studies. The women who attended Rice University made almost no mention of any such gendered responsibilities and instead viewed themselves first and foremost as students.

These differences contributed to the themes that emerged when considering how their decision-making processes influenced their ongoing perceptions and experiences of their respective institutions. In terms of *pragmatism versus prestige*, the Rice University students entered their institution with the highest expectations and were also the most vocal in articulating

their varying senses of disappointment with their collegiate experiences. Although none regretted their decision to attend Rice, the lofty goals they had for themselves seemed to inevitably set them up for disappointment. As the University of Houston students' decisions centered on pragmatism, they entered their institution with comparatively more realistic expectations both of themselves and their institution. These expectations were then uniformly exceeded, with all of the women noting the ways that they were pleasantly surprised by experiences afforded to them through their attendance at UH. As the HCC women's decision-making largely centered on affordability, they reiterated that they were glad to have attended an institution that minimized the financial burden of their higher education on their families.

Overall, these themes underscore the ways that the women's cultural and gender identities were a powerful force in shaping their college decision-making process. In considering these broader themes together with the detailed nuance of the portraits in the previous chapter, it becomes clear that the pathways the women in this study navigated to enter and persist in their institutions were largely a function of their cultural and gender identities.

Similarities in the Decision-Making Process

Uncertainty in the Initial Search

While the prevailing consensus from the literature would suggest that students with the backgrounds reflected in this study would be well-equipped to navigate the college search process (Cipollone & Stich, 2017; McDonough, 1997; Stevens, 2009), the experiences of the women in this study point to the need for greater nuance in this understanding. All of the women in this study had grown up with the expectation of attending college immediately after graduating from high school and all of the women had at least one parent who had completed a bachelor's degree, yet these expectations and background characteristics did little to equip the women to efficiently approach the initial search phase of their college decision-making. Rather

than embarking on the search phase of the process with a clear, well-informed understanding of how to gather and evaluate information that would be pertinent to their college search, the women expressed a sense of uncertainty, compounded by confusion and isolation. These feelings were inherently intertwined in that they were unsure of how to begin to gather the necessary information and they also felt as though they were having to do so without adequate support.

It is important to contextualize the ways that this confusion existed alongside the women's lifelong understanding that college would necessarily follow upon their completion of high school – so much so that they typically thought of their educational trajectory in terms of a K-16 educational path, rather than viewing college as a distinct addition to their K-12 schooling. Despite having ultimately attended three distinct types of institutions, all the women shared college-going aspirations to which they were socialized from their early childhood. In fact, several of the parents who participated in the family member interview indicated that they had begun thinking about their daughters attending college as soon as or even before they were born.

Sara's father was emphatic about his long-standing college aspirations for his daughter, explaining that "Honestly, when you're born...I always say my family members, your mother, my parents, always say that I'll make Sara a very good child as well as a very educated person...that is...my dream when you born." Jasmine's father answered the question about initial college aspirations similarly and said that he and Jasmine's mother had begun thinking about her college attendance when she was a baby. When Jasmine teasingly balked at this and asked, "The second I was out of the womb?" her father replied sincerely that they always knew she would attend college. In a similarly sweet exchange, Suchitra's mother said that she had begun thinking about college when she began kindergarten, to which Suchitra playfully protested "Ma! Ma!." Yet, her mother insisted that she had begun thinking about "where to send her,

where to fund her, you know, all that” to which her sister who was eavesdropping in the background additionally laughed and exclaimed “She was like five [years old]!” These exchanges underscored the extent to which the women’s families viewed their entry into higher education as being crucially important, even more so than the women themselves might have realized at the time.

Yet, just as the parents’ perspectives made apparent the ways that the women had grown up with the expectation of attending college, their perspectives also pointed to the ways that the women were often expected to navigate this process without substantive support from their parents. Many parents viewed the college search process as simply another academic task that their typically overachieving daughters would complete with minimal involvement from them. Keerthana’s mother matter-of-factly recalled that “You didn’t waste any time, you did all the process, all the application, everything. You are independent in doing everything with application process” seemingly unaware that she might have played a larger role in Keerthana’s process.

In addition to this perception of perhaps overstated confidence in their daughters’ abilities to navigate this process on their own, many parents also pointed to their having attended college outside the U.S. as a reason for their inability to be better engaged in the search process with them. For example, Aradhana’s father explained that “College choice process was a little bit tricky for me, for us...I did my engineering in India, and then Amma did in India...so yes, we were very confused how the process works, so then we went and we attend a lot of college seminars and we also spoke to our friends who have been through this process to understand how did they manage. Then slowly slowly, we learn the process.” Yet, even among parents who had earned their bachelor’s degrees in the U.S. and had experienced the American higher education

system firsthand, there remained a sense of inadequacy when it came time to helping their daughters consider their own college options. For example, Deepika's mother explained that "I thought I had an understanding because I didn't go to college in a different country, [but] I relied on you for knowing the process than me giving you guidance."

Indeed, many of the women noted the ways that being the first in their families to attend college in the U.S. left them feeling unsure of how to navigate the initial search process. Maya's and Keerthana's portraits include anecdotes that vividly illustrate the sense of othering that they felt when listening to elementary school peers describe their allegiances (as dictated by their parents' college attendance) in local college football rivalries and noting their own inability to engage in these conversations, as their parents had not attended schools in the U.S. Maya explained that "Not understanding college for a really long time was definitely difficult...Even though I knew I was going to college, I didn't really understand what college was for a long time...Even though my parents did go to college...I think the Indian system is very different than the U.S. system, and I just didn't really understand what it was as a concept." Alongside these examples, Jasmine and Aradhana noted their experiences of another form of culture shock when they moved from Florida and California respectively to begin attending school in Texas. They both recalled having to acclimate to state-specific terminology (e.g., Texas common app, top ten percent rule) that was brand new to them but seemed to be second nature to their peers and the sense of both overwhelm and otherness they felt as a result of these experiences.

Ultimately, the women seemed to share a sense of disappointment, as they described how they viewed their search process as having been less than optimal, relative to their own expectations for how they would have ideally liked to have undertaken this search process. This frustration was perhaps most acutely voiced among the Rice participants, who noted their

inability to devise a focused plan to ensure their ability to achieve the lofty aspirations they had in mind for themselves. Despite having her older siblings' leads to follow and knowing that she wanted to attend a prestigious institution, Marie recalled that "I was so open to anything, I didn't know where to go or what to do." Maya and Deepika also echoed these sentiments and recalled how they relied on the word-of-mouth recommendations of their peers to drive much of their initial search process. Maya explained that, "I think I did a really bad job of this [college application process]. But I think a lot of the reasons why I picked certain schools is because like, my friends were applying to those schools." Suchitra neatly summed up this disconnect by explaining that "I wish I could say there's a rigorous process, but it was really random."

Despite this theme of a suboptimal search process, it is important to note that the women were largely pleased with their final decisions. Moreover, in keeping with Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1997) reminder to illuminate goodness, it is also important to note that although the women engaged in their own search process with this sense of confusion and isolation, they later leveraged their knowledge and firsthand experiences of navigating this process to ensure that their younger siblings did not face similar obstacles. Nearly all of the women shared the ways that they were able to provide a level of support to their younger siblings that was simply not available to them. In Maya's case, her father's frustration with the "holistic process" and the resulting lack of acceptances from Ivy League institutions despite her perfect test scores drove him to hire for her younger brother a private college counselor whom he credited for her brother's attendance at the University of Southern California. For Sadaf, offering this support meant advising her brother to only complete applications for institutions that were a reasonable match for his academic profile, rather than applying (as she had) to Ivy League institutions to simply appease their parents' desires. These examples underscore how access to social capital

can vary even within one family, as the older siblings were able to offer greater support and college-going knowledge to their younger siblings than they themselves were able to access while navigating their own search process.

South Asian Stereotypes

Once the women managed to address their feelings of confusion and isolation and move forward with their search process, they again had to contend with an additional layer of complexity in this process – South Asian stereotypes – that was a direct function of their identity as the daughters of South Asian immigrants to America. In many instances, while these stereotypes eventually influenced the women’s college decision-making process, the women’s awareness of these stereotypes long predated their college search. Ultimately, the lifelong awareness of these stereotypes meant that the women did not simply navigate their college search process in a linear manner. Instead, they found themselves constantly doubling back in the process to consider how their potential choices would or would not align with these expectations.

One of the facets of this theme was the way the women and their families viewed their place within America. Whether the women’s families had emigrated here prior to their birth or they emigrated with their families, all of the women voiced in various ways the significance of being able to pursue their education in America. In many cases, the women understood that their educational trajectory was often chief among the key motivators for their families’ decisions to emigrate to the United States. For example, Sara recalled that her move from Dubai to the U.S. was motivated by her parents’ desire to provide her and her siblings with access to better educational opportunities. She explained that education was “very important to them, so they wanted us to have more opportunities here in the U.S....my parents were like, ‘What’s the point of living here [in Dubai],’ like ‘they are not getting the best education they should be,’ so that’s

why we moved.” Sara was constantly aware of the expectation to excel in her studies, given the central importance of education in shaping their overall family life.

Along those same lines, Deepika attributed her family’s place in America to their strong belief in the American dream and the assumption that the best educational opportunities were to be had here. Aradhana, too, connected her parents’ immigration journey to the central importance of education in her own life. “They moved from India to America, and they didn’t have much money, but because they had these STEM jobs they were able to grow very fast in America and settle down and they were able to give us the life that we have.” She then connected that to why her parents “definitely focus on studies...It’s like, ‘How are you doing in school? How are you doing in school, like grades, grades, grades,’ things like that. And so, inherently, we just become focused on it, even if the pressure ceases as we go to college. We definitely still have those thoughts in our head because of how our parents raised us.”

In a similar vein, Keerthana recalled how her father, despite having never finished college himself, dreamed of bringing his family to America for the plentiful opportunities and assured success that he imagined waited for them here. This perspective along with their keen awareness of the many sacrifices their parents had made in order to build a life in the U.S. motivated the women to ensure that their educational pursuits and achievements rightly honored these contributions to their success. Indeed, this sentiment was shared by many of the women across all three institutional types and was perhaps best reflected in Keerthana’s words, as she explained that “My parents came to this country so that I have these opportunities...I do feel guilty in the way that I had opportunities here that other people don’t...the way I’ve channeled that feeling is to drive myself to achieve...and give back.”

Going hand in hand with this sense of reverence in honoring their families' pursuit of greater educational opportunities for them, another facet of this theme of South Asian stereotypes was the narrowly defined set of acceptable paths to pursue. As if reading from an identical script, nearly all of the women recited the same three occupations that were favored within their families and the broader diasporic community – doctor, lawyer, engineer. The only aberration from this list was the inclusion of “investment banker” on Deepika’s list, likely a reflection of the fact that her family lived on the East Coast in a neighborhood rife with Wall Street financiers.

The women were also equally aware of fields that would be deemed less acceptable. After rattling off the usual list of three, Marie described the relative freedom she felt from operating within these confines but quickly added that “I don’t know how well English or Art History would have gone over.” Indeed, in describing her decision to switch her focus from medicine to Art History, Saira called it the “scariest thing” to have to relay the news of this decision to her father. She additionally underscored how the decision was looked down upon “especially in a Desi household,” again nodding to the expectation to pursue a field of study that would lead to one of the more typically accepted occupations.

While Saira’s experience was perhaps the starkest example of this tension, many of the women described shades of this same tension, as they struggled to balance their families’ desires for them to pursue a STEM-focused degree with their own interests in non-STEM areas. For example, Jasmine recalled a desire to indicate a liberal arts major on her college applications, but her parents were adamant that she not do so. She explained that “They definitely pressured me towards STEM. I mean, he literally was like, ‘Absolutely not, you cannot do anything in the social sciences.’” Deepika’s parents similarly dismissed her liberal arts interest out of hand, calling it a “waste” and questioning “Why would you ever do that?”

Yet, in again looking to Lawrence-Lightfoot's principle of illuminating goodness, it is equally important to note that the women understood that the weight of these tensions were largely a function of their parents' desire to see their daughters succeed. Many of the women described their deeply felt understanding that their parents' overarching goal was simply to ensure that they were set up for success and additionally acknowledged that STEM fields were often synonymously viewed with economic stability and job security in their parents' home countries.

Maya captured this tension well as she described how she was expected to college in order to get "a real career that could make money and be fulfilling... Well, I don't really know if fulfillment was any real part of it." Indeed, many of the women shared how their parents' immigrant identities rendered fulfillment of creative pursuits and desires as being irrelevant when compared to the primary, overarching goal of ensuring long-term stability and economic security. Ultimately, there was an understanding among the women that their parents' desires were well-intentioned, if sometimes overbearingly wrought onto their daughters. Suchitra had a particularly generous take on this tendency, as she explained that "It's just such a weird clash of expectations that sometimes it's hard to reconcile... I will say... a lot of the parents that have come over here have done really well with adapting to American society, like they try really hard to not to put as much pressure, at least, I hope they're trying to not put as much pressure on their kids as possible."

Performativity

As the women moved further into the decision-making process and neared the point at which they would have to identify the institution they planned to attend, the women seemed to be intuitively aware that their decision would have to pass muster not only within their own household but across the various contexts within which they were nested, including their

extended families, their diasporic communities, their faith communities. In the case of the Rice students, this audience additionally included their high school peer groups, which uniformly held Deepika, Marie, Maya, and Suchitra to exceptional standards of excellence. This pattern was in keeping with the women's seemingly lifelong tendency (which they attributed to their South Asian identity) to second guess themselves and consider how their actions and behavior would be perceived by those around them, rather than simply making decisions based solely on their own wants and desires.

In reflecting on these tendencies, Keerthana described the role of the diasporic community as being a constant audience to her life choices. When I remarked that it sounded as if she felt like she had spent her life under a specific gaze and I wondered whose gaze that was, she pointedly asked, "Can I say everybody?" She went on to describe her perception that "Brown people just talk and gossip you know, regardless of what community you're a part of, which spreads like wildfire." She additionally explained that she felt beholden to the community's judgments "not because I give a crap about what they say or do, but because my parents do...and I don't want any of the choices that I make to affect them in any way." Yet, Keerthana also noted that her intention to attend college was as much a function of her own desire as it was driven by community norms and expectations. She explained how her college attendance was "definitely an expectation, unspoken, but definitely an expectation. But in terms of college, like, I've never seen it as something I had to avoid, or that was a question. So, unlike other behaviors, other personal behaviors that I might choose to do or to not do because of this, because how it might be perceived by this community, I didn't even think of not going to college."

While Keerthana's experience of growing up with this sense of performativity was due to her proximity to a sizeable diasporic population in her hometown, Marie's experience with

performativity was rooted in how “conspicuous” her family seemed to be within their predominantly white town in the Midwest. She constantly explained that she and her siblings were expected to behave in ways that were befitting of the children of the town’s highly regarded cancer specialist. Marie was especially aware not only of the role of culture but also gender in determining the exacting standards to which her parents held her and her sister, but not her brothers. She remembered how “Oftentimes, discussions about what my sister and I were wearing at an event or how I looked or if we had jewelry on was always a topic of conversation for my parents. Right, they’re like ‘Where are your earrings, like you have to wear gold,’” seemingly referring to the culturally-mediated desire for their daughters’ mien to reflect the family’s respectability and stature. This mentality extended to the way that Marie and her siblings’ academic performance was held to an exceptionally high bar. While she weighed several relevant criteria in her search process, she was cognizant of ultimately being able to “mention it to the Indian uncles” and have her choice be validated by this audience.

The assumption of the women’s choices serving as a reflection of their parents’ values was also poignantly echoed in Suchitra’s sentiments. She described a similar sense of knowing that her actions would be scrutinized as a broader statement on the way her parents had raised her. She recalled her mother advising that she should attend Rice because it would look good to attend a school with a notably superior reputation. Suchitra explained that “It feels like [Indian parents] are putting expectations on their child because they see [the child] as an extension of themselves, and they’re like ‘I need to see them succeed, so I have something to show.’ I don’t think most of us, like the second generation of Indian Americans, care to be a trophy. We just want to live our lives.”

While Suchitra seemed to chafe at these expectations and rue the burden of having to balance what the desires of this broader audience dictated alongside her own intentions for her life, Aradhana internalized these expectations of what she referred to as “society pressure, family pressure” in such a way that yielded her own “personal pressure.” She attributed her decision-making calculus to this sense of personal pressure and the attendant desire “for the college that I ended up choosing...to look good to everyone...the Indian community, friends, neighbors, just in general, I wanted it to be something that looked good.”

Sara’s decision-making was similarly influenced by the desire to attend an institution that she knew would be approved by her immediate network, namely her extended family and cousins who had also previously attended community colleges before transferring to four-year institutions. She additionally considered the institution that would best align with the needs of her faith identity and her intention for her behavior to be viewed as acceptable and appropriate as defined by her parents and their faith community. Sara explained her concern that “If I lived by myself [on campus], I just would not be grounded, I would be...having too much fun, not focusing on school...I feel like I would do all those things and not have discipline. Whereas, if I live with my parents, I’m following their rules and they’re helping me understand what’s right.”

These examples together point to the powerful influence of the women’s cultural and gender identity in shaping the way they navigated their search and decision-making processes. Having had their actions and behaviors held to the litmus test of community standards and expectations throughout their lives, the women naturally expected for their decision of where to attend college to face a similar level of scrutiny. Importantly, these examples again underscore the role of social capital in shaping the decision-making process, as what was deemed acceptable

by these broader audiences was simply a function of the women's networks' college-going knowledge.

Family Involvement

The final similarity that emerged when examining the role of the women's cultural and gender identity in their college decision-making process was family involvement. The participants routinely pointed to their families' needs and desires as the factor that tipped the scales in favor of the institutions that they ultimately opted to attend. As a result, the institutions that the women attended were a reflection not only of their own personal aspirations but also those of their families. Certainly, all of the women seemed pleased to varying degrees with their decision to attend their chosen institution; the myriad examples of the academic and personal growth they enjoyed as a direct result of attending these institutions stood as an unequivocal testament to support that assertion. However, it is important to understand the ways that the college decision was largely a collective, rather than an individual, decision for the women in this study.

The pervasiveness of the family's involvement in the decision-making process varied by institutional type. For the women who attended HCC, family needs and expectations held a central role throughout the search and decision-making process. Namely, both Sara and Saira were acutely aware of their family's financial status and therefore felt compelled to pursue the least financially burdensome path to higher education. Sara recalled that her father was the first to encourage her to consider attending a community college first because "All your cousins went there, it's smart to go to community college." Although she initially resisted the idea, she soon realized that "This is better, I'm saving a lot more money...like, why should I not save my dad's money, I don't want to put him through that stress." She additionally explained her view that "[My dad] wants the best for me, but I think the best for me and my parents would be me staying

at home.” Saira echoed a similar mindset of prioritizing cost effectiveness, as she described her experience of her pathway into higher education, as a result of her brother’s insistence that Saira “should just go to HCC” and emphasized that “it’ll save you money.” She almost solely credited her brother for her decision to attend HCC, as she explained that “He’s the one who really guided me to going into community college.”

While the HCC women’s experiences had the influence of family throughout their search process, family involvement seemed to bookend the UH women’s process, with notable influences both at the initial and final stages of their search. On the front end, family expectations seemed to largely define the parameters in the preliminary stages of the women’s search process. Essentially, the women used their families’ wishes as an initial filter, thereby ensuring that they were only applying to or seriously considering institutions that fulfilled the criterion of addressing their families’ needs. For Keerthana, this initial filter hinged on cost of attendance. Ever aware of the financial stressors that affected her family, Keerthana only looked into institutions where she felt reasonably sure of her ability to secure scholarships to minimize as much as possible her parents’ contributions toward her education. While this filtering process narrowed Keerthana’s field of possibilities early on in her process, the same family-driven filtering process led to Aradhana having an unusually wide field of possibilities, because she was broadly looking for colleges that fit her father’s desire for her to find a school with a good engineering program. She described scouring lists of options and asking her dad one by one “Okay, should I apply to this one?” and adding to her list all of the schools that he approved of for her. “He didn’t help me with the applications, obviously, that was all me, but he helped me figure out which ones to choose,” Aradhana explained. Although Aradhana herself was excited about the possibility of attending UH, explaining that “I just really liked what I saw [at the UH

engineering orientation session],” she ultimately pointed to her parents’ input as the factor that solidified her decision to attend UH. She recalled her parents’ insistence that she attend UH for a variety of factors, including its proximity to their home in Austin, the sizeable Indian community within UH and across Houston, and especially the generous full-ride scholarship she had been offered. With all that in mind, it simply came down to this: “My parents were like, ‘you’re going, you have to go.’”

In a similar vein, Sadaf’s family’s input determined the list of schools to which she applied. She explained that “My parents really wanted me to apply to Ivy Leagues,” so she applied to Harvard and Cornell. She described her own reluctance to do so, given her assumption that her academic profile was not a good match for those types of institutions. Yet, she simply explained that “I honestly just did it for my parents,” referring to her desire to fulfill her parents’ wishes as “They really wanted me to apply.” She also attributed her decision to attend and remain at UH (rather than transferring to UT as she had initially planned) based on her parents’ desires. She explained that she “would have to come back to Houston every weekend” even if she had gone to UT, because her parents would have expected her to do so.

Finally, although the women who ultimately ended up at Rice began their searches in a comparatively more specific manner, with an eye toward the academic fields and eventual career paths they planned to pursue, their decision was also largely shaped by their family’s input. In reflecting on her search process, Deepika unequivocally pointed to “my parents’ wishes and desires” as having been the force that “sculpted” her eventual attendance at Rice. Marie similarly described the influential role of her family in her search process, explaining that “Applying to college is like a family affair.” She largely credited her family’s involvement to explain her connection to Rice, from the initial consideration of it to the final decision. Although she had

been considering many top tier institutions, Rice was only added to the list based on her brother's recommendation to do so. Her parents' approval of her final decision was also a key factor in Marie's decision to attend Rice, as she explained that "I saw value in them agreeing with my college choice." She recalled the "nodding approval" that she received from her parents that "made me know that that decision was the right one."

Differences in the Decision-Making Process

Pragmatism Versus Prestige

One of the starkest contrasts that emerged when examining differences wrought by cultural and gender identities in the decision-making process stemmed from the ways that the women were socialized to weight certain criteria more heavily on their personal rubrics of the college search. I broadly refer to this dichotomy as a difference in favoring pragmatism versus prestige. Recognizing that these terms can be understood in a somewhat reductive sense, it is important to note, then, that my use of the word pragmatism here encompasses more than a mere cost-benefit understanding of the decision. Rather, the women's cultural and gender identities necessarily mediated the ways that they perceived the importance of this criterion. Moreover, it is especially important to note the class differences that are enmeshed within this analysis, as the women who favored prestige had the resources to render cost of attendance a non-issue for them, whereas the women who prioritized pragmatism did not have the same level of financial support available to them. In a similar vein, I use the term prestige to refer not just to the institution's selectivity and mirror the language the women in used in describing their decision-making process, but to additionally conjure an image of the kind of student experience that is synonymous with the nation's most elite institutions.

With that understanding of my use of the terms pragmatism and prestige in mind, there are many notable ways that this difference emerged among the participants. All of the Rice

students in this study began their search with prestige in mind and looked to their parents, their peer groups, and broader media (e.g., *U.S. News and World Report*, College Confidential, Khan Academy) as sources of confirmation as to whether an institution merited the somewhat hazily defined concept of prestige. The UH students were comparatively more focused on identifying institutions that would provide them with a good education and at a price point that felt affordable for their families. Finally, the HCC students' searches were the most narrowly defined by the criterion of the cost of attendance.

Saira was particularly explicit in explaining the connection between her focus on attending an institution that would not be financially burdensome for her family and her family's journey to the U.S. She contrasted her own pathway into HCC with those among her social network who had graduated from high school to immediately begin attending four-year institutions. She explained that "We had our whole life set up in another country...and then having to move our whole life plan to a whole other country, we had to build ourselves up for that...and that's why we're not as financially suitable to strictly just go to university." She went on to explain her perspective that "If you live in America ever since you were young, it's understandable for you to go straight to university...You have your whole life set up, so you're already financially capable, so going to university makes sense...But, when you move midway of your life and you have to build yourself up, it's kind of hard to just go straight to university."

Although Sara did not echo these same thoughts, the same could be said of her family in the sense that they had emigrated to the U.S. more recently than the families of the women in this study who attended UH and Rice. Sara's thoughts on her decision-making did mirror Saira's in that she was forthright in emphasizing her desire to pursue a path that would minimize the financial burden on her family. She recalled that her father preferred for her to attend a four-year

institution straightaway, but her thought process was “I thought it would be better financially...to save money and make a smart decision to stick at a community college and then transfer to university, because it’s the same for the first two years.” In further explaining this decision, she again emphasized that “what I was doing was to think of [my dad]...it was basically for [my dad] and to save his money.”

In stark contrast, several of the Rice women reflected on the extent of their privilege which allowed them to be able to engage in their college search process without considering the cost of attendance. Indeed, Marie recalled that “money was no object” in her college search, as her parents simply “wanted us to be in the best university that we can access.” Deepika similarly shared that “I don’t think I figured [the financial aspect] into it like absolutely at all, because I was so privileged by the time that I was applying to college...It was an assumption that your parents were going to pay for your college.” She was quick to note that “I’m super lucky to have had that lack of pressure” which ultimately allowed her to approach her search process with the mindset that “I want to be around people that I think are smart.”

Indeed, all of the Rice women were unanimous in their desire for their time as undergraduates to be synonymous with rich intellectual stimulation. Suchitra reflected precisely these sentiments in describing her view of college as a time when “you’re a part of this intellectually rich community, and you’re a part of this group of like-minded individuals, and you’re a part of all these activities. It’s what people mean when they say, ‘it’s gonna be the best four years of your life’.” Deepika described her view that “For me pursuing higher education, I think in terms of my personal happiness. I think having intellectual stimulation...is important to me and who I am.” Marie also described a similar sense of her identity as a student largely defining her sense of self. She explained that “I was always set on like, I’m going to be the

student who does well in class...always expected to get an A and perform well.” Maya also echoed the sentiment of her academic achievements largely defining her identity, which then shaped her higher education aspirations. “I was very much an overachiever. I think that’s just the name of the game for me,” Maya explained. She additionally noted that “A lot of my friends were overachievers, so we were always thinking about college and talking about that.”

Indeed, this lifelong tendency to define themselves by their exceptional academic pursuits naturally led the women to prioritize prestige in their college decision-making process. Marie explicitly connected the significance of prestige with her South Asian identity. She explained how among the diasporic community within which her family socialized, there was a tacit expectation of “a certain level of prestige...our kids must go to a certain prestigious university or strive for that, and...among the broader South Asian community, too, I think there’s that expectation.” Deepika’s description of her initial search process echoed a similar mindset. She explained that she began her search by “obviously, just cycling through...all the Ivies, which ones do I like, which ones do I not like, and I applied to them all except for Harvard...Harvard just seems too elite for me.” She summed up her search as “I was mostly looking at schools that are still elite but kind of had the vibe I was looking for.” Maya, too, described her longstanding understanding of the importance of prestige in the college search. She explained that “I was always like ‘Prestigious school!’ Like, there’s prestigious schools like Harvard or Yale or something that you need to strive for.” In reflecting on how this mindset developed, she explained that “I think an aspect of it definitely came from my parents.” She additionally noted that “I think just other Asian kids...we all kind of pressured each other into thinking that we had to go to these schools, or it was those schools or bust.... There was just a lot of pressure built around [prestige] as a concept.” Taken together, these examples highlight the extent to which

prestige was of central importance for the Rice women's search processes. By contrast, the HCC's women's description of their search processes included no mention of the concept of prestige and instead emphasized economic value, as it related to being able to prioritize their family's overall needs.

Salience of Traditional Gender Roles

The salience of traditional gender roles also emerged as a key theme when examining differences across the women's experiences of navigating their decision-making process. Similar to the difference of pragmatism versus prestige, this difference is perhaps best understood by examining the experiences of the women at opposite ends of the selectivity spectrum, between Houston Community College and Rice University. In looking at these experiences, it quickly became apparent that there was an inverse relationship between the selectivity of the institution and the expectation to adhere to traditional gender roles. In other words, the women at Rice had no discernable expectation to adhere to traditional gender roles, while this expectation was central to the HCC women's identities.

Even before considering the content of the interviews, the interview setting itself made apparent the differences in the HCC women's and Rice women's experiences and approach to their student life. For example, while both HCC participants detailed the ways that they were an integral part of their households' day-to-day operations, I likely would have come to that same conclusion simply by observing the course of my interviews with them, as their roles within the larger fabric of their families was evident. I met with Sara for the second time as her sister's twelfth birthday party was underway and within earshot of our Zoom call. When I asked if she wanted to reschedule our session so she could join in the festivities, she declined and good naturedly replied that she hadn't been invited to the party and instead "I just got the errands memo." In the time of our interview, she paused to take a phone call from her mother who

wanted to make sure that Sara was keeping an eye on the birthday party. Similarly, various members of Saira's family, particularly her younger sister, interrupted our Zoom sessions together. Saira also explained that she could only meet later in the evenings because she would first have to make sure that her sister had finished all of her homework. This was, of course, in addition to the basic household functions that were primarily her responsibility to see to, including cooking for the family, cleaning their home, and generally tending to the family's needs.

Saira was explicit in the ways that she understood these responsibilities as a function of her gender identity. She explained that "As a daughter, I do have a lot of responsibilities. I take care of the house, I take care of cleaning and take care of cooking. I take care of [my younger sister], I take care of my own studies. I try to take care of everything. As a daughter, I try to help out my parents as much as I can, and that's just a big role for a daughter overall." This explanation served as a particularly apt representation of the way that Saira viewed her studies as merely another among a laundry list of responsibilities with which she was charged. She additionally contrasted the role of a son as being one that takes care of "more futuristic aspects and not current aspects" and emphasized her view that sons "have to study, to quickly make money, quickly have a job...so they can have a stable income and they can start taking care of a family." She roundly dismissed the idea that she would feel a similar type of pressure to study hard and get a good job, because "in the future, when I have a family, I always think that 'Oh, my husband's gonna take care of this'."

By contrast, the Rice students made almost no mention of the ways that their studies were affected by any interfering responsibilities. All four women lived on campus, although two were from out-of-state and two lived in Houston area suburbs. All of them Zoomed with me without

any notable interruptions, from campus-related locations ranging from their own dorm room or apartment or various communal spaces, like the student-run coffee shop. The only hindrances to scheduling our sessions revolved around their coursework, exam schedules, and various commitments to student organizations.

Indeed, even when directly addressing questions about the role of their gender identity, it was apparent that this was an identity nested within their identity as high-achieving students. For example, when I noted that Deepika's "I am" activity framed her identity as a person of color, rather than a woman of color, she reflexively connected her gendered experiences within the context of her academic pursuits. She explained that "I feel like especially at Rice, and even growing up as a child, I've never felt like I was not offered any opportunity because I am a woman, because I came from schools where there were other girls and women, young women like me who were interested in STEM or whatever. And at Rice, I don't feel like I face any discrimination for being a woman in STEM."

Marie had a similarly academically-focused understanding of the role of her gender identity's influence in her educational trajectory, specifically within the context of her identity as a political science major. She explained that "Unfortunately, poli sci is still male dominated, still predominantly white students. And..., within the poli sci department, I've heard other women of color share that they don't see themselves reflected in the curriculum or in the faculty, and that sort of hinders them from wanting to just engage more with the material." Deepika additionally considered the role of gender within the context of her collegiate experiences broadly, explaining that "being a girl growing up in a society that was trying to criticize you...or judge on appearance, Rice did feel like a place where people were so welcoming and kind, and I think that's something that I wanted for myself."

Influence of the Decision-Making Process in the Collegiate Experience

The themes that emerged in examining the differences in the women's college decision-making process are also useful in understanding how the women's decision-making process influenced their ongoing perceptions and experiences of their institutions. The theme of pragmatism versus prestige seemed to align with the differences in the overall sense of satisfaction that the women felt for the ways their institutions were able to help them meet the goals they had set for themselves, with the Rice women being the most vocal about second-guessing their decision or identifying ways that they felt that their experience had fallen short of their ideal.

In reflecting on the ways that their decision-making process influenced their ongoing perceptions, the women who attended HCC described the greatest sense of alignment between their incoming expectations of their institution compared with the reality of their experiences within the institution. Given the primacy of finances in the women's decision to attend HCC, it was perhaps unsurprising to hear them frame their satisfaction with the institution in terms of its relative affordability. Sara addressed this perspective directly when she explained that "tuition time, like when I have to pay tuition, that's the only time I'm glad, like oh, I made the right decision." She also connected her satisfaction with the cost of her attendance at HCC helping to support her longer-term academic and professional goals, as she explained that attending HCC allowed her to "save money for med school and for whatever I do next, it's better to save money." Saira also shared a similar perspective in crediting her attendance at HCC with supporting her longer-term plans. She explained that "I'm glad I went to community college, because I got to think through what I want to do with my life, what I want to do for my future, and everything like that."

While the UH women's decision-making process included a comparatively wider variety of factors ranging from cost, campus life, and career opportunities, their collegiate experiences largely seemed to fulfill the expectations they had as incoming students. Jasmine recalled how "when I first came, I definitely wanted to party...to have fun...to experience fun stuff...and I think I did get that" in the sense that "I liked the balance that UH had, like it's not a party school, but you can find parties...it was a perfect balance for me." She admitted that "she "didn't have a lot of expectations for the actual classes," perhaps due to the ongoing tension with her parents over her major: "I would just be so frustrated, like if you had given me the freedom that I wanted to think about what I really wanted to pursue...I feel like I'd be happier." But, she looks back on her pursuit of her STEM degree with a sense of satisfaction and pride, "I feel good that I pushed myself to do something that was really hard." With these ups and downs in mind, she summed up her view that "overall, pretty happy with my experience." Aradhana similarly entered UH with a priority of "Not doing things the same way I did in high school" and she declared that "In that first year, expectations were met and exceeded...I was like, 'College is the best, best time of your life'." While her priorities shifted over the course of her time at UH and she became more focused on her rigorous coursework as a chemical engineer and balanced involvement in undergraduate research and internships, she also declared that "I don't think I would do anything differently. Honestly, I'm happy that I ended up at UH."

Given the lofty expectations the Rice women had both of the institution and of themselves as they began college, it was perhaps unsurprising to note that they were the group that described a wider disconnect between their idealized version of their college life and the experiences they actually had. Marie shared that "I think I suffered from imposter syndrome in a lot of ways...not having some of the academic rigor that other students had, I think was a big

part of that.” Despite having been weeks away from graduating, she wondered whether “should I have taken a gap year maybe, and just gotten more experience and exposure to what critical academic rigor looks like?.” She additionally second-guessed her decision in terms of the course offerings and emphases within her major department. She explained that “I do have that regret of say I’d gone to American University, I definitely would have had more international affairs exposure and things like that, that Rice could not offer me.” In addition to academics, Maya also held a more skeptical view of the overall campus culture at Rice. While all four of the women pointed to the immersive week-long orientation session that is a hallmark of Rice’s traditions as a largely positive experience that affirmed their decision to attend Rice, Maya also pointed to this as a source of the gradual decline she noticed over time in the way she defined herself as a Rice student. She explained that “I think Rice just kind of gasses you up, especially freshman year, thinking you’re like, kind of hot shit, that...over time you realize, like, ‘No, you’re not’ like, ‘You’re just like this one small person.’”

Summary

This chapter identified key themes that related to the study’s research questions of understanding how South Asian American women’s cultural and gender identities manifest and then influence their college decision-making process, in terms of both similarities and differences that could explain their decision to attend one of three distinct institutional types. The similarities among the women’s decision-making processes included feeling a sense of uncertainty in the initial decision-making process, bearing the weight of South Asian stereotypes, recognizing the role of performativity in their decision, and relying on family involvement. The differences included a contrast between prioritizing pragmatism versus prestige in the search process and the variations in the expectations for the women to fulfill traditional gender roles. Additionally, this understanding of the women’s decision-making process and the themes that

emerged across the differences in their decision-making process revealed a strong thread that bound the women's initial decision-making process with their ongoing perceptions and experiences of their institution. Overall, these findings underscore the powerful influence of both culture and gender in shaping the women's college decision-making process and their collegiate experiences.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One of my most treasured experiences as a UCLA graduate student was enrolling in Mike Rose’s writing course during the winter 2021 quarter. Although we did not know it at the time, ours would be the last class that Mike would ever teach. Even without that foresight, Mike’s legendary talent to offer the most thoughtful and encouraging feedback and patiently nurture fledgling writers like ourselves made each minute spent in his company (even via Zoom) feel like a precious gift; we hung on his every word. He led by example in imparting his lessons, often reminding us that we could always use simple language to put forth even the most complex ideas. One of the rhetorical devices he encouraged us to use was what he referred to as a “dear reader moment” – plainly stating for the reader what we, as the writers, intended for our audience to understand about a particular point we were trying to make.

I imagine this entire chapter, then, as one long “dear reader” wherein I can make explicit the connections between the portraits in Chapter Five, the analysis in Chapter Six, and the ways that these findings dovetail with theoretical frameworks laid out in Chapter Three. I begin by discussing the key takeaways of this study and the ways that these findings align with theory, and highlight the differences in explanatory power yielded by the Par/Desi Framework (Bhattacharya, 2019) as compared to Perna’s (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice and Social Capital Theory more broadly. I then offer considerations for the ways that these findings relate to implications for theory, research, and practice, and I conclude with a final discussion of this work overall.

Connecting the Findings to Theory

The findings of this study can (and arguably, should) be considered from several different vantage points. At the most granular level, it is first important to understand each individual participant’s perspective. Therefore, the portraits that comprise Chapter Five offer an in-depth

understanding of the unique twists and turns that characterized each woman's experience of navigating her college decision-making process and the ways that this initial experience then shaped her ongoing perceptions of her institution. Keeping this understanding in mind, it is then useful to take a step back and consider the broader themes that emerged across these experiences. Therefore, the analysis in Chapter Six identifies the key similarities and differences in how the participants' cultural and gender identities influenced their college decision-making process and collegiate experience.

Taking a step back further still, it is useful to consider what these women's experiences reveal about the pathways and motivations that lead students into each of these three different institutional types represented by Rice University, University of Houston, and Houston Community College. From this macro-level view, it becomes readily apparent that there are some elements of the women's decision-making processes that closely align with what the extant literature (Allen et al., 2003; McDonough, 1997; Palardy, 2015) would suggest about the pathways and pre-college experiences that result in students attending each type of institution. It is equally apparent, however, that the women's cultural and gender identities contributed heavily to the ways they navigated their decision-making processes. Indeed, it is a testament to the powerful force of cultural and gender identities that although the women ultimately attended three notably different types of institutions, there were more similarities than differences that emerged when examining their decision-making processes.

One way to understand the relationship between these two types of findings would be to visualize the women's experiences as being contained within a three-ring Venn diagram, with each circle denoting each of the three study sites. The findings that closely aligned with extant literature would be contained in the non-overlapping portions of the diagram, while the

similarities motivated by cultural and gender identity would be contained in the overlaps between two and among all three institutions. This visual is a useful way to not only consider the points of convergence and divergence among the women's experiences, but it also serves as a useful way to map theory onto findings, in that Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice serves as a robust lens through which to understand the non-overlapping portions of the diagram, while Bhattacharya's (2019) Par/Desi Framework provides necessary theoretical support for the similarities shared across institutional types. The following sections discuss the ways that both of these theories can be applied to this study's findings.

Connections to Perna's Conceptual Model of Student College Choice

At its core, Perna's (2006) model combines sociological, psychological, and economic approaches to understanding college choice and frames the decision as one that is driven both by a cost-benefit analysis and the various contexts within which a student is nested (i.e., family, school, community, broader society). Given this comprehensive approach, this model largely explains the differences that emerged when looking across the women's decision-making processes that led them to attend Rice, UH, and HCC.

One of the key differences among the women's decision-making process was what I referred to in Chapter Six as the contrast between a focus on pragmatism versus prestige. In looking across the selectivity spectrum from Rice (with an 8.56% acceptance rate in its most recent application cycle [Misra, 2022]) to HCC (an open access institution), the women's approach shifted from a heavy focus on prestige and a desire to ensure that they could attend an institution that they found befitting of their strong academic profiles to a focus instead on pragmatism and almost exclusively basing their decision on the total cost of attendance at a particular institution. As the institution located between HCC and Rice along the selectivity

spectrum, UH functioned as an option that balanced the women's intent to attend an institution that met both their academic and affordability criteria.

Perna's (2006) model makes sense of this pragmatism versus prestige finding, by connecting how the women whose families had greater financial resources had the luxury of making prestige a key criterion in their search. In particular, the first layer of the model captures many of the factors that undergird the rationale behind both the pragmatism- and prestige-driven mindsets. Included in this level of the model is a depiction of the choice process as a linear cause-and-effect relationship, with a student's academic background and family resources shaping the perspective of expected cost and benefits of attendance which then results in the college choice.

Indeed, the women's experiences neatly align with these elements. On the academic achievement side of the equation, the women who ended up at Rice were those who had either perfect or nearly perfect standardized test scores, AP credits amassed from several years of coursework and test-taking, and held leadership positions in several student organizations. In terms of resources, the Rice students were also those who reported the least concern about the cost of attending college, with several of the women indicating that money was no object in their pursuit of higher education. While there was greater variation among the UH women's experiences than among the Rice women's experiences, the UH women for the most part also had strong academic achievements that were comparable to the Rice women's. However, the UH women were far more focused on additional logistical criteria (e.g., proximity to the family home and cost of attendance) when weighing their final options. By contrast, neither of the HCC women indicated excelling in their high school coursework (when compared with the academic profiles of the rest of the women included in this study) and cost of attendance was of the utmost

concern to them, given the relative precarity of their families' financial status. Each of the three pathways hews closely to the model's depiction of the relationship between these factors and illuminates the mechanisms that resulted in the differences in mindsets to favor specific criteria in the search process.

Alongside the difference in mindset of centering pragmatism versus prestige, another difference that emerged when examining the women's decision-making processes was a notable variance in the salience of traditional gender roles. Like the difference of pragmatism versus prestige, this difference, too, is most simply understood by viewing the starkest contrasts at either end of the selectivity spectrum. The women who attended HCC expected to balance a multitude of responsibilities within their households in addition to pursuing their higher education. The women who attended Rice made almost no mention of any demands on their time beyond what they themselves chose to pursue, which revolved around their identities as high-achieving students. The balance of academics, involvement in student organizations and professional development opportunities, and personal/social activities were at the women's discretion and not contingent on any familial responsibilities.

The first layer of Perna's (2006) model again offers a theoretical anchoring to make sense of these differences, through the concept of habitus, or "the internalized set of dispositions and preferences that is derived from one's surroundings and that subconsciously define what is a 'reasonable' action" (p. 113). Certainly, this conceptualization captures in broad strokes the differences that emerged. It is perhaps additionally useful to consider the role of immigration patterns in shaping each student's habitus. For example, among all of the eleven students included in this study, the two HCC women had spent the least amount of time in the U.S. after having emigrated here with their families. Their social networks were largely defined by their

faith communities, particularly families who had also recently emigrated. Moreover, the women's families' comparatively limited financial resources necessarily required the women to play a greater role within the day-to-day functioning of their households. By contrast, all but one of the Rice women were born in the U.S. and all hailed from families that came to the U.S. with high levels of education and whose parents were employed in white collar jobs. The comparative financial ease enjoyed by these families allowed the women to engage in various enrichment activities outside of school and gain a broader social network that additionally aided in the development of their primary identity as being that of a high-achieving student.

It is important to note, then, that this layer's concept of individual habitus is useful in understanding why in both cases, there was consensus among the women's networks that the decision that they were making was the appropriate one. The role of social capital is additionally useful in understanding this phenomenon. Indeed, Teranishi and Briscoe (2006) explain that "the social capital that exists within ethnic social relations in a community has a unique and powerful effect on shaping aspirations and educational values among ethnic immigrant children" (p. 606).

However, it is important to also highlight how Perna's (2006) model falls short of accounting for the ways that the women's cultural and gender identities were a powerful influence within every "layer" of the process. The framing of the second and third layers of the model in particular lack the nuance to appropriately support some of the findings that emerged from this study. Instead, the explanation of these layers tends to be conceived in broad strokes, with contrasts between students from well-resourced backgrounds and students with comparatively fewer resources. However, the experiences of the South Asian American women in this study suggest that this framing is somewhat inadequate.

For example, the second layer of the model focuses on the school and community context with the explanation that well-resourced schools can better provide access to college-related resources and opportunities. Yet, this explanation seems to overlook the ways that the mere presence of these resources is not enough to ensure that students find success in navigating this process. More concerningly, this explanation does not seem to account for the interplay between these college-related resources and larger societal mechanisms, such as racism and sexism. These forces serve to explain why one of the overarching similarities in the women's experiences was a sense of confusion and isolation in navigating the search process, despite all of the women having attended relatively well-resourced schools where they had access to college counselors. For example, Jasmine's college counselor discriminated against not only her but also her mother on the basis of their Indian identity, as she went so far as to supply Jasmine with false information about college application deadlines. Despite having a counselor available to her, Jasmine felt ill-equipped to navigate the search process, because she knew that the counselor's racism against her prevented her from accessing the information she needed. Similarly, Sadaf also had a pointedly negative experience with her private Islamic high school's counselor, as he framed college-going as a contingency plan, necessary only for those who did not marry well. As a direct result of this interaction and despite having a college counselor available to her at her high school, Sadaf largely relied on Google searches to guide her throughout her search process. Both of these examples point to the ways that Perna's (2006) framing of the second layer of the model could appear to be somewhat facile in the face of these South Asian American women's experiences of navigating the search process.

The model's third layer recognizes the role of higher education institutions and how they engage in direct and indirect means of disseminating information about themselves. Perna's

(2006) framing of this layer again overlooks the ways that specific cultural lenses can shape this understanding. One of the similarities shared across women from all three institutions was the experience of having to navigate educational expectations specific to the South Asian community. One of the ways that this manifested was a mismatch in parents' expectations and understanding of the admissions process in the U.S. as compared to their home countries. For example, both Maya's and Deepika's participant-led interviews revealed that their parents harbored deep disappointment in the way that their daughters had fared in the college admissions process. Both were of the mind that their daughters' high test scores (a perfect 36 and near perfect 35 on the ACT, respectively) should have opened many more doors among the most elite institutions to which they had applied. Both parents had passively absorbed information about the status of Ivy League institutions and applied their understanding of college admissions (largely shaped by admissions processes in India) to arrive at the certainty that their daughters would be accepted by these top tier institutions.

Another way that the South Asian expectations manifested was in an insistence on attending a well-regarded or even "the best" possible institution. For example, we can also look to Jasmine's mother's insistence that her daughter attend Texas A&M (rather than the University of Houston), because A&M had a better word-of-mouth reputation in the small Texas town where they lived during Jasmine's senior year of high school. Despite being presented with additional details about the campus culture that would have made the institution a poor fit for Jasmine's needs, her mother continued to favor A&M because of its seemingly superior reputation.

These examples illuminate the ways that the understanding of the higher education context is shaped by the cultural contexts of students and their parents. Although all of the

information that the women's parents had received about these institutions was objectively accurate, the "unlearning" that the participants had to engage their parents in points to the ways that access to this information was not necessarily an asset and instead made an already fraught search and decision-making process that much more so. Therefore, a more culturally nuanced framing could better reflect the diversity of experiences in engaging with the higher education context of the third layer of this model.

Connections to Bhattacharya's Par/Desi Framework

While Perna's (2006) model is a useful one with which to understand the broader patterns that defined the women's pathways into the three different types of institutions, Bhattacharya's (2019) Par/Desi Framework offers a valuable lens to not only understand the themes of similarities that emerged across the women's experiences but also the nuances of their individual experiences as well. Given the multiplicity of the framework's applicability to the study's findings, the following discussion is organized by the framework's six tenets, rather than by finding. Rather than providing an exhaustive list of the experiences and findings that map onto each tenet, I offer key findings and experiences that best exemplify each tenet's utility to the overall study.

Tenet 1: Re-membering Desh

This tenet refers to the sense of nostalgia with which immigrants and by extension their children imbue their view of their homeland. I had initially expected for this tenet to lend itself to making sense of the expectations that the women's parents might have had for their daughters, with the assumption that the women's parents might have had more rigid expectations that they adhere to relatively traditional gender roles. Certainly, this theme did emerge to some extent, in that the women who attended HCC were more likely than their UH or Rice counterparts to

describe having to balance the demands of the responsibilities as dictated by their gender roles alongside their studies.

However, this tenet was additionally revealing in making sense of how the women conceptualized the role of higher education in their lives. For example, Keerthana invoked the experiences of her great-great-grandparents and great-grandparents to explain the evolving levels of access to higher education with each next generation. She was acutely aware of her place in this lineage and the deep sense of both gratitude and guilt that arose from that. Sara also shared the deep sense of responsibility she felt to make worthwhile her parents' sacrifices of having chosen to build a life in this country. She noted that her father had been unable to see his own family for seven years, due to the financial constraints and various hardships they faced in emigrating to the U.S. Similarly, Maya recognized that her pursuit of higher education was especially important to her father, because his sisters were denied the opportunity to do so and were instead simply expected to get married. Although each of these three women ultimately attended each of the three different institutional types represented in this study, they all shared an awareness of the privilege they felt for having been granted opportunities that would have been impossible to imagine for previous generations of women in their families.

In this way, understanding the women's experiences with the tenet of "re-membering Desh" revealed how the women's memories of the homeland shaped their commitment to prioritizing their entry into higher education. While these elements might have been overlooked or simply understood as elements of the women's "habitus" in Perna's (2006) model, the Par/Desi Framework highlighted the weight of the women's cultural and gender identities in their lifelong approach to education and especially to their college decision-making process.

Tenet 2: Par/Des(i): The More Desirable Other

This tenet operates in a two-fold manner. On one level, it refers to the internally held assumption among Desis of the *pardesi*'s superiority, in many ways a holdover of a colonial mindset that views the western world as somehow better than the homeland. It additionally refers to the tendency for Desi Americans to themselves be viewed as *pardesi* by those in the homeland. This tenet served as an especially powerful lens through which to understand the similarities that emerged in understanding the weight of South Asian stereotypes on the women's decision-making processes. For example, all of the women had grown up with the understanding that their parents expected them to receive a superior education, relative to what they might have otherwise received in their home countries had they not emigrated to America. They all carried this understanding into the way that they approached their college decision-making process. This approach extends beyond what a traditional framing of college choice, such as Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) predisposition-search-choice model would encompass about a student's orientation to higher education. Indeed, the women's understandings about the importance of their education was not confined to simply a predisposition to pursue higher education, but instead underscored the weighty sense of responsibility and duty that they felt to fulfill the lifelong expectations that had been placed on them, as it related to their educational trajectories.

This tenet was also applicable to another similarity, the pervasive sense of performativity, that emerged in the analysis of the women's decision-making processes. The women understood that the college that they ultimately decided to attend would be yet another in a lifetime of actions and behaviors that needed to be deemed as acceptable by various audiences, particularly the diasporic communities to which they belonged. In many ways, this judgment was a function of the women's families' decision to emigrate to the U.S., as the women felt a tacit need to prove that their choice of school was somehow commensurate with the sacrifice their families had

made to leave their own families and homes behind to make a better life for their daughters in America. This finding and the underlying reasoning of this second tenet were aptly reflected in Suchitra's explanation that, "It feels like [Indian parents] are putting expectations on their child because they see [the child] as an extension of themselves, and they're like 'I need to see them succeed, so I have something to show.'" She went on to add that, "I don't think most of us, like the second generation of Indian Americans, care to be a trophy. We just want to live our lives" and in so saying alluded to the Par/Desi Framework's sixth tenet of the need for communal healing.

This tenet was also useful in providing additional theoretical grounding to the contrast between prioritizing pragmatism versus prestige, a finding that emerged among the differences in the women's decision-making process. The women who centered prestige in their initial search often admitted that they were not necessarily drawn to these institutions because of their own preferences, but instead felt compelled to consider them because of how highly regarded they were by the "meaningful others" in their academic and social networks. While habitus adequately explains this tendency, this tenet provides additional explanatory power in understanding why the women may have been motivated to consider these institutions, despite their incongruence with their own interests and needs. Moreover, where a traditional college choice model might view the HCC women's decision as somehow lacking, this tenet suggests that the HCC women's decision could be understood as a quiet act of resistance, by prioritizing their parents' and communities' values and forgoing attendance at a four-year institution to instead pursue the path that was best suited for their particular needs.

Tenet 3: Home is Permanently Deferred

This tenet refers to the middle space that South Asian Americans continually occupy, somehow not viewed as South Asian among those in South Asia but also not American enough in America. I had expected this tenet to play a key role in the women's search process, particularly in seeking an institution where they would feel a sense of belonging. This assumption proved to be true in the case of several of the women's searches. For example, after having spent her senior year of high school in a town that she described as "95% white," Jasmine partially attributed her interest in attending the University of Houston for its sizeable South Asian community and explained that she was "super ready for the diversity stuff." In a similar vein, Sara emphasized the sense of safety that she felt in attending the University of Houston especially as a result of her previous early childhood experiences of having been bullied on the basis of her South Asian identity. Sara shared that "UH has a big Brown and Muslim community. And, I don't know why I think that just makes it easier for me to be like, 'Okay, I would like it there.'" Conversely, Sadaf's family cautioned her against the idea of attending Baylor University in Waco, Texas, as her father reasoned that "you can't go there, it's in the middle of nowhere...you wear hijab," implying that her obvious presentation as a Muslim woman would jeopardize her safety. In every case, the women's awareness of their otherness (relative to whiteness) was a cornerstone of their understanding of their own identity and therefore their understanding of what was possible or necessary in their college search process.

Tenet 4: Beloved and Problematic Communities

This tenet refers to the internally held view of the Desi community as being simultaneously beloved and problematic. Perhaps more so than any of the other five, this tenet was apparent in all of the women's experiences and could be applied to make sense of all of the study's findings. In particular, this tenet is useful in understanding the theme of South Asian

stereotypes and performativity that emerged among the key similarities across the women's decision-making processes, as well as the theme of the differences in the salience of traditional gender roles.

In terms of stereotypes, the women simultaneously acknowledged the burden of having to operate within the confines of these narrow expectations, while they also recognized the sacrifice and good intentions that animated these desires. There were several notable examples of this tension. For example, Marie's experience of having been held to exceptionally high standards left her feeling constantly stressed and dealing with bouts of impostor syndrome even after having been accepted to attend Rice. Yet, she also credited her family for being a key source of happiness ("I feel like there's like so much joy that I've gotten from my family") and particularly serving as a soft spot to land, so to speak, after having to keep up appearances in their predominantly white town.

Suchitra's experience of securing an internship with a publishing house, after having previously pursued a pre-med track, is another illustrative example of the tensions of this tenet. She described the outpouring of support that she received from her diasporic community within Houston and the many offers to connect her with potential contacts who could help her. Yet, she simultaneously acknowledged the pushback that she felt from the community, in choosing to forgo a potential career in medicine. She was acutely aware of the weight of these pressures and felt as though she was not living up to what was expected of her.

This tenet also made sense of the women's experiences that fell within the theme of the differences in the salience of traditional gender roles. In addition to the ways that the second tenet aligned with this finding, the fourth tenet also illuminated key tensions. For example, in reflecting on her eventual plans to attend a four-year university, Sara described her plan to live at

home so as to ensure that she could better maintain her deep connection to her faith identity and ensure that her behavior met her faith community's expectations. While Sara largely credited her proximity to her family as beneficial to her (speaking to the "beloved" component of this tenet), it was apparent that Sara's family would not empower her to consider the ways that she could become more immersed in the campus community and prioritize her identity as a student (a problematic stance). Similarly, Saira had been socialized to view herself as the primary caretaker for her family, while she expected her hypothetical husband to assume the responsibilities of financially supporting the family. While Saira expressed a sense of pride and joy in being able to support her family in these ways (beloved), the ways that she falsely circumscribed her own professional trajectory could be viewed as problematic. In thinking about the communal need for healing, this tendency to assume that women will prioritize their family's wishes over their own seems to be an area that is ripe for attention and change.

Tenet 5: Commodification of Multiculturalism and Diversity

This fifth tenet is perhaps best understood as the other side of the coin of the second tenet. Where the second tenet casts the *pardesi* in a superior light, the fifth tenet then highlights the ways that *Desi* identities are essentialized in ways that fail to capture the full breadth of nuance and complexity of this identity. While both tenets refer to a tendency to falsely minimize our lived experiences, this tenet focuses on the tendency to be reduced in the *pardesi*'s eye. This tenet was perhaps most useful in understanding Marie's college application process, in which she described various experiences of having grown up as one of the only South Asians in a small midwestern town that was overwhelmingly white. She recalled how she felt as though she needed to package her experiences in a way that would appeal to admissions officers. She reflected that it was only after she had spent time with fellow South Asian women at Rice that

she realized how her essays were, in fact, not an accurate reflection of the elements of her life that were truly unique and significant to her. While Perna's (2006) model might simply view this approach to her college applications as a function of Marie's social capital (particularly in understanding that a college admissions essay should be crafted in a "package," so to speak), the Par/Desi Framework adds necessary additional nuance to this understanding, recognizing how Marie understood her Desi identity as a potential commodity to be put on offer to the colleges to which she was applying.

Tenet 6: Prioritizing Communal Healing

This tenet, which refers to the need among the Desi community to prioritize communal healing, largely informed my thinking about my research design and overall approach to this work. In particular, I hoped to employ the participant-led interview with the participant's family member of choice as a means of facilitating this healing process. Indeed, there were several emotionally fraught moments in these interviews that underscored the need for this healing. For example, in our first two interviews together, Maya described at length her long-held perception (which she had developed as early as her preschool years) that her parents thought she was not smart or likely to excel academically. Despite years of GT and AP coursework and a perfect score on both the SAT and ACT and having successfully earned her degree from Rice University, she still continued to harbor doubts about her parents' perceptions of her academic merit. She voiced this concern (seemingly for the first time) to her father during their conversation together, and the obvious tone of shock and hurt in his voice mirrored his actual response that he and Maya's mother had never thought such a thing. In a similar vein, Mohini's mother confessed that her insistence that Mohini make specific choices in both her college search and in her college major was merely a function of the disappointments and disillusionments she

harbored about her own career path, rather than a reflection of what she thought her daughter might or might not be able to accomplish, as Mohini had previously assumed. These were just two among many exchanges in the participant-led interviews that underscored the significance of this tenet.

Moreover, these exchanges confirmed the importance of applying culturally relevant theoretical frameworks to research. In terms of both research design and analysis, this framework's tenets allowed for greater nuance and depth of understanding than would have otherwise been possible. Certainly, without the lens offered through the framework's sixth tenet, the participant-led interviews (and the resulting exchanges) likely would not have occurred. Moreover, key elements of the women's decision-making process might have been overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant. The use of the Par/Desi Framework in this study ensured that the breadth of the women's experiences were seen and honored.

Implications

The following section offers potential implications for ways that the findings of this study can serve future research, theory, and practice. Certainly, there are important takeaways that apply to each of these areas. However, beyond these three areas, the overarching implication of this work is the importance of ensuring that South Asian American women's experiences are better represented in the literature and understood using appropriate cultural lenses, given the long history of their aggregation, at best, or their utter absence, at worst. To that end, beyond any connections to future work, it is my hope that these women's experiences could simply be understood in situ and for the inherent importance of their experiences to be at the forefront of the reader's mind.

Implications for Par/Desi Theory

As the preceding sections detail, the Par/Desi Framework served as a powerful lens through which to understand the experiences of the participants in this study. My conversations with these women also allowed me to envision a complementary framework to develop from the foundational work of the Par/Desi Framework, so as to depict the milestones of identity development for South Asian American women. While the Par/Desi Framework's six tenets address the tensions of the community writ large and in many ways applies to both first and second generation Americans, there continues to be a need to understand how this identity develops and shifts through various life stages.

Implications for College Choice Theory

While the key elements of the college search and decision-making process of all of the participants in this study aligned with the layers of Perna's (2006) College Choice Model, the model could be expanded to better reflect various cultural nuances as described in the earlier section on the model's connections to the study's findings. I argue that this study's findings point to the importance of expanding the conception of the model's first layer, as it focuses only on the elements that may influence a student's decision to pursue higher education. In many instances, the women's navigation of their college decision-making process was simply an extension of the ways they had navigated their lives, with Keerthana's search process being particularly emblematic of this type of pattern. The college decision-making process did not exist in a vacuum, somehow separate or removed from the rest of the women's lived experiences. Rather, the search and decision-making process was just another in a lifetime of processes to which they applied the same sets of logics and assumptions that they brought to other facets of their lives as South Asian American women. In particular, the women recognized the tacit expectations of

how their cultural and gender identities required them to navigate these processes in specific ways.

Therefore, the college search and choice models should take into account the fact that students are approaching these processes with lifelong habits and tendencies that will shape how they understand and navigate their entry into higher education. While on its face this may sound as if an expanded model would simply be blaming students for any potential missteps in their navigation of this process, I would argue that the opposite is true. By recognizing that students are operating within oftentimes subconscious tendencies and habits, institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) should take care to make the college application process as transparent as possible to ensure that students have a clear, accurate understanding of what may be possible for them.

Implications for Research

The findings from this study underscore the need for higher education research to consider South Asian American college students as distinct from other Asian American groups, so as to better understand their unique experiences and attendant needs. This study highlighted that South Asian American women's cultural and gender identities were powerful influences in shaping the ways that the women navigated their college decision-making processes. However, South Asian American cultural identity was intentionally very broadly conceived for the purposes of this study. Future research should focus on specific components that comprise cultural identity, which could include faith identity, nationality, or ethnic/regional affiliation, among others. The women's families' immigration background (including the impetus for and recency of the immigration) emerged as a key differentiator in the women's experiences of the decision-making process. Future research should more closely examine this aspect of the South Asian American identity.

A longer-term study would perhaps be useful to understand the evolving role of cultural and gender identity in the collegiate experience. By following a cohort of women from the initial search process into their transition into college and then following their collegiate experiences through the point of graduation, this longer-term study would be deeply valuable in understanding how the current structure of American higher education at turns reifies and redefines how students understand themselves and their overall educational and professional trajectory.

Implications for Practice

Culturally Responsive Student Services

Both the Rice and UH students described the challenges of navigating their collegiate experiences in a way that simultaneously met their families' expectations while also fulfilling their own desires. One of the key sources of this tension came from their parents' expectations that they should only pursue a major that would yield lucrative job opportunities. Yet, in following these wishes, the women felt as though they were precluded from immersing themselves in fields that piqued their interest, typically in the humanities and liberal arts. Several students described seeking out support from fellow South Asian American women to discuss strategies of how to have productive conversations about major choice and career plans with their parents. Certainly, this type of peer-to-peer support is valuable and irreplaceable. However, the women's experiences seemed to point to the potential utility of training academic advisors, career counselors, and other relevant student services staff in culturally responsive practices so as to ensure students have formal pathways to seek this type of guidance and support.

To that end, McCoy and Rodricks (2015) put forth a Critical Student Affairs Servant Pedagogy to address the need for greater cultural nuance and understanding in providing these services to students. They argue that "culture within contemporary U.S. society as well as the

U.S. university campus cannot be distinguished from a historical and structural analysis of race and racism” (p. 118). Given this reality alongside students’ culturally-specific needs, it is imperative that student affairs practitioners are given the resources and training to be able to adequately address these needs. While seeking out culturally-responsive support from career counselors, in particular, would likely have been of great benefit to the women in this study, a combination of these women’s experiences and McCoy and Rodricks’s (2015) argument points to the importance of ensuring that all student affairs staff engage with students in ways that honor their cultural identities and attendant needs.

Transparency in the Admissions Process

Of all the study’s findings, the theme of isolation would be most easily addressed by practice. Regardless of the depth and breadth of resources to which the students in this study were able to access through their schools, communities, and social networks, there was a pervasive sense of confusion and isolation in knowing exactly how to undertake the search process. This finding was especially concerning, given that all of the women had at least one parent who had earned a bachelor’s degree. Yet, their initial approach was far more similar to what the literature would describe of a first-generation college student (Cushman, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996) and supported Toutkoushian et al.’s (2018) findings that suggested the importance of being as specific and nuanced as possible when conceptualizing what characteristics constitute first-generation status.

Therefore, higher education institutions should ensure greater transparency and accessibility to information about the admissions process. While there is obvious need and value in providing tailored information sessions and resources to specific sub-groups of students, such as first-generation students, the experiences of the women in this study revealed that even

students from seemingly well-equipped backgrounds (i.e., attending well-resourced high schools, having at least one parent who completed college) can struggle to navigate the search and decision-making process, in this case as a function of their identity as the daughters of South Asian immigrants. Moreover, although implications for school-level stakeholders (e.g., college counselors in high schools) would be beyond the scope of the findings of this dissertation, it is apparent that the responsibility for greater transparency in the college-going process extends beyond the higher education landscape. Providing explicit instructions and explanations can help all students feel more confident in navigating the college decision-making process.

Community Outreach

In addition to greater transparency in the admissions process, the findings also suggest the importance of community-specific outreach. Particularly among the women who attended HCC, the faith community was a key source of information and influence in their college decision-making process. One of the Rice students anecdotally mentioned a college counseling resource that she had heard about on a Hindi-language radio station in Houston. These experiences point to the importance of meeting students where they are, so to speak. In doing so, these efforts would likely help alleviate the sense of isolation that characterized in varying ways all of the women's search processes.

Conclusion

This study was initially motivated by the lack of South Asian American women's experiences reflected in higher education literature. The tendency to overaggregate across Asian American groups invariably meant that South Asian American experiences were often overlooked or even absent. Beyond the specific findings of this study, this work highlights how the twin forces of cultural and gender identities powerfully shape the ways that South Asian American women understand their place within the American higher education landscape. Their

experiences of navigating the decision-making process were in many ways a function of their identities, particularly as the daughters of South Asian immigrants.

This study was also a labor of love, and what began as me-search slowly morphed into we-search. I was endlessly fascinated to see the ways that cultural and gender identities among women in a generation entirely separate from my own faced so many of the same challenges and asked themselves so many of the same questions that I have often asked myself. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that writing a final, concluding thought to summarize this work feels like an impossible feat. After all, nothing has actually been concluded. These women's lives will continue to unfold in ways that will have been shaped by their decision of where to attend college, and many generations of women will follow them in navigating this same decision-making process while trying to balance the competing demands and desires that arise from their identities as South Asian American women. Perhaps, then, the lack of conclusion is itself the conclusion. There is much work to be done, many more stories to listen for, and systems and structures that could be changed to be more inclusive of all students.

Therefore, I offer just one final thought here to bring this unfinished work but finished dissertation to a close. The astute reader might wonder where the title of this dissertation came from; after all, none of the participants referred to "living so boldly." The phrase was inspired by an interview I completed as part of my second pilot study for this work. In reflecting on her identity as a South Asian American woman, this participant referenced a Rupi Kaur poem (included in Appendix C) that imagines ancestors in the afterlife reveling in the full, rich lives that the current generation of South Asian women currently enjoys. The poem ends with the line "how wild it must be for them to see one of their own living so boldly" (Kaur, 2020). To live so boldly, then, is as much a reminder as a clarion call to make the most of the opportunities that

have been afforded to us while always keeping an eye to the future and making the world a better, more just place for those who will follow.

Appendix A

| Rice University: Fall 2020 Enrollment (Domestic only) | | |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| Asian | 26% | 1,493 |
| Black | 10% | 590 |
| Hispanic | 15% | 856 |
| Other | 6% | 344 |
| White | 43% | 2521 |
| TOTAL | 100% | 5804 |
| | | |
| First Gen | N/A | |
| Non-FG | N/A | |
| | | |
| Women | 43.00% | |
| Men | 57.00% | |
| | | |
| Tuition & fees (semester) | \$25,555 | |

| University of Houston: Fall 2020 Enrollment (Domestic only) | | |
|--|----------------|---------------|
| Asian | 23.18% | 10,155 |
| Black | 10.98% | 4,811 |
| Hispanic | 35.69% | 15,639 |
| Other | 5.43% | 2,381 |
| White | 24.72% | 10,831 |
| TOTAL | 100.00% | 43,817 |
| | | |
| First Gen | 47.50% | |
| Non-FG | 52.50% | |
| | | |
| Women | 51.40% | |
| Men | 48.60% | |
| | | |
| Tuition & fees (semester) | \$6,131 | |

| HCC: Fall 2019 Total Enrollment | | |
|--|---------|--------|
| Asian | 10.10% | |
| Black | 26.80% | |
| Hispanic | 37.60% | |
| International | 5.50% | |
| Other | 5.60% | |
| White | 14.50% | |
| | | |
| Women | 60.03% | 31,966 |
| Men | 39.97% | 21,281 |
| | | |
| Tuition & fees (semester) | \$5,088 | |

Appendix B

I. Interview One

-Twenty Statements Test: Fill in the blank: “I am _____” twenty times.

-Do these twenty statements paint an accurate picture of who you are?
Which words would you like to tell me more about? What stands out to you about the words when taken together? Is anything missing?

- a. Background
 - i. Childhood context:
 1. Where were you born?
 2. When did you/your family arrive to the U.S.?
 3. What do you consider as your hometown?
 - ii. Parental context:
 1. When did your family arrive to the U.S.?
 2. To your knowledge, why did your family emigrate from [India/Pakistan/Bangladesh/Sri Lanka]?
 3. What type of educational opportunities have our parents pursued in their home country and in the U.S.?
- b. Family
 - i. Who were the members of your household throughout your childhood?
 - ii. Which members of your family would you say that you are close to? Why?
 - iii. Among your family members, whose opinions do you value most highly?
 1. When making decisions, are there specific family members’ opinions you take into consideration?
- c. Education
 - i. Walk me through your educational journey
 1. Where did you go to elementary/middle/high school?
 - ii. What was your experience with school like?
- d. Cultural background
 - i. Would you describe yourself as an “[Indian] American?” How do you identify?
 - ii. How do you blend these identities?
 1. What experiences exemplify your [Indian] identity?
 2. What experiences exemplify your American identity?

II. Interview Two

- a. College choice
 - i. What is the earliest memory you have of the concept of attending college?
 - ii. How would you describe the “college-going culture” within:
 1. your family?
 2. your neighborhood?
 3. your high school friends?
 4. any other context that was relevant to you?

- b. College application
 - i. Walk me through, with as much detail as possible, your college application process.
 - ii. Which colleges did you apply to during your senior year?
 - 1. How did you narrow your list to these colleges?
 - iii. What college did you hope to attend (i.e., your first choice)?
 - iv. How did you ultimately make the decision to attend UH?

III. Participant-led Interview

At the conclusion of Interview 2: As you're thinking about your college choice process specifically, who within your family was most influential? Conduct an interview about your college choice process with them. Here are some questions you might want to include in your interview:

How did they perceive/understand the college choice process?

At what point in your childhood and/or educational journey did they begin thinking about you attending college?

How did they perceive your potential college choices? What were their criteria for you to seriously consider? How did this differ from what you wanted?

Did they feel well equipped to give you the support you needed to successfully navigate the process?

For your family member: What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

For you: What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

IV. Interview Three

- a. Walking interview/observation
 - i. Let's walk through [your campus] together.
 - 1. Show me how the campus looks through your eyes. What are the most significant places on campus to you?
 - 2. What places or experiences on campus have made you feel like choosing [this institution] was a good idea?
 - 3. What places or experiences on campus have made you feel like choosing [this institution] was not a good idea?
- b. Connecting the dots
 - i. In reflecting on our prior two conversations, your interview with your family member, and our campus tour today, how would you say that your cultural identity shaped your college choice?

Appendix C



rupikaur_ 



i am the first woman in my lineage with freedom of choice.
to craft her future whichever way i choose. say what is on my
mind when i want to. without the whip of the lash. there are
hundreds of firsts i am thankful for. that my mother and her
mother and her mother before her did not have the privilege of
feeling. what an honor. to be the first woman in the family
who gets to taste her desires. no wonder i'm starving to fill up
on this life. i have generations of bellies to eat for. the
grandmothers must be howling with laughter. huddled around
a mud stove in the afterlife. sipping on steaming glasses of
milky masala cha. how wild it must be for them to see one of
their own living so boldly.



(ode to amrita sher-gil's *village scene* 1938)

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