



Bicultural Identity Conflict and South Asian International Students

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Fact Sheet for Mental Health Practitioners

This fact sheet brings together a few of the sociocultural factors and issues that are relevant in the lives of South Asian international students in the United States. This factsheet is meant to be used as an introduction, and generalizations should not be applied to all South Asian international students.

Overview of General Facts

- Admission of international students in U.S. colleges has increased over the past few years.
- International students from India constitute the second largest international student population with 13.6% (Migration Policy Institute, 2016).
- Some preadmission challenges for these students include deciding if they can afford school (i.e. tuition, living expenses, textbooks, flight costs etc), applying for scholarships, and applying for a nonimmigrant visa by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). (Migration Policy Institute, 2016)

Identity Conflicts in South Asian International Students

Acculturation is defined as the struggles that immigrants experience as a result of arriving into a new, host society whilst trying to adjust with their own native culture (Berry, 1997). There are four different acculturation strategies. Individuals can fully accept the new (U.S.) culture and reject their heritage culture (assimilation); retain heritage culture and reject host culture (separation); reject both native and new culture (marginalization); or select aspects of both heritage and new culture (integration) in order to navigate society (Berry, 1997).

Bicultural identity involves efforts to balance two different cultural identities. South Asians often have to balance their heritage culture (i.e. values, traditions, religion) and western (American) culture. Examples of identity conflicts:

- A South Asian female student may be assigned to a co-ed dorm. The student knows that her parents would be upset and not feel comfortable with her staying in a co-ed dorm. However, this is the only available dorm on campus that is close to her classes. She now has to try to balance the expectations/norms of her family and that of accessibility on campus.
- A South Asian student has been assigned to a non-South Asian advisor. The advisor asks the student to refer to them with just first name and asks student to initiate meetings and discuss problems. The student has been taught to respect authority and to address older people/professionals as sir, ma'am, doctor, Mr. or Mrs. and is uncomfortable using first name for advisor. The student has to now incorporate her values and notions about authority with that of the advisor's preferences.

- A South Asian student who has never been in a romantic relationship begins dating. The student feels more freedom to date in the U.S. than in his or her home country. However, cannot tell parents about dating life because parents would not approve of dating prior to marriage.

Individual Differences

- Due to effects of colonization, some South Asian students may have good English proficiency whereas others may not.
- Socioeconomic status and regional differences can affect level of adjustment.
- Additionally, some South Asian students may experience reverse culture shock when revisit their home countries on vacations. As they navigate through the cultures of both countries, they have to readjust the way they interact and behave.

| Challenges faced by South Asian International Students | Resources for Coping |
|---|---|
| Cultural Values | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A cultural value could be to keep family problems to themselves. (e.g. students may not want to discuss financial problems, divorce, fights in family etc). • Struggle to find ingredients to prepare ethnic foods (e.g. spices, grains). • Struggle to find religious places of worship if non-Christian background (i.e. Buddhist temples, Mosques, Hindu Temples, Gurudwara etc). • May not be able to celebrate cultural festivals/holidays due to not being acknowledged in American society (Vesak, Eid, Diwali, Vaisakhi etc). • Pressure of representing entire family and community abroad and not engage in “bad behavior” (in terms of physical attire, alcohol, drugs, romantic relationships). • Parents may fear cultural erasure (“Americanization”) and need reassurance from children to maintain their culture (Dasgupta, 1998). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking to other South Asian students who have lived longer in the U.S. will help with feelings of loneliness and ease acculturation process. • Help students find grocery stores that sell ingredients for ethnic foods. • Assist students to find spiritual resources or places of worship of their religion. • Book resources: ~ <i>Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America</i> by Bakirathi Mani. ~ <i>Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora</i> by Sheela Bhatt, Pretty Kalra & Aarti Kohli. ~ <i>The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in the Age of the U.S. Power</i> by Vivek Bald, Miabi Chatterji and Sunjani Reddy. ~ <i>A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in America</i> by Lavina Shankar. |
| Social/Dating | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggle to make friends due to cultural differences (i.e. social norms, mannerisms, attire, language barriers etc). • Different ideas about dating/romantic relationships. May want to keep dating life secret from parents/family. Non-South Asian students may not understand this need for secrecy. Female South Asian students feel more pressure (Dasgupta, 1998). • May not want to talk about dating with other South Asians due to fear of judgement and criticism. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect students with integrated South Asian students/individuals. • Connect students with non-South Asian students/individuals in the community. • Educate students about social norms in American society and how to adjust that with their own cultural and social norms. |

Academics

- Instructors may misinterpret language barriers for difficulties comprehending class material. Or may think that South Asian students are intelligent and well-prepared and do not require help with classes. Thus, international students who are struggling may not receive help they need.
 - Students are often assigned advisors of non-South Asian descent. As a result, advisors may not understand specific struggles related to South Asian diaspora, family values/conflicts, academic challenges, and social alienation.
 - English proficiency may not translate into knowing everyday American sayings and result in students feeling alienated, confused, or unintelligent.
- Connect students to advisors of South-Asian descent or learn/read about South-Asian values/culture to understand students.
 - Help students access resources on campus (financial aid, information on visa applications).
 - Instructors should ask students about struggles or strengths.
 - Help students understand everyday colloquials. Connect students to international student affairs offices.

Racism/Stereotypes

- Many South Asian students may not have a clear understanding of racism in the U.S.
 - Experiences of discrimination and racism can be shocking. Students may not realize that a racist remark has been made due to not knowing common racist remarks towards racial/ethnic minorities.
 - South Asian students may be grouped together and experience same stereotypes (i.e. terrorist, stingy, asexual).
 - May feel uncomfortable, experience racist remarks, or hate crimes due to ethnic attire (turban, head scarves, hijab).
 - Media depictions of South Asians are often stereotypical, one-dimensional characters (e.g. Raj in Big Bang Theory, Apu in the Simpsons). South Asian male characters are often shown as nerdy, undesirable, lacking social skills, and heavy accents or shown as terrorists. South Asian female characters are either hypersexualized, exoticized or asexualized.
- Counselors should read about South Asian culture to become familiar with client needs.
 - Counselors should discuss how counseling works and expectations with clients.
 - Counselors should assess client comfort level on regular basis.
 - Online/Media resources for understanding stereotypes
 - [*Reluctant Fundamentalist*](#) directed by Mira Nair.
 - *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* by Junaid Rana

Gender identity, feminism and sexual orientation

- Strong patriarchal culture (strict male and female gender roles).
 - May know there are gender nonconforming identities/third gender identities but high stigma in culture.
 - Due to stigma and fear of being open about non-heterosexual orientation or gender non-conforming identity, may not feel comfortable or safe to tell anyone. Are even less likely than heterosexual South Asians to seek mental health services.
- Counselors can help students navigate through conflicts between patriarchal culture and strict binary gender norms with that of their sexual orientation.
 - It will be helpful for students to be given books and connect with other South Asian students in the LGBTQ+ community.
 - Queer Book/online/video resources:
 - ~ *Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* by Gayatri Gopinath.

- May not know of LGBT-specific housing options on campus.

- ~ *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* by Jasbir Puar
- ~ *Serving the Desi Queer Community of New York* ([resource website](#))
- ~ [Margarita with a straw](#)
- ~ [Romil and Jugal](#) (Hindi and English)
- Transgender/Gender Nonconforming Identities book/video resources:
 - ~ *This is me* ([docu-series](#))
- Feminism book resources:
 - ~ *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture (Asian American History and Culture) 1st Edition* by Vanita Reddy.
 - ~ *Good Girls Marry Doctors: South Asian American Daughters on Obedience and Rebellion* by Piyali Bhattacharya
 - ~ *Living Our Religions: Hindu and Muslim South Asian-American Women Narrate Their Experiences* by Anjana Narayan, Bandana Purkayastha.
 - ~ *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities 1st Edition* by Srila Roy.

Mental Illness

- Mental illness could be seen as bringing embarrassment, shame, and dishonor to families.
- South Asians may fear that having a mental illness will prevent them from dating prospects or getting married.
- South Asian students may not want to seek mental health services due to high stigma of mental illness.
- South Asian international students may not feel comfortable if therapist forces them to describe family details and personal history.
- DSM-V diagnoses may not translate into South Asian cultures.
- South Asian students may come from families that maintain silence or secrecy of mental illness.

- ~ [Unbroken Glass](#) is a documentary film by Dinesh Sabu.
- ~ [Haneri](#) is a documentary by Rakhi Mutta.
- ~ [Depression In The South Asian Community: The Hidden Illness](#)
- ~ *Indian Diaspora Handbook: Mental Health Challenges and Solutions* by Dr. Greesh Sharma
- ~ [The South Asian Mental Health Initiative and Network](#)

Division of South Asian Americans (DoSAA) is one of the divisions of the Asian American Psychological Association

