Always at a Crossroads:
Desi-South Asian Administrators Navigating Race and Racialization on Campus

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214 D - Convention Center
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Session Overview:

Introduction

Overview of Learning Outcomes & Study Participants

Theoretical Foundations- Understanding Borderlands and Constructivist Frameworks

Findings

Implications
Learning Outcomes

Gain a foundational understanding of DSA administrators in U.S. Higher Education

Understand how critical and constructivist methods can be utilized to understand DSA experiences of race/racialization

Engage with colleagues to develop and share strategies for supporting DSA people in student affairs
Why this study?

Personal Investment

Lack of research on staff/administrators and Desi-South Asians

Invisible in the literature

DSA in the US – race and racialization

Post-9/11, Olathe Murder and other incidents of violence
Terminology

South Asian—A geo-political term for people with ethnic and cultural roots in India, Burma, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, including those from the diaspora (SAALT, 2012)

Desi - A Hindi word which means “from the motherland”) to define our community with our language (Accapadi, 2012)

Desi-South Asian (DSA) - Recognizing there is not one term that we as a community have agreed upon, throughout this study I use DSA to be as inclusive as possible and recognize ways in which some prefer one term over another while others are comfortable using them interchangeably
Race

One’s understanding of one’s race/ethnicity informed by interpretation and internalization of social, political and cultural values and experiences (Omi & Winant, 1994) and understanding the current and historical contexts in which this occurs is important to inform effective policies and practices (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007)
Research Questions

How do DSA Administrators make meaning of race and racialization on campus?

How has DSA administrators’ college experiences shaped their professional experience on campus?

How do DSA administrators’ intersectional social identities (e.g. gender, religion, sexuality, immigration history) impact their racialization and meaning-making process?
Theoretical Foundations

Critical & Constructivist Approaches
Foucault (1991) Decentralized knowledge
Guba & Lincoln (1994) “truths” are constructed and complicated through various identities
Anzaldúa’s (1987) Borderlands/ La Frontera

- Concept of *Mestiza* construction - someone of mixed heritage (specifically Mexican and Native American) but as symbolic of the mixing and complication of social, cultural, religious, gender or other forms of identities

- Goes beyond physical borderlands and political boundaries in exploring psychological, sexual and spiritual borderlands and the complicated existence in that “space” in the broadest sense possible
Seidman’s three interview protocol fused into one 75 min semi-structured interview

10 participants selected to interview in person and via Skype and Facetime platforms

Transcribed and coded using three rounds of inductive and deductive analyses

Coding Methods: Open, Versus and Thematic
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Emigration to U.S.</th>
<th>Religion/Spirituality</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Campus Position</th>
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<td>20s</td>
<td>Asian Pacific Islander/ Sri Lankan</td>
<td>2ⁿᵈ Gen</td>
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<td>Woman</td>
<td>New professional</td>
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<td>30s</td>
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<td>2ⁿᵈ Gen</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Mid-level</td>
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<td>Jedi</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1ˢᵗ Gen</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mid-level</td>
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<tr>
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<td>40s</td>
<td>Asian American/Indian American</td>
<td>2ⁿᵈ Gen</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior Administrator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>20s</td>
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<td>2ⁿᵈ Gen</td>
<td>Christian</td>
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<td>Mid-level</td>
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<tr>
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<td>30s</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>1ˢᵗ/1.5 Gen</td>
<td>Hindu &amp; Catholic Christian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior Administrator</td>
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<tr>
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<td>20s</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1.5 Gen</td>
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<td>20s</td>
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<td>2ⁿᵈ Gen</td>
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<td>1ˢᵗ Gen</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mid-level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

Two Major Themes:
Decolonizing Self: Challenging and reclaiming DSA identity
Navigating racial identity on campus are discussed with several subthemes
Decolonizing Self: Challenging and reclaiming DSA identity

Language: Self-Definition vs. Categorization

Indian, Pakistani, Gujarati, Sindhi, South Asian, Desi, Asian, Asian American...
“I didn’t think that I was Asian American until someone was like, “Oh no, you’re Asian American.” And I’m like, “Oh, yeah. Okay,” But not feeling like I connected to people that fit within an Asian American umbrella..[and] also very clear that being Desi was something different. I’m really thankful to have grown up in a geography of the United States where I could say Desi. I used to call myself Indian – and I am Indian – so, it’s okay. And I remember a mentor of mine saying “South Asian” and I remember having a visceral reaction to the first time I heard the term...I was like, “What is that? I don’t even know what that means.” And she was like, “Well, Indian is just India.” And so I embraced that term South Asian ...”it’s my mentor and she’s telling me this and so I should believe her.” And so I embraced the term because I was like, “this is what educated people say”. But then I just had my own realization that that’s not who I am. I’m Desi.
“I just don’t identify with the word Desi at all. I think it was a term I wasn’t familiar with until maybe even grad school.” She states, “I understand the term APIDA [Asian Pacific Islander Desi American], I think the reason it’s in there is to be more inclusive but it just doesn’t resonate with me. I think that’s why I prefer South Asian.”
Career Choice: Rajiv

I have a complicated way in which I got to where I am….I didn’t really know what I wanted to do with my life and then after talking it over with my parents, they were like, “Oh you’re really good with computers and technology, why don’t you become a computer engineer?’… I ended up realizing that I really hated it… It was causing me so much stress...

I decided to switch to psychology but my parents were concerned. “You can’t get a degree in psychology and magically expect to get a job after…Oh you know what…you should become a psychiatrist”, because what else do you do with a degree in psych besides becoming a psychiatrist, right? Of course going to become a psychiatrist requires going to med school so at that point I, it had basically been stereotypes of either becoming an engineer or a doctor within the Desi community…so I was premed for the rest of my undergrad. So, I thought, really long and hard about what I could do with my life and I remembered that I loved being a first-year experience mentor….and that’s when it kinda hit me that I wish that I could work with college students and …that was the thing I could do for the rest of my life, then everything just came together.
“I remember the day so clearly. Picking up my organic chemistry book to study for my midterm and I closed it and called my mom and I started crying...‘I can’t do this... like I can’t, I just can’t do this.’ I had been pushing along for several quarters then, because that was the plan. That was the plan. I hear that a lot from other South Asian identified students, even today as a professional.... That it’s planned...this is what was decided by them, by their families, both for a very long time.”
“Now, my Dad, tells everybody...that I’m a [senior administrator at a university]. He doesn’t know what the hell that means, right? No idea at all. But he tells everybody...It was a big deal, and the community thought it was a big deal even though nobody understands what the hell it is. Nobody talked about anything before that.”
Bridges & Borderlands: Negotiating DSA Identity on Campus

Colluding or Challenging Stereotypes: Coalition Building and the “Happy Medium”

Complicating Race: Understanding Intersections/hybridity as strength
“When I think about my identity and my professional life I first think about myself as an Asian American; along with that I think about my Desi-ness. I think I have a deep, deep responsibility to represent my community in an authentic way; defying whatever stereotypes and myths and things that people have drawn up. That’s always on my mind. In meetings, I’m intentionally not quiet or passive. I have to force myself to do that to make it very clear that I am not who you think I am.
"I think I’m the only person of color in our division at my level or higher. Some coordinators but there’s not that many People of Color. There are no Indians,” reflects Jedi, “There is a board member who is a grad student who’s Indian...But lately I’ve been feeling invisible. And that’s more of a structural thing here. So yeah, I dunno. I mean I can’t go down that road where, is it color? Is it my level of intelligence? Is it my personality? Like, I can’t.”
“What was perceived oftentimes by me was never expressly said was people in some ways would ask me to be the voice of the administration when it came to taking about students of color issues.”

“In some ways I was seen as, ‘Oh this person is kind of the ‘happy medium’. They’re not Black.’ So it was almost like I was sort of a safe person to come and talk about things and say, ‘We’re thinking about this, what do you think?’ But they wouldn’t do that maybe with some of my Latino or Black colleagues. And so I would often go [to meetings]. I was unsettled by that sometimes but then I remember having a conversation with one of my African American colleagues. She said, ‘You know, if that’s how they’re seeing you as sort of a ‘go between’, then how can you use that space to really mobilize and change conversations for folks?’ And so that was an important shift for me.”
“Among my colleagues, I feel there’s a lot of unspoken and unresolved tension because the...there are very few Black people in the division of student affairs, even fewer Latinas. I’m the only South Asian [yet] to my colleagues, I have more voice and clout than them institutionally....It’s very hard to build bridges with other People of Color in the department as a gay woman of color.”

“It suits the institution to see me mostly as a woman and as a gay woman. It doesn’t suit them to see me as a racialized person. Or at best, if they seem me as racialized I’m ‘a more palatable racialized person’ than the ‘angry black person’ or the ‘angry Latina person’; that’s the white institution.”
“I recognize that there are stereotypes of women who look like me. Sometimes my brown skin is a complexly brown skin when you’re of Asian descent. There are stereotypes of Indian women as being meek and humble and submissive and those things, but then there’s also this paradox of Brown women as being seen as aggressive and angry; I get them both and I don’t know which perception that I’m being viewed as or experienced as...”
Caste: “I think of myself as Brahmin and it’s a very particular worldview...and whether I continue to have that worldview or not, it shaped my most formative years...and yet, we have no way to talk about it in this country...because it’s irrelevant here, right? It has been made irrelevant. It’s sort of made into this monochromatic “you’re south Asian”...So I push against the category itself, because I think it’s a U.S.-made category and that’s what it is. It’s a U.S. category and that it erases more than it provides.”

“I would be shocked when people would say things like, ‘Okay what’s your caste?’ when I got here [to the U.S.]. Whereas in India, that was never a conversation we would have...Religion was important but we didn’t have conversations about, ‘what caste are you from?’.”
Implications – Small Group Discussion

Why is this data important?

How can this inform your work?

What else can we do?
Implications – Suggestions

Increase role models for DSA students of non-STEM career opportunities

Foster non-Indian DSA community

Identify our cultural values and experiences as strengths that contribute to innovative thinking and programming

Acknowledge hybridity and border-crossing abilities as strengths to foster and recognize

More research on and by DSA people
Final Thoughts

Are we Racial Negotiators? We sit at the intersections of too much of one identity or too little of another, all while continuing to challenge and adapt to our campus environments.

DSA administrators employ various strategies and frameworks to make meaning of their race and racialization on campus, each intersected with their history of immigration, gender, caste and understanding of DSA within larger U.S. racial constructs.

Many spoke about undergraduate and graduate programs as a critical point of racial consciousness and a key motivation to enter the Student Affairs profession.
Q & A
Thank you!

Let’s keep the conversation going!

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