ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN & LEADERSHIP: HOW RACE & GENDER IDENTITY INFLUENCE PERCEPTIONS & ENACTMENT OF LEADERSHIP
	Nicole Mehta, Doctor of Philosophy, 2025
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This dissertation explored how second-generation South Asian American women describe, define, and enact leadership. Using intersectionality and DesiCrit as a theoretical framework, this narrative inquiry study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' descriptions of leadership? (2) How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' enactment of leadership?

Ten South Asian American women college students from a university in the Mid-Atlantic participated in this study. Participants completed one interview and submitted a participant-generated visual method (PGVM) depicting their conceptualizations of leadership. This dissertation includes individual narratives for each participant, outlining their unique experiences, perspectives, and meaning-making related to leadership and their identities, as well as a collective narrative outlining themes that cut across the participants' individual narratives.

The themes from the collective narrative include: (1) learning leadership, particularly through women in their communities; (2) connections to South Asian community and identity; (3) navigating a bicultural identity and stereotypes; (4) leadership grounded in community; (5) leadership grounded in advocacy; and (6) developing an integrated South Asian American woman leader identity.

SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP: HOW RACE AND GENDER IDENTITY INFLUENCE PERCEPTIONS AND ENACTMENT OF LEADERSHIP

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ii
Table of Contents v
Chapter 1: Introduction 1
Background and Context 3
South Asian Immigration to the U.S. 3
The Model Minority Myth 6
Statement of the Problem 10
Purpose of the Study 13
Significance 14
Key Terms 15
Chapter 2: Literature Review 17
Immigration History 19
First Immigration Wave & Fight for Access to U.S. Citizenship 19
Second Immigration Wave & Shaping of Asian American Population 22
Third Immigration Wave & Diversification of Asian American Population 23
South Asian Racialization 25
Asian American 26
South Asians & Racial Ambiguity 28
Model Minority Myth and Upholding Racial Hierarchies 29
South Asian American Women Representation in Research 38
Navigating a Bicultural Identity 39
Navigating Gender Expectations and Perceptions 43
Asian American Women and Leadership 47
Historical Context of Asian Americans & Leadership 48
Asian American College Student Leadership 49
Asian American Leadership in Academia 55
Leadership for Asian Americans Outside of Higher Education 59
Summary 66
Chapter 3: Methodology 70
Paradigm 70

Theoretical Frameworks 71
DesiCrit 71
Intersectionality 76
Theoretical Borderlands 79
Methodology 80
Data Collection 82
Interviews 84
Participant-Generated Visual Methods (PGVMs) 86
Analysis 88
Trustworthiness 90
Positionality 92
Chapter 4: Participant Profiles 97
Individual Narratives 98
Aishwarya 98
Ananya 106
Annie 113
Hannah 118
Indrani 122
Meena 131
Meenakshi 142
Mira 150
Sarah 157
Sky 167
Summary 176
Chapter 5: Collective Narrative – Foundational Learning and Motivations 177
Learning Leadership 178
Learning through Mothers and Aunties 182
Challenging Dominant Views of Leadership 188
Connections to South Asian Community and Identity 192
Connections to South Asian Community 192
Connections to South Asian Identity 196
Navigating a Bicultural Identity and Stereotypes 199

Navigating a Bicultural Identity 200
Experiencing Stereotypes 206
Responses to Stereotypes 213
Summary 220
Chapter 6: Collective Narrative – Enacting and Developing Leadership Identity 222
Leadership Grounded in Community 222
Community-Centered Leadership 223
Leadership Grounded in Advocacy 232
Advocacy-Centered Leadership 232
Advocacy as a Balancing Act 239
Grappling with the Model Minority Myth 243
Developing South Asian American Woman Leader Identity 247
Developing an Integrated Leadership Identity 248
Creating a Pathway for Others 250
Summary 252
Chapter 7: Discussion 254
Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Questions 254
How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' descriptions of leadership? 254
How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' enactment of leadership? 256
Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature 263
Racialization 264
Bicultural Identity 268
Socialization Around Leadership 271
Leadership and Connection to Community and Identity 273
Approaches to Leadership 274
Sense-making around Identity and Leadership 278
Implications for Practice 281
Recommendations for Future Research 284
Limitations 286
Contributions to the Literature 288
Conclusion 290

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer 294
Appendix B: Recruitment Email 295
Appendix C: Interest Form 296
Appendix D: Interview Protocol 297
Appendix E: Participant-Generated Visual Prompt 299
References 300

Chapter 1: Introduction

Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial and ethnic group in the United States (Akutagawa, 2013; Budiman & Ruiz, 2021; Chin, 2020; J. Lee et al., 2018; J. Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2021). The Asian American population increased by 80% between 2000 and 2019 (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). With this growth, Asian Americans are also one of the fastest growing racial/ethnic student populations within higher education (Alcantar et al., 2022; Kodama et al., 2002; Nguyen et al., 2018; Ruzicka, 2011). Additionally, the number of second-generation Asian American college students continues to increase. Within the Asian American community, second-generation Asian Americans are a growing population and over half of second-generation Asian Americans are part of Gen Z or younger (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021; Chin, 2020). However, although the population of Asian American students is increasing, these students are often neglected in higher education research (Accapadi, 2005; Ruzicka, 2011). In a review of five of the most widely used journals in higher education over 10 years, only 1% of articles gave explicit attention to Asian Americans (Museus, 2009). Furthermore, a major criticism of the existing literature pertaining to Asian Americans is the categorization of all Asian Americans as one homogeneous racial group, negating cultural differences and identity-specific challenges and needs (Accapadi, 2005; E. Lee, 2015; J. Lee et al., 2018; Poon et al., 2016; Ruzicka, 2011; Shih et al., 2019; V. Yi et al., 2020).

Within the Asian American community, South Asians make up a significant portion of the population. Indian Americans have surpassed Chinese Americans as the largest Asian alone population group, increasing by over 50% between 2010 and 2020 (Rico et al., 2023). This growth in population has been mirrored on the U.S. political stage. In the 2024 presidential race, there were several visible South Asian Americans, including two Republican candidates, Nikki

Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy, and the Democratic nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris, who if elected, would have been the first Black, first South Asian, and first woman President of the United States (Rajvanshi, 2024). With Harris' nomination, South Asians' involvement with the presidential race as well as attention to South Asians as a vital voting block has increased (Brown, 2024; Qin, 2024; Rajvanshi, 2024).

Nonetheless, as Asian Americans are underrepresented in higher education research, literature on South Asian Americans is even more sparse. Consistent with being left out of conversations around Asian Americans, this population is also often left out of research in the field of Asian American studies (Accapadi, 2005; Ruzicka, 2011). This lack of research results in insufficient knowledge and understanding of Asian American and South Asian American students, their needs, and the type of support they need. The lack of awareness and understanding of this student population also leads to the perpetuation of stereotypes and myths of Asian Americans as foreigners, as well as a model minority, which are pervasive stereotypes that shape students' identity development, racialization, and leadership efficacy (Accapadi, 2005; Museus & Park, 2015; Ruzicka, 2011).

Further, South Asian American women experience a "dual invisibility" as a result of marginalized gender and racial identities (Accapadi, 2005, p. 53). Additionally, literature on leadership often is grounded in White, patriarchal norms, and does not account for the ways in which identity and culture influence perceptions of and engagement in leadership (Beatty et al., 2020). In the existing literature on leadership, there is a lack of representation of Asian Americans, particularly South Asian Americans, as well as a lack of attention to the intersections of race and gender. In this study, I will focus on second-generation South Asian American

women and leadership, exploring how race and gender identity influence definitions, descriptions, and enactment of leadership.

In order to understand South Asian American women's experiences, it is essential to understand the historical and contextual factors that shape the South Asian and Asian population within the U.S. The following section briefly introduces the immigration history of South Asians to the U.S. and the prominent Model Minority Myth (MMM) that has implications for South Asian American leadership. This chapter then includes the statement of the problem and significance of this study, as well as key terms and definitions.

Background and Context

South Asian Immigration to the U.S.

Scholars describe three waves of immigration that form the current South Asian American population (E. Lee, 2015; Rangaswamy, 2000; Ruzicka, 2011). The first occurred in the early 1900s, initiated by the U.S. and Canada's need for farm laborers. The initial wave of largely Punjabi and Sikh men was working class, and by 1930, totaled around 3000 (Dhingra, 2016; Prashad, 2001; Rangaswamy, 2000; Ruzicka, 2011). During this time, interracial families were more common than South Asian families, with South Asian men marrying into Puerto Rican, African American, and West Indian families in the Northeast and South, and Mexican families on the West coast (E. Lee, 2015; Prashad, 2001). The "tide of turbans" (Dhingra, 2016, p. 217) brought about hostilities toward South Asians from White people, similar to the hostilities against other Asian communities immigrating to the U.S. South Asian immigrants were seen as a threat in the United States and Canada, with newspaper headlines of "Hindu Invasion" and the U.S. Immigration Commission labeling South Asians as "the least desirable race of immigrants" (E. Lee, 2015). Many advocated for full exclusion of South Asian

immigration; however, the U.S. was cautious about restricting South Asian immigration as Indian immigrants were technically British subjects, and it was unclear how U.S. exclusion policies would impact relations (E. Lee, 2015). Despite evading absolute exclusion, many South Asians were denied entry to the U.S. Between 1911-1915, over half of South Asian applicants were refused entry to the U.S. with reasoning such as "likely to become a public charge" and citing appearances of weakness, emaciation, and poor health (E. Lee, 2015, p. 166). The U.S. enacted restrictions through the Immigration Act of 1917, outlining the Asiatic Barred Zone and banning immigrants from Asian countries, expanding restrictions beyond the Chinese Exclusion Act (E. Lee, 2015). Legislation began to shift in the 1940s, granting access to citizenship to Asian immigrants. The Luce-Celler Bill of 1946 granted citizenship rights to Indians, established a quota of 100 Indian immigrants per year, and led to 6000 Indian immigrants to the U.S. between 1947 and 1965 (Rangaswamy, 2000).

A key piece in the history of South Asian and Asian American history is the 1965 Immigration Act, which drastically altered and continues to shape the Asian population in the U.S. (Bhatia, 2008a; Dhingra, 2016b). During the 1960s, support for immigration reform grew amid Cold War politics internationally and the civil rights movement domestically; while the U.S. espoused values of freedom and democracy, the growing visibility of the civil rights movement revealed hypocrisy in U.S. immigration policy (E. Lee, 2015). The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, ended national origin quotas and allowed skilled professionals in certain fields to immigrate, using financial and professional success as incentives (Harpalani, 2015; E. Lee, 2015; Ruzicka, 2011; Thakore, 2014). In contrast to the first wave of South Asian immigrants, the second wave brought South Asians holding social, educational, and cultural capital gained in their home countries that allowed them to

achieve middle and upper-middle class status in the U.S. (DasGupta & das Dasgupta, 1998; Dhingra, 2016b; Finn, 2009; J. Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2021; Ruzicka, 2011; Thakore, 2014). This altered the South Asian American population from "pariahs to elite" with a drastically different immigrant population, and increase in numbers with 469,000 Indians immigrating between 1961 to 1990 (Prashad, 2001; Rangaswamy, 2000).

The third, and current, phase of South Asian immigration differs in the wider diversity of identities in terms of national origin, religion, and socio-economic status (Ruzicka, 2011). While immigrants in the first two waves were primarily from India, the number of immigrants from other South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, is increasing. According to the 2020 Census, of those who identified as Asian alone (not multiracial), 4.1 million identify as Asian Indian, 500,159 as Pakistani, 185,177 as Bangladeshi, and 162,993 as Nepali (Monte & Shin, 2022). Further immigration reform, including the 1990 Immigration & Nationality Act, increased accessibility of H-1B visas, which allow highly skilled professionals to temporarily work in the U.S. and are especially popular in the technology sector. From 2011 to 2015, Indians received 56% of 129,000 H-1B visas granted by the U.S. (E. Lee, 2015). Family reunification is an increasingly large driver of immigration. Originally brought about in the Hart-Cellar Act and enhanced in further legislation, many more recent South Asian immigrants come to the U.S. to join family members already settled (Harpalani, 2015; E. Lee, 2015). Additionally, the current wave of immigration includes a larger number of South Asian refugees; Burmese and Bhutanese immigrants make up the largest refugee group entering the U.S. in recent years (Quirk, 2014). More recent immigration trends have diversified the South Asian population in country of origin, as well as other factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, language, education levels, and religion (Harpalani, 2015; E. Lee, 2015).

The Model Minority Myth

While the Asian and South Asian American population continues to grow and evolve, the second wave post-1965 Immigration Act immigrants continue to largely shape perceptions of the population within the U.S. The term "model minority" was coined in the 1960s originally to describe the success and achievements of Japanese immigrants and their children; since then, the term has evolved to refer to Asian Americans as a whole (Ruzicka, 2011; Shih et al., 2019). The Model Minority Myth (MMM) asserts that Asian Americans hold inherent traits, such as hard work ethics, intelligence, and diligence, that result in universal success in academics and achieving higher socioeconomic status (Akutagawa, 2013; Liang et al., 2002; Prashad, 2001; Sy et al., 2017; V. Yi et al., 2020). Coinciding with the Civil Rights Movement and Cold War, "the Asian American model minority who achieved the American Dream was held up as proof of American democracy at a time when the United States was being criticized by communist rivals abroad and civil rights activists at home" (E. Lee, 2015, pp. 8–9). The touting of Asian Americans as a "model minority" able to achieve the American Dream also served to pit communities of color against each other. White politicians and journalists used Asian Americans as a counter-example to Black Americans and other communities of color, idealizing their story as overcoming hardships and adversity to achieve higher social status through assimilationist frameworks and hard work ethic (Harpalani, 2013; Prashad, 2001; Shih et al., 2019; J. Yi & Todd, 2021).

The use of Asian Americans and the MMM as a "tool of racial wedge politics" (Poon et al., 2016, p. 469) served to reinforce belief in a meritocratic society with equal opportunity for all and free of racial discrimination (Dhingra, 2016a; Harpalani, 2013; Shih et al., 2019; J. Yi & Todd, 2021). J. Yi and Todd (2021) conceptualized the MMM as a "legitimizing ideology";

these ideologies maintain the belief in a fair society by reinforcing the narrative that individuals are solely responsible for their social status and outcomes, rather than acknowledging the influence of systemic inequality on life experiences and outcomes. The MMM upholds belief in meritocracy and minimizes the presence and impact of racial inequities, reiterating that those who do not succeed only have themselves to blame (Prashad, 2001; Shih et al., 2019; J. Yi & Todd, 2021). Asian Americans are used as a "middleman minority," a pawn in the struggle to maintain power by those in the dominant societal group (Poon et al., 2016, p. 473). Internalization of the MMM further reinforces systems of power and inequities. In a study on the connection between the MMM and anti-Black attitudes, Yi and Todd (2021) conceptualized internalization of the MMM to include achievement orientation, the belief that Asian Americans are successful because they value hard work and determination, and unrestricted mobility, the belief that Asian Americans are less likely to experience racial prejudice and discrimination. The researchers found that Asian American college students with high internalization of the MMM were more likely to hold anti-Black attitudes and oppose affirmative action (J. Yi & Todd, 2021). The MMM as a legitimizing ideology not only pits minority groups against each other while diverting attention away from systemic inequities, but also dismisses inequities faced by Asian Americans while maintaining systems that reinforce these inequities (Shih et al., 2019; J. Yi & Todd, 2021).

Despite the increasing diversity within the Asian American community, the MMM is leveraged to portray Asian Americans as a monolithic group, "honorary Whites" (Harpalani, 2013, p. 118), "cold but competent" (Park et al., 2015, p. 3), and "poster children of American success" (E. Lee, 2015, p. 373). This portrayal paints a misleading and incomplete picture of Asian Americans. As articulated in the previous section on immigration history, Asian

communities in the U.S. frequently experienced discrimination and racism. More recently, anti-Asian racism resulting from 9/11 targeting South Asians and the COVID pandemic targeting East Asians illustrate how quickly perceptions of Asian Americans can shift from model minority to threat (Harpalani, 2015; E. Lee, 2015). The "simultaneous acceptance and rejection of Asian Americans reflects their complex place in contemporary American society as well as the myths and realities of the so-called rise of Asian Americans" (E. Lee, 2015, p. 374).

Implications of the Model Minority Myth for Leadership

In addition to labeling Asian Americans as universally and inherently successful, the MMM asserts that Asian Americans are quiet, passive, conflict averse, respectful of authority, and prioritize group needs over individual needs (Akutagawa, 2013; Kawahara et al., 2013; Liang et al., 2002; Park et al., 2008; Prashad, 2001; Shih et al., 2019; Sy et al., 2017; V. Yi et al., 2020). While these traits are not inherently negative, they do contrast with mainstream and dominant ideas of leadership in the U.S., such as assertiveness, risk-taking, individualism, and extroversion (Bhatia, 2008a). The MMM is prevalent in the literature on Asian Americans and South Asian Americans as an influence in socialization and racialization, self-perception, and perceptions of others (Akutagawa, 2013; Dhingra, 2003; Harpalani, 2013; E. Lee, 2015; Poon et al., 2016; Prashad, 2001; Shih et al., 2019; J. Yi & Todd, 2021; V. Yi et al., 2020). As this concept reflects some of the key differences in South Asian and European American cultural norms and ideas of leadership, it is central to this study in understanding how South Asian American women describe and enact leadership.

Despite population growth, high educational attainment, and demographic overrepresentation in fields such as law, engineering, and computer science, Asian Americans remain underrepresented among leadership levels in private, public, and non-profit sectors

(Akutagawa, 2013; Kawahara et al., 2007, 2013; Ng, 2017; Prashad, 2001; Sy et al., 2017). Historically, leadership has exclude people of color by labeling their behaviors "service" or "activism," separate from leadership (Jones et al., 2016). Leadership has traditionally been based on Western ideals and values as a "one-size-fits-all" approach (Sy et al., 2017). These ideals often conflict with South Asian and Asian American cultural norms.

Among all ethnic minority groups, Asian Americans are least likely to be in leadership positions and management roles in fields such as law, finance, business, and STEM sectors, with Asian American women less represented than Asian American men (Kawahara et al., 2013; Sy et al., 2017). The barrier to leadership is not a "supply barrier," but the result of hegemonic narratives that endorse assimilationist frameworks as the path to success and sociocultural barriers that construct rigid definitions of leadership that do not include historically marginalized groups (Kawahara et al., 2013). In several fields where Asian Americans are demographically overrepresented, especially in entry-level positions, the numeric overrepresentation does not extend to executive-level positions. For example, while Asian Americans made up the largest racial minority group in major law firms for nearly two decades, they had the lowest partner-to-associate ratio of all racial/ethnic groups (Chung et al., 2017). However, in a series of studies comparing leadership attainment of East Asians and South Asians, Lu et al. (2000) found that while South Asians face more prejudice than East Asians, they hold a higher rate of leadership attainment. While Lu et al.'s (2000) study disaggregated data among Asian American subgroups, it did not account for differences in other aspects of identity, such as gender. In a study on Asian women in STEM fields, Williams et al. (2017) found that Asian women were less likely to be viewed as leaders and less likely to get high-profile or desirable assignments than their White counterparts. Similarly, in a multiyear analysis of employment in technology companies in the

San Francisco Bay Area, Gee & Peck (2017) found that Asian employees outnumber White employees in entry-level positions, but White employees were twice as likely to become executives and held almost three times the number of executive-level jobs as Asian employees. Citing the perceived overrepresentation of Asian Americans in STEM fields, diversity initiatives in the sector tend to exclude Asian Americans as they are not considered an underrepresented minority (Shih et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2017).

Tran et al. (2019) focused on second-generation Asian Americans in the workforce, exploring the "Asian second-generation advantage." Due to hyperselectivity in immigration policy, first-generation Asian immigrants are more likely to have graduated from college than both the U.S. population and the population in their countries of origin; the socioeconomic status and capital gained by the first generation leads to an advantage for their second-generation children in educational attainment (Shih et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2019). While Asian Americans make up seven percent of the U.S. population, they comprise over 10% of student populations on most college campuses, and nearly 25% of student populations at elite universities (Chin, 2020). However, this advantage does not necessarily transfer to the workplace. In 2012, of the 20 Asian American CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, five were born in the U.S.; in 2017, there were fewer than a dozen Asian American CEOs of Fortune 500 companies (Chin, 2020). In a study on second-generation Asian Americans with 103 participants who held degrees from Ivy League and highly selective institutions, many who held terminal degrees, only seven held executive-level roles (Chin, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Many scholars attribute the inattention to Asian Americans' low representation in leadership positions and higher education research to the Model Minority Myth (Accapadi, 2005;

Akutagawa, 2013; Kibria, 1996). Further, several scholars refer to both a bamboo and glass ceiling faced by Asian American women in the workplace (Akutagawa, 2013; Chin, 2020; Kawahara et al., 2007; Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009; Shih et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2019). In the past decade, there have been high-profile examples of South Asian women breaking these ceilings. In 2017, Pramila Jayapal became the first Indian American woman to join the House of Representatives, Nikki Haley was the first Indian American in a presidential cabinet, and Kamala Harris became the first to join the Senate before becoming Vice President in 2020 (Stevens & Ruiz, 2020). In business and the tech industry, there are several South Asian CEOs. While this group is male-dominated, Indra Nooyi, former CEO of Pepsi Co, and Leena Nair, CEO of Chanel, are both of Indian origin (Nooyi & Saha 2022). However, these women continue to be exceptions rather than the norm. Among Asian American and White men and women, Asian American women are least likely to hold management positions or positions with supervisory responsibility in corporate American (Chin, 2020).

Scholars point to several factors, some of which connect to the MMM. Tran et al. (2019) refers to less tangible factors, including social and cultural capital, that influence workplace outcomes "beyond human capital accumulation, in ways that particularly benefit native whites" (p. 2263). Similarly, Chin (2020) names the ways in which Asian American women, in particular, must navigate socialization and values from both their family's cultural norms and dominant U.S. culture. Chin (2020) attributes the difficulty in moving up and lack of Asian American women in leadership to how Asian American women are viewed in the workplace, relating to several characteristics of the MMM that are counter to hegemonic ideas of leadership. Lastly, both ethnic/racial and sexual and gender harassment may influence Asian American

women's career trajectories, coupled with lacking the resources and support to deal with such experiences (Chin, 2020; Tran et al., 2019).

As a group, Asian Americans are demographically overrepresented in educational attainment relative to labor market attainment, implying that a degree of discrimination persists (Tran et al., 2019). However, the assumption that Asian Americans have "made it already" (Akutagawa, 2013, p. 281) and notions of South Asian Americans as raceless or "ambiguous nonwhites" (Kibria, 1996, p. 78) neglects the racism, stereotypes, and discrimination that South Asian American women face in society and excludes them from leadership development programs for communities of color (Dang, 2021a; Kawahara et al., 2013; Ng, 2017; Sy et al., 2017). With the lack of research and attention to South Asian Americans, and in particular, South Asian American women, institutions of higher education are underprepared to serve this demographic.

The concept of leadership has historically been based in Western ideals and values, with a history of excluding people of color (T. B. Jones et al., 2016; Sy et al., 2017). Early literature on leadership focused on managerial, industrial, and political leadership, with a focus on leadership in the workplace (Komives, 2011). Scholarship relating to leadership and leadership for college students developed and became prominent during the 1990s and 2000s; several key texts were published, but still focused on and reflected traditional Western views of leadership (Komives, 2011; Komives et al., 2009; Komives & Wagner, 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2008; Northouse, 2008). The literature on college student leadership focuses on conventional leadership theories and while there is some attention to gender, there is little attention to the intersections of race and leadership (Arminio et al., 2000; Beatty et al., 2020; Chunoo et al., 2020; Whitney & Collins, 2021). Further, although the literature around leadership has expanded

drastically in recent years with the assertion that anyone can be a leader, as well as acknowledgment of different forms of leadership, the authors and focus of leadership studies remains predominantly White, cisgender, male, heterosexual and aligned with Western norms (Beazley, 2013; Dugan & Humbles, 2018).

Navigating the discrepancies between dominant views of leadership and South Asian cultural norms is further compounded by the dual invisibility South Asian American women face. Further, the ways in which people of color engage in leadership is often labeled as activism or service (T. B. Jones et al., 2016). As the South Asian American population continues to grow, it is essential to broaden definitions of leadership to include non-Western cultural norms and different ways of leading, as well as understand how South Asian American women define leadership and connections to activism and service. Unpacking the experiences of South Asian American women who engage in and practice leadership is critical in order to expand definitions of leadership and deepen understandings of how race and gender influence perceptions and enactment of leadership.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this constructivist narrative inquiry study was to explore how second-generation South Asian American women describe, define, and enact leadership. I chose to focus on second-generation students as it is a growing population; nearly 60% of Asian Americans born in the U.S. are part of Gen Z or younger, with an average age of 19 years old (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). Second-generation South Asian Americans, especially women, navigate bicultural identities of South Asian and American cultural norms. These sets of norms are particularly pronounced, and often in conflict, in current leadership theories and literature. Through this study, I explored how second-generation South Asian American women navigate these bicultural

norms to describe, define, and enact leadership. The research questions that guide this study were:

1. How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' descriptions of leadership?
2. How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' enactment of leadership?

I utilized a constructivist paradigm and narrative inquiry methodology, prioritizing the participants' stories and meaning-making, as well as acknowledging multiple truths. To frame this study, I used two theoretical frameworks. DesiCrit, a branch of Critical Race Theory, focuses on the unique experiences of South Asian Americans with attention to the significance of racial ambiguity in racialization (Harpalani, 2013). Recognizing that the cultural norms influencing South Asian women's experiences differ, an intersectionality framework assisted in illuminating the nuances and unique experiences at the intersections of race and gender identity (P. H. Collins, 2015a).

Significance

This study focused on the experiences of second-generation South Asian American women, a population frequently overlooked in current research. Through centering their stories, this study's findings will contribute to the literature for greater understanding of the nuances of cultural norms and experiences within the Asian American community, and illuminate how multiple identities, specifically race and gender, influence second-generation South Asian American women's experiences. Of the scarce research that does focus on South Asian American women, much of it focuses on navigating a bicultural identity and intergenerational relationships, primarily between second-generation daughters and first-generation mothers

(Ibrahim & Ohnishi, Sandhu, 1997; Inman, 2006a; Ruzicka, 2011; Traxler, 2009). As the younger, second-generation South Asian population continues to increase in higher education settings, it is essential to not only understand how these students navigate bicultural norms and family relationships, but also how they understand leadership, develop and enhance their understanding and skills, and engage in leadership behaviors that are meaningful and authentic to them.

Additionally, this study will contribute to the literature on leadership and leadership development. Leadership, its conceptual frameworks and development theories, have long been grounded in White, patriarchal, and Euro-centric ideals and values (T. B. Jones et al., 2016; Kodama et al., 2002; Ng, 2017; Sy et al., 2017). This narrow approach to leadership does not take into account cultural and contextual factors that may influence how South Asian American women, and people of color in general, describe and enact leadership. Representation of South Asian American women has increased in politics and media including Vice President and Democratic Presidential nominee Kamala Harris and Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, to actress and comedian Mindy Kaling, who speak about the ways in which their cultures and heritage has shaped their drive, values, and approaches to their work (Rajvanshi, 2024). As second-generation South Asian American women college students emerge as leaders in the wake of this increase in representation, it is important to expand the definition of leadership to recognize and include cultural influences, how communities of color describe and engage in leadership, and how diverse groups reconcile ideas of leadership with collectivist norms, and definitions of activism and service (T. B. Jones et al., 2016).

Key Terms

This section provides definitions of key terms that are pertinent and useful to the reader. While some of these key terms have multiple definitions, the definitions presented below are applied to these terms throughout this study.

South Asian: This term refers to individuals whose country of origin includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives.

Asian American: This term refers to individuals who immigrated from or have descendants from countries in Asia. The term originated through social change movements in the 1960s, intending to build solidarity among various Asian communities within the U.S. Since the 1960s, additional terms have been introduced in efforts to be more inclusive of the diversity within the Asian American community. These terns include, Asian Pacific Islander (API), Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), and Asian Pacific Islander Desi Americans (APIDA). For the purpose of this study, I will primarily use the term Asian American when referring to the broader Asian community within the U.S. This reflects common terminology in much of the research, as well as the lack of disaggregation.

First-generation: This term refers to individuals who were born and raised in another country and immigrated to the U.S.

Second-generation: This term refers to individuals who were born in the U.S. and primarily socialized in the U.S., with parents who immigrated from another country.

Desi: This term is synonymous with South Asian American, meaning "of the soil" or "someone from our country." Although the term is understood by some to specify individuals from India, it has become increasingly common among South Asian scholars and activists and is often used as an expression of solidarity among South Asian communities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Dominant theories of leadership and leadership development have historically been based on patriarchal and Eurocentric ideals and values (T. B. Jones et al., 2016; Kodama et al., 2002; Leigh et al., 2021; Ng, 2017; Sy et al., 2017). This "one-size-fits-all" approach (Sy et al., 2017) does not consider cultural and contextual factors that influence how South Asian American women, and other people of color, define and enact leadership. Leadership among communities of color is often labeled as service or activism in existing research, versus being explicitly labeled as leadership (T. B. Jones et al., 2016). Literature on leadership and leadership development has traditionally been the domain of White men, and more recently, White women (J. D. Collins, 2017; T. B. Jones et al., 2016; Owen, 2020). As a result, typical definitions and images of leadership continue to perpetuate the status quo of a hierarchical framing of leadership, reflecting those already in power, versus reflecting more communal norms (J. D. Collins, 2017). With an absence of representation in the research, people of color often do not see or label themselves as leaders (J. D. Collins, 2017; Grim et al., 2019a; T. B. Jones et al., 2016). Further, the social construct of leadership holds different meanings for various groups (T. B. Jones et al., 2016; Leigh et al., 2021; Rosch et al., 2017). It is essential to expand the definition of leadership to recognize and understand cultural influences, perceptions and definitions of leadership, the influence of collectivist cultural norms, and the roles of activism and service (J. D. Collins, 2017; Dugan, 2011; T. B. Jones et al., 2016; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Liang et al., 2002; Rosch et al., 2017).

In this chapter, I will explore South Asian American women's representation in the literature on leadership and leadership development. Several challenges arise with this topic. First, Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States

(Akutagawa, 2013; Kawahara et al., 2007; J. Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2021; Ng, 2017), yet are severely underrepresented in research (J. D. Collins, 2017; Museus, 2009; Ng, 2017; Sy et al., 2017), with South Asians and South Asian American women even less so (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009; Kibria, 1996; Ruzicka, 2011). Second, when Asian Americans are represented in research, the community is often portrayed as a monolithic group that is characterized by the Model Minority Myth and forever foreigner stereotypes (Accapadi, 2005; J. Lee et al., 2018; Ruzicka, 2011; V. Yi et al., 2020). This dynamic is problematic because of the wide diversity within the Asian American community. Further, South Asian Americans, with distinct physical features and attributes as well as experiences with racism that differ from other Asians, often do not identify with the label "Asian American" (Accapadi, 2005; Inman, 2006a; Kibria, 1996).

South Asian American women face a "dual invisibility," holding marginalized gender and racial identities (Accapadi, 2005, p. 53). Several scholars call for more intersectional research that would foster a more holistic, complex, and comprehensive understanding of Asian American subgroups' and Asian American women's experiences (J. D. Collins, 2017; Kawahara et al., 2013; Ng, 2017; Rosch et al., 2017). Much of the current research on Asian Americans omits or does not have substantial South Asian American representation (Accapadi, 2005; Kawahara et al., 2013; Ruzicka, 2011; Sy et al., 2017; V. Yi et al., 2020). Asian Americans are also neglected in research on women in leadership, which tends to focus primarily on White women and Western norms, values, and culture (J. D. Collins, 2017; Owen, 2020). This lack of representation in leadership research has implications for Asian American women's leadership efficacy. Data from college freshmen in 2005 indicated that 49.4% of Asian American women rated themselves highly in leadership ability, compared to 58.7% of women overall; in 1971, the rates of both groups were similar, at around 35% (Park et al., 2008). The lack of representation in

the leadership research canon likely contributes to Asian Americans, and people of color broadly, not perceiving themselves as leaders (Grim et al., 2019a; T. B. Jones et al., 2016). Further, current research tends to examine the intersection of leadership and gender or leadership and race, but few studies account for the intersection of race *and* gender in relation to leadership development (Kawahara et al., 2007). For these reasons, the literature focusing on South Asian American women specifically and leadership is sparse. In this chapter, I will include literature on Asian American women and Asian Americans in leadership and draw connections to research on South Asian American women.

In order to better understand the literature around South Asian American women and leadership, it is essential to understand the sociohistorical context of South Asian Americans in the U.S., including immigration history and racialization. In the next section, I will provide an overview of South Asian immigration history and how it has shaped the current South Asian American population, as well as the racialization of South Asians in the U.S. and pervasive stereotypes that influence South Asian Americans' lived experiences. Next, I will explore the current literature on second-generation South Asian American women. In the following sections, I will delve into leadership research with a focus on Asian Americans and Asian American women in different contexts within and outside of higher education. Lastly, I will identify themes throughout the research as well as gaps that require further exploration.

Immigration History

First Immigration Wave & Fight for Access to U.S. Citizenship

Researchers refer to three primary waves of South Asian immigration (Harpalani, 2013; E. Lee, 2015; Rangaswamy, 2000). The first wave in the early 1900s was brought about by opportunities marketed to farmers in India around farming and economic growth on the west

coast of Canada and the U.S. (Rangaswamy, 2000). This wave consisted of mostly Punjabi and Sikh male laborers with intentions to earn money in agricultural work and return home to their families (Harpalani, 2013; E. Lee, 2015; Rangaswamy, 2000). By 1930, the US Indian population was mostly farmers on the west coast and totaled around 3000 (Rangaswamy, 2000). While many in this wave were Sikh, others in the U.S. referred to the population as "Hindoos", presaging South Asians' racial ambiguity in the U.S. (Harpalani, 2013).

South Asians were viewed as an immigration problem by many Canadians and Americans, with Sikhs especially targeted for wearing dastars or turbans (E. Lee, 2015). The 1911 U.S. Immigration Commission referred to South Asians as "universally regarded as the least desirable race of immigrants thus far admitted to the United States" (Munshi, 2016). South Asian immigrants experienced racial discrimination and violence. In 1907 in Bellingham, Washington, a thousand union supporters marched yelling "Drive out the Hindus," dragging South Asians from their homes; 200 South Asians were in jail by that night and many left the next day for Vancouver, Seattle, or Oakland (E. Lee, 2015). In 1908, Canada barred South Asian immigration, pushing more immigration to the U.S.; by 1910, San Francisco was a hub for South Asian immigrants, who were still portrayed as lowly, dirty, cheap laborers (E. Lee, 2015).

This stereotyping of and racism toward South Asians was counter to what many immigrants expected, especially Indians, when arriving to the U.S.. South Asians in the U.S. saw their experiences as connected to British rule in India. While many expected to be treated as British subjects in the U.S., they were met with discrimination and saw an independent India as key to creating belonging and success in the U.S., contributing to support for the Indian Nationalist Movement among South Asian Americans (E. Lee, 2015). Rising support for the movement raised alarms with the Canadian, U.S., and British governments and prompted efforts

for full South Asian exclusion; however, the U.S. was also cautious about absolute exclusion as South Asian immigrants were technically British subjects at the time and how exclusion policies would impact international relations was unclear (E. Lee, 2015). Despite not enacting full exclusion, immigration policies remained strict for South Asians. Between 1911 and 1915, 55% of South Asian applicants were denied admission to the U.S. on grounds such as "likely to become a public charge," citing appearances of weakness, emaciation, and poor health (E. Lee, 2015, p. 166).

One of the most stringent instances of immigration legislation was the Immigration Act of 1917, which outlined the Asiatic Barred Zone and halted much immigration from South Asia as well as other Asian countries for 30 years (Chin, 2020; Harpalani, 2013; E. Lee, 2015). Simultaneously, Alien Land Laws were enacted, barring South Asians and other immigrants from owning or leasing land (E. Lee, 2015). During this same time, South Asians who had immigrated to the U.S. were vying for citizenship.

The Naturalization Law of 1790 was the first Congressional act around citizenship and designated citizenship and naturalization to White people (Harpalani, 2013; Rangaswamy, 2000). In order to gain citizenship, Asian and South Asians had to "make a claim to formal whiteness" (Harpalani, 2013, p. 127). Two cases, the *United States v. Balsara* in 1910 and *A. Kumar Mazumdar* in 1913, declared Indians as considered "Caucasian" and therefore eligible for citizenship (Harpalani, 2013; Rangaswamy, 2000). However, in 1923, the decision was reversed. In *U.S. v. Bahagat Singh Thind,* courts ruled that Asian Indians were not eligible for citizenship and differentiated between "Caucasian" and "white" (Harpalani, 2013; E. Lee, 2015; Rangaswamy, 2000). As Thind, who served in the U.S. military during World War I, did not fit common perceptions of a White person, he was not considered among "free white persons" and

thus ineligible for citizenship (E. Lee, 2015; Rangaswamy, 2000). This ruling led to around 50 Indians being stripped of U.S. citizenship, while approximately 3,000 moved back to India between 1920 and 1940, feeling unwelcome in their new country (Rangaswamy, 2000). In 1946, the Luce-Celler Bill granted citizenship rights to Indians, and established a quote of 100 immigrants from India per year (E. Lee, 2015).

Second Immigration Wave & Shaping of Asian American Population

The 1965 Immigration Act initiated the second immigration wave and is considered the "most significant and profoundly influential for the history of Indian immigration" (Bhatia, 2008a, p. 24). The act, which allowed immigrants skilled in certain fields, was brought about amid growing support for immigration reform in the midst of Cold War politics and the Civil Rights movement; while the U.S. extolled values of freedom and democracy, racism and particularly treatment of war veterans of color, revealed hypocrisy (E. Lee, 2015). The 1965 Immigration Act ended national origin quotas and shifted the demographics of immigrants to the U.S. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, immigrants came predominantly from Europe. By the 1980s, 80% of immigrants were from Asian and Latin American countries and by 2010, 53% of all foreign-born people in the U.S. were born in Latin American and 28% in Asian countries (E. Lee, 2015).

In addition to changing the demographics of the overall immigrant population, the 1965 Immigration Act fundamentally changed the South Asian and Asian populations within the U.S. In creating immigration preference categories based on professional skills in certain fields, the U.S. was able to curate an Asian immigration wave that arrived with educational capital and professional qualifications (Finn, 2009; Harpalani, 2013; Prashad, 2001; Thakore, 2014), thus, creating "a system of discrimination that privileged well educated or professional immigrants"

(Finn, 2009, p. 280). Scholars tie the development of the Model Minority Myth, outlined further in this chapter, to these immigration preferences. While the MMM espouses innate intelligence and high achievements of Asian Americans, "those attainments are *not* caused by natural or cultural selection; rather, they are the result of *state* selection whereby the U.S. state, through the special-skills provisions in the 1965 Immigration Act, fundamentally reconfigured the demography of South Asian America" (Prashad, 2001, p. 4). Further, many of the South Asian immigrants spoke fluent English, a remnant of British colonization and influence on education systems (Rangaswamy, 2000). With the combination of educational, social, and cultural capital, South Asian immigrants did not experience "the more transient enclave of many immigrant groups" and many were "structurally situated for success and mobility" within the U.S. despite experiences with discrimination (Harpalani, 2013, p. 142).

The demographics of the second wave shifted the reputation of Indians within the U.S. from "pariahs to elite" (Rangaswamy, 2000, p. 40). Between 1966 and 1977, 83% of Indian immigrants worked in STEM fields, with 20,000 holding doctoral degrees in science fields, 40,000 engineers, and 25,000 physicians (Prashad, 2001). The social and cultural capital gained in their homeland, including education, professional expertise, and English fluency, allowed South Asians to achieve middle or upper-middle class status and assimilate more easily than other immigrant groups (Finn, 2009; Harpalani, 2013). Once they were settled in the U.S., many of the second-wave South Asian immigrants invested in franchises and small businesses and brought over relatives through family reunification programs in the 1970s and 1980s (Rangaswamy, 2007).

Third Immigration Wave & Diversification of Asian American Population

Family reunification programs spurred the third immigration wave post-1980, which further diversified the Asian American population (Harpalani, 2013; E. Lee, 2015). During the third wave, immigration continued to grow, mostly due to family reunification stipulations first adopted in the 1965 Immigration Act (Harpalani, 2013). Asian Americans who immigrated as part of family reunification programs differed from the second wave population in education levels and professional skills, and had a higher proportion of women while previous waves were predominantly men (E. Lee, 2015). Many of these immigrants hold working class positions in the U.S., not having the same economic and educational capital of the immediate post-1965 wave (Dhingra, 2016b; Harpalani, 2013).

The third wave was also more diverse in country of origin for Asian Americans generally, as well as South Asians. Attributing this to political and economic unrest in Asian countries and opportunities for economic success in the U.S. as well as family reunification sponsorships, (E. Lee, 2015) noted the increase in immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. There was also more gender diversity, with immigrants in the first two waves being predominantly male, as well as diversity in language, religion, and socioeconomic status (E. Lee, 2015; Rangaswamy, 2000).

Asian immigrants working in STEM fields continued to immigrate and make large impacts on U.S. working sectors. By 1998, Chinese and Indian immigrants had started more than a quarter of tech businesses in Silicon Valley, generating over 60,000 jobs; by 2012, over 15% of start-ups were founded by Indian immigrants (E. Lee, 2015). While the Indian American population is still often characterized by high educational attainment and high-paying professions, the number of Indian Americans living under the poverty line has also increased (Rangaswamy, 2000). Many of the immigrants coming under family reunification programs are

not college graduates and work in blue-collar roles (Harpalani, 2013; E. Lee, 2015). Immigrants who came in the second wave used their capital to set up their families and extended relatives in small grocery stores, motels, and gas stations (E. Lee, 2015). For example, Indian Americans own roughly half of the country's motels, with siblings of white-collar immigrants often pooling their resources (E. Lee, 2015). The current wave of immigration also brought about more diversity within educational attainment; South Asian subgroups hold the largest within group gap in educational attainment within the Asian American community, with 75 percent of Indians holding a college degree compared to 15 percent of Bhutanese individuals in the U.S. (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). Despite many different types of diversity within the South Asian American population, the population is often characterized as homogeneous while also racially ambiguous.

South Asian Racialization

Immigration policies largely shaped the ways in which South Asians have been racialized in the U.S. (Dhingra, 2003; Koshy, 1998; Thakore, 2014). At different points in history, South Asians were designated as Hindu, White, or Other on the U.S. government census (Iyer, 2017) and have had varying connections to the umbrella term "Asian American" (Accapadi, 2005; Dhingra, 2003; Harpalani, 2013). In both being categorized in distinct groups and part of larger identity groups, Asian Americans have been forced to view themselves through a Eurocentric lens regarding race (Yu, 2000).

Early Punjabi immigrants during the first wave of immigration were classified as "brown", "black", or "white" based on skin color (Harpalani, 2013). However, the Immigration Act of 1917 created a region termed the "Pacific Barred Zone" that effectively lumped Asians together in order to exclude them from immigration to the U.S. (Harpalani, 2013). This contradicted previous racial classifications that designated Asian Indians as "Caucasian" and

East Asians as “Mongolian” (Harpalani, 2013). U.S. citizenship laws further complicated racial classifications and dynamics for early wave immigrants. As citizenship was designated for White people, South Asians’ attempted claims to Whiteness in order to gain citizenship hindered South Asians’ ability to build solidarity with other Asian groups who could not make these claims (Harpalani, 2013). The U.S. Census continued to designate Indians as White until 1970 when South Asians sought classification under “Asian”, and thereby be recognized as minorities (Harpalani, 2013).

Asian American

The term “Asian American” was coined in the 1960s as a term for political solidarity (Park Hong, 2020). While communities within the Asian American umbrella do not hold a shared language, culture, religion, or immigration history, they do share a history of exclusion from Whiteness and U.S. citizenship (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2021). Historically, many South Asian Americans perceived Asian Americans as a different cultural group that did not always include South Asians (Dhingra, 2003; Inman, 2006a; Kibria, 1996; Purkayastha, 2005). At the time the term “Asian American” was coined during the Civil Rights Movement, South Asians were still a small, growing population in relation to Chinese and Japanese immigrants and not unified with a larger “politicized subcategory of Asian America” (Bhalla & Dhingra, 2022). Further, the context of South Asian immigration history differed from the histories of other Asian American groups, pulling South Asians away from the politicized movement. Connecting these histories to the creation of Asian American studies, Bhalla and Dhingra (2022) wrote:

> … The politics of South Asians in the United States were complicit with either models of class-based assimilation shaped by the professional provisos of the 1965 Immigration Act that ushered in the immigration of South Asian doctors, scientists, and engineers en

> masse, or self-exotification as spiritual gurus. In either case, these positionalities did not align well with Asian American studies (309).

The class privilege and cultural capital many second wave South Asian immigrants held created a gap between South Asians and the rest of Asian America.

Further, as South Asians do not have similar physical features attributed to most Asian Americans, they are often left out of racial categories (Accapadi, 2005; Khandelwal, 2002). In a study on how Indian and Indian American women describe their college experiences in relation to racial, ethnic, and gendered identities, none of the participants used "Asian" or "Asian American" as descriptors of their own identities (Alexander, 2018). Many identified more with "South Asian American" than the umbrella term of "Asian American". In a study focusing on students in a South Asian sorority, one participant said of her choice to join the South Asian organization:

> It did not even cross my mind at all to join an Asian sorority. To me that was very different. We are obviously, continent-wise, from the same continent. But that could have been African-American to me. I didn't really see a connection that I personally related to. (Accapadi, 2005, p. 99)

Although the "Asian American" umbrella term and categorization is understood, South Asians' identification varies. Alexander (2018) found that upbringing influences how South Asians identify, including the region where they grew up, national origin, ethnicity, and immigration status. For example, first-generation South Asians were more likely to identify based on ethnicity, national origin, or religion, while second-generation South Asians tended to identify by race and ethnicity (Alexander, 2018).

Additional more recent studies suggest South Asians' identification with the umbrella term "Asian American" may be shifting. A quantitative study using the 2016 National Asian American Survey explored Asian American subgroups' identification with the umbrella term, as well as others' perceptions of who counts as Asian American (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2021). The researchers found that Indians and Pakistanis identified as Asian, although other groups, including White, Black, Latino, East and Southeast Asian individuals were significantly less likely to identify South Asians as Asian (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2021). Additionally, college-educated and younger Americans were more likely to racially assign South Asians as Asian, holding across racial groups, suggesting that "understanding of racial categories can change through formal education about the diversity of the U.S. population, exposure to U.S. census classifications, and/or intergroup contact (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2021, p. 1751). This study, along with Alexander's (2018) findings on factors influencing how South Asians identify, suggests that while South Asians may still be excluded by others from Asian American classification, South Asians' identification with the term is shifting to see themselves as part of the larger group.

South Asians & Racial Ambiguity

The lack of consensus around a racial identity label and multiple identifiers within the community contribute to racial ambiguity experienced by South Asians in the U.S. (Harpalani, 2013; Kibria, 1996); Kibria 1996) used the term "ambiguous nonwhites" to describe these experiences (p. 78). South Asians do not fit easily into conventional U.S. racial categories of Black, White, or Asian, causing social discomfort for others and leading to a "raceless" identity where race is ignored and racialized experiences invisible (Kibria, 1996).

The racialization of South Asians in the U.S. is very much understood in relation to Whiteness and Blackness in the U.S. (Dhingra, 2003; Harpalani, 2013; Thakore, 2014). Thakore (2014) refers to the racial hierarchy in the U.S. as a 3-tiered system with White people at the top, Black people at the bottom, and Asian people in the middle as "honorary Whites" (p. 151) due in large part to their economic, academic, and professional success driven by second-wave immigrants. Kim (2018) extrapolates on the racial hierarchy by recognizing Asian Americans as between White and Black Americans, but also outside as forever foreigners, a stereotype that frames Asians as not fully American. The continuous experiences with microaggressions and discrimination, along with perceived foreignness, negate the possibility of complete assimilation for Asian Americans, regardless of immigration status or how many generations have lived in the U.S. (J. Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2021); Lee and Ramakrishnan (2021) note anti-Muslim and anti-South Asian violence after 9/11 as well as more recently, anti-Asian discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic, as examples of the perpetual othering and perceived foreignness of Asian Americans.

Hong (2021) describes the Asian American experience as holding "a vague purgatorial status: not white enough nor black enough, distrusted by African Americans, ignored by whites, unless we're being used by whites to keep the black man down" (p. 9). This status not only holds Asian American, and South Asian American, racialization as inseparable from Whiteness and Blackness, but also posits Asian Americans as a wedge against other people of color, particularly Black people. The framing of Asian Americans' proximity to Whiteness is upheld by the Model Minority Myth, which I will expand on in the next section.

Model Minority Myth and Upholding Racial Hierarchies

The Model Minority Myth (MMM) is one of the most prominent themes that emerges in the literature on South Asian Americans, as well as Asian Americans more broadly (Akutagawa, 2013; E. Lee, 2015; Liang et al., 2002; Ng, 2017; Park et al., 2008; Poon et al., 2016; Prashad, 2001; Sy et al., 2017; V. Yi et al., 2020). The myth asserts that Asian Americans are universally and inherently quiet, successful, respectful of authority, pliant, passive, conflict averse, introverted, and prioritize group needs over individual needs (Akutagawa, 2013; Kawahara et al., 2013; Liang et al., 2002; Park et al., 2008; Prashad, 2001; Sy et al., 2017; V. Yi et al., 2020). Such stereotypes imply complacency with the status quo and "mischaracterize Asian Americans as a group with little interest in becoming activists, community leaders, or politically engaged citizens" (Park et al., 2008, p. 78). Although some of these attributes are not inherently negative qualities, they are often in contrast to normative, Westernized ideas of leadership, such as assertiveness, risk-taking, extroversion, and charisma (Park et al., 2008). This incongruence can lead to perceptions that Asian Americans are not qualified for leadership roles, and Asian Americans internalizing this perception as well (Park et al., 2008).

Further, although references to the MMM are prominent in research, literature that applies a critical lens to the ways in which the myth is used to uphold White supremacy and anti-Blackness is still emerging. In a review of 112 studies, (Poon et al., 2016) found that most cited MMM without a critical perspective, the second largest category did not mention MMM, and the third had critical definitions of MMM. In this section, I will provide a brief historical context of MMM and its relationship to socioeconomic status, followed by the role of MMM in perpetuating White supremacy and racial hierarchies, and stereotypes of Asian Americans.

Historical Context

The MMM was first introduced in the 1960s through media stories such as the New York Times' article, *Success Story Japanese American Styles,* and US News & World Reports' *Success Story of One Minority Group in the US* (Huang, 2012). Initially crafted primarily around Asian Americans, excluding Pacific Islanders, the MMM was popularized during the Civil Rights Movements by politicians (Poon et al., 2016; J. Yi & Todd, 2021). The term was used to frame Asian Americans as a counter-example to Black Americans, positing that Asian Americans, particularly those of Chinese and Japanese descent, had ascended into higher social statuses through hard work and assimilating successfully to U.S. culture (J. Yi & Todd, 2021).

The anti-Blackness rhetoric of the MMM continued for decades. During the 1992 Los Angeles riots, media outlets framed the dynamics as a Black-Asian conflict with African Americans as unproductive and resentful of Korean Americans' presence and economic success, while Korean American shopkeepers were upheld as hardworking immigrants working toward the American Dream, unphased by structural inequities that brought about the riots (E. Lee, 2015). In addition to pitting Asian and Black Americans against each other, the MMM was also seen as a threat to White Americans. In the 1980s, the rising number of Asian college students at elite universities brought about nicknames for MIT, "Made in Taiwan", and UCLA, "University of Caucasians Lost among Asians" (E. Lee, 2015). More recently, E. Lee (2015) referred to business magazines touting Indian Americans having "conquered Silicon Valley" (p. 383). In all of these comparisons, both with Black and White Americans, success of Asian Americans was framed "as coming at the expense of other groups" (E. Lee, 2015, p. 376) and a threat to others rather than contributions.

Relationship to Socioeconomic Status

Economic success is a central component of the MMM, with a narrative that supports the notion of the meritocratic American Dream. Due to immigration policies that brought about the second immigration wave, Asian Americans are often middle class and able to gain membership in highly-esteemed STEM professions (Alexander, 2018; Bhatia, 2008a; Kibria, 1996). This structural integration, defined by access to educational and economic opportunities, results in a perceived "proximity to Whiteness" (Bhatia, 2008a, p. 31). Membership in highly-esteemed fields "sheltered by the privileges of their class status from the most blatant forms of racism against nonwhites in the United States" (Kibria, 1996, p. 81). Although the South Asian population has since diversified with many more recent immigrants in blue collar professions, the narrative of economic success persists.

The intertwining of class, immigration status, and American identity is the crux of the MMM, used as evidence to support the possibility of the American Dream with a story of immigrants coming with nothing and achieving success through hard work and perseverance. (Finn, 2009) asserts that the transition of immigrant to American is often marked by an arrival in middle class society in the U.S. In a study on South Asian women college students, many of the participants described their parents' stories in ways that conformed to the American Dream, neglecting "transnational linkages in class positioning" (Finn, 2009, p. 286). The participants attributed their family's class mobility to attributes such as perseverance, frugality, work ethic, and struggle, without acknowledgement of social and cultural capital gained in their parents' home countries before immigrating. Thus, the ability to conform to the American Dream narrative of "starting from scratch" required their families' stories to start at the point of immigration to the U.S., ignoring class positioning and capital in South Asia (Finn, 2009, p. 294). This "rags to riches" narrative of immigrant communities played a role in upholding White

supremacy by framing Asian Americans as an American success story, with implications that other communities of color were at fault for their societal and class positioning. Bhalla and Dhingra (2022) asserted the importance of attention to class privilege in understanding the experiences of South Asian Americans. Citing increased representation of South Asian Americans in media and politics, including shows such as *Never Have I Ever* and Kamala Harris's role as the first South Asian American and Black Vice President of the U.S., scholars "cannot disarticulate these more progressive narratives of South Asian American representation from the privilege that made them possible" (p. 315).

Perpetuation of White Supremacy

Although the MMM is pervasive in research on Asian Americans, much of the literature presents the myth as merely a stereotype around high achievement and educational success, lacking a critical analysis of the ways in which the MMM reinforces deficit perspectives and White supremacy. (Poon et al., 2016) emphasizes the importance of integrating critical perspectives around the MMM for a more complete and just understanding, asserting that research that defines the MMM without a grounding in critical perspectives on race and racism maintain systems of White supremacy.

In touting Asian Americans as models of overcoming hardship and achieving success through work ethic and perseverance, the MMM is used as a wedge between Asian Americans and other people of color. V. Yi et al. (2020) asserts that "White supremacy weaponized the myth as a political tool to invalidate claims of systemic racism against non-Asian American people of color" (p. 3). In a study exploring perceptions of Asian Americans' competence compared to other communities of color, Park et al. (2015) found that greater perceptions of Asian American competence relative to other communities of color was associated with stronger

individualist beliefs about inequalities faced by Black and Latinx communities. Belief in the MMM reinforces notions of a meritocratic society, denies the existence of discrimination and systemic racism, and renders programs such as affirmative action unnecessary. The MMM serves as a legitimizing ideology, maintaining that "society is fair primarily by holding individuals solely responsible for their outcomes and social standing, rather than attributing unequal relationships among groups to systemic inequality" (J. Yi & Todd, 2021, p. 570). This positions Asian Americans as a "middleman minority," a term coined in the 1960s that refers to groups as buffers or pawns in the struggle to maintain power by elites (Poon et al., 2016).

Further, internalization of the myth perpetuates similar beliefs in the Asian American community. In a study on internalization of the MMM among Asian American college students, particularly as it relates to anti-Black attitudes and opposition to affirmative action, J. Yi and Todd (2021) used several quantitative scales to measure internalization of the MMM, belief in a just world, colorblind and anti-Black attitudes, and opposition to affirmative action. The study's results affirmed that the myth upholds racial inequality, specifically anti-Black racism, with direct and indirect links of greater internalized MMM with anti-Black attitudes and opposing affirmative action, specifically through higher ratings of colorblindness and just world beliefs (J. Yi & Todd, 2021). The researchers pose that internalization of the MMM may function as a survival mechanism that allows Asian Americans to maintain belief in meritocracy, serving as "an adaptive function in the short-term, but ultimately works against group interests by maintaining White dominance and justifying the inferiority of racial minority groups" (J. Yi & Todd, 2021, p. 575). Through perpetuating victim blaming and denying the existence of systemic racism, J. Yi and Todd (2021) assert that internalization of the MMM may hinder Asian American college students' development around sociopolitical awareness.

Denial of systemic racism and discrimination against other people of color also requires a denial of racism against Asian Americans. The upholding of the MMM requires Asian Americans to endure experiences of racism without complaint in order to uphold the American Dream, and allows others to ignore racism against Asian Americans or frame incidents as isolated rather than resulting from structural inequities (E. Lee, 2015; Sy et al., 2017). This is a misleading picture that "obscures the unstable place of Asian Americans in contemporary America" (E. Lee, 2015, p. 374). Asian Americans are touted as examples of the American Dream, yet also experience a perpetual foreigner stereotype as never being fully American. As such, domestic and global sociopolitical issues influence whether, and which, Asian Americans are accepted or marginalized and ostracized within the U.S. The "simultaneous acceptance and rejection of Asian Americans reflects their complex place in contemporary American society as well as the myths and realities of the so-called rise of Asian Americans" (E. Lee, 2015, p. 374). The tenuous positioning of Asian Americans within U.S. racial dynamics was apparent during post 9/11 racism against South Asians. In the 8 weeks following 9/11, over a thousand incidents of racial violence against Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Americans were reported (E. Lee, 2015). Conversely, Asian Americans are often categorized with White students in reporting data related to racial achievement gaps, perpetuating the notion that Asian Americans are "honorary Whites" (Poon et al., 2016). This complex and precarious placement positions Asian Americans "as having to prove their loyalty or otherwise be assumed as the yellow (or brown) peril, the invading foreigner" (Bhalla & Dhingra, 2022, p. 311).

The MMM not only asserts that systemic racism is nonexistent, but also condemns those who acknowledge, speak against, or take action against prejudice, upsetting the status quo. Prashad (2001) describes how the MMM enacts a racial wedge and silences dissent:

> As if to say protest is un-American, the myth of the model minority emerged in the wake of the Civil Rights movement to show up rebellious blacks for their attempts to redress power relations… Look at the Asians, the black intelligentsia was told, they work hard without complaint. True, to some extent, but they don't seem to get very far either. (p. 7)

While Asian Americans are touted as a model, there is also a limit to their success as not to threaten the status of White supremacy.

In tying the MMM to a work ethic without complaint or protest, generations of Asian Americans have been socialized to deflect, ignore, or rationalize and excuse racism they experience (E. Lee, 2015). E. Lee (2015) posits that:

> To be Asian American in the twenty-first century is an exercise in coming to terms with a contradiction: benefitting from new positions of power and privilege while still being victims of hate crimes and microaggressions that dismiss Asian American issues and treat Asian Americans as outsiders in their own country. (p. 391)

While Asian Americans can be complicit in accepting inequities to hold on to privilege, this hinders progress toward racial equity and solidarity among people of color.

Perpetuation of Stereotypes

The denial of systemic racism and overlooking of racist experiences requires silence around issues of justice, belief in meritocracy, and an unwillingness to challenge the status quo – all components of the MMM. Stereotypes of Asian Americans as quiet, respectful, obedient, hardworking, passive, conformist, and conflict averse are perpetuated through the MMM (Akutagawa, 2013; Kawahara et al., 2013; Liang et al., 2002; Prashad, 2001; Sy et al., 2017). While none of these traits are inherently negative, they not only assist in upholding White supremacy but also contrast with typical ideas of leadership in the U.S. (Kawahara et al., 2013).

This is significant as Asian Americans are often touted as academically and professionally high-achieving, the crux of the MMM. However, the above traits result in society not viewing Asian Americans as qualified for leadership roles, as well as Asian Americans not viewing themselves as leaders (Liang et al., 2002; Sy et al., 2017).

The MMM frames Asian Americans as hardworking and compliant yet not holding the capacity for leadership. In exploring South Asians' experiences, Prashad (2001) asserts that South Asians are expected to stay in a designated zone and are wanted for their labor, not managerial skills, and encouraged to embody the MMM in all aspects of life. However, "the bargain revolves around the sale of the desi political soul in exchange for the license to accumulate economic wealth through hard work and guile" (Prashad, 2001, p. 102). The Model Minority label, and the status that comes with it, is contingent upon Asian Americans' complacency with and adherence to the status quo.

Additionally, the MMM perpetuates the stereotype that Asian Americans are a monolithic group, with an overgeneralization that Asian Americans are universally successful in academic and professional careers (Poon et al., 2016; Sy et al., 2017; V. Yi et al., 2020). This results in a belief that Asian Americans do not need support, as well as a lack of resources and attention to the community (Sy et al., 2017; V. Yi et al., 2020). Rather, Asian Americans are framed as "poster children of American success" and "honorary whites" (E. Lee, 2015, p. 373). While the common counterargument that disaggregating data and understanding diversity within the Asian American community is important, Poon et al. (2016) emphasized the potential unintentional consequence of perpetuating deficit frameworks. By emphasizing educational disparities within the Asian American community through disaggregated data, researchers may play into a narrative that a key indicator or requirement of "authentic" racial minorities is that they display

educational deficiencies (Poon et al., 2016). Further, this approach may also uphold that the MMM does apply to certain groups within the Asian American community that are statistically high achieving, such as Indian Americans.

As illustrated through this section, the MMM is pervasive throughout existing literature on Asian Americans, which Poon et al. (2016) frames as a "prolonged scholarly project of debunking MMM" (p. 470). However, Poon et al. (2016) argues that the centering of the MMM in Asian Americans' experiences and research is a disservice to understanding lived experiences and perpetuates White supremacy. In order to disrupt the hegemonic narrative of the MMM, researchers must apply critical perspectives and center the lived experiences of Asian Americans (Poon et al., 2016). As the MMM is prominent in research and racialization of South Asian Americans, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which the myth shapes perceptions of leadership. However, in this study, I seek to center the experiences of South Asian American women in ways that acknowledge the influence of the MMM, but are not confined by it. In the next section, I will explore existing research that focuses specifically on South Asian American women and their experiences.

South Asian American Women Representation in Research

Much of the research on South Asian American women focuses on topics such as cultural norms, values, and beliefs, as well as familial and gender roles, and intergenerational conflict (Alexander, 2018; Banerjee-Stevens, 2009; Kawahara et al., 2007). In this section, I will explore themes that emerge from the literature, starting with how South Asian American women perceive and navigate bicultural identities, followed by expectations and perceptions around gender. These themes overlap with findings from research on Asian Americans and leadership.

Considering the scarcity of research that focuses on South Asians, particularly in relation to leadership, the themes outlined in this section provide valuable context.

Navigating a Bicultural Identity

Second-generation South Asian American women whose parents immigrated to the U.S. often have to navigate a bicultural socialization. They grow up amidst two spheres, which conflict at times - their South Asian identity, perceived as passive and submissive, and their American identity, characterized as active and progressive (Alexander, 2018; Roy, 1998; Ruzicka, 2011). While South Asian American women hold space in each sphere, part of navigating a bicultural identity is feeling othered in both South Asian and American spaces (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009; Inman, 2006a; Soin, 2015). According to Mukherjee (2000):

> South Asian American women are usually defined in terms of the other or in opposition to some other category. They are either not like South Asians or not like Americans. Add to this the layer of being a woman and we are left to deal with the cultural baggage and stereotypes ascribed to both categories of women. (p. 281)

Rather than freely shaping one's own identity, South Asian American women are often pressured instead to react to definitions of South Asian American identity from external forces (Mukherjee, 2000).

Intergenerational conflict contributes to the difficulties in navigating a bicultural identity. In a study examining the racial and ethnic identity of first- and second-generation South Asian women, Inman (2006a) focuses on the role of "cultural value conflict" which she defines as "the experience of negative affect resulting from dealing simultaneously with values and expectations from the culture of origin (e.g. South Asian) and those imposed from the new culture (e.g. White American)" (p. 306). The theme of conflict between two cultures and between generations is

salient in the research on South Asian Americans, as well as identity development theories pertaining to Asian Americans (Ibrahim & Ohnishi, H.Sandhu, 1997; Inman, 2006a; Ruzicka, 2011; Soin, 2015). I will explore this theme more in the following section on gender norms and expectations.

While South Asian American women's identities as South Asian and American clash, the literature also illustrates how South Asian families draw clear boundaries at times. For example, some first-generation South Asian parents, in efforts to make sure their children assimilate to the dominant culture successfully, only spoke their native language in the household and used English to speak with their children outside of the home (Alexander, 2018). In some ways, women's South Asian and American worlds were kept separate and did not intersect. In the two separate spheres, South Asian American women spoke different languages, had different friend circles, and had separate birthday parties to celebrate with each sphere (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009). However, despite efforts to maintain strong ties to both cultures, South Asian American women often felt othered within each in feeling pressured to choose one identity in certain contexts while being expected to be an expert in both, and not feeling fully part of either group (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009).

Feeling Othered

The Perpetual Foreigner stereotype is prevalent in the literature and contributes to the feelings of otherness among South Asian Americans (Alexander, 2018; Soin, 2015). In a dissertation study exploring Indian and Indian American women's experiences in college, specifically related to their racial, ethnic, and gendered identities, participants commented on being "asked where they are *really* from upon identifying themselves as 'American'"

(Alexander, 2018, p. 60). In these interactions, they described needing to differentiate between their birthplace and heritage as a result of not being able to identify as "fully American."

Interactions with White peers throughout childhood and adolescence emerged as a theme in South Asian women's descriptions of feeling othered (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009; Soin, 2015). In her dissertation study, Banerjee-Stevens (2009) explored the process in which second-generation South Asian women developed a bicultural identity. Themes from the participants included feeling different from their peers and a sense of imposter syndrome within South Asian and American cultures. Participants expressed that their South Asian identities were seen as problems to be fixed by their White peers and roommates (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009). Despite adopting dominant norms and behaviors, participants still felt othered by dominant culture (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009).

Similarly, in a study exploring the college experiences of second-generation Indian American women, Soin (2015) interviewed and conducted focus groups with 10 second-generation Indian American undergraduate students at a midwestern university. Participants in the study described positive experiences with White peers while also recounting experiences with microaggressions and subtle forms of racism (Soin, 2015). Soin (2015) referred to systemic racism as an invisible stressor, as participants described being accustomed to being in predominantly White spaces and adapting to mainstream cultural norms while simultaneously also experiencing racism. These experiences with racism had a strong impact on students' racialization at a time where the participants were still forming their racial identities and held different levels of awareness around racism and racial identity (Soin, 2015). Consistent with literature on the MMM, participants expressed that despite their lived experiences with racism, they described a lack of support and a hesitancy to speak out. The Indian American women also

did not feel a sense of belonging within the larger Asian American community. According to Soin (2015), the students were "unsure of where they can feel validated, recognized, and valued on campus" and experienced feelings of invisibility in being "neither a true 'minority' nor a 'White' student" (p. 228), reflecting the racial ambiguity many South Asian Americans experience.

Socioeconomic status further complicates the sense of in-betweenness South Asian Americans experience between South Asian and American cultures, particularly for those from middle and upper-class backgrounds (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009; Finn, 2009; Rangaswamy, 2000). Middle- and upper-class South Asian Americans often live in predominantly White neighborhoods and experience many of the benefits of class privilege, yet remain outsiders in "a WASP world" (Rangaswamy, 2000, p. 6). In a study on South Asian American women and class, Finn (2009) discussed the relationship between being upper class in socioeconomic status and racialized as White. Exploring one of the participant's feelings of otherness, Finn (2009) stated "racial identity as non-White precludes her from full belonging as an upper middle classed subject. 'Real' upper-middle class subjects are White" (p. 290). Regardless of financial success, academic achievement, and adopting dominant norms and behaviors, South Asians remain outsiders of dominant American culture (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009; Finn, 2009).

Conversely, South Asian women also experience judgement for not being South Asian "enough," both from White peers and within South Asian communities (Soin, 2015). South Asian American women cited being referred to as "white-washed" by White peers when they did not consistently outwardly express their South Asian identity through visible indicators such as food, dance, and language (Soin, 2015, p. 128). Additionally, South Asian student organizations provided both belonging and pressure to perform identity. While South Asian student

organizations can lead to positive experiences that provide a sense of community, belonging, and empowerment, as well as strengthening of ethnic identity development, second-generation South Asian Americans also often experienced pressure and discomfort in forming relationships within the community, feeling they were not South Asian "enough" (Alexander, 2018; Soin, 2015). Further, the lack of connection to extended family and community influenced second-generation South Asian Americans' abilities to embrace and take ownership of their ethnic identity (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009). South Asian American women faced the additional challenge of finding in-group communities where they could be themselves without feeling the pressure of traditional gender expectations (Soin, 2015).

Navigating Gender Expectations and Perceptions

Navigating a bicultural identity includes negotiating pressures to conform to two very different sets of norms, values, and cultures; this is especially true when considering expectations and perceptions around gender in South Asian and American cultures (Alexander, 2018; Hasnat, 1998; Inman, 2006a; Mukherjee, 2000; Soin, 2015). South Asian American women are immersed and socialized within American culture, while also facing familial pressures to maintain a South Asian identity that embodies traditional values related to family responsibilities and gender norms (Inman, 2006a).

In a collection of essays from South Asian American women on experiences navigating these cultural conflicts, one participant spoke of her own experiences navigating her identity as a Muslim, American-born, Pakistani woman:

> I feel that I am fighting two battles: one dealing with religious and racial prejudices within mainstream American society and the other, at home and in my community, wrestling to keep my rights granted by Islam and denied by a patriarchal cultural system.

> According to the older generation in the Pakistani community one is either a good Muslim girl or an "Amreekan" (American). In reality, one can be both. (Hasnat, 1998, p. 39)

This captures the complexities of how South Asian American women perceive and shape their identity while navigating and fighting external pressures to conform to established norms and values set by both cultures.

Family, especially parents, are a key influence in South Asian women's identity development (Inman, 2006a; Ruzicka, 2011; Soin, 2015). In a study on second-generation South Asian American women's undergraduate experiences, Soin (2015) referred to how participants spoke about family as "the center of everything," working as a system that "shapes who the women can be, including as students, future professionals, mothers, and wives" (p. 215). For example, women described feeling limited in career choices due to gender by their families. While their parents emphasized pursuing high-status and well-earning professional fields, career choices were consistently framed in relation to marriage and having children (Soin, 2015). This emphasis on traditional gender norms and values often resulted in tension for the second-generation South Asian American women, who wanted to make their families proud while also feeling constrained by imposed identities and limited choices (Soin, 2015).

In a study on cultural value conflict among first- and second-generation South Asian women, (Inman, 2006a) identified selective acculturation as an important and common experience within South Asian immigrant communities. The study included 193 participants between 20 and 60 years old; 63 were first-generation immigrants and 130 were second-generation immigrants. Inman (2006) used a quantitative cultural value conflict scale to measure cultural value conflict in intimate relations and sex role expectations. According to Inman

(2006), in order to successfully assimilate in the U.S., South Asian Americans "adapt to some U.S. sociocultural norms (e.g., speaking the English language, career goals), but they strongly hold on to 'central' ethnic cultural values related to marriage and dating practices" (Inman, 2006a, p. 314). Although Inman, (2006a) found this selective acculturation to be more pronounced among first-generation South Asian American women, the pressure to adhere to traditional South Asian norms and values around dating and marriage was also present for second-generation South Asian American women (Ruzicka, 2011; Soin, 2015). In a study on intergenerational issues between first-generation South Asian American mothers and second-generation South Asian American daughters, Ruzicka (2011) found that second-generation South Asian American women often experience pressure from their mothers, in particular, to date and marry someone who shares their religious and cultural backgrounds. Participants described their mothers as traditional and rigid, yet also internalized some of these expectations (Ruzicka, 2011).

The relationship between mothers and daughters was a significant theme in the research on South Asian American women (Inman, 2006a; Ruzicka, 2011; Soin, 2015). For second-generation South Asian American women, mothers were often cited as influential in their beliefs around marriage and relationships, a source of support in their personal lives, shaping ethnic identity development, and serving as role models (Ruzicka, 2011; Soin, 2015). However, while mothers tended to be engaged in their daughters' social and personal lives, they tended to be less directly involved in the academic, professional, and career aspects (Ruzicka, 2011). Although mothers highly encouraged college and establishing successful career fields, many of the mothers in Ruzicka's (2011) study were not college graduates themselves and so, their lack of knowledge and understanding around the U.S. academic system limited their guidance on college and career choices. Daughters of mothers who are highly educated also described their mothers

as more engaged with their ethnic identity development, both admiring their mothers and wanting to be different from them in holding to traditional gender values (Soin, 2015).

First-generation South Asian American mothers played an important role in maintaining a connection to South Asian culture for their second-generation daughters. Traditionally, South Asian women held the responsibility within families of upholding their family's reputation and honor, as well as carrying and passing on the culture (Alexander, 2018; DasGupta & Das Dasgupta, 1998; Mukherjee, 2000; Ruzicka, 2011). For second-generation South Asian American women, their mothers served as their passport to cultural knowledge, teachers of rituals and traditions, and connections to South Asian culture and community (Alexander, 2018; Ruzicka, 2011). For the first-generation mothers, this was a primary way they contributed to their daughters' identity development as South Asian women (Ruzicka, 2011). Although South Asian women have traditionally held the role of "primary agents of cultural transmission" (Ruzicka, 2011, p. 238), the sense of responsibility to fulfill this responsibility is shifting with second-generation South Asian American women. South Asian women raised in the U.S. often did not grow up feeling the sense of responsibility to be the holders of cultural knowledge, but developed deeper interest in learning and connecting to South Asian culture later in their lives, particularly after moving out of their parents' house (Alexander, 2018). Additionally, Ruzicka (2011) described the strengthening of mother-daughter relationships after the daughters went away to college, as well as the second-generation South Asian daughters seeking out their own efforts to engage in South Asian culture and values outside of their parents' home.

Another difference between first- and second-generation South Asian American women is how they perceive their own identities. While first-generation South Asian women have typically held on to their homeland's concepts of "national, linguistic, and communal identities,"

second-generation South Asian American women were more likely to perceive themselves as American and assume a racial-political designation as they locate their social positions (Inman, 2006a, p. 309). Further, although parents exert a strong influence in passing down traditional South Asian traditions and values, peer groups were influential in shaping an understanding of what it means to be a South Asian *American* woman, particularly for second-generation South Asians (Ruzicka, 2011). While first-generation South Asians typically used specific labels referring to country of origin, religion, and communities, the labels "brown" and "Desi" were distinct to the second-generation in attempts to represent a pan-ethnic South Asian identity as well as differentiate themselves under the broader Asian American umbrella (Ruzicka, 2011). Ruzicka (2011) asserted that the use of these terms "allows for the second-generation 'racially ambiguous non-whites' to finally describe themselves in a meaningful way around their racial identity" (p. 242). This shift in identity within the South Asian community challenges common stereotypes of South Asian women that contradict dominant ideas of leadership. In the next section, I will provide an overview of current literature around Asian American women and South Asian Americans in relation to leadership.

Asian American Women and Leadership

Though much of the research on Asian American women emphasizes the influence of traditional cultural values and familial roles, upholding stereotypes of Asian American women as victims of patriarchal cultures, there is also a less-often-told history of Asian American women's leadership (Kawahara et al., 2007). As stated previously, research on leadership that focuses on South Asian American women is virtually nonexistent and research on Asian American women and leadership is scarce. In this section, I will explore literature on leadership and leadership development of Asian American women and Asian Americans, highlighting when previous

studies focus on or include South Asian Americans. Beginning with a brief overview of historical context of Asian Americans in leadership and activism, I will then address research on Asian American college students, faculty and staff, and professionals outside of higher education.

Historical Context of Asian Americans & Leadership

In order to understand South Asian American women's relationship to leadership, it is important to understand historical and social contexts. As Kawahara et al. (2007) states, "Asian American women's leadership in the 21st century can be understood only in the context of Asian American women's history" (p. 298). Living amidst two cultures, Asian American women's engagement with leadership has often brought about dissonance and clashes with traditional Asian cultural norms and expectations around gender within their ethnic and racial communities. Nonetheless, Asian American women leaders contributed in significant ways during the male-dominated Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly around creating courses and programs pertaining to Asian Americans and ethnic studies in higher education institutions and publishing work on Asian American women's experiences (Grim et al., 2019; Kawahara et al., 2007; Leigh et al., 2021; Manzano et al., 2017). A salient theme in Asian American activism, particularly for women, is its historic and continual focus on issues that impact the Asian American community, such as supporting immigration rights, advocating for children, education around domestic violence, fighting against residential racial segregation as well as racial violence and discrimination, and engaging in activism against sweatshops and unfair labor practices (Grim et al., 2019; Kawahara et al., 2007; Kodama & Dugan, 2020; Park et al., 2008).

Although Asian Americans have a substantial history of political and community activism, the sparse retelling of this history contributes to feelings of invisibility and dissonance

with perceptions of leadership (Grim et al., 2019). In a study exploring how regional context shapes Asian American college students' social justice activism in the Midwest, Grim et al. (2019) interviewed administrators who worked with Asian American student organizations. The participants described the regional history of Asian American activism and social justice work, including involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and creation of Asian American and ethnic studies departments on their campuses (Grim et al., 2019). However, these stories were largely "untold and unheard in most spaces in the Midwest" and with little exposure, students were largely unable to see themselves as social justice activists (Grim et al., 2019, p. 31).

Asian American College Student Leadership

Asian American students' leadership is often portrayed as activism, service, or civic engagement (Liang et al., 2002; Manzano, 2018; Manzano et al., 2017), reflecting the common ways in which leadership of students of color is frequently framed within the literature (T. B. Jones et al., 2016). Additionally, Asian American students may resist labels related to leadership, associating the term with Whiteness and patriarchal norms, and gravitate more toward "activism" as an apt label for their involvements (Leigh et al., 2021).

Consistent with the history of Asian American women's leadership, Asian American and South Asian women's leadership in college tended to focus on issues affecting their communities, such as racism, campus climate issues, and building panethnic alliances (Accapadi, 2005; Grim et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2002; Manzano et al., 2017). Much of Asian American students' leadership occurred within ethnic and race-based in-group communities (Accapadi, 2005; Liang et al., 2002). In a study on developing Asian American leaders, (Liang et al., 2002) highlighted three campus-based leadership programs for Asian Pacific Islander students, all of which conceptualized leadership as strongly tied to activism and grounded their programs in

Asian identity and culture. This in-group community was important in building leadership efficacy. Asian Americans were more likely to score lower on measures of socially responsible leadership and leadership self-efficacy; some attributed this to dominant and racialized notions of leadership that resulted in excluding Asian Americans (Liang et al., 2002).

Due to how Asian Americans were racialized and the pervasiveness of the Model Minority Myth, Asian Americans were often excluded from discourse around diversity and race, which had negative implication for their experiences as well as larger conversations about race which were incomplete (Grim et al., 2019; Kodama & Dugan, 2020; Soin, 2015). Conversations around race were often focused on "White and underrepresented students, and the term 'underrepresented' was often used synonymously with Black students or Black and Latinx students" (Grim et al., 2019, p. 30); through this, Asian American students were rendered invisible as neither White nor a "true minority" (Soin, 2015, p. 228). Asian Americans did not often have opportunities to discuss racism beyond a black-white binary (Grim et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2002), and were also frequently socialized to ignore acts of racism in order to avoid causing trouble (Soin, 2015). Situated in this difficult position, some Asian American students reacted to experiences of racism through delving into their academic work or immersing themselves in their ethnic communities, avoiding more broad campus engagement and leadership (Liang et al., 2002).

Students' involvement in cultural organizations was associated with a sense of belonging, as well as enhanced opportunities to develop leadership identity, capacity, and efficacy (Accapadi, 2005; Manzano et al., 2017; Park et al., 2008), illustrating the important connection between belonging related to racial identity and one's leadership efficacy. In order to gain a better understanding of this, Kodama and Dugan (2020) conducted a quantitative study to

investigate how racial identity and resilience influence leadership self-efficacy among Asian American students. As many studies on Asian American students are localized to an institution or a particular region, the researchers were intentional in seeking a large, national sample of 2,223 Asian American students of which 18% identified as Indian or Pakistani and 59% women. In defining racial identity, the authors used the Collective Racial Esteem (CRE) framework, which includes: private CRE, referring to one's internal pride in their affiliation with their racial identity group; public CRE, defined as opinions of others about one's racial group; CRE membership, referring to relationships and sense of belonging within one's racial identity group; and CRE salience, the importance of racial affiliation to one's overall identity (Kodama & Dugan, 2020).

Although CRE was found to influence resilience, the authors found that resilience was the only direct influencer of leadership self-efficacy (Kodama & Dugan, 2020). Private CRE was found to have a particularly strong relationship to resilience, meaning that positive perceptions of one's racial group may increase Asian American students' self-confidence to deal with challenges (Kodama & Dugan, 2020), which may be especially important considering that Asian Americans' experiences with racism are often minimized (Grim et al., 2019; Kodama & Dugan, 2020; Liang et al., 2002; Soin, 2015). Similarly, Asian American students' resilience was essential to, and often emerged from, withstanding racial stereotyping students experience in their leadership roles and experiences (Kodama & Dugan, 2020). This finding highlighted the importance of opportunities for within-group spaces for students to develop a sense of belonging and supportive community (Manzano et al., 2017a).

Much of the research on Asian American college students and leadership was situated in Asian-identified student organizations (Accapadi, 2005; Manzano et al., 2017; Museus, 2008)

and leadership programs tied to activism and grounded in Asian identity and culture (Liang et al., 2002). In describing the similarities and differences between activism and leadership, (Manzano et al., 2017) presented a conceptual framework using Asian American identity as a lens. The researchers conceptualized leadership as working within an established system toward incremental change, and a limited understanding of systemic and structural inequities; they defined activism as working within and outside of established systems and roles, and working toward transformational change (Manzano et al., 2017). While leadership and activism are interrelated, Asian Americans were rarely connected to either concept despite the community's history and continued activism, service, and leadership (Manzano et al., 2017). This dynamic contributes to the ongoing invisibility of Asian American advocacy. (Manzano et al., 2017) sought to address these omissions through using a lens of Asian American identity to explore activist and leader roles, as well as possible actions, such as advocating and organizing for identity-related issues on campus for activists and working within cultural centers and student organizations as leaders.

While much of the research on Asian American college students included the population broadly, some studies highlighted the unique differences related to gender in Asian American students' experiences. Research suggests that Asian American women may be more likely to engage in community-based leadership than Asian American men during college (Kawahara et al., 2007; Park et al., 2008). Examining 35 years of data on college freshmen, Park et al. (2008) found that Asian American women were more likely than their male counterparts to want to engage in community action programs and slightly less likely to prioritize influencing political structure and rate themselves highly in leadership ability. Reflecting the importance of in-group organizations to build leadership efficacy, Accapadi (2005) found that students in a South Asian

American sorority were more likely to pursue leadership opportunities outside of their community after engagement with and developing skills and efficacy within their in-group organization.

Current research emphasized a strong link between students' identity development as Asian Americans and their leadership identity and efficacy. Manzano et al. (2017a) stated that "developing an Asian American identity and engaging in Asian American-related student leadership or activism are intertwined" (p. 74). Similarly, Accapadi (2005) found that engagement in a South Asian sorority contributed to students' positive self-image as South Asian American women, leadership development and efficacy, and provided opportunities for students to take ownership of leadership roles. Women in the sorority perceived and valued leadership as a means to break stereotypes of South Asian women and address their own internalizations of stereotypes associated with the MMM, as well as gender stereotypes depicting South Asian women as subservient and passive (Accapadi, 2005). This dynamic manifested in a "deep personal responsibility that the sisters felt to represent South Asian American women in a manner which challenged these stereotypes" (Accapadi, 2005, p. 91). Involvement and leadership served as a vehicle for students to change others' perceptions of South Asian and Asian Americans, as well as to serve as role models for younger students who may have also internalized stereotypes about Asian Americans and leadership (Accapadi, 2005; Manzano et al., 2017a).

Through her qualitative study on a South Asian-based sorority, Accapadi (2005) developed the South Asian American Empowerment model to illustrate how empowerment emerges in the college environment. While related to identity development, Accapadi (2005) intentionally chose "empowerment model" which "more accurately reflected the inter-

relatedness of an individual and group development process" (p. 122). As group process and community are central values within South Asian and Asian cultures, and often unaddressed in identity development theory, the label of "empowerment model" was used to refer to both the individual and group process toward identity development, empowerment, and change.

While the South Asian American Empowerment model is not labeled as a leadership development model, it does parallel characteristics of leadership reflected in Asian American communities. The four-stage cyclical model begins with increased awareness of their identities as South Asian American women, which triggers identity development. In the second stage, participants "tap into their identities as South Asian American women as a source of strength, rather than a weakness as they may have previously perceived" (Accapadi, 2005, p. 118). In this stage, they challenged previously internalized stereotypes and took a more proactive ownership in defining their own identity as well as reframing cultural norms as assets rather than deficits or points of difference. The third stage is marked by enhanced empowerment at the individual and group level. Accapadi (2005) connects this state to the value of collectivism and community embedded in South Asian culture, asserting that South Asian American women "often see themselves as extensions of their group identity" (p. 119); therefore, it is crucial to include both individual and group identities. On the individual level, empowerment may manifest in positive self-images, personal commitments, and pursuing leadership opportunities outside the organization. Accapadi (2005) illustrated group empowerment through an example of the sorority developing a national conference based on empowerment, as well as learning about issues South Asian women face. The fourth stage is group change, consisting of further establishing the actions arising from the third stage and leading back to increased identity awareness (Accapadi, 2005).

Asian American Leadership in Academia

Much of the research on Asian Americans and leadership in higher education beyond undergraduate students focused on faculty and senior-level administrators (Asher, 2010; Dang, 2021; Ng, 2017; Reeves, 2014; Somer, 2007; Torne, 2013). Recognizing that these positions do hold a certain level of power, Asher (2010) captured the complex position many Asian American women in leadership were in. Holding these leadership positions, Asian American women were situated at the "margins, centre, and the spaces in-between" (Asher, 2010, p. 67). Using her own identity to illustrate this point of holding power while simultaneously holding marginalized identities, Asher (2010) described the margins as where her South Asian, lesbian, immigrant, and woman identities lied, and her center identities as her tenure, leadership responsibilities, and income. The in-between referred to a salient theme in the research on Asian American women and leadership – "the contradictory tensions of margins-and-centre on a daily basis in the academy" (Asher, 2010, p. 68). Throughout navigating roles and cultural environments, racial and gender identities remained salient for these women (Asher, 2010; Somer, 2007).

The ability to navigate between Asian and American cultures, and adhering to cultural norms within each setting while encountering and addressing stereotypes was a theme in the research on Asian Americans in academia (Dang, 2021; Reeves, 2014; Somer, 2007; Torne, 2013). In a qualitative narrative study on how racial, ethnic, and gender membership influence female Asian American senior administrators' leadership experiences in higher education, participants described differing ways of finding leadership styles authentic to them between U.S. and Asian cultural norms (Dang, 2021). Among the five participants, the women ranged in describing their styles as leaning more toward Western or Eastern norms, or finding balance between both. Salient among all of the participants was an emphasis on authenticity,

communication, and drive within their leadership styles, as well as learning to be assertive in ways that aligned with their values and approaches; this connected to the participants' emphasis on being diplomatic, and entailed being assertive through their ability to name dynamics and perspectives rather than raising one's voice (Dang, 2021).

Similar to students, Asian American women administrators spoke of encountering stereotypes associated with their racial and gender identities and negative perceptions of Asian Americans and leadership (Dang, 2021; Reeves, 2014; Somer, 2007; Torne, 2013). In addition to experiencing assumptions about their leadership abilities, Asian American women often described selection processes as a barrier to advancement due to selection criteria that emphasized traditional views of leadership and racially homogeneous search committees (Reeves, 2014). On the other hand, when Asian American women did advance in their careers, they experienced questions about why they were selected for their positions and challenges to their qualifications and abilities (Somer, 2007; Torne, 2013). Further, Asians American women experienced stereotyping relating to the MMM that perpetuated existing power structures. In (Dang, 2021) study on female Asian American senior administrators, participants noted being invited to tables and settings where other people of color, particularly Black and Latinx colleagues, were not represented; the participants perceived this as pitting them against other people of color. This dynamic was consistent with research on women of color in leadership more generally encountering perceived tokenism and questions about their merit (Huang, 2012). Coupled with being the only or one of few Asian Americans in leadership, some administrators expressed anxiety around missteps, fearing errors would reflect on and be attributed to their identities as Asian American women, confirming negative stereotypes about their leadership abilities (Somer, 2007).

In multiple studies, Asian American women administrators expressed their perceptions of leadership as being connected to a larger purpose, beyond themselves and tied to community (Huang, 2012; Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009; Somer, 2007; Torne, 2013). In a study on Asian American women who served as presidents of two-year institutions, Torne (2013) noted that all of the participants "took the challenge of acting as president for the common good, whether to advance higher education, serve the needs of the students or as a role model, breaking the stereotype of Asian Americans and proving in particular that the model minority image is false" (p. 143). Although this sense of responsibility to community and contributing to a larger purpose was a salient theme in research on Asian Americans, it did not always emerge depending on the frame of analysis. In a study on Asian American leaders in higher education, Neilson and Suyemoto (2009) conducted two rounds of analysis. In the first, the researchers analyzed the participants' experiences using a lens of past research on leadership, which meant that the data was "analyzed and understood through a white Eurocentric perspective" (Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009, p. 88). This resulted in themes such as intentionality in career paths, mentorship, and taking advantage of professional opportunities outside the organization. In the second round, the authors used inductive coding to generate themes and create a culturally specific framework based in literature on Asian American values. The results were categorized among several values that influence Japanese and Japanese diaspora cultures: "*on* (ascribed obligation), *giri* (contracted obligation), *ningo* (humane senseibility), *enryo* (modesty in the presence of one's superior), and *haji* (shame)" (Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009, p. 90). These differing themes, particularly around obligation, imply a sense of responsibility to a larger purpose and to one's community. It is also important to note the differences due to frames of analysis. The latter round

of analysis was able to grasp key themes specific to Asian American cultures that did not emerge from the first round, which utilized a Eurocentric lens.

The notion of hard work was a salient theme in the literature on Asian American administrators and leadership (Dang, 2021; Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009; Somer, 2007; Torne, 2013). The ways in which hard work was conceptualized by Asian Americans tied back to a higher purpose; hard work emerged as an internalized expectation that connected to notions of honor, legacy, and moral obligations to legacies of one's ancestors and family (Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009). Similarly, while risk-taking and conflict are not usually associated with Asian Americans and the MMM, Neilson and Suyemoto (2009) found that Asian American leaders did engage in and value risk taking that served a larger purpose, such as improving the lives of the next generation.

For Asian American leaders, risk taking and hard work were grounded in values related to community (Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009). Several additional values emerged from the research on Asian American administrators, including filial piety, harmony, self-control, importance of education, and collectivism (Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009; Reeves, 2014; Somer, 2007; Torne, 2013). Neilson and Suyemoto (2009) used the Japanese phrase "okage same de" to describe the Asian American administrators' collectivist orientation, meaning that "people are extensions of one another and everything is connected" (p. 91). Asian American women, in particular, expressed concern about the lack of Asian American and Asian American women representation women in leadership roles, which served as motivation for some to pursue higher-level roles. Rather than attaining leadership roles as the ends to a long-term career goal, many Asian American women did not initially intend to pursue high-level leadership roles but took them on as challenges where they saw a need (Torne, 2013).

Mentorship emerged as a salient theme in the research (Dang, 2021; Huang, 2012; Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009; Reeves, 2014; Somer, 2007; Torne, 2013). With few Asian Americans and women of color in leadership positions, mentorship was important as Asian Americans, women of color, and Asian American women advanced in their careers. Mentors contributed significantly to learning how to navigate the organizational environments, as well as provided social and cultural capital within the organization, emotional support, and career guidance (Dang, 2021; Huang, 2012; Reeves, 2014). Mentorship took different forms, including formal mentorship programs, informal networks, and relationships with upper-level administrators, often observing others to learn from example (Dang, 2021). As workplaces may assume Asian Americans do not need support or mentorship due to stereotypes related to the MMM, informal networks and relationships were especially important to Asian American women (Dang, 2021). Relating back to the sense of obligation to community, many Asian American women administrators felt a responsibility to pass on mentorship (Torne, 2013). These women "believed that mentoring was one of their duties" in order to help others move up, as well as to break the cycle of Asian Americans not seeing themselves as leadership through supporting, mentoring, and encouraging Asian Americans in higher education (Torne, 2013, p. 137).

Leadership for Asian Americans Outside of Higher Education

As with research within higher education, the majority of the research on Asian Americans and leadership in other contexts focused largely on challenges, barriers, and stereotypes Asian Americans face, as well as how Asian cultural values and norms contrasted with traditional Western views of leadership (Kawahara et al., 2013). Some researchers emphasized assimilationist approaches for Asian Americans to pursue leadership roles, while

others reframed Asian American cultural values and norms as assets in leadership rather than deficits or challenges. Sy et al. (2017) identified success factors for Asian American leadership development through interviews with 37 East Asian American leaders who ranged from mid-level managers to CEOs, as well as two non-Asian American executives who were identified as knowledgeable and advocates of developing leaders of color. Several of the success factors identified called for shifts away from typical Asian cultural values, such as: leadership branding, emphasizing self-promotion with an assertion that runs counter to humility and the notion that one's work speaks for itself; communication, adhering and conforming to workplace norms around language, accents, and ways of thinking; social decorum, understanding dominant social norms, networking for self-promotion, and framing managing emotions as an asset; leadership aspirations, referring to the bias against Asian Americans' leadership abilities, perceived lower leadership aspirations and perceived lack of leadership imagination; and career determinism, advocating for self-directing of career paths, risk-taking, and less emphasis on filial piety (Sy et al., 2017).

In order to explore challenges Asian American women face in corporate career advancement, Chang (2021a) conducted an exploratory case study which included participants who worked in financial and technology industries in Fortune 500 companies. Of the 26 participants, five identified as South Asian while the majority identified as East Asian. Assimilating to dominant norms of leadership emerged as a theme: "Through critical reflections, a majority of participants unlearned certain Asian cultural values or gender expectations and mastered the experiences and career mobility actions that helped them overcome barriers" (Chang, 2021a, p. 87). Half of the participants intentionally shifted their behaviors to overcome barriers that they perceived stemmed from Asian cultural values and gender norms. This

unlearning included combating internalized racism and sexism, as well as learning how to be direct, challenge authority, and advocate for themselves (Chang, 2021a). The unlearning, however, was specific to work contexts. Participants also described accessing cultural values and beliefs based on contexts, adopting more Western norms in the workplace and traditional norms at home, without assigning judgements on which were better or worse (Chang, 2021a).

In contrast, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP) developed a model that viewed Asian cultural norms through an asset perspective (Akutagawa, 2013). For example, through the Asian Balancing Cultures (ABC) model, the Model Minority Myth's attributes of passiveness and being conflict averse were reframed as valuing harmony, being a team player, and working effectively with diverse groups (Akutagawa, 2013). Kawahara et al. (2013) sought to explore how Asian American leaders defined, shaped, and experienced leadership for themselves, rather than situation Asian American leadership within Western norms. The sample for this study included 14 Asian Americans who were part of a larger national study on diversity and leadership, which included 367 participants. Of the 14 Asian American participants, there were 6 men and 8 women; 4 identified as South Asian. All of the participants emphasized common Asian cultural values as informative of and central to their leadership approaches. Among these cultural values were humility, prioritizing others' well-being, serving others, and kindness, along with an internally-motivated strong work ethic with excellence as a goal (Kawahara et al., 2013).

Conversely, Chin (2020) explored the "playbook" second-generation Asian Americans were taught to abide by in order to succeed, but that failed in helping them attain leadership roles within their organizations. In order to explore what barriers prevented Asian Americans from advancing past mid-level positions, Chin (2020) interviewed 103 second-generation Asian

Americans who graduated college between 1980 and 2008 and worked in elite specialized fields, such as finance, media, law, and technology. Six of the participants identified as South Asian American; the largest group was Chinese participants (61), followed by Korean American (28), Japanese American (5), Filipino American (2), and Vietnamese (1). Chin (2020) referred to the playbook as a "verbally transmitted, informal, and practical 'how-to' guide for Asian Americans designed to show them how to 'make it' and be successful at both school and work" (p. 51). As the playbook was communicated often through first-generation parents, the playbook was specific to Asian Americans rather than Asian culture with an emphasis on learning how to adapt to American institutions. The playbook included components consistent with the MMM, including a narrative that deference to authority, not asking questions that challenge the status quo, being obedient and reliable, avoiding confrontation, and hard work lead to success (Chin, 2020). However, participants in the study expressed that while these tips were helpful in gaining academic success and entry-level positions, the playbook worked against them when trying to advance to higher levels in their careers. Of the 103 participants, only seven held executive-level roles; all seven of these participants graduated from Ivy League or highly selective institutions, held terminal degrees, and graduated in the 1980s or 1990s (Chin, 2020). The playbook did not include acknowledgement or discussion of racism and how to address it, social skills important to leadership roles such as building relationships and trust among colleagues, nor how to overcome setbacks, causing participants to self-blame, feel shame, and avoid seeking guidance (Chin, 2020). Some of the participants in Chin's (2020) study described seeing "themselves as 'reading' as white and elite as opposed to black or Latinx" (p. 172) due to factors such as college-educated parents, growing up in predominantly White suburbs, and attending mostly White schools, rendering their Asian racial identity, as well as the resulting discrimination and

stereotyping, invisible. In consideration of the study's findings and implications of the playbook, Chin (2020) asserted a need for recognizing and addressing race directly in the workforce, including through hiring practices, mentorship, and retention programs.

As stated before, one of the challenges in research on Asian Americans is that much of the research treats the group as a monolith (Accapadi, 2005). While Sy et al. (2017) asserted that Asian Americans were the least likely among all racial minority groups to advance to leadership roles, other scholars claimed that this is the case for some but not all Asian Americans. Lu et al. (2020) conducted a series of seven studies using mixed methods to investigate the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in leadership positions and applicability of the problem within different subpopulations, comparing leadership attainment between the two largest Asian American subgroups: East Asians and South Asians. Across the seven studies that focus on leadership attainment in settings ranging from CEOs in S&P 500 companies to MBA graduate students, the researchers found that South Asians were more likely than East Asians and White people to attain leadership roles (Lu et al., 2020). While East Asians and South Asians showed similar levels of motivation to pursue leadership roles, South Asians tended to experience more prejudice in the workplace (Lu et al., 2020). In one of the studies, South Asian MBA students reported significantly higher rates of experiencing prejudice compared to East Asian MBA students on a quantitative scale. In another quantitative study, Lu et al. (2020) explored non-Asian Americans' perceptions of South Asians and East Asians; participants rated various Asian subgroups on characteristics such as warmth and competence, as well as comfort levels in various types of interactions, such as dating, working together, and being neighbors. The results indicated greater prejudice toward South Asians than East Asians. The researchers asserted that South Asians face more prejudice yet attain leadership positions at a higher rate than East Asians

due to differences in communication styles, positing that "the bamboo ceiling is not an Asian issue, but an issue of cultural fit – a mismatch between EA norms of communication and American norms of leadership" (Lu et al., 2020, p. 4599).

However, Lu et al. (2020) study did not consider how gender may have influenced leadership attainment nor perceptions of Asian Americans. In Chin's (2020) study, Asian American women, as a whole, reported more discrimination in the workplace than Asian American men, and were found to be least likely to get management positions in corporate America. As the "playbook" emphasized not raising issues that could make others uncomfortable or cause trouble, women often did not have the resources and support that White women did to deal with sexism in the workplace (Chin, 2020). Additionally, similar to the research on South Asian American women's experiences navigating a bicultural identity, the research on Asian American women in the workplace noted the familial pressures women face to uphold traditional gender roles, placing priority in being a spouse and mother after college (Chin, 2020).

The literature also illustrated how Asian American women often integrated their identity into their leadership. In a study focused on Asian American women leaders that explored the intersection between Asian American women's culture and gender in leadership (Kawahara et al., 2007), the researchers interviewed 12 Asian American women who held leadership roles in various fields, including education, law, psychology, and media. Of the 12 participants, eight were East Asian, three were Southeast Asian, and one was South Asian. The participants were also diverse in national origin, with eight from the U.S. and four identifying Asian countries as their country of origin. Kawahara et al. (2007) found that the women emphasized a collaborative leadership style, and attributed this to racial and gender influences, emphasizing relational, collaborative, and non-hierarchical leadership. Empowering others and the ability to inspire

others through pulling different pieces together to convey a shared agenda, values, and vision was seen as essential to being an effective leader (Kawahara et al., 2007). The participants discussed this ability in the context of a deep, internal sense of responsibility to give back to their communities and serve others, perceiving their leadership engagement as connected to a purpose bigger than themselves (Kawahara et al., 2007). Asian American women also highlighted the importance of knowing one's self and values, and engaging in leadership and roles that are consistent with one's personal values, interests, and passions (Kawahara et al., 2007).

Similar to research on Asian Americans and leadership in higher education, navigating two different cultures and confronting negative stereotypes of Asian American leaders were salient themes in the literature (Kawahara et al., 2007, 2013; Sy et al., 2017). Sy et al. (2017) found that Asian American leaders' success factors included *cultural acumen*, understanding Asian and American cultures and their influences on perspectives and behavior, as well as *cultural inclusion,* integrating one's heritage and culture into the dominant culture. Asian American women leaders emphasized a "necessity to work and be visible in multiple cultural settings, particularly the dominant culture" (Kawahara et al., 2007, p. 308). This dual presence was connected to a feeling of having to prove one's self, especially to outside communities, and portray Asian American women as qualified and effective leaders (Kawahara et al., 2007).

Mentorship, which also emerged as salient in the higher education literature, was a prominent theme for Asian American leaders outside of academia (Chang, 2021a; Chin, 2020; Kawahara et al., 2007, 2013). Mentorship was important in order to help navigate workspaces and work-life balance, as well as have someone who could advocate, empower, and intervene on their behalf if and when needed (Kawahara et al., 2007). Asian American women also stressed the importance of familial support for their careers, particularly from their parents and spouses

(Kawahara et al., 2007). Recognizing the importance of mentorship, some Asian Americans hired their own coaches after being excluded from their workplaces' minority-focused training and development programs (Chin, 2020). While some workplaces began excluding Asian Americans citing the high population in entry-level roles, Chin (2020) noted that companies were re-examining the need as representation in higher-level roles stagnated.

Consistent with the cultural values of humility and letting one's work speak for itself, participants spoke of not intentionally seeking out leadership roles, but rather serving leadership roles that emerged throughout their careers (Kawahara et al., 2007, 2013). In Kawahara et al.'s (2007) study on Asian American women and leadership, many of the participants expressed that they did not actively pursue leadership positions in their careers, but were asked to apply by others who recognized their work ethic and abilities. Participants in Kawahara et al.'s (2013) study on Asian Americans' shaping of leadership styles voiced similar experiences. Participants emphasized a preference for having a low profile, yet being asked to fulfill leadership positions by others because of their "reputation to 'get the job done' or their highly credible position in their profession" (Kawahara et al., 2013, p. 244). Asian American leaders in the study also emphasized the significance of strong support from others to take on leadership roles, leading to a willingness to serve for the good of the group (Kawahara et al., 2013). Further, Asian American women leaders emphasized a willingness to get involved and take action when problems arose, thereby challenging cultural norms of Asian women being seen as quiet and passive (Kawahara et al., 2007).

Summary

In this chapter, I grounded my study in the existing research related to South Asian American women and leadership. In order to understand the current status and experiences of

South Asian American women, I started with important contextual factors such as South Asians' immigration history and racialization in the U.S., along with the pervasive Model Minority Myth and its implications for South Asian Americans' experiences and racial dynamics. I then provided an overview of the current literature on South Asian American women, highlighting two overarching themes of navigating a bicultural identity between South Asian and American norms and values, and gender expectations and perceptions. A subtheme of navigating a bicultural identity, feeling othered, described the ways in which South Asian American women experience racialization and othering while also navigating a proximity to Whiteness due to attributes associated with the MMM, such as socioeconomic, academic, and professional success. The research on South Asian American women's experiences with gender expectations and perceptions highlight the unique pressures South Asian American women face that are tied to components of the MMM as well as gender. While they experience high expectations and assumptions from others on highly-achieving academic records and careers, they also experience familial pressure to prioritize marriage and having children, upholding traditional gender norms. There is an underlying theme of expectations to be obedient to dominant norms as a South Asian American woman, in ways that perpetuate stereotypes that South Asian women are submissive and passive, as well as their roles within traditional family structures. Taking on leadership roles and engaging in leadership activities often brings about dissonance for South Asian American women; however, they have always played an important role in their communities.

As the literature on South Asian American women predominantly focuses on their experiences navigating their bicultural identities and gender norms and perceptions within South Asian and American culture, there is a lack of research focusing on South Asian women and leadership. As such, the overview provided here on leadership is grounded in research on Asian

Americans and Asian American women more broadly. However, there are direct connections and themes between this research, particularly the leadership studies focusing on Asian American women, and the literature focusing on South Asian American women's experiences. The theme of feeling othered, invisibility within conversations about race, and experiences with stereotypes related to the MMM was prominent throughout the research on Asian American women's leadership as college students, higher education administrators, and outside of higher education. Further, as research on South Asian American women emphasized their role in upholders of cultural traditions, practices, and values as an important role in their families and communities, the research on Asian American women leaders illustrated its grounding in community-oriented leadership. The values informing Asian American women leaders were often discussed in the context of how leading with these values benefitted the larger community, such as risk taking for the public good rather than an interest in innovation. Across the areas of Asian American women's leadership and research on South Asian American women, personal responsibility arose as a theme. Throughout the studies, personal responsibility was emphasized in relation to disproving stereotypes around South Asian American women, as well as an acknowledgement of the lack of representation of Asian American women in leadership roles and taking on the responsibility of role modeling, mentoring, and encouraging other Asian American women. Lastly, the research on South Asian American women highlighted navigating a bicultural identity in life experiences and expectations, while the research on Asian American women and leadership discussed finding leadership styles that felt authentic to them, often requiring finding balance and a way to integrate components of Asian and American culture into their leadership styles.

The literature on Asian Americans and leadership in various contexts also highlights the lack of attention to subpopulations within the Asian American community, specifically South Asians. Research also highlights that South Asians have very distinct experiences with racialization in the U.S. within the Asian American community, often to the extent where South Asian Americans do not identify with the broader label of Asian American. Further, some research suggests that due to these differences in racialization and socialization, there may be different outcomes in leadership attainment for South Asians and East Asians; however, these studies do not consider how gender may influence South Asians' experiences. In this study, I will focus intentionally on second-generation South Asian American women college students in order to better understand their experiences with leadership, as well as their perceptions of and ways in which they enact leadership. In doing so, I will contribute to a better understanding of how second-generation South Asian American women are situated to transition into leadership structures in the workplace as well as how workplaces and college environments can better support these women in their leadership development and engagement. In the next chapter, I will outline the paradigm, theoretical framework, and methodology that will inform my study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this constructivist narrative inquiry study was to explore how second-generation South Asian American women describe, define, and enact leadership. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' descriptions of leadership?
2. How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' enactment of leadership?

This dissertation was guided by a constructivist paradigm and narrative inquiry methodology in order to explore the experiences of the participants from their own understanding and meaning-making. The analysis was guided by theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and DesiCrit, a branch of Critical Race Theory, in order to understand the unique experiences of second-generation South Asian American women. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the constructivist paradigm and theoretical frameworks that guide this study, followed by an overview of narrative inquiry methodology, data collection, and analysis methods. Lastly, I identify tools to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of this study, including reflexivity with a personal narrative to reflect on my own experiences that may shape the research process.

Paradigm

Constructivism, also known as social constructivism, holds that meanings are socially constructed by individuals through their experiences and interactions with others (Glesne, 2006; S.R. Jones et al., 2006). This allows for coexisting and multiple truths, as knowledge and meanings are dependent on individuals' contexts (Creswell, 2014; Glesne, 2006; S.R. Jones et

al., 2006) and "historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8).

This paradigm places emphasis on understanding the participants' unique experiences, encouraging the "researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow meanings into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). In using this paradigm, I am able to honor the participants' stories, multiple truths, and their own understandings and meaning-making.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is guided by two theoretical frameworks: DesiCrit, a branch of Critical Race Theory that focuses on the experiences of South Asian Americans, and intersectionality. The use of these two frameworks recognizes the racialization of South Asian Americans specifically and the experiences of South Asian American women. To give an overview of DesiCrit, I will first explore Critical Race Theory, then specify DesiCrit, followed by a section on intersectionality, and lastly, a section on how I will integrate and apply these theories in this study.

DesiCrit

Critical Race Theory

In order to understand DesiCrit, it is important to first understand Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is concerned with "studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 2) and understanding how these concepts shape the experiences and circumstances of people of color (Quaye, 2013). While CRT was initially used in the field of law in the mid-1970s, it has since expanded to other fields (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Quaye, 2013). CRT places issues of race, racism, and power in broader contexts, such as history, group- and self-interest, and economics to better understand how these issues impact various contexts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

There are several key tenets of CRT. Firstly, CRT asserts that race is socially constructed and racism is ingrained in society and is a normal and everyday experience for people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995; Quaye, 2013). CRT presents societal inequities as a "logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized" (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995, p. 47). This is especially important and nuanced considering the lack of attention and understanding of the racialized experiences of South Asian Americans (Accapadi, 2005; Banerjee-Stevens, 2009; Inman, 2006a; Kibria, 1996).

Further, CRT contends that racism serves the interest of White people, establishing a racial hierarchy that serves "psychic and material" purposes, often requiring interest convergence for change to be made (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 7). CRT emphasizes the significance of counter-storytelling for the narratives of people of color to be heard (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995; Quaye, 2013), supporting the use of narrative inquiry as the methodology for this study. Lastly, CRT recognizes the importance of intersectionality, allowing for the analysis of race as well as gender, which will be covered more thoroughly in a following section.

DesiCrit

As the use of CRT grew, scholars expanded the theoretical framework to illuminate the experiences of specific identities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Harpalani (2013) developed Desi Critical Race Theory (DesiCrit) to analyze the unique experiences of South Asians, in which he emphasizes the significance of racial ambiguity. Likening South Asians to Latinx, biracial, and multiracial people, Harpalani (2013) asserts that racial ambiguity is "under-theorized" in scholarly work (p. 84), thereby limiting understanding of certain groups' experiences.

In emphasizing racial ambiguity, Harpalani (2013, 2015) highlights the social meaning of race and racial symbols. Race is identified as a salient "form of transferrable capital (or as a negation of such capital) rather than just a category" (Harpalani, 2013, p. 183). The ways in which race is indicated by societal norms are more complex than discrete categories. As such, racially ambiguous groups, such as South Asians, can simultaneously hold attributes of Whiteness, Blackness, and foreignness, and make claims to assert or deny these identities based on contextual factors (Harpalani, 2013). Further, race as a form of capital can be ascribed and withdrawn, as illustrated through the history of U.S. citizenship rights based on race. The first Congressional Act addressing citizenship, the Naturalization Law of 1790, restricted naturalization to White people; later amendments granted citizenship rights to Native Americans and Black people, but not non-European immigrants (FitzGerald, 2017).

For South Asian immigrants to gain citizenship, they had to make claims toward Whiteness. From 1878 to 1952, 52 court cases' rulings defined who was non-White and, therefore, not eligible for naturalization as a U.S. citizen (FitzGerald, 2017). Those impacted included immigrants from China, Japan, Burma, Syria, Armenia, the Philippines, and India (FitzGerald, 2017). For Asian Indians, these rights and claims to "Whiteness" were ascribed and withdrawn. In 1910, 1913, 1919, and 1920, Asian Indians were ruled as White, while in 1909 and 1907, they were ruled as non-White (FitzGerald, 2017). In Abba Dolla's 1910 case, he was ruled White due to his skin color and demonstrated ties to the White community in Savannah, Georgia; in Akhay Kumar Mozumdar's 1913 case, caste was taken into account and high-caste Hindus were categorized as White while others were not (Harpalani, 2015). However, in the 1923 *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind* decision, the Supreme Court ruled Indians as non-White (FitzGerald, 2017; Harpalani, 2015). This ruling also stripped at least 65 Asian Indians' U.S.

citizenship as a result of their claim to Whiteness being revoked. South Asian immigrants, while holding attributes of foreignness, have also made claims to assert Whiteness at certain points in history, and have been categorized as White at certain points based on contextual factors.

DesiCrit also emphasizes formal and informal methods of racialization. Formal racialization refers to formal ways of categorizing and defining racial identity, such as the census, laws, and categories conferred by an authority, such as the government (Harpalani, 2013). Informal racialization refers to the "performance of race" (Harpalani, 2013, p. 113), meaning physical features, behaviors, symbols, or attributes that indicate racial identity or status. Harpalani (2015) emphasizes informal racialization as increasingly significant. As the naming of race in formal laws decreases as a common practice, informal racialization contributes more to individuals' understanding of identity and inequalities related to race and ethnicity.

Another key factor in informal racialization are racial microclimes, defined as "local settings with particular social and political dynamics that affect racialization processes" (Harpalani, 2013, p. 121). For example, some South Asian youth raised in predominantly Black neighborhoods are exposed to Black consciousness in ways that impact their own racialization and identification with race, specifically identifying with Blackness and anti-assimilationist ideas (Harpalani, 2013). The sociopolitical factors that influence individuals' understanding and sense of racial identity can vary widely, necessitating an understanding of the individuals' context. This is consistent with the emphasis on context in narrative inquiry methodology (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Phoenix, 2008). Awareness and understanding of racial microclimes is important to understanding racialization, racial ambiguity, and discrimination, as well as how racial ambiguity impacts South Asian Americans' experiences.

Due to racial ambiguity and methods of racialization, South Asian Americans have historically been able to make claims to various racial statuses depending on motivations and contexts. DesiCrit:

> builds on theories of whiteness, racial capitalism, and racial hierarchy to argue and illustrate that formal and informal racialization occur through claims by minority group members to various statuses in America's racial hierarchy, and via ascriptions of these statuses onto minority group members. (Harpalani, 2013, p. 180)

In discussing the historical racialization of South Asian Americans, Harpalani (2013) cites examples of South Asians embracing the Model Minority Myth as an indicator of honorary Whiteness, and affiliation with Blackness through association with components of Black culture and shared experiences of discrimination.

The Black/White racial paradigm is salient throughout (Harpalani, 2013, 2015) discussion of race and racialization. Harpalani (2013) cites calls from scholars to go beyond the Black/White paradigm, particularly from Latinx and Asian American critical race scholars – which DesiCrit attempts to do, yet ironically illustrates the persistence of the dichotomy. Recognizing that racialization is contextual and relational, the U.S. context of racial history and hierarchy renders it impossible to "fully understand the racial portrayal and positioning of South Asian Americans without considering the experiences of African Americans and other minorities" (Harpalani, 2013, p. 181). Although the U.S. has become increasingly diverse and racially complex, the Black/White paradigm persists, which Harpalani (2013) attributes to the salient social meanings attached to Whiteness and Blackness in a U.S. context. Due to this context, the ways in which South Asians are racialized are often in relation to Whiteness and Blackness (Harpalani, 2013, 2015). DesiCrit's emphasis on context, including microclimes and a

larger U.S. racial context, is consistent with the importance of understanding context and setting within narrative inquiry methodology.

While a constructivist paradigm will emphasize participants' meaning-making, the use of DesiCrit will allow for broader understandings in contextualizing the participants' experiences within microclimes and the national racial context. This theoretical framework will inform data collection, with questions attending to how participants perceive their own racial identities and cultural influences on perceptions of leadership. DesiCrit will inform my data analysis process in connecting participants' experiences to South Asian racialization and racial dynamics within the U.S., with attention to power structures related to race.

Intersectionality

While DesiCrit recognizes the unique experiences of South Asians in the U.S., it does not account for how other aspects of identity, such as gender, influence individuals' experiences. Intersectionality illuminates the unique experiences at the intersections of identity that result in distinct forms of marginalization. Similar to Critical Race Theory, the framework of Intersectionality was originally named and used in the field of law (P. H. Collins, 2015a). Crenshaw (1989) described court cases to illustrate the need to recognize intersectionality and the experiences of Black women as different from those of Black men and non-Black women. Antidiscrimination laws are narrowly defined and limited in scope, resulting in race and sex discrimination referring to experiences of individuals who hold privileged identities except for either race or gender identity. This approach does not allow for understanding of the unique experiences of Black women. Crenshaw (1989) asserts that "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black

women are subordinated" (p. 140). Intersectionality attempts to recognize the distinct experiences and ways in which multiple marginalized identities intersect.

Although intersectionality is not a finished framework, but rather a working and evolving analytical tool, the use of the concept has expanded rapidly across disciplines, including public policy, criminology, and education (P. H. Collins, 2015a; P. H. Collins & Bilge, 2020). The concept has three primary uses: as a field of study, as critical praxis, and as an analytical strategy (P. H. Collins, 2015). In this study, intersectionality serves as an analytical framework to better understand the experiences of South Asian American women, taking into account race and gender. According to Cho et al. (2013), intersectionality is used as an analytical strategy where there is an "adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference in its relation to power" (p. 795). The use of intersectionality, in addition to DesiCrit, centers how subordinated identities, specifically in relation to race and gender, influence South Asian American women's experiences and perceptions.

As the use of intersectionality has grown and expanded in various fields, varied definitions of intersectionality have also arisen (Duran & Jones, 2019). As such, it is important for researchers to name the ways in which intersectionality will inform the study and with which tradition of the concept; this is especially important for studies related to identity development "as researchers consider how their chosen tradition enables micro-level *and* macro-level analyses" (Duran & Jones, 2019, p. 461). In this study, I will utilize P. H. Collins' (2015) intersectional tradition, outlining the six primary tenets in the following paragraph. Further, throughout this chapter, I will refer back to the theoretical frameworks to name how intersectionality will inform data collection and analysis.

While the use of intersectionality may vary, (P. H. Collins, 2015) outlines six underlying assumptions when using intersectionality as a form of analytical strategy. First, aspects of identity, such as race, class, and gender, are best understood in relation to one another rather than in isolation. Second, "these mutually constructing categories underlie and shape intersecting systems of power" (P. H. Collins, 2015, p. 14); for example, the systems of power related to race and gender are interrelated. Third, these interrelated systems of power "catalyze social formations of complex social inequalities that are organized via unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for people who live within them" (P. H. Collins, 2015, p. 14). The fourth assumption emphasizes the importance of context, recognizing that the realities and experiences within these social formations may vary due to location and time, similar to the concept of racial microclimes in DesiCrit. Fifth, individual and group perceptions of themselves and others in relation to social inequalities vary based on their positioning within intersecting systems of power, and individuals typically advance "knowledge projects that reflect their social locations within power relations" (P. H. Collins, 2015a, p. 14). Lastly, these intersecting systems of power foster social inequalities that are complex and unjust, and influence knowledge projects and engagements in ways that either uphold or challenge the status quo.

In illuminating systems of power, intersectionality poses a tension in balancing individuals' stories and meaning-making with a critical analysis of societal structures. In particular, the use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework in studies on student development brings about a tension of honoring "*both* the individual and systems of power when examining how people develop in college as it relates to their identities" (Duran & Jones, 2019, p. 455). In the next section, I will explore the tensions and strengths of bringing together constructivism, DesiCrit, and intersectionality.

Theoretical Borderlands

The use of intersectionality and DesiCrit along with a constructivist paradigm presents paradigmatic tensions between intersectionality and DesiCrit's focus on systems of power and constructivism's emphasis on perceptions of students themselves. Although these can conflict, drawing from multiple perspectives also present an opportunity for a fuller understanding of the topic. "Employing both constructivism and critical theory in conjunction with one another can allow researchers to engage in micro-level and macro-level analyses, honoring the both/and approach of intersectionality" (Duran & Jones, 2019, p. 461). The use of critical frameworks along with constructivism allows for attention toward participants' meaning-making while also situating such meaning-making within larger societal contexts.

Abes (2009) refers to the bringing together of multiple and at times conflicting theoretical perspectives as "theoretical borderlands", based on Anzaldua's (2007) concept of borderlands as a third space to describe the lived experiences of those immersed in a culture other than their native lands, not fully one or the other, but a both/and space. To illustrate this point, Abes (2009) reflects on utilizing queer theory and constructivism to better understand the experiences of LGBT college students. Abes (2009) refers to constructivism as an interpretivist theory, where multiple realities may exist and knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participants; this category of theories seeks to understand construction of participants' realities. In analyzing data purely from a constructivist lens, the focus in on the individual participant and their development, without necessarily situating the data in dominant social structures and their influence on development. In juxtaposition, queer theory is a poststructural theory, intending to deconstruct reality by examining power dynamics as well as societal structures and constructs (Abes, 2009). In analyzing purely through this lens, the focus on societal dynamics overshadows

nuances of individual development, and may not provide an interpretation of development that resonates with the how the participants make meaning of their experiences. Using both theories together can allow for a more rich and deeper understanding of participants' experiences and meaning-making with attention to societal structures and power dynamics, as well as an examination of inequitable power structures that create and perpetuate marginalization in the research process.

This type of experimentation with theoretical frameworks "has the potential to benefit the student affairs profession by revealing new possibilities for how student development theories can be more inclusive of marginalized student populations" (Abes, 2009, p. 141). Abes (2009) presents two primary considerations when utilizing multiple theoretical perspectives. The first is considering the appropriateness in partnering multiple and contradictory theoretical perspectives, with an intention to have them co-exist with tensions rather than attempt to reconcile two separate approaches. The second consideration refers to the politics of representation in creating theoretical borderlands, and ethical considerations throughout the data collection and analysis process (Abes, 2009). Abes (2009) emphasizes the importance of participants being able to see themselves in the stories. In utilizing critical theory in conjunction with interpretivist theory, the researcher may present critiques of power structures and inequities that are unfamiliar to participants which may minimize how they see themselves in the narrative. While this tension may complicate the data analysis process, particularly through member checking, being introduced to critical theory during the research process may also have an emancipatory effect on participants in challenging dominant norms and narratives (Abes, 2009; Duran & Jones, 2019).

Methodology

This qualitative study was guided by narrative inquiry methodology, emphasizing the stories and lived experiences of participants (Bell, 2002; Creswell, 2007). Narrative inquiry draws on individuals' stories and the ways in which individuals share their experiences. The methodology "helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants recounting of their experiences" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 93). Although the concept of a story is prevalent in many cultures, the content, format, and structure of stories vary widely (Bell, 2002). In researching issues tied to identity and culture, "a key way of coming to understand the assumptions held by learners from another culture is to examine their stories and become aware of the underlying assumptions that they embody" (Bell, 2002, p. 207). The use of narrative inquiry allows a deep focus on the stories of second-generation South Asian American women and how they make meaning of their experiences. Through analysis, I was able to examine these stories for deeper understanding and hidden assumptions. Further, the emphasis on narratives as told by second-generation South Asian American women "function in opposition to elitist scholarly discourses" (Bell, 2002, p. 209) through including a group that has historically been left out of leadership literature in the process of knowledge construction.

Similar to Critical Race Theory, narrative inquiry emphasizes the significance of context in understanding participants' stories and the meaning behind them. Narrative inquiry research draws on a "Deweyan view of experience" (Clandinin, 2006), including both interaction and continuity. In this framework, interaction highlights the importance of social context – "people are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2); continuity refers to how experiences influence further experiences, rather than each experience being understood in isolation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Drawing from Dewey's theory of experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000)

developed a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space to address context, adding situation, referring to place, to interaction and continuity. Bell (2002) further elaborates on the notion of continuity, highlighting that narrative inquiry "illuminates the temporal notion of experience" (p. 210), acknowledging that individuals' understanding of their experiences and others can change over time. Creswell (2007) specifies additional components of context that include "participants' personal experiences (their jobs, their homes), their culture (racial or ethnic), and their historical contexts (time and place)" (p. 56). Taken together, these components of context provide a fuller picture and allow for deeper understanding of participants' stories.

Narrative inquiry requires extensive data collection in order to grasp participants' stories and contexts (Creswell, 2007). This necessitates a close collaborative relationship between researcher and participants (Bell, 2002; Clandinin, 2006; Creswell, 2007). The participant-researcher relationship is co-constructed with ongoing relationship negotiation through each encounter (Bell, 2002; Clandinin, 2006; Creswell, 2007). In this process, researchers cannot "bracket themselves out of the inquiry" (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47); rather, researchers co-construct the meanings derived from participants' narratives (Bell, 2002; Clandinin, 2006).

In making meaning of participants' stories, the researcher goes beyond simple re-telling of the story. "In its fullest sense, narrative inquiry requires going beyond the use of narrative as a rhetorical structure, that is, simply telling stories, to an analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates" (Bell, 2002, p. 208). Narrative inquiry methodology involves analyzing stories for deeper meanings and hidden assumptions (Bell, 2002; Creswell, 2007). This may also involve critical examination of silences and contradictions, and exposing dichotomies (Creswell, 2007).

Data Collection

The nature of narrative inquiry requires intentionality and extensive data collection in order to articulate the detailed stories of the participants. As such, it is essential that participant selection be intentional and purposeful in gathering participants (Creswell, 2007; S.R. Jones et al., 2006). Qualitative research involves purposeful sampling "with an emphasis on information-rich cases that elicit an in-depth understanding of particular phenomenon" (S.R. Jones et al., 2006, p. 65). Participants must meet specific criteria and have experience with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007). In using intersectionality as a theoretical framework, it is essential to be attentive to within-group differences in order to not homogenize the population (Duran & Jones, 2019). Further, it is important to recognize how language used to describe criteria may shape the participant pool (S.R. Jones et al., 2006). For example, the literature shows that Asian American students are less likely to identify as leaders (Liang et al., 2002; Sy et al., 2017); therefore, in the recruitment for this study, I was intentional in asking questions that illustrate leadership qualities and behaviors rather than simply listing "leader" as a criterion. Further, during participant recruitment, I listed a variety of leadership activities, including engaging in community service, involvement in clubs and organizations, and participation in leadership programs. For the purpose of this study, participants had to be second-generation South Asian American women undergraduate students who engaged in leadership activities.

The participant pool was recruited from a large, Mid-Atlantic, public research university. In order to recruit participants, I utilized several strategies for purposeful sampling, including intensity and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). Intensity sampling refers to "information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely" (Patton, 2002, p. 243), while snowball sampling refers to a process of identifying participants through others who know of individuals who meet the participant criteria.

In order to recruit participants, I distributed recruitment emails with a flyer for the study through several venues, including identity-based campus departments, such as cultural centers, that serve South Asian students, student organization listservs, and faculty who teach courses pertaining to the Asian American population. The recruitment email and flyer stated the purpose of the study, criteria and time commitment of participants, and incentives. I also posted the flyer to social media, and shared with South Asian student organizations. Interested participants completed a short in-take form including demographic information, such as class year, ethnicity, and involvements, in order to ensure a substantive and diverse participant pool. From this, I selected 10 participants in order to provide a rich understanding of the topic.

Narrative inquiry requires the researcher to spend significant time with participants to gather their stories using multiple forms of data collection in order to have a clear understanding of contextual factors in participants' lives (Creswell, 2007; Squire, 2008). While narrative inquiry "implies verbal accounts of stories, stories exist in other spaces too, such as pictures, music, videos, dances, and so on" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 93). This study included one semi-structured interview with each participant, as well as participant-generated visual methods (PGVMs).

Interviews

Consistent with a constructivist paradigm, the open-ended approach of semi-structured interviews allows space for participants to express their unique perspectives and worldviews (Merriam, 2009). In seeking to gain a deeper understanding of South Asian American women's relationship to leadership, semi-structured interviews allow "the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic"

(Merriam, 2009, p. 90). Semi-structured interviews include a list of questions, while also allowing for flexibility (Merriam, 2009).

The focus of the interviews was on how race and gender identity connect to participants' descriptions and enactment of leadership. Consistent with an intersectional lens, this approach moved "away from focusing on single-axis to double-axis forms of oppression" (Duran & Jones, 2019, p. 464). Further, it was essential to be attentive to other aspects of identity, such as socioeconomic status and religion, may influence the participants' experiences. The use of critical theory in qualitative research related to identity and student development called for attention to "overlapping axes of domination and how they manifest with institutional/sociohistorical cultures" (Duran & Jones, 2019, p. 464). As participants may have differing levels of readiness and awareness around systems of power, the interviews included questions that led to reflection on environments, policies, practices, and other factors that may influence identity and leadership development.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim using a transcription service. Prior to each participant's first interview, I provided an overview of the study and a consent form. I also reviewed these documents with participants at the start of the first interview. The questions in the interviews pertained to participants' learning around leadership, involvements, and perception of leaders and leadership.

Duran & Jones (2019) emphasized the significance of using multiple research methods to assist participants in reflecting on the influence of systems of power on their identities. In bringing attention to structural inequities with critical theory, it was beneficial to employ methods in addition to interviews "to motivate individuals to think about their environments

from a power-based perspective" (Duran & Jones, 2019, p. 465). The use of multiple methods of data collection opened up possibilities for new understandings and reflection from various vantage points. To this end, I also used Participant-Generated Visual Methods (PGVMs) as a method of data collection.

Participant-Generated Visual Methods (PGVMs)

While rare in higher education literature which often privileges quantitative data and the written word, researchers assert that visual methods can introduce new insights and contribute to more rich and deeper understandings of phenomena (Kelly & Kortegast, 2023). Visual methods have become increasingly common in several fields, particularly social science (Kortegast et al., 2019). Kortegast et al. (2019) identified four categories of visual methods: existing images and artifacts; participant analysis of existing visuals; researcher-generated visuals; and participant-generated visuals. Consistent with the paradigm and approach of this study, I integrated participant-generated visuals which emphasized the participants' meaning-making and worldviews. Through PGVMs, participants created visuals and provided information pertaining to their visuals through written reflections or interviews (Kortegast et al., 2019).

Incorporating visual methods in data collection contributed in two primary ways: enrichment of data and enhanced relationships between the researcher and participants (Kortegast et al., 2019). PGVMs, specifically, enhanced the "ability to address research questions, achieve nuanced understandings, and honor participants as authorities on their perceptions, experiences, and meaning-making abilities" (Kortegast et al., 2019, p. 503). In honoring participants' ways of knowing in this way, PGVMs disrupted the typical power dynamic of the researcher-participant relationship by providing space for participants to have ownership of data generation and express their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs visually with few

pre-set parameters or constructs (Kortegast et al., 2019). This co-construction of knowledge shifted the process to conduct "research *with* rather than *on* participants" (Kortegast et al., 2019, p. 504).

Further, PGVMs complemented more traditional data collection methods and aided in uncovering tacit knowledge, deeper exploration of subjective experiences, and create space for reflective consciousness (Denton et al., 2023; Kortegast et al., 2019).Visual methods provided a tool to elicit information and express knowledge and perspectives about phenomena that were difficult to convey through traditional data collection methods because the topic was more conceptual and abstract, or participants' lack of familiarity or terminology to articulate; PGVMs provided a way for participants to "express parts of their lives that they did not yet have the discourse or language to articulate" (Kortegast et al., 2019, p. 494). For participants in this study, this may have been the first time they were reflecting on the ways in which their definitions of and approaches to leadership have been shaped. PGVMs provided participants a way to express how their perspectives have been shaped, particularly in relation to identity. Further, through the process of considering what to convey through the PGVM, creating the image, and providing an explanation, the use of PGVMs encouraged deeper reflection and contributed to rich, think description (Kortegast et al., 2019).

In this study, participants were asked to create a drawing after the interview. The prompt for the drawing asked participants to reflect on how they defined leadership, who they saw as leaders, and what traits good and effective leaders should have. Participants were asked to create a hand-drawing or digital drawing, whichever they were most comfortable with, as well as a one-page summary of their PGVM. Consistent with Kortegast et al.'s (2019) guidance on incorporating PGVMs in data collection, I provided guidance on time spent to be no longer than

one hour and potential benefits that included deeper understandings for participants as leaders themselves and what leadership means to them. I also emphasized the purpose of this as on the process of creating the images and the messages they convey, rather than an emphasis on artistic ability. After completing the interview and submitting a visual, participants received an incentive of a $40 gift card to Target or Starbucks.

Analysis

While there is no consensus on rules for analysis of narrative inquiry, the methodology drew on concepts from various fields, including humanities, social sciences, and literary criticism (Saldana, 2016). Narrative analysis is highly exploratory and intended to analyze phenomena and data holistically (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Saldana, 2016). Saldana (2016) asserts narrative analysis is "particularly suitable for such inquiries as identity development, psychological, social, and cultural meanings and values" (p. 155). The exploratory nature of narrative analysis, as well as its suitability for topics related to identity and cultural nuances, were apt for the purpose of this study considering the lack of existing literature on South Asian American women and leadership.

In its fullest sense, narrative inquiry is intended to go beyond simply retelling stories, and engage in examination of the underlying assumptions, insights, and themes the stories illustrate (Bell, 2002; Creswell, 2007; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In order to understand stories' meanings in a substantive way, attention to context is imperative. This approach recognizes that individuals make sense of their experiences within narratives they are familiar with, and constantly restructure stories based on new information and experiences (Bell, 2002). Thus, stories are shaped by both personal and community narratives (Bell, 2002; Phoenix, 2008; Saldana, 2016). Phoenix (2008) refers to the personal and community as local and societal

context. These two contexts are "reflexively related, not categorically distinct, dimensions of narrativity" (Saldana, 2016, p. 144). While the local context refers to the immediate context of the interview setting and the participant-research relationship, the local context is intertwined with the larger societal context (Phoenix, 2008; Saldana, 2016). Context is essential as participants' "stories operate *within* society as much as they are about society" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

Analytical examination for emergent themes from the data involves "narrative shaping" in order to make meaning and link together previously disconnected stories (Riessman, 2008, p. 5). In asking participants to share previous experiences, the research must connect past stories to the present. "Isolated self-disclosure of past events are not enough: they have to be tied together into a string of disclosures that makes past events relevant for a here-and-now" (Bamberg, 2012, p. 119). Further, when the phenomena under study is related to identity negotiation, it is imperative to be able to understand how "the past self becomes the self of the present" (Bamberg, 2012, p. 119). In this study, participant-generated visual methods will complement individual interviews to contribute to understandings of how participants' previous experiences have influenced definitions and enactment of leadership.

Narrative analysis typically focuses on events or emergent themes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Phoenix, 2008). Event-focused narrative analysis focuses on analyzing stories for key elements and "restorying" through reorganizing stories into a framework to illustrate the topic of study (Creswell, 2007, p. 56). This study will utilize thematic analysis to explore and gain understanding of South Asian American women's definitions and enactment of leadership.

Thematic analysis de-emphasizes the focus on narrations of events and approaches narrative more broadly with an emphasis on content of stories and attention to the construction of emotions, worldviews, key figures or events to understand participants' meaning-making processes (Phoenix, 2008; Riessman, 2008). While this may seem similar to analysis for grounded theory studies, narrative thematic analysis differs in that the focus is on illustrating patterns and themes among individual narratives rather than themes that are common across narratives (Riessman, 2008). For example, participants in this study may differ greatly in their first recollections of learning about leadership. This may still emerge as a theme articulated in the findings of the study, and the text would illustrate the narratives of multiple participants rather than a focus on the commonalities. Additionally, when utilizing thematic analysis, connections to social context and larger systems of power and subordination are emphasized more than local contexts of individual participants (Riessman, 2008). This was important to this study in order to gain deeper understanding of the ways in which race and gender identity connect to definitions and enactment of leadership, and similarities and differences to dominant ideas of leadership.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the quality or goodness of a study, and involves the confirmability of interpretation and findings, applicability of the study to practice, and reasonable judgement of the researcher in relation to the topic and circumstances (Creswell, 2007; S.R. Jones et al., 2006). Trustworthiness is also referred to as reliability in qualitative research, referring to consistency and dependability between the findings and data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I addressed trustworthiness through the following

strategies: member checking, triangulation, and peer review (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Member checking

Member checking involves collaborating with participants throughout the research process and sharing findings and interpretations to ensure credibility (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this process, participants reflected on the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations, shared their views on themes and descriptions, and identified missing components (Creswell, 2007). Member checking ensured accuracy of interpretations and deeper understanding of participants' perspectives, and provided a method of identifying the researcher's own biases in the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the research process for this study, I shared with each participant their participant profile as well as my initial findings, themes, and descriptions via email and invited their feedback.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a "powerful strategy for increasing the credibility or internal validity" of the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 245). This process involved using multiple sources of data to corroborate findings through comparing and cross-checking across different sources (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I triangulated data across two different sources of data – semi-structured interviews and participant-generated visual methods.

Peer Review

Peer review refers to a process in which the researcher enlists the assistance of a peer who is knowledgeable about the topic, but not connected to the study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The peer reviewer reviews the data to assess whether the researcher's findings, interpretations, and conclusions are plausible and supported by the data (Creswell, 2007;

Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I engaged two peer reviewers familiar with research on South Asian women and South Asian college students to review my findings and interpretations of the data.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the on-going process of investigating and acknowledging the researcher's biases and assumptions, as well as how the researcher's values and perspectives influence the research process and findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method assists the researcher in reflecting on "subjectivities, emotions, hunches, questions that arise, and ways in which s/he is making sense of the data in association with theoretical, methodological, analytical framework and research purpose and questions" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). Throughout the research process, I engaged in memoing to reflect on my own experiences, perspectives, and reactions in the data collection and analysis processes. Additionally, member checking and peer review contributed to my own reflection and understanding of how my biases and assumptions may influence the research process. In the following section, I provided an in-depth reflection on my perspective of the topic and personal experiences that have shaped my perspective in an effort to provide transparency to the reader.

Positionality

As researchers are central to the processes of data analysis and interpretation, it is imperative to engage in reflexivity and be proactive in identifying potential ways in which the researcher may influence the research process and findings. My positionality as a second-generation South Asian American woman likely shaped, in some ways, how participants perceive and interact with me. As such, it was important to reflect on and provide a narrative of

my own experiences as a second-generation South Asian American woman and perceptions of leadership.

My parents were both born and raised in Mumbai, India. My father, an engineer, moved to the United States in the early 1970s with the intention to work for a few years, earn a higher income than he had access to in India, and then move back home. However, he received several opportunities for professional growth that led him to stay in Sunnyvale, California in what is now referred to as Silicon Valley. He and my mother had a somewhat arranged marriage, set up by my grandparents and they corresponded via letters before deciding to marry. After marrying in 1978, my mother moved to the United States with my father. My sister and I were both born in the U.S., meaning that we are second-generation Indian American.

My parents taught me Gujurati as my first language, the second most common language to Hindi in India. However, when I started preschool at two years old, the teachers encouraged my parents to speak in English more, citing my own learning and potential confusion between the two languages. Now, I can understand Gujurati in some contexts, but am not at all fluent. My younger sister does not speak Gujurati at all. Around this time, there were other markers of assimilation, including celebrating holidays like Christmas and Easter. As many second-generation South Asians navigate a bicultural identity (Inman, 2006a; Ruzicka, 2011; Soin, 2015), I was raised between South Asian and American culture. We celebrated Christmas and Easter, but did not practice the religious aspects of the holidays. My parents taught me Zoroastrian prayers, which were in Farsi, and I recited them at my navjote, a ceremony in which children enter the Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrians in India are referred to as “Parsis” or “Parsees”, and are a religious minority in India with ancestral heritage in Persia, now Iran. There was a small Zoroastrian community that my family was part of, but with most of the religious

texts in Farsi and lack of access to education about the religion, it was not a salient part of my socialization or identity.

While I was growing up, there were not many other South Asian families in our neighborhood. There were a handful of South Asian families at my elementary school, and my mother was friends with several of the other mothers. Most of the families were Hindu, but our shared ethnic identity provided a foundation for relationships among our parents. In addition to not sharing religious traditions and practices with the few Indian kids I knew, there were other aspects that made it difficult for me to feel comfortable claiming my ethnic identity and feeling "Indian enough.". I also did not follow popular Indian culture or watch Bollywood movies regularly, my skin is lighter than many South Asians, and my name is Nicole. Growing up, I remember several Indian adults asking my mother what my real name was, assuming that I only went by "Nicole" in non-Indian spaces to avoid mispronunciation of traditional Indian names.

In the area I grew up, while there were not many South Asians, my high school was predominantly students of color. As (Harpalani, 2015) refers to the racial ambiguity of South Asians and being mistaken for Puerto Rican or Mexican in various settings, I identified as a person of color and felt comfortable among communities of color before I felt comfortable claiming a specific South Asian or Indian identity. I felt like I needed external validation in that from other Indian people, and felt like an outsider because of a lack of cultural knowledge and traits that were different from the majority of Indian-Americans I knew. It was not until college when I became more comfortable claiming my ethnic identity. I interned at the university's Cross-Cultural Center and in working with cultural student organizations and the other interns, I was able to see and form relationships with peers who were similar to me in navigating bicultural, and for some, biracial, identities. In their modeling of claiming their Filipino,

Chicana, and Black identities and sharing their experiences of navigating being biracial or not fitting certain traits traditionally associated with their identity groups, I became more comfortable owning mine and focusing on internal validation.

While I had been involved in leadership activities since high school, I often felt like a visitor in those spaces. I understood leadership as a title and responsibilities or tasks, but did not necessarily see myself as a leader. In college, there were plenty of leadership activities I engaged in – collaborating with students and faculty to plan guest speaker events, leading advisory boards, and developing and implementing events and workshops. However, I saw "leadership" as something separate. I saw leadership development programs advertised on campus, and remember thinking they seemed incomplete. To me, leadership always had to be attached to a larger purpose – it had to be leadership development to a certain end, for something; leadership development in and of itself did not make sense to me. I also saw spaces that were labeled with leadership as predominantly White spaces. I did not see them as spaces for myself, or the students that I was involved in cultural, justice, and advocacy-oriented organizations with. While we were all engaging in leadership work, leadership as a concept and leadership development as a program felt separate.

In studying and working in student affairs, I began to see the ways in which students of color engage in leadership behaviors that are often termed activism or service and seen as distinct from one another. Further, throughout my career, I have become increasingly aware of the ways in which I am perceived in spaces because of my identity and the way I engage in leadership that differs from White and male colleagues. I also think of leadership more broadly than I did in college. In my own definition of leadership, it is collaborative, cognizant of power

dynamics, goal-oriented but balanced with high-quality process, and seeks understanding and investment from those involved.

Throughout the research process, I engaged in memoing in order to further reflect on my own experiences related to identity and leadership to identify my assumptions and biases. As articulated in the previous section, I also utilized member checking and peer debriefing to consider the ways in which my biases and assumptions may influence my interpretations and ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this study.

Chapter 4: Participant Profiles

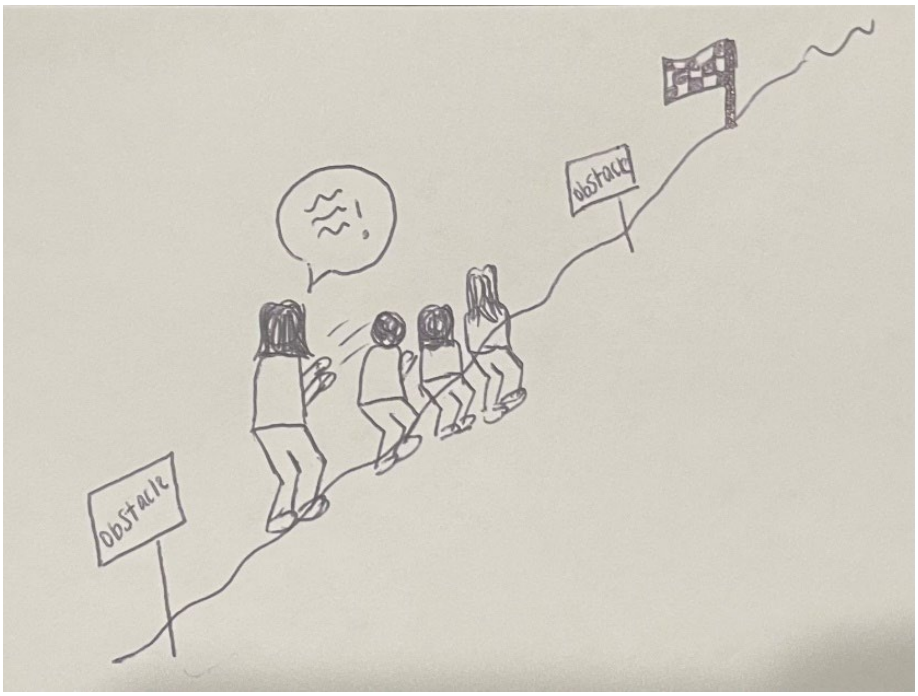
The purpose of this study was to explore how second-generation South Asian American women describe, define, and enact leadership. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' descriptions of leadership?
2. How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' enactment of leadership?

In this chapter, I will share the findings of the study through individual participant narratives, honoring the ten participants' individual voices and stories. These narratives are presented in alphabetical order by the participants' selected pseudonyms. Throughout the individual narratives, I utilize direct quotes from the participants to preserve and amplify their voices throughout this study and provide rich, thick description. Each narrative begins with a display of the individual's participant-generated visual method (PGVM) and their description of their PGVM, as a way to further amplify the participants' authentic voices and provide deeper connection and understanding with the reader. In the next two chapters, I will present a collective and comprehensive narrative, sharing themes that emerged across participants' experiences.

Individual Narratives

Aishwarya



"Leadership is defined by the ability to motivate those around you to accomplish a common goal. Rather than being the one at the top of the mountain, you are part of the progress and journey that made it possible for the entire group to reach the top of the mountain. As depicted in the drawing, good and effective leaders are there to motivate those who surround them and guide them through any obstacles that may be standing in the way."

– Aishwarya (PGVM description)

Aishwarya was a fourth-year information science major. She grew up with her parents, who had immigrated from India, and older sister as well as extended family. Her grandparents often came to stay at her family's house for six months at a time and she described close relationships with her cousins who lived in the U.S. Aishwarya's family would go to India every two to three years, which she reflected on as an important way for her and her sister to connect to South Asian culture, as well as learn more about India and diversity within the country.

Aishwarya described her first experience with leadership in fourth grade, where she took initiative to encourage her peers when they were nervous during an advanced math class. She marks middle school as when the "spark for leadership started" and she joined student council:

> I just loved being the one to help students have a better experience in school and help bring events together that made their experience in school better. And also, if students had any complaints, being able to relay that to staff or to our advisor, it felt very natural for me to do that as well. It felt like it was within my abilities and my strengths as a person.

She credited both her parents with teaching her about leadership, although she recognized it in her father first. She described him as "self-taught" and "self-driven," working his way up the career ladder to eventually become CEO of his own company. She often turned to him for advice on how to approach situations, from conflict resolution to ensuring others felt heard and valued. She described her mother more as a resource for personal conflicts, citing that she was very empathetic and imparted life lessons. Aishwarya's connection of her mother to leadership emerged when she reflected on her mother's role in their Indian community where she planned an annual festival including food and performances from children, "aunties and uncles." Her mother planned the festival with her friends, and Aishwarya described it as inspiring to see her mother at the forefront. The communal nature of the planning also stood out to her: "when they put it together, they would come over to our house and have meetings and plan together." When comparing her observations of her mother to her own leadership style, she said:

> I actually have never thought about it like that… it very much did look like it was just a group of friends planning something, and that way it was so fun for everyone who was involved. It just felt like a meeting. Everyone was kind of pitching ideas. It never felt like

> it was like someone was taking control. So I would say for sure, that probably impacted the way that I go about my leadership positions now.

This reflected Aishwarya's sense of her own leadership style, which she said she was still figuring out but that she led "as a friend" and found that to be more effective than hierarchical styles of leadership.

Having been in leadership roles since middle school, Aishwarya reflected on her learning about leadership and growth as a leader. She noted the increased scope and responsibility in leadership roles, from planning pep rallies in middle school to seeking the ability to change policies and advocate for representation in college. With each experience, she reflected on increasing expectations for herself, pushing boundaries, and taking risks, all of which led to more confidence in her own abilities as a leader:

> Suddenly it's not just your leadership skills that are tested, but it's your time management skills, it's your people skills because you are responsible for numerous different groups of people. It's your ability to stay on track with the specific organization's mission. I think with each experience and each period of my life, there's been a completely different breadth of what I've been doing to the point where now I think I can reflect back on high school and be like, wow, if she saw me today, I think she would be pretty proud of what I'm doing. And I think that self-reflection, the ability to look back and see my skills as a leader, my capacity as a leader, just grow is amazing.

Aishwarya underscored the importance of adapting leadership based on the organization, while holding certain characteristics, such as collaboration and empathy, steadfast. She also reflected on leadership as a reciprocal relationship, as leaders advocate for people they represent and the people represented help leaders grow.

Aishwarya illustrated differing ways of engaging in leadership through her involvement with organizations, ranging from organizations that were primarily recreational and focused on fun and connection to academic-based organizations focused on resources and networking to cultural organizations with a purpose of creating community and connecting to identity. The ways in which she showed up in these spaces also differed to an extent. She spoke about feeling deeper connections with others in a South Asian student organization, where there was shared identity among members that created a foundation for more in-depth relationship-building and learning about each other. Noting a difference in the cultures of the South Asian organization and academic organization she was a part of, she was intentional in transferring approaches to the latter that allowed her to create deeper connections.

She emphasized the importance of community throughout the organizations she was a part of. Joining a South Asian organization was particularly impactful for her. She noted having South Asian friends as a child that were mostly family friends, while her social circle at school was primarily East Asian. This shifted for her in college, where there was a substantial South Asian student population:

> It's been game-changing. I would say I had never - growing up, I didn't necessarily feel like I lacked that because I had great friends growing up. I loved the people that I surrounded myself with… But I do feel like coming and finding the brown community definitely enhanced my experience. I think for me, I didn't realize how much I valued that connection that you have to people who share your culture… there are just so many shared experiences that just don't even need to be explained. And so the fact that we were able to create those relationships and also just have this common understanding for each other, it meant a lot to me.

In addition to the ease of building these relationships and an understanding of each others' experiences, Aishwarya also highlighted the ability to share culture with South Asian peers including cooking traditional food together and watching Bollywood movies.

Immersion in South Asian social circles as well as involvement in South Asian student organizations also prompted her to take pride in her identity:

> My identity right now is also pretty different than my identity entering college, for sure. I think I definitely, I wouldn't say I identified as Indian, identified as Desi, but now I feel like I'm very much more proud of that part of my identity.

She attributed this new claiming of identity and exploration as a key factor in how she navigated campus experiences and what she chose to be involved with, citing student organizations and enrolling in Asian American studies courses.

Part of her motivation to get involved on campus stemmed from wanting to challenge stereotypes around South Asian women. She spoke of traditional gender norms and historical treatment of women as subservient as "a very integral part of the South Asian culture" and acknowledged that although there had been progress, there were ways in which gender expectations remained persistent:

> That has definitely shaped the way that I think and also the way that I am, because part of the reason why I wanted to involve myself in [South Asian student organization] and also specifically [women in academic major organization] is to kind of push that narrative that there's no reason that women should be placed on a lower pedestal as men. There is no reason that because you're a woman, you're not expected to do as much in the sense of career driven and the professional world… So I think it definitely contributes a lot to my motivation, especially being a South Asian woman. I want to inspire maybe other people

> who maybe feel like they aren't at a place to do that, that you're more than capable despite what may be fed to you.

Aishwarya talked about being passionate about women's involvement in leadership and a sense of responsibility to lead and change the narrative for South Asians and women. As the president of a women's organization in business, she reflected on how others may accept her leadership because the organization is gender-based but if it were another type of business organization then "people would feel a little bit, like okay, that's interesting. That's different." She emphasized the importance of representation in leadership roles for organizations at all levels, from student organizations to corporations, for historically marginalized populations to feel capable of holding leadership roles, succeeding in different fields, and celebrating each other:

> I feel very proud when I see South Asian CEOs, when I see leaders from similar descent of mine. I feel an extreme amount of proudness and also celebration. I feel like it feels like a very much turning point. It feels like you're headed in the right direction to celebrate the successes and wins of people that aren't just… 80 year old white men. We're branching out. And so I think part of moving in that direction is involving ourselves as much as we can, because the more that we are apparent in, whether it's the professional world, whether it's on campus at college, on leadership boards, the more that we see each other, whether it's other South Asians or even people from other minority groups, the more that we're able to recognize each other's strengths and also celebrate each other, then we can see more and more of us in those big leadership roles.

While emphasizing the importance of representation, Aishwarya also reflected on the interplay of the MMM in how others perceive Asian Americans. Despite being underrepresented in leadership roles, she shared comments she heard from others: "everyone always says, oh, the

Asian people are always in leadership positions… People look at the top 0.01% of people, they're like, oh God, everyone's in a leadership position when really they're talking about Google and Pepsi," referring to Sundar Pichai, Google CEO, and Inra Nooyi, former CEO of PepsiCo, Inc.

In addition to overestimating South Asian representation in leadership, Aishwarya also shared how the MMM influences how South Asians perceive and others' reactions to experiences of South Asian racism and discrimination. She said these experiences are not taken seriously when they happen to South Asians, referring to incidents as "borderline racism" or "borderline discrimination":

> …it's like, 'oh, but you guys are making so much money. Like, oh, you guys are so successful… If you want someone, something done right, you call a brown person or you call an Asian person to do it.' And it's like those kinds of comments I've heard personally directly to me before, and it definitely rubs me the wrong way because it diminishes any sort of experience that a South Asian person has with racism because they're just automatically put into this category of, 'okay, but you're fine because you're so successful because you make so much money because you're basically white, you're fine.' Which is not the case at all. I think there's just so much suffering and historical discrimination faced that to diminish it all with comments like that, it just feels very much, just feels like we're going back 50 years, 200 years, 300 years. It just feels very regressive.

The negation of South Asian Americans' experiences with racism, while also stereotyping them as universally high-earning and "White," was frustrating and dismissive to Aishwarya. On the other end of the spectrum, she also noted the MMM's prevalence within the South Asian

community with expectations from elders of fitting a “copycat cookie cutter mold” in regard to choosing academic majors and career paths.

These experiences underscored the importance of community for Aishwarya and components she spoke about as important in her future employment and career, including employee resource groups for South Asian and Asian American communities, as well as collaborative work environments. She described her leadership style in relation to her identity, specifically that her identities as South Asian and a woman “revolve around community” and “are very much how you identify with other people.” This played out in putting people first in organizations rather than tasks and outcomes, being intentional about making sure people felt included, heard, and valued, and engaging in collaborative rather than hierarchical leadership. Aishwarya recognized that this approach was often in conflict with dominant ideas of leadership:

> I do think that leadership is viewed among the majority as a very much one person is in charge per se of a lot of other people and they're the boss type of thing, which I struggle to fit that definition just because I don't ever feel like I'm the boss of anyone…But I think especially if you look up mean on Google, a picture of leadership, you're going to see one person who's probably standing above a lot of other people… But really it's like leadership is honestly, you're a team. Leaders cannot do what they do without the people. People can't do what they want to do without leaders too.

Aishwarya’s descriptions of leadership and her experiences reflected the importance of leadership in community, as well as leading with empathy and care.

Ananya



"I wanted to emphasize that leadership does not necessarily pertain to one person leading a group of people in a formal or political manner, but leadership can also be a group of people collectively creating change in community. I specifically focused on collaborative leadership between women/underrepresented groups since when many think of leaders their minds go to political leaders, which here in America are typically straight white men. It is important to emphasize how crucial the role of leadership women and other minorities play when it comes to community building, addressing changes that are needed, and having diverse perspectives."

-Ananya (PGVM description)

Ananya was a second-year information science major. Her parents immigrated to the U.S. with her grandparents from India and she is an only child. When she was two years old, her family moved to India for two years and Gujarati was her first language. She recalled her lack of proficiency in English as difficult and had trouble adjusting to elementary school in the U.S. However, she also recognized the benefits of growing up with her grandparents and extended

family close by in keeping connected to Indian culture, including learning and maintaining her fluency in Gujarati.

She described her immediate family as "a mix," blending Gujarati and American culture. Her household maintained traditional norms through daily routines, including typically eating Indian food, practicing religion through prayers and ceremonies such as pujas, and celebrating Indian holidays. However, there was still a balance; Ananya used mainstream American holidays as an example: "definitely at home we're more Gujarati than American, but we still celebrate Christmas." Ananya said she personally leaned more toward American culture in certain settings. She described her elementary and middle schools as diverse, and found connections to her culture through friendships with five other Indian households within her neighborhood. However, at school, she leaned more toward American culture:

> At school I feel like it was definitely different since I grew up more Gujarati at home and at school it was like I wanted to lean towards American culture more, like, I don't know, I would want Lunchables instead of Indian food and little things like that.

She reflected on a shift toward the end of high school and entering college, becoming more comfortable embracing her Indian culture and finding herself wanting Indian food rather than dining hall food, enjoying watching Bollywood movies, Indian fashion, and jewelry.

Ananya attributed this shift partly to increasing South Asian representation in media, including social media. Seeing South Asian content creators be vocal about their culture had a significant impact, prompting Ananya to "want to express myself through my culture more as well." South Asian representation and stories through TV shows were also impactful, although Ananya reflected on problematic components of the representation as well. She named South Asians in media who she previously found inspiring, before noticing patterns in their work such

as South Asian women continuously pursuing White love interests and their self-worth and confidence depicted as dependent on the White love interest's returned affection. Although Ananya expressed strong opinions about South Asian representation in media, particularly of South Asian women, she shared that these topics, such as relationships, were taboo in her household and avoided by her family.

In reflecting on her first recollections of leadership, Ananya named her elementary school teachers: "I feel like I always idolized them." She noted that all of her teachers were White, and some more welcoming than others. Similar to other participants, she also spoke of her mother and women in her community:

> I feel like at a really young age, I idolized my mom and other women who were older in our community. They would always organize events or plan things or just have everything in the house under control. And I feel like without those women as leaders, I feel like they're a foundation to South Asian society.

Ananya recognized the leadership of women in her community as leaders due to their actions and behavior, rather than titles. However, she reflected on not always recognizing this type of leadership and adhering to more dominant ideas of leadership tied to positionality and power as a child. She spoke about teachers and older students as leaders, and "idolizing" them as a child before realizing "not everyone just because they're older are good people or responsible" and more recently gaining clarity on who she looks up to and sees as a leader. This included broadening her definition of leadership:

> I feel like people just immediately think of even myself sometimes I immediately think of just people that are in positions of power, but I feel like people who aren't inherently in positions of power can also be leaders in their own way as long as they're inspiring other

> people or just interacting in a way that is leading and they don't necessarily have to be in a job or political position of power.

She differentiated between “people who are naturally leading or actual authority figures” with examples of her mother’s leadership of their household and professors whom she admired and defined leadership as “someone who inspires and connects with people” without necessarily having a direct connection, but rather role modeling behaviors. She emphasized the importance of compassion, effective communication, and care in leadership, and returned to her mother as a model in leading with care and enacting organizational skills that enable effective communication.

Ananya’s own involvement with leadership expanded in high school with leadership positions in various academic and athletic student organizations. Engaging in positional leadership was pivotal for Ananya in viewing herself as a leader: “Until late high school, when I actually had positions where I was a leader, I didn’t really think of myself as a leader.” Her reflections on leadership implied experience in positional leadership, knowledge, and certain skill sets as qualifications for leadership:

> I feel like being able to inspire anyone is really empowering and I feel like I still see leadership as a goal and not something I've totally achieved yet. And I definitely want to get to a place where I feel like I am helping other people and inspiring other people and passions of my own, whether it's - I really like art, and as an info sci student, I feel like I've recently switched into the major, so I've yet to have learned about so much about it. So I feel like once I'm at the point where I have more experience, whether it's through internships or actual classes, I feel like I'm going to be able to step into bigger positions where I can actually help people.

Similar to other participants, Ananya did not see herself as a leader until she had met certain qualifications, including holding positional leadership titles within organizations. She also reflected on how others perceive her leadership abilities based on her identity. Growing up in a racially diverse community, she noted feeling that her gender was more influential than race in how others responded to her: "I feel like the fact that I'm a woman is mostly why people didn't respect or didn't see me as a leader." She emphasized this dynamic even more so within her major in a STEM field: "where men are the majority, it's really hard to find yourself paving the way." She named women that she looked up to within her major, as well as public figures, as inspiration and role models to pursue leadership and how to advocate for issues and communities:

> I feel like I'm more comfortable with leading something now than I would be before because I feel like, especially as a woman, you don't really see many women in positions of power until recently and it was just hard to see myself as that. But I feel like after actually experiencing positions, I have the courage to apply for more.

Seeing other women of color in leadership positions, as well as her growing leadership experience, was impactful for her own leadership self-efficacy.

Within the STEM field, Ananya reflected on the challenges of being in a predominantly White and male field, and the ways in which she has found community, particularly with other women. She named specific organizations for women in STEM fields "that are really helpful because then it builds a sense of community, especially in a field that's majority white men." She also reflected on informal connections among women of color in classes and group projects as a source of comfort and support. She spoke about feeling uncomfortable in predominantly White, male groups, feeling self-conscious, "scared that I wouldn't be able to voice my opinions" and

"more restricted to not say what I want to." When there was another woman of color in the group, Ananya noted feeling more comfortable and building a supportive connection with the other women in the group.

Ananya also reflected on building community through South Asian student organizations, and a desire to deepen her connections within the community. She differentiated between South Asian student organizations and felt that some required additional knowledge and familiarity with current members while others were more welcoming. She named a Nepali student organization as one of the latter "where I don't feel like everyone's judging each other or there are just groups of friends in it." She spoke about wanting to branch out and joining more South Asian organizations to create more connections: "I find myself wanting to talk about Bollywood movies or talk in my language, but I can't with my friends who aren't South Asian." She was particularly interested in South Asian dance organizations, as she did Bollywood dancing as a child. The competitive nature of the organizations was a barrier though: "I feel like I've always been a little afraid unless I know more people or know more information about the club itself." Rather than joining long-standing organizations, she spoke about joining recently formed dance organizations where there were not "any cliques within it yet."

Although Ananya found community with women and among South Asians, her identity also presented challenges in pursuing leadership. As noted previously, not seeing women, particularly South Asian women, as leaders influenced her own ability to see herself as a leader. Speaking of her identity as a South Asian woman, she said:

> I feel like it has definitely knocked me down a couple [times]. Especially growing up, I feel like I couldn't see myself as a leader because I never saw anyone else who was South Asian or a woman in a leadership position. I feel like that's starting to change really

> recently, and I feel like I definitely want to see myself as a leader and I feel like when I am able to reach that goal, I feel like I want to help other people who are South Asian or who are women or South Asian women to also see themselves in that way.

Ananya echoed other participants in voicing the significance of representation, as well as a sense of responsibility to future generations and creating pathways to leadership in order for others to see themselves in a more diverse set of leaders. She also noted that representation is not enough in and of itself. She reflected on the limited South Asian representation, particularly in media, as "slightly problematic or racial stereotypes against South Asian people. And I feel like it's important that we reframe that narrative towards the people that are going to look up to us." Ananya's sense of responsibility toward future generations reflected her observations and understanding of how South Asian stereotypes were presented in the media, and the ways in which they upheld Whiteness as a standard.

Her sense of responsibility also extended to her parents, which she attributed to South Asian cultural norms. She described this sense of responsibility as double-edged, reflecting on increased freedom of women in her generation yet steadfast expectations related to gender: "We still have to fight for that freedom in some ways, whether it's about marriage or wanting to have an independent life with your career." Her sense of responsibility to her parents stemmed from observing their experiences and sacrifices they made in their own dreams and pursuits as well as their immigration process to the U.S. Understanding these sacrifices "adds a lot of pressure to wanting to be successful." Ananya spoke about success in varying ways, as positional and in terms of leadership style:

> My goal is to be successful in my field, but I never saw my goal as I'm going to be someone's boss someday or something like that - the typical sense of leadership. But I

definitely want to be in a place where I'm a leader in my own way and not necessarily.. I don't mind if I'm not in a position of power that leads other people in the structural work-sense. But I feel like as long as I am being my own definition of being a leader, I will see myself as one.

Ananya was able to see leadership, and success, beyond positional titles and tied her own definition relating to representation, advocacy, and a sense of responsibility to her future goals.

Annie



"I decided to draw a collection of lighthouses, which are used as a symbol for leadership. They represent guidance, safety, reliability, a beacon of light, service, inclusivity - traits/characteristics that encompass how I define leadership. But I think another thing about lighthouses that reflects how I see leadership is that they can physically look different from one another, while sharing the same/a similar purpose. I have found leaders and leadership roles to be present in all aspects of my life, and the people who take these roles are just as diverse."

-Annie (PGVM description)

Annie was a sophomore computer science major. Her parents immigrated from India in the mid-1990s, and were somewhat assimilated to U.S. culture by the time she was born. She is

an only child and grew up in a predominantly White area, but had extended family close by and strong bonds with her cousins, aunts, and uncles.

When reflecting on her first examples of leadership, Annie named positional leaders, such as elementary school safety monitors, club leaders, and TAs, as well as family members who had taken on leadership roles in their careers. She talked about one of cousins specifically as influential in her perception of leadership. Her cousin, who owns her own therapy practice and is active in community service, "treated everyone like an intelligent human being, which I think can be hard to come by. I think some people really don't take you seriously, especially when you're a kid." Her ability to make Annie feel listened to and respected, as well as creating a kind and welcoming environment, instilled her as a role model for Annie in terms of leadership.

Annie's own leadership journey was spurred by encouragement from her mother, who emphasized leadership as a means to gain respect, be active in community, and as a resume-builder. Annie described herself as shy: "it does take me a while to feel confident in my voice and especially when I'm in new surroundings." She said she felt more comfortable toward the end of elementary school, having become familiar with her peers, and pursued leadership activities in fourth and fifth grade.

Attending an all-girls high school was pivotal in Annie's understanding of leadership and her own development. Annie noted feeling comfortable much faster in a new setting because it was an all-girls environment:

> I think that just made me more comfortable even in terms of just not even necessarily leadership per say, but speaking up in math and science classes, I think that was a big thing for me that just became, oh, I don't feel like I am dumber than the boys who are more outspoken. And so I think that environment definitely pushed me towards taking on

> a lot of leadership roles and more than that, be more active with it and creating those roles for me to take instead of just being in a club and then sort of rising.

In addition to joining clubs, Annie also created clubs about topics she was interested in and grew to enjoy organizing events and bringing people together to make new connections.

Coming from an all-girls environment in a small community, Annie reflected on the difficulties in transitioning to college. She attributed this to the size of the institution, as well as ambiguity around where she felt she stood in terms of intelligence compared to her peers:

> For really the first time in my life, I didn't feel I was even close to the smartest person in the room. I never felt like the smartest person, but I definitely knew my standings in terms of socially and academically…

Annie spoke about how this transition impacted her in a lack of confidence in pursuing leadership opportunities, as she felt intimidated in a new setting. However, as she noted with earlier settings, she built confidence as she became more familiar with the college environment and began joining student organizations in her second semester. She said she was moving toward not being afraid to get involved, yet saw herself "less of a leader now than I probably was sophomore year of high school. But I guess that's kind of how it is." Annie's perceptions of her involvement reflected dominant notions of leadership tied to positions and status.

Annie spoke about stereotypes she had encountered related to women and leadership from a young age. She reflected on when she was first interested in engaging in leadership and remembered being scared of getting called "bossy" or not being taken seriously because of her identity. Although she noted these fears were somewhat alleviated during high school in an all-girls environment, she experienced the fears reemerge in college and reflected on the association of bossy with certain identities:

> It's not fun being called bossy, even if that's what people think a leader is. I think that's definitely a characteristic only assigned to women and probably even more than that women of color, I think, get associated with those types of characteristics and negative traits more often than our other peers.

Annie's reflections on gender exposed contrasting narratives, both in women being unfairly characterized as "bossy" yet also having to prove themselves in predominantly male spaces. Annie's interest in her major, computer science, was sparked in high school and how male-dominated the field is did not register for her until entering a coed environment in college. She reflected on feeling insecure and unsure of herself academically "especially when a lot of the students that are first to raise their hand, the first to call out and all that, are all men." However, she also noted that this dynamic motivated her to "stick with it" even when she was feeling doubtful or felt a lack of interest, similar to other participants' noting a sense of responsibility to challenge stereotypes.

Unlike some of the other participants, Annie's sense of community with other South Asians was tentative at times. She attributed this to having parents who had immigrated almost a decade before she was born and had time to assimilate, leading to her having a different experience from many other children of South Asian immigrants. Annie talked about South Asian spaces and social circles at her institution and:

> …not having that prominent of a South Asian influence on my childhood as some of my friends. I don't feel like I necessarily fit in those spaces because of how much they can relate. And I can to a certain extent, but maybe not as much as they all do.

Having exposure to more South Asian peers prompted her to reflect on her connection to her identity, and provided motivation to be more involved with the South Asian and Asian American

community and “figure out where that balance, I guess between Asian and American part of me.” However, Annie also noted despite increasing involvement still feeling less confident in South Asian spaces:

> I don't know if it was ironic or not, but I think sometimes I feel less comfortable in South Asian spaces being a leader because again, I don't know if disconnected is the right word, but I at least feel more disconnected than I think my peers are. And sometimes I think that translates to me not kind of wanting to take a backseat in those communities and not be a big voice… So I think sometimes I feel less confident in those spaces than in the broader life in general.

Annie’s reflection on her sense of comfort and confidence reflected narratives around navigating a bicultural identity and not quite fully fitting into either space, South Asian or American.

Although Annie’s discussions of leadership were often linked to positional leadership, she also recognized the ways in which leadership behaviors emerge in unstructured ways. She reflected on how she saw leadership show up in her friend groups when someone took initiative, made sure everyone was included, or planned group outings:

> Sometimes that’s not recognized as a so-called leadership role by a lot of people, but I think I see those types of people as leaders… I think your actions speak more to if you’re a leader or not than maybe your title.

Leadership beyond positional titles or roles coincided with Annie’s reflection on her own growth as a leader as well, wanting to build her self-esteem and confidence in her voice, and becoming more involved in her community.

Hannah



"South Asian women's leadership is multifaceted. Women are leaders, no matter in what form. Whether they choose to be upfront and loud about injustices or they choose to be behind the scenes, take care of children, or cook to maintain her household, South Asian women are leaders in the home and in whatever career they choose. Silent leadership, household duties, and career breakthroughs are all equally important in showcasing the leadership that South Asian women are exhibiting in society."

-Hannah (PGVM description)

Hannah was a third-year physiology and neurobiology major. Her parents moved to the U.S. from India. She grew up in a predominantly White, middle class suburban town, and considers her family upper middle class. Along with her parents and brother, her grandparents often stayed with her family. Additionally, her parents often rented out the basement to recently-arrived Indians who worked with one of her parents and she described the tenants as extended family during her childhood.

Although her schools were predominantly White, she grew up attending a Hindu Sunday school. She looked up to the Sunday school teachers as leaders more so than those in her academic spaces, saying that as people who held jobs such as scientists but were also teachers of spiritual texts, she admired how they balanced work and community involvement. However, her first example of leadership was her mother. Hannah described her mother as a leader within the household, as well as in their community, often organizing events and bringing people together.

Hannah considers herself as an extrovert from an early age, often taking the lead in group projects, although the rigor of high school prompted her to take a step back:

> …even in elementary schools when we would have group projects and things like that, I would always be the leader of the group… I always found myself taking that role more than just a follower role and more so I feel like in high school it kind of pivoted just because the academic rigor also increased. So I would sometimes be a follower if I felt somewhat inferior to my classmates, but I'm trying to get back in college to be a leader wherever it's appropriate for me to, and try as hard as I can not to be a follower, just this is where the race and gender aspect comes into it. I feel like automatically as a minority and as a woman, it's kind of my responsibility to be that spokesperson and set an example.

Throughout our interview, Hannah often talked about the importance of challenging stereotypes of South Asian women as passive, weak, and obedient. She said part of her motivation to be a leader and be seen as one was challenging these stereotypes and creating a new perception of South Asian women as those who take charge. As one of only two Indian girls in her high school, she said she often felt the need to set an example to combat common perceptions of Indian women.

While stereotypes frame South Asian women as subservient, Hannah also reflected on the implications of the MMM in how South Asians are perceived by others. She views South Asians as taken more seriously than other people of color with "the stereotype of intelligence behind us," which brought a sense of responsibility for her. Hannah talked about using the stereotype to her advantage, saying that "for South Asian women, it's really important that we strongly listen to people that black women or Latino women or I don't know, other minority groups of women that don't have that voice in society, so we can take what they say and put it out there because we know that people listen to us." While acknowledging the MMM as a stereotype that can be harmful, she also saw it as a privilege in some contexts because it allowed for her voice to be heard. However, she also identified that it depended on the setting and identities of others present. Naming a hierarchy of race and gender, she said "It's like white men, men of color, Indian men, and then Indian women. That's how I would view that. If the three above me were present, then they would be the leader instead of me". This also impacted how Hannah approached situations and the roles she took on.

Hannah also shared how she experienced gender roles and expectations in other settings, including differing rules for herself and her brother growing up and observations of expectations and behavior of South Asian women in her community. She described the aunties of her community as the "backbone of my Sunday school and my Indian community", organizing events, cooking and preparing for the events, and caring for others. However, Hannah also spoke about how women's leadership was often invisible and taken for granted:

> They're socialized to be leaders in the home, and they're socialized to be quiet leaders though, so they're socialized to do everything behind the scenes and make sure everything is working. But then when someone thinks of the head of the home or the

> head of the house in South Asian cultures, they think of the man automatically… The Indian woman, the mother, is the one that is doing all the work, but she never gets any credit for it

Hannah expressed frustration with the lack of recognition of women's leadership, also acknowledging that South Asian women often took on quiet leadership both in and outside of the home.

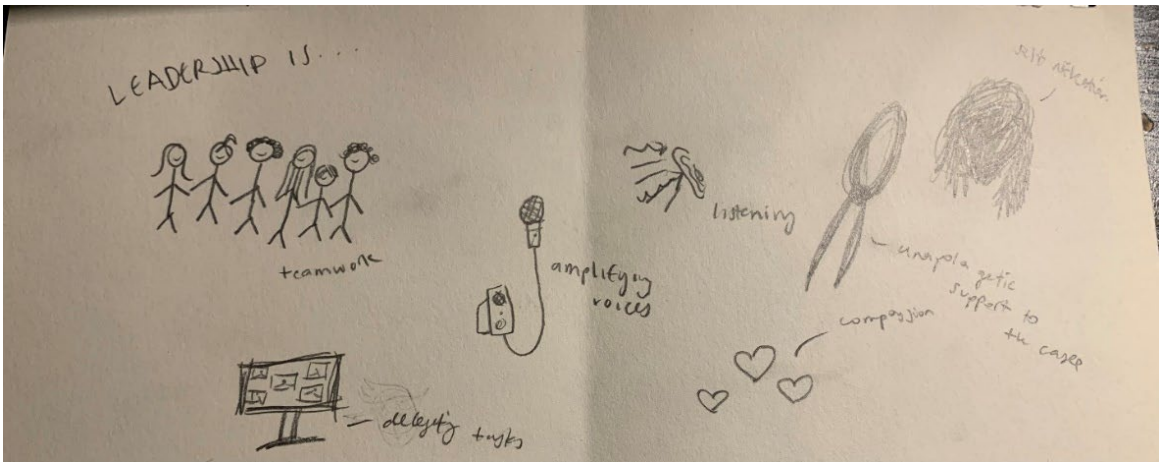
Hannah also talked about community-based leadership not being recognized as often as leadership in more structured settings such as academia and the workforce. She attributed this to mainstream perceptions of leadership in the U.S. that portray leaders as loud and often the center of attention: "... in the U.S., it's very just the people who are out there, the people who are making statements. It's never the silent leaders… Leadership doesn't always have to mean I am being the loudest voice in the room". Hannah expressed some dissonance with this, acknowledging that leadership did not require being at the forefront, yet also linking leadership to using one's voice for advocacy and speaking up:

> I feel like people have to know what you want to say. And I think even if you're an introvert, you're quiet, you don't really like to have attention on you. I feel like if you are a leader, you kind of need to not be quiet. You need to kind of be loud and not loud, but you need to be out there so people listen to you and people look at you and take you seriously.

Along with connecting leadership to community and caring for others, Hannah also tied leadership to advocacy. When speaking about her views of leadership, she talked about students who protest inequity and issues that create hostile environments as "brave enough and strong enough to be able to take a stand against something". In reflecting on leadership in multiple

settings and contexts, Hannah also grappled with the differing views of leadership she held, broadening her definition as we spoke to include quiet leaders and those who may not recognize their own leadership.

Indrani



"1. I chose pencil and paper because I often doodle; I'm not the best artist objectively so it is the best medium

2. I don't really find it easy to express myself through drawing, words are my friend! So I first thought of words for qualities of leadership that I value and conjured an image related to the word.

I hope these help you understand more! The scissor looking doodle is supposed to be a keffiyeh, which I wrote: unapologetic support to a cause--I think the case of activism for Palestine has become an issue that people are afraid to speak about for fear of rejection. I think it's important as a leader to be steadfast in activism and approach issues with a critical AND accountable vision. I also have a shaded face, which says "self reflection". Going off of accountability, I think if a leader is tasked with coordinating with a team they have to do self-reflection on their own about how best to take care of oneself and also be there for others."

-Indrani (PGVM description)

Indrani was a third-year government and politics major and first-generation college student. Her parents immigrated from Sri Lanka. She identified as Sinhalese and Buddhist, and noted significant communities of both populations growing up. Although she grew up with many extended family members closeby, she, her parents, and twin sister traveled to Sri Lanka every four years to visit her parents' siblings. Indrani grew up with a close connection to her Sinhalese

Sri Lankan heritage, and noted becoming more aware of diversity within the Sri Lankan community, as well as history and power dynamics, as she went to college and met other Sri Lankan students, particularly Tamil and Muslim students.

Indrani's father moved to the U.S. following extended family members and worked multiple jobs. Her mother had wanted to go into nursing but was discouraged by her own father, and instead worked in medical coding. Although she described her mother as reserved and private, her stories resonated with Indrani:

> I don't know much about her to be honest, but it's just interesting. And I think her way of telling me her story is to pressure me into doing well in school. She's like, don't make mistakes or don't regret your choices. She tells me that a lot.

Indrani spoke about parental pressure and expectations to succeed academically and professionally, specifically to move beyond her parents' socioeconomic status. She described their mindset as "because we came to this country and made it up here, you should be able to exceed that boundary and move up even further." While understanding her parents' mindset, Indrani also expressed feelings of internal conflict and balancing income potential with her passions and interests around social justice.

Indrani noted that controversial issues, such as divisions within the Sri Lankan community and Islamophobia, were not often discussed within Sri Lankan communities. However, she found space to discuss such issues within broader Asian American communities, influencing her affiliation with the term "Asian American" despite feeling othered at times as a South Asian: "... In a broader sense, as citizens with political power, that label [of Asian American] is also very, very strong, and it definitely wasn't like that before in high school." Indrani recalled leading a South Asian student organization in high school, and an unwillingness

from the Asian American student organization to include South Asians. She characterized the relationship as separate and disconnected, leading her to identify more so with the label of South Asian. This shifted in college:

> When I went into college, that definitely changed for me because a lot of the work or things that I experienced or that I took part in really resonated with the label of Asian American because that label has a history of unifying as a political force rather than a social category.

Indrani was involved with Sri Lankan, South Asian, and Asian American organizations in college, and noted that one of her goals was increasing South Asian participation in organizational work around political action, advocacy, and education.

Indrani's conceptualization of the label "Asian American" was also shaped by her involvement in her university's Asian American studies program. She found the classes to be a space to explore her own thoughts and ideas around identity and get to know others on a more personal level than most classroom environments; she also named several of the program's faculty as examples of leaders she looked up to. The personal relationships she built with them mirrored similar relationships and leadership role models in her childhood, such as a South Indian dance teacher and a sociology teacher.

She noted that many of the individuals she looked up to were women of color and many Asian or South Asian, although she still saw the South Asian community as a male-dominated space. She reflected on the gender dynamics she observed within households and South Asian community settings. Indrani shared that many families "have a dominant male voice, and a lot of the women are accepting of their position as wives, as homemakers" while also maintaining their own professional careers. She described the women taking on the majority of housework on top

of their professional responsibilities as “what’s expected of them.” She emphasized that this dynamic did not necessarily signify that women who took on these roles were complacent or obedient, but that “how a household runs or the way I've seen it is still very patriarchal.”

The ways in which she described community settings shifted gender dynamics, with women taking on a more visible leadership role: “It’s mostly the women who take charge of how this is going to run,” planning logistics, organizing, and bringing people together. Despite this role, Indrani acknowledged that women’s leadership and contributions often went unnoticed and unrecognized. She described women’s contributions to the household, in particular, as:

> ...almost the norm. So those things go unappreciated. Sometimes they're not vocalized. There are times where my dad says, thank you for some things, but it's not the norm. And then actually, this is really interesting because when I say thank you to my mom for cooking a meal, she's like, oh, why are you thanking me? She laughs. But then it's also like I'm expected to thank my dad for cooking for me. So it's very interesting to see those different reactions. My dad's like, oh, where's my thank you? And then my mom's like, why are you thanking me? So it's very apparent what their roles are in the house and how if they're shifted, there's just this response from them that's very inherent, I guess.

These observations informed Indrani’s perceptions of leadership and expanded her definition beyond positional leadership. She described her initial views of leadership as a “surface-level understanding,” acknowledging that holding a position was “not necessarily enough” to be considered a leader.

Indrani described characteristics that she perceived as essential to leadership: care, compassion, advocacy, communication, accountability, and attention to social issues as well as individuals’ well-being. These characteristics were evident in her observations of other leaders’

characteristics, and their influence on her sense of community and belonging. She reflected on university staff members who worked with Asian American students, and the ways in which they led with care and compassion that she saw as "an invitation to be more open" while she is usually more reserved. Indrani described community as central to leadership, emphasizing that "having that shared ideology or belief that community is the first and foremost most important thing in what makes a movement or a club or something run successfully." She noted that this view is often in contrast with mainstream American ideas of leadership, which she described as "individualistic and logistical" and lacking compassion. She reflect on the focus being more on an end goal and outcomes rather than process:

> Even in my academic spaces, that has never been a priority to really digest information together. It's just been, 'oh, you do this, you do that, and we can just paste everything and be done with it.'… The way group projects are even designed for students to complete is not like, I don't think it's ever designed for thoughtful group discussion, especially given deadlines and things like that.

As an Asian American studies minor, Indrani observed differences in classroom environments and described her government and politics courses as more depersonalized and focused on course outcomes rather than relationship building and self-exploration. She described her own leadership style as reflective, understanding, and collaborative, and acknowledged experiencing tension as those values can conflict with deadlines and ways in which we are socialized as workers and leaders. With her leadership style and values she held, she noted a need to trust others she works with and "that's something that's very difficult, especially when we're trained to be very individual workers, is to rely on other people to get work done."

Indrani attributed her changing definition of leadership to her involvement with an Asian American student organization, which she described as community-oriented and welcoming. After not feeling welcome in an Asian American student organization in high school, she got involved in college and held leadership roles within the organization: “I knew so many people in the organization as the years went by and I understood how things ran, that I felt comfortable in pushing myself to apply.” She also spoke about her growth and learning around identity through the Asian American student organization, and connected this to solidarity with other communities of color, particularly activism within the Black community and the Civil Rights movement:

> In terms of my own education, I think recognizing Asian American history as almost a product of the civil rights movement and the work done by Black activists. Passing the [1965] Immigration Act, that was a direct result of the Civil Rights movement, and it's the work of Black people in the United States really is what makes us a community here. It's because of their work that we're here, and that's something that I always remember, and especially when we're talking about activism. I read a lot of Angela Davis these days. Her work is very relevant. I think understanding how she views the world as a Black woman and then connecting that to my experiences has also been very, very powerful. But yeah, she and other authors have a way of bringing intersectionality and telling people, her readers, that this is an issue for all of us and not just the Black community. And she even brings up in her book, Freedom is a Constant Struggle, the issue of policing for the South Asian community, particularly South Asian men after 9/11 with advanced surveillance and things like that. So I think those foundations are always there when I think about my activism and my advocacy.

Indrani emphasized the importance of knowing and sharing this history, and building solidarity networks among people of color. She noted similarities she observed between solidarity networks built during the Civil Rights movement and current activism around Palestinian liberation:

> … A lot of the solidarity networks that are being built around that specific issue are mostly students of color, and there's a lot of history between the Civil Rights movement and the freedom struggle. I think those histories are very important to bring up again. But yeah, I think it's very connected to a broader goal of reforming or completely changing a system that's built on foundations of racist ideology and sexism, those things that we have to really take a moment to really understand and teach others about, because there's a lot of things that we can do as a collective personally that I think would make a lot of things very, very easy to accomplish as a collective. So I think that's something, but yeah, I definitely think that we have a responsibility to speak up for each other considering those connections.

Indrani's observations of connections between historical and current activism were grounded in an understanding of systemic power and marginalization. She also reflected on the complexities of solidarity, implications of U.S. racial hierarchies, and the Model Minority Myth (MMM). While it was outside of the norm for her to discuss issues of race with her parents, she had conversations with them about activism around Black Lives Matter and noted both understanding and resistance in the conversation. While her parents were able to understand the historical legacy of racism in the U.S. as immigrants, discussing anti-Blackness within the South Asian community and privileges South Asians may hold felt "almost accusatory in a sense" and was a more difficult conversation to have.

Indrani perceived conversations about gender and sexism as less approachable within the South Asian community, and complicated by solidarity within the community and stereotypes around South Asian men:

> I think speaking about misogyny within our own community is one big thing that when we're talking about issues related to South Asian communities kind of goes under the radar at times. I think there's always this dilemma of talking about issues that affect women without insulting an entire community. And that's always been a problem, like bringing up domestic violence or abuse in South Asian communities or households. There's always this pressure to paint the South Asian man as a good person because we don't want to feed into the stereotypes that are already existing within Western media about the nerdy Asian, or sorry, nerdy Indian or abusive Indian or abusive South Asian men or violent men in general, because that would be working against what we're trying to advocate for. But at the same time, that kind of minimization of the issues really does contribute to the erasure of the experiences of women.

Indrani described struggling with the tension between bringing attention to issues within the community and being perceived as a "traitor" for bringing these issues to light. These issues around gender often stayed in within-group conversations, as she noted the topic "takes up a lot of space" in her conversations with other South Asian women.

Indrani also noted that despite womens' contributions and roles in South Asian communities, men often took "center stage" in activist spaces. She described observing the dynamic in direct and indirect ways through settings such as student organization meetings and group chats where "dominant male voices and perspectives" were present and "voices of women are drowned out." She also described differences in climate between her Asian American studies

courses and others, particularly her government and politics courses, which were predominantly White and male spaces. She reflected on approaching the latter with hesitancy and prioritizing her own sense of security. This manifested in being cautious around her word choices and a hesitancy to voice perspectives that the majority may disagree with. She reflected on her tendency to avoid confrontation, striving to balance being a "relaxed leader and then also not authoritative, even though I really want to be," and an awareness of others' perceptions of her due to identity. As an Asian American woman, she was "kind of afraid of people seeing me as this party pooper or someone…who doesn't understand that we have other things going on in life," as well as labels of "bossy" for giving directions or guidance to men. In contrast, within Asian American studies courses with predominantly Asian American female students, she described her approach as "more freely saying what I believe in, and I don't really mind about the pushback that I might receive." She also described an increased sense of agency in predominantly White spaces as a result of her experiences voicing her perspectives and insights around identity in Asian American spaces:

> So in those discussion rooms where I had originally been very, very hesitant to say things that aligned with my opinions in fear of backlash, I kind of was able to let go and start advocating for myself because the point of a discussion is to share your thoughts. And so, I think later on I kind of felt that it was a necessity that I speak up not just for myself, but for other people who are around me who also felt like they were outnumbered.

Indrani also connected this approach to her sense of responsibility around building solidarity and making space for other marginalized voices within the classroom environment.

Indrani's experiences and learning around activism and collectivism influenced how she thought about her future goals and professional career aspirations:

> I think definitely now I've really found so much value in community work, and I think the concept of leadership is really just teamwork. It should be viewed as teamwork. And a lot of the time you think of leadership as one central person, when really when we're thinking about social movements or even finishing a deadline, it's always going to be a group of people working towards a goal. So I think moving forward, when I think of how I want to apply my passions, it's definitely going to be centered around doing something collectively rather than being independent or hyper individualistic.

While Indrani perceived collectivist-oriented work as counter-cultural in U.S. society, she emphasized the approach as important to her and was adamant about proactively seeking out such environments in her future career.

Meena



"*The poster that I have created is meant to represent how leadership is often required in the face of challenging circumstances. This is represented by the umbrella standing firm against the rain. The umbrella is being propped up by some of the characteristics that I believe are essential in good leaders, many of which I have seen in the leaders that I look up to in my own life.*

The form of the drawing came to me very quickly while I was trying to visualize leadership. It seemed like the perfect comparison to how I see leaders in my life as well as the type of leader that I wish to be."

-Meena (PGVM description)

Meena was a fourth-year criminology and public policy major. Her parents immigrated from Pakistan in the early 1990s, and she is the second eldest of four children. Her family would travel to Pakistan frequently during her childhood to visit relatives and she lived in Saudi Arabia for two years. She grew up around many extended family members, with her family's household being known as "the boarding house," consistently having guests from Pakistan stay with them until they "leave to go to work and get married and new ones come."

Despite the close ties to family and Pakistani culture, Meena spoke of not feeling fully integrated into the community. She named terms such as "burger bacha" and "mango lassi kids" her cousins in Pakistan used to refer to Westernized or American Pakistanis. When in certain settings, she reflected on having a heightened sense of whether she was being judged for not being Muslim or Pakistani enough and conscious of her American accent when speaking Urdu. Similar to other participants, she did not feel fully included in U.S. culture either. She described feeling othered due to her appearance "where people will automatically look at you and assume that you are different" despite similar perspectives and other commonalities. Meena reflected on how she internalized this as well, wanting to minimize ways in which she was different than White, U.S.-born Americans:

> When we answer a phone call, we go, 'Salaam.' I don't want to say that. I'm going to be like, 'hello?' I'm going to be like, 'hi, mom.' Even though that's not how I speak to her, but I don't want anyone to - I know that they know, they look at me and they know that I'm different, but I want to minimize that as much as possible. I don't want them to treat

> me like I'm different. And for that, I feel like [I have] to act as plain like a gray rock as I can, just a plain piece of paper, and hopefully I can find things in their personality that I'm like, oh, I like that too… You feel like you're putting on a performance. You're like, oh, I have to jump through all these hoops to make them understand that I'm a human being and I'm just like them and I'm not whatever they think they've seen on TV.

Meena spoke of distancing herself from her Pakistani culture in order to blend into the dominant culture in several ways. She reflected on never wanting to wear Pakistani clothing outside of South Asian settings, describing it as "too homey" and adopting jeans and a T-shirt to blend in to "the American aesthetic":

> I think that also comes with the proximity to Whiteness ideal of 'I want to remove myself from as much culture as I can,' a more White-washed version, like a butter chicken version. A butter chicken. Everyone eats the butter chicken. Nobody eats the keema or the mutton curry. It's just the butter chicken… That's the one that's White people-friendly.

Meena's desire to make herself more palatable to White peers derived from feelings of difference and otherness. This sense of otherness also carried to her two years in Saudi Arabia as a child, where she attended a school with predominantly White Americans and described herself as "the only hijabi girl in my class." She described instances of other children pulling her and her sister's hijabs off "as if it's a hide and seek game." She noted the irony in feeling like an outsider as a Muslim girl in a Muslim country, and differentiated this with her experience in the U.S. She felt she experienced more explicit racism in the predominantly White schools in Saudi Arabia than in more diverse schools in the U.S. With the racism she experienced in Saudi Arabia, judgements and jokes about being Westernized from her cousins in Pakistan, and the ease of slipping into the

“American aesthetic,” Meena recalled leaning into her Americanness when returning from Saudi Arabia:

> When I was in Saudi Arabia, I didn't feel accepted by the White Americans who saw me as a hijabi girl and coming with my lunches that are Desi and smell like Desi spices. And then in Pakistan, it was like when I was younger, I liked to play outside a lot with my male cousins. And I was like, she's too dark skinned. I was skinny and then I was too fat. And then there was always nitpicking and stuff like that. And then over here, I think I felt like I saw people that were so many different shapes and sizes and nobody, that was the first time I actually didn't care. Having more variety means you don't care how you look. And that's when I was like, okay, I am an American. That's the problem. That's why I don't resonate with people and the communities there, because I'm an American. I was born here.

Her experiences of feeling ostracized within Pakistani and Muslim communities pushed Meena to lean more into her American identity and distance herself from the former.

She described a shift when she met others who shared her experience of being Pakistani, Muslim, and American, and reframing what it meant to be “mango lassi kids”:

> There's nothing wrong with that. It's just developing a unique identity that's a mixture of that - I'm not Pakistani, I'm not American. I'm like, there's something else here… I think as easy as it is to just try to push it away and ignore it, there's always this cognitive, there's a dissonance in your head of like, but this is not who I am. Even if you're acting, it's like you're acting a role. It's like, this is not who I am. Even if you're like, oh, I don't like anything about being Pakistani. You just know that, I can act like I'm fully American, and I am an American, but I'm not from the White culture. This is not my

> culture. This is not who I am. And it's always going to be there inside you, and there's just that voice, and it's going to be heard. You can do it. You can ignore it for years and then have a breakdown later, or you can just do it now and come to terms with it. But there's always going to be that sense of, this is not who I am. This is not who I am. This is not who I am, you're always going to feel like you're acting, like you're putting on a facade. This is something you're pretending to be because you don't connect with that. That's not how you were raised.

Meena's integration of Pakistani, Muslim, and American culture also prompted her to reflect on nuances between generations, particularly how she perceived race compared to South Asian elders. When speaking about race within the U.S., she acknowledged anti-Blackness within the South Asian community, yet also noted her own sense of affinity based on how she perceived a racial hierarchy in the U.S.: "... for me, African-Americans, you're already halfway there. I identify more with African Americans than I do with kids who are like, 'oh, I'm a Pakistani kid from back home.'" Meena's understanding of South Asian identity within a U.S. context, and the implications of marginalization relative to Whiteness, prompted an affinity with African Americans and other people of color because of their shared experiences.

Meena also reflected on her relationship with language in relation to race and Whiteness. She spoke of growing up viewing speaking Urdu outside of her home as "regressive," associated with a lack of education, and not "proper," "professional," "friendly," or "pretty." Meena's associations with Urdu shifted as she saw representation in different settings and what it meant to women in leadership speaking her language. She spoke about meeting:

> … young professional women who are South Asian and being able to speak my mother tongue with them and seeing them give speeches in my mother tongue, understanding

> that and seeing in a different context gives you so much more pride about your identity and really normalizes it.

Interacting with these women in multiple settings prompted Meena to think about the lasting impact of speaking Urdu with family as well. She recalled some of the women emphasizing the importance of speaking Urdu to elders and to their children, emphasizing that their children would "hear English everywhere else in the world. They have to speak Urdu at home. This is how we hold our culture." These interactions reframed how Meena thought about speaking Urdu, from undesirable to a cultural component that can preserve and build legacy. She also related this to an expectation of women to share and pass down culture to future generations, citing language and the cultural significance of cooking, including histories and traditions of certain ingredients and recipes.

The women in Meena's community were influential in passing down culture, and shaping her views on community and leadership. She named her mother as her first example of leadership, describing her active role in the community, owning her own clinic as a dentist, and initiating her family's involvement with community service. Meena's father was a professor and also held leadership positions. However, Meena differentiated between mens' and womens' roles in the workplace and community:

> Professionally speaking, I was like, yeah, men are always going to have higher professional roles. That's how I always saw it. But I always saw community as women. There's no community without women.

The role women played in building community shaped how Meena perceived leadership. From her peers to older women in her community, Meena described seeing women succeed academically and professionally, while also caring for their families, friends, and neighbors; she

described the “tight legacies” and close “family friendships of generations” that women created and maintained. In describing the gender differences she observed, Meena oscillated between what she perceived as natural instincts and societal pressures around gender norms. She spoke of community leadership and caring for each other as “something that naturally comes to women” in South Asian culture, while also positing that while men may care to take on such efforts, societal expectations that they are more apathetic to their neighbors may influences their behaviors and dissuade them taking on such efforts.

Meena’s observations of women’s care for others within her community influenced her perceptions of leadership as community-based. She differentiated this from positional leadership: “even with state legislators or community council members, it was like, they’re not leaders of our community.” She emphasized the importance of relatability and relationship-building, particularly when leaders did not share important identity aspects, such as race and religion, with community members. However, she spoke about leadership primarily from within the community, characterized by a sense of responsibility and protectiveness: “... we are the ones who are going to protect us. That sense of solidarity with what we do for the weakest of us is what defines our character.” She named important characteristics of leadership as loyalty, morality, and compassion, stemming from a “sense of duty” to care for others.

Meena’s description of leadership as community-based aligned with other participants as well. However, Meena also named nuances to collaborative leadership, and the advantages of having an individual leader:

> It's the pinpoint with the force of everyone behind it, it narrows. There's a saying in [Urdu] that I'm trying to translate, but if you take a lot of force and apply it, it's too blunt. You have to have a little focal area, a little key hole that you apply it through, and then

> that will have more progress or more pressure, I guess, if that makes sense. So it's more detailed. You're more specific that way. And so, that is what a leader is supposed to do is you narrow your scope of all the things you want to affect. We can't solve all the world's problems. That's too much to do at once. So you've got to narrow your scope and narrow all the voices and all the energy into one area, and then that's how you fix it. So that's definitely how I think, where I think my sense of leadership comes from, that it's the person who takes - everyone has good intentions, but if everyone's talking, then we can't really get anything done. So we focus that area towards the leader and they help us get it going in the right direction.

Meena emphasized her values in community-based leadership, advocacy, and collaboration, while also acknowledging the advantages and effectiveness of concentrated leadership within an individual or smaller group of individuals.

Her own engagement in leadership started when she was young with involvement in school and community-based non-profit organizations. When she started college, she looked to student organizations as a way to find community. She recalled being younger than most of her peers, along with a fear that others would make assumptions and not take her seriously, and sought out identity-based organizations. Speaking about experiences of feeling othered due to identity, she said:

> In some ways it's helpful because it helps you almost immediately find your community because you can just tell from the way that people look at you, who's going to talk to you, who's not going to talk to you. So immediately I'm like, okay, Muslim Student Association, maybe the Pakistani Student Association.

At times, this logic resulted in a bit of trial and error for Meena. She reflected on joining a women in law organization and anticipating a connection with the other members based on shared gender identity and common career goals, yet found that the willingness to engage and perceived connection was not reciprocated. On the other hand, she reflected on a more welcoming and inclusive orientation within South Asian and Muslim organizations. Despite differences in languages, religions, and nationalities, Meena asserted that within a U.S. context, there was not as much differentiation between being Nepali, Pakistani, or Indian; rather, she asserted "there is a unique experience in being South Asian American or Desi American. And as long as I can find people who identify with that, I'm good with that." This was also reflected in a sorority she co-founded for Muslim women. Although the group was predominantly South Asian, there were also women from other continents. Meena emphasized the significance of a shared Muslim identity despite various racial backgrounds.

Meena spoke extensively about finding community with other Muslim women and bonding based on common experiences, particularly in predominantly White spaces. Reflecting on being one of two Muslim women in her majors, she said:

> If I see any other hijabi women, we're automatically like, we're best friends now that's just, we're going to sit next to each other. We have each other's backs. It doesn't matter what language you speak, where you're from, even if you don't speak English, it's fine.

She attributed this sense of solidarity to feelings of otherness and judgment from others, particularly as a Muslim woman pursuing leadership opportunities. She posted that her engagement with leadership "kind of clashes with their image of what a hijabi girl should be doing," referring to stereotypical gender norms of Muslim women being married young, having

multiple children, being quiet, and not pursuing education. Meena also reflected on how others' perceptions of her influenced their interactions and willingness to engage with her:

> One thing about being a hijabi Muslim woman is that when I walk into a room, whether I like it or not, people are going to look at me and make a set of assumptions. Some people are going to say, 'oh, that's one of my people.' And some people are going to say, 'I have no idea - what is that. I didn't know They let people like you into classrooms.' I've had someone say that to me before. So whether I like it or not, people are going to look at me and make an assumption within seconds… it's like they don't even have to see my face. They could see me from the side, see me from the back, and they already know how they feel about me. They don't know anything about my political beliefs. They dunno anything about me, but they know how they feel about me.

Awareness of others' perceptions of her based on her appearance prompted Meena to seek out community based on shared identity as well as a desire, and feelings of pressure, to prove herself due to being the only or one of few Muslim women in spaces. She spoke of feeling judged in multiple settings. For example, in South Asian and Muslim settings, she reflected on having concerns that others would think she was "not a good enough Muslim" or take issue with her disrupting traditional gender norms as "a woman that wants to be in a high powered job." She noted that identities and interests she held seemed to be in conflict at times: "You're in leadership, you do a lot of public speaking, you work directly with a lot of men. That doesn't sound very traditionally cultural to a South Asian woman." South Asian and Muslim spaces provided a sense of community, yet also conflict at times. On the other hand, Meena also noted feelings of judgment when being the only or one of few South Asians in the space and often reflecting trying to pinpoint why others were treating her a certain way; she outlined various

aspects of her identity, including starting college young, being a woman, wearing a hijab, and being South Asian, that may cause others to mistreat her.

Nonetheless, Meena emphasized the importance of involvement and visibility in various spaces. Particularly in predominantly White spaces, Meena spoke about the importance of representation despite feelings of otherness. Speaking about students who chose to stay in cultural organizations with those with shared identities, she said:

> I understand the reasoning of why they don't want to get involved, but you are contributing to your own isolation. You are contributing to the reason, to your invisibleness instead stepping into those leadership positions, wanting to speak for the people who identify with you.

She reflected on her own experiences on committees and in student organizations where she was the only South Asian or the only Muslim student, and the awareness, learning, and change she was able to cultivate by speaking about her experiences and advocating for others. One example she shared was preparing information for faculty on Ramadan, how students may observe it, and ways to support students observing Ramadan. She emphasized a sense of community and a responsibility to improve campus climate for future students "because I didn't get to see anyone that looked like me, but I don't want them to have to go through that." Legacy building and advocacy were central to Meena's conceptualization of leadership:

> I think that's how I see leadership on campus is it is more than just you. It's the environment and the atmosphere that you're building as a legacy for future students. And because these provosts, these administrators in school, they're going to be here a long time. They've been here a long time. They're going to be here a long time. The way they're affected and the things they learn from us, we might be here four years, they're

going to be here 40 years, and who knows how many more students they're going to interact with and how their perspective might change and the things they might become more sensitive to by interacting with us.

Meena's conceptualization and motivation in leadership, similar to other participants, stemmed from a sense of community and responsibility to create pathways for those after her.

Meenakshi



"During my interview, I talked a lot about how I take leadership inspiration from the values and strong convictions I've seen people in my family, including my mother and grandmother, demonstrate. My drawing depicts that inspiration with a visual of my mother and grandmother watching as I go out into the world. To me, leadership also means being confident despite obstacles and anxiety. I also aimed to convey that in the drawing. The path I chose to draw represents uncertainty and goes to an unknown, daunting place, but the figure I drew representing myself is walking that path with confidence. The footprints on the path represent lasting actions and a positive legacy, which I hope to leave through the way in which I lead."

-Meenakshi (PGVM description)

Meenakshi was a fourth-year journalism and environmental science and policy double major. Her parents immigrated from India and she is an only child. She grew up with a large

extended family close by, and her maternal grandmother lived with her family. While there was not a large South Asian community at her schools, she noted having a sizable number of South Asian friends growing up through her family, school, and church.

She grew up feeling very connected to Indian culture. Her first language was Telugu and her family primarily spoke their first language at home, and most of the family meals consisted of Indian food. She noted that coming to college deepened her knowledge of Indian culture through connecting with a large community of South Asian students, learning about different ethnicities and cultures within India, and engaging in discussions on structural issues that were not talked about at home such as the caste system and its role in South Asian history. Meenakshi was raised Christian; her father's side of the family was Christian and her mom converted when she got married. Meenakshi recalled hearing conversation about caste from her mother's side of the family, but felt distanced from Hinduism and did not see caste as pertinent. However, conversations about caste in college shifted her viewpoint:

> Coming in and learning more about it and talking about it, I saw how, I guess, parts of it did play into my identity and how especially my mom and her family growing up had a lot of caste privilege and how that may not be as evident for me today growing up in the United States, but how a lot of the abilities that older generations of my family had that have gotten me where I am have come from that.

Similar to her learning about caste, conversations through student organizations also changed Meenakshi's view of the Model Minority Myth. She reflected on gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the MMM and "how it relates to divides between different groups of color and especially anti-Blackness and how it's used as a device to pit different groups against each other." She brought this knowledge home, talking to her parents about structural issues

pertaining to India and South Asians in the U.S. that she had learned about in college. Her parents were open and welcoming to the conversation and viewpoints that were new to them. Although structural issues related to racism and classism were new to her parents, Meenakshi described her family as progressive related to gender. Her grandmother had been a single mother and experienced negative stigma related to her status in India, and she described her mother as very focused on her career. However, despite her parents' progressive mindsets, Meenakshi recalled experiencing stereotypes from aunties in the community, particularly around pressures to marry soon after college.

When reflecting on her earliest observations of leadership, Meenakshi named "classic elementary school stuff," such as line leaders and reading group leaders. She noted her experience as editor for her middle school newspaper as particularly impactful. She tied leadership to positional roles for the most part throughout her life; as a college student organization leader, she reflected on looking to her peers in leadership roles for guidance on how to lead. However, she also noted other forms of leadership, particularly in women in her family, "in a more abstract way" because of "how they approach things more widely in life and leadership roles within our family." She specifically spoke about her mother and grandmother. She noted seeing her mother as a role model, and growing up observing her take on leadership roles in her career and within their community. She saw her grandmother as taking on a caretaker role in the household, and also admired what she had persevered as a single mother in India:

> There was obviously a lot of stigma around that and a lot of barriers she had to overcome. So just looking at how she went through that and how she overcame that is inspiring from a leadership standpoint for me.

While she did not recognize these roles as leadership early on, she recalled the end of high school as a turning point in becoming more aware of everything her mother and grandmother were doing and sacrifices they made.

As an aspiring journalist, she attributed her conceptualizations of leadership to those in the field she looked up to as well as her family. Her experiences in journalism illustrated the importance of thoroughness and thoughtfulness. She noted the hectic nature of news cycles, difficult decisions that need to be made quickly, and the importance of being thoughtful and thorough in covering issues ethically and comprehensively. Confidence was also an important component, as she noted that it can be difficult to make decisions with authority and have confidence that it is the right decision. She emphasized collaboration, again using examples within the field of journalism of the importance in gathering and representing multiple voices in regard to sharing stories and making decisions. Meenakshi noted gathering input from others as key to her approach to decision making, while also acknowledging limitations in areas that she was not willing to compromise on, such as social justice:

> In a lot of spaces where we have to make considerations… and we have to consider how we're being equitable and how we're actively being anti-racist and how we're taking that all into account and how we lead, that's sort of an area where I feel like I have a lot of passion and a lot of conviction in that realm. And so if someone suggests something that I think is not really equitable or they're not really thinking it through or something like that, I'll be like, no, here's why we need to do this because we have to actively make an effort to be equitable and to be inclusive. And I don't think your decision is lending itself to that, so I'm not going to compromise on that.

She also emphasized social justice as a core component of leadership, as leaders often hold positions of influence and have a platform, therefore a responsibility. She asserted that leaders' actions can either drive or inhibit progress, and underscored the importance of being well-informed on justice issues to understand how their actions may play into historical and structural marginalization.

Although Meenakshi named her mother and grandmother as influential in her thinking on leadership, she did not make this connection until engaging in this study. Her observations of her mother's and grandmother's approach illustrated a quiet leadership that went against dominant ideas of leadership. Through her family's influence and observing different forms of leadership in college, she shifted her view of leadership to be more flexible:

> Because I was more reserved growing up, I sort of saw a leader in that part of my life as someone who had to speak up and had to be at the forefront and had to be like, 'here's what I have to say' all of the time. But I think I've definitely seen these past couple of years that there's a lot of behind-the-scenes work going on, especially as I've become more involved in certain spaces and that there's so many people leading who aren't necessarily recognized all the time or who aren't the ones who are the face of certain organizations, yet they're still kind of doing the work to lead these initiatives and create these spaces and direct how things move on a day-to-day basis. And so, I think definitely just learning in general that that's also a big part of leadership has changed my perceptions of, I guess, the prototype of a leader.

Her involvements in college also illustrated where different leadership approaches may be beneficial. She shared examples of cultural and affinity-based groups as more collaborative and

focused on advocacy, while leaders in journalism spaces were more authoritative decision makers.

Dominant ideas of leadership impacted Meenakshi's own sense of self-efficacy and identity as a leader. As opposed to common perceptions of leaders as vocal and the center of attention, she reflected on being more reserved growing up, a tendency to "shrink more into the background," and considering herself to be a "follower" which she attributed to a lack of confidence. She thought of the end of high school as a turning point, when she became more sure of what career fields she was interested in and where she wanted to make an impact. She noted that this prompted shifts in her definition of leadership:

> There's a societal expectation that… a lot of leadership is done very openly and at the forefront of things, and you're the one being named in all these awards and these profiles and magazines and everything like that. So I think there's definitely not as much of an appreciation of leadership that's more behind-the-scenes and roles that are, I guess less esteemed, but are still kind of doing the work in the day-to-day. And so I think when it comes to my own perception, that's led to some insecurity that I've had to work to overcome just in certain situations of like, 'oh, I am not in this top position in this organization. Am I genuinely making an impact? Am I genuinely doing anything just because this societal messaging is only that one person who's at the forefront of everything is really the one that matters and the one that's recognized?' And so, I think being able to just build my own perception of leadership among that messaging has been important just to see that the work that I'm doing and that a lot of other people are doing is equally as important, even if it's not as open or as publicized.

Societal expectations of leadership as vocal individuals at the forefront of organizations did not align with Meenakshi's leadership view or approach, leading to insecurity and doubts. However, observing others enact various leadership styles that did not fit dominant molds bolstered her ability to recognize her own work as leadership as well.

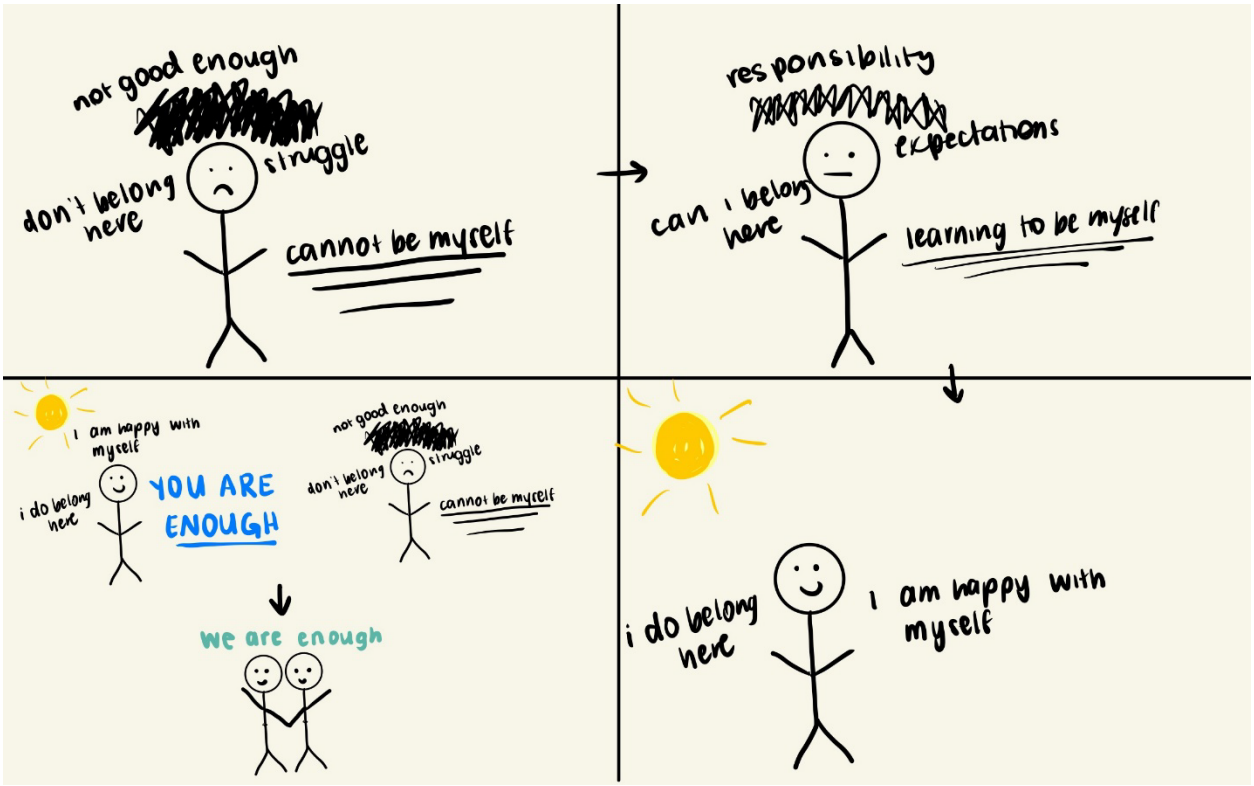
Meenakshi's involvements were primarily around her field of study, journalism, and cultural and affinity-based spaces. She highlighted looking for and finding a "strong South Asian community" in college in order to build a stronger connection to her culture, sustain cultural connections she grew up with, and learn more about issues within an "advocacy-minded space." She noted how identity, particularly her South Asian identity, had influenced her college experience through what she chose to get involved with and her experiences in those spaces. She reflected on her work in journalism, as well as the field in general, as a predominantly White industry and how that shaped her leadership approach. She noted the "need to be inclusive and to be equitable in order to foster more welcoming spaces for people who may not look like the majority in those spaces" drove her priorities in decision-making, sharing examples such as recruiting diverse participants, ensuring equitable news coverage, and using inclusive language. Meenakshi shared being only one of two South Asian women in the newsroom she worked in on campus; she valued the opportunity to educate others on issues of equity and inclusion as well as share her own experiences and perspectives yet also found it isolating, "especially as I'm looking at graduating in a few months and going into the industry it's also super White and a lot of places are super male-dominated as well." While she described the homogeneous pipeline from journalism school to the industry as "bleak," she noted her experience in predominantly White collegiate journalism spaces as helpful in building strategies to navigate future homogeneous environments and learning the importance of finding affinity-based spaces.

Meenakshi also emphasized a sense of solidarity with other people of color, citing common experiences of marginalization, feelings of isolation, and not feeling heard or represented in predominantly White spaces. She highlighted working against the MMM as an important component of solidarity for South Asians, and personally for her:

> I think it's important to work against that myth of 'this group can do more than this group, and so let's put these groups against each other' just to create a space where people can come together around those issues while also embracing those differences and taking those differences into account. So I think that's sort of driven a lot of, I guess my desire to make spaces just more generally inclusive and generally equitable beyond just what's beneficial for me because I know that if I work towards that larger goal, which is important to me, it not only benefits me, but it can also benefit other people who have not been served in the past.

This awareness and mindset shaped Meenakshi's conceptualization of future leadership and goals for herself in her career. She spoke about wanting to lead in ways that improved climate and opportunities for people of color, specifically women of color, in order for them to "be more empowered to make their way into these spaces and hold space without feeling like they have to shrink into the background." Reflective of her changing views of leadership, she also noted taking action and engaging in leadership behavior to create the environment she wants for others regardless of the position or level she holds within an organization.

Mira



"I drew a few stages of leadership -- albeit not very well. I feel like in leadership, I have learned that I have to use my own experiences to help other people. There are often feelings of not being good enough to be a leader, or to be someone who can help others. Knowing that I once felt that way encouraged me to help others who are also struggling. I think leadership is built off of the quality of empathy and authenticity, which is what I tried to portray in my drawing. The point was to highlight how it feels when you're alone, and then how it feels when you're with someone you trust -- someone who is also a leader."

-Mira (PGVM description)

Mira was a third-year government and public policy major. Her parents and older sister immigrated from India, and she grew up in a rural area. Her parents were the first of their immediate families to move to the U.S. She grew up "pretty disconnected" from extended family in India. However, her parents were intentional about maintaining connections to Indian culture and community. Mira grew up attending a Hindu Sunday school, where her mother also taught, and Kuchipudi (a classical Indian dance) classes.

Mira described her first examples of leadership as observing her mother and sister. Her older sister often served as an intermediary between Mira and her parents, communicating more serious issues that her parents thought her sister could better explain at Mira's young age. Mira continues to look up to her sister, who is now a doctor, as she models calm and composure during crises and navigates situations in a way that pulls in stakeholders' views and feelings. As a Resident Advisor, Mira often thinks of her sister in tense situations. Mira also grew up watching her mother take on leadership roles in her Sunday school, as well as the larger organization and at her schools. Observing her mother and sister inspired Mira to pursue leadership positions at a young age, running for student government when she was in elementary school.

She reflected on her current leadership style as a combination of what she had learned from her mother and sister. Mira described emulating her sister's composure and calmness, and her mother's confidence in her own decisions and ability to confront others, as well as her willingness to ask for what she needed. Mira talked about how she emulated her mother and sister through roles as an RA and leader of student organizations, and her growth as a leader. According to Mira, "the best part of leadership is learning how to be confident in yourself". Through her growing confidence, she has noticed she is better able to serve as a resource and support other students in her leadership roles.

In addition to confidence, Mira emphasized empathy and building community as essential to leadership. She described leadership as collaborative and inclusive of others' voices and perspectives. As an RA, she attributed her ability to build community to understanding and empathizing with her residents. The importance she placed on understanding and empathy stem from her own experiences as often "the diverse token" in spaces. Reflecting on how experiences

in middle and high school impacted her leadership style, she said: “I will listen to people who feel different or who feel like they can't be heard because I couldn't be heard when I was younger.” She gave examples, including being intentional about checking in with and including gender non-binary residents on her floor and as an organization leader, making sure those with differing political perspectives were heard. In describing one example of a club member who was hesitant to share his opinion, she said:

> I will make sure people listen to you because I think that everyone deserves a space to share their opinion. And that is born out of the fact that I am a South Asian woman. And people did not feel like they needed to hear my opinion when I was growing up. And I had to be the loudest person in the room to do so.

While feeling that she needed to be vocal in order to be heard, Mira also experienced pressure to stifle herself in order to make others feel more comfortable.

Mira’s parents, particularly her mother, emphasized the importance of presenting herself “in a way that’s very calm” because of preconceived notions others may have about South Asian women:

> I'm grateful that they were like, this is something you need to learn because you need to present yourself as a level-headed Indian woman because they already see you on a lower tier than everyone else. Because, apparently, they believe that we're quick to anger. They believe that we smell weird. They think that we talk strange. And in a memorable instance, someone once told me that they thought I wasn't going to speak English. And I was like, you knew I was born here. I was born and raised in the same country as you.

This sense of otherness was compounded by race and gender, particularly in her roles in leadership. She experienced others questioning her abilities to lead and meet her goals due to her

identity, citing stereotypes of South Asian women as submissive and not capable of leading groups, being vocal, and engaging in difficult conversations. She described facing expectations that she would fail because she was different as motivation: “I think that I've been pushing myself to be a better leader and a better person because people seem to think that Indian women can't do that.” Mira also expressed that her motivation extended to a sense of responsibility for other people of color, particularly South Asians, wanting to broaden ideas of leaders and leadership so that those after her would not have the same experiences facing stereotypes as she has.

Mira also spoke about the impact of the MMM, and how she had internalized it at times. She said she “always embodied it” in her K-12 schooling, and it stemmed from pressure she put on herself as well as the perceptions she felt from others. “[The Model Minority Myth] is true because I’ve seen it”, she said, describing multiple experiences with her peers and teachers expecting her to naturally be talented and knowledgeable in certain subjects. She described feeling perceived as “a robot who’s good at everything,” and the impact: “People never gave us the time to be human.” While the expectations around perfectionism were present in academic spaces, Mira encountered experiences of being dismissed in leadership spaces. She spoke about creating a student organization meant to bring students together to bridge political differences and serving as president of the organization: “when people see me, they don't assume that I'm the leader. They assume that my white friend who's next to me is, and I'm like, no, no, I'm the president. I started the student org. This is my child.” Despite assumptions around the MMM in the classroom, the expectations related to intellect, work ethic, and studiousness did not translate to leadership positions.

Coupled with her experiences growing up and messaging about how she needed to present herself as a South Asian woman, these experiences of being underestimated drove a work ethic characterized by perfectionism: “I've had to push myself to be better than everyone else, and I've always had to push myself to be better than the White people because they have to do less to be respected. And that means I have to be perfect. That means I can't make mistakes with dates. I can't make mistakes when I'm talking. I have to have everything ready.” Mira described the strive toward perfection as upholding the Model Minority Myth to an extent, even though the need to be perfect stemmed from racism and a sense of otherness.

Similar to other participants, Mira also grappled with integrating South Asian and American norms and cultures. She spoke about leaning more toward American or Western norms in the workplace, academia, and other predominantly White spaces, citing a need to prove that she deserved to be there. In communities of color, she described feeling more comfortable: “I don't have to put on a front about being a human or I don't have to prove to anyone that I am supposed to be where I am.” In contrast, Mira reflected on instances where she explicitly tried to fit into Western norms. One example of this was a conference she attended:

> …my mom gave me her suit to wear. It's a bright red suit. It's very much so a professional, you stand out type of suit. And I met the ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas Greenfield in that suit. But I had to be very, very obviously business professional with my hair back. I couldn't have my curls in. I had to wear contacts, I had to put on concealer, I had to wear heels. And the presentation, because there was White males and White females at this conference, was so different. I had to prove to them that I deserved to be at this conference. And it's so obvious in the way you present yourself, and it's difficult to reconcile that because I'm like, I hate that I have to be two separate

> people because it's not like my credentials change when I go from one to the other. I'm still the same person. I just am presenting a lot differently. And in one, I'm a lot more comfortable than the other, but I think the nature of what I want to do in the future is I have to be out of my comfort zone to make it work. So it's good practice. It's hard sometimes.

Similar to her parents' advice to maintain a calm demeanor when she feels angry, Mira seemed to value the experience and skill to adapt to dominant culture in certain situations. However, she also expressed dissonance with having to present herself in ways that did not feel authentic to her.

Mira spoke about several instances of her parents, particularly her father, questioning Western norms and pulling her back to South Asian culture. When she was a child and initially in ballet classes: "I was in ballet for four years, and then my dad was like, why is she doing this? This is American. Why is she not doing an Indian thing?" Mira has been practicing Kuchipudi, a classical Indian dance, for 14 years now. More recently, Mira attended annual student leadership award ceremonies where she was nominated for her leadership and contributions and wore "White business professional clothes". Her father asked her why she did not wear a sari, prompting her to reflect on her own perceptions of professionalism:

> … But he was like, well, why are you presenting yourself differently? And I was like, I don't know. I genuinely don't know why I'm conditioning myself to feel that this is more professional than a sari with a blazer on. I could really just do that. Things would be a lot different if I was willing to accept that. And I think I'm learning that my Indian clothes, my traditional jewelry and stuff, nothing is wrong with it. And I think that my parents and my sister have been really integral in helping me learn that because I've always thought

> of myself as someone in my community who's way more, I'm way more open and willing to wear my ethnic clothes and wear jewelry… But I think it was clear with when I got to the university, I was stifling my culture a little bit, and now I'm pushing myself to not do that. So I'll wear Indian jewelry a lot when I can. I'll wear Indian clothes when I can… And I'm pushing myself to go back to that person that I was… and I feel happier when I'm wearing those clothes. I feel happy when I'm presenting as who I actually am. And I think that it's definitely a Eurocentric standard, but I'm trying to teach myself out of it.

Along with Mira's understanding of how dominant culture and Western norms can be stifling, she also described the importance of representation in her motivation to be visible in her identity as a South Asian woman. Although she recognized the importance of people feeling they are represented in their leaders, she also expressed doubt that the U.S. is ready for leadership that does not fit traditional norms: "I think there are disconnects because a lot of mainstream America feels like, it feels to me that mainstream America is still not ready for a leadership of color." However, she also emphasized her thoughts on the purpose of leadership as making people uncomfortable and pulling society forward, rather than leaders conforming to traditional societal norms. Mira recognized her internalization of Western norms, particularly around professionalism, and continued to grapple with wanting to challenge these norms as well as stereotypes of South Asian women, while also attempting to understand when and where she wanted to push boundaries.

Sarah



"Leadership, in my view, embodies the art of guiding a collective towards a shared goal through influence and inspiration. It's akin to navigating a sea of diverse individuals, each with their own unique perspectives and abilities. Effective leadership hinges on fostering understanding and fostering a sense of common purpose among this diverse group. My visualization represents this by illustrating a multitude of people, each distinct yet positioned together, symbolizing the importance of leveraging differences for mutual growth and strength.

The essence of an exceptional leader, in my opinion, lies in their capacity for mentorship. They serve not only as a guide but also as a source of support and learning. A great leader embodies empathy, vision, and the ability to empower others. They listen intently, understand diverse viewpoints, and unite individuals by harnessing their collective strengths. Furthermore, they encourage continuous learning and growth, acknowledging that every individual has something unique to contribute to the larger vision."

-Sarah (PGVM description)

Sarah was a fourth-year international business major. Her parents immigrated from Bangladesh along with her mother's side of the family, and she has an older sister. She described a close relationship with her father, helping him at business fairs as a child and taking after his outgoing personality. She described her relationship with her mother as more tenuous, which she attributed to differing conceptualizations of Islam and gender roles; her mother held traditional

views of gender in which women should be reserved, while Sarah had a more active and social demeanor.

She grew up attending predominantly White schools, but said her parents made an effort to maintain connections with South Asian culture. She reflected on going to a Bengali community center every weekend as a child, as well as participating in cultural activities such as dance and poetry. Sarah noted how she presented herself differently in various settings:

> I think that growing up in a PWI, I definitely influenced a lot of how I represented myself. I also think that being bisexual plays a large part into my identity, and especially growing up in a religious [family] and being closeted at home and being out at school is a very interesting dynamic. I'm also agnostic and I'm in a Muslim household. So again, all those roles definitely play into how I express myself and where I express myself openly and where I kind of am more muted and more, I guess, reserved.

As she engaged in code switching at a young age, she also observed it in her family. She reflected on the impact of 9/11 for her parents and how they talked about the ramifications. Specifically, she noted how her father struggled after 9/11, losing business clients and facing unreturned phone calls due to an Arabic name, which led him to change the name on his business cards to a more common name in the U.S.. This shift was contrary to Sarah's view of her father:

> Even though my father has always attempted to be a pioneer and defy expectations, so much of his career has been met with these obstacles related specifically to his English, his name, and it weighs down on him in the same way that it weighs down on all of us, except it's this silent begrudging acceptance of that and just having to resist regardless, but do that within this controlled system where everyone can digest it and digest our success as something that is valid and not competitive.

Sarah's understanding of success in the U.S. was tapered by Islamophobia and racism, with the notion that for her family, there were parameters on what success could look like so that it would not be perceived as a threat to others.

Sarah also reflected on growing up within a predominantly White area and navigating a bicultural identity. She spoke about feeling a sense of otherness within PWIs, as opposed to a sense of belonging in Bengali spaces:

> Being so different from everyone for such a long time growing up was very difficult for me because I could go to my Bengali Saturday school and I could be confident and I could be loud and expressive, and everything that I was doing was normal because everyone was raised in the same exact manner. But within these PWI or the PWI high school I went to, the food I ate was different. The way I spoke was different. English was very difficult in the sense of my pronunciation. For instance, I was very well read. In fact, I was, English was my favorite subject, but I would enunciate certain words in a different way than everyone else, and that could easily become something of ridicule. So I always felt as if I was walking on eggshells. And then as I became older, jokes about terrorism, jokes about things that are integral to my identity.

Sarah's experience with otherness and encountering racism and Islamophobia prompted timidness, as she noted being afraid to engage in leadership when she was younger. She also said she felt like an outsider within the South Asian community, as Indian and Pakistani subgroups usually make up the majority and she did not grow up with those cultures. She recalled "whitewashed" jokes by her White friends as well, and feeling "very uncomfortable in either identity." In her timidness, she muted herself in settings, sharing an example of wanting to be engaged in theater and increase her confidence, but doing more of the behind-the-scenes work.

In college, Sarah was intentional about seizing a new opportunity. She wanted to change how she approached involvement and be more vocal. Choosing organizations to join was not an easy task for Sarah. She recalled feeling scared to join the Bengali student organization: "I felt as if I was an imposter within that environment," citing her lack of familiarity with Bengali pop culture, not being fluent in Bengali, and sense of disconnect with the culture as a whole. A friend suggested she join the Asian American Student Union, which did not occur to her, as she assumed the organization was primarily East Asians and Pacific Islanders. She ended up joining both organizations, and gained valuable experiences and insights from both:

> From [Bengali student organization], I definitely healed so much of my, specifically the Bengali aspect of my identity. I met people who were akin to older sisters and older brothers to me, I felt comfortable in my broken Bengali. I felt comfortable talking about my childhood experiences and stories of my childhood.

In a parallel process, involvement in the broader Asian American community prompted a sense of comfort with differing connections and knowledge bases within home cultures:

> I found people who were like myself, and specifically within [the Asian American student organization], I was someone who very much struggled with my cultural identity because I did feel such a disconnect from it… And I found people who had the same level of disconnect and even more disconnect and even less disconnect. And having that variation really helped me kind of feel confident in the fact that I am never going to be perfectly connected within my culture, and that is okay… I felt as if under this common Asian American identity, I could speak about my individual experiences and they would be valid.

Additionally, Sarah highlighted the ways in which she learned from others in the Asian American student organization, raising her awareness of various identity groups and histories as well as commonalities in histories. In particular, she noted learning about the impact of colonialism in the Philippines and drawing connections to a similar history in Bangladesh. She credited her organizational involvement with learning about solidarity and advocacy, and driving her further engagement in college.

Sarah also credited her organizational involvement for exposure to differing leadership styles based on context. She compared the structures and priorities in student government and cultural organizations, characterizing the former as rigid with bylaws and distinct subcommittees, while allowing for collaboration, and the latter as prioritizing friendship and community and leading with empathy. She acknowledged that both styles of leaders have a place. While leadership styles within student government may seem harsh compared to others, she emphasized the differing environments as well as expectations and standards around outcomes for each organization.

She characterized her own leadership style as collectivist, hands-on, and caring. Within the context of student government, she talked about building individual relationships with students on the committee she oversaw and prioritized making them feel included, empowered, and balanced: “I believe I am the most successful when every single person in my committee is doing well and doing their initiatives in a way that they feel confident and secure.” Rather than prioritizing outcomes, she spoke about prioritizing the individual with an understanding of how stress can impact their work and willingness to step in and help where she could.

Sarah perceived leading with empathy and care as her leadership approach. As a woman of color, the approach sometimes brought about challenges:

> With the entire idea of leading with empathy, leading with these kind of maternal characteristics has been so difficult in terms of gaining respect. Because so much of the time I am treated like a secretary so much of the time. I'm treated like a mother where I am overextending myself into areas where I should no longer have to extend myself. And I am a director within [student government], and that is a cabinet position.

She noted that student government was predominantly women, and still, men gained respect more readily and ascended leadership ladders faster than women. She recalled being treated differently than her male counterparts by committee members who expected her to be more lenient and flexible with expectations and timelines.

Sarah elaborated on her perceptions of maternal characteristics and leadership, as well as the ways in which she observed women in leadership within her community. She recalled women who held leadership positions at her Bengali Sunday school, including the school's president. However, at the time, she did not classify this as leadership because it was within the community and "within the roles that women typically engage in." She spoke about leadership traits she observed in her father, who she considered a leader, and women in the community:

> I think my father's actually someone who always believed in the idea of giving someone a chance. And I think that I did see that in the women in my community too. People who were incredibly smart, incredibly caring and giving, because although I didn't associate it in that traditional sense of leadership, what I did see is incredibly intelligent and incredibly organized women mobilizing for a greater cause. They would host events with hundreds of Bengali people in the audience, and they would make thousands of dollars in revenue off of fundraisers, et cetera. And these were women who were mothers who often had jobs, and they still managed to do all of this by themselves. And I thought that

there was something powerful about that I just didn't necessarily connect until later in my life, I guess.

Part of Sarah's challenge in relating these women's roles to leadership and seeing similar traits in herself was pressure around gender expectations. She reflected on intergenerational conflict with her mother and aunties, who identified strengths she held that were "associated with traditional South Asian femininity or gender norms" and translating that to expectations of her being a "well-educated housewife," having children, etc.:

> I always assumed leadership had to be very harsh and very much like what we see on TV and whatever shows like dramas, etc. I thought it had to be in that way. But one thing I realized growing up is one of my strengths is my compassion, one of my strengths is my ability to mentor other people… I've always loved taking care of people and, very much detested at one point in my life because I thought that it made me maternal or I thought it made me abide by whatever gender roles were assigned to me.

While Sarah considered her compassion and empathy to be "maternal" instincts associated with traditional South Asian gender norms, she came to accept them, see them as a strength, and broadened her view on what it means to be a modern South Asian woman. She asserted that part of changing gender norms is "choosing what you want to implement in your life," including aspects of traditional and non-traditional expectations.

Sarah's understanding of her own leadership style influenced factors important to her in various work environments and organizations she chose to be involved with. While she characterized her leadership style as collaborative and prioritizing empathy, she recognized that various environments did not always lend themselves to collaborative work:

> What I realized is, especially in the business school, it is very easy for me to compare myself to other people and to feel frustrated by people who are more individualistic, who tend to go for what they want and be able to grab that at a much faster and much more efficient rate than I ever will be. But what I realized is consulting, investment, banking, these are not areas which will make me happy because I'm not someone who, I enjoy competition. I enjoy healthy competition, but what I enjoy even more than competition is competition within an environment where everyone is uplifted, supported, and working towards a socially innovative or positive cause. So I'm not going to be happy in these competitive, money-driven environments, and that's something that is personal to me. And I don't necessarily have to compare myself to people who have a completely different goal than I do.

Sarah acknowledged that her inclination toward collaborative leadership may be in conflict with certain work environments, and identified that as a factor in her decision-making in future career choices.

She spoke about evaluating systems and navigating her role in them in several instances. In her student involvement areas, she was engaged in both traditionally conforming and activist spaces. She described a frequent topic of discussion among her friend group about working within as opposed to outside of systems: “do you rise within a system and then change the rules of the system, or do you just define and dismantle the system from where you are?” Sarah described her own approach as very deliberate and strategic, working within systems. She attributed this partly to her upbringing, sharing that she grew up in a wealthy area where her family’s socioeconomic status did not mirror those around her:

> I grew up in a very wealthy, affluent area where I was not necessarily of the same tax bracket, and I had my parents working extremely hard for me. So to not take advantage of those opportunities, to me, felt so ungrateful. So I've always been very walking on the straight and narrow and anything that is that I can do to be averse to risk, I will always take that route.

Sarah connected this to her approach to leadership and advocacy, often working within systems to create change. Within the context of higher education, she described her approach as working with administration to understand their perspectives as well as convey her own with the goal of figuring out solutions that would mutually benefit all stakeholders. She named "coming to a happy medium" as a strength for her, and viewed her approach in contrast to those who take more outside-of-systems activist approaches:

> … being extremely vocal, extremely daring, brave, courageous has not always been something I excel at, but I very much admire it. I just think that because of the way I was raised and I was always raised to be cautious, be respectful, I tend to follow that demeanor.

She reflected on her approach as rare in environments she described as grassroots and more radicalized, as she considered herself to be more pragmatic and not idealistic: "I think that also bogs me down because I feel very controlled and I feel that everything works in a systematic way."

Her descriptions of her approach to leadership and different forms of advocacy was similar to how she made sense of the MMM and its influence. Sarah described the MMM as very instilled in the way she grew up and how she identified pathways to success: "I believed that if I was the smartest, most well-behaved person, then I would succeed in life." She recalled this

mindset being encouraged, particularly by her mother; she talked about an example when she told her mother about protests she attended around the conflict in Israel and Gaza: "her immediate reaction was fear for me." Even though it was an issue her mother also cared about, she discouraged Sarah from acting in ways that would bring attention to her otherness, which Sarah related to post-9/11 climate and her father's difficulties having an Arabic name.

Although Sarah bought into the MMM growing up, her involvement, particularly in the advocacy-focused Asian American student organization, changed her view of the MMM and its implications for Asian Americans and other communities of color. She reflected on how Asian Americans are used as a pawn to divide communities of color:

> … that is so hurtful and for that to be a representation of our community or for that to be something that is consistently forced down on people that Asians are this model minority myth, or if they can behave and they can abide by this rhetoric and sentiment that you can too is just so incredibly harmful for everyone. Because at the end of the day, as soon as people are mobilized against Asians, whether that be through COVID or through any other circular agenda, everyone will turn on Asians in the same way that they will turn on any other race because that is just what is evidently clear… So I just think that the Model Minority Myth serves to further divide communities. And I think that one thing I have learned from [Asian American student organization] that is so incredibly important is solidarity.

Sarah's learning about the MMM and solidarity between communities of color shifted her view of advocacy and leadership. In describing her view of leadership, she underscored the connections between different types of marginalization and group histories:

For me, leadership also means being cognizant of what is occurring around you and providing an example to others in terms of how we can engage with each other and how we can collaborate in a way that is productive for all of us and beneficial for all of us. Sarah held experiences with otherness as well as finding community, and one that emphasized solidarity with other historically marginalized groups and celebrated identity while applying a critical lens.

Sarah reflected on a great amount of growth through college, related to her own identity development and understanding of race and gender, as well as leadership in becoming more confident in herself and defining her values. Sarah's values of collaboration, empathy, advocacy, and solidarity drove her interests and she spoke about wanting to live out these values in her career: "whether that be through marketing, whether that be through HR, whatever I do, I want that to be consistent with my values and in a way that is promoting other people and promoting the growth of other people."

Sky



"I define leadership as a responsibility that one takes for the purpose of ensuring all voices are heard while leading initiatives for those that they represent. My collage demonstrates who I see as a leader – everyone! I believe in going beyond the typical norm of a leader (which in my opinion is a male in a defined position). An example of this could be a hijabi farmer, a social media influencer, an LGTBQ+ rights activist, and beyond.

To be an effective leader, one must be diplomatic/democratic, determined, and diligent. To lead "diplomatically and democratically", they should acquire input from all (most if all is not feasible) of their members and ultimately take actions that are considerate of those choices. Additionally, while consideration is essential, a true leader must be able to decipher if that decision is the best course of action for the imminent and overall future. Although accommodating all perspectives is typically difficult, the leader's final decision making must be informed by the fact that there is a clear distinction between right and wrong. Finally, a leader must be diligent in their duties, meaning that they are willing to take initiative beyond the purpose of problem-solving. They must either delegate their tasks to others (in an appropriate manner) or instead be willing to take on additional duties!"

-Sky (PGVM description)

Sky was a third-year public policy and international relations major. Sky's family came to the U.S. from India, starting with an aunt and uncle immigrating during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s, followed by her father and mother in the late 1990s and early 2000s. With close extended family members who had witnessed the India and Pakistan partition and the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., as well as older cousins who worked in politics, political engagement strongly shaped Sky's upbringing, often hearing her parents, aunts, and uncles discuss politics both in India and the U.S.

Sky grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods and schools, being one of the few South Asian students in her community. She reflected on stereotypes she encountered, including the MMM and others perceiving South Asians as a monolithic group. She recalled an incident in middle school during a jeopardy game where there was a question about Islam and her classmate turned to her: "she's like 'answer it!', and I was like, why… would I know? …Why are you assuming that about me? I'm Hindu and I'm Indian." Sky talked about the transition to her university, where there was a larger South Asian population, as a culture shock and welcome change to having to educate others on South Asian culture:

> I was used to literally being best friends with only one brown girl in my grade, and she was Pakistani, and so we joke, we're like 'my *dushman*,' which is my enemy. Going from

> that experience where there's similarities, but you're just surviving, to actually having a space where there's so many people that it's kind of normalized… It was not that I'm technically not a minority still, but going from an extreme minority to just another one of those people was pretty interesting. I went from having to explain Diwali every single year, giving a presentation and getting faculty brownie points or something and just being like, 'wow, I'm doing the bare minimum and you're eating it up.' Going from that to having people understand was, for lack of a better word, apologies for swearing, but bat shit crazy.

In addition to not needing to educate others as much as she used to, Sky also talked about the "opportunity for bonding" based on a shared identity with other South Asian students. She differentiated South Asians from the umbrella term of Asian, while recognizing that South Asians are designated under Asian. Although she acknowledged checking "Asian" while filling out forms, she emphasized identifying specifically as South Asian due to distinctions she saw, as well as others not perceiving South Asians as Asian and wanting to avoid arguments about how she identified.

Sky's awareness of identity and otherness at a young age shaped her views on early examples of leadership. She spoke of her aunt and uncle who were first in her family to immigrate to the U.S. as leaders, citing the difficulty in establishing oneself in a new place, particularly a predominantly White area and during the time of their arrival in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement "especially considering Brown people were literally not even thought of as equal in a time like that." She further reflected specifically on her mom and aunt as role models "just because of how they carried themselves through family expectations of women, workforce expectations, and just a lot of… not conflicting roles, but just managing a lot of

roles." Similar to other participants, Sky spoke about the multiple roles her mother played on a daily basis, including a demanding job at a medical care center, caretaking at home including cooking meals and helping Sky with her homework, and helping Sky's father at their family's store. Sky emphasized her mother's work ethic, dedication, and variety of leadership roles as models for leadership.

Observing her mother and aunt was also influential in Sky's learning about gender roles and expectations. She noted that she learned primarily about gender roles through spending time around her mother and aunt and listening to their conversations. She reflected on becoming aware of how much they were managing through the conversations, and as she grew older, gained a greater understanding of what it meant to manage multiple roles. She also noted double standards around gender, noting that her mother did the bulk of the housework with no recognition, while her father was praised by others for doing small things. There were also ways she saw gender play a role in interactions between herself and her parents:

> … there are certain things that I'm like, I don't know if you should say that, dad. He's like, you're my son and daughter, both. I'm like, thanks. I don't want to be both. I just want to be a girl. Thanks. So although he's super duper liberal and is so proud of me for accomplishing certain things and also just being a good kid, I guess, I don't know, I might be speaking for them, but there's certain times that it still does come out, that traditional narrative.

Although she considered her parents to be liberal around gender compared to extended family and friends' parents, she also acknowledged areas where gender norms were present.

Sky's mother and aunt played an influential part in shaping her view of leadership. Advocacy, taking initiative, and collaboration were central to her definition of leadership, as she noted seeing "a successful model" of these components modeled by her mother and aunt:

> They just kind of… not intuitively know as moms, but they see the gaps, they're observant and they pick up on it, and then they make sure it gets done. And part of that I've noticed is not just doing it all on your own, but also making sure to uplift people through the process.

Her mother and aunts' examples of helping others also influenced Sky's career aspirations; she reflected on knowing she wanted to go into foreign service or politics at a young age because of the advocacy involved in these fields, and also recognized the different ways advocacy may look depending on the role and power dynamics. However, she was steadfast in her commitment to collaborative leadership. She talked about friends who argued the need for leaders to be more directive in order to effectively and efficiently resolve programs, and how she always disagreed with the sentiment:

> Delegating doesn't make leadership… [leadership is] not just uplifting other people, but making space for them and making sure that they have the opportunity to share their thoughts and… give everyone a voice, make sure that they are also coming up with you.

Elements of advocacy, collaboration, and community were apparent throughout her description of leadership.

Although Sky held several leadership positions, she noted that she did not think of herself as a leader when she was younger; she attributed this to the predominantly White environments she was in, and feeling othered within them:

> It's been a progression of realizing that I'm capable, but the main reason that I didn't think I was capable was the environment I was in. And I think a lot of people also probably feel that as South Asian women… it's like you're not seen as capable until you prove yourself.

Her leadership journey began with behind-the-scenes roles where she was able to learn organizational cultures and structures. She spoke about becoming an assistant stage manager for a musical in middle school and realizing she had leadership potential through the role. Her approach also reflected a behind-the-scenes leadership style as she described how stage managers operate: "you do what needs to be done and you don't necessarily have to talk about it, you just kind of do what you need to do." In high school, she took on additional stage manager roles and began managing shows with older students, bolstering her sense of self-efficacy and confidence in her capabilities as a leader. Reflecting on her role as a stage manager as a freshman, she said "it was, I think, a big pivotal point for me to realize, you can do this. It's ok. And since then, it's just been a slow progression of getting involved in things."

Sky also spoke about her progression as motivated by building her reputation and becoming known to others through her work:

> My senior and junior year in high school where people noticed that I put in the work and also started to take me seriously because of the quality of work, whereas in elementary or middle school, it was just like, you're the other, so you have to work your way up. And I think that's what I carried in, I guess operating in silence or under the radar. So I kept, I guess working so that people would see my work speaks for itself in a sense. And that's kind of what compelled me to join different organizations in high school.

Sky's quiet leadership was modeled by her aunt and mother, but also influenced by being one of few South Asians in predominantly White schools. Engaging in leadership was a way to be

recognized and taken seriously by her peers. Her experience instilled a sense of responsibility to create pathways and assist others in pursuing leadership opportunities through reviewing college essays, networking, helping peers connect to internship opportunities: "just kind of making myself available to enable others to succeed, because I know there's not necessarily spaces for POCs, but especially South Asian women in America." In advocating for others, she also recognized her own privilege and ability to leverage her network and resources to lift others.

Sky's involvements reflected her commitment to advocacy, as well as the importance of representation. She spoke about an academic-based organization she and her friends created that provided space for South Asian students within public policy:

> The main reason that my friends and I actually created it was just to give South Asians a space in the school of public policy because I feel like other fields we're more populated in, but this one, we just don't exist. I can count on my fingers the amount of not just Asian, but South Asian representatives in the Maryland General Assembly or actual Congress in the U.S., so just seeing or making space for us and making sure other people know that there is space for them in this field.

She shared planning events around building community and connection, as well as programs where students could share their own experiences with microaggressions and being one of the few South Asians in spaces. Similarly, when Sky joined an organization focused on sexual assault prevention, she reflected on first perceiving it as "a space exclusively for White women" and her goal of broadening how the group talked about sexual assault and reaching a wider audience. She joined a subcommittee on DEI, led discussions during meetings to shift the narrative around sexual assault on campus, and planned events in collaboration with cultural

organizations, including a South Asian student organization, where she was able to incorporate elements of language and cultural context:

> I was able to put things like… 'what are people going to say' is '*log kya kahenge"*? And then *'sharm'* is 'shame', and they're really common, I guess, themes or just if you tell someone that speaks Hindi, that's a teen, they'll be like, 'yeah, that's real life for us.' So it was cool being able to incorporate things like that that they understand, and I also do.

Sky's sense of advocacy reached beyond South Asians, as she noted feeling a sense of solidarity with women of color broadly, even more so than she does with South Asian men at times. She said that she felt most comfortable in spaces with other women of color: "we share more traits than I feel like South Asian men or White women or White men… so it's just that security, I guess." One of the organizations in which she held a leadership position focused on advocacy for undocumented Latina students pursuing higher education. Involvement with organizations advocating for non-Asian people of color also caused Sky to grapple with her own identity and racial positionality: "part of the work I do with [a Latinx student organization], I have to be careful and to not play into the Model Minority Myth, but half that and half not White savior, but I guess Western savior in a sense." While acknowledging the role MMM can play in racial dynamics, Sky also reflected on the lack of support she felt from White women and common experiences with other women of color that created more of a sense of solidarity.

Sky spoke about her experiences operating in different settings, and how she thought about her approaches to those settings in relation to her identity - both as a woman, and a woman of color:

> Women in general have to show up very carefully in every space that they go to. You talk too much or do certain things, you're a doozy, or if you are too stoic or poised, you're a

> bitch, no in-between. And to achieve that in-between, there's a really fine line. So you're like, you're kind of masking the entire time and just acting based on cues that other people give you. So I would say it's like that for me. I'd navigate the space as someone by observing, I guess. But in certain cases, I just sit back just because I know what to expect. So in my internship, I'm bold and bright. I know it's a space for POC people to shine. But in certain other places, for example, [government internship]... I presented myself more reserved in a sense.

Sky noted the ways in which women often have to navigate spaces, as well as the unique experiences of women of color. She also reflected on an interview experience where she felt she needed to be humble because of messaging she had received about how women should present themselves. Similar to the "in-between" she noted above, she talked about not selling herself too short as to seem underqualified, but also "even if you have a hint of vanity, you're screwed." Sky spoke about this as an example of how women navigate situations, but particularly "an added layer of carefulness for Brown women, Black and Brown women specifically."

Sky's analysis of how women show up and navigate leadership also influenced her thoughts on various leadership styles and who can hold them. When comparing her own perception of leadership, which is collaborative and advocacy-based, with how she perceived dominant views as more directive and individualistic, she acknowledged space for both:

> There's space for the kind, democratic, uplifting leader and the hardcore, borderline-dictator, like military general or politician-type-of-leader in American society. But I think there's more space for White men exclusively to be the latter power-usurping type of position. Whereas with everyone else, you have to be careful and walk on eggshells in terms of leadership and make sure you do nothing potentially even borderline wrong. So

> yes, there's space for all leadership types, meaning my perception and the general U.S. perception, but it depends on who you are and also the context of the situation.

Sky's observations of leadership reflected differing expectations and perceptions of leaders based on identity, acknowledging power dynamics and historical structures of racism and sexism.

Summary

Each of the ten participants shared their stories and ways in which they made meaning of their racial and gender identities in the context of their conceptualizations and enactment of leadership. Their stories were unique, and illustrated nuances and diversity within the population of second-generation South Asian women with intersections of identities related to socioeconomic status, religion, and nationality that were integral to their experiences. There were also common threads of experiences and perceptions in each of the ten participants' narratives. In the next chapter, I will further explore the areas that emerged as themes as a collective narrative of the participants' stories.

Chapter 5: Collective Narrative – Foundational Learning and Motivations

The ten participants shared stories about how they understood and lived out leadership as second-generation South Asian American women, reflecting on how their identities and experiences influenced how they think about and engage in leadership. Their stories were unique, and illustrated diversity within the South Asian community through intersecting salient identities such as religion and socioeconomic status. Their stories also point to themes that cut across their individual narratives. Together, these themes make up a collective narrative that illustrates the ways in which second-generation South Asian American women learn about leadership through community, navigate stereotypes and power structures, engage in leadership in ways that foster connections to community and identity, and develop authentic bicultural identities through leadership engagement.

In this chapter, I will elaborate on three themes that illustrate participants' learning and foundational experiences related to leadership: learning leadership, connections to South Asian community and identity, and navigating a bicultural identity and stereotypes. The first theme of learning leadership illustrates how second-generation South Asian American women learned leadership through community, particularly through their mothers, aunties, and other South Asian women. Participants reflected on observing leadership that is grounded in community, as well as how women managed multiple roles within and outside of the household in the leadership they engaged in. Through their direct experiences and observations, the participants both acknowledged and challenged dominant views of leadership. The second theme names how participants engaged in leadership in ways that fostered connections to the South Asian community on campus and their own South Asian identities, leading to deeper learning and sense of belonging. The last theme focuses on how participants navigated a bicultural identity, along

with experiencing stereotypes. The participants reflected on experiencing stereotypes, and spoke about feelings of inadequacy as well as stereotypes leading to a motivation to change the narrative around South Asian American women.

Learning Leadership

The first theme describes how participants learned about and shaped their definitions of leadership. Participants shared how they perceived mainstream views of leadership, as well as observing and learning leadership through community, particularly women. They also reflected on similarities and differences between their observations of dominant ideas of leadership and their own.

When naming first impressions and earliest memories of leadership, many participants named positional leaders such as elementary school class leaders, teachers and professors, and politicians. Some participants, including Meena, also named a link between common ideas of leadership and Whiteness: “I guess a more traditional leader sense is someone who's working a corporate job, the leader of their team at work. But I guess the image that comes is a white man for me.” Connotations of Whiteness and maleness emerged throughout participants’ reflections on dominant ideas of leadership.

Participants also described mainstream views of leadership as individualistic with one person in charge being named as the leader. Some of the participants reflected on internalizing this view of leadership and used language associated with dominant views, identifying as “followers” or “leaders” at different points in their lives. Meenakshi recalled her process of thinking of herself as a leader, attributing her lack of self-confidence to environmental factors related to identity and marginalization: “A large part of my childhood and my adolescence, I very much considered myself a follower just because I didn’t have a ton of self-confidence.” She

and several other participants also described leaders as vocal, visible, and at the forefront of organizations. Hannah shared her perspective on the importance of being vocal as a leader:

> If someone wants to be a leader, I feel like people have to know what you want to say. And I think even if you're an introvert, you're quiet, you don't really like to have all attention on you... I feel like if you are a leader, you kind of need to not be quiet. You need to kind of be loud and… not loud, but you need to be out there so people listen to you and people look at you and take you seriously.

For Hannah, the vocal and visible components of leaders did not necessarily entail positional power. Rather, she named student activists who participated in campus protests and demonstrations as leaders who were vocal and took stances on issues with and without positional titles.

While all of the participants named similar ideas of dominant leadership, they also recalled points where dominant views of leadership were challenged, particularly around hierarchical leadership. For some, this happened in college. Indrani shared her experience: "... when I first came here, it was a very surface level understanding of what leadership is. So, oh, if you hold a position on an organization, that makes you a leader, but I don't think that's necessarily enough anymore." Several of the participants shared similar sentiments as they spoke about their involvement in student organizations and began to see their peers as leaders, as well as differentiate between positional authority and leadership from those who may not hold positional titles. Meena shared an example related to political representatives within her community: "with state legislators or community council members, it was like, they're not leaders of our community, you are the representative of my district, but you're not a leader of my community because you just don't resonate with my community." Rather, Meena considered

leaders of her community as community members themselves, and spoke about politicians, particularly White politicians, who took time and effort to build relationships with her South Asian community and understand their needs despite not sharing their cultural background.

All of the participants also spoke about significant learning around leadership through South Asian communities. Every participant named individuals within their families, or religious or cultural centers as early examples of leadership and influential in their own leadership journeys, although some differentiated this leadership within communities from leadership within their schools which they thought of as hierarchical. Hannah spoke about teachers at her childhood Sunday school as some of her first examples of leadership, noting their success in their professional fields while maintaining a commitment to their community. Sky named her aunt and uncle, who were the first in her family to immigrate to the U.S. and create a pathway for the rest of her family, including Sky's parents:

> The aunt and uncle actually, we talked a lot about having gratitude to them because they came at such an early point where obviously it's hard for anyone to establish themselves on their own, but especially considering Brown people were literally not even thought of as equal in a time like that. And also, not just moving to a more liberal area where people are kind of more understanding, but Carroll County, "Yeehaw County," as I like to put it. I go into the stores and I am always like, "wow, there's so many White people here" because Baltimore County, it's not necessarily diverse, but there's always a mix, whereas Carroll County is White. So we've definitely talked about my aunt and uncle specifically as leader figures because of how they have had to establish themselves through random tribulations, not having a vegetarian restaurant even, or options at restaurants.

Similar to Sky's sentiments about her aunt and uncle, several of the participants named appreciation and admiration for their parents' process of immigrating to the U.S. and creating a life for them and their siblings.

Collaboration and care were central in how the participants spoke about leadership within their communities. Many of the participants described their observations of leadership as people working together as peers toward a common goal, both in community and academic spaces. This description contrasted with dominant views of leadership, as Meenakshi described:

> Growing up, I sort of saw a leader in that part of my life as someone who had to speak up and had to be at the forefront and had to be like, "here's what I have to say" all of the time. But I think I've definitely seen these past couple of years that there's a lot of behind-the-scenes work going on, especially as I've become more involved in certain spaces and that there's so many people leading who aren't necessarily recognized all the time or who aren't the ones who are the face of certain organizations, yet they're still kind of doing the work to lead these initiatives and create these spaces and direct how things move on a day-to-day basis. And so, I think definitely just learning in general that that's also a big part of leadership and has changed my perceptions of, I guess the prototype of a leader.

The participants spoke about teamwork as essential to leadership, further fostering a sense of community. Participants articulated the care in which leaders took, which Indrani described as a "concern for the individual" and their well-being. Sarah described advocating for community and "being able to rely on each other and uplifting each other" as central to effective leadership. For some participants, leadership was illustrated in how community members took care of each other rather than relying on authority figures. Meena shared an example of her community's reliance on each other rather than police:

> Because leadership to me was like… it's like growing up in Baltimore, there is no authority that is going to come save us. We have to save us. We don't call the police. If something is wrong, we work it out because we're not going to have, and this was before George Floyd times, although I was pretty young for George Floyd and everything with the Black Lives Matter movement. But even before then, it's like you're not supposed to call the police, specifically, not if it's something to do with children, even if it's like kids are vandalizing your house, you don't call the police. It's not something we do. It's just not a norm. In my community, it's like we don't do that at all. We call each other.

Meena's example illustrated seeing community leadership as a norm, as well as how community leadership can emerge as a result of power and racial dynamics. In her situation, traditional authority figures were not perceived as serving or protecting particular populations, specifically people of color.

Learning through Mothers and Aunties

All of the participants spoke about learning leadership through community, particularly through South Asian women. For most of the participants, their mothers and aunties were their first examples of leadership and influential in shaping their own definitions and approaches to leadership. Mira reflected on her mother's involvement at her Sunday school teaching pre-kindergarten children: "I've literally watched her take on more leadership positions in our Sunday school… I've watched her take on roles in my own schools, and I think that is what inspired me to start getting involved in things." Ananya described idolizing her mother and other women in her community and observing them organize events and run households: "I feel like they're a foundation to South Asian societies." Meenakshi named her mother and grandmother as her first examples of leadership. She talked about barriers and stigmas her grandmother had

overcome as a single mother in India, and the role she and her mother took in running and taking care of her household as well as being involved in the community.

Modeling Community-Based Leadership

Many of the participants' mothers and aunties modeled community-based leadership. Participants described this as centering community needs, organizing events to bring people together, identifying needs and stepping in to address needs, and working collaboratively to serve the community. Aishwarya shared about an annual festival her mom planned that included food and performances highlighting different dance styles from India; observing her mother plan the event with other aunties influenced her own leadership in leading collaboratively as friends rather than hierarchically.

Hannah described women as "the backbone of my Sunday school and my Indian community," reflecting on the ways in which women pulled together to organize community events. She also talked about her mother's influence on her view of leadership:

> Whenever she would see something that needed organizing or needed a person to put everything in place, like a managerial role, she would always be the one to fill it. So whenever I think of leadership, I'm like, okay, that's the person who gets everyone and gets everything together. That's being a leader.

Several of the participants also named their mothers as direct influences on their views of leadership. Meena recalled observing a "sense of duty" to take care of others from women within her community and how that set the norm for ways in which community members interacted. Sky also shared how women in her community took initiative and cared for others:

> My mom and aunt, for example, they don't ask what needs to be done. They just kind of... not intuitively know as moms, but they see the gaps, they're observant and they pick up

> on it, and then they make sure it gets done. And part of that I've noticed is not just doing it all on your own, but also making sure to uplift people among the process.

Modeling care, taking initiative to meet community needs, and working collaboratively were common themes in how the participants described their mothers' leadership.

Managing Multiple Roles

Nine of the ten participants' mothers worked outside of the home. Their positions and fields were diverse, ranging from clerical jobs to owning their own dental practice. These participants reflected on observing their mothers manage multiple roles within their professional fields, taking care of a household, and being engaged in their communities. Sky spoke about looking up to her mom and aunt because of:

> … how they carried themselves through family expectations of women, workforce expectations, and just a lot of, not conflicting roles, but just managing a lot of roles. I remember in particular, my mom, she had a full-time job that's also pretty rigorous, a center for advanced fetal care, so it's pretty high-risk obstetrics, but she wouldn't, her day wouldn't end there, even though she woke up really early. So she'd wake up, go to her insane job and then come home, help me with my homework, help my dad at our family store, take care of me and the dog. Her day really didn't end, so I saw her as a leadership figure primarily because of her dedication.

Several participants expressed similar reflections on their mothers' multiple roles and how they managed expectations of South Asian women within and outside of the household, and influence on their own involvement in leadership. Meena attributed her initial involvement with community advocacy and service to her mother's involvement in a nonprofit. Hannah spoke about her mother's commitment and care in her household as well as in the community.

While their mothers' multiple roles were instrumental in the participants' views of leadership, they also expressed criticism of the multiple roles women are expected to fill. Sarah reflected on her earlier views of leadership, when she "didn't necessarily think of them as leaders in the same respect because they were leading something that was more of a community. It's still within the roles that women typically engage in." These views, echoed by other participants, framed the leadership women engaged in as "women's work" rather than leadership, negating the leadership women illustrated within their homes and communities. In recognizing South Asian women's engagement as leadership, Sarah named the juxtaposition of South Asian men ". . . honestly only told to fulfill the role of breadwinner and academics" while South Asian women "have continuously done everything in every realm of academia, of household. It's fulfilling so many roles at once. The one who is nurturing. South Asian women do it all in the modern day of America." She described women in her community as:

> … incredibly smart, incredibly caring and giving, because although I didn't associate it in that traditional sense of leadership, what I did see is incredibly intelligent and incredibly organized women mobilizing for a greater cause. They would host events with hundreds of Bengali people in the audience, and they would make thousands of dollars in revenue off of fundraisers, et cetera. And these were women who were mothers who often had jobs, and they still managed to do all of this by themselves. And I thought that there was something powerful about that I just didn't necessarily connect until later in my life.

Sarah's reflections on earlier observations brought about new recognition of the leadership among women in her South Asian community, as well how dominant ideas around leadership and stereotypical roles of women negate the leadership roles women took on. Hannah also

expressed frustration with the societal expectations of South Asian women, which she perceived as an unequal burden based on gender:

> It makes me very happy to talk about the women in my community, but it also makes me upset at the same time because I want the men to also take accountability and take leadership roles. I don't want the women to be doing all the work all the time… That's not women's job to be a leader 24/7. And the men in my community, especially the dads or the husbands, they don't ever cook and they make their wife do all the housework and things like that… they're leaders and I'm happy about that, but I'm also upset that they're leaders because I want it to be equally split. I don't want them to be doing all the work just because they're women.

Hannah's observations of women's leadership also illustrate the ways in which women's caregiving and organization of households is expected of women, yet rarely recognized as leadership or seen as important as leadership outside the home. Indrani noted the contrast in how community leadership is viewed, recognizing women's leadership within households while expressing that "it's hard to picture them in realms outside of the home, but I don't think that makes it any less important."

The participants also named double standards related to gender, with men being recognized for behaviors and tasks that women often took on without prompting or expectations for appreciation. Indrani asserted that while women's leadership in the home was valued, ". . . it's also this thing where it's almost the norm… so those things go unappreciated. Sometimes they're not vocalized." Similar to other participants, she noted an example of saying thank you to her parents for cooking a meal: "When I say thank you to my mom for cooking a meal, she's like,

oh, why are you thanking me? She laughs. But then it's also like I'm expected to thank my dad for cooking for me." Hannah shared her observation that South Asian women are:

> . . . socialized to be leaders in the home, and they're socialized to be quiet leaders though, so they're socialized to do everything behind the scenes and make sure everything is working. But then when someone thinks of the head of the home or the head of the house in South Asian cultures, they think of the man automatically when they do nothing. The Indian woman, the mother, is the one that is doing all the work, but she never gets any credit for it.

The lack of recognition and appreciation for women's leadership was observed by many of the participants, who shared similar observations about household labor and gender norms.

Participants also grappled with the notion of being a caretaker, and how the attribute was both part of traditional gender norms expected of South Asian women and a trait they strived to emulate in their leadership. Sarah noted that "one of the things I struggled most with is so many of my strengths are just strengths that are associated with traditional South Asian femininity or gender norms" and expectations around being "a well-educated housewife." She described her process of rejecting these traits to reframing "traditional South Asian femininity" as strengths in caretaking and empathy as a leader. Sarah's reflections on gender related to South Asian norms within a U.S. context illustrate how she navigated a bicultural identity, as well as specific ways in which South Asian women's engagement with their communities shaped her own leadership style.

The participants expressed varying levels of awareness of how their mothers and aunties influenced their leadership, and when they started to recognize their mothers and aunties as leaders. Meenakshi recalled increased awareness of her mother and aunts' roles and workloads

toward the end of her high school experience. Aishwarya noted making the connection during the data collection process between observations of her mother and grandmothers' leadership and her own view of leadership:

> I don't actually think I've made that connection, but I think … it definitely is true just in terms of the people who lead more in the background and who keep things together but aren't always the ones at the forefront of things.

In describing her learning about leadership as a child and how she enacted leadership in college, she made connections in her mother and grandmothers' influence on her leadership style. Similarly, Hannah spoke of the impact of women within her community:

> I've always been a leader since I was a little kid. I've never been much of a follower ever. And a big part of my identity is the women that I've seen growing up, that they've always been the leaders. So I automatically assume and think that I also need to be a leader. So I think as I grow older, I will become loud auntie, and I don't care.

The examples of leadership among South Asian women Hannah shared and looked up to and her aspiration and equivocation of leaders and the "loud auntie" illustrate her challenging dominant ideas of leadership and stereotypes of South Asian women, pushing against the ideas that South Asian women are passive and quiet as well as notions that women should be in a subservient role to men.

Challenging Dominant Views of Leadership

As the participants noted learning leadership through South Asian women in community, they described several key differences between their own perceptions of leadership and what they perceived as dominant views of leadership. The first nuance was viewing leadership as non-hierarchical and not tied to positional titles. While many of them named positional leaders as

their first encounter with leadership, they also emphasized that leadership does not require a title and that those who hold titles are not necessarily engaging in effective leadership. Hannah spoke about "silent leaders" as those who work behind the scenes and are essential, yet do not get credit and are often invisible. Some of the participants also connected this to their own leadership aspirations. Ananya spoke about her future aspirations in relation to leadership as not necessarily being "someone's boss someday or something like that. - the typical sense of leadership. But I definitely want to be in a place where I'm a leader in my own way." Similarly, Meenakshi shared that she had "rethought a lot of what leadership means to me" in the past year, centering on how she can engage in leadership behaviors, such as creating inclusive spaces, while not holding a positional role. She also connected hierarchical leadership to privilege and power, reflecting on who has access to leadership positions and those who have been historically excluded.

The second key difference was around individualist and collectivist leadership. All of the participants noted that dominant views of leadership were often individualistic, while they recognized the importance of teamwork, collaboration, and community as essential to leadership. Aishwarya articulated her perspective on the difference:

> If you look up on Google, a picture of leadership, you're going to see one person who's probably standing above a lot of other people…as a whole, I think people just view that's what leadership is, one person who's just above everyone else. But really, it's like leadership is honestly, you're a team… leaders cannot do what they do without the people. People can't do what they want to do without leaders too. And so, I feel like that's one stark difference between the definitions that I would view it as a very much collaborative thing… It's never one person taking control of everything.

Participants also connected their collectivist views of leadership to empathy and a sense of care for community, citing lessons learned from South Asian communities and leaders. Sarah noted the differences in leadership between campus student government and cultural organizations, noting that the latter attended more to individuals' well-being within the organization, group dynamics, and ensuring others felt included and cared for. Indrani expressed her view of the differences: "something that I see lacking is probably the compassion aspect. It's very, leadership in America is very individualistic or logistical." She gave an example of how lack of attentiveness to process and group dynamics permeates academic settings, citing group projects as often more focused on the fastest way to meet an outcome than "thoughtful group discussion."

The third key difference in views on leadership related to race and gender. Participants spoke about learning about leadership through their communities, particularly through women, and how that influenced their own approaches to leadership. Some of the participants also discussed how identity, namely racism and sexism, influenced leadership styles they felt they could or could not hold. Hannah described factors within the South Asian community that may influence how women engage in leadership; she named the threat of domestic violence as a potential consequence for South Asian women being vocal and challenging traditional gender norms: "I wouldn't change my definition, but I do recognize that being loud is a privilege in the western world, and in most households, being a woman, being loud and not being a victim of a crime is a privilege."

Other participants spoke about the history of leadership related to Whiteness and patriarchal systems, and implications for others engaging in leadership. For example, while Sky recognized different forms of leadership, she also articulated restrictions for people of color:

> There's space for the kind, democratic, uplifting leader and the hardcore, borderline dictator, like military general or politician type of leader, in American society. But I think there's more space for white men exclusively to be the latter power-usurping type of position. Whereas with everyone else, you have to be careful and walk on eggshells in terms of leadership and make sure you do nothing potentially even borderline wrong. So yes, there's space for all leadership types, meaning my perception and the general U.S. perception, but it depends on who you are and also the context of the situation.

Sky's observations posit that the ways in which South Asian American women engage in leadership are not only a result of their own community norms and socialization, but also because of systems of racism and sexism in the U.S. that deem what constitutes acceptable and appropriate behavior based on identity.

Mira shared a similar perspective as she spoke about leadership as pushing people outside of their comfort zones in order for progress, and noted that people of color were more heavily critiqued than others. She interpreted this as "mainstream America is still not ready" for leaders who are not White even though people of color may be elected: "We elected a Black president. We still crucify him for everything. We elected a Black Indian vice president and they're crucified for everything." She reflected on the implications for her own leadership, noting that historically, leadership has been:

> … white, it's very white. And I think that also makes the disconnect where I'm not what they're looking for in a leader because of the color of my skin and because of my gender. So yeah, there is a disconnect, but I think it's an understandable one where I'm like, we can fix that. We just have to keep working on it.

Mira's sense of hope and motivation to challenge stereotypes and dominant forms of leadership also came up with several other participants, and is noted in the final theme of this chapter.

Connections to South Asian Community and Identity

Participants spoke about leadership as a means for connection, both to the South Asian community and their own identities. Community was a central theme in how participants discussed leadership, particularly in finding community through South Asian student organizations and motivation to pursue leadership opportunities as a means to build community. Participants also named a deeper connection and learning around South Asian identity as a result of their engagement and involvement.

Connections to South Asian Community

Many of the participants recalled growing up in predominantly White environments, contributing to feelings of invisibility. Several of the participants reflected on feeling that they were expected to play spokesperson roles in the classroom, speaking for an entire identity group. These experiences persisted in college. Meena spoke about being the only South Asian person on a student advisory committee for the Provost, and Meenakshi noted being one of only two South Asians in the newsroom she worked in.

Although participants continued to experience being "the only" in a room at times, they also emphasized the impact of attending a college with a significant South Asian population. Hannah described her classroom experience in college:

> It's not like high school, and it's not like home where I was the only one, or I was one of two. And when the word India was mentioned in class, everyone would turn and look at me. I don't have to go through that anymore.

Several participants similarly expressed relief and joy about being around other South Asians, and that this experience was new for them. Sky reflected on her upbringing where she was best friends with the only other South Asian girl in her grade, who was Pakistani, "so we joke, we're like 'my *dushman*,' which is my enemy… Going from that experience where there's similarities, but you're just surviving to actually having a space where there's so many people, it's normalized." For Meena, her Muslim identity and wearing a hijab as a part of religious observation was salient to her identity, and she described her excitement in befriending women who shared her identity.

Meena also noted that the visible markers of her identity, including wearing a hijab, influenced others' perceptions of her and how she found community:

> In some ways it's helpful because it helps you almost immediately find your community because you can just tell from the way that people look at you, who's going to talk to you, who's not going to talk to you? So immediately I'm like, okay, Muslim Student Association, maybe the Pakistani Student Association.

Meena's awareness of others' perceptions and reactions to her prompted where she felt a sense of otherness, and where she could feel a sense of community, specifically within South Asian organizations.

Motivation to be Involved

For several of the participants, the opportunity to connect and create community with other South Asians motivated them to seek out leadership opportunities. Some of the participants named wanting to get involved in South Asian organizations as a means to have South Asian friends to connect with. Ananya spoke about "wanting to talk about Bollywood movies or talk in my language, but I can't with my friends who aren't South Asian." Others wanted to join South

Asian student organizations as a way to build connections and learn about South Asian culture. Annie spoke about her motivation:

> I do feel like I maybe didn't experience as much of an Indian influence on my childhood as a lot of other people did, including people I've met here. So, I think realizing that has made me want to, I guess, be more active in the South Asian community and even just the Asian American community in general.

Annie and Ananya, both sophomores, spoke about wanting to join organizations and become more involved.

Some of the older participants reflected on their involvements and accomplishments. For example, Sky shared about a student organization she founded for South Asian students in public policy:

> The main reason that my friends and I actually created it was just to give South Asians a space in the school of public policy because I feel like other fields we're more populated in, but this one, we just don't exist. I can count on my fingers the amount of not just Asian, but South Asian representatives in the [state] General Assembly or actual Congress in the U.S.. So just seeing or making space for us and making sure other people know that there is space for them in this field.

For Sky, creating community for herself and South Asian peers motivated her to engage in leadership and create an organization.

Sense of Belonging

Many of the participants spoke about finding a sense of belonging and community within South Asian student organizations. They named the sense of care, welcoming nature, and finding similarities with others as well as an openness within these organizations. Aishwarya, a senior,

reflected on growing up in a predominantly White environment and her involvement and leadership within a South Asian student organization:

> It's been game changing… finding the brown community has definitely enhanced my experience. I think for me, I didn't realize how much I valued that connection that you have to people who share your culture. And what I found about it was that it's just, it became really easy to make friends that were brown just because there's so much that needs to be unsaid about, there are just so many shared experiences that just don't even need to be explained. And so, the fact that we were able to create those relationships and also just have this common understanding for each other, it meant a lot to me. And also, you have people to share your culture with, whether it's making Indian food together, whether it's listening to Bollywood songs or watching Bollywood movies, or even just reflecting on your experiences growing up, whether that's ranting about your parents or whether that's about sharing common experiences that we all dealt with growing up. It definitely changed my experience because it made me a lot closer to people I was around. Again, I really appreciated the friends that I had in high school, but I feel like I... found a new level of comfort and also new level of closeness with the friends I have in college just because we have that shared background.

Aishwarya noted not only the friends she made through her leadership involvement, but also a deeper connection to South Asian culture.

The participants spoke about belonging in a variety of organizations, ranging from umbrella organizations for Asian American and South Asian students, to more specific organizations, such as Muslim, Indian, or Pakistani organizations. Some joined multiple and found value in each. Indrani recalled joining an Asian American student organization and the

inviting atmosphere: “It didn’t feel like you were a stranger even in your first meeting.” Meena, who is Pakistani, spoke about a sense of community within South Asian spaces:

> When I go back to Pakistan, then people care a lot about, are you Pakistani or are you Indian, or are you Bangladeshi? You're not just, like, Desi, but over here we don't care. We’re the same, we wear the same jewelry and we eat the same sweet, so it doesn't matter. And that's just how we see it… whereas back home people are like, “oh, are you from the exact square mile that I'm from? Are you from the exact two tribes that I'm from?” Whereas I'm like, I don't even know what that means for me. I'm just glad that you can understand me when I say hi.

Meena’s observations illustrate how participants defined and found community as second-generation South Asian Americans. Participants’ sense of belonging within these spaces emerged from a sense of familiarity and solidarity with others, as well as space to develop and deepen connections to South Asian identity and culture.

Connections to South Asian Identity

In addition to finding community, participants expressed deeper connections and understandings of South Asian identity. Several of the participants noted having space to embrace parts of their South Asian identity, such as Bollywood pop culture, South Asian food, and traditional clothing, and the significance of this in contrast to the predominantly White schools they had come from. Aishwarya named her willingness to participate in this study as an indicator of her increased connection to South Asian culture, recalling her excitement about an opportunity to talk about her culture and heritage. Many of the participants noted an increased sense of pride and appreciation in their South Asian identities, as well as their learning around South Asian culture.

Connecting as South Asian Americans

Many of the participants spoke about not feeling fully integrated into South Asian or American culture. Meena recalled being referred to as a "mango lassi kid," a term her cousins used to describe Americanized Pakistanis. Annie shared feeling a disconnect with South Asian peers due to not being immersed in Indian culture throughout her childhood. For some of the participants, getting involved and engaging in leadership roles served as a way to connect with others who shared a sense of being in between cultures. Sarah shared that she was initially hesitant to join the Bengali student organization because she felt like "an imposter within that environment," but was encouraged by a friend:

> I was someone who very much struggled with my cultural identity because I did feel such a disconnect from it. My Bengali is not proficient. I no longer remember classical Indian dancing. I never really associated with a pop culture, Bengali songs and movies. And I found people who had the same level of disconnect and even more disconnect and even less disconnect. And having that variation really helped me kind of feel confident in the fact that I am never going to be perfectly connected within my culture, and that is okay.

Sarah expressed that her involvement with the student organization "healed so much of my, specifically the Bengali, aspects of my identity." She and several other participants referred to a familial nature of South Asian student organizations, with a few referring to other members in Hindi as older sisters (*didis)* and brothers (*bhais)*, who were influential in their own identity development.

Deeper Learning about South Asian Identity and Culture

In connecting more with their South Asian identity, many of the participants also spoke about having increased interest in learning about South Asian, and Asian American, culture,

history, and current issues impacting the community. Meenakshi discussed learning more about her own culture through her engagement with South Asian organizations; as part of a larger South Asian student organization, she spoke about learning from her peers and raising her awareness and knowledge of the diversity of communities within India. Similarly, Indrani shared learning about the history of Sri Lanka and ramifications of its civil war on different identity groups, deepening her understanding of her own identity. Aishwarya noted collaborating with other South Asian organizations, including Nepali, Pakistani, and Afghani student organizations, and learning about issues pertinent across communities.

While participants described learning about issues pertaining to South Asian communities, they also noted these issues were not spoken about in their households as they grew up. Indrani talked about growing up feeling very connected to Sri Lankan culture, and yet, how eye-opening it was to learn about Sri Lanka's civil war and divisions between Sri Lankan people. Meenakshi shared about her learning around caste; her father is Christian and her mother is Hindu, and she reflected on not seeing caste as relevant to their lives in the U.S. Through her involvement with a South Asian student organization, she gained a deeper understanding of the caste system, its role in South Asian history, and implications for South Asian Americans. Meenakshi spoke about sharing her learning on South Asian topics with her parents, and their positive reception to expanding their knowledge on issues. She also shared experiences of engaging her parents in conversations around anti-Blackness within the South Asian community and the Black Lives Matter movement. While she described her parents as resistant at first, she was able to connect their experiences as immigrants in order to create understanding and empathy. Her learning on these issues prompted her to seek out additional "advocacy-minded spaces" where she could further her learning and connections with South Asian culture.

Learning about Asian American culture generally was also a theme that emerged. Participants differed in how much they affiliated with the term "Asian American," but recognized it as an umbrella term that included South Asians. Aishwarya shared about enrolling in Asian American studies courses with a desire to learn more about South Asian history and culture. Sarah described her experience with an Asian American student organization and building relationships with others:

> There are Koreans, there are Japanese people, there are Indian people. There are so many different identities and so many people who are multicultural, some people who are extremely connected to their heritage and some people who are not whatsoever. And that was very fulfilling to me… and I felt as if under this common Asian American identity, I could speak about my individual experiences and they would be valid. But at the same time, I was learning so much about intersectionality, about how colonialism impacted the Philippines in a similar way that it impacted Bangladesh and how all these influences may be in a different nation or in a different culture, but impact us in very similar ways. So collective identity felt very affirming to me.

Sarah's involvement with the Asian American student organization contributed to her learning and understanding of Asian American histories and commonalities between Asian American groups. She also named a familiarity with others who experience an in-betweenness of cultures, with differing levels of connection to one's heritage as second-generation Asian Americans.

Navigating a Bicultural Identity and Stereotypes

For many of the participants, connecting with other South Asian Americans, particularly second-generation peers, was a new experience. Many of them attended predominantly White K-12 schools and reflected on navigating a bicultural identity and experiencing stereotypes within

and outside of the South Asian community, particularly related to gender and race. Experiences with stereotypes led to varying reactions among the participants, ranging from feelings of inadequacy to fueling motivation to change the narrative around South Asian American women.

Navigating a Bicultural Identity

Participants spoke about feeling different from their peers at a young age, as well as navigating differing environments between home and school. For example, Ananya reflected on growing up "more Gujurati at home" and leaning toward American culture at school, wanting Lunchables instead of Indian food for lunch. Mira recalled having two friend groups - a group of close, Indian friends she met through Sunday school "and then I had my White friend group every other day of the week."

Conflations with Whiteness

Participants also spoke about South Asian identity being conflated with or compared to Whiteness. Indrani and Ananya named beauty standards they grappled with as grounded in Eurocentric standards of beauty and validation from men, particularly White men. In addition to influencing self-esteem and how they perceived themselves, participants also named how these standards are perpetuated in media with South Asian women as exotified characters with light skin and White love interests.

Although participants were critical of Western beauty standards and perpetuated power dynamics within media along with limited South Asian representation, some also critiqued what they perceived as South Asians' desire to assimilate and aspirations of proximity to Whiteness. Indrani recalled conversations with her parents' friends, who were largely immigrants, about assimilation and how they view themselves after living in the U.S. for an extended time as opposed to more recent immigrants. She recalled questions posed such as "'oh, why aren't they

assimilated? What are they coming here and not changing?' Which is just so interested because they came to this country as well as those new immigrants." Contrastingly, Meena shared her own experience of when she "practically wanted to be White" and distanced herself from South Asian identity:

> When I was younger, I never used to speak my mother tongue to the point that I almost forgot it. I could understand it, but I felt awkward speaking. It felt like my tongue was too heavy because I didn't see it as, I thought it as a home language. I only ever heard it at home. I was like, this is not proper. This is not professional. This isn't friendly. This isn't a pretty language to speak.

She reflected on distancing herself from Pakistani identity and speaking Urdu because "being more American is closer to being more White," eschewing Urdu for English and traditional Pakistani clothing for jeans and "the American aesthetic":

> I think that also comes with the proximity to whiteness ideal of I want to remove myself from as much culture as I can, a more whitewashed version, like a butter chicken version. A butter chicken. Everyone eats the butter chicken. Nobody eats the keema or the mutton curry. It's just the butter chicken. That's the White people friendly.

Meena placed some of the responsibility and blame on South Asians, saying "a lot of the whitewashing that we see… we honestly do ourselves." However, she also recognized external factors that pressure South Asians, particularly South Asian youth, to conform to Eurocentric standards, and recalled meeting young professional South Asian women who spoke their native languages in public and integrated their South Asian heritage as a turning point for how she perceived her own identity.

Participants also spoke about how others perceived South Asians' proximity to Whiteness. Aishwarya spoke about the disregard for racism South Asians experience, with others reacting as if South Asians are "basically White" due to high average incomes and academic success. Mira shared an example from a presentation by her university's president in which Asian American and White students were grouped together, apart from other students of color. Holding up her arm and pointing to it to emphasize her complexion, she said: "I was telling somebody the other day when President [name] unintentionally had that graphic last year, and it was like grouping Asian students with White students. I was like, it doesn't come- It doesn't come off. I'm not White."

Feeling In-Between and Code-switching

A theme across the participants' narratives was a sense of in-between-ness, not feeling a sense of belonging in either American or South Asian culture. Sarah described how she experienced straddling two cultures in school:

> Being so different from everyone for such a long time growing up was very difficult for me because I could go to my Bengali Saturday school and I could be confident and I could be loud and expressive, and everything that I was doing was normal because everyone was raised in the same exact manner. But within these PWI or the PWI high school I went to, the food I ate was different. The way I spoke was different. English was very difficult in the sense of my pronunciation… English was my favorite subject, but I would enunciate certain words in a different way than everyone else, and that could easily become something of ridicule. So I always felt as if I was walking on eggshells. And then as I became older, jokes about terrorism, jokes about things that are integral to my identity. And even within the small Asian communities within my high school,

> everyone was Indian, everyone was Pakistani. So I as a Bengali never really felt, I guess, that ability to resonate… I did not grow up with so much of what is integral to Indian or Pakistani culture. So I felt as if I was an outsider for so long, and I felt, and even casual jokes from my white friends about, oh, you're so whitewashed, whatever. I felt very uncomfortable in either identity. So I definitely… think I hid myself in so many ways in terms of how I dress, how I acted, what I participated in.

Sarah reflected on experiencing discomfort in South Asian and White spaces, feeling different in both although she shared aspects of identity, being South Asian and being American, with the group. While she felt comfortable and a sense of belonging within her Bengali Sunday school, she described a sense of otherness in her high school experience. Within the South Asian population, she was an outsider as non-Indian or Pakistani; within White friend circles, she was an outsider in her racial identity, yet her White friends also were aware she did not fit in to the high school's South Asian circle.

Similarly, Meena described a sense of anxiety around public speaking within both South Asian and predominantly White spaces, even though she felt confident in herself and emphasized the importance of using one's voice and advocating outside of one's comfort zone. She recalled questioning whether she was "enough" of one identity, if the ways in which she was presenting herself would conflict with a cultural norm, or if her American-accented Urdu made her seem in authentic. In negotiating different spaces, she said:

> In some areas you feel like you have to tone down your identity or whatever identity that it is that you feel like is standing out in that area because you don't want it to be too much. But then in other areas, if it's a shared identity in the room, you're like, should I

> tone it up? Should I fine tune it? Because I just don't want to stand out. I want to be able to connect.

Meena described consistently calculating her approach in various settings to determine how to present herself in order to connect with those around her. In some ways, this was also strategic in how she could reach different groups in order to advocate for community needs.

Many of the participants described turning a certain identity up or down, as Meena described, leaning to one or the other, or trying to play a neutral role depending on the context and setting. This theme emerged as participants spoke about their upbringing as well as current experiences in college and internships. For example, Sky described herself as "bold and bright" in an internship space with other people of color that she described as "a space for POC people to shine," and "more reserved" in an internship in the governor's office. Mira described the Sunday school in which she teaches: "I walk in there and I'm at home. I don't have to put on a front about being a human or I don't have to prove to anyone that I am supposed to be where I am." She juxtaposed this with a public affairs student conference she attended, where she borrowed a suit from her mother, straightened and pulled her hair back, wore make up and heels:

> I had to prove to them that I deserved to be at this conference. And it's so obvious in the way you present yourself, and it's difficult to reconcile that because I'm like, I hate that I have to be two separate people because it's not like my credentials change when I go from one to the other. I'm still the same person. I just am presenting a lot differently. And in one, I'm a lot more comfortable than the other, but I think the nature of what I want to do in the future is I have to be out of my comfort zone to make it work. So it's good practice. It's hard sometimes.

Mira's reflection of one setting in which she could be human and at home as opposed to having to prove her right to be in a space, along with an acceptance of code-switching as an inevitable part of life, was common among the participants. For example, Sarah reflected on how various settings connected to different identities she held, and how that influenced how she approached those settings:

> Growing up in a PWI definitely influenced a lot of how I represented myself. I also think that being bisexual plays a large part into my identity, and especially growing up in a religious and being closeted at home and being out at school is a very interesting dynamic. I'm also agnostic and I'm in a Muslim household. So again, all those roles definitely play into how I express myself and where I express myself openly and where I kind of am more muted and more, I guess, reserved.

Sarah's awareness of her own identities and the norms of various settings informed her behavior, feeling more or less safe expressing certain identities based on the setting.

Some of the participants also described situations where they subconsciously code-switched or leaned toward one identity they felt would be more accepted in a setting, particularly toward "being American" as Meena described, or Whiteness. Mira recalled a university award ceremony in which she was a finalist, and her family attended. She wore "White business professional clothes" and her father asked her why she didn't wear a sari: "I was like, I don't know. I genuinely don't know why I'm conditioning myself to feel that this is more professional than sari with a blazer on. I could really just do that." Her father's question prompted her to reflect on her internalized ideas of professionalism, what is acceptable, and what feels authentic to who she is.

Additionally, while all of the participants had traditional South Asian names, a few explicitly chose what they called their "Starbucks names" as their pseudonyms. Sarah shared how she selected hers:

> One day I panicked at Starbucks and because they asked my name and I was like, "Sarah," and all of my friends found it so funny because this was all of my hometown White friends. And ever since then… whenever I go to Starbucks or wherever I go where I don't want someone to have to struggle to spell my name, I'll say, Sarah.

Several of the participants selected their "Starbucks names" as their pseudonyms, feeling an affinity toward these pseudonyms, yet in other parts of the interview voiced frustration with White peers for mispronouncing their names and a desire to take more ownership of their South Asian identities in predominantly White spaces.

Experiencing Stereotypes

Participants spoke about experiencing a wide range of stereotypes, including feeling inferior to White people, inherently smart and gifted in certain subjects, and, as South Asian women, submissive and weak. One of the participants, Mira, described stereotypes around South Asians:

> They're smart, so they're going to do more. They're higher achieving, the model minority myth aspect of it. And the darker versions are that we're more dangerous because we're from regions of the world that have a lot of conflict. Our religion is a danger to you, and "I don't understand anything about this person, so they must be a threat to me."

Mira named the conflicting and multiple stereotypes experienced, and recalled messaging from her parents that she needed to be aware of these stereotypes and present herself in ways as to not be perceived as a threat. She recalled: "My mom has always impressed upon me, and my dad for

that matter, that because I look different, I have to present myself in a way that's very calm." Her awareness of stereotypes of South Asians influenced her socialization and approach to various situations; she spoke of this with gratitude to her parents, seeing the value of being able to code-switch in different situations. While stereotypes ranged widely, many of the stereotypes participants spoke about related to the MMM and gender.

Experiencing Stereotypes Related to the Model Minority Myth

Many of the ways in which participants described their experiences with the MMM reflected paradoxical perceptions of South Asian Americans as academically and professionally successful, yet not leaders, and poster children of the American Dream, yet threats to Americans' safety. Participants spoke about these dichotomies through reflecting on their own experiences with stereotypes, as well as observations of their parents' experiences and their own upbringing.

Many of the participants named academic aspects of the MMM, including "we are more academically successful, therefore we are more professionally successful and we earn more money," as Ananya noted. The MMM also included fitting a "copycat cookie cutter mold" of academic success in specific fields, such as computer science, as Aishwarya said. Sarah reflected on internalizing the MMM: "I believed that if I was the smartest, most well-behaved person, then I would succeed in life." She described talking to her mother about her involvement with campus protests around Israel and Gaza, and her mother's "immediate reaction was fear" and discouraging her from participating. In addition to stereotypes around academic success, Sarah also named a component of the MMM that emphasizes obedient, quiet obedience of the American Dream.

The stereotypes of the MMM departed from the realities of many of the participants. Ananya spoke about how the MMM ignored the wealth gap in the South Asian community and

poverty within the South Asian American community as well as South Asian countries. Mira described her experiences with the MMM in school growing up, where both peers and teachers expected her to be "naturally very good at any subject," particularly math and computer science. She recalled having to work hard and build a strong study ethic in order to succeed academically, and resented the assumptions that her academic abilities came naturally and dismissal of the work she put in. She named these experiences as dehumanizing: "People never gave us the time to be human. It was always like, you have to be a robot who's good at everything." Mira reflected on internalizing the expectations of others, acknowledging the work ethic it instilled yet the pressures and unrealistic standards that accompanied the stereotype:

> I've had to push myself to be better than everyone else, and I've always had to push myself to be better than the white people because they have to do less to be respected. And that means I have to be perfect. That means I can't make mistakes with dates. I can't make mistakes when I'm talking. I have to have everything ready. I need to be earlier on time, or this needs to be planned several weeks in advance.

Mira spoke of the MMM as double-edged, instilling a work ethic yet also bringing about the pressure of perfectionism - framing South Asians as inherently smart yet also having to outperform White students in order to uphold the MMM.

Mira's reflections illustrated the paradox of the MMM, positioning South Asians as naturally successful while also having to work twice as hard. Aishwarya described others' perceptions of Asian Americans broadly as inherently successful and prevalent in leadership positions: "People look at the top 0.01% of people, they're like, oh God, everyone's in a leadership position when really they're talking about Google and Pepsi." She compared perceptions of Asians in leadership to the narratives around a post-racial society when President

Obama was elected: “We had a Black president. We also had 43 White presidents.” For Aishwarya, the highlighting of notable South Asian CEOs in order to generalize South Asians’ access to leadership positions negated the reality of historical exclusion of such positions.

To illustrate the juxtaposition of presumed success yet lack of leadership ability, Mira shared an example from her own experience:

> I run a student org. I created [name of organization], and I also work for the national organization now too, which makes a difference as well with my leadership style because I know everyone personally who I'm working with. But when I email professors or when I do anything or when my executive board does anything on everything, I get all of the information when I need it. I'm the one delegating tasks to them. I'm the one giving them the heads up to do this or we need to get this done. But when people see me, they don't assume that I'm the leader. They assume that my White friend who's next to me is, and I'm like, no, no, I'm the president. I started the student org. This is my child.

Mira’s experience illustrates the paradoxical stereotypes of South Asian Americans. Mira and other participants spoke about experiences with teachers and peers assuming they were intrinsically intelligent, yet this experience illustrates the paradox South Asian women experienced when cast aside as perceived leaders.

Sarah also spoke about the nuances of the MMM, describing South Asians’ success as celebrated within certain parameters that are not threatening to White people, or that do not challenge the racial hierarchy and White supremacy. She recalled her father’s struggles as a businessman after 9/11 when “people would stop answering his calls after they saw the Arabic name” and heard his accent. She said in order to resist pressure to assimilate and hold on to South Asian culture, one has to “do that within this controlled system where everyone can digest

it and digest our success as something that is valid and not competitive." Sarah framed South Asian success as needing to fit within certain confines, as she observed from her father using an Americanized name in his business and her mother discouraging her involvement in activism and protests. For the participants, the MMM emphasized South Asian success within a specific mold that valued the American Dream and upheld White people as leaders. Participants also reflected on the ways in which the MMM perpetuated anti-Blackness within their communities and influenced how they were perceived by and interacted with other students of color, which I will elaborate on in the next chapter in how the participants conceptualized and engaged in advocacy.

Experiencing Stereotypes Related to Gender Norms

Participants also spoke at length about experiencing stereotypes related to gender throughout their lives. Aishwarya described gender expectations as embedded in South Asian culture and "tricky at times to understand certain dynamics that just appear to be a little bit different for women." Many of the participants recalled different expectations for boys and girls as they grew up, sharing stories about brothers, male cousins, and friends to illustrate their point. Sarah described "a greater sense of entitlement within being a South Asian male than there is being a South Asian woman." She noted that many of the South Asian male peers she knew did not know how to do "very basic life skills," such as laundry and cooking while she learned these skills as a child with "an expectation for a woman to fulfill that role." Hannah also spoke specifically about differing household expectations of her compared to her younger brother. Noting differing expectations as well as what they were allowed to do at different ages, she said: "I think being an Indian woman and being a man, you almost have two completely different lives." Many of the participants also named parents' and elders' expectations around marriage and raising children with the assumption that for women, caring for their family would be a

priority over career and other pursuits. Indrani recalled hearing these assumptions from various family members, even though she did not see marriage and children as something she wanted.

Participants spoke about the ramifications of differing expectations, including the privileges and advantages they observed in South Asian men compared to their own experiences. Mira asserted that South Asian men "have it a lot easier" than women, particularly in the context of job searches and leadership positions. Mira and other participants named that men were often trusted more than women regardless of experience and abilities, and were perceived as having more potential to carry out a leadership role successfully. Hannah and Sarah both recalled experiences of feeling that their voices were disregarded or regulated to certain roles. Sarah described being "treated like a secretary," while Hannah spoke about not being taken seriously in settings that were predominantly male, whether the men were White or men of color.

Several of the participants were STEM majors, and spoke specifically about the identity dynamics within classroom spaces. For a few of the participants, their gender identity was more salient. Annie, a computer science major, named being a woman as her more prominent identity, citing the racial demographics of STEM fields where she perceived Asian students as being well represented. Ananya spoke about her upbringing as well:

> I grew up in a diverse community and that allowed the fact that I was South Asian to be… not unseen, but I feel like the fact that I'm a woman is mostly why people didn't respect me or didn't see me as a leader.

Ananya described feeling like she could blend in to diverse communities racially, yet her gender was what set her apart from others. Also a STEM major, she said "the fact that being in a STEM field where men are the majority, it's really hard to find yourself paving the way." She and

Hannah spoke about feeling more restricted and self-conscious in these types of spaces compared to settings with more women or people of color.

While a few of the participants stated they felt their gender identity was more salient than racial identity, they also acknowledged that negative experiences attributed to gender were exacerbated for women of color. For example, Annie recalled observations as a child of female leaders being labeled as bossy and not taken seriously, resulting in her own hesitancy to engage in leadership. Speaking of those labels, she said: "I think that's definitely [a] characteristic only assigned to women, and probably even more than that, women of color I think get associated with those types of characteristics and negative traits more often than our other peers." Similarly, Sky reflected on interviewing for internships, and trying to balance coming off as confident without seeming arrogant. She recalled advice she received and observations of other women's internship searches as well:

> Don't sell yourself too short because then they're going to think you're underqualified, but if you even have a hint of vanity, you're screwed… For all women overall, you have to be really particular, but it's an added layer of carefulness for Brown women… Black and Brown women, specifically.

Sky and Annie's observations highlighted the participants' awareness of others' perceptions toward them, and what Sky described as "a really fine line" acting based on cues from others on what behavior is acceptable.

Meena also named how intersecting identities of race, religion, and gender influenced her experiences and perceptions others had of her. She spoke about wearing a hijab, and described it as a visible marker of her religion and a component that often symbolized how she was different from her peers. Speaking of her classmates' perceptions of her, she said:

> Obviously being a woman in leadership, it kind of clashes with their image of what a hijabi girl should be doing. They're expecting that I am maybe not going to be able to speak that many languages, or maybe I'm already married with three kids, even though I'm 20. They've got expectations of me and being hyper aware of just how everyone around me is looking at me and living in contrary to how they might expect me to be, I feel like that kind of forces me to think a lot more about certain aspects of my identity.

Meena, as well as other participants, named a heightened awareness of identities that differed from their peers, as well as stereotypes ascribed to them. Although all of the participants spoke about experiencing stereotypes related to their identities, their reactions ranged. For some of the participants, their experiences with stereotypes brought about a sense of inadequacy or imposter syndrome, influencing their process of developing confidence and efficacy as a leader. Participants also spoke about seeing these experiences as a challenge and motivation to combat stereotypes around South Asian women and shift the narrative, influencing their desire to take on more leadership roles. These reactions were not mutually exclusive; some of the participants also spoke about feeling both inadequate and motivated at various points.

Responses to Stereotypes

Participants reflected on experiencing stereotypes in various settings, including within their families, K-12 experiences, and college classrooms and involvements. They also reflected on different ways in which they reacted to these experiences. Participants shared about feelings of inadequacy as a result of experiencing stereotypes, questioning their own abilities and a hesitancy to engage in leadership. They also spoke about their experiences with stereotypes as a source of motivation to step into leadership disrupt dominant narratives around South Asian American women.

Facing Feelings of Inadequacy

While all of the participants spoke about building leadership efficacy and self-confidence through experience and growing engagement with leadership, some also reflected on overcoming a lack of confidence that resulted from feeling othered and stereotyped within predominantly White environments. Several of the participants spoke about a lack of representation of women in leadership, particularly South Asian and women of color. Ananya reflected on how this lack of representation influenced her own self-perception:

> Until late high school, when I actually had positions where I was a leader, I didn't really think of myself as a leader or what it would be like to be a leader… especially as a woman, you don't really see many women in positions of power until recently and it was just hard to see myself as that.

Sky shared similar reflections around not seeing herself as a leader until college, which she attributed to her environment at predominantly White, small, private K-12 schools. Annie, who experienced both all-girls and co-ed school environments, recalled feeling more confident at the all-girls high school she attended. Transitioning to a coed environment, she spoke about feeling "a little more insecure… just less sure of myself academically. Especially when a lot of the students that are first to raise their hand, the first call out and all that are all men." The transition from an all-girls to a co-ed environment shifted Annie's sense of confidence in her leadership and academic abilities. While participants recognized that leadership did not necessarily entail being the first to raise your hand or be at the forefront of an organization, the internalization of dominant ideas of leadership still impacted their own leadership efficacy. Several participants described their leadership styles as similar to South Asian women they had observed in their communities, as more "behind-the-scenes" and less acknowledged than visible actions.

Meenakshi shared that the lack of appreciation for "behind-the-scenes" leadership led to insecurities for her:

> …in certain situations of like, "oh, I am not in this top position in this organization. Am I genuinely making an impact? Am I genuinely doing anything" just because this societal messaging is only that one person who's at the forefront of everything is really the one that matters and the one that's recognized.

She spoke about coming to her own terms of leadership, recognizing that behind-the-scenes work was essential and important regardless of others' views or recognition.

Several of the participants echoed recollections of feeling insecure, particularly in predominantly male and White environments. Aishwarya, Sarah, and Sky spoke specifically about "imposter syndrome." Sky elaborated on external factors influencing feelings of imposter syndrome: "Not to say I have no confidence, but just the way that I have been, not treated by society, but just the way the world is, I tend to question myself a lot more... like, imposter syndrome goes crazy." Sky's reference to "the way the world is" in relation to imposter syndrome indicated a recognition of structures and systems of power related to identity, specifically race and gender, that historically and continue to marginalize people of color and women. Meena spoke about questioning whether she would be taken seriously by others, particularly those who did not share her identity: "It was a serious mental toll, so I would just kind of stick to the communities that I felt connected with my identities." For Meena, in-group communities provided a safe space where she felt she could be heard.

While the participants spoke about feelings of timidity, insecurity, and otherness in regard to engaging in leadership, they also named turning points of realizing they wanted to be more engaged, vocal, and advocate for change. For many of them, progressive engagement in

leadership starting with joining an organization served as an entry point to leadership to help build confidence. For example, Sarah recalled feeling:

> very afraid of leading, especially in high school. I was very timid and I continue to be a bit reserved. That being said, when I entered college, I realized I wanted that to change and I wanted to be more vocal and more confident in my abilities. And I just entered every organization that I could possibly be interested in.

While Sarah named feelings of imposter syndrome as an organization member, she also described increasing confidence and efficacy, as well as learning leadership skills.

In contrast, Sky described her entry point through a behind-the-scenes role as an assistant sound manager for a middle school play where she learned about the structure and organization of theater, and moved up to stage manager by eighth grade and continued in high school. She recalled that by her senior year, she noticed others recognized her work ethic and leadership:

> People noticed that I put in the work and also started to take me seriously because of the quality of work, whereas in elementary or middle school, it was just like, "you're the other, so you have to work your way up." And I think that's what I carried in, I guess, operating in silence or under the radar. So I kept, I guess, working so that people would see my work speaks for itself in a sense… It's been a progression of realizing that I'm capable, but the main reason that I didn't think I was capable was the environment I was in.

Sky's reflection on feeling that she had to prove herself to others in order to be a leader was common among the participants. Many of them named different criteria or qualifications to meet in order to see themselves as leaders, including a certain level of education, experience within a

field, familiarity with an organization's structure and people, and clarity around major, passions, and career goals.

Meena named "a sense of confidence that comes once you've gotten a little older… the more educated you become, you have more confidence." Several of the participants alluded to confidence with seniority in school or an organization, as well as a tendency to be more reserved in new settings. Annie described her process of getting involved in college and increasing confidence in her sophomore year:

> There's some people who can be brand new to a community and will be the first to volunteer to do stuff, and that's not how I am or how I currently am. So, I think specifically here as I get older and become older, even right now as a sophomore, I think I'm definitely more sure of myself than I was last year. And I think that is reflected in how active I am in various clubs and even in classes and stuff. So, I just think that those go hand in hand. And I think hopefully, I think as a junior, senior, I will not only have more opportunities, but I'll want to take those opportunities more.

For Annie, familiarity with the organization and establishing herself within the community aided in building self-efficacy and confidence in taking on leadership roles. Similarly, Meenakshi reflected on her childhood and adolescence when she "very much considered myself a follower just because I didn't have a ton of self-confidence in my ability to lead… And so, I think that kind of started changing when I became more sure of what exactly it was that I wanted to do."

Many of the participants named that their tendency was to be more reserved and quieter, particularly in predominantly White or male settings, and wanting to assert themselves more in such settings. For example, Hannah acknowledged that she approached spaces differently based on the demographics of the group:

> Whenever I'm in a space where it's predominantly White men, I always go back into my little middle school shell. I'm trying not to, but I feel like I always do that, and I've noticed it more recently that I do that and I become quiet and I just keep to myself and just am the one who's taking notes and things like that. But this literally was this semester that I realized that I was doing that, and I decided to never ever do that again. I hate myself for doing that, but I think when it's men of color and when it's women, I am the same. I want to be the leader. I want to be the one who's telling people how we should approach the lab or things like that. But when it is white men in a lab group or an academic setting, and especially if they tell me that I'm wrong or if they tell me what to do, then I immediately shut down and go back into my shell and I'm like, okay, whatever you say is, but I am trying not to do that when I'm with those kind of people.

Hannah spoke in detail about how her approach differs in various settings, having an awareness of that, and wanting to show up as a leader and resist going into a "shell." Many of the participants spoke about these processes with pride, recognizing the difficulty in their experiences and also having pride in taking steps to build their confidence, which Mira named as "the best part of leadership is learning to be confident in yourself."

Motivation to Change the Narrative

While participants named experiences of otherness that hindered their leadership efficacy, many of them also described experiencing stereotypes as motivation to take on leadership roles and behaviors in order to combat stereotypes and change the narrative around South Asian women. Aishwarya reflected on the pervasiveness of gender norms within South Asian society:

> A very integral part of the South Asian culture is just how different women are treated historically. I feel like it's definitely a lot more progressive now, but some of those ties still do persist today, and that has definitely shaped the way that I think and also the way that I am, because part of the reason why I wanted to involve myself in [South Asian student organization] and also specifically [women in business student organization], is to kind of push that narrative that there's no reason that women should be placed on a lower pedestal as men… So, I think it definitely contributes a lot to my motivation, especially being a South Asian woman.

While Aishwarya spoke about challenging norms within the South Asian community, Hannah emphasized dispelling stereotypes around South Asian women that others held. Reflecting on her own community of South Asian women, she said: "I want this stereotype that South Asian women are quiet to go away." She juxtaposed the stereotype with women she knew, who she described as loud but that "other South Asian people are the only ones that know." She described wanting to change the narrative as motivation to be seen as a leader and use her voice:

> I guess that's also a subconscious reason… I feel like in high school especially, I was one of two Indian girls in my entire school, and I room with the other one now, so it would always be me and three other white people. So, I would be like… "I don't want to listen to what he or she has to say and have the other people agree with them just because they have that somewhat community just because they're all white." So, I felt that if I was a leader… people would actually take into consideration what I had to say. I feel like if I was a follower then that wouldn't have happened.

Hannah viewed being a leader as being able to be heard and respected within groups where she did not share aspects of identity, particularly where others held dominant identities. She viewed

being vocal as a means to be seen as a leader, as well as counter the stereotype of South Asian women as passive and quiet.

Several of the participants spoke about confronting assumptions that South Asian women could not be leaders and wanting to prove others wrong. Sarah spoke about defying expectations of others:

> I definitely feel as if I came into leadership and the prospect of leadership with something to prove. I have always felt that I had some chip on my shoulder where people continuously told me that I was not a fit.

She described entering various leadership positions feeling that she had something to prove. Echoing similar sentiments about challenging others' assumptions, Mira described her motivation as a leader: "I think that I've been pushing myself to be a better leader and a better person because people seem to think that Indian women can't do that." In describing her community's reaction when she started a student organization focused on addressing political polarization, she recalled that only her parents and a few family friends believed in her while others doubted her ability to lead such an organization: "they were like, 'oh, well, you're a girl, who listens to you?' And I'm like, that's ridiculous to me that your expectations of me failing are because of my gender and because I look different than everyone else." For Mira, these sentiments served as motivation to take on leadership "positions where I can help people recognize that leadership is not defined by one quality." Those who questioned her ability to lead or dismissed her experiences motivated Mira to expand ideas and norms around leadership.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present three themes that describe the participants' learning and foundational experiences related to leadership. These themes included learning

leadership, connections to South Asian community and identity, and navigating a bicultural identity and stereotypes. The first theme highlighted how second-generation South Asian American women learned leadership through their communities, especially from their mothers, aunties, and other women. They observed leadership rooted in community and how women balanced multiple roles; these experiences challenged dominant views of leadership often grounded in Whiteness and patriarchal norms. The second theme explored how participants engaged in leadership in ways that fostered connections to their South Asian identity and South Asian communities. The third theme illustrated how participants navigated bicultural identities and experiencing stereotypes, with participants reflecting on feelings of inadequacy as well as motivation to disrupt dominant narratives about South Asian American women. In the next chapter, I will share themes that describe how participants enacted leadership and described their own leadership approaches.

Chapter 6: Collective Narrative – Enacting and Developing Leadership Identity

The participants differed in the types of organizations they were involved in, leadership positions they held and how many, and their own leadership efficacy. However, several themes emerged from the data in connection to how the participants integrated their values into leadership behaviors, priorities within their leadership, and how they navigated their own learning around leadership as well as dominant ideas of leadership grounded in White, patriarchal norms. In this chapter, I will explore three themes: leadership grounded in community, leadership grounded in advocacy, and developing an authentic, integrated South Asian American woman leader identity. The first theme, leadership grounded in community, describes how participants centered relationships, built community for others, valued mentorship, and practiced inclusion through their leadership. The second theme of leadership grounded in advocacy illustrates how students conceptualized advocacy, advocated for visibility and representations as well as systemic change, and how they defined the communities in which they advocated with and for. Participants also named values and factors they balanced through their advocacy, and how they grappled with the MMM and its implications. The third theme highlights how participants integrated norms and values from South Asian and U.S. cultures to develop their own ways of leading, as well as their emphasis on creating pathways for others.

Leadership Grounded in Community

As described in the previous chapter, participants learned about leadership in ways that were based in community through family, Sunday school teachers, and community leaders, and saw engaging in leadership as a means to build connections with South Asian community. Participants also described their own leadership engagement in ways that were strongly grounded in community. Leading in community-centered ways included centering relationships, building

community for others, valuing mentorship, and engaging in inclusive practices through their involvements, particularly in student organizations.

Community-Centered Leadership

Centering Relationships

Many of the participants described their leadership styles as leading with care and empathy, attending to process and group dynamics as well as outcomes, and prioritizing building relationships with others. They described these components as essential to effective leadership, and relationships as essential to strong organizations. Meena emphasized the importance of building trust and "that sense of we have each other's back" throughout an organization. She also described managing relationships between others, observing group dynamics and mediating when necessary to repair relationships, in order to effectively carry out organizational goals:

> I want to manage all the things, but not just on the professional level, but also I want to be able to sense when there's a fight coming, I want to be able to, I don't want anyone to argue or have disagreements or, oh, okay, if this person isn't talking to that person and they're both on the same team that's planning this event, this event might not go that well because these two aren't talking to each other.

Meena described herself as "the secretary" in managing logistical pieces as a strength, and also in ways that embodied caretaking for others within the organization.

Aishwarya attributed her relationship-centered leadership style to her upbringing, family, and identity, particularly as a South Asian woman, sister, and daughter. Being a part of communities based on identity and familial relationships shaped her approach to leadership: "That's definitely influenced the way that I navigate my leadership style because it's very much community based, familial based, like you're putting the person first as opposed to what needs to

get done." Aishwarya reflected on building community within a South Asian student organization where students shared an aspect of identity as a basis for connection, and how she transferred a communal environment to academic organizations she was involved with as well. She described differences in the cultures of a South Asian organization and another for women in business, which she described as "a pretty professional organization, but we want to make it feel like it's still personal and it's still a community."

For several of the participants, leading in a relationship-centered way also meant straying away from traditional hierarchies. Sky described not needing a positional title, but rather approaching leadership in a way where her "work speaks for itself" through building trust with others, identifying needs, and taking action. Aishwarya acknowledged that hierarchical organizational structures and cultures may be beneficial for some contexts, but that was not her direct experience:

> I like to lead as a friend, if that makes sense. In all the organizations that I'm in, I feel like I approach the board as more of my friends as opposed to an organization board. And that just has worked really well for me. It's also come really naturally because I've grown to love the people that I work with in every organization. So naturally they become my friends. But I just think it makes us work a lot more effectively as a board, because I have been on a few boards where it's felt like you can feel the hierarchy, and I don't think that's necessarily an effective board in my experience.

For many of the participants, challenging hierarchical notions of leadership in order to lead in ways that valued relationships, empathy, trust, and collaboration aligned with their values and instinctual approaches to leadership, as well as how they observed leadership within their communities while growing up.

Building Community for Others

Indrani emphasized community in relation to leadership, emphasizing community as "the first and foremost most important thing in what makes a movement or a club or something run successfully." As previously mentioned, many of the participants found community and a sense of belonging through their engagement with leadership. Additionally, participants spoke about using their leadership roles as a means to create community for others. Sky and Meenakshi both talked about the importance of having within-group affinity spaces and building organizations' visibility so that other South Asian students had access to them. Aishwarya reflected on her experience with a South Asian student organization, where she found community for herself and was also able to build community for others:

> Having that experience to connect more to my culture, entering college and have all these new experiences while also being kind of spearheading an organization which is kind of responsible for creating that sort of environment for a lot of different students is very much rewarding.

Similarly, Meena spoke about building community as a cycle: "That's how it works… We build our communities because our community built us." Many of the participants framed building community as a natural progression of their leadership approach as they had benefited from a sense of community.

Several of the participants reflected on tangible ways in which they had built community for others. Aishwarya described the connections students made during events, and how these connections transferred to relationships outside of the organization. Sarah talked about building community among organizations, including Asian American student organizations and those for students of color broadly, and the benefits to creating solidarity among groups: "seeing people of

different cultures or different ideas or different systems of thought all integrate under one umbrella, it benefits us all." She connected this to leading in relationship-centered ways, emphasizing the ability to help others, advocate for community issues, and strengthen relationships.

Valuing Mentorship

Although the participants described having role models around leadership, they did not name people who had mentored them. However, some of them did speak about mentorship as important to their own leadership styles. Sky reflected on recognizing the importance of mentors because she had not had that experience: "My leadership style is literally bringing other people up because I kind of wish I would've had that in a sense, like a foot in the door so you can open opportunities for other people." She spoke about her commitment to uplifting others and "to enable other people to succeed, because I know there's not necessarily spaces for POCs, but especially South Asian women in America."

The participants spoke about engaging in mentorship in ways that connected to their identities, as well as viewing leadership as grounded in community and relationships. Mira described her experience as a resident assistant, and noted that students of color and their parents would often approach her while White students tended to approach her co-resident assistant, who was White. She welcomed this responsibility:

> It's nice because I know that I can empathize with them because I've lived that experience too… I can recognize how and what stages of college they're going through, which helps me a lot with when I'm talking to them or getting to know them or offering support because I know what they might need support with.

She reflected on the trust students had in her as a point of pride and positive indicator of her leadership and role as an RA.

For some of the participants, the ways in which they mentored others was modeled after how they observed women serve as caretakers in South Asian communities. Sarah reflected on her approach to working within organizations:

> I know that every single person brings with them some valuable experience, knowledge, and ideas. And so, I do my best to mentor every single person individually. My friends always joke that I just adopt people, but I really do believe [in leading] with empathy and care.

For Sarah, mentorship included checking in with individual members, identifying needs for support, helping others manage stress, and empowering others to take initiative. She also recognized the challenges for students of color, particularly women, to take on leadership roles especially without representation and mentorship: "I realize that a lot of these environments are very difficult or scary or overwhelming, so I do my best to lead." Through mentorship and leading by example, Sarah described her intentions in creating pathways for others.

Practicing Inclusion

Leading in ways that promoted and modeled inclusion emerged as a theme among the participants. Many of the participants connected their commitment to inclusion to their identities. Sarah attributed her commitment to inclusion to collectivist ideals central to South Asian culture, believing that her own success as a leader was tied to others being able to take on initiatives "in a way that they feel confident and secure." She also emphasized leading by example:

> Leadership also means being cognizant of what is occurring around you and providing an example to others in terms of how we can engage with each other and how we can collaborate in a way that is productive for all of us and beneficial for all of us.

Sky echoed these sentiments, differentiating between individualist leadership and more collaborative, inclusive leadership. She said that leadership is "not just uplifting other people, but making space for them and making sure that they have the opportunity to share their thoughts and… giving everyone a voice. Make sure that they are also coming up with you."

Mira attributed her understanding of and commitment to authenticity, empathy, and inclusion to her own experiences not being heard as a South Asian woman. She reflected on an example from a political organization she started, which creates spaces for students to engage in discussions around political and social issues. A conservative classmate approached her about the organization:

> He was like, "I don't know if I want to come to [name of organization] because I don't know if people are going to listen to me." And I was like, "I will make sure people listen to you because I think that everyone deserves a space to share their opinion." And that is born out of the fact that I am a South Asian woman. And people did not feel like they needed to hear my opinion when I was growing up. And I had to be the loudest person in the room to do so.

For Mira, it was important to include all perspectives and for everyone to feel heard because she understood what it felt like to not be listened to. Conversely, some of the participants described nuances to inclusion. Indrani emphasized the importance of inclusion, and described her own efforts to create programming that was inclusive of various backgrounds within the APIDA community. However, she also reflected on the role of power dynamics in inclusive practices:

> I guess when we think of leadership on that kind of level, we're always thinking about including all sides or being neutral or being all encompassing or receptive to everyone's ideas. But I think there's also shortcomings in that kind of perspective when we're thinking about, oh, we have to consider everyone's opinion, especially when we're living in a predominantly White society where those opinions might overshadow those of the minority.

Indrani emphasized the importance of within-group spaces, such as "primarily Black or primarily Asian American because they're able to come together as a collective, if that makes sense."

Meenakshi elaborated on nuances within inclusive practices as well. She spoke about inclusive practices within the field of journalism, and advocating for representation and inclusion of people of color:

> I know my experience as a South Asian person of color is very, very different than a person of color who's a black person, but I do also think there's a lot of overlap just in terms of at least the fields that I've been involved in of people historically being denied opportunities and the stuff that's written about us missing the mark or not being thorough. And so, I think just in terms of that, I feel like I can relate at least a little bit to what all people of color maybe in a journalism space are feeling in terms of feeling isolated or feeling not heard or feeling underrepresented. And so, I think in terms of that, just a general commitment to inclusivity with the knowledge that I don't know everything that those people are feeling or everything that those people need in order to feel like they're getting an equitable and thorough experience. But just in terms of the baseline of what I can do, I've definitely tried to do that.

For Meenakshi, thinking about inclusion extended beyond her identity groups to people of color generally, while also recognizing differences within the experiences of people of color.

Many of the participants spoke about inclusion within the organizations they were a part of. Aishwarya shared an example of a new member of a South Asian organization who joined in the middle of the academic year, after members had gotten to know each other. Aishwarya proactively made efforts to connect with her within and outside of the organization, meeting for coffee to build the relationship. She eventually started talking with her about leadership opportunities within the organization, involving her more with executive board activities and conversations, until she felt more comfortable with the organization. Meena spoke about trying to build consensus when making decisions, and reaching out to those who disagreed:

> If we take a vote and six people said yes, one person said no. Okay, those people said yes, but I'm calling up the person who said no right after the meeting and saying, "Hey, what's going on? Explain this to me." I don't want anyone to feel like they're not being heard because that's inadequate leadership. It's not necessary that they'll always get what they want, but they should at least still be heard. And… I think that just comes from what I think is positive leadership based on community and families.

Several of the participants spoke about consensus-building and seeking out multiple perspectives. Indrani also spoke about asking others for feedback on how she was leading, specifically in relation to others feeling heard, included, and valued. Meenakshi shared from the context of her journalism experience, in which it was important to seek out and include differing perspectives. However, she also named her own limits to being inclusive, particularly for issues she was passionate about:

> It's important to talk to a lot of people and to represent a lot of voices and get people's stories and allow space for those and allow space for incorporating those into any sort of decision. And so, I think in terms of situations where I'm a leader, I definitely like to solicit opinions from people and solicit voices from people and use those to, I guess, inform my decisions. But at the same time, there are certain things that I have a lot of conviction about, a lot of passion about. And so, I think a lot of times it's difficult for me to budge on those even though I'd like to value compromise. And so, in that sense, I think there's a couple different areas maybe where I will make very authoritative decisions and sort of stick to my gut in terms of leading.

Meenakshi differentiated between incorporating all perspectives and being inclusive in ways that aligned with antiracism and promoted equity:

> …we have to consider how we're being equitable and how we're actively being anti-racist and how we're taking that all into account and how we lead, that's sort of an area where I feel like I have a lot of passion and a lot of conviction in that realm. And so, if someone suggests something that I think is not really equitable or they're not really thinking it through or something like that, I'll be like, no, here's why we need to do this because we have to actively make an effort to be equitable and to be inclusive. And I don't think your decision is lending itself to that, so I'm not going to compromise on that.

For Meenakshi, leading in inclusive ways was nuanced with an awareness of power structures related to identity. While many of the participants spoke about inclusion as a core value in their approach to leadership, their conceptualizations of inclusion differed. Some of the participants conceptualized inclusion as creating space for and incorporating everyone's voices while others thought about inclusion in relation to systems of power, access, and equity.

Leadership Grounded in Advocacy

Along with community, participants also spoke about leadership as grounded in advocacy. Participants reflected on how they learned about advocacy, often in parallel with leadership learning, as well as how they conceptualized advocacy: advocating for visibility and representation, as well as systemic change. In speaking about advocating for community, they shared varying ways of defining such communities, ranging from South Asian women to all people of color, as well as their reasoning. They also spoke about advocacy as a balancing act between differing societal expectations and grappling with the MMM's implications for perceptions of South Asian Americans and activism.

Advocacy-Centered Leadership

Participants often spoke about leadership as intertwined with advocacy. For example, Sarah defined leadership as "the ability to advocate for and inspire a group of people toward a cause or initiative." Meenakshi named advocacy for social justice as a responsibility of leadership:

> A lot of leaders obviously have the power to advance social justice or to curb it in what they do. And so I think it's super important that people in any kind of leadership role, whether that's a more abstract one or kind of a more concrete one are just well-informed on social issues and well-informed on how maybe what they're doing has a very structural history and can maybe play into structural racism if they do it wrong or how I guess the people that they're platforming and the people that they're working with can have a big impact… leadership roles and leadership spaces are a very big catalyst for good things that can happen or bad things that can happen. I think especially being able to use them as a vehicle for progress is really important.

Meenakshi's view of leadership included recognition of responsibility and scope of influence in relation to being a catalyst for positive social change.

While many of the participants defined leadership in tandem with advocacy, some of them also reflected on key points in time where they connected the two. Aishwarya reflected on learning about leadership and advocating for her peers through her involvement with class councils from elementary through high school, and carrying agency as a changemaker and advocate into her leadership roles in college. Sky reflected on feeling pressure to decide on a career path: "maybe eighth grade, Brown parents are starting to be like, 'where do you want to go to college? What do you want to do with your life?'" She recalled elders within her community suggesting she pursue being a doctor and other "traditional paths," but she always knew she wanted to help people through a different profession. Naming helping people, advocacy, and taking initiative as central to her conceptualization of leadership, she narrowed her career aspirations to foreign service, politics, or medicine.

Many of the participants reflected on how their identities and backgrounds drove their passion for advocacy. Indrani and Mira named experiences of not feeling heard, which led them to want to use their own voices more as well as advocate for space for others. Meena spoke specifically about observing a broken criminal justice system in the neighborhood where she grew up, particularly the high incarceration rate of Black men and implications for families and her neighborhood community: "Those are the things that I look at and I'm like, okay, I'm going to be a lawyer. I'm going to come back. I'm going to help my community… that is the main purpose I want to be a leader." Sarah recalled stories her father told her about political advocacy in Bangladesh and feeling that she was "on the sidelines of everything" as a child, but getting

involved in organizations as a college student where she was able to create change empowered her and instilled a sense of efficacy and agency.

While many of the participants named advocacy as a central component of leadership, their identities and experiences influenced what they were passionate about advocating for. The participants spoke about advocacy related to mental health, criminal justice, building solidarity among groups, racial profiling, and improving treatment of people of color and women in the workplace. Three themes that emerged in the participants' reflections on advocacy were around representation, creating systemic change, and how they defined their communities.

Advocating for Visibility and Representation

Many of the participants expressed a sense of invisibility around being South Asian in their schools while they grew up, as well as in college settings. For many of them, these experiences drove a motivation to advocate for South Asian representation. Meena shared: "...just that sense of building your own identity and building awareness for the fact that you exist, I think is really important to me. And seeing representation is really important to me." Through their leadership, participants were aware of the ways in which they symbolized representation for others and how they could advocate for increasing representation.

Several of the participants reflected on the impact of not having South Asian representation, especially South Asian women representation, in various settings and feeling motivated to shift the narrative through their own leadership and aspirations. Meenakshi and Indrani both shared experiences within academic settings in predominantly White journalism and political science courses, respectively. Meenakshi noted much of her leadership within her field focused on recruiting underrepresented populations to journalism, stemming from her own experiences as a person of color in the field. Indrani spoke about initially feeling hesitant to

voice her perspectives, and overcoming that fear to start advocating for herself: "I think later on I kind of felt that it was a necessity that I speak up not just for myself, but for other people who are around me who also felt like they were outnumbered." Similarly, Mira reflected on being elected vice president of an organization, and realizing holding that role was meaningful representation for not only South Asians, but also students of color broadly.

Participants also talked about advocating for South Asian representation in advocacy-based spaces and community organizations. Indrani shared her experience within an Asian American student organization where South Asians were not well represented:

> One of my goals when I entered [the organization] was to increase South Asian participation because we're mainly focused on political action or advocacy and education. And without South Asians in that space, it really does dilute our goals and our vision moving forward.

Indrani was able to collaborate with organizations with South Asian leadership in order to increase representation.

In reflecting on the importance of representation, many of the participants spoke about the nuances of being an advocate for a community rather than a spokesperson, as well as the emotional and mental labor associated with educating majority groups about South Asian culture. Mira acknowledged the labor, and perceived it as part of the responsibility of being a South Asian leader. Meena acknowledged that some may not want to step into roles in non-South Asian spaces because of factors such as having to teach or explain things to others and feeling like an "other" in the organization. While she understood the reasoning, she also expressed that this mindset contributed to isolation and otherness: "you are contributing to your own isolation. You are contributing to the reason, to your invisibleness instead [of] stepping into those

leadership positions, wanting to speak for the people who identify with you." However, she also understood the emotional labor and named a leader's responsibility to be aware of the differential experiences of people of color in predominantly White spaces:

> I think creating that atmosphere where people feel comfortable asking questions, but also not putting the burden of making minorities explain themselves, become educators to explain themselves and their cultures, their religions, their histories, that's also a part of leadership on campus.

For the participants, advocating for representation of South Asians was important, and was often tied to an internal sense of responsibility to advocate for South Asians and other people of color. In valuing this advocacy, participants also recognized the emotional labor associated with roles many of them took on.

Advocating for Systemic Change

Participants emphasized the importance of creating lasting change, particularly within the context of their university, to improve the experiences of future students. Several participants described developing a sense of agency and ability to create change through their leadership process and opportunities. Sarah, who was involved in several cultural organizations, shared about her involvement with student government:

> I just saw so many people who are so empowered within their own respective causes. Everyone in SGA comes in with a purpose in mind. And I felt so inspired by that and seeing the enormous changes they were making and changes I would affect more than thousands of students at a time was exciting to me because I never had that, I guess, vehicle for change.

Through her involvement, Sarah was able to gain experience working with administrators on initiatives, be innovative and experiment with her own ideas for programs and initiatives, and lead groups toward change. She reflected on her family's connection to advocacy, citing her father's stories about political advocacy in Bangladesh and her own feelings of disconnection from advocacy and agency: "But being in all of these organizations allowed me to kind of have that spirit where I can advocate for what I want. My voice is important within these conversations, and I will influence things to change." Sarah's engagement in leadership provided an avenue for voice and advocacy on issues she was passionate about, creating a connection for her to her South Asian heritage and family's history of activism.

Meena shared an example of working with administration and faculty within her college to create change through raised awareness and inclusion of Muslim students' needs, particularly during Ramadan. She recalled the experience as a point of pride in which she and her friends had made a difference through "being leaders on campus and advocating for our student groups, for our communities." She acknowledged that while administrators may not be coming from a "malicious place," they may not be aware of cultural differences and resulting student needs; and therefore, the importance of students' advocacy and voice:

> The way they're affected and the things they learn from us… we might be here for four years, they're going to be here for 40 years, and who knows how many more students they're going to interact with and how their perspective might change and the things they might become more sensitive to by interacting with us?

Meena spoke about working with administrators as a strategic way to implement long-lasting change. While some of the other participants also named working with administration to create change, their reasoning and approaches differed.

Defining Community

Although participants named South Asians, as well as South Asian subgroups, as their primary community, for some of them, their definitions broadened in regard to advocacy. For example, Mira spoke about feeling a sense of responsibility toward students of color generally as an RA. Speaking about her experience in college as well as thoughts on her future career, Meena noted predominantly White leadership in many organizations and the need for people of color to build solidarity and advocate for each other rather than dividing into silos of individual minority groups.

Some of the participants noted specific demographic groups they felt affinity toward, even if they did not share that identity. For example, Sarah spoke about advocating for Muslim students; although she is not Muslim, she expressed "feeling protective over certain causes associated with [South Asian communities]." Indrani named "historical and current day issues" that connected communities of color and the importance of understanding each other's needs and challenges; she shared examples of collaborations with other organizations around combating anti-Blackness within the APIDA community and building Black and Asian solidarity as ways in which communities "can connect and intercept." Sky shared about her involvement with an organization advocating for undocumented Latina students' access to education; although the organization focuses on a different racial group, she emphasized similarities and connections within immigrant communities. Sky also acknowledged racial dynamics and her own positionality within the organization: "part of the work that I do with other organizations… I have to be careful and to not play into the model minority myth, but half that and half not white savior, but I guess western savior in a sense." Many of the participants noted the MMM and racial hierarchies within a U.S. context, which I will discuss further at the end of this section.

Notably, many of the participants named racial and religious minority groups as demographic groups they felt affinity toward and built solidarity with. Although some of the participants recalled experiences trying to build community with White women, the majority that shared about such experiences were met with resistance. Further, although participants spoke about advocating for people of color and South Asians generally, some of them noted they felt more of a sense of community, comfort, and belonging among women of color. Sky shared her experiences and feelings of solidarity:

> Whenever a White woman is taking up a lot of time discussing their identity and honing in exclusively on being Jewish or queer, it kind of strikes a chord in me a little bit. I'm like, yes, but there's other people too. I feel like obviously I don't want them to speak from that perspective. It's not their experience, but it's just obvious that, I don't know, they've got one eye closed. It's just a one-track mindset and focused on their benefit in a sense. So I just kind of don't like that because I see with black and brown women, we try to make sure that everyone is included, everyone's being uplifted… And I don't want to be like, well, yes to that experience, but we have it so much worse because then I just look like I'm comparing pain, which is so not worth it because it's just number one, wrong, number two, not the space for it… I guess I'm using this example as an explanation for the fact that I find solidarity with other POC women exclusively because we don't have that support from white women or just society in general.

Sky spoke about advocating for people of color generally, and called attention to historical and current inequities within feminist movements that marginalized women of color.

Advocacy as a Balancing Act

When speaking about advocacy, many of the participants noted nuances and balancing various factors in the ways that they engaged in advocacy themselves. Meena spoke about feelings of safety within one's in-group, and the importance of stepping out of comfort zones in order to advocate for South Asian and Muslim students. She acknowledged hesitations around not being taken seriously by others, yet emphasized speaking up anyway:

> If you think they're not going to take you seriously, you'll never talk in front of them. You'll never hear any ideas. You'll act very meek, little mouse. I should just be invisible. They're not going to see me anyways. So what's the point of doing anything that will make them see me? And that… will make you only a leader in your community. You can't be a leader in a more general community where you represent your smaller community, and you have to be able to connect with people on other things than just your basic identity.

Meena emphasized the importance of overcoming discomfort in order to use one's voice and advocate for community in larger settings. Another participant, Mira, recalled an example of advocating for South Asian students at her high school and voiced similar sentiments of the importance of using one's voice despite feelings of discomfort or hesitations.

Indrani reflected on conversations about misogyny within the South Asian community, and how to advocate for South Asian women in ways that did not perpetuate stereotypes of South Asian men or portray the South Asian community in a negative light. She noted that conversations about domestic violence and issues related to misogyny were often exclusively among women, and "under the radar" within the broader South Asian community:

> I think there's always this dilemma of talking about issues that affect women without insulting an entire community. And that's always been a problem, like bringing up

> domestic violence or abuse in South Asian communities or households. There's always this pressure to paint the South Asian man as a good person because we don't want to feed into the stereotypes that are already existing within Western media about the nerdy Asian, or sorry, nerdy Indian or abusive Indian or abusive South Asian men or violent men in general, because that would be working against what we're trying to advocate for. But at the same time, that kind of minimization of the issues really does contribute to the erasure of the experiences of women. And I've definitely struggled with that because it's like, how do I call out people in my community without them being like, "oh, you're a traitor," or, "oh, you don't represent us" when these are very dominant issues or perspectives that the women in my community always have. When I'm with my friends, we're always talking about this. It always becomes a political social discussion about the way women are treated, and then men just get to exist and live their lives and not really have to think about it.

Indrani's reflections illustrated how she was navigating intersectionality, recognizing the marginalization and stereotypes related to South Asian men and power dynamics within the U.S.'s racial dynamics while also seeking to address misogyny and gendered violence toward South Asian women.

Sarah also spoke about how her identity and upbringing shaped her approach to advocacy and factors she weighed in how she engaged in leadership. She described herself as "very pragmatic" and differentiated her approach from "more radicalized or more grassroots environments." While she was involved in activist organizations and admired grassroots and "radical" movements, she approached her own advocacy in a different way:

> I've always been a very cautious person, and I think that growing up within a PWI, I always realized that consequences were much more severe for me, just being that my parents put so much stake into my education. I grew up in a very wealthy, affluent area where I was not necessarily of the same tax bracket, and I had my parents working extremely hard for me. So, to not take advantage of those opportunities to me felt so ungrateful. So I've always been very walking on the straight and narrow and anything that is that I can do to be averse to risk, I will always take that route.

Differing from some of her peers, Sarah preferred to work through administration and bureaucratic processes, understanding perspectives of stakeholders in order to find mutually beneficial solutions. She perceived the "more controlled route" of working through existing systems as having "more wins and more incentives." Sarah also acknowledged that this approach was often safer. She said she did not aspire to "be a pioneer in any situation. I don't enjoy being in an uncomfortable or difficult situation where I don't know where to land my feet at." Working through established systems in order to initiate change allowed her to weigh consequences and tread carefully. While she spoke to her own approach, she also voiced admiration for others who took a "more liberal radicalized route":

> Coming to a happy medium within that has always been a strength of mine, whereas being extremely vocal, extremely daring, brave, courageous has not always been something I excel at, but I very much admire it. I just think that because of the way I was raised and I was always raised to be cautious, be respectful, I tend to follow that demeanor.

The ways in which Sarah described her approach to advocacy emphasized strategy, yet also a fine line between engaging in strategic advocacy and engaging in ways that upheld perceptions

of South Asians related to the MMM, with traits such as risk aversion, obedience, and aligning with established rules and norms. In some ways, Sarah was beginning to grapple with this issue, posing the question, "do you rise within a system and then change the rules of the system, or do you just... dismantle the system from where you are?"

Grappling with the Model Minority Myth

The ways in which participants spoke about and understood the MMM varied in the contexts in which they brought it up, how it had shaped their experiences, and how they felt about it. Some had a surface-level understanding of the MMM as being a stereotype of Asian Americans as academically and professionally high-achieving; many shared experiences when peers and teachers made assumptions about their academic abilities and aspirations. Other participants named and discussed implications for how South Asians experienced racism in the U.S. as well as how the MMM is used to perpetuate anti-Blackness and build divisions among communities of color.

Aishwarya and Ananya spoke about how the MMM assumes homogeneity among South Asians. Ananya named socioeconomic disparities within the U.S., as well as poverty in South Asian countries, which the MMM does not allow space for. Aishwarya spoke about racism South Asians experience being perceived as "borderline racism" and glossed over:

> It diminishes any sort of experience that a South Asian person has [with] racism because they're just automatically put into this category of, "okay, but you're fine because you're so successful because you make so much money because you're basically white, you're fine."

Aishwarya named how this lack of attention and recognition of anti-Asian discrimination pits groups against each other as "experiences that we face are sometimes not taken with as much

severity as another experience from another minority group." She also talked about how the MMM conflates Asian Americans with Whiteness in terms of income and academic success, yet overlooks and negates anti-Asian discrimination.

Meena also named South Asians' proximity to Whiteness as a result of the MMM positioning Asian Americans as a racial wedge. Describing how White people may view Asian Americans, she said: "They're the other, but they're the proper other that they can almost be us. Black people cannot be us." She also named how anti-Blackness is perpetuated in the South Asian community. Referring to "White-washed" South Asians, she posed the question: "What gets closer to Whiteness historically than looking down on Black people?" She perceived South Asians' "wanting to be closer to Whiteness" as upholding systems of White supremacy and counter to advocacy efforts for South Asians. Similarly, Meenakshi referred to the MMM as "very real and very damaging" and "a device to pit different groups against each other," as well as one that perpetuates anti-Blackness.

Hannah recognized how the MMM reinforced a racial hierarchy, but she perceived Asian Americans as holding advantages as a "model minority" that could be used to serve as an ally to other people of color:

> I feel like we're lucky in that aspect that we are the model minority. So, when South Asian people speak up, people take them more seriously and have less negative stereotypes than compared to a Black woman speaking up or a Latinx person speaking up. I feel like we have the stereotype of intelligence behind us, which also pushes the stereotype that whatever we say will be [right] just because [we are] considered nerds.

Hannah spoke about the MMM as a reality of racial hierarchy within the U.S., and perceived South Asians as having a "responsibility to speak up for voices that aren't as privileged as we

are." Although Hannah also shared many experiences where she questioned whether she would be taken seriously as a South Asian woman, was talked over by men, and felt the need to prove herself, she also perceived her own positionality as more privileged than that of other women of color due to the MMM.

Meena, Sarah, and Meenakshi spoke explicitly about how the MMM perpetuates anti-Blackness within the South Asian community and expressed frustration about the ways in which it reinforces racial hierarchies and drives a wedge between communities of color. Meena reflected on how colorism and the lasting impact of colonialism in many South Asian countries transfers to anti-Black racism within the U.S., citing stereotypes of Black people held by South Asian elders. For Meena, however, she emphasized the difference between first-generation elders and second-generation South Asian Americans:

> I'm an American Desi… I don't identify specifically with being Pakistani. And for me, African Americans, you're already halfway there. I identify more with African Americans than I do with kids who are like "oh, I'm Pakistani, a Pakistani kid from back home." I have nothing in common with you.

In her reflection, Meena positioned her sense of affinity with Black people through shared experiences of marginalization within the context of an existing racial hierarchy that upholds White supremacy. This racial hierarchy positions White and Black people at opposite ends, with White people at the top, South Asians in middle, and Black people at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Sarah recalled an example of anti-Blackness in an interaction in high school discussing college admissions, where an Indian student made a comment asserting a Black student was admitted to certain universities because of their race. Reflecting on her own reaction, she said:

> For me, that is so hurtful and for that to be a representation of our community or for that to be something that is consistently forced down on people that Asians are this model minority myth, or if they can behave and they can abide by this rhetoric and sentiment that you can too is just so incredibly harmful for everyone. Because at the end of the day, as soon as people are mobilized against Asians, whether that be through Covid or through any other circular agenda, everyone will turn on Asians in the same way that they will turn on any other race because that is just what is evidently clear… So I just think that the model minority myth serves to further divide communities. And I think that one thing I have learned from [Asian American student organization] that is so incredibly important is solidarity and solidarity between causes.

Sarah's reflection illustrated frustration with the pervasiveness of the MMM, as well as its internalization among Asian Americans. She recognized the precarious positioning of Asian Americans, touted as model minorities yet at other points in history, turned against as a threat or forever foreigner, while simultaneously being used as a wedge to create division among people of color. While she experienced and shared reflections on anti-Blackness within the community, she also recognized and valued learning about solidarity from Asian Americans as well.

Meenakshi echoed sentiments emphasizing the importance of solidarity among people of color. She spoke about doing what she could "to remedy… structural issues throughout history," including:

> I think it's important to work against that myth of "this group can do more than this group, and so let's put these groups against each other," just to create a space where people can come together around those issues while also embracing those differences and taking those differences into account. So, I think that's sort of driven a lot of, I guess, my

> desire to make spaces just more generally inclusive and generally equitable beyond just what's beneficial for me because I know that if I work towards that larger goal, which is important to me, it not only benefits me, but it can also benefit other people who have not been served in the past.

Her reflection illustrated an awareness of the importance of solidarity, and potential harm of progress for one group at the expense of another. Her commitment to inclusive and equitable spaces for her own and other identity groups acknowledged and showed a deep understanding of the connection between advocacy and collective liberation. For many of the participants, the ways in which they spoke about advocacy, solidarity, and community were shaped by their understanding of their own racialization, as well as their positionality as South Asian American women within a U.S. racial context.

Developing South Asian American Woman Leader Identity

A consistent theme in the data was participants' experiences navigating the cultural norms and expectations of their South Asian heritage and their U.S. upbringing. As noted in the previous and current chapters, participants grappled with dominant ideas of leadership often grounded in White, patriarchal norms and what that meant for them and how they showed up as South Asian American women. Participants spoke about navigating a bicultural identity, as well as experiencing and navigating stereotypes related to race and gender. They recalled these experiences both as causes for feelings of imposter syndrome that influenced their self-confidence, and as motivation to prove others wrong. They described their approaches to leadership in ways that centered community and advocacy. Participants reflected on taking ownership of their own ways of leading that were authentic to them, and a sense of responsibility to create pathways for others. They each spoke about the process of creating a leadership identity

of their own that felt true and authentic to the wholeness of their cultures, and named this as a process that was still in progress.

Developing an Integrated Leadership Identity

In developing their own leadership identities, the participants spoke about reframing traditional gender norms associated with stereotypes as leadership assets, navigating familial expectations, and grappling with South Asian norms and values within U.S. settings. Sarah shared her thought process around a "maternal" leadership approach; she described being maternal in her approach, wanting to care for others and often serving as a source of support:

> I've always loved taking care of people and… very much detested at one point in my life because I thought that it made me maternal or I thought it made me abide by whatever gender roles were assigned to me. But I think also a part of gender roles, and just gender in general, is choosing what you want to implement in your life. It is fine to be traditional. It is absolutely fine to be traditional. It's also fine to be non-traditional. And I think that one thing about me that is traditional, traditionally maternal or whatever, is I love taking care of people.

Sarah's feelings toward being maternal shifted over time. While at one point she resented this trait which came naturally to her, feeling that it perpetuated stereotypes around South Asian women and contrasted with mainstream ideas of leadership, she described coming to a realization that she could reframe and integrate a traditional trait as an asset in her leadership and take pride in it.

Also speaking about values, Indrani spoke about balancing familial pressures and societal expectations with her own passions around social justice, as well as valuing collectivism and a desire to integrate that in future workplaces:

> When I think of how I want to apply my passions, it's definitely going to be centered around doing something collectively rather than being independent or hyper individualistic. And I think that's especially hard, especially in the workforce where most of the jobs are sit behind a desk and do your part and get the money and go home.

Indrani's experience with collectivism in student organizations further instilled community as a value. Several of the participants spoke about community and identity in various ways. For Aishwarya, her leadership experience in college emphasized the importance of South Asian community; she spoke about seeking out Asian American resource groups in future workplaces, and possibly spearheading South Asian resource groups as well. In contrast, Mira spoke about branching out beyond South Asian and Asian communities:

> I think what I learned after my first semester of college was that I didn't need to necessarily … associate with people of the same religion to continue honoring my religion and culture. And that was when I branched out a lot more and started doing things that I'm genuinely a lot more interested in.

Mira recalled starting an organization addressing political polarization, attending trivia nights, attending pre-law activities, and pursuing internships.

> All of this I think was definitely a product of me being like, yes, I'm a South Asian woman, but no, I don't have to abide by a certain standard of what that means to continue being a South Asian woman. And I think that me recognizing that really changed how I approached the college experience because I was a lot less restrictive with myself of what I could do and what I couldn't do.

While Aishwarya leaned into the South Asian community as a result of her leadership experiences, for Mira, her experiences served as a base to branch out from. Through navigating

cultural norms and confronting stereotypes, the participants grappled with what an authentic leadership style and identity meant to them and broadened ideas of leadership.

Creating a Pathway for Others

Many of the participants spoke about a lack of representation of South Asian women leaders and mentors, and expressed a sense of responsibility to create pathways to leadership for other South Asian American women. For several participants, this sense of responsibility reached beyond South Asian women to other marginalized groups. For example, Aishwarya shared about her motivation to engage in leadership: "I want to inspire maybe other people who maybe feel like they aren't at a place to do that, that you're more than capable despite what may be fed to you." She also spoke about increasing representation of South Asian leaders as CEOs, and an:

> …extreme amount of proudness and also celebration. I feel like it feels like a very much turning point. It feels like you're headed in the right direction to celebrate the successes and wins of people that are, aren't just, like… 80-year-old white men. We're branching out. And so I think part of moving in that direction is involving ourselves as much as we can, because the more that we are apparent in, whether it's the professional world, whether it's on campus at college, on leadership boards, the more that we see each other, whether it's other South Asians or even people from other minority groups, the more that we're able to recognize each other's strengths and also celebrate each other and we can see more and more of us in those big leadership roles. I think that's just how we head into the right direction.

Aishwarya emphasized the importance of representation, as well as celebration and a sense of solidarity with other minoritized identities.

Several of the participants also expressed a desire to clear obstacles and serve as representation for others. While Ananya described herself as early on in her leadership process, she aspired to be an example to others that she did not have when she was younger. Speaking on the lack of representation of South Asian women in leadership, she said it:

> …definitely knocked me down a couple, especially growing up, I feel like I couldn't see myself as a leader because I never saw anyone else who was South Asian or a woman in a leadership position. I feel like that's starting to change really recently, and I feel like I definitely want to see myself as a leader and I feel like when I am able to reach that goal, I feel like I want to help other people who are South Asian or who are women or South Asian women to also see themselves in that way.

Ananya tied seeing herself as a leader to other South Asians and women being able to see themselves as leaders, similar to Aishwarya.

Hannah added to this sentiment, sharing a sense of responsibility to "try as hard as I can not to be a follower" in order to dispel assumptions about South Asian women: "this is where the race and gender aspect comes into it. I feel like automatically as a minority and as a woman, it's kind of my responsibility to be that spokesperson and set an example." Several of the participants echoed the notion of changing the narrative about South Asian women as a means to create and clear pathways for others. Sky spoke of "continuing to make space for other people because I didn't have that space" while Mira shared:

> I have to prove people wrong because I don't want other people to be impacted by this the same way I am. And I think that if I'm going to go through this type of strife, it's not fair for other people to go through it if I can fix that.

The participants spoke about experiences with confronting stereotypes and assumptions about their own abilities as the source of their sense of responsibility. Additionally, Meena echoed notions of dispelling stereotypes so future students would not face the same experiences, and also spoke of leadership as a way to initiate change that could be continued by others with less hurdles. She spoke of the value of community within South Asian culture, specifically for South Asian women:

> We have that big sister energy… I think it's a cultural thing. We're used to the baji *(big sister in Urdu)* culture, the didi *(big sister in Hindi)* culture, where you've got cousins and then you've got people you call your cousins, but you're not even related to them. It's just a thing where we have that community sense of, I'm going to look out for the people from my culture, look out for the people that look like me and everything, because I didn't get to see anyone that looked like me. But I don't want them to have to go through that. They can, I don't want them to have the same struggles as me. I'll just take the rewards of my struggles and give that to them, and they can go on and fight bigger battles. And I see that sense in our community a lot.

Meena viewed her own leadership as a way to create change not only to improve the experiences and create pathways for other students, but also to create a foundation of change for others to build from.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present themes that illustrate how participants enacted leadership and described their own leadership approaches. The themes that emerged were leadership grounded in community, as well as advocacy, and how participants were developing a South Asian American woman leader identity authentic to themselves. The first theme described

how participants centered relationships, built community for their peers, engaged in mentorship, and practiced inclusion. The second theme focused on how participants conceptualized advocacy and advocated for visibility, representation, and systemic change while navigating challenges and grappling with the MMM. The third theme described how the students integrated South Asian and U.S. cultural norms to develop their own approaches to leadership that were authentic to them, and created pathways for others. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings of this study in relation to the research questions as well as the literature outlined in Chapter 2. I also present implications for practice and recommendations for future research, as well as limitations and strengths of this study.

Chapter 7: Discussion

The purpose of this constructivist narrative inquiry study was to explore the roles of race and gender identity in how second-generation South Asian American women college students define, conceptualize, and enact leadership. In the previous chapters, I shared in-depth profiles of each participant as well as themes that emerged from the data. In this chapter, I will explore the findings of this study in relation to the research questions and existing literature. I will also suggest implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and limitations of this study.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

As identified in the introduction and literature review, second-generation South Asian Americans, specifically women, must navigate bicultural identities within South Asian and American cultural norms and expectations, some of which are often in conflict with dominant leadership theories and literature. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' descriptions of leadership?
2. How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' enactment of leadership?

Using a theoretical framework that includes DesiCrit and Intersectionality frameworks, I explored responses to each question through the participants' individual and collective narratives.

How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' descriptions of leadership?

Participants named learning leadership through South Asian community spaces, particularly through South Asian women. Influential spaces included their households, community centers, and Sunday schools. They described the resilience of their parents, aunts, and uncles who immigrated and established a life in the U.S., and spoke about their resilience, work ethic, drive, and care for one another as qualities they admired and sought to emulate in their own leadership.

While they described leadership within South Asian communities, participants tended to note differentiations between community leadership and dominant ideas of leadership. They described their socialization around leadership and dominant ideas of leadership, including that leaders are typically White and male, as well as vocal, visible, and lead in individualistic ways. Although participants spoke of their mothers, specifically, as role models in leadership, they varied in when they came to recognize and name their mothers' roles as leaders. Participants noted that much of South Asian women's leadership they observed within the community and in the household tended to be behind the scenes and unseen, counter to hegemonic views of leadership. They recognized double standards related to gender in observations of their parents and the roles they held in the household. Indrani reflected on feeling expected to thank her father when he did tasks that tasks her mother completed on a regular basis without acknowledgement, as managing the household was part of the norm and therefore unacknowledged for women. In discussing the double standard, several of the participants noted that responsibilities related to caring for households and community were often seen as duty as opposed to recognizing the labor women engaged in through their leadership.

Participants also spoke at length about leaders as connected to and grounded in their communities. They described leadership as not necessarily positional, but rather collaborative,

non-hierarchical, and based in strong relationships. They expressed a sentiment of community taking care of each other as the essence of leadership. Meena named a "sense of duty" among women in the community to ensure community members are cared for. Hannah and Sky described observing South Asian women identify and step into gaps to address needs of the community, while Mira recalled observations of the multiple roles South Asian women held within their professional and personal lives. Several of the participants referred to South Asian women as the backbone and foundation of South Asian communities.

The ways in which participants spoke about leadership were intertwined with advocacy. Several of the participants defined leadership in ways that included advocating for specific causes and communities. Participants named a responsibility of leadership as being informed of social issues, as well as how structural racism and other systems of power influence and impact the organizations and communities they are a part of.

Due to the ways the participants were socialized around leadership as grounded in community, care, and advocacy, they perceived engaging in leadership as a way to connect to others. Participants described leadership, and their intentions to engage in leadership, in the context of connecting with other South Asian students and the South Asian community on their campus.

How do racial and gender identities influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' enactment of leadership?

Centering Community

The participants enacted leadership in ways that were grounded in and further perpetuated community. Participants described a desire to connect with South Asian community when they entered college and sought out those connections through identity-based student

organizations. The participants were involved in a variety of identity-based organizations, including Muslim, Indian, South Asian, and APIDA organizations, reflecting the multiple ways participants identified as second-generation South Asian Americans. Involvement in these organizations also provided a way for the participants to connect with other second-generation South Asian Americans who navigated between cultures. Meena and Sarah spoke about being able to be in community with others who experienced being in between cultures, or "mango lassi kids," as Meena named. For Sarah, these connections and exposure to others who navigated between cultures made her more confident in her own identity and more comfortable in the in-between space.

Participants also described leadership as a means to build deeper connections with South Asian culture. Several of the participants named joy in exploring and bonding with others over aspects of South Asian identity, including Bollywood movies and pop culture, food, clothing, and jewelry. Their involvement with identity-based organizations brought about an increased sense of pride and appreciation for their South Asian heritage, as well as deeper learning about their own identities, diversity within the South Asian community, and social issues related to South Asian Americans.

All of the students in this study spoke about centering relationships and the importance of building trust within organizations. This reflected the ways in which South Asian women modeled leadership in the participants' communities; they noted observing South Asian women create community, and wanting to create community for others. As part of their efforts to create community, some of the participants spoke specifically about the importance of mentorship and noted the absence of mentors within their majors and fields of study. Sky and Sarah spoke about wanting to change the narrative and mentoring younger students. Several of the participants

reflected on mentoring and encouraging younger students; they named identifying needs for support, helping students with transitions to college and managing stress, and encouraging them to take on leadership roles. The participants also spoke about their mentorship as informed by how they observed South Asian women care for people in their communities.

Inclusive Leadership and Advocacy

Among all of the participants, they recalled experiencing stereotypes, being the only or one of few South Asian women in spaces, not being listened to, and a lack of representation in media, politics, their classrooms and fields of study. They spoke about these experiences in the context of their motivation to create inclusive spaces and advocate for representation through their leadership. Their advocacy for representation was complicated by the MMM and perceptions of South Asians. Aishwarya named several visible South Asian CEOs, and noted that these CEOs in addition to the MMM resulted in assumptions that South Asians not only have access to but also hold leadership roles: "everyone always says, oh, the Asian people are always in leadership positions… People look at the top 0.01% of people, they're like, oh God, everyone's in a leadership position when really they're talking about Google and Pepsi." Reflecting on her own experiences in leadership positions in cultural and academic organizations, she emphasized the importance of increasing representation of South Asian women and women of color. Several of the participants also named the importance of creating pathways for other South Asian women, and viewed challenging stereotypes within their own leadership roles as a way to increase access and improve environments for South Asian women that would come after them.

Participants also connected their values of inclusion to their identities as South Asian women. Sarah reflected on her commitment to inclusion as grounded in collectivist norms in

South Asian culture and the ways she observed leadership as a child. The students spoke about wanting to be a leader in order to create inclusive spaces, advocate for causes and communities they cared about, and create change for communities. In their advocacy, participants expressed varied understandings of power and identity, and the implications for their approaches to advocacy and inclusion. For example, Mira described her approach as creating spaces for all voices and attributed this to her experiences feeling unheard: "I think that everyone deserves a space to share their opinion. And that is born out of the fact that I am a South Asian woman. And people did not feel like they needed to hear my opinion when I was growing up." Conversely, Indrani challenged the notion of "including all sides" in the context of a predominantly White society, recognizing that some viewpoints may hold more influence due to structures of power and identity. Several of the participants talked about power dynamics related to race, and named more of an affinity toward other people of color as well as more comfort with people of color even though many of them described having predominantly White friend groups while growing up. Their experiences navigating stereotypes and understanding of power structures created a foundation to build solidarity with other communities of color.

The participants spoke about changes they were able to create within their communities on campus, and how these experiences of creating change helped them develop a sense of agency and increased leadership efficacy. Sarah recalled feeling "on the sidelines of everything" as a child hearing her father's stories about political advocacy; engaging in leadership and advocacy in college instilled a sense of agency and efficacy, as well as empowerment. Building on their leadership efficacy, several of the participants spoke about their involvement in identity-based communities as starting points to develop foundations of leadership before stepping out of comfort zones. For example, Mira described her in-group leadership roles as a launching board

for her to build leadership efficacy and get involved in other communities and organizations. This mirrored findings in previous research; in Accapadi's (2005) study on students' experiences in a South Asian sorority, she noted that students' participation in the organization provided them space to develop skills and efficacy as a launching point to purse leadership opportunities outside of their community.

Engaging in advocacy often brought about conflicting norms and values the participants navigated between. Sky reflected on her desire to incorporate advocacy in her career path and goals, and navigating familial expectations to choose "traditional" career paths that prioritized financial stability. Indrani described wanting to expand conversations about misogyny and gender violence within the South Asian community, and pressure to portray South Asian men positively in order to avoid existing stereotypes within U.S. media, including "nerdy Indian or abusive Indian or abusive South Asian men or violent men in general, because that would be working against what we're trying to advocate for." She expressed her difficulty in navigating potentially and unintentionally perpetuating stereotypes of South Asian men with contributing to erasure of South Asian women's experiences. Several participants also reflected on working within or outside of systems in order to create change. Hannah and Sarah described respect and admiration for students who engaged in forms of activism such as protesting as well as a recognition of this activism as leadership, yet named that this method differed from their own approaches. Sarah contemplated working within or outside of systems, and which was more effective in creating change. She also reflected on her own approach as within systems. She described herself as "walking on the straight and narrow and anything that is that I can do to be averse to risk, I will always take that route." Having grown up within a predominantly White

community where her family had a lower socioeconomic status than her peers, she perceived consequences as more severe for her than her White peers.

As students in this study engaged in advocacy, they reflected on the ways in which South Asians are racialized in a U.S. context, the impact of the MMM, and existing within a racial hierarchy. Aishwarya described conversation about racism and implications of the MMM. She recalled hearing assumptions about South Asians' success and high incomes, resulting in others dismissing South Asians' experiences with racism: "they're just automatically put into this category of, 'okay, but you're fine because you're so successful because you make so much money because you're basically white, you're fine.' Which is not the case at all." Aishwarya expressed frustration with the dismissiveness of South Asians' experiences with racism, and sought to advocate for representation in order to address these experiences. Additionally, the ways in which the participants spoke about race were often in relation to Whiteness or Blackness in the U.S., recognizing a societal racial hierarchy. For some, the internalization of this hierarchy resulted in different approaches to advocacy. For example, Hannah spoke about leveraging South Asians' positioning in the racial hierarchy to advocate for non-Asian women of color, while Meenakshi described working alongside other women of color and building solidarity toward collective liberation.

Connections to South Asian Identity

In addition to connecting to community, inclusion, and advocacy, participants also reflected on building deeper connections to their own identities as South Asian women. Several of the participants reflected on times they distanced themselves from their South Asian identities in order to fit in at school. For example, Meena talked about wearing Western clothing to fit an "American aesthetic," while Mira reflected on experiences adhering to dominant ideas of

professionalism connected to Whiteness and Western norms. Code switching in various settings emerged as a theme, as participants described how they behaved and showed up in cultural or identity-based spaces as opposed to internships, academic organizations, and student government. The participants expressed a strong awareness of their own identities, as well as how others perceived them.

Participants also spoke about their socialization as South Asian women and messaging they received, which at times were contradictory. While all of the participants acknowledged the MMM as holding assumptions that South Asians are inherently successful, several recalled messaging from parents that they needed to work twice as hard in order to achieve success. Mira named developing a work ethic to meet the expectations of the MMM academically, yet also expressed a desire to challenge and debunk the narrative. For Mira, the result of the MMM was feeling that others perceived her as "a robot who's good at everything," asserting that "people never gave us the time to be human." While participants may have strived to meet the academic expectations of the MMM, several also recognized the ways in which the MMM stripped them of their humanity to an extent and aimed to reassert their humanity in the ways they engaged in leadership.

In describing their experiences with leadership, many of the students reflected on being dismissed due to their identity and feelings of insecurity, as well as a desire to challenge stereotypes and feeling they had to prove themselves to others. Some of the participants, such as Hannah, Mira, and Meena, named intersectional identities in describing ways others perceived them and barriers to belonging. Others, including Annie and Ananya, named gender in particular as a barrier. As a STEM major, Ananya talked about the demographics of her classes and having a substantial population of South Asian students yet being one of few women in those spaces.

Within these settings, Ananya perceived her gender identity as a barrier rather than her identity as a South Asian woman.

As the participants reflected on their experiences navigating cultural norms and leadership roles as South Asian women, several of the students described integrating South Asian and American cultural norms and values into their own unique and authentic approaches to leadership. This included reframing their perspectives on traditional values. For example, Sarah recalled associating her caring nature with traditional South Asian values of femininity, maternal natures, and caretaking. Initially, she resisted this trait and perceived the approach as contrary to leadership behaviors; however, she came to reframe the value as a strength of her leadership style with empathy, trust, and care. Participants also described connecting with the South Asian community in different ways. Many of them named being more comfortable in their own identities, and no longer relying on external validation of being South Asian "enough" as Meena described. In gaining confidence, experience with leadership, and building efficacy, participants differed in their involvements. Some deepened their involvement within South Asian organizations, while others chose to branch out and focus their involvement in academic organizations, student government, or student employment positions.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature

In this section, I will discuss the findings of this study in relation to the literature review presented in Chapter 2. Through this exploration, I discuss the connections and inconsistencies between this study's findings and the literature through the lens of the theoretical framework of DesiCrit and intersectionality, outlined in Chapter 3. Connections emerged between the findings and literature in how participants described their socialization in relation to racialization and

navigating a bicultural identity, as well as how participants spoke about leadership, including socialization around leadership, leadership and connections, and approaches to leadership.

Racialization

In the U.S., South Asians are racialized in relation to Whiteness and Blackness due to social meanings attached to Whiteness and Blackness within the U.S.'s sociopolitical and historical context (Harpalani, 2013, 2015). In this study, participants often spoke about race in relation to Whiteness or Blackness. Their descriptions reflected what Thakore (2014) referred to as a 3-tiered system of racial hierarchy, placing White people at the top, Black people at the bottom, and Asian people in the middle, with the positioning of Asian people in large part driven by their economic, academic, and professional success shaped by immigration policies. This positioning of South Asian Americans resulted in a perceived "proximity to Whiteness" (Bhatia, 2008b, p. 31). Participants made sense of this hierarchy and their own experiences in different ways. In describing conversations on race, Aishwarya noted others referring to South Asians as "basically White" and dismissing South Asians' experiences with racism. This comment reflected the in-betweenness of South Asians, as a group that experiences racism and also experiences that racism dismissed due to their perceived proximity to Whiteness. Hannah spoke about South Asians' racial positioning in ways that acknowledged both racism against South Asians and how South Asians could use their racial positioning to advocate for others, specifically Black people. Her descriptions of racial positioning also illustrated the in-betweenness of South Asians in experiencing racism, yet also holding privilege to an extent. Both Aishwarya and Hannah's perspectives demonstrate an understanding of race shaped by the established hierarchy noted by Thakore (2014), reinforcing normative standards of Whiteness as an aspirational reference point. They articulated both South Asians' tenuous proximity to

Whiteness, as well as ways in which South Asians remain outside the protective boundaries of Whiteness. South Asians are positioned by structural hierarchies as a racial buffer, as Hannah illustrated through her proposal of using South Asians' positioning in relation to Whiteness to advocate for Black people. This positioning complicates solidarity efforts with Black communities, as South Asians are implicitly encouraged to uphold established hierarchical structures that privilege Whiteness and maintain anti-Blackness.

Through immigration policies that shaped the MMM, South Asians were "structurally situated for success and mobility" in the U.S., yet not protected from racism and discrimination (Harpalani, 2013, p. 142). As second-generation South Asian Americans, the parents of study participants immigrated to the U.S. in the 1990s and early 2000s. Many of their parents had high educational and occupational capital, mirroring parts of the post-1965 immigration wave. Only two participants made note of parents who immigrated through family reunification or refugee status processes, which may reflect sampling occurring at a selective, competitive state flagship institution. In turn, the participants held varying views on the MMM. Some of the participants held a surface-level understanding of the MMM that lacked a critical perspective, while others recognized the MMM as a tool of racial division that perpetuated anti-Blackness. Ananya understood the MMM as assumptions about Asian Americans' academic and professional success, but was unaware of how the MMM created divisions among people of color or how it could be harmful to Asian Americans. In contrast, Meenakshi acknowledged stereotypes, but also spoke about the MMM's connections to perpetuating anti-Blackness and a racial wedge dividing communities of color. Several of the participants also spoke about familial pressure to ignore racism and not challenge those in power, and connected this pressure with maintaining the MMM narrative of South Asian Americans being studious and highly intelligent. While

participants expressed frustration in the dismissal of racism against South Asians, their understanding was primarily on the impact on South Asians and did not include a broader, more critical perspective on how maintaining the status quo perpetuated systemic racial hierarchies. This pressure to ignore or downplay anti-Asian racism and not challenge the status quo while conforming to standards of Whiteness reinforces South Asian Americans' positioning as a racial buffer and tool to uphold a racist system that perpetuates anti-Blackness (Poon et al., 2016; Prashad, 2001; J. Yi & Todd, 2021).

Participants also spoke about the tenuous positioning of South Asian Americans within the U.S. and understandings of how stereotypes around South Asian Americans can shift, such as post-9/11 and during the COVID-19 pandemic. During these times, South Asian Americans are placed in a position of "having to prove their loyalty or otherwise be assumed as the yellow (or brown) peril" (Bhalla & Dhingra, 2022, p. 311). Sarah reflected on her father's experiences post-9/11, struggling to retain business and changing his name to a more common American name in an effort to distance himself from the Islamophobia and xenophobia. Sarah recognized the MMM as supporting South Asian success, yet also confining success within parameters as not to be a threat to the status quo, or the racial hierarchy. Lee (2015) posited that success of Asian Americans was framed by mainstream media "as coming at the expense of other groups" and "a threat to others rather than contributions" (p. 376). The positioning of South Asians as "basically White," as Aishwarya noted, but also a potential threat, as Sarah expressed, reflected racial labels as "transferrable capital" rather than distinct categories (Harpalani, 2013, p. 183). Harpalani (2013) asserted that South Asians can hold attributes of Whiteness, Blackness, and foreignness, all of which participants touched on in their descriptions of race and how South Asians are racialized.

Aishwarya's experience of being referred to as "basically White," and others' notes of feeling racially invisible were consistent with previous research highlighting how South Asians, and Asian Americans, are often left out of conversations about race (Grim et al., 2019b; Kodama & Dugan, 2020; Soin, 2015) and socialized to ignore acts of racism (Soin, 2015), which in turn upholds racist power structures and anti-Blackness (E. Lee, 2015; V. Yi & Todd, 2021). According to Liang et al. (2002), Asian American students often responded to experiences with racism by focusing on academic pursuits or deepening involvement within ethnic communities, distancing themselves from broader campus involvement. For participants in this study, involvement with their ethnic and racial communities was associated with comfort and belonging, reflecting Liang's (2002) finding. However, several of the participants, including Meena and Mira, described their engagement with within-group organizations as a launching point for their involvement with broader campus leadership roles.

The identity-based organizations the participants were involved with ranged from country-specific, such as a Bangladeshi student organization, to broad Asian American student organizations. Reflective of the research, participants often used different racial labels depending on the context (Alexander, 2018). As second-generation South Asian Americans, they also tended to use broader labels such as South Asian, "brown," or "Desi," rather than labels based on national origin or religion (Alexander, 2018; Ruzicka, 2011). Meena reflected on her parents' and elders' affiliations with specific nationalities and religions, and asserted that within a U.S. context as a second-generation South Asian, there was not much differentiation between the experiences of Nepali, Pakistani, or Indian students: "there is a unique experience in being South Asian American or Desi American. And as long as I can find people who identify with that, I'm good with that." The adoption of broader racial labels reflected generational differences in how

South Asians identified (Alexander, 2018; Ruzicka, 2011). However, participants still expressed mixed perspectives on seeing themselves as part of the "Asian American" umbrella label. Some recognized their association with the label based in a U.S. context and racial categories, but saw themselves as separate from Asian American student organizations. This reflected previous research in which South Asian students differentiated themselves from Asian American organizations (Accapadi, 2005). The students in this study who participated in Asian American student organizations spoke about the historical solidarity and political advocacy behind the term.

Bicultural Identity

A common theme in the literature and the participants' experience was their experiences in navigating a bicultural identity. All of the participants described feeling othered in both American and South Asian spaces at various points, reflecting previous research (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009; Inman, 2006b; Soin, 2015). Several of the participants compartmentalized South Asian and American cultures, living within two spheres. Mira recalled having two distinct friend circles – Indian friends through Sunday school and "my White friend group every other day of the week." Meena described feeling that Pakistani clothing was "too homey" to wear outside of the house, and adopted more Western clothing to fit into an "American aesthetic." Several participants also named speaking their parents' native languages at home, while only speaking English at school.

The majority of the participants grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods, and reflected on efforts to assimilate and distance themselves from South Asian culture in order to avoid feeling othered by White peers. Meena reflected on distancing herself from South Asian culture in order to blend into the dominant group, describing her approach as wanting to present

as “a more White-washed version, like a butter chicken version.... Nobody eats the keema or the mutton curry. It’s just the butter chicken… That’s the one that’s White people-friendly.” While Meena reflected with self-awareness of adapting to dominant norms and distancing herself from her South Asian identity, she and other participants described this process as often subconscious. Mira recalled wearing pant suits for events such as networking socials, conferences, and award ceremonies. It was not until her father asked her about wearing a sari to an award ceremony that she questioned and challenged her notions of professionalism as tied to Whiteness and Western norms. This vignette mirrored findings in Soin’s (2015) study, where she noted participants had grown accustomed to adapting to mainstream cultural norms in predominantly White environments, and named systemic racism and an invisible stressor for South Asians.

South Asian American women also experience judgment for not being South Asian “enough,” both from White and South Asian peers (Alexander, 2018; Soin, 2015). Meena reflected on entering different identity-based spaces, with a self-awareness of how others might perceive her and whether she would seen as Muslim or Pakistani enough. Sarah, who felt she did not fit in to Indian and Pakistani circles in high school as a Bangladeshi student, recalled being called “whitewashed” by White peers. Sarah’s experience reflected findings in Soin’s (2015) study, where South Asian American women who did not outwardly express South Asian identity through visible indicators were called “whitewashed” by White peers. An additional factor in participants’ sense of otherness within South Asian communities was their connections to extended family. Annie described feeling out of place in South Asian spaces in college and attributed this to her upbringing; she spoke about being raised as Americanized and was not immersed in South Asian culture throughout her childhood. As families and South Asian community are often second-generation South Asians’ strongest connections to their heritage, a

lack of connection to extended family and South Asian community can influence their abilities to embrace and take ownership of their South Asian identities (Banerjee-Stevens, 2009).

In navigating a bicultural identity, South Asian American women also have to manage differing and sometimes conflicting gender norms and expectations of women. While South Asian American women are immersed and socialized within the U.S., many also face familial pressures to embody South Asian values emphasizing family responsibilities and gender norms (Inman, 2006b). Ananya recognized the freedom of her generation as opposed to her parents', and also noted continued pressure for women: "We still have to fight for that freedom in some ways, whether it's about marriage or wanting to have an independent life with your career." Mira and Meenakshi described questions and pressures from aunties in their community about relationship statuses and expectations to marry soon after college. Although the participants spoke about shifting norms, particularly more support and encouragement for women in academics, they still felt pressure related to relationships and prioritizing marriage and children in their futures.

Participants' relationships with their mothers was a salient topic in the data, as well as an emergent theme in previous research. In the literature, relationships between first-generation South Asian mothers and their second-generation daughters are often described as contentious (Inman, 2006b; Ruzicka, 2011). Further, although mothers were often influential in their daughters' personal lives, particularly around fostering connections with their South Asian heritage and beliefs around relationships, they tended to be less involved in their daughters academic and career pursuits (Ruzicka, 2011; Soin, 2015). Ruzicka (2011) attributed the lack of involvement to limits in the mothers' knowledge and understanding of the U.S. academic system, as many of them were not college graduates themselves. Conversely, nine out of the ten

participants in this study had mothers who held at least a college degree and worked in professions such as medicine, education, and business. These participants described their mothers as heavily involved in all aspects of their lives, and looking up to their mothers as role models in leadership due to the roles they took on professionally and in the household. The participants' descriptions of their relationships with their mothers differed from previous research themes around mother-daughter relationships. A key difference was the educational level and occupations of the participants' first-generation mothers, which may implicate socioeconomic status as a factor as well as cultural norms. There were also similarities in how the participants described these relationships. Participants' narratives mirrored previous research findings (Soin, 2015) in that they in looked up to their mothers yet also wanted to be different from them and continue to challenge traditional gender norms. For example, Hannah spoke about the disproportionate amount of labor and leadership her mother engaged in within her family and the lack of recognition. Indrani also noted a double standard between her parents, where her father expected to be rewarded for tasks her mother took responsibility for on a daily basis. While participants looked up to their mothers as leaders, they also critiqued the unrecognized invisible leadership they observed their mothers engage in.

Socialization Around Leadership

The concept of leadership and research around leaders has historically been based in Western ideals and values, with a history of excluding people of color, and focusing on predominantly White, cisgender, male models of leadership (Beazley, 2013; Dugan & Humbles, 2018; T. B. Jones et al., 2016; Sy et al., 2017). The participants described ideas of leadership that aligned with these definitions grounded in Western values. In describing dominant ideas of leadership, they included characteristics such as individualistic, hierarchical, absent of

community, visible, vocal, and associated with White men. Ananya described difficulty in coming to see herself as a leader due to the prevalence of dominant ideas of leadership, as well as the lack of representation of South Asian women leaders. Sky shared about experiences with imposter syndrome, noting that she did not have a lack of confidence but rather questioned herself more because of the ways she had been treated. Several of the participants, including Meena and Hannah, named feeling more comfortable and confident in their leadership abilities among shared identity groups rather than predominantly White or male settings.

The ways in which participants characterized their learning about leadership within South Asian communities, particularly through South Asian women, reflected previous literature on Asian American women's leadership. Several studies indicate that Asian American women may be more likely than their male counterparts to participate in community-based leadership during college (Kawahara et al., 2007; Park et al., 2008). Moreover, Asian American women leaders displayed a willingness to take initiative, step in, and act to resolve problems when issues emerged (Kawahara et al., 2007). These emphases on community-based leadership and taking initiative to address emergent issues were reflected in how participants described their observations of leadership in their mothers and other South Asian women, as well as their own approaches to leadership. Sky recalled observations of her mother and aunt's leadership: "They don't ask what needs to be done. They just kind of... not intuitively know as moms, but they see the gaps, they're observant and they pick up on it, and then they make sure it gets done." Meena described how the women in her community looked out for others through a "sense of duty" and worked together to care for neighbors who needed support. Participants also named ways they identified needs and took initiative, ranging from seeing a new organization member struggling to connect and intentionally reaching out, to hearing about students struggling to observe

religious holidays and creating more awareness and understanding around religious observances among faculty.

Further, the ways in which Asian Americans, particularly women, engaged in activism illustrated a historic and consistent focus on issues pertaining to the Asian American community (Grim et al., 2019; Kawahara et al., 2007; Kodama & Dugan, 2020; Park et al., 2008). The students in this study named a range of issues they cared deeply about and worked to advocate for, all of which impacted South Asian Americans or the communities in which they grew up. These issues included advocacy for access to and destigmatizing mental health, criminal justice reform, increased representation of South Asians and women of color within professional fields, and building solidarity among communities of color.

Leadership and Connection to Community and Identity

Previous research highlights students' involvement in cultural organizations as associated with sense of belonging, and opportunities to develop their leadership identity, capacity, and efficacy (Accapadi, 2005; Manzano et al., 2017b; Park et al., 2008). All of the participants in this study were involved with at least one identity-based organization that was predominantly South Asian; some were also involved in religious organizations, such as a Muslim student organization, and Asian American organizations. The participants described a sense of belonging and connection within these organizations; for some of them, it was their first experience in a South Asian circle outside of their family's relationships.

Hannah and Sky reflected on their high school experiences where they were one of few South Asians, and took comfort in having a larger South Asian peer group in college. Annie and Ananya spoke about their initial motivations to become involved in leadership as a means to connect more with the South Asian community and their own identities as South Asian American

women. Aishwarya described her experience in leadership within a South Asian student organization as "game changing." She described a sense of belonging through common understandings and "shared experiences that just don't even need to be explained." Meena and Sarah highlighted the significance of creating community with other second-generation South Asians who had shared experiences in navigating between South Asian and American cultures. The participants' experiences reflected findings in previous research, where students involved in a South Asian sorority described positive self-images as South Asian American women, increased leadership development and efficacy, and enhanced confidence to pursue leadership roles (Accapadi, 2005).

Approaches to Leadership

The Asian American "playbook" for success, a "verbally transmitted, informal, and practical 'how-to' guide for Asian Americans designed to show them how to 'make it' and be successful at both school and work," emphasized deference to authority, avoiding confrontation, and the belief that hard work leads to success (Chin, 2020, p. 51). In Chin's (2020) study on barriers to Asian Americans' attainment of leadership roles within their organizations, some of the participants saw "themselves as 'reading' as white and elite" (p. 172), immune from racial discrimination and thus rendering the racism they may have experienced as invisible. Conversely, the participants in this study illustrated an awareness of their South Asian identity, and although several grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods and had college-educated parents, similar to the participants in Chin's (2020) study, they saw themselves as separate from Whiteness. While the majority of the participants noted that their parents had not had conversations about racism with them as they grew up, the participants noted ways in which they saw racism in their personal experiences and toward other South Asians.

However, participants did reflect on internalizing pieces of the "playbook" (Chin, 2020), specifically the belief that hard work leads to success and avoiding confrontation. Sarah described her mother's reactions to her talking about political issues, discouraging her from participating in events or protests. She described being risk averse, walking a line of advocating for social change while working within systems. Mira reflected on her parents' advising her to "present yourself as a level-headed Indian woman because they already see you on a lower tier than everyone else." She described consciously maintaining a calm demeanor when she felt angry, and internalizing a work ethic she perceived as essential to meeting others' expectations of her.

Several of the participants described a behind-the-scenes approach to leadership, reflecting the leadership many of them noted from their mothers and other South Asian women in their communities. Hannah described the South Asian women in her community and their leadership: "They're socialized to be leaders in the home, and they're socialized to be quiet leaders though, so they're socialized to do everything behind the scenes." Many of the participants internalized this approach, as well as the belief that their hard work would lead to success. Sky described her early experiences with leadership as a stage manager in high school where she noticed others recognized her work ethic. Her approach was "operating in silence or under the radar. So I kept, I guess, working so that people would see my work speaks for itself in a sense." Leading from behind the scenes was a theme among the participants and reflected previous research on professional Asian American women preferring a low profile in the workplace, while also having a "reputation to 'get the job done'" (Kawahara et al., 2013, p. 244). However, Chin (2020) asserted that this approach did not in fact benefit Asian American, but rather worked against them in trying to advance beyond mid-level positions in their careers. For

participants in this study, while they recognized vocal and visible leaders as adhering to dominant ideas of leadership, they often embodied varied approaches and strove to expand definitions of leadership to include those who were not at the forefront.

Similar to previous research, the participants in this study described their approaches to leadership as highly collaborative and relationship-centered. The Asian American women in Kawahara et al.'s (2007) study prioritized a collaborative leadership style and attributed this to racial and gender influences; they emphasized relational, non-hierarchical, and cooperative approaches, similar to the South Asian American women in this study. Many of the participants acknowledged dominant ideas around leadership as associated with titles, yet their own definitions of leadership expanded beyond positional leaders and were often non-hierarchical. Indrani described community as central to leadership, and emphasized caring for individuals' well-being and building relationships as central to leadership. Aishwarya spoke about leading "as a friend" and challenged the notion that hierarchical organizations are more effective.

While engaging in leadership South Asian American, and Asian American women, often experience dissonance and conflict between two cultures' norms, values, and expectations (Akutagawa, 2013; Chang, 2021b; Grim et al., 2019b; Sy et al., 2017). Participants in this study spoke about code switching and navigating different environments. In a study on Asian American women in technology and financial industries in Fortune 500 companies, participants described "unlearning" traditional Asian cultural values and norms in order to advance in the workplace, while maintaining these traditional values and norms within their homes (Chang, 2021b). Participants in this study differed in that they spoke about wanting to integrate their South Asian values and norms rather than compartmentalize. When reflecting on their ambitions in their careers after college, many of the participants emphasized wanting to maintain their

commitments to non-hierarchical, relationship-based leadership while acknowledging that this was not the norm in most workplace settings. One of the participants, Sarah, also spoke specifically about her process of reframing a traditional South Asian American value of women as nurturing caretakers as a strength in her leadership style to be empathetic, caring, and compassionate. Sarah's reframing of caretaking as a strength embodied a stage in the South Asian American Empowerment Model in which participants "tap into their identities as South Asian American women as a source of strength, rather than a weakness as they may have previously perceived" (Accapadi, 2005, p. 118). The participants' descriptions of integrating South Asian values and norms more so mirrored the work of Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc.'s (LEAP) model that viewed Asian cultural norms through an asset perspective rather than conflicting with leadership strengths (Akutagawa, 2013). Through the model, LEAP reframed attributes such as passivity and conflict aversion as valuing harmony and collaboration (Akutagawa, 2013). Similarly, in a study exploring how Asian American leaders defined, shaped, and experienced leadership, participants highlighted cultural values such as humility, prioritizing others' well-being, service to others, and kindness as informative and central to their leadership approaches (Kawahara et al., 2013).

Further, in multiple studies on Asian American women administrators in academia, participants described their leadership as connected to a larger purpose beyond themselves, as well as tied to community (Huang, 2012; Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009; Somer, 2007; Torne, 2013). This was consistent with how participants in this study spoke of their engagement with leadership. Many of the participants expressed feeling a sense of responsibility to create pathways for others, challenge stereotypical narratives, and create change that would benefit their communities.

Sense-making around Identity and Leadership

Participants made sense of identity in different ways in relation to leadership. Some named specific ways in which race and gender intersected as South Asian women, recognizing how systems of power are interrelated (P. H. Collins, 2015b). For example, Hannah reflected on how she shows up differently in spaces based on the demographics of others and the ways White women hold more power in settings than women of color. Sky voiced feeling more affinity with women of color than South Asian men or White women: "we share more traits…. so it's just that security, I guess." She also attributed this affinity to her experiences with feeling a lack of support from White women and solidarity with women of color through shared experiences. In contrast, a few participants named gender specifically and felt their identities as women was more of a barrier than being South Asian. Ananya expressed feeling that her gender was "mostly why people didn't respect or see me as a leader," and felt this was exacerbated in her major in a STEM field "where men are the majority, it's really hard to find yourself paving the way." The nuance of gender being more salient to participants within particular settings emphasized the significance of racial microclimes and how realities and experiences are influenced by context (P. H. Collins, 2015b; Harpalani, 2013).

South Asian American women's experiences with stereotypes associated with their race and gender identities was salient among the participants in this study, as well as previous research. Findings in this study and previous research emphasized stereotypes contributing to negative perceptions of Asian Americans and leadership, as well as the MMM in ways that perpetuated division among communities of color (Accapadi, 2005; Dang, 2021b; Kawahara et al., 2013; Ng, 2017; Reeves, 2014; Somer, 2007; Sy et al., 2017; Torne, 2013; J. Yi & Todd, 2021). As much of the previous research on Asian Americans in leadership focuses on Asian

Americans within professional and workplace settings, the ways in which this study's participants experienced stereotypes differed slightly from findings of previous research. For example, Asian American women administrators in academia described stereotypes they experienced as barriers in selection and hiring processes, as well as being questioned of their qualifications when they did attain leadership roles (Reeves, 2014). Students in this study described stereotypes in the context of influencing their interactions in classes, assumptions about their roles within organizations, and their ability to be heard in professional settings and committees with faculty and staff.

For some South Asian American women, their experiences with stereotypes resulted in a motivation to challenge stereotypes related to South Asian women. Engaging in leadership can provide a way to change the narrative around South Asian women, as documented in previous research. In one study, South Asian women students in a South Asian sorority perceived leadership as a way to challenge stereotypes of South Asian women as subservient and passive, as well as address their own internalizations of stereotypes related with the MMM (Accapadi, 2005). In other work, Asian American women in corporate settings felt a need to prove themselves and portray Asian American women as qualified, competent, and effective leaders (Kawahara et al., 2007). Several of the participants in this study described similar motivations to disrupt dominant narratives of South Asian women. Sarah described feeling the need to prove herself to others as a leader. Mira expressed a similar sentiment: "I think that I've been pushing myself to be a better leader and a better person because people seem to think that Indian women can't do that." Aishwarya emphasized engaging in leadership as a way to "push that narrative that there's no reason that women should be placed on a lower pedestal… I think it definitely contributes a lot to my motivation, especially being a South Asian woman." Aishwarya and

Hannah both spoke about dispelling stereotypes that South Asian women are passive, compliant, and not as qualified as men.

Engagement in leadership provided students with an opportunity to challenge perceptions of South Asian and Asian Americans, while also serving as role models and creating pathways for younger students who may have internalized stereotypes on Asian Americans and leadership (Accapadi, 2005; Manzano et al., 2017b). Mentorship was a salient theme among Asian American women in the workplace, both in academia and corporate settings (Chang, 2021b; Chin, 2020; Dang, 2021b; Kawahara et al., 2007, 2013; Reeves, 2014). While the participants in this study reflected on the women in their South Asian communities as influential to their leadership approaches, they also noted a lack of South Asian women role models within the university and their career fields. Several of the participants described feeling a sense of responsibility to mentor others in order to create pathways for the students after them. Meena emphasized the familial culture of South Asian organizations, and not wanting younger South Asian students to have the same struggles she did: “I'm going to look out for the people from my culture, look out for the people that look like me and everything, because I didn't get to see anyone that looked like me.” Mira expressed a similar sentiment of wanting to prove others wrong and challenge stereotypes through her leadership because she didn’t want “other people to be impacted by this the same way I am.” Aishwarya and Ananya spoke about their motivations to be leaders so that younger South Asian American women, and women of color, could see themselves reflected in leadership roles. These sentiments mirrored findings in a study on Asian American women leaders in academia, who “believed that mentoring was one of their duties” to help others advance in their careers as well as disrupt the cycle of Asian Americans not seeing themselves as leaders (Torne, 2013, p. 137).

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study, along with the context of previous research, bring about several implications for practice. The ways in which students in this study spoke about their experiences with race and racism supported findings in previous research on how South Asian American, and Asian American, students are often left out of conversations about race (Accapadi, 2005; Grim et al., 2019b; Liang et al., 2002; Ruzicka, 2011; Soin, 2015). This omission results in racial dynamics that perpetuate the MMM and South Asian American students' experiences with racism being ignored or not taken seriously due to perceptions of their socioeconomic success, thereby maintaining systems that center Whiteness and reinforce anti-Blackness. Administrators should be intentional in providing South Asian American students with spaces to be in conversation with others about race and racism, and recognize and validate South Asian American students' experiences with racism as real and valid regardless of class status. Along with opportunities to be in community with others to engage in conversation about race and racism, South Asian American students also need spaces to learn about and explore their own identities. The participants in this study emphasized the importance and meaningfulness of identity-based student organizations as spaces where they learned about the diversity within South Asian communities, deeper learning on their own identities, and understanding of issues pertaining to the South Asian community. For these participants, student organizations were the primary source of this learning. As the South Asian American population grows, opportunities to engage in dialogue around race and racism and learn about South Asian American histories and culture are imperative for second-generation South Asian Americans to develop critical perspectives on the positioning of South Asians, and the APIDA community more broadly, within a U.S. context. Higher education institutions need to recognize the history,

diversity, and experiences of the South Asian, and Asian American, community and integrate spaces for exploration and learning, such as Asian American cultural centers and Asian American Studies programs that reflect and are inclusive of the APIDA population. These efforts would not only create space for APIDA students, but also provide opportunities for non-Asian students to learn more about APIDA experiences and collaborations with other cultural centers and ethnic studies programs to work toward coalition and solidarity.

Further, higher education institutions should be more attentive to the needs of South Asian American students, particularly in relation to experiences with racism and religious needs, recognizing that South Asians are not a monolithic group. Participants spoke with pride about ways in which they were able to create change and work with administrators to advocate for South Asian students' needs. In describing these experiences of advocating to faculty and administrators, participants also described a sense of responsibility to do so and feeling that these changes would not occur without their advocacy and knowledge of the issues. For example, Meena shared her experience advocating for Muslim students to faculty within a certain major; she sought to increase faculty's understanding of Muslim holidays, how they are observed, and how faculty could better accommodate students' needs during these times. Administrators and faculty need to be more proactive in learning about and understanding the needs of South Asian students and their various religious, socioeconomic, and ethnic identities, and creating policies and practices that are equitable and inclusive of identity-based practices and observances. While the participants took pride in the change they created and developed agency, it should not be the responsibility of students of historically marginalized identities to educate faculty and administrators in order to create spaces that are inclusive of them.

Participants recalled observing the leadership of their mothers, aunties, and women in their communities as often invisible and unrecognized, while men's leadership was acknowledged and celebrated. Several of the participants described their own leadership as a "behind-the-scenes" approach. In speaking about how they engaged in leadership and how they envisioned their leadership in the future, participants emphasized that their leadership was not tied to titles but rather non-hierarchical and non-positional. They spoke of engaging in leadership from any position within an organization and allowing their work to speak for itself. Despite this approach emerging as a theme among the participants, the students also expressed questions of whether and to what extent they could impact change if not in leadership positions and holding titles. Participants also noted dominant ideas of leadership as grounded in Whiteness and maleness, further leading to questions about their own leadership capabilities. Administrators who work with student organizations and leadership programs should recognize the ways in which race and gender influence leadership approaches and implications for how students of different identities are seen, valued, and heard for their leadership. These efforts could include creating curriculum illustrating diverse leadership approaches grounded in varying cultural values as well as intentionally naming and including engagement in service, social justice, and activism as leadership. Additionally, administrators should develop and normalize practices that recognize non-positional leaders and those that engage in important work yet do not hold titles within an organization. For example, award ceremonies could include recognition for meaningful participation and engagement from student organization members who are not in leadership roles. Such efforts by administrators would challenge dominant ideas of leadership grounded in Whiteness and maleness, expand definitions and recognition of leadership, and increase pathways to leadership for historically marginalized populations.

Participants emphasized their desire to create pathways for others through their own leadership, and valuing the ability to mentor younger students to encourage their involvement and efficacy in regard to leadership. They also spoke about not having South Asian women as mentors and the lack of representation of South Asian women within their fields and majors as their motivation to serve as mentors for others. Administrators and faculty should be intentional about creating ways for South Asian American women college students to connect with South Asian American women in their fields. This could include intentional connections through mentorship programs, partnering with South Asian and APIDA community organizations to provide research and internship opportunities for students, and ensuring South Asian representation at events such as panels and career fairs. Further, as the students valued mentoring younger students and recalled being one of few South Asian women in their classrooms and organizations outside of South Asian organizations, administrators can also create opportunities for South Asian American women who are juniors and seniors to mentor younger students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from this study suggest several recommendations for future research. First, the ways in which the participants described and defined leadership were linked to advocacy and activism, as well as a commitment to social justice, diversity, and inclusion. The literature review includes previous research on Asian Americans and activism, including the influential roles of Asian American women in the Civil Rights Movement and founding of Asian American Studies departments (Grim et al., 2019b; Kawahara et al., 2007; Leigh et al., 2021; Manzano et al., 2017b). Much of the research on Asian American activism focuses on Asian Americans broadly with few to no South Asian participants. Further, research suggests that due to immigration patterns and policies as well as socioeconomic positioning, South Asians were still a small

population compared to East Asians during the Civil Rights Movement and therefore not integrated into the larger "politicized subcategory of Asian America" (Bhalla & Dhingra, 2022, p. 308). The participants in this study emphasized their values of and commitment to social justice, while some also distanced themselves from traditional forms of activism. Future research should explore how second-generation South Asian American women conceptualize activism and enact working toward social justice.

Participants in this study spoke about their growth as leaders and expanding their definitions of leadership through their collegiate experiences. They also reflected on values, aspects of climate, and leadership approaches they wanted to embody and look for in future workplaces. Some of the participants noted that their leadership approaches and values were outside of the norm of most U.S. work settings, which they characterized as individualistic, hierarchical, and outcome driven. Further, this study focused on participants' experiences within the context of a collegiate setting. Considering rising enrollment of women in higher education institutions and the prevalence of women in leadership roles of student organizations, collegiate experiences may be beneficial to South Asian American women's development of leadership efficacy and experience. Future research should include longitudinal studies on how second-generation South Asian American women's descriptions and enactment of leadership shift over time, from incoming college students to graduates and working professionals.

Lastly, as participants described grounding themselves in community and a sense of responsibility to create pathways for others, they named populations including South Asian women, women of color, and people of color. One of the participants described their involvements with an organization advocating for other populations of women of color, while several also spoke about the importance of being part of representation in leadership for women

of color broadly. Participants also talked about advocating for and building solidarity with other communities around causes such as Black Lives Matter and a cease-fire in Gaza. Participants described having difficult conversations, collaborating on programs, and working with administrators. Some of the participants also noted implications of the MMM and a conscious effort to avoid approaching issues as a "savior" or perpetuate racial hierarchies. Future research should explore and interrogate the ways in which second-generation South Asian American women engage in and build solidarity with communities of color through a critical lens.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered with several limitations. First, data for this study was collected over the course of one semester, limiting it to a snapshot in time. Participants ranged from sophomores to seniors with varying levels of experience with leadership. With one interview with each participant and a short data collection period, there was not opportunity to explore whether and how participants' views, understandings, and approaches may have changed over time. Further, several major sociopolitical shifts relevant to the South Asian community occurred during and following the data collection process. The attacks by Hamas in Israel on October 7, 2023 occurred in the middle of the data collection process. Several of the participants who I interviewed after that date spoke specifically about activism related to Palestine and experiences with Islamophobia. Additionally, Kamala Harris became the democratic presidential nominee after data collection concluded. The increased attention to her identity as a South Asian and Black woman along with South Asian voters has shifted the political landscape, and may have shifted the ways in which participants spoke about representation. The data collection process designed for this study limited the ability to follow participants over time during these shifts.

There are also limitations related to the participant recruitment and selection processes for this study. I bounded my study by location, focusing on students at one institution. Many of the participants were in-state students as well. While the participants had experiences with different majors and living learning communities, this limited the ability to explore different racial microclimes (Harpalani, 2013, 2015). Additionally, while I intended for a diverse participant pool, the participants of this study were predominantly Indian, middle or upper middle class, and Hindu. Of the 23 students who completed the interest form, 18 were Indian; seven of this study's 10 participants were Indian, along with students whose families were from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Six identified as Hindu, two as Muslim, one as Christian and one as Buddhist. While this reflects the South Asian community with Indians as the largest proportion of the group, a more diverse pool could have resulted in deeper understandings across South Asian women's experiences. For example, the Muslim participants spoke in-depth about how religion influenced their experiences; they strongly connected their religion with their identities as South Asian American women and how others perceived them.

The students' emphasis on religion brings about another limitation in this study's focus on race and gender identity. In addition to religion, participants also named sexual orientation and socioeconomic status as influential factors in their experiences. I chose to focus on race and gender, which limited understandings of how additional factors may play salient roles in South Asian American women's descriptions and enactment of leadership, such as religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and colorism.

Additionally, while qualifications for participation in the study did not include involvement with South Asian student organizations, all of the participants were involved in some way in at least one South Asian student organization. While the participants were also

involved in non-identity-based organizations, the participants spoke at length about the South Asian organizations and how these organizations influenced their growth as leaders as well as connections to the South Asian community and their identities. The students' descriptions of their experiences in South Asian student organizations were integral to the findings of this study. Given that family and organizational involvement are influential factors in connecting to South Asian heritage for second-generation South Asian Americans, findings may differ for South Asian American students who are not connected with South Asian student organizations.

Contributions to the Literature

Despite the limitations, this study makes key contributions to our understanding of how second-generation South Asian American women conceptualize and engage in leadership. The main strength of this study lies within the rich narratives shared by the 10 second-generation South Asian American women who participated in this study. The participants expressed excitement about the opportunity to share their experiences as South Asian American women and noted the lack of spaces to do so. They shared their stories with eagerness, vulnerability, and thoughtfulness. In addition to experiences they are proud of, they shared about nuanced relationships with their families, competing values and perspectives they were weighing in their own leadership approaches, and ways in which they struggled to navigate a bicultural identity.

While I named the diversity within the group as a limitation of the study, it is also a strength. In addition to sharing their perspectives on their racial and gender identities, the participants also spoke about ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status in ways that nuanced and complicated the findings of this study. For example, a Muslim participant who wore a hijab reflected on how others may perceive her and make assumptions more readily than with other South Asians. A Bangladeshi participant recalled feeling like an outsider within a high school

South Asian community that was predominantly Indian and Pakistani. These stories contributed to a rich, more comprehensive understanding of second-generation South Asian American women's experiences.

Another strength was the use of narrative inquiry as a methodology and DesiCrit and intersectionality as a theoretical framework. The use of narrative inquiry allowed for an in-depth focus on the participants' narratives to explore and understand second-generation South Asian American women's experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). Considering the lack of attention to South Asian women in research on leadership, a focus on the participants' stories disrupted dominant narratives through centering a group that has been historically marginalized and left out of leadership literature. The use of DesiCrit and intersectionality further bolstered the ability to center South Asian women's experiences with theoretical frameworks closely aligned with the identities of the participants and their experiences. Employing DesiCrit and intersectionality included analyzing the data through a critical lens, supporting narrative inquiry's intentions of unearthing deeper meanings and hidden assumptions from participants' narratives (Bell, 2002; Creswell, 2007). This approach to analysis actively and intentionally centered race and gender to explore the nuanced ways these identities, as well as other intersecting social identities, shaped the lived experiences of second-generation South Asian American women. Through this approach, I explored the participants' individual narratives, as well as how the participants' stories connected to larger societal structures and power dynamics, and was able to incorporate critiques of power structures and inequities participants alluded to yet may not have the language to articulate. Centering these frameworks also allowed me to identify and question ways in which participants talked about aspects of identity in isolation and how they made sense of South Asian Americans' racial positioning within a U.S. context.

In recruiting participants, I intentionally chose not to define qualifications through involvements or positional roles. This decision was consistent with a constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes that meanings are socially constructed by individuals through their experiences and interactions, and allows for multiple and coexisting truths (Creswell, 2014; Glesne, 2006; S. R. Jones et al., 2006b). Students were able to define leadership for themselves and decide to participate in the study. Further, part of the purpose of this study was to explore how second-generation South Asian American women made meaning of their experiences and interactions in ways that shaped their definitions of leadership. Through the interviews and participant-generated visual methods, I sought to create space where participants could contemplate, reflect, and assert their ideas about leadership and what leadership looked like in practice in their experiences.

Lastly, my positionality as a second-generation South Asian American woman allowed me to build rapport with the participants through shared aspects of identity. While the focus of each of the interviews was on each participant's experiences, when they shared experiences I could relate to, I chose opportunities to relate in on those points at times. I did this in an effort to build trust and connection with the participants. Additionally, some of the participants asked me questions about my own leadership process and experiences, or issues related to the South Asian community where they wanted to gain more understanding. If I thought my answer would sway their perspective, I asked them to share their experiences first before offering my experiences and viewpoints. This reciprocal approach maintained my intention to center the participants' experiences while also being able to introduce ideas, questions, and understandings that offered a critical lens.

Conclusion

This research took place at a pivotal point for South Asian Americans, and evolving views of leadership. When I began my dissertation research, Kamala Devi Harris had just been elected Vice President and was the first South Asian American and Black woman to serve in the position. By the time I was writing about my findings, she was the Democratic nominee for President of the United States, leading to a surge in visibility of and attention to the South Asian American population and, in particular, the mobilization of South Asian American women. Harris's success is a powerful symbol of progress, yet also brought to light many of the challenges this study's participants spoke of. Media coverage around the election and the candidates' campaigns have perpetuated systems of power that excuse and protect Whiteness while holding people of color, particularly women, to unrealistic standards of perfection. While the landscape around South Asian American women and leadership has shifted during the process of this dissertation study, the findings of this study serve as a reminder that while high-profile and highly visible success stories exist that disrupt dominant views of leadership, South Asian American women continue to grapple with invisibility, marginalization, and experiencing stereotypes as they navigate bicultural identities, challenge systems of power, and forge leadership approaches that integrate their cultures and are authentic to them.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore how race and gender influence second-generation South Asian American women college students' descriptions and enactment of leadership. Through the 10 participants' stories and lived experiences, along with the use of DesiCrit and intersectionality as a theoretical framework, this study centered second-generation South Asian American women. The participants shared how they learned leadership through South Asian women in their community, and how they modeled caring, community-based leadership and managed multiple roles, challenging dominant norms and ideas of what

leadership looked like. As second-generation South Asian Americans, their connections to South Asian heritage relied on family and community. As such, they engaged in leadership as a means to develop and deepen their connections to South Asian community and their own identity. Participants navigated a bicultural identity, grappling with perceived proximity to Whiteness, code switching in different environments, and experiencing stereotypes based on their racial and gender identities. Experiencing these stereotypes led to feelings of inadequacy, as well as a motivation to disrupt dominant narratives around South Asian women. The participants grounded their own leadership in community and advocacy, with the desire to create community and care for others as well as advocate for representation and systemic change. They shared their thoughts and reflections on internal dilemmas they wrestled with and implications for how they show up in their leadership roles. They reflected on working toward an integrated leadership identity that honored the wholeness of their cultures as South Asian American women, and the importance of creating pathways for those that will come after them. Their individual and collective narratives contribute to the literature in illustrating the unique and nuanced experiences of second-generation South Asian American women and their approaches to leadership.

The participants' individual and collective narratives contribute to the literature in illustrating the unique and nuanced experiences of second-generation South Asian American women and their approaches to leadership. The findings of this study contribute to breaking down monolithic views of Asian Americans through focusing on the intersection of the participants' identities as second-generation South Asian American women. This is especially poignant at a time when the South Asian American population is growing and South Asian American women in leadership have become more visible yet research, awareness, and knowledge of South Asian Americans' experiences, needs, and challenges remains scarce. As we

continue to see South Asian American women break barriers and make history, my hope is that this study not only contributes to the academic discourse but also urges us to actively interrogate and disrupt dominant narratives around leadership, intentionally recognize and model diverse ways of leading, and empower students to integrate their cultural values into leadership approaches that are authentic and meaningful to them.

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer



Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Hello!

We would like to invite you to participate in a research study on second-generation South Asian American women college students and leadership.

The purpose of this study is to explore how race and gender influence leadership definitions and approaches. Students who meet the following criteria are eligible for this study:

- South Asian women
- Enrolled at UMD as undergraduate students
- Second-generation (born in the U.S., parents born in South Asia)
- Engaged in leadership activities (i.e. student organizations, student government and RAs, service, activism)
- 18 years or older

Participation in the study consists of one 60-90 minute interview via Zoom (interviews will be video recorded) and a visual, where participants will be asked to create a drawing based on a prompt. Participants who complete participation in the interview and submit the visual will receive a $40 gift card to their choice of Starbucks or Target.

Your responses will be kept confidential through removing identifying information from the transcripts and the use of pseudonyms. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to discontinue participation at any time. If you are interested in participating in the study, please complete the intake form at go.umd.edu/SAWomen. Please do not hesitate to contact the Principal Investigator, Nicole Mehta (doctoral candidate in UMD's HESI-Student Affairs PhD program) at nmehta@umd.edu, if you have any questions. Thank you!

Appendix C: Interest Form

South Asian American Women & Leadership
Participant Intake Form

1. Name:
2. Email:
3. Phone Number:
4. Class Standing (i.e. freshman, sophomore)* checkbox
5. Major:
6. Religion:
7. Caste (if known):
8. Second-generation South Asian refers to students who were born in the U.S., but whose parents were born in South Asia. Please list the country (or countries) where your parents were born:
9. Current Involvements (on campus – i.e. clubs, campus employment; off campus – i.e. community service):

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Introduction:

- Name, role
- The purpose of this study is to explore how race and gender identity influence second-generation South Asian American women's definitions & enactment of leadership. We're scheduled for about 60-90 minutes, and I'd like to record this interview with your consent.
- *Review consent form with participant*

Research Questions

- How do race & gender identity influence second-generation South Asian American women's definitions of leadership?
- How do race & gender identity influence second-generation South Asian American women's enactment of leadership?

Interview Structure:

1. Tell me about where you're from/where you grow up
    a. Tell me about your family. Who did you grow up with in your household?
    b. Year of parents' immigration
2. What is the earliest example of leadership you remember?
3. Who are some people you see as leaders?
    a. Who are some people as leaders that you look up to/want to emulate as a leader?
4. Tell me about your journey in thinking of yourself as a leader - after what is leadership
5. How would you define leadership in your own words?
    a. Where does this definition come from?
    b. How did that influence how you see yourself as a leader?
6. What does leadership look like to you on campus?
7. How would you describe your style of leadership?.
    a. Where do you think it comes from?
8. What was the first time you remember seeing leadership in women in your community?.
9. What are aspects of your identity that are salient to you?.
10. Tell me about how you identify racially and ethnically
11. How does that intersect with gender for you?
12. How do you think your identity has influenced your experience on campus?
13. How do you think your identity has influenced or shaped your leadership style/how you approach leadership?
14. Are there cultural or familial expectations related to leadership that influence your perspective?
15. Have there been times you feel that your identity has impacted how others perceive your leadership abilities? How so?
16. What resources or support have been influential for your own leadership development?
17. Are there disconnects you see in how you see leadership in your world and how it's framed more broadly?
    a. (If conflicts), How do you navigate those conflicts?

18. Thinking about diff definitions of leadership & your future - in your career, field you're going into, how do you reconcile/think about that?
19. Looking ahead, how do you envision your growth as a leader and how identity connects to that?
20. Anything else you want to share?

Appendix E: Participant-Generated Visual Prompt

South Asian American Women & Leadership: How Race & Gender Identity Influence Perceptions & Enactment of Leadership

Visual – Prompt

Please create a drawing that depicts your ideas, beliefs, and perceptions of leadership. This drawing can be by hand or done electronically – whichever resonates most with you. Please use the questions below to guide your drawing:

- How do you define leadership?
- Who do you see as a leader?
- What traits, characteristics, etc. should good and effective leaders have?

Please submit your visual drawing to Nicole Mehta (Principal Investigator) within 2 weeks of your interview date. You can email it to nmehta@umd.edu or drop it off at 0102 Annapolis Hall.

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