

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: MACRO, MESO AND  
MICRO FACTORS IN CHALLENGES FACED BY  
SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN LGB PERSONS

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## Abstract

This ethnographical research is geared towards understanding the lived experiences of South Asian LGB persons, residing in the United States. The thesis proposes that a strong LGBT cultural competency framework is needed to overcome challenges faced by South Asian sexual minorities. With this idea, the research delves into core aspects of South Asian culture using Geert Hofstede's cultural taxonomy. Also, the paper engages in in-depth identity construction of South Asians from macro, meso and micro factors. The scope of the research also includes immigration, group dynamics of South Asian diaspora and individual-level standpoint in ethnic South Asian social spaces. To achieve this the study, uses Harry Wolcott ethnographical methodology for data collection and analysis. Finally, the research sums-up on all cultural factors that affect integration of South Asian LGB persons into mainstream society as well as in-group South Asian circles. The larger aim is to bridge the gap in cross-cultural study, which is deeply rooted in western traditions of thinking.

*Keywords:* South Asian LGBT, queer, South Asian gay, South Asian lesbian

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: MACRO, MESO AND MICRO FACTORS IN CHALLENGES FACED BY SOUTH ASIAN LGB PERSONS

In South Asian (SA) culture, when a youth comes out of the closet- about his or her sexual orientation, it has a major impact not only in the life of the individual but also his or her entire family. Given this scenario, a typical western mindset would ponder, why should a person's choice of sexuality, impact the whole family in life-changing ways?

The answer lies in the cultural traits that define a SA's way of life. Cultural identity refers to one's sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group and people internalize the beliefs, values, norms and social practices of their culture and identify with that culture as part of their self-concept (Myron. W Lustig).

This ethnographical research seeks to address the core question; what are the cultural challenges faced by SA- LGB minority in dealing with in-group SA ethnic social spaces while lying on the margins of the dominant LGB community? To achieve this, the research study utilizes concepts of intercultural and interpersonal communication to provide the necessary framework in understanding, unique attitudes of SA diaspora and how it gets exhibited towards the in-group LGB community. Here I use Bennett (1993) definition of integration, where the SA LGB person lies on the margins of both the home (South Asian) and host cultures (American) and constructs his or her identity in such a way that it leads to creative hybridization of the two cultures. Further, this study aims to

outline specific competencies that can be used by counselors and other professionals in addressing LGB issues in an inter-cultural milieu.

For the purpose of this study I use the terms queer and South Asian Lesbian Gay and Bisexual (SA LGB) as a generic expression to describe the South Asian diaspora who exhibit alternate sexual identity. A deliberate attempt has been made to look at this study from an intercultural lens for two reasons:

- 1) To develop a framework for LGBT cultural competence and overcome inherent issues in cross-cultural study which is deeply rooted in western traditions of thinking and ethnocentric Euro-American approaches. (Spering 2001)
- 2) Cognitive theories on queer communities rarely consider the factor of culture. (Guess, 2004). There is a seeming conflict between South Asian cultural values and values implicit in counseling and psychotherapy. (Nash, 1993).
- 3) Therefore study of culture and LGBT community is a relatively new and unexplored field. The idea behind this study is to integrate the findings from non-Western cultures into a model that can be helpful to derive specific competencies for further studies into this field.

Family stands at the core of individual SA identity

Family is a central concept within SA communities which supersedes the individual. Families are considered an independent group where the “whole” is cared for by all. Privacy is “familial” and not personal. That means, privacy is shared by the family within the family and not considered a right unto one person. (Kemp 1997). The SA trans-migrants, assimilate themselves in a new country, as part of a culture-sharing group, be it music, religion, art or anything that reinforces their ethnicity. Consequently, their identity is defined as part of the in-group rather than individually. (Tajfel 1981). For Instance, let us take the example of a family of an SA LGB person which regularly visits a nearby Hindu Temple where they mingle with folks who share the same cultural outlook and space. Here, Cultural space is defined as the communicative practices that construct meaning in, through and about particular places. (Nakayama, 2004). Thus they represent one homogeneous group.

In this scenario, families are seen to be in constant pressure to conform to prevalent norms, customs and practices to maintain a respectable social face. As a result, it can be particularly challenging to SA LGB persons to come out of the closet, as they run the risk of affecting the social identity of the family. There is evidence that ethnic and religious minority non-heterosexual individuals can continue to face discrimination from within their ethnic and/ or religious communities (Yip 2007).

Being an integral part of a migrant SA network

When one looks at the micro, meso and macro levels of cultural adaptation process of an SA person, it is seen to be largely governed by migrant networks. Migrant networks stand for sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship and shared community origins (Douglas S. Massey 1993). For instance the social network of a SA family which provides initial support for adjustments, travel, living, housing, employment, education and health care are instrumental in forging long-lasting connections among diaspora that bind them together. This is to bring out the compelling need for a family to socially comply and to emphasize that anything that happens around the world has a bearing on the migrant populations.

SA diaspora in the US, typically represent a group known as trans-migrants in intercultural parlance or migrants who move across national boundaries to new locations for work and family reunification and yet also maintain, cultural, social, economic and political ties with their country, region or city of origin. (Basch, Blanc & Schiller, 1994; Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt, 1999).

To support this observation, let us look at a second case in point where the Supreme Court in India recently passed a law, criminalizing homosexuality. This is an anti-gay law passed in India and widely considered as draconian. Common sense might suggest that any incident occurring in the country of origin may not have any bearing in the lifestyle of people who have already migrated. However, research suggests that this is far from

true. This is because migrants represent a transnational group who are an integral part of the network. In a transnational network population such as SA, factors such as these, contribute to reinforcing cultural stereotypes within the community. And it is seen that an individuals' existence is embedded in the backdrop of inter-connecting political, cultural, community and familial relationships, environments and locations where social capital develops and is exchanged. Transnational communities are constructed by trans-migrants whose density of movement and social ties overtime and across geographic space form circuits of exchange support and belonging (Goldring 1996).

#### Fear of loss of social capital

Social capital refers to the sense of commitment and obligation people within a group or network share to look after the well-being and interests of one another (Gold, 2005). In SA culture, when someone's son or daughter comes out as queer, the social standing of the family is largely impacted and it runs the risk of being disowned from the community rendering them social outcasts. This forces them into a situation of a "closeted family," where the immediate family keeps the external social circle in the dark about the queer nature of their close family members. Here, I have given an overarching view of the barriers faced by SA LGB persons.

#### The scope of the study

In order to find ways to mitigate a problem, one needs an accurate framework or a clear definition of the problem itself. Here, a detailed look at the barriers faced by SA queer participants will immensely help in carrying out an intercultural bridgework between cognitive and other service providers and SA queer population.

Intercultural bridgework means developing sensitivity, understanding, and extending vulnerability to traverse multiple positions, creating points of contact, negotiation and pathways to connection. Intercultural alliances often calls on individuals to bridge and translate different cultural standpoints, positionalities, struggles and histories. (Anzaldúa, 1981).

Culturally, for SA queer diaspora, being queer and being South Asian are not mutually exclusive, it is practically impossible to uproot their cultural belongingness in order to fit in their queer identity. In this study, I deliberately use the term “their sexual identities” in a holistic way since as mentioned earlier, in SA culture the problem of a child is seen as the problem of the family.

Serving as a bridge- The need for cultural competence

In Intercultural parlance, “serving as a bridge” often means, translating languages, values, norms, ways of thinking and being, as well as standpoints and positionalities between dominant and diasporic groups. (Sorrells 2013).

While looking at this, from the paradigm of a problem and solution, the acute societal as well as personal barriers faced by SA LGBs calls for a holistic understanding. While

identifying the same, the study explores appropriate inter-cultural competence practices for SA queer participants taking into account their need for integration and acceptability. The crux of this research is to build a framework for cultural analysis of individualistic and collectivistic cultures. This may lead to further development of education and training programs in the field of cultural competence and multi-cultural awareness of lived experiences of diverse LGBT persons.

#### Research Question

How do SA queer diaspora cope with cultural barriers to their integration into traditional heteronormative spaces while also lying in the margins of dominant groups-Is LGBT cultural competence the answer?

#### South Asian population in United States- An overview

SAs are people who trace their ancestry to India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan; Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and speakers of different SA languages and atleast three generations of immigrants make up the diaspora. Since 2000 the South Asian community as a whole grew 81% over a ten year period and became the fastest growing ethnic group. (SAALT-Elevating South Asian voices and perspectives in the US, 2010).

There are approximately 3.4 million SAs in the US. Indians comprise the largest segment of the SA community, making up over 80 percent of the total population. The five states with largest SA population are California, New York, New Jersey, Texas and Illinois. (Together 2012).

Over the years there have been waves of migration to the US, therefore this is a demographically diverse group. Despite the differences in lifestyle and food habits, SAs are largely a homogenous population due to a collectivistic mindset, which gives overt importance to shared socializations and keeping the honor of the community. These cultural tenets are deeply rooted in the SA psyche, and often serve as a guiding force to enforce certain stereotypical behavioral norms for young people. These overarching factors steadily percolate down through the annals of society, shaping the individual identity.

#### Religious attitudes towards queerness

Given the multi-cultural and religious background of India, most American Indians are primarily of Hindu, Sikh or Muslim faith. Sikhism has no specific teachings on homosexuality –there is no mention of homosexuality in the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book. However, homosexuality finds its mention in old scriptures of Hinduism. What modern psychologists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, now acknowledge as sexual dualism in each individual was a principal enunciated in ancient traditions in India. Ratti R (1993). As presented earlier Indian's collectivistic tendencies, makes them tilt towards looking at

their own familial identities as a part of a group. “This means that among SAs the cultural barriers for queers is far more pronounced than the religious barriers barring muslims,” says a participant. Furthermore, levels of religiosity seem to differ among Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus in Britain: in a survey, 74% of Muslims saw their religion as ‘very important’, while only 46% of Sikhs and 43% of Hindus did (Modood et al. 1997).

After presenting a rundown, on the cultural background of SAs, now I would like to enumerate the ethnographical research technique used to gather data for this specific study. I would also highlight on ethical practices that were adhered to considering the participants need for privacy.

## Chapter Two: Methodology and Research Design

In the previous chapter, I presented a brief introduction of the micro, meso and macro factors that have an impact on the life of an SA LGB person. With this background, I present a research design, starting from the broad philosophical and theoretical perspective to the quality and validation of the study. Talking about research design Yin (2009) commented, “The design is the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study’s initial research questions, and, ultimately to its conclusions.”

### Philosophical Assumptions and Interpretive frameworks

Being a SA myself, I am aware that I bring with myself certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to the research. These assumptions could be in the form of deeply ingrained personal views about problems faced by marginalized people in a SA society. However, the current research was carried out by me, being deeply aware of my assumptions and beliefs.

Firstly, let me highlight the philosophical dimensions in my research namely ontological issues, epistemological assumption, axiological assumption (Creswell 2009).

Ontological issues: When I started this research I was keenly aware of the existence of multiple realities. For Instance, when I spoke to two SA gay participants of similar backgrounds, I approached them with the assumption that both may have a different

experiences to share and I carried out this research with the intent of reporting these multiple realities through verbatim quotations etc.

#### Epistemological assumptions in current ethnographical research

Being aware of epistemological assumption has particular significance when carrying out an ethnographical study. This is because an epistemological assumption has everything to do with how closely the knowledge is gathered. During this research I got as close as possible to my research participants by spending considerable time in their personal spaces. Gathering information in the context or setting where the group works or lives. This is called fieldwork (Wolcott, 2008a). In order to ease this process, I established a trusting relationship with one or two individuals in the group as a gatekeeper or key informant.

Lastly, I am consciously making an axiological (value-laden) assumption in the study by stating upfront that heteronormativity should not lead to exploitation of those who have alternate sexual identities. Thus before even embarking on the research I am consciously aware of my own paradigms that may impinge on the study.

#### Transformative framework:

The very nature of my ethnographical research leans towards addressing the problems of a marginalized group. Throughout my research the “point of view” of the participant can be heard in shaping the final report. The basic tenet of this transformative framework is

that knowledge is not neutral and it reflects the power and social relationships within society and thus the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society (Mertens 2003).

At the end of my research process, I aim to bring in a SA cultural framework, with an idea to bring about change in social practices. Also my research is very participatory in nature, where I bring to the fore social problems of SA LGB minorities.

Further, the aim of this research is to spur debate and discussion so that social changes will occur. A transformative framework is seen as a typical characteristic of ethnographical study since the issues facing the marginalized group is of paramount importance to the study where research participants are active collaborators in the study.

Choosing a methodology for research: An analysis

To understand the lived experiences of SA LGBs, a detailed cultural analysis is very important because SA LGB persons, exhibit an alternate choice of sexuality which is far removed from their heteronormative backgrounds.

I figured that since the ultimate aim of my study is to build a cultural framework, my research needs to be multi-level and multi-dimensional; meaning that I should get a holistic understanding of influencing forces. To achieve this, my main interest lied in understanding the day-to-day experiences and behavior patterns of SA LGB persons. To

find out how sexual identities and cultural identities inter-mingled, ethnography as a mode of research was chosen, which entailed interacting with SA LGB persons in close quarters.

Given the nature of research the exact mode of data collection, coding and interpreting requires a considerable thought process since the researcher is the primary observer. As a result, I decided to draw on the approaches discussed by Wolcott (2008a). Ethnography is not the study of a culture, but a study of the social behaviors of an identifiable group of people, where the researcher looks for patterns of social organization (e.g, social networks) and ideational systems (e.g, worldview ideas) (Wolcott 2008a). Reading through Wolcott's works, I couldn't help but wonder about, how aptly the methodology is designed for my kind of work. For Instance, in dealing with SA LGB I had to rely on the participant's views as an insider emic perspective and report them in verbatim quotes in order to filter and synthesize the data through an etic scientific perspective to develop an overall cultural interpretation. (Wolcott 2008a).

### **Research Tools**

Two research methods were combined to form an ethnographical approach:

- participant observation
- semi-structured interviews

The complementary nature of these two methods helped to most effectively gather the richest data possible. To only use participant observation would imply that one can

reliably interpret the meaning of practice by observation, Interviewing will enable the meanings that participants attach to their practice to be identified. The research followed a three-pronged approach, beginning with observation, proceeding to interviews, followed by at least one additional occasion of observation.

I gathered data through involved participant observation from 2013 to 2015. The SA queer participants I studied were mostly IT professionals from well-educated middle class backgrounds. My contacts grew to include 12 from the local SA queer chapter. My interaction with the group occurred mostly in queer group events and subsequently on the phone to gather in-depth data.

To get better insight into my participant observation I conducted unstructured interviews with 12 of my participants who were between the ages of 25 years and 45 years old. To learn from individuals of various walks of life, I interviewed participants who stayed in the US for various amounts of time and participants who had made advocating for queer rights, central or peripheral to their lives, both. I conducted in-depth interviews at participants' homes or at public places taking notes and later drawing up my analysis.

Though I organized the sessions around certain themes relevant to my research, I left the interviews unstructured enough so that individuals could share what being queer and of SA descent actually meant to them.

These interviews were primarily guided by the research questions but were informal enough to allow for free-flow of information, so that new ideas and themes could be

incorporated. Additional questions were added depending upon the responses, to open gateways for further engagement and perspective taking.

According to Wolcott (1994), data collection should be understood as a process of description, analysis and interpretation. In that view description is a process of sharing collected data in language that fairly represents its character. Analysis reaches beyond description of recognizable description by recognizing relationship among the data, Interpretation stretches beyond data in order to suggest what is significant about the data.

### My experiences on the field

My first encounter with SA queers occurred in 2013 as I had attended a “meet and greet” organized by Trikone, which is a SA queer advocacy group based in San Francisco. The purpose of the meeting was to give SA queers an opportunity to find like-minded friends. Here, I happened to chat with an Indian SA gay person, who spoke about “coming out” issues with his parents. As I was chatting with him, I noticed that SA queers in the US live exactly like the mainstream SA diaspora, except that they were not fully assimilated in in-group circles. Apart from having an alternate sexual identity, their identity as SAs was totally imperceptible, meaning they moved about in society like any other SA. On further engagement, I learned that they socialized in separate groups that empathized with their concerns on being queer of SA origins. Till then I would often wonder, where are SA gays and lesbians? How come I haven’t come across a single person in my natural social environment? The silence was very conspicuous. Also having been a woman of SA descent I was well aware of the social norms for people who treaded away from the traditional path. I quickly discovered that life for a SA queer was exponentially difficult

in the ethnic circle. I despised feeling that SA culture puts tremendous pressure on people to conform to a prescribed norms, otherwise treat them as total outcasts. I could not understand why the educated elite in SA society, the most highly regarded people were often the ones who would express great contempt for queer people. Furthermore, given my family's apparent "homophobia" and insistence on "heteronormativity," there was no scope for me to even engage in a discussion about the existence of queers and the need to treat people equally. Finally, my interest in social justice and my ability to logically question certain set norms, led me to embark upon this research. The data I present result from more than two years of observing the SA queer groups in a variety of settings and roles and interviewing members of the circle.

During my formative years in India, I became very well-versed with how marginalization works in SA cultures. When I moved to the US, in 2005 and began mingling with SA in-groups here, I noticed similar attitudes and similar prejudices manifesting itself in myriad forms. For about 8 years or so I mingled predominantly in heteronormative circles where homophobia is a way of life until I decided to embark on my research thesis. Living in the US, where people are relatively comfortable in opening up and talking about their personal experiences, I decided to take advantage of this opportunistic research situation. My background in humanities, combined with my SA upbringing allowed me to approach the setting with a relatively neutral perspective while my personal involvement and knowledge of the SA cultural ideology enabled me to gain entry into queer circles fairly quickly.

To gather more information, I sometimes asked for referrals in a snowball fashion (Waldorf 1981) though over a period of time I had built enough trust level to approach them without any judgement from them. Through participant observation I was able to observe the body languages of participants and their affiliations with each other. On many an occasion, I consciously distanced myself to maintain a critical outlook and an objective perspective. Keeping an outsiders perspective helped me note down peculiar behaviors that were characteristic of SA queer groups.

In an effort to expand my perspective beyond my immediate observations, I sought interviews with those who were in long-term relationships, some who were married to same-sex partners and also those who were earlier in heterosexual relationships. In addition to casual conversations, structured interviews and family interviews, I examined a variety of other sources including newspaper stories, narrative books and culled out relevant information into my field notes. Throughout my research, I sought patterns and emerging typologies of data (John Lofland 1995). Reexamining the coded field notes and transcribed interviews led me to analyze several themes, including the lifestyle of SA queer participants, I continually refined these themes as I gathered more data through emergent, inductive analysis (Hammersley 2010). This ethnographical research has a two-step approach first listing down problems that are typical to SA LGB persons and second to develop and assess approaches to mitigate the problems and bring about positive changes in communities.

### Ethical considerations

Before embarking on the interview process, I decided to anticipate in advance any ethical issues that may arise during the research process (Creswell, 2009). This is relevant, in the light of sensitivity of the topic and acutely homophobic attitude of SAs. The study participants, I met were in various stages of their coming out process, like coming out only to family, deciding to not come out in the workplace, coming out only to friends etc. So keeping confidentiality was of paramount importance to them, which I was very much mindful of.

Research involves collecting data from people, about people (Punch, 2005). Researchers need to protect their research participants by developing trust with them, promoting the integrity of the research, guarding against misconduct and any impropriety that might reflect on their organizations or institutions, and cope with new challenging problems (Creswell, 2009).

All of the participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the California State University Institutional review board (IRB). Although there were no inherent risks for participating in this study, a couple of considerations were kept in mind while dealing with female queer subjects in terms of confidentiality and sensitivity. Secondly, utmost caution was undertaken in dealing with other research participants who may be acquaintances or friends of each other and may not be comfortable in sharing their stories. In this type of study, maintaining privacy is a paramount concern since some of the participants may not be fully out of the closet, care was taken to ensure that none

of the participants are mentioned in any conversation or otherwise. Also, in the age of social media, one must be careful whom we interact with so utmost caution was enforced to keep the participants discreet.

As noted by Harrington (2003), the richness of data and the depth of insight possible through the ethnographic process is reliant on the development of relationships with participants. As such it is important for the researcher to continually evaluate the ethnographic process. In order to do this, building trusting relationships with participants is the key. Gaining acceptance from the group members allows the researcher to participate and more accurately engage the group.

### Chapter Three: Literature Review

In reviewing the current empirical literature for understanding the lives of diasporic SA queer persons, I have identified four major areas of thought.

- 1) South Asian diasporic studies based on multicultural counseling
- 2) Socio-psychological perspective on queer diaspora
- 3) Queer theories bearing on ideas of diaspora
- 4) Quantitative research studies focusing on social constructivism.

- 1) South Asian diasporic studies based on multicultural counseling:

Though there is acute lacuna in literature that connects SA LGBs to SA cultural issues, (Kemp 1997), examines some of the mental issues, associated with counseling SA immigrants in the United States. This article gives an excellent overview of family structures and thought processes of a SA, however it does not include in its ambit the problems of SA queers in particular. Given the acute heteronormative outlook, typically expected cultural traits from SAs may not be reflected. This is because, the article itself goes with the assumption that they are addressing a largely heteronormative population. However, this article serves as a good starting point to build on research concerning core SA culture.

- 2) Socio-psychological perspective of queer diaspora:

Socio-psychological perspective focus on the inter-relations between social representation, identity and social action. Most of the research here draws on Identity

Process theory, and socio-psychological processes underlying the identity construction and management of identities and how groups and individuals respond to threatened identity. (Jaspal 2012) looks at inter-personal relations of gay men, during situations when their identity is threatened.

3) Queer theories bearing on ideas of diaspora: Research addressing the interaction of SAs and LGB diaspora is often, presented as queer theory bearing on ideas of diaspora. (Gopinath 2005) examines diasporic literature, film and music in order to bring out concepts of community in disparate geographic locations. Through media representations the research examines a space which falls outside not only the mainstream narratives of diaspora, colonialism and nationalism but also most projects of liberal feminism, gay and lesbian politics and theory. But, most literature in this space is a representation of popular narratives rather than micro-level identities.

4) Quantitative research studies focusing on social constructivism.

In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. (Creswell 2009). Hence the focus here is to create collective meanings out of experiences of some people. The social constructivism approach, has its benefits in the area of quantitative studies that access needs-assessment for a broad level of the population. In a report titled, Southern California LGBTIQ needs assessment report, a quantitative analysis of various needs of SA queer community in terms of number of people who would be using some vital services like counselling etc. The information

presented in these reports are mostly designed to formulate strategic planning processes and to be presented to policy-makers.

There is abundance of literature highlighting queer movements in South Asian countries and historical references to existence of queer practices but very few that highlight individual challenges in a largely heteronormative society from a holistic perspective. (Dave 2012) examines the formation of lesbian communities in India from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Dave documents how activism oscillates between the potential for new social arrangements and the questions that arise once the activists' goals have been accomplished. However, for the purpose of this study, I was interested only in the diasporic queer identities.

Though when it comes to intercultural communication theories, the relationship between cultural patterns and communication has been greatly explored in the area of intercultural competence from the point of view of interpersonal behavior in organizations (e.g, Koester 2010) however research on queer narratives amongst SA from an intercultural and interpersonal perspective has not be documented.

However, objective research that informs about their day to day lives of SA persons who identify as queer is largely under-represented in empirical literature. For example, not much is known about the experience of a queer individual who is born in the US to SA

immigrant parents, and the challenges faced by them in navigating between belief systems at home and outside world.

Unlike other Asian American groups, sociologists have not really emphasized on research pertaining to SAs. Most knowledge about this group has to be borrowed from sociological researches done on early immigrants to this country, fictional as well as non-fictional works of immigrant writers and drawing parallels from other Asian immigrants. But they do not include in their ambit, studies related to the queer SA population.

I argue that while all these theories offer valuable insights into the SA diasporic population, they are better understood, and indeed contextualized through inter-cultural theory. This is because, when the focus is on culture, it is possible to draw from all these sources to create a holistic cultural profile of this population. In particular, the process of defining the individualistic-collectivistic dimension, illuminates the theoretical relevance to lived experiences of SA queer persons.

In the current study, the issue of identity and intersectionality has been deeply explored because the connection between identity, culture and society, remains an area of vacuum for counsellors and other service providers. Minority and sexual identities are seen as connected to race rather than culture. This work addresses the need for experiential research, focusing specifically on exploring the intersection of culture and individual identity, from the perspective of SA LGBs themselves. Presently there is a lack of research in examining how macro, meso and micro level affect individual identity.

### Theoretical framework

In this section, I highlight the reasons behind why I chose to use intercultural communication theories as my central focus in this research. In order to explain this, I would like to draw the reader's attention to various areas where developing intercultural competence yield better results. As an example, let us take the field of cross-cultural psychology where western traditions of thinking and ethnocentric Euro-American approaches have shaped the landscape of cross-cultural research in the last five decades (Spering 2001). In this scenario, when a counselor encounters a SA LGB person, there is a scope for ethnocentric bias.

Ethnocentrism, a term coined by (Sumner 1906), means that there is a strong tendency to use one's own group standard as a standard when viewing other groups. As Azuma (1994) notes "When a psychologist looks at a non-western culture, through Western glasses, he may fail to notice important aspects of the non-Western culture, since the schema for recognizing them is not provided by his culture."

### Function of intercultural communication

The primary purpose of intercultural communication is to foster understanding of culturally mediated communication phenomena. Within this goal there are three distinct research avenues: culture specific, culture general and intercultural interaction. The "culture specific focuses on identifying communication behaviors of a specific culture. The "culture general" seeks to identify commonalities or universalities across cultures. A

combination of both culture- specific and culture-general integrates different culture interacting and hence called intercultural interaction (Zaharna, 2000).

To foster western understanding of SA culture

In order to do their job well, counsellors and interventionists rely on effective interaction with students who seek their help. “What is taken for granted, purposely discounted, or inadvertently ignored in the social behavior of one’s own culture may be focal and objectified in another, and these foreign insights may be relevant and useful in the analysis and understanding of the social behavior of one’s own culture” (Markus et al., 1996). Using intercultural communication in a school or college setting is important because they are becoming more diverse culturally.

In his paper Roux (2002) argued that successful educators are effective communicators and thus culturally competent in cross-cultural encounters. Thus for student counsellors intercultural communication can be a useful source of intercultural knowledge which would in turn foster outcomes that are culturally sensitive. Otherwise students who seek counselling can feel culturally isolated due to dichotomy between cultural identities and the dominant cultural norms. Thus cross-cultural communication is complex when it comes to advising or counselling those who cannot relate to a western cultural ideology. During my interactions with my SA queer participants, I came across similar sentiments echoed by SA LGBs who did not know whom to approach with their internal conflicts as they did not feel understood either by their SA peers nor the professional counsellors. For

Instance, one of the subjects was advised to move on and not bother if his parents accepted his queer status or not. But for an SA approval of parents has a profound impact on their identity.

Obstacles to effective intercultural communication include attitudes and dispositions, stereotyping and ethno-centrism. A rich repertoire of verbal and non-verbal behaviors appropriate to the intercultural situation as well as affective capabilities to react sensitively to fellow communicators from other cultures is a necessity in education (Linde, 1997).

Similarly, intercultural communication can be handy in fostering better interpersonal communication. For instance, it has been observed that ethnically distinct clients often showed therapeutic improvements when a counselor effectively acknowledged and validated clients inner world of experiences, which was previously uncommunicated to others. Consequently, in counseling, communication process has been viewed as an intervention for client change, in and itself, and not just the medium by which a counselor applies his or her counseling approaches.

Thus this research serves a window to define predominant attitudes of SA cultures, the study of which can help counselors foster better communication, with clients through acknowledging the lived realities of this ethnicity.

To start off my analysis, I would like to discuss the identity processes that are unique to SA.

#### Chapter Four: Coping with incompatible identities

This chapter explores how a group of young American queer participants of SA background, perceive and define their mix of ethnic and sexual identities. The ethnic identity for diasporic populations is closely tied to their migration story into the United States. In Intercultural parlance, diasporic communities are groups of people who leave their homeland and who maintain a longing to return to “home.” (Sorrells 2013). Most SAs who live in the US maintain very close ties with their home country and its cultural signifiers (Saussure 1969). Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1997) summarized, “Meaning does not inhere in things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is a result of a signifying practice—a practice that produces meaning, that makes things mean” (p 24). This brings out the fact that SA culture is a system of long-held beliefs and practices that, is hard to pass over despite migration to another country.

When we analyze the identity construction process of a diasporic population, it pays to take a close look at their immigration and assimilation processes. In order to explain this, I would like to discuss the relationship between macro level identity development, and micro-level identity development from an intercultural perspective. Also drawing from my discussions with SA queer participants, I would like to bring out the metamorphosis of how macro-level identity development percolates down to micro-level identity development that forms the social identity of a SA LGB person.

## Diasporic identity development-understanding differences

In the United States, since the SA LGB persons, belong to a non-dominant group they are more aware of their own differences vis-à-vis the dominant group. Due to this, responses related to their culture come with a good measure of self-awareness; however their responses come with a certain sense of uneasiness due to their alternate sexual identity. Cultural identity is defined as ones situated sense of self that is shaped by cultural experiences and social locations (Sorrells 2013). Ironically, people who are keenly aware that they do not belong to the dominant group, have a heightened sense of cultural differences. “Differences in culture,” then becomes their gateway to understanding their culture better; developing a more conscious awareness of their cultural identity earlier than those belonging to the dominant group.

Similarly people of alternate sexuality, become more aware of their sexual leanings very early in life. Just as one of the research participants put it “My friends who identify as white American are able to see themselves as “individuals,” which often underlies the fact that they do not owe allegiance to any culture. However, we SA LGBs see ourselves as having a cultural identity based on the ways in which we are different from the dominant group. Most SA LGBs seem to go through this identity crisis twice, once when they become aware of being different from the dominant group and second when they become aware of their different sexual preference.”

Identity crisis- a cultural dichotomy

Being an integral part of SA culture, SA queer persons, innately sense the non-acceptance of alternate sexual choices within their community. Due to this, they go through a sort of emotional dichotomy in an effort to “fit-in,” given that their religious and cultural groups can prescriptively advocate heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, non-heterosexual ethnic and religious minority individuals may opt to remain ‘invisible’ (Murray 1997).

For SA queer persons, their unique identity is a part of the cultural history they grow up with. Cultural histories are shared stories and interpretations of cultural groups that are often passed along in written or oral form from generation to generation. Cultural histories provide cohesiveness for cultural groups and a foundation for sustaining unified group-based identities. People from non-dominant groups generally know about the cultural histories of the dominant group than the reverse. (Kivel 1996). It can virtually be a moral dilemma being brought up in a rigidly heteronormative and homophobic cultural space.

As communication scholar Donald Ellis (2005) who says “Identities are strong, rigid and stable. They do not change easily. In fact, identities are so strong, the conflict threatens individual’s sense of self. This threat evokes a powerful response. Typically, this response is aggressive and can escalate. At a macro level, ethno-political conflicts usually involve polarized negative identities where one’s sense of self is dependent upon being in opposition to another. (p.47).

Going by the experiences of SA LGBs this occurrence is true even at a micro-level where opposition is seen as a way to reclaim the SA identity. This perpetuates an in-group

climate of disrespect and rejection of queer persons. Secondly, an SA LGB person is always surrounded by ethnocentric cultural trait that act as reinforcer to a socially prescribed way of living.

#### Ethnocentrism an acute barrier

As first conceptualized by William Sumner (1906), ethnocentrism is the idea that one's own groups' way of thinking, being and acting in the world is superior to others. For SA LGB persons, this attitude among SAs is particularly problematic since such a thinking acts as a mental block in even gathering knowledge about the compulsions of a queer person. The assumption among SAs that one's own group is superior to others, leads to negative evaluation of those who don't "fit-in,"; this can also result in dehumanizing behavior, legitimization of prejudices, discrimination, conflict and violence.

While some scholars argue that ethnocentrism has been a central feature in all cultures throughout history and served as a mechanism of cultural cohesion and preservation (Kim 1997). This feature of SA culture, pushes SA LGB persons into further dilemma. As one of the participants put it, "being proud of their culture, has served as a binding force within this diaspora but at the same time resulted in, people being unreceptive to any change in attitudes, that's the reason why heteronormativity is very prevalent in our culture."

On a societal level, ethnocentrism is closely associated with identifying with the group and an elaborate social display emphasizing allegiance towards a particular culture.

“Being traditional and ethnocentric is almost like gaining a pride of place in SA circles, so for parents whose kids identify as queer, it is like deviating from the norm, which they themselves have been prescribing. This gets a little socially awkward for them,” says a participant. Historically at a macro level and today, ethnocentrism is symbolic of having a license to perpetrate unfairness in a prescriptive manner.

A participant narrates his own experience of ethnocentric outlook among his family members. “I am skeptical about coming out to my family because they seem to be completely blind to a broader point of view. They believe that SA’s way of doing things, seeing things, etc, is the only right way. Any mention of gay rights only leads to a stronger point of view. Also, in a bid to be defensive, they respond arrogantly and dismissively to those who don’t fit the mold.”

This problem is further aggravated when the ethnocentric person is socially powerful, he or she will then have power to influence others and the SA LGB person tends to be further marginalized. “Most people who are ethnocentric and exude a sense of power are simply not aware of the disservice they do, to those who cannot fit into the conventional heterosexism.”

Heterosexism is an ideological system that denies and denigrates any non-heterosexual behavior, identity or community. Like sexism and racism, heterosexism, not only entails individual biased attitudes but refers to a coupling of prejudicial beliefs with institutional power to enact systemic discrimination. Here, institutional power would be community based organizations that prescribe heterosexism. (Thomas Nakayama 1998).

Drawing from accounts shared by SA LGBs, who say “We are bombarded by diktats that tell us how to regulate our behavior, to keep up the rhetoric of superiority of heteronormative life, if not in action, then communication.” This suggests that queer people may experience rebuke on a daily basis from their families, where being queer is a completely invisible phenomenon. In SA circles, heteronormativity is all pervasive including socially constructed gender roles, opposite sex romantic attractions and minimum display of physical affection in public to the point that sexuality is generally unquestioned.

To understand this further, it pays to look at how minority identity develops at a macro, meso and micro level.

#### SA Minority Identities from an intercultural communication perspective

In the previous section, we dealt with moral dilemma of a SA queer person in terms of individual identity. Here I would like to build an analysis of how identity develops among diasporic populations at a group level (meso). Group dynamics has a profound effect on individual identity. The relationship between group dynamics and identity, gives us an insight into how and why marginalization occurs. To understand this, the standpoint theory can be applied to queer participants who feel a sense of isolation in their own groups as well as dominant groups. A standpoint is a place, from which to view and makes sense of the world around us. Our standpoint influences what we see and what we cannot or do not or choose not to see. (Wood 2005). So feminist theorists argue that

people from oppressed or subordinated groups, must understand both their own perspectives, and perspective of those in power in order to survive. Collins (1986) notion of outsiders within, points to the possibility of dual vision of marginalized people and groups. The concept of “outsiders within” fully resonates with the social placement of SA queer groups. Typically, SAs identify with multitude of identities: gender, religion, nationality to name a few.

As noted earlier our identities develop over a period of time and always through interaction with others in a similar culture. In a diasporic sense, SA’s primarily develop their identities, on the relative position or location of the identity within their social hierarchy. For Instance, being a male and of higher caste have a higher position on the social hierarchy even among diasporic populations. Also, in SA cultures being a queer person falls under the lowest strata of the social hierarchy; a Hindu religious identity is generally more privileged than a homosexual identity etc.

#### Majority identities and Minority identities

To create a differentiator between various positions, we label the privileged identities “majority identities” and label the less privileged identities as “minority identities”.

Social science researchers have identified various models that describe how majority and minority identities develop. Although the models center on racial and ethnic identities, they may also apply to other identities such as class gender or sexual orientation (Pedersen, 1993)

## Minority Identity Development

As noted earlier, minority identities develop earlier than majority identities. For example straight people tend to not think about their sexual orientation identity often, whereas gay people are often acutely aware of their sexual orientation identity being different from the majority and develop a sense of sexual orientation identity earlier than people who are straight. Similarly while whites may develop a strong ethnic identity, they often do not think about their racial identity, whereas members of racial minority groups are aware of their racial identities at an early age (Ferguson 1990)

### Stages of minority identity development (nakayama)

Stage I- Unexamined identity: As the name suggests, this stage is usually understood as lack of any thought process associated with identity be it racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, gender etc. At this stage, the identity issue may simply not occur to an individual. As one SA queer person puts it, “Why should I care about my SA roots in the United States, I have other friends.” Or the SA queer person may feel very secure in the dominant white culture and will have a negative attitude towards the SA culture. They may enjoy the invisibility that the dominant culture, sometimes offers them. Sometimes SA queers may exhibit overtly straight demeanor just to fit into their culture.

Stage II- Conformity- This stage is characterized by emulating the dominant group and exhibiting a strong desire to assimilate into the dominant culture. For Instance, some of

my research participants had a negative and self-depreciating attitude towards both themselves and their immediate SA group. This attitude largely stemmed from the frustrations of not being able to assimilate in the group with their core desires intact. As one young SA lesbian woman said “I made all effort to look straight by talking about my desire to get married and never let my parents know that I had reservations about getting married.”

Here, individuals who have an openly negative attitude towards their own culture, may get negative labels like “black sheep of the family” for being queer. They may even be known to be uncultured for their desire to be like the dominant white group. This often is the case, until they face subtle or over rejection from the dominant group.

Stage III: Resistance and separatism: The biggest trigger for SA queers to move to this stage of identity development is discrimination. A growing awareness that not all aspects of dominant group can match with SA sense of ideals. No matter how much we try to emulate white people, lack of acceptance can leave one feeling like they belong nowhere. For example. One of my research participants never really thought much about her identity, since she was for the most part, raised in the US. However, she became more self-aware when during an event, she was asked to stay aside due to her brown skin. This in the company of other queer participants, who were most white American. At the end, of one of the discussions, she realized that no concessions were made to include her in the group, that’s when her SA identity became important to her. She started cherishing

her SA queer identity and started playing the role of an activist and started mingling more with her SA peers.

Take the case in point of an international SA queer student who came to the United States, she did not consider her identity to be an issue in queer circles. Until, she felt marginalized and did not have anything in common with her American queer.

In some cases, minorities move to this stage, when they come in contact with someone from in-group who exhibits a strong identity. This encounter may result in a correction of sorts of their own identity. For Instance, when they come across members of SA queer groups who play an active role in creating awareness among the SA communities, they feel inspired and join the cause primarily fueled by rejection from the dominant group. This stage is characterized by a thorough endorsement of one's group and all the values attributed to the group. At the same time, the SA queer may cultivate a disdain for the values and norms of the dominant group.

Stage VI: Integration: This stage is simply a stage of acceptance. Here, it can be said that individuals are comfortable with their identity. Individuals who have reached this stage have a strong understanding of who they are in relation to their group and also an appreciation of other groups. Simply put, comfort with their own identity makes them feel less threatened or marginalized by other groups. When it comes to SA queer persons, their desire to assimilate also boils down to a desire to oppose other forms of injustice and not merely oppression aimed at their own group.

C: I had a hard time accepting my SA identity. And for a while I didn't want to be among typical SA folks. However, now I realize there will also be some discrimination against queer people among SA circles. We're really just invisible. Many times, when I am at a social function, people often treat me like I don't exist. But the flip side of it is that because of my own rejections, I have developed empathy for people in similar situations.

Why it pays to look at identity construction from an inter-cultural perspective

SA American queer persons go through significant struggles due to socially incongruous sexual and cultural identity. A person's cultural identity has a crucial role to play when dealing with communication and identity issues.

Identity serves as a bridge between culture and communication. It is important because we communicate our identity to others, and we learn who we are through communication. It is through communication—with our family, friends, and others—that we come to understand ourselves and form our identity. Issues of identity are particularly important in intercultural interactions. (Nakayama 2004)

South Asians, homophobia and heteronormativity

Given the generally unfavorable social representations associated with any alternate sexual identity, SAs find themselves struggling with a dual sense of identity, one that conflicts with their sense of self as interpreted by society and what they actually feel from within. This phenomenon is amply explained through Identity negotiation theory where individuals define themselves in relation to groups they belong to due to the basic human need for security and inclusion. At the same time, humans also need differentiation from

these same groups. Managing relationships to these various groups involve boundary regulation and working through the tension between inclusion and differentiation and can make us feel secure or vulnerable. (Toomey, 2005).

Perhaps it is reasonable to assume that in their process of identity negotiation, with their immediate family and social contacts the queer participants, may fear becoming a target of discrimination and hatred from their community if they reveal their alternate sexual identity. More so, because similar experiences have been reported by their fellow contacts. Conflicts can arise within a family when there are sharp differences between what others in the family and friends think we are and what we think we are. In order to understand how SA queers negotiate their social identity lets first understand how they form their identities in the first place.

Micro level identity development in diasporic populations

Our aim in this study is to look at assimilation of alternate sexual identities within the same culture and their experiences being in the margins of the dominant culture. A useful theory to understand this is that of impression management-how people present themselves and how they guide the impression others form of them (Goffman, 1959). Some scholars suggest that individuals are constantly performing “spin control” campaigns to highlight their strengths and virtues while also attempting “damage control” by minimizing deficiencies (James T Tedeschi 1985; Paul R Rosenfeld 1991). This is

particularly evident in SA queer youth interaction when they want to present a favorable picture of themselves by highlighting their education and other achievements to project themselves as responsible youth who just have alternate sexual identities.

Many of the research participants expressed intrigue at the fact that when they meet at a queer gathering the first question they seem to ask each other is “Do your parents know?” not even specifying About what?. Also all the participants mentioned the fact that they seem to instinctively talk about their families of origin. For SAs in general, families form the core central aspect of their identity.

What it means to negotiate a South Asian queer identity?

As one participant put it, to be SA American is to unconditionally love ones family and all it stands for. SA American are incredibly closed-knit group of people especially when it comes to community related activities. In this respect, SA American families and community members are like clans, they go much further than the immediate families and runs deep into the extended families. In these societies, even in the US, the immediate society has an important role to play in a person’s educational and even marital choices. The goal of existence for a SA person is to find his or her place not as an independent entity but in the complex web of interdependent relationships. For a SA queer person, the challenge is to find acceptance as an individual in a contrasting surrounding.

Communication scholar Ge Gao (1996) describes the Chinese sense of self: The other-orientation thus is key to an interdependent self. Congruous with the notion of an interdependent self, the Chinese self also needs to be recognized, defined, and completed

by others. The self's orientation to others' needs, wishes and expectations is essential to the development of the Chinese self. ( p. 84)

Given the various interviews conducted with SA queer persons, my analysis is that their identities vary according to social contexts, where the individualistic self constantly conflicts with the collectivistic self. For Instance, in the United States, the dominant sense of identity comes from being independent and self-reliant however an SA queer persons' cultural identity lays emphasis on independence within the boundaries of their cultural milieu. Even today SA persons live and socialize in small cohesive communities which precisely add to the challenge of wholehearted acceptance. Among their kin, a SA queer person is seen as the "other."

This is very similar to Chinese culture where the other-orientation is key to an interdependent self, the self also needs to be recognized, defined and completed by others. The self's orientation to others' needs wishes and expectations is essential to the development of the Chinese self. (Ge Gao 1996). Also, in my interactions with SA culture their identity from a familial perspective appears to be very dominant. For Instance in an open ended interview question when asked to describe self, they always tend to talk about themselves in relation to relationships, family, groups etc which brought forth their idea of self as an entity of a particular culture and challenges to blend in. Groups play an important role in the development of all these dimensions of self. As we are growing up we identify with many groups, based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion and nationality (Tajfel, 1981, 1982)

When it comes to SA queer persons, they are seen to be, constantly juggling their multiple identities according to the groups they are interacting with. For example, while going to the temple or place of worship with the families, their sexual identities do not surface at all, in fact in many instances the community members are totally unaware of their queer identity. So concealing certain personal things about them becomes a mode of self-preservation to be accepted in society in normal times, in other contexts, like interacting with members of local queer organizations, participants lay emphasis on their gender identity. Thus for SA queer diaspora, identity is decided on the basis of contexts. Individuals define themselves in relation to groups they belong to due to the basic human need for security and inclusion. At the same time humans also need differentiation from these same groups for forming a unique self-identity.

How the SA queer movement began in the US?

In order to analyze the SA queer identity it is vital to look at emergence of South Asian queer community and movement in the United States. The South Asian queer movement in United States, began in true earnest, after two gay South Asians Savir and Arvind established Trikon (tri as in trim, kon as in cone) Sanskrit for triangle. Pink triangles were first used in Nazi concentration camps to identify gay prisoners (Ratti, 1993). Today the sign is embraced by gay men and women not only as reminders of injustice done in the past, but also as a symbol of gay pride. Trikon was one of the first groups to identify with South Asian queers living in San Francisco. (Cooper,n.d). For most South Asians

who come to the US, the economic imperative, meaning the need to find a better job and lifestyle acts as a dominant mode to stay here. For the SA LGB person being in the US, also serves as a haven to experiment with their alternate sexual identity and their assimilation process.

During my interviews with SAs, a fact that came up over and over again, was the Asian obsession with healthy standing in society. For parents who hold a certain goodwill in society, with their children coming out as queer, their standing in society suddenly takes over a paramount concern. An essential ingredient to maintaining familial standing is satisfying the cultural expectation of a heterosexual marriage. A slight deviation from the norm is enough to raise eyebrows. Most participants said that the idea of a person having an alternate sexual identity is almost inconceivable to most SAs.

Since this study is about integration of queer SA persons in their own in-groups it pays to look at the intersection of culture and identity and symbolic representation.

## Chapter Five Defining SA queers through thick Intersectionalities

In the previous section, I used a multi-level approach to determine factors influencing, identity construction of an SA person. To expand this further, I would like to analyze the reciprocal effects of other socially defined categories like nationality, sexuality, age etc, within the concept of intersectionality.

Intersectionality highlights the construction of multidimensional relationships traditionally involving gender, race, and class. Because it is problematic to treat gender, race, and class as mutually exclusive, additive categories, studying such significant positions at their intersection highlights how normativity produces social inequality and ignores multiple, stratified experiences (Crenshaw 1989; 1995).

More recently, scholars have begun to acknowledge dimensions of sexuality, nationality, and age into the intersectional scope (Collins 2004). Despite that when it comes to the study of diasporic populations, it is widely left unclear as to which level these reciprocal effects apply: the level of social structures, the level of constructions of identity, or the level of symbolic representations. (Degele 2011). The idea here is to utilize it's potential to look beyond different theoretical currents. Incorporating the concept of intersectionality into studies using standpoint theories represents an important extension that reduces the likelihood of essentializing complex human beings into oversimplified categories. (Katrina Bell Jordan 2000)

The need for thick intersectionalities

To construct complex identities such as SA queer participants, I am using a concept called as “thick intersectionalities.” The race/class/gender/sexuality mantra produces a flat, formulaic, superficial and “roster-like approach” to intersectionality by simply listing such categories as an individual’s identity. (Yep, 2010).

#### Filtering through thicker intersectionalities

Thick intersectionalities features four defining characteristics associated with social identity.

- 1) **Struggles against coherence and premature closure of identity:** To highlight and illustrate these features, I draw on the ethnography of SA queer participants. As is the case with any population, it is important to note that there is no singular SA queer community in the United States. But there are multidimensional intersecting communities based on such finer details like immigration status, profession, body type, gender performance, middle-class, country of origin, color of skin within the same ethnicity. During the inter-play of such dynamics, thick intersectionality struggles against coherence and premature closure of identity through the exploration of consistencies, contradictions and tensions in context-specific ways. This feature of thick intersectionality emphasizes that identity is an ongoing process, one that is more about “becoming” than being (Yep, 2002) In the context of this ethnography, I would like to explain how SA queer people display their identities as a member of a certain race, gender and sexual identity at different moments in their life; in the workplace when they

dress formally and get into a world where they do not explicitly speak about their sexuality unless questioned; in SA queer groups when they display their identities in full scope and demonstrate their SA identity without having to hide their sexual identity; third, when they are with their families and are expected to fit into the hetero-patriarchy mode. Thus they navigate their social worlds, by being inside and outside of their SA identities. This aspect brings out the fact that their identities cannot be fixed because of its dynamic nature. For Instance, at their workplace, they are governed by the structural forces of corporate dynamics. While most SA queers in the US work in the tech industry, they may choose to hide their sexual identity for reasons other than culture. For Instance, queer face uphill battles fighting for organizational acceptance by management despite their individual achievements (Schope, 2004). Although such identities seem to be exhibiting itself in micro contexts they are already infused with global meanings.

2) Embracing the messiness of everyday lived experiences: Here, the concept of thick intersectionalities suggest that individual identities are also defined by certain creative and performative aspects. In other words, how an individual inhabits an identity say for instance, U.S South Asian female IT industry employee- is a combination of being SA and adhering to the social scripts and expectations as imposed by the culture and creative enactment ie. Being a social crusader against discrimination and one who demonstrates her intelligence and educational levels in building strategies to tackle issues concerning lesbians. Such demonstrations of interplay of messiness of everyday life is taken into account as part of the process of construction of intersectional identities. In this

research study, an average technology employee in bay area, who identifies as gay inhabits many identities- a board member in a local SA queer organization, a host at a cultural SA music festival and a counsellor for SA parents whose kid identifies as queer, all these different identities play for and against the backdrop of core culture. In short, the identity he embodies in the local bay area social scene is like enactment of a script with improvisations.

### 3) Focusing on the Affective Investments of Identity Performances:

An affective investment would mean to make positive investments in your life to gain acceptance as a queer and make way for others. To explain this concept I would like to draw upon the example of a SA lesbian whom I interviewed, describes her own affective journey- which is full of sadness due on non-acceptance, fear and apprehension that engulfed her, a taste of both rejection and popularity as the triumph of a good education gave her the necessary acceptance as an intellectual.

Theoretically, affective charges involves the process of identification, counter-identification and disidentification (Munoz 1999). Identification refers to the process of adherence and subscription to the dominant discursive and ideological forms and structures in a culture. Counteridentification refers to the process of rejection of and rebellion against dominant cultural ideologies and structures.

Disidentification refers to the process that neither completely assimilates nor strictly opposes dominant cultural ideology. Disidentification produces a politically conscious

subject that recycles and reworks dominant cultural meanings to include, and potentially empower, marginalized identities in a cultural system. Gradually most SA in the US function with dual-identity (Kemp 1997).

In this research, the subjects' joy and pride in her own affective investments like demonstrating professional success to get a sense of seriousness to the queer movement in general. Using her tenacity to survive in a cultural climate that denies queer people the right to exist. Thus making personal investments gives her a chance to make a positive effect in the life of queer people.

4) Understanding identities as embodied: Finally the concept of “thick intersectionalities” defines identities as embodied when the group shares common geopolitical and historical contexts. In other words, identities cannot be understood as abstract social categories (e.g, race, class, gender, sexuality, nation and the body. (Seikmoto 2012) To illustrate such relations, let me take the example of a group of Indian gays and lesbians, whose SA identities puts them in an empowering position and a disempowering position all at the same time. For Instance, living in the US, can be give SA queer people a sense of invisibility, who are looking to escape oppression and discrimination in their immediate social circle. Yet, being in a western country, can subject them to subtle white racism and negative stereotypes about their heritage. Alongwith these fears, SA queers face the discomfort of cultural, familial and spiritual support. But the flip side is that denial of their diversity has forged better assimilation and group dynamics through shared oppression. Thus “thick intersectionalities” focuses on the complex interaction between such abstractions and how individuals make sense of

enact and contest these categories as they are simultaneously enabled and constrained by them in various ways and to different degrees.(Yep 2015).

Far from being a homogeneous group, the cultural identity and world view of most SAs in the US are mediated by many factors, including generation in the US, educational level, social class, identification with their own ethnicity and culture and experiences with racism, sexism and exclusion. (Farah Ibrahim 1997).

By using “thick intersectionalities” I have tried to bring out the symbolic, structural and individual aspects of social genders. (Harding 1998). Through a context-specific description of SA queer identity, I have explained intersectionality as a system of interactions between inequality-creating social structures (i.e power relations), symbolic representations and identity constructions that are topic-oriented and inextricably related to social praxis. Thus the structural levels are linked to individual social practices faced by SA LGBs.

Further to SA identity construction, the upcoming section also deals with strategies employed by SA queer persons, to negotiate and construct a semblance with external in-group environments.

## Chapter Six: SA LGB's cultural orientation

This chapter provides an analysis of cultural reasons and social practices that contribute to acute resistance to accept the SA queer community. Following Pierre Bourdieu's "Theory of Practice," I have used social practices that are accessible through empirical research, as the subject for my analysis. Bourdieu makes a plea for a theory of practice that resolves the sharp division between empiricism and theory (Bourdieu 2013). To achieve this, I have used Geert Hofstede's cultural taxonomy to bring out the degree of interdependence, a society maintains among its members. Starting from social practices of a SA person, I was able to reconstruct identities the SA LGB community constructs as well as the structures and norms they draw on.

### "Social reputation" as the prime barrier for integration

Among SA circles "social reputation" is by far the biggest barrier for SA LGB acceptance in every day society. Here "reputation" does not refer to individual reputation but collective reputation of the family. All the participants who were interviewed, unanimously responded that their parents' attitude towards social standing of the family came in the way of their wholehearted acceptance.

As one participant puts it, "There is always an air of hesitation and wishful thinking that the opposite is true, meaning, my child will grow out of being queer. The family members were more concerned about how it will be received in the community and how

the family as a whole will be looked upon. In fact this attitude is so deeply entrenched that it even precedes their own child's pain and suffering. More than their personal opinions, it is the opinion of the immediate group that they were most concerned about," said he. In SA culture, every individual decision taken has to augur well with the group paradigm. Each person is responsible for fulfilling many family obligations, such as enhancing the family's reputation (Bhattacharya 2004). This points to the "outside-in" perspective of SAs, which diametrically contradicts the western mindset of "inside-out." This approach constitutes the core dichotomy of an individualistic-collectivistic dimension.

Cultures differ in the extent to which individual autonomy is regarded favorably or unfavorably. Thus cultures vary in their tendency to encourage people to be unique or independent or conforming or interdependent. These variations as the individualism-collectivism dimension, the degree to which a culture relies on and has allegiance to the self or the group. (Hofstede 2001)

In the US, larger cities like San Francisco, New York tend to have a large group of people of the same countries of origin. Most participants claimed that when it comes to SAs, they tend to understand themselves through family lineage, caste membership which results in a blurred sense of personal identity and a dominant sense of in-group identity. For parents who may be first generation SA American, it is hard to break out of this perception of themselves in order to thoroughly accept a person of non-heterosexual sexual tendencies. Similar, attitudes were experienced by the participants in themselves who expressed, "All my life, imbibing the core attitudes of SA, I had tried to avoid conflict with my parents." As she did not want them to lose face because of her being

identified as queer. But the confusion was that this Asian passivity was highly incorrect in the eyes of their American peers who felt that South Asians were not being true to themselves by being closeted. However, most SAs would like to seek in-group assimilation by retaining their core SA values.

I would like explain this in the backdrop of American culture, where the autonomy of the individual is paramount. Key words used to invoke this cultural pattern include independence, privacy, self and the all-important I (Koester, 2010). As one interviewee says “My mother keeps ill health, so I am afraid to come out to her, lest it may give her an existential crisis of sorts since the core orientation towards life is her place in society and her respect and dignity in her immediate surroundings.” For a queer youth raised in core individualistic values, a judgement about what is right or wrong can be made only from his or her vantage point. So he or she may think that “hey, it would be great if my parents accept my sexuality, if not, it is ok”. The difference is that being accepted by parents or by their extended families may not be the central focus of their lives or may not be seen as “must-have” since the orientation itself is “its my life.” For a SA person, this may be a cause of surprise, as they feel their existence to be incomplete without coming to terms about their sexuality with their parents.

Most participants have experienced that being in the closet imposes a very large chasm of psychological distance between those who are members of their group (the ingroup) and those who are not (the outgroup). It can conclusively be said that the individualism-collectivism dimension is the key deciding factor in determining how non-heterosexual

individuals will be perceived in society where the practice of heterosexuality is the norm. Scholars such as Harry Triandis believe that the individualism-collectivism dimension is by far the most important attribute that distinguishes one culture from another (Triandis, 1986)

Power distance comes in the way of coming out

In SA culture the relationship between parents and children tend to have a tone of formality. As one participant put it. “We are taught early on that children who refrain from sharing their own unique ideas are seen as the best behaved ones, in fact getting spanked for spelling out any idea that contradicts the outlook of elders in the family is not all that uncommon.” This suggests that the rules of discipline and what constitutes “good-behavior” is largely governed by how well you fit into the mold. Also, as said earlier, the paradigm of life itself is outside-in, meaning, a child’s good behavior is defined by how the child appears to social observers or acquaintances. Thus power distance and being collectivistic goes hand-in-hand; the topics that can be discussed with motherly or fatherly figures is also a component of the prevalent social order. Here, I would like to add that, lately, media and globalization has bridged this communication gap where children are beginning to give their parents a better insight into their personal lives. But talking about sexuality still remains a taboo. “Most conversations about marriage and having a partner merely skirt the issue of sexuality” said a participant. The traditional desire of parents to choose the child’s mate also complicates the lives of younger generation who want to please the parents but also acculturate and assimilate (Kemp

1997). Thus power distance refers to the degree to which the culture believes that institutional and organizational power should be distributed unequally and the decisions of the power holders should be challenged or accepted. The consequences of the degree of power distance that a culture prefers are evident in family customs, the relationship between students and teachers, organizational practices and in other areas of social life (Myron W Lustig 2010). In order to entrust the support of their parents, children need to have a way to convey their innermost feelings in an unabashed manner. But for SA queer persons, to use a metaphor, there is cultural wall of sorts that makes the process of coming out far more challenging. Also there is an added problem of the fact that it does not even remotely occur to parents, that their child must be queer. "Heteronormativity is so much entrenched in SA culture that being queer is considered otherworldly," says a participant.

Poor tolerance for uncertainty poses a major barrier for SA queers

Adapting to life changes and coping skills towards uncertainties is seen to differ from culture to culture. Having said that, given any culture a certain degree of uncertainty is inevitable. However, cultures differ in the extent to which they prefer and can tolerate ambiguity and therefore, in the means they select for coping with change. Thus all cultures, differ in their perceived need to be changeable and adaptable. The extent to which the culture feels threatened by ambiguous, uncertain situations and tries to avoid them by establishing more structure. (Hofstede, 2001).

In SA culture, there is a high degree of uncertainty avoidance, meaning, at a societal level SAs would like to keep everything predictable. Through the responses of the research participants, I realized that this trait is similarly applicable to SA queers and the in-group social circle. To put it simply, SA queer persons try to avoid coming out because they fear that it will irreparably damage their relations with their parents, who in turn would like to keep it within the family as they fear that their social standing will be permanently altered. Contrasting to this, their American peers (parents and children alike) belong to a culture which live life on a day-to-day basis, are more willing to accept change and take risks. In Individualistic cultures, there is an attitude towards communicating your feelings to solve your problems. In fact deviance is expected from kids after a certain stage especially in their formative years. In collectivistic cultures, parents typically find themselves at a loss in dealing with their children's deviant ideas. "When I look at my western peers, I notice that there is hardly any struggle towards finding acceptance from parents. They tend to sulk a bit but quickly recover and move on but for SA gaining acceptance from parents becomes a matter of identity crisis," says a participant.

In Hofstede's 6D Model, India scores very high on this dimension indicating an appreciation for top-down structure in society. (<http://geert-hofstede.com/india.html>.n.d.). Power distance is also a matter of how two generations perceive each other. For Instance, the young queer participants may be viewed by their families as too non-confirming and unconventional; consequently, they may view their parents as being too rigid and controlled. Thus for SAs coming out of the closet is fraught

with underlying tensions as being queer is not seen as one of the traits but stands at the very core of the identity paradigm.

### Masculinity vs Femininity

One of the concerns of cultures in general pertains to gender expectations and the extent to which people prefer achievement and assertiveness or nurturance and social support. Hofstede refers to these variations as the masculinity-femininity dimension. This dimension indicates the degree to which a culture values “masculine” behaviors such as assertiveness and the acquisition of wealth or “feminine” behaviors such as caring for others and quality of life. I would relate this to the acute differences in a way a lesbian and a gay would be perceived in SA culture. “In SA queer circles it is not uncommon to hear that boys can do anything they want, but you need to be in your best behavior”. In fact many SA men, who engage in same-sex behaviors are married and have children. There are no studies on the same sex behaviors of SA women- however given several websites and other resources of gay and lesbian SA individuals, to arrange “marriages of convenience” to fulfill their societal and familial duty of getting married, while being able to continue same-sex behavior. (Patrick Mangto 2002). Social shame towards a female is far more pronounced than a male child. Boys are expected to enjoy a certain degree of independence and lead a carefree life. SA culture advocates that female remain within the fold of the family for security reasons. But in the US most of the SA lesbians are highly educated and in highly paid jobs.

Through this section, I have given an all-encompassing way of how a social order is passed on from generation to generation until it becomes normalized.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

When one comes to understand the core values of the SA queer group, it clearly shows that resistance to society's heteronormative culture is much more complex than a typical reaction to mainstream culture. I conclude by discussing an analytical framework for understanding the individual and collective meanings, multiple identities, personal and familial way of coming to terms with their queer identity.

To do this, I use Intersectional analysis in eight steps (Winker and Degele 2009). My ethnographical study concerns the integration challenges of SA queer community.

Thirteen narrative interviews were carried out with SA queer participants who shared their challenges about integrating into society. The participants were differentiated in terms of age, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on. Here, I present the conclusions of my findings, taking into account the inter-mingling effects of social structures, constructions of identity and symbolic representations.

Step 1: Describing identity constructions: Through my interviews with SA queers, I find that when they speak about themselves to define who they are, they do so by means of differentiation from the dominant group. This means that SA LGBs tend to construct their own "otherness" even before their personal identities. This is amply brought out in the section regarding "Identities," where, a metamorphosis of how social construction have a bearing on individual identity is presented. The findings suggest a profound difference in construction of identities in an individualistic culture, versus the collectivistic culture in

diasporic populations. In this study, I have tried to bring about that the macro, meso and micro forces contributing to identity construction, are not mutually exclusive. The chapter outlines the intra-categorical complexity that constitutes the identity construction of SA LGB persons.

Step II: Identifying symbolic representations: In the chapter on “thick intersectionalities” I have carried out a contextual analysis of social practices of SA culture. This helps in bringing out the changing nature of identity according to contexts. Thick intersectionalities is useful in bringing out how SA LGBs negotiate their identity on the basis of norms and values that operate within a society. While describing the SA social event or going to the workplace, I bring out how SA LGBs navigate through the hegemonic representations of heteronormativity. Here, I use contextual analysis, to bring out the exact behavior patterns that fall in the realm of appropriateness in a SA society.

Step III: Finding references to social structures: By analyzing the immigration pattern of SAs I try to bring out the fact that social practices and identity constructions are linked together. Thus micro level identity constructs are directly influenced by social structures and institutions (macro and meso level). Though extensive interviews with SAs, I have analyzed, how the narratives about their social practices, relate to structural power relations. The concept of trans-migrants brings out how something happening in the country of origin has a cultural influence among the immigrant population in another country.

Step IV: Denominating interrelations of central categories on all three levels: Here, I have made an attempt to cull out most important differentiating categories, starting from identity. Since SA identity construction stems from forces of differentiators like skin color, clothes, individualistic versus collectivistic dimension. In this study, it was the most crucial thing, since differentiators are a site of interwoven-ness and conflict.

Step V: Comparing and clustering of subject constructions: Through Hoefstede, intercultural taxonomy, I draw up a synopsis of the interviews and categorize them into themes. Here I first look at the themes in detail, and then generalize them into categories of gender, religion etc.

Step VI: Supplementing structural data and analyzing power relations: At this stage, it becomes possible to alienate other categories and only focus on structural and power relations that have a bearing on individual identity. This stage is particularly relevant in case of diasporic populations since, their immigration history point to macro factors that determine their positionalities in society.

Step VII: Deepening the analysis of denominated representations: In the number of interviews that I had taken, certain social norms suggested symbolic representations of norms and values that further isolate SA LGB participants. The “thick intersectionality” section deals with some of these representations.

Step VIII: Elaborating interrelations in the overall demonstration: In the final analysis, I have summed up all the dimensions of inequality and power relations. Specifically, when

dealing with SA LGB diaspora, we are able to form an holistic analysis of all the macro, meso and micro forces that affect individual identity.

How to build SA LGB cultural competence?

Faced with racism from dominant groups and in-group homophobia, SA LGBs find themselves relegated into the periphery of mainstream society. They tend to find solace in in-group SA LGB communities to experience cohesiveness and affinity with their own kind. But when it comes to seeking counselling and professional psychiatric services, often SA LGB's do not find services that is culturally sensitive. Often both LGBT and Asian/South Asian service providers and policy makers are not aware enough of this community to address their needs. Below are examples of theme clusters that determine the most critical areas of lacuna in services related to health and well-being.

1) Prejudice and discrimination both in SA as well as mainstream LGBT communities: Difficulty in finding assimilation in dominant LGB communities as well as SA groups leads to feelings of alienation. Though most participants are open about their sexuality to their immediate family and friends their restrained acceptance leaves them without a community.

2) Feelings of rejection leads to serious mental health issues: Thoughts of suicide, depression, drug use are all too common in SA LGB circles. Dealing with all the above problems requires a good understanding of core cultural issues and identity issues.

- 3) Making use of healthcare services: Typically SA culture leans more towards physical health issues rather than mental health issues. A SA would not readily avail the services of a counselor due to close-knit families who provide solace during tough times. But since an SA queer person cannot completely rely on the family, he/she finds herself without many options.
- 4) Emotional support only for life's issues: Most respondents claimed that they generally get emotional support from their families for life's issues like job losses, physical ailments etc but almost nil for LGB issues. They are least likely to receive empathy and emotional support from ethnic organizations.
- 5) Lack of coming out support groups: Most SA LGB's felt that when an SA LGB person discovers his or her sexual identity, they do not have many places to turn to. There is a need for SA social spaces where coming out issues can be addressed in a culturally sensitive manner.

Possible measures that can foster better assimilation in in-group circles

- 1) To create awareness among religious establishments and community leaders to alleviate stigma around LGB.
- 2) To conduct orientation sessions for parents and friends of SA LGB so that they understand the challenges of their near and dear ones.

3) To create a sense of community among the families of SA LGB so that they are able to identify with queer groups of SA origin.

4) Identify the nature of stigma in SA cultures and develop programs that create knowledge of the same.

5) Create orientation to make SA individuals more equipped to deal with discrimination

6) Use community resources to identify professionals in the field of psychiatry and counselling and conduct workshops to orient them on cultural issues

Queer participants who belong to SA core culture construct both individualized and collective meanings for their assimilation. Participants may hold individualized identities that are not central to the heteronormative ethnic cultures, while simultaneously maintaining collective understandings of what it means to have your origins in the SA subcontinent. Thus at an individual level, being queer entails chalking out an individual identity in the midst of an over-arching collective identity. In addition, for most participants, individualized sense of self gains a certain credence when merged with a larger societal identity. The collective meanings central to a SA queer identity includes building a brotherhood through shared oppression and experience. Some of the SA participants are seen to be embracing the queer label rather than simply being in a closed group specifically because their “coming-out” ness will add up to a collective challenge. Here, a queer identity is synonymous to collectively rationalizing some aspects of culture that deny the existence of alternate sexual identity, bringing the invisible nature of SA queerness into mainstream ethnic society.



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