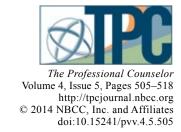# Group Counseling with South Asian Immigrant High School Girls: Reflections and Commentary of a Group Facilitator

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The diversity of the U.S. school population speaks to a need to provide support for youth from various backgrounds. As a school-based mental health counselor, the first author observed that the South Asian immigrant students at her school did not utilize any of the counseling services provided. Because South Asians are typically collectivistic, the counselor chose group counseling as a potential intervention and hoped to provide a place for the students to address issues related to orienting to a new school in a new country. In this article, the authors weave information about the South Asian population into the first author's reflections and commentary on initiating and conducting a group with South Asian high school girls. Recommendations for group counseling in schools with South Asian immigrants are provided.

Keywords: **South Asian, immigrant, youth, schools, group counseling**

The United States has seen a marked increase in the number of children who have at least one parent born outside the United States (Capps et al., 2005). Between 1995 and 2012, the population of first- and second-generation immigrant children in the United States increased by 66% (Child Trends Data Bank, 2013). This sharp rise is important for American cities because 95% of all children of immigrants attend urban schools (Fix & Capps, 2005). Furthermore, according to a recent update from the Asian American Federation and South Asian Americans Leading Together (2012), the South Asian American population was the fastest growing major ethnic group in the United States from 2000–2010. Relationship building is part of acclimatizing to a new country for immigrant youth, and it is in the schools that these youth build new friendships and create social networks (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). For South Asian youth in American schools, group counseling can provide a setting for students to connect to others who share similar stories and experiences. Groups can offer a safe place for them to discuss their cultural norms, exchange stories of challenges and hope, and enhance their social development in a new country as they form emerging adult identities.

As a school-based mental health counselor in a public urban high school on the northern California coast, the first author's responsibility is to provide overall behavioral health support through assessments, counseling (short- and long-term, individual, group, crisis), staff and teacher consultations, and presentations on mental health issues to students, parents and teachers. When two South Asian students were referred for individual counseling, the first author wondered if other South Asian students might be experiencing challenges associated with adjusting to a new school in a new country. She also was personally aware of difficulties associated with identity development for adolescents negotiating different home and school cultures. She decided that

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counseling focused on prevention of problems related to acculturation and identity could be helpful to the South Asian students in her school. Because the South Asian collectivistic orientation is consistent with the goals of group counseling (Sharma, 2001), she chose this approach. As a South Asian herself, the first author believed that her understanding of South Asian culture could contribute to her effectiveness as facilitator of a group with this population. Thus, the first author developed a simple strategy for recruitment and set out to create a group for South Asian immigrant high school students.

Although in many cases the first author's expectations about the group were met, she also confronted surprises and challenges. This article is the result of discussions with the second author in which the first author shared her reflections and commentary on the facilitation of students' exploration of issues in the group. The goal is to impart the first author's personal knowledge and perceptions, so that counselors working with South Asian youth may consider how her experience might inform their group work with this population. A secondary goal is to inspire other counselors to find ways to meet the needs of immigrant youth in their own schools and clinics through group counseling. A very brief overview of South Asian culture will provide a context for understanding these reflections.

South Asian Culture

This section provides information about South Asian culture as it relates to the first author's personal experience facilitating a group with South Asian immigrant girls; the authors do not intend stereotypical representation of South Asian adolescents or their families. The girls with whom the first author worked had both similarities and differences based on their cultural backgrounds, level of acculturation and individual personalities.

The term *South Asian* is used to describe people of various religions and nationalities who trace their cultural origins to the Indian subcontinent (Assanand, Dias, Richardson, & Waxler-Morrison, 1990; Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997). Countries of South Asia include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (The World Bank, 2011). According to 2010 estimates (Pew Research Center, 2012), the majority of South Asians practice Hinduism or Islam, but there also are South Asians who practice Buddhism (the majority religion in Bhutan and Sri Lanka), Christianity or other religions. Overall, there is great diversity within this population with regard to religious affiliation, language, immigration history, socioeconomic status and education (Inman & Tewari, 2003). Despite their differences, South Asians generally share some common characteristics including customs, values, family expectations and beliefs that relate to mental health (Maker, Mittal, & Rastogi, 2005). Specific values include formality in interpersonal relationships, inhibition of strong feelings, respect of elders, primary allegiance to the family and deep respect for religion (Kim, Atkinson, & Yang, 1999).

Unlike other Asian American groups, South Asian immigrants have not been studied by social scientists to any appreciable degree (Maker et al., 2005). Existing research on South Asian individuals and counseling suggests that South Asian Americans have neutral or positive perceptions of mental health care, but infrequently use mental health services (Panganamala & Plummer; 1998; Sue & Sue, 2008). This reality may be due to South Asians' lack of awareness of available services, cultural and language barriers, or fear of confidentiality breaches. Another reason for this infrequent use of mental health services may relate to the South Asian belief that disclosing mental problems or mental illness brings shame and stigma to the entire family (Atkinson, 2004). Moreover, research suggests that South Asians are likely to make external attributions and spiritualize emotional problems while emphasizing somatic complaints and academic or career concerns (Sandhu & Madathil, 2007). The first author used her personal understanding of South Asian culture to help inform recruitment and facilitation of the group.

Recruiting Participants for the Group

Recruiting immigrant and minority populations for counseling services involves providing an accessible service delivery location (Yuen, 1999). Recommended approaches for attracting group members include advertisements (e.g., hallways posters), referral networks (e.g., teachers) and announcements (e.g., classroom presentations; Gladding, 2008; Kline, 2003). The first author decided to take a straightforward approach by putting up posters and flyers around the school—in hallways and homerooms, and on bulletin boards. Because it was important to use language that lacked stigmatization, she carefully planned the posters. She used a term familiar to South Asians, *Desi*, which describes individuals who identify themselves as South Asian or with South Asian culture (e.g., music, traditions, films, food). The flyers read, "Come and meet other Desi's in the school! Want to learn more? Come to room 200." That approach, however, proved ineffective; after two months not a single student had inquired about the group. Next she asked teachers for referrals, approached the identified students during their homeroom period and described the group. Again, she used terms such as *support group*, *sharing*, *confidential place* and *time to meet others* in lieu of the more stigmatized language of *mental health counseling*. Although most students showed interest, they communicated skepticism about joining a group.

Refusing to give up, she pondered Yuen and Nakano-Matsumoto's (1998) suggestion highlighting the importance of finding an appropriate point of entry for recruiting immigrant populations. She walked around campus targeting the places where South Asians congregated during passing hall periods and lunchtimes. She introduced herself, discussed her role at the school, disclosed her own ethnic identity as a South Asian and invited students to drop by her office at lunchtime. After an entire semester of drop-in encounters, a group of girls agreed to participate and the idea of a group for South Asian students became a reality.

Background of the Group Facilitator and Participants

When contemplating recruitment for the group, the first author believed that her background would be advantageous. Born in London, England, she was raised in an Asian Indian family; she speaks Hindi and Gujerati (Asian Indian languages) in addition to English. It seemed intuitive that her commonalities of background and language with the students would facilitate initial recruitment as well as rapport building. (As she learned, however, this was only partially true).

The group participants were first-generation immigrants, born outside the United States, or second-generation immigrants, born in the United States. All group members identified culturally as South Asian, but came from different countries in South Asia. They shared similar customs, food, clothing and popular culture (film and music). However, because the students' home countries were different, the students spoke various languages. Moreover, as the group progressed, distinct cultural traditions (e.g., age of marriage) and values (e.g., definitions of beauty) emerged, along with differences in the girls' perspectives on those beliefs and values. As the authors describe the first author's reflections of the group, they carefully maintain the anonymity of the girls' disclosures and share only overall themes and activities in the context of South Asian culture in general.

Reflections on Facilitating the Group

When the first author chose group work for the South Asian girls, she identified the counseling group as the most appropriate type of group. The counseling group utilizes members' interactive feedback and support to help address problems of living, which may be related to transitions or development (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010). For adolescent immigrant students, these everyday problems often involve the challenges of adjusting

to a new culture and developing a cultural identity (Ahmad-Stout & Nath, 2013; Shariff, 2009). The first author sought to provide a safe place for the South Asian girls to explore these issues of acculturation and identity. She presented topics at each session designed to encourage this exploration.

The first author's approach to counseling this group was integrative; she borrowed concepts from relational-cultural theory as well as multicultural counseling. Relational-cultural theory is based on the idea that psychological growth takes place in the context of relationships characterized by empathy, mutuality and empowerment (Comstock et al., 2008; Jordan, 2000). Multicultural counselors also promote empowerment by helping clients develop strategies for exercising control in their lives (Crethar, Rivera, & Nash, 2008; Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). Based on these concepts, the first author's goal was to provide a safe space in which the South Asian girls could build mutually supportive relationships and where she could help promote the girls' self-confidence as South Asian females.

Consistent with the beginning stage of a group, the members were initially reluctant to disclose information (Corey et al., 2010). Despite the first author's similarity in background to the South Asian girls in her school, it still took time for them to perceive her as a safe person with whom they could share. She allowed time to build rapport and trust to aid the girls in overcoming their reluctance about help seeking. Openly discussing the expectations and goals of the group was helpful in creating safety and served to ease student anxieties about committing to a weekly group. The first author clearly laid out group expectations in the first session, invited input from all group members and highlighted confidentiality. Although members initially avoided sharing personal experiences about family, boyfriends and sexuality, two girls were very vocal about less intimate issues. After approximately 12 sessions (halfway through the group), there was a noticeable shift as all members began to disclose their experiences. At this point, the level of trust in the group allowed the girls to explore issues at a deeper level, which is one characteristic of a working stage (Corey et al., 2010). Two outcomes of the group suggested movement toward the relational-cultural theory and multicultural counseling goals of relationship building and empowerment. About midway through the group, the girls began socializing at school; and later, toward the end of the group, they continued to build relationships by spending time at each other's homes. Additionally, the girls' confidence showed at termination when they asked to form their own South Asian group, which the first author helped them create.

The topics presented for discussion in the group involved asking the girls to answer a list of questions that the first author formulated: "What does it mean to be a South Asian female in our school?," "What is it like to navigate dissimilar home and school cultures?," "What gender messages do you receive as a South Asian girl?" and "How do media messages shape your identity as a South Asian female?" The following discussion provides additional information about South Asian culture as a backdrop for the first author's reflections on the girls' exploration of these topics.

South Asian Lifestyle in a U.S. School

Asian Indian immigrants in Western cultures often continue to base their lifestyle on traditional values, beliefs and expectations (Farver, Bhadha, & Narang, 2002). This includes unwritten rules, such as respecting adults, so adults do not tolerate rude or disrespectful speech from children. South Asian girls must heed strict family rules regarding girls' roles (which may include caring for younger siblings), respect for elders and male members of the family, and choices related to school and college. For example, family rules often prohibit dating, having male friends and being out after school. In group sessions, these topics permeated the discussion, as expected.

Also guiding South Asian lifestyle is collectivism. South Asian girls are taught to respect the importance of community as part of what it means to be South Asian. In the context of the group and their collectivistic orientation, it was especially important for the girls to feel connected and understood by the other girls. Sharing enjoyment of similar foods (e.g., roti, samosas), conversing in English and Hindi, and exploring what it is like to be a South Asian girl in the United States created a sense of group cohesion. This cohesion established an environment in which the girls could feel emotionally supported and empowered in an unfamiliar school environment.

Despite the apparent safety of the group environment, however, the first author noticed that the girls were sensitive to feedback and needed to consult with each other on decisions (e.g., what school clubs to join). The power of group decision making became significant in the group. When the first author initially asked for individual opinions (i.e., "What do *you* think?"), the girls were reticent. This restraint reminded the first author of her own upbringing, in which older members of the family made decisions jointly, and the message she internalized was that she was not supposed to offer a viewpoint. The first author felt an urge to overcome any sensitivity a girl might have to rejection or shame due to expressing ideas different from those of other group members. She found herself helping the girls to express their own thoughts and opinions, even if they differed from those of the other girls. When the first author explained that the group was a place to express thoughts and feelings that they were unable to express at home, many of the girls began to open up.

South Asian Girls' Challenges in Negotiating Dissimilar Cultures

The dialogue around navigating home and school cultures was not surprising. The first author expected identity development to be a major issue, along with struggles to integrate South Asian cultural identity with mainstream American norms, expectations and culture. Facilitating the group brought up memories of negotiating home and school cultures in the first author's own adolescence in London. As an Indian/South Asian in an urban high school that was over 90% Caucasian, she often felt different from others not only in terms of physical appearance (e.g., skin and hair color), but also because of family cultural activities. She felt embarrassed explaining her Indian/South Asian cultural beliefs and values to peers. Her role as a teenager was to follow family rules, respect elders and play a traditional female role (e.g., learning to cook, taking care of siblings). Her non-Asian school friends could not understand this cultural dilemma or the cultural restrictions placed on her behaviors (e.g., not going out after school). She was forced to adopt a dual identity—at home, the traditional Indian/South Asian girl, and at school, a more stereotypically British teenager. The girls' dilemmas mirrored the first author's experience as a teenager and she was able to understand their disclosures in a personal way. She was sometimes viewed as *didi* ("sister" in Hindi). It seemed advantageous to be perceived as a family member, yet this was only partially true (and explained later).

Within the context of navigating two cultures, the theme of academics came up frequently. Because a primary motivation for the immigration of South Asian parents is educational opportunity, high aspirations for their children are common (Ghuman, 2003). It did not surprise the first author that the girls had internalized messages from parents and put pressure on themselves to succeed in school. However, South Asian immigrant youth have an added pressure that stems from the fact that they must contend with schools that differ from those in their native countries. Immigrant students may come from South Asian schools that have very strict rules with rigid guidelines regarding teacher–student interaction, but they must adapt to the less formal educational approach in U.S. high schools. U.S. teachers often encourage students to express their thoughts and feelings, while South Asian parents instill in their children that openly expressing their opinions to adults shows disrespect. The first author supported the education of the girls in their U.S. school by helping them build self-confidence in expressing their viewpoints. She initiated discussion about ways for the girls to voice their opinions in the classroom to help them succeed in U.S. schools and provided an opportunity for them to practice these strategies.

In addition to these internal struggles, attempting to fit into a mainstream American school often comes with other costs for a South Asian girl. Because of the differences between Western and South Asian traditional value systems, adolescence can be a difficult time for South Asian immigrant families (Ranganath & Ranganath, 1997). An exacerbating factor borne out in research is that "children of immigrants adapt more quickly to the new culture than do their parents" (Farver et al., 2002, p. 13). These circumstances can create conflicts with parents around issues such as choice of friendships, dating and education. South Asian immigrant girls may observe their mainstream American peers having different adolescent experiences (e.g., spending time with boys) and may want to have the same experiences. In doing so, or even considering doing so, they may deal with anxiety and helplessness as well as fears of parents finding out. Although the girls' dilemmas were similar to those in the first author's experience as an adolescent, she was nonplussed at times by the depth of the struggles of the first-generation girls in negotiating the two cultures. As a second-generation South Asian, the first author was born and raised in London. In contrast, many of these girls were born in their home countries and immigrated to the United States, some of them as teenagers. Thus the first author was sometimes challenged to grasp their difficulties in comprehending American culture, and she had to work assiduously to facilitate their understanding of foreign ideas and practices. She was sometimes unnerved by the intensity of the girls' internal struggles to process the conflicts between the values and beliefs of their home and school cultures. Therefore, she realized the critical importance of giving careful attention to providing a nonjudgmental space for the expression of the girls' frustrations related to these differences.

Gender Messages Received by South Asian Girls

Within traditional societies such as India, there are different expectations for male and female behavior (Farver et al., 2002). In traditional South Asian families, males are permitted greater independence, personal autonomy and educational opportunities, whereas females are restrained (Dasgupta, 1998; Ghuman, 1997). For example, females are expected to perform household chores and take care of younger siblings, while boys are allowed more freedom (e.g., going out after school). According to Ghuman (2003), South Asian families in the West also tend to be more lenient with boys, even overlooking breaking of social and family rules, precipitating distress for many South Asian girls. In particular, exposure to mainstream American culture may further increase girls' distress in response to South Asian culture's seemingly unfair expectations of girls and boys. Girls may feel overprotected by their parents, inferior to their male counterparts and envious of American-born South Asian girls who follow less traditional roles. It is important to remember, however, that there is variation in the messages that South Asian youth receive depending on a number of factors including socioeconomic status. In her middle-class family, the first author was socialized on how to behave (e.g., what to say, how to dress) as a female in order to obtain a husband. Coming from a high Hindu caste family, however, afforded more privileges such as access to education and social connections, which can result in opportunities outside the home.

Media Messages and South Asian Girls' Identity Development

Youth often look to role models in identity development, and there are few South Asian public figures and role models in the media to whom South Asian youth can relate. Research in which Asian American children reported admiring Black figures first and White figures next (entirely overlooking Asian and Latino figures) supports this idea (Cortés as cited in Aoki & Mio, 2009). In the group, the first author helped the girls examine how South Asians are viewed in American media and discussed Bollywood (i.e., Indian film industry) movies, which present current Hindi film stars. In the film *Om Shanti Om* (Khan & Khan, 2007) the heroine, Shanti, is a beautiful, tall, slender Indian woman who has an unfulfilled relationship with a man because of her parents' disapproval. Role models such as Shanti represent beauty in South Asian culture, and exposure to standards

of beauty that differ from Western beauty ideals is helpful for young South Asian females' self-image. Additionally, however, South Asian girls need exposure to a broader range of role models to enhance their development. Currently, there are many successful South Asian American individuals who integrate South Asian and American identities in the worlds of academia, business, entertainment, politics, media and the sciences, and the first author deemed it important to expose the girls to the accomplishments of these people. An array of examples includes Sri Srinivasan (judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia circuit), Anita Desai (novelist), Sanjay Gupta (neurosurgeon & CNN chief medical correspondent) and Norah Jones (singer). The author's hope was that exposure to this diverse range of role models might motivate the girls to explore different careers and inspire them to consider nontraditional career tracks. Moreover, a future goal was to bring in local South Asian role models from the surrounding community.

South Asian youth also draw from traditional Hindi music to shape their identity and represent a sort of new ethnicity (Dawson, 2005). In the group, listening to traditional South Asian music supported the South Asian girls' roots, and listening to music such as Indian music with hip-hop and rap fusion represented a blending of the girls' American and South Asian cultural identities. Sharing music provided a sense of group connectedness, while analyzing lyrics led to fruitful discussions about characteristic gender themes related to being South Asian.

Common Adolescent Issues Among South Asian Immigrants

In addition to the previous topics, the group discussed other issues that are typically important to adolescents. Though South Asian girls tend not to date and often struggle to follow rigid and unyielding norms around relationships (Ayyub, 2000; Durham, 2004), immigrant girls in American schools may want to explore the topic of dating and relationships. In the first author's experience, some South Asian girls may never date, while others may simply refrain from informing their parents that they are involved in relationships. Fear of being caught by parents, family members and friends may precipitate girls' avoidance of dating or permeate the experiences of girls who date.

Related to dating is the topic of ideal partners for relationships. South Asian girls from traditional families are expected to marry a person from the same cultural background (Bhatia & Ram, 2004). For example, families would not accept a union between a Pakistani girl and an Indian boy, even though both individuals are South Asian. For some girls, even thoughts of relationships with boys from different cultural backgrounds may result in sentiments about conflict as well as feelings of shame and guilt about disrespecting the family. Having a space in a school group to discuss these feelings was particularly important because South Asian girls often cannot discuss these topics with family members; and even girls who have no desire to be in a relationship in high school may be curious about such topics. The first author presented the topic of what relationships might look like for the girls in a South Asian community as well as what relationships might look like for their non-South Asian peers. She wondered about the value of disclosing that her spouse was non-South Asian, and decided to do so to address the girls' curiosity about her non-South Asian last name. This information provided a space for the girls to process fantasies they might have about marrying a non-South Asian or someone outside their identified community.

Recommendations for Counseling Practice

From reflections and discussion of the group experience, the authors have developed recommendations for counselors serving South Asian girls in their schools. A primary component in this group counseling experience is the provision of a safe space within which South Asian students can discuss salient issues with other South Asian youth. Equally important, as authors (e.g., Shariff, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2008) have explained, is the

counselor's ability to employ culturally appropriate helping skills and interventions. Counselors must pair these skills and interventions with knowledge of topics that are relevant to the particular youth they are serving. Because identity development is a significant issue for adolescents in general and a more challenging task for South Asian girls who must straddle two cultures, it is critical to focus on this issue.

Creating A Safe Space at School

A primary goal of a group for South Asian girls is to provide a space for them to interact with students from similar backgrounds. Due to size of the student population and variety of schedules in urban schools, it may prove difficult for South Asian adolescents to connect with each other in classes. Moreover, cultural mores may make it prohibitive to meet other students after school, excluding another avenue for interaction. Therefore, group counseling offers a social sphere for interaction, but must of course be a safe space. Moreover, as Chung (2004) explains, a focus on confidentiality is critical in working with any Asian American group because disclosing family matters to outsiders is frowned upon.

Providing a safe psychological space depends not only on sensitive recruitment and open communication, but also on the counselor's ability to analyze personal racial/ethnic beliefs and values in relation to those of South Asians. As part of this self-examination, non-South Asian counselors must explore any preconceived notions based on the portrayal of South Asians in the American media. Additionally, White European-American counselors who seek to develop groups with South Asian youth must carefully and continually explore their willingness to confront their level of privilege. In a study of graduate students in clinical psychology and social work, findings showed a correlation between White privilege attitudes and multicultural counseling competencies (Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011). Counselors committed to working with South Asian immigrants should be ready to accept responsibility for change at not only the personal level to better meet the needs of South Asian students in group counseling, but also at the institutional (i.e., school) level to enhance the experience of South Asian students in the school.

Counselors can broaden their knowledge of the South Asian culture by reading as well as watching films about South Asian life. Some recommended films for counselors include *The Namesake* (Pilcher & Nair, 2006) and *Monsoon Wedding* (Baron & Nair, 2001). Suggested books are *Brick Lane: A Novel* (Ali, 2004), *Fasting, Feasting* (Desai, 1999) and *Indivisible* (Banerjee, Kaipa, & Sundaralingam, 2010), an anthology of South Asian American poets who trace their roots to Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Another way to learn is by going to a South Asian neighborhood and immersing oneself. The counselor might observe the interactions between parents and their children, as well as how teens interact among their peer groups. Familiarity with the latest fashion trends in clothes, food, music and films can further help counselors to understand the commonalities and differences within the South Asian population, and in particular with South Asian adolescents. Moreover, community leaders can serve as valuable resources in understanding Asian American populations (Chung, 2004). For example, counselors can build relationships with persons who run community centers and organizations that serve South Asians or with faith-based leaders in the South Asian community.

Counselors who are South Asian may have an easier experience initiating a South Asian group. However, it seems important for the first author to share an observation she has made in her 13 years of working with South Asian students: First-generation students have been more likely to seek her out than to approach her non-South Asian colleagues. However, as students have become more acculturated to mainstream American schools, they seem to be more wary of this student–counselor shared ethnic background. Some students have disclosed concerns about possible connections with the South Asian community in which they live (e.g.,"Will you tell my auntie about my activities?"). In those instances, the students seem to seek out counselors who are not South Asian. (Although this cannot be generalized to all South Asian populations, it suggests an interesting area for exploration).

Creating Culturally Appropriate Counseling Interventions

The importance of knowing the backgrounds of the particular members of a group in order to design culturally appropriate interventions cannot be overstated. As many authors have asserted, not all Asians are alike (e.g., DeLucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004; Sue & Sue, 2008), and within-group differences among Asian groups is often overlooked (Sandhu, 2004). This idea holds true for South Asians who may come from a variety of different countries such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. In addition to within-group differences, counselors must consider each adolescent's level of acculturation when identifying counseling strategies.

When designing interventions for group counseling, counselors may look to focus on individual disclosure, individuation and autonomy, and direct types of communication (e.g., confrontation; Corey et al., 2010)—ideals based firmly in Western culture. These goals, however, might not apply to Asians who value humility and modesty (rather than open sharing) as well as group harmony (instead of individual goals), and who might be uncomfortable with direct communication (Chung, 2004; Sue & Sue, 2008). In light of this situation, there are several issues that the counselor must keep in mind when designing interventions.

Personal disclosure. Even within a safe environment, South Asian students may still exhibit a disinclination to share personal information. Counselors can model disclosure by sharing their own family experiences, which can prove beneficial in getting youth comfortable and involved in a group (Sandhu, 2004). However, it is still important that counselors are sensitive to any member's reluctance (communicated either verbally or nonverbally) to disclose, especially because of the cultural value of respect for authority figures (i.e., the counselor), which could precipitate member disclosure and subsequent shame over exposing family information.

Goal setting. Individual goal setting is consistent with Western culture and is often encouraged in group counseling literature (Corey et al., 2010; Gladding, 2008). Because of their collective orientation, South Asians may be reluctant to set individual goals and may want to focus on group goals. Potential goals may involve achieving academic success, exploring family pressures, examining gender roles and discussing taboo topics such as sexuality. The counselor must not, however, overlook a member's desire to set individual goals. (Over time, certain members in this South Asian girls' group did set personal goals.)

Direct leadership. Asians' values related to respect for adults/elders and authority figures (DeLucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004) suggest that a direct leadership role within a structured group format might work best. Initially, the first author provided a structure for the group sessions using expressive art media through which the girls could explore. For example, having the girls create individual collages from magazine cuttings helped them to share about their lives (e.g., favorite foods, clothing, places), and using South Asian and non-South Asian films and books offered metaphors that helped the girls explore their identity. After a few months of leader direction, the first author was surprised to find that the girls felt comfortable setting the group's agenda and openly suggesting session activities. Therefore, counselors should be aware of any indication on the part of the group members that they want to self-direct.

Topics for Exploration

Through group counseling, the first author was able to identify topics that were particularly important to these high school South Asian girls; these areas could serve as a starting point for other counselors working with South Asian immigrant girls. Although the topics were often consistent with salient adolescent issues (e.g., dating, relationships), they were shaped by the girls' South Asian backgrounds. The girls discussed the often contradictory values and beliefs of home and school culture. They explored dual identities related to being South Asian and American as well as multiple identities related to culture and gender.

Examining values and beliefs. Family and culture are important topics for South Asians, but telling stories of family and culture in mainstream American culture may raise challenges. Especially significant is the discomfort adolescents may experience when sharing their cultural stressors with non-Asian peers. A group with peers from similar backgrounds can facilitate open sharing of cultural stories that would be difficult to disclose to those who could not identify with their experiences. In this group, the first author followed Sue and Sue's (2008) recommendation and facilitated discussions about values, beliefs and behaviors characteristic of both the home culture and host culture, so the girls could discover those that fit for them, those with which they identified and those about which they were ambivalent. These discussions pervaded the group sessions, and counselors are advised to explore these topics in depth.

When examining values and beliefs, South Asian girls may broach topics that are unacceptable for discussion with their own families and community members. Because they are often expected to adhere strictly to the role of the "perfect" South Asian girl (e.g., attaining good grades and following family rules), girls may feel judged by family and community members when expressing curiosity about issues such as love, sexuality and relationships. A counselor can help girls examine their roles within their families and explore unique circumstances of developing peer relationships as a South Asian female growing up in mainstream American culture.

An issue that may arise with South Asian girls as they explore behaviors related to values and beliefs involves being under the watchful eyes of other South Asian immigrants. Girls might dwell in a neighborhood where they are in close proximity to local mosques, temples and community centers as well as businesses owned by South Asians. In addition to close and extended family members, they may interact frequently with South Asian peers and neighbors. This can present challenges related to the different values and beliefs of the two cultures the girls are negotiating. For example, some girls may want to talk to boys in the neighborhoods, but fear that South Asian community members might tell their parents. This anxiety underscores the girls' need for support from trusted adults and peers both at school and in their communities as they grapple with these issues.

Coping with dual identities. Because immigrant students are straddling home and school cultures, it is important to explore ways to cope and deal with multiple identities. One goal of a discussion of values and beliefs involves supporting girls' positive connections to their home and community culture. According to Farver et al. (2002), several studies of adolescents from a variety of ethnic backgrounds showed a positive connection between commitment to/identification with ethnic group and self-esteem. A counselor must encourage discussion around cultural topics, emphasize the importance of family traditions and help foster pride in South Asian identity. For example, it is important to recognize religious holidays and explore the meaning of the holidays and their significance in girls' lives.

The group setting can provide a safe environment for girls to explore challenges and voice frustrations related to dual identity. A counselor can help girls deal with the conflict of self versus collective identity through using culturally appropriate self-empowerment and self-esteem exercises. For example, the first author offered the girls an activity in which they made a collective collage (using magazine cutouts, drawings and words) of what it means to be a South Asian female. After the activity, they processed the meanings of the images on the paper, the role of women in South Asian society and school, and the similarities and differences between group members. The activity highlighted the girls' cultural commonalities and differences as well as their shared challenges of dual identities.

An important discussion may involve decision making around behaviors that diverge from home cultural norms, because South Asian youth may choose to deviate from parental and cultural expectations in spite of the consequences. The counselor's responsibility is to help girls explore the pros and cons of pursuing their personal happiness at the expense of their parents' wishes or demands (Segal, 1991). For example, if the topic of dating (an area of conflict between home and school culture) arises, the counselor must help girls explore what it means to them to date, their reasons for wanting to date, and if they are dating, issues related to dating without family permission.

Addressing racism. Racism is an important topic for South Asian immigrants, especially due to the impact of the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11). In the aftermath of 9/11, a climate of racial profiling emerged in the United States, and South Asians have been subjected to prejudicial attitudes affecting both personal autonomy and group identity (Inman, Yeh, Madan-Bahel, & Nath, 2007). In the first author's experience, as well as that of many of her South Asian colleagues, racial profiling is not uncommon when traveling, even for professional women. It also is not atypical for South Asians to experience microaggressions, such as being stared at or asked personal questions about ethnicity by strangers. Racism has psychological impacts (Astell-Burt, Maynard, Lenguerrand, & Harding, 2012) and also can create fear. South Asians wearing traditional dress may be subjected to name calling, racial slurs and even physical violence. Adolescents with whom the first author has worked report experiencing teasing or bullying at school as well as other forms of racism when walking with a family member wearing traditional dress (e.g., headscarves, turbans). In a study of South Asian women in Canada, Beharry and Crozier (2008) found that racism in youth had a more marked effect on self-esteem and self-efficacy than that in adulthood. Moreover, social support networks were critical in helping women address negative experiences. A counseling group offers a space for South Asian girls to share their experiences, express their fears and devise ways of coping with racism in a supportive environment.

Reaching Beyond the Girls' Counseling Group

The one challenge that eluded the first author during her recruitment of South Asian adolescents was how to meet the needs of boys. Although it made sense because of gender roles to have an all-girl group, she also recognized the need to address issues for South Asian boys. When the girls' group terminated, she helped them form a South Asian student club within the school. All the girls from the group were members of the wider South Asian club, but in addition to girls, a number of South Asian boys joined. The cosponsor of the South Asian club is a male teacher who, although not South Asian, is Latino and well-liked and respected by students, including South Asians. In addition to finding ways to unite the group, the cosponsor and the first author have supported the boys and girls in working together to explore issues that South Asian students encounter in the school and to develop strategies to help the wider school community understand what it means to be South Asian.

An additional way for counselors to reach beyond the group is to identify any needs of the South Asian families in the school community. One way that the first author has supported parents of South Asian students is by helping them understand the school system (e.g., how grades are interpreted). Parental support is significant in light of findings that suggest parental difficulties in adjustment to a new culture may result in adolescents with more psychological problems (Farver et al., 2002). Thus, support and advocacy for families may in turn reap benefits for adolescents. A significant way to identify needs and issues of families is to connect with community leaders, who can "act as a cultural bridge" to developing relationships with parents and other community members (Chung, 2004, p. 206).

Conclusion

There is a need for research focusing on South Asian American families and a further need for research focused specifically on the issues of South Asian immigrant youth. As the population of South Asian immigrant youth in U.S. communities and schools increases, it is critical to understand the unique needs of these youth who are learning to forge an identity based on their home cultures and mainstream American culture. Because there are differences in the U.S. communities in which South Asians live, researchers also must explore the differences in identity development of South Asian immigrant youth living close to a South Asian community versus those who live in a heterogeneous (non-South Asian) environment. Understanding the South Asian experience in the United States will pave the way for developing culturally appropriate interventions for working with South Asian immigrant youth.

Growing diversity in American schools demands that counselors develop culturally appropriate strategies for working with youth from a wide variety of cultures, including those individuals who come from immigrant families. Today's immigrant families struggle with cultural differences, racism and oppression of earlier generations, but do so in the context of easier access to transatlantic travel and global communication technology (Bhatia & Ram, 2004). Practically speaking, these closer family connections with the home country may create more challenges for adolescents forging an identity while balancing the demands of home and school. The responsibility of helping to enhance the development of these youth falls to counselors along with other school and community personnel, and group counseling is one useful strategy for meeting student needs. Before initiating a group, counselors must explore their own cultural background and biases, understand the culture of the students in the group and, from this knowledge, develop culturally appropriate interventions that highlight culturally relevant and adolescent-specific topics. Through the group described here, the first author attempted to promote the positive development of South Asian girls in her school. The authors' hope is that these efforts will challenge other counselors to find ways to do the same with the immigrant youth in their schools and clinics.

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