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# Stable, Practical, and High-paying: How Second Generation Indian/Pakistani Adults are Affected by Parental Pressure in Their Career Choices

Sabrina Eveland  
*SIT Graduate Institute*

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Stable, Practical, and High-paying: How Second Generation Indian/Pakistani Adults are  
Affected by Parental Pressure in Their Career Choices

Sabrina Eveland

PIM 70

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Advisers: Dr. Kevin Brennan and Dr. Sora Friedman

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Student name: Sabrina Eveland

Date: 4/14/12

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the pressure to succeed that some Indian and Pakistani first generation parents put on their second generation children living in the United States. The study was conducted through guided interviews with fourteen interviewees; six first generation parents who immigrated to the United States between 1966 and 1978 and eight second generation adult children between the ages of 20 and 35. The study captures the intergenerational stress that occurs when parents want their adult children to study traditional and stable careers that the second generation adults are not necessarily interested in. It also explores the pressures and limitations that the first generation parents experienced when choosing a career for themselves in Pakistan and India.

The parents came to the United States as educated professionals and made comfortable lives for themselves. The children have been exposed to many possibilities and do not have the same financial worries as their parents. All of the interviewees have close familial relationships and communicate with their families on a daily basis. The children do not want to displease their parents but understand why their parents desire them to study and work in fields such as engineering, medicine, law, and business. Despite some of the parents' lack of understanding towards putting passion and personal interests before financial stability, all second generation interviewees ultimately chose to make life decisions on behalf of themselves and not their parents. Overall, all second generation children felt that their parents' attitudes towards their careers were well intentioned but not necessarily contemporary. All first generation parents respected their children as individuals, even if they did not understand the rationale behind their children's choosing of their respective careers.

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## **Introduction**

My mother was born in Karachi, Pakistan and moved to the United States in the mid 1970's. She had come from a poor single-parent family, put herself through school, and through hard work had found a professional mentor that offered to sponsor her to come to the United States. My father was born in White Plains, New York and has lived in the New York area his whole life. Growing up, my mother purposefully socialized my sister and I around other Indian and Pakistani children so that we would understand our culture. We attended Eid parties, celebrated Diwali, and ran around wildly in curry scented houses filled with circles of gossiping women all wearing brightly colored saris. We regularly took trips with other families to the Indian grocery stores in Edison, New Jersey and sat through long car rides listening to my mother chatter with her friends and their children in Urdu, a language my sister and I could only understand when she was talking about us. My mother still keeps in touch with these families and regularly updates me on the life happenings of the children I once socialized with.

I have always felt like an outsider to Indian/Pakistani culture because of my mixed-heritage, but because of my mother's purposeful exposure feel like I have an insider's view. In sharp contrast to my sister and I, all of the now-adults that we once played with as kids are either doctors, lawyers, or are involved in finance. In high school, I was playing guitar and making glass beads while they were going to private tutors and SAT preparation classes. All of them attended Ivy League universities. Their parents are also very successful, with the majority being retired doctors, lawyers, and engineers.

I began to wonder how this phenomenon happened. Outside of my familial social circle, I noticed that many South Asian high school classmates had also attained success in medicine, engineering, law, and finance. Their parents had all been immigrants that came to the United States during roughly the same ten year period. I was curious to find out what, if any, pressure the parents had imposed on their children to succeed. I wanted to hear the perspectives of both the parents and the second generation adults to see how they varied. I wanted to find out if these second generation adults had any regrets about choosing, or not choosing, a career path that their parents had hoped they would pursue. I also wanted to learn how the parents experience in choosing a career for themselves in India and Pakistan affected how they viewed their childrens' careers. I believe this information could be helpful to international education professionals, in understanding why so many second generation South Asians gravitate towards the same courses of study. I also hope that it will shed light on the stress and pressure second generation South Asians feel during this process. Having a better understanding of this phenomenon could assist school psychologists, professors, and university administration professionals to be better equipped to deal with the specific issues of South Asian students.

### **Literature Review**

#### **South Asian Immigration History and Motivation**

According to *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-Generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World* by Bandana Purkayastha (2005), in 1917 all Asians were prohibited from entering the U.S., regardless of nationality, due to ill feelings toward the

Japanese. In 1965, after the Civil Rights Movement, the ban on Asian migration was lifted although preference was given to highly-skilled professionals from South Asian countries. According to a study by Ralitsa Atkins entitled *Motivation of Asian Americans to Study Medicine* (2007), the 1965 legislature permitted South Asian students who were studying medicine, engineering, and selected other skilled professional occupations to change their status to permanent residence upon graduation in order to contribute to United States economic growth. Additionally, due to their training and education in their home countries, many South Asians that immigrated after 1965 had relative ease obtaining white-collar jobs and often bought homes in suburbs where the majority of inhabitants were white. In a study by Rifat A.Salam called *Negotiating Tradition, Managing Dilemmas: Examining the South Asian American Family Experience through Second Generation Experiences* (2005), she lists the motivations for first generation interviewees to immigrate to the U.S. as: “(1) to pursue higher education, (2) career or economic opportunities lacking in the home country, (3) better overall quality of life”.

### **Success of South Asian Immigrants in United States Society**

According to a 1990 Census study, Indian immigrants have the highest median household income, family income, and per capita income of any foreign-born group. (Leonard, 1997) In 1994, Indians comprised the largest group of foreign born doctors. By way of example, one out of every six doctors in Ohio is South Asian. Among all professional South Asian women in the United States, 60 percent work in the healthcare industry. There is also a disproportionate amount of South Asian doctors in the United States whose spouses are also doctors. In 1989, 40 out of 90 Indian physicians that



Leonard interviewed in Bakersfield, CA were married to each other. Indian engineers are the second largest foreign-born group in the United States. Additionally, Indian business students outnumber any other international group (Leonard, 1997).

According to a 2010 study by Metlife on the American Dream, “more South Asian Americans are on solid financial ground compared to other Americans; with almost twice as many (59% versus 39% of the general population) saying they have an adequate personal safety net.” According to a 2007 article by Rupam Saran, “Asian Indians migrate with higher level of human capital and are the most successful among all Asian Americans. According to the 2000 census, Asian Indian families had the highest median income and 64% of Asian Indians had earned a bachelor’s degree.” (Saran, 2007)

### **Parental Pressure to Succeed Among All Asian Americans**

In a study by Ralitsa Atkins that surveyed motivations of Asian Americans to study medicine, many cultural similarities were drawn across the Asian continent and not exclusively limited to South Asians (2007). Atkins found that a stress on education and hard work in general, as well as high expectations from parents on their children was present among all Asians Americans that she interviewed. In terms of a parental push to study medicine, many of the parents stressed the prestige of the profession. Some of her interviewees felt “brainwashed” and felt that their minds had been shaped to pursue studying medicine. The notion that medicine is considered a stable profession was present throughout all of her interviews. She also noted that engineering was also considered a successful profession in India. One of her Indian interviewees explained:

In India there are two things a guy can do or is supposed to do: medicine or engineering- for success, intellectual success. If you don't go to these, forget it. Forget the respect and the money. In India, in order to be successful the only two careers parents talk about are medicine and engineering. A lot of Indians give two choices to their children- either to be a medical doctor or an engineer. (Atkins, 2007)

It is clear that honor and respect towards parents is prevalent among many Asian cultures, and decisions regarding careers are highly influenced by parents. In Asian cultures where Confucianism is the dominant value system, familial hierarchy is adhered to and a high priority towards education is stressed. In South Asian culture, families are close-knit and children are expected to support their parents when they grow older. Failure is not regarded as an option for second generation Asian Americans, as their parents could not afford to disappoint family members back home when they started careers in a new country. The expectation to attain academic success, obtain a high paying job, and support their families is an unquestionable reality for many second generation Asian Americans living in the United States. (Atkins, 2007)

### **Academic Pressure Due to the Model Minority Stereotype**

Second generation South Asians in the United States have to deal with the additional pressure of conforming to the model minority stereotype. Due to the documented academic and professional success attained by many South Asians in the United States, the second and third generations have to deal with a “generalized

collective judgment that all Asian Indians are submissive, hardworking, and intelligent.” (Singh (ed.). 2007) The stereotype also includes being “super-achievers” whose success is prevalent in the fields of science, technology, medicine, and economics. Although the stereotype contains positive attributes, according to Salam the stereotyping often causes “feeling of marginalization, conflicts, and stress for model minority students”.(2007) Many South Asian students do not get the attention they need at school because of the teachers’ assumptions that South Asians are smart and capable of doing well without direction. Asian parents in the United States frequently instruct their children to ignore prejudice, focus on their studies, and to not challenge authority figures. (Singh (ed.). 2007).

First generation immigrants often feel proud of the way they are stereotyped, and seek to perpetuate it in order to push their children to upward mobility. Helweg and Helweg (1990) state that “the caste and class background of this type of immigrant lead them to the privileges of the upper-middle-class life style as their just due or right.”

### **Parental Pressure and Expectations in the South Asian Community**

In the documentary film *Spellbound*, about the world of The National Junior High School Spelling Bee, a young Indian-American speller named Neil Kadakia is profiled. His father is adamant that he win the spelling bee, and acts like a coach training an athlete for the Olympics. He insists that his son adhere to a highly regimented training routine and hires a spelling coach so that his son will have a competitive advantage. His sister was also a former champion in the competitive spelling world. This is an illustrative if

not extreme example of the pressure that South Asian parents sometimes put on their children to attain success. As written in *The South Asian Americans* (Leonard, 1997),

Parental ambitions for the economic success of their offspring are extremely high. Young people are encouraged to undertake high education and professional training, particularly in engineering. Material security seems to be critical when careers are being considered, and parental expectations and pressures for high achievement can bear heavily on the children. (p. 152).

In a case study by Manisha Roy, published in *A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America* (1998) a female second generation South Asian listed the following two items as her highest priority when she was 12 years old “(1)- To be the best student in the Bengali community and to attend a good University. (2)- To please my parents with my academic success and gain approval from my community”. Among second generation South Asians residing in the United States, in addition to pressure to succeed coming from parents, second generation children also feel pressure to “compete” with South Asian peers. Helweg and Helweg (1990) have found that first generation Indian parents often base their self-esteem and self-worth on the levels of success attained by their children. This is why many South Asian parents are intensely focused on sending their children to the best universities available. South Asian parents frequently discuss the academic progress of their children with other South Asian parents, and the children feel pressure to outperform other children in their social networks. Recognition

for attaining academic success reflects well on oneself and upon one's family in the greater South Asian community.

In another study by Beaumont, Howard, Inmam, & Walker (2007), on the influence of contextual factors in Asian Indian immigrant parent's experiences, education and financial security were considered a top priority among mothers surveyed. One mother stated "hard work and being disciplined is the way for a successful life." Another mother felt that the pressure to study careers such as law, medicine, and engineering was "an Indian thing" due to the association with job and financial security. (Beaumont, et al. 2007). In a 1991 study Agarwal found that "over 50% of first generation South Asians wanted their children to pursue a career in medicine, and a similar percentage followed their parents' wishes". In Saram's study on the model minority stereotype, he finds that his first generation interviewees stress the importance of "secure jobs" and judge prospective careers for their children solely based on the levels of income. (Singh (ed.). 2007). South Asian parents put great emphasis on choosing a career within the fields of medicine, engineering, business, or law. These fields are viewed as stable, respectable, traditional, and high paying. Due to the high incidence of first generation parents who had immigrated to the United States to pursue a career in one of these fields, the pressure for their children to follow in their footsteps and attain upper-middle-class status is great.

### **Research Design/Practitioner Inquiry Design**

This research was approached through phenomenological interviews, conducted individually using guided questions. Phenomenological research is focused on lived

experience and based on the belief that the researcher cannot separate themselves from their presuppositions (Groenewald, 2004). This research method was chosen because it seemed particularly suited to capturing the pattern of parents pushing their children to succeed in traditional career field, from the perspective of South Asian individuals.

For the purpose of this study, the interviewee pool was limited to two groups. The first group was comprised of second generation adults who were between the ages of 20 to 35, were born and raised in the United States, and whose parents were both Pakistani and/or Indian. The second group consisted of first generation immigrants from India/Pakistan, who came to the United States between 1965 and 1980, and who had raised their children in the United States. All South Asian countries were not included because the cultures in other South Asian countries are distinctly different and would not be adequately captured in this small of a study. This phenomenon was initially in Pakistani and Indian families living in the United States, and it is unclear if the same patterns would emerge had this study included Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and other South Asian countries. For the purposes of this paper, Pakistani and Indian interviewees will be referred to as South Asian as that is what seemed to be the most common term used by the interviewees during this research.

Research subjects were found through the snowball sampling technique. The researcher's circle of friends and their friends assisted with recruiting interviewees. The researcher's mother served as the primary recruiter, and the majority of the interviewees came from her social network. She asked her South Asian friends to participate and asked

for the contact information of their children as well. The study was also advertised through a posting on the researcher's personal Facebook page.

In total, six parents (four females and two males) and eight adult children (seven females and one male) were interviewed. Of the interviewees in total there were three sets of related individuals, one mother and two daughters, a mother and a daughter, and a mother and a father. The other parents and children were unrelated. The careers of the parents interviewed (including spouses mentioned) are: administrative assistant, accountant, engineer, nurse, scientist, housewife, physician, designer, and physician. The careers of the children interviewed include: college student studying business/accounting, college student studying medicine, data analyst, festival coordinator, two lawyers, graduate social work student, and Foreign Service officer.

Conversational interviews were conducted that consisted of two separate sets of open-ended questions (a copy of which can be found in Appendix A and B), one for parents and one for children. The methods of communication available were a phone conversation, an email questionnaire, and a web-based chat. Interviewees were given this choice to ensure that they felt comfortable and open to sharing in a way that was preferable to them. Questions were not asked in a predetermined order and identical questions were not asked to each interviewee. This ensured that the interview moved along like a naturally flowing conversation. The interviews ranged in duration, from 20 minutes to two hours, depending on the interviewee's interest in the subject matter and the depth of the conversation. Time was purposefully allowed at the end of each

interview for further discussion and let the interviewees dictate when the conversation was over. Interviewees were encouraged to speak candidly and honestly.

All interviewees electronically signed the informed consent letter (see Appendix C) before the interview took place. The majority of the interviews were conducted through Skype, and participants were informed that the calls were being recorded for transcription purposes. When all of the interviews were completed, they were re-read, notes were made, and common threads and patterns were noticed. The attitudes of parents and children could be divided into two separate groups of experiences, which is reflected in the analysis section.

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

The Presentation and Analysis of Data section contains the following sub-sections: Interviewee Introductions and Quotation and Findings. Both sections have been separated into two separate sections comprised of first generation parents and second generation adult children. The Interviewee Introduction section will give the reader some basic background information on participants in this study. The Quotations and Findings section gathers groupings of quotes from interviewees on specific themes and then analyzes them and connects them to a broader scope.

#### **Interviewee Introductions: First Generation Parents:**

1)**Tahera:** Tahera was born in Pakistan and came to the United States in 1978. She always wanted to leave Pakistan and was working as an Executive Assistant there. She had a close friend in the United States and applied for her visa. When she arrived in the



United States, she stayed with her friend for three months and got a job at the United Nations. She went back to Pakistan a few years later, married her husband, and came back to the United States with him in 1982. Now he has his own accounting business and she works as a school administrator. She has two daughters, Zaynab and Sukaynah, who are both in college.

2 and 3) **Kumari and George** (interview conducted together): Kumari came to the United States in 1968 because she was recruited by a hospital in California after she had completed her last year of college for Nursing in India. George came to the United States in 1970 in order to complete post-graduate studies in engineering. They have raised a son and a daughter in the United States and have stressed the importance of being independent and responsible.

4) **Mahesh**: Mahesh came to the United States in 1970 from India. He had finished a Masters in organic chemistry and spent six years doing research in England. After England, he enrolled at Rutgers for a PhD. He wanted to come to the United States because he felt that United States had the best programs for pharmaceutical research. When he graduated, he returned to India to marry his wife and bring her to the United States, where they had a son and a daughter. They settled and raised their family in New Jersey.

5) **Madhu**: Madhu and her husband came to the United States in 1976. They came because her husband is a doctor and wanted to get his degree. He was already a doctor but wanted to be an American trained doctor. They originally planned to stay in the United States for five years and then return to India, but “one thing led to another” and

they've been in the United States for 36 years. She is currently a homemaker but has her degree from India in English literature. She had three daughters shortly after arriving in the United States and decided to stay home and stop working in order to care for her children.

6)**Hema:** Hema studied fine arts in India. Her husband came to the US in 1965 to continue his medical education. He returned to India and married her in 1973 and brought her to the United States. She worked as a designer for a year and a half, and then stopped working to raise her children. She has two sons, who both went to Yale.

**Interviewee Introductions: Second Generation Adult Children:**

1)**Zaynab:** Zaynab is Tahera's daughter and Sukaynah's sister. She lives in California where she is a fourth year college student. She studies business and accounting and hopes to pursue a career related to her studies. Her mother, Tahera, is an administrative assistant at a school and her father is an accountant.

2)**Sukaynah:** Sukaynah is Tahera's daughter and Zaynab's sister. She lives in California. She is a freshman in college and wants to study medicine. Like Zaynab, her mother Tahera, is an administrative assistant at a school and her father is an accountant.

3)**Jotsna:** Jotsna is a data analyst. She grew up in New Jersey but now lives in a Virginia suburb of Washington, District of Columbia. Her father is an engineer and her mother is a physician.

4)**Pia:** Pia currently works as a Fringe Festival Coordinator, where she organizes performances of avant garde theater and music. She lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her mother, Madhu, is a housewife and her father is a physician.

5)**Noreen:** Noreen is currently a housewife and has two young children. Before she started a family, she worked as a lawyer. She grew up in Brooklyn, New York and then moved to northern New York in a relatively small town where her parents owned a dry cleaning business. She currently lives in Brooklyn, New York.

6)**Mona:** Mona is currently getting her graduate degree in Psychology. She grew up in New Jersey and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. Her father works in corporate finance and her mother is an accountant.

7)**Ali:** Ali is a public interest lawyer. He was raised in Brooklyn, New York and still lives and works there. His father owned many businesses and his mother works for Pakistan airlines.

8)**Maryum:** Maryum is a Foreign Service officer and is currently working in Egypt. Her mother is a physician and her father was an engineer but retired in order to manage their family farm.

### **Quotations and Findings**

In order to present this phenomenological data, interviewee quotes are grouped according to themes that emerged through analyzing the interviews. In each section, a “Findings” section follows the grouping of quotes, which draws upon the similarities and differences of each interviewee’s experience and connects the patterns noticed in the interviews to a broader scope. The first section focuses on common themes from the parents interviewed, and is followed by common themes in the adult children interviews.

## **Quotations and Findings from Parents**

### **From Parents: On Individual Self-Motivation While Growing Up:**

1)“I did it all on my own. We had a big family so I decided I wanted to get the highest degree and very early I decided I was going to leave India. We have a large family, my father was so busy in his work, I had six brothers and one sister. They didn’t really have time to motivate us.” –Mahesh

2)“She (my mother) never interfered with my passion for education. I was very passionate about going to school. I left school at 9 to look after her for a few years. I left school many times just to go back for one reason or another. My father said to do whatever you’re interested in. My parents were not very instrumental in my learning. I was self-motivated to learn.” – Tahera

**Findings:** Neither Mahesh nor Tahera grew up in households where they were pressured to succeed academically and professionally. Unlike families mentioned in the literature review and other interviewees in this study, there was no emphasis on studying math or science throughout school in order to attain a predictable and stable career. Due to the size of Mahesh’s large family and his parents multiple responsibilities, he found a sense of freedom to direct himself towards his interest, which was science. The success attained in his career seems to emanate from a quest for knowledge through research, without influence from external forces.

Alternatively, Tahera’s mother was very ill when she was growing up, and her father was not very involved in her studies. Although her mother’s illness disrupted her studies, when she finally returned to school and graduated, she was exempt from many of

the pressures that other Pakistani children from a similar background would face. In the absence of strong parental figures, Tahera immigrated to the United States and turned to a friend for guidance, who pushed her to follow her passions but not to subscribe to a predetermined course or career.

Both Mahesh and Tahera's experiences were atypical of what was presented in the literature review. Due to their special circumstances, they were both exempt from the pressure to succeed that many South Asians in India and Pakistan experience. As a result of their independence in choosing careers for themselves, their parenting styles reflected a nontraditional approach as compared to other parent interviewees in this study.

**From Parents: On Having Limited Choices to Choose a Career in India/Pakistan**

1) "As for his parents (her husband's) it was pretty simple for him. There are two brothers. One was an engineer. And in India it was either you were an engineer, you were a doctor, or you were a lawyer. There's not a choice. So his parents said "the oldest one is an engineer and you become a doctor", and he said yes." –Madhu

2) "My husband's family wanted him to be a doctor so he said okay and became a doctor. I think in a way, my thinking, when we came to this country we had no choice for our careers. We had no choice and whatever it was we had to do it because we needed to survive. We needed to do things and we had to work very hard." –Hema

**Findings:** Both Madhu and Hema's responses were consistent with what was found in the literature review. The interviewee in Ralitsa Atkin's study recounted the two choices that Indian parents give to their children; either you study medicine or engineering.

Madhu's husband was faced with the identical choice, except that his brother has already decided to be an engineer, so the decision to be a doctor was made for him. In keeping with the large proportion of South Asian doctors in the United States, Hema's husband was only given one choice as well. In reality, it does not appear to be a choice, but only a verbal acceptance of a predetermined fate given to a child by their parents. From an American perspective, allowing parents to choose a career for their sons and daughters seems forceful and limiting. However, both Madhu and Hema seemed to value the simplicity in having their parents decide. For both of their husbands, it seemed that there was no struggle involved as they would have probably been aware of their parents' wishes from an early age. Formally deciding to pursue medicine was just an affirmation of what they had been groomed to become.

The pressure to pursue a career that is widely recognized as admirable and high paying, is a way for the parents to nurture, guide, and prepare their children for a financially comfortable and secure adulthood. It ensures that when children leave the nest, they will land in a similarly soft nest instead of taking flight without knowing how and where they will land.

### **From Parents: On Levels of Involvement and Expectations in Children's Choosing a College Major**

1) "I was very encouraging but my husband's role was more active." - Tahera

2) "We brought them, two boys and a girl, up to be independent and responsible and they chose their own college. We supported their choice of major." -George and Kumari

3)“I asked them what career they wanted to choose. Based on that we selected the colleges and took them around. Ultimately, they made the decision of where they wanted to go...I knew I did not want to interfere, but being a scientist, I would have liked if they had gone into science. But, it was ultimately their decision and they did well by going to what they wanted to do”-Mahesh

4)“I wasn’t really hands-on but I definitely had a say, especially in high school when they were applying to which schools to go to... Our other two went to Williams and Tufts and we did have a say in where you’re going to go. They were accepted into a lot of schools but these were the choices that we pushed them to.”-Madhu

5)“We had an expectation that they must have a certain SAT score and they must go to [SIC] Ivy League school. They both went to Yale.” –Hema

**Findings:** The process of helping a child choose a college and a major is no easy task, especially for immigrant parents. The staggering array of choices: locations, majors, facilities, and costs involved is not comparable to the college decision making process in India. South Asian immigrant parents are in uncharted waters when it comes to helping their children decide what college to attend. Their experiences in India and Pakistan are much more structured. For example, in Pakistan or India if your parents knew that you would be studying medicine for your entire upbringing, it seems fairly probable that they would have a college in mind, most likely not very far from your home, where you would continue to live until you got married. Thus, it is very difficult for South Asian parents to use their own vastly different experience to guide their children to a decision.

Interviewees Mahesh, George, and Kumari took a relaxed and somewhat more

Americanized approach of letting their children direct the process. Both Madhu and Hema allowed their children some freedom in decision making, but made it clear that they had expectations and were active stakeholders in the decision making process.

The challenge of supporting a child through the college decision making process is difficult for all parents, across all cultures living in the United States. For South Asian immigrant parents, there is no history or precedent that they can bring into the decision making process. The only concrete experiences that they could draw on would be that of their peer network. For example, it is very common to hear around South Asian women's circles "so-and-so's son went to Yale and now he graduated and got a high paying job so your daughter should go to Yale as well". It seems that all of the parents in this study are very self-aware that the decision making process is very different than in India and it is not culturally acceptable in the United States to make the decision on behalf of your children. They all seem to understand that it is a collaborative process, and as such approach it with varying degrees of involvement.

### **From Parents: On Pushing Their Children to Make Certain Choices**

1) "I wanted one (of my daughters) to go into medicine... I'm okay but I'm a little more conservative. I mean, engineer, doctor, lawyer. There's always a need for those jobs. Even now, I'm pushing them to go to graduate school."-Madhu

2) "We wanted to make sure that they do well in school, kind of thing. Although we did give them freedom, whatever they want to do we made them work hard and study hard. That's what we did... We had no choice. We were on top of them that they have to do well because that's the way we grew up in India. Our parents never allowed us to do



things like slack away. In the school if you didn't do right we can punish. And although we never hit them I was always on top of them. My husband was always on top of them. You must do the right way, or you must do the right thing, things like that.”-Hema

**Findings:** Both Hema and Madhu's pressuring and pushing their children to make certain choices appear to be coming from a more “traditional” mentality. As Helweg and Helweg noted (1990), many South Asians base their self-esteem and self-worth on the success of their children. Additionally, there is a significant amount of competition among South Asian social networks to have the brightest and most successful sons and daughters. Hema and Madhu seem to want to steer their children towards the same choices that they and their husbands were guided towards. Not putting pressure on their children to conform and follow a traditional path opens up an element of risk and uncertainty. The formula of following your parents' guidance towards a career while attaining academic and then professional success in a stable field is a tried and true formula for both Hema and Madhu. It seems natural that both of them have tried to fashion their children's path similarly to what has proven successful for themselves.

#### **From Parents: On Not Pushing Their Children to Make Certain Choices**

1)“In India you have three choices: doctor, lawyer, and engineer. Many of my friends push their children to study these things. A lot of my friends push their kids these certain ways. More than 70% I think push their kids to study these things. It comes in marriage too. Like, my son is a doctor so it has to be this... My kids know that there's a lot more to things than in India where you should satisfy your parents, and they knew I wanted more for them than to follow a routine.” –Mahesh

**Findings:** Mahesh’s analysis of the limited choices South Asian parents give to their children is consistent with what was stated in the literature, as well as the experiences of other interviewees. Mahesh’s lack of parental involvement due to his large family granted him a sort of “wild card”. He was self-determined and self-motivated and made decisions for himself at an early age based on following his passions, and not necessarily in the pursuit of financial stability. When he went to England to study science, he did not have a predetermined plan nor did he know where he wanted to end up. He leaped into the experience without knowing anyone in England, or knowing much about the University he was going to attend. In contrast to Hema and Madhu, Mahesh attained success by deviating from the traditional South Asian norm. For him and his family, there was no norm, expectation, or path. I think that Mahesh imparted a similar attitude to his children, that if you follow your interests and try hard you will be able to succeed and you will be happy.

**From Parents: On Satisfaction with Their Children’s Career Choices**

1) “We are happy and proud of their career choices. Yes, we are satisfied.” –George and Kumari

2) “My son and daughter are both successful in their own way...I always felt satisfied because in their own way they’re doing what they like. I’m satisfied and I think they’re satisfied too. There’s not really much that they could’ve done differently.”-Mahesh

3) “I think they’re both happy in place where they are. They have found their niche and they’re doing well. I’m happy if they’re happy.”-Hema

**Findings:** George, Kumari, Mahesh, and Hema are all satisfied with their children's career choices. The parents who expressed the most satisfaction with their children's career choices are also the parents who have the oldest children of all of the parent interviewees. George, Kumari, Mahesh, and Hema's children are all over the age of 30. They seem to feel satisfied because their children are out of the house and completely self-sufficient, regardless of their career choices. As their children are more established and are beginning to have their own families, the judgment and critiques of their career choices start to fade away.

**From Parents: On Dissatisfaction with Their Children's Career Choices**

1)“Mmmmm...I don't know. I wouldn't jump up and say yes, I'm satisfied...Maybe I should have put my foot down. Go to law school! Or go to medical school! Maybe that. Hindsight... Maybe I could've been more aggressive and hands on and say hey!...Maybe the second generation wants to get away from this, like they saw their dads working hard and they say hey, maybe we're not going to work as hard. I don't know. He did work hard because we came from an affluent background. We had servants, chauffeurs, that's the way it was in India. My dog had a servant, just for the dog...I want my kids to be one step more than where their parents are but they're very happy where they are. I'm very happy, but I'm not. I wonder when we're gone, will they be okay. Those things.” –Madhu

**Findings:** Madhu's statement is very honest and very revealing of the struggle and concerns that she feels. Her daughter, Pia, is a Fringe Festival coordinator and in Madhu's mind has deviated from the prescribed “safe” and “stable” path.

Understandably, Madhu feels conflicted between supporting her children and feeling

happy about their choices and feeling nervous about their futures. In some ways, many American parents, regardless of cultural background, feel similarly. It is a reality that 20- and 30- somethings are making career choices in a very difficult economic climate. Seeing her daughters deviate from what she knows to be safe and stable is not easy for Madhu. She seems to alternate between being hands on, being hands off, and then regretting she wasn't more involved. I think that her concerns and fears towards her daughters' careers are grounded in her own experiences and formula for success.

### **Quotations and Findings from Second Generation Adult Children**

#### **From Children: On Self-Motivation to Succeed Academically While Growing Up**

1)“They were always laid back. They’ve always told us school is really important. Why wouldn’t you do your homework? There was no reason not to. Our parents made it a point to be home. We had everything we needed. We wanted to do the best we could and they wanted us to do the same.”-Zaynab

2)“I just wanted to succeed...For me, money had always been at the back of my mind. We’re not very well off at all, so I just wanted to succeed...Studying was always a big part of my life.”-Sukaynah

3)“I don’t remember them pushing us or anything like that. They would always try to help us but we were pretty self-motivated...When we were in high school they left it to our own choices. I would procrastinate but they let us do what we wanted and work at our own pace because we did well enough.”-Jotsna

4)“I started college early (at 15)...My parents/brother all thought it was a bad idea. In retrospect, I’m glad I did it...I was very self-motivated.”-Maryum

**Findings:** Even though the children perceive themselves as being almost entirely self-motivated, their parents probably played a significant part in guiding them to succeed. In Ralitsa Atkin's study (2007), some of the interviewees felt "brainwashed" to study medicine. While none of these young women were literally brainwashed by their parents to study, the expectations from their parents were clear and constant. If they had been raised in an environment where they knew they were expected to do well, the parents could have essentially trained them to be self-motivated to study.

**From Children: On Parental Pressure to Succeed Academically While Growing Up**

1) "We always knew where they wanted us to end up... They expected us to be able to compete with the Asian Americans that did really well in our school, you know, and get into the highest classes... Just to make them happy, I joined a lot of things that I did just to make my academic profile better, but it really wasn't what I wanted to do." -Sukaynah

2) "(Their motto was) Study all the time. They were pretty serious about it. Compared to friend's parents they had a traditional trajectory for us. They wanted us to become a doctor or a lawyer, make a lot of money. In school the focus was on math or science, not reading or art. They took us to museums on vacation and stuff but in terms of school the focus was on more practical subjects." -Pia

3) "My parents were adamant that we try our best and try to get all A's in all of our classes. They did not push us to study but made sure that we did our homework and such. It was just understood that we had to try and get the best grades possible." -Noreen

4)“I’m not sure if we actually did well in school because they pushed us or because we were nerdy. They did stress taking academics seriously. They stressed the importance of math and practical subjects.”-Mona

5)“(Growing up) it was all about education and a lot of emphasis on doing well in school. A lot of expectation to achieve academically.” –Ali

**Findings:** From these responses and the findings in the literature review, the pressure on South Asian second generation children to succeed academically is a real and experienced phenomenon. This is in keeping with the theory in the section above that South Asian parents set clear and constant expectations that their children must do well. All of the interviewees emphasize “that it was understood”, “that it was expected”, and that it was “felt” that you had to do well. None of the interviewees discussed the consequences or the punishments for not doing well. It seems like it was presented as if there were no alternative. If you are only presented with one option, that option being success, as a child you might feel as though you have no other choice. This may explain where the self-motivation comes in. Similar to the example of Neil Kadakia in the film *Spellbound*, he felt that he had to win the National Spelling Bee. There was no other option than winning because of the intense pressure his father put on him.

**From Children: On Parent’s Attitudes toward Non-Traditional Careers**

1)“I don’t think they would ever tell me not to do something unless it was like, being a go-go girl, you know? They just want me to be stable.”- Sukaynah

2) "Actually, some of the nontraditional things they kind of encouraged a lot... Not like if you want to go collect rocks or something that's a terrible career. They're not like that. They're like, if that makes you happy..."-Jotsna

3) "Me and my middle sister do things that they don't understand... For them it's about the biggest and the best. Not (like working) in a small art gallery, but why not the Metropolitan Museum of Art?"-Pia

4) "They made it clear that they would not be supportive of a non-traditional career, like a hairdresser... Even though I had extra-curricular activities, they knew and I knew that I wouldn't pursue it as a career but as an extra to help me get into better colleges."-Noreen

5) "I changed majors and jobs a lot. I started out with science, switched to business, then art, and eventually graduated with a political science degree and this was just undergrad. I think on my end, they just let things unfold."-Maryum

**Findings:** In terms of nontraditional careers, the young adult interviewees had mixed experiences. Both Maryum, and Jotsna felt that their parents were supportive of any career that they were interested in; be it rock collecting or art. Sukaynah's parents were also generally supportive of a non-traditional career, as long as it was stable. Noreen's parents made it clear that they would not be supportive of a non-traditional career. Pia's parents urged her to strive to work for the biggest and the best. It seems that both Noreen and Pia's parents fall into the more traditional category and who still hold strongly to the thinking that if you follow a course of study in medicine, law, engineering, or business you will be able to live a comfortable life. From the parents' perspective, any deviation from this formula, like a non-traditional career would not fit into the equation and could

yield unpredictable results. A non-traditional career is viewed as stepping into future of financial instability, which is directly opposite of the parents' vision for their children.

### **From Children: On Pressure to Follow a Stable Path**

1)"They just want me to be stable. They don't want a high income, just something stable...They just want me to be independent and be able to support myself."-Sukaynah

2)"I knew that my parents expected me to be a professional, like a doctor or a lawyer and that was always stressed."-Noreen

3)"I always felt a passive aggressive non stated pressure to do something practical and pragmatic...They didn't realize at the time that you can be successful in other fields than law, engineering, medicine, and finance. Those infamous sure fields are all they know. Their experience was about survival. They were in a new country and didn't have any connections or resources here. They had to choose a practical career in order to make it."

-Mona

4)"There was a lot of pressure to get an advanced degree. I'm an attorney and went to law school and there was a lot of pressure to get things done quickly and follow a straight path...There's definitely a lot of emphasis on getting a professional career track and doing something that will pay."-Ali

**Findings:** The pressure to have a career that is stable and high-paying seems to be a common thread among all of the second generation interviewees, and is consistent with the findings from the literature review. As written in *The South Asian Americans* (Leonard,1997), South Asian parents put a strong emphasis on material security and expect children to be successful academically and professionally. The data collected here



certainly acknowledges the pressure being put on them to pursue a “traditional” career track.

**From Children: On Attaining Traditional Success versus Choosing what is Personally Rewarding**

1) “For me, it’s not really about a career choice; it’s about self-esteem or something. Even if people are doing a million different degrees or something really prestigious, they have to like it. They have to have something in them, drive. I’m not working in a direction like that. That sounds bad for me but it’s not like so-and-so is doing this job so I have to have this job... They always had a path and they didn’t have any choices growing up but now it’s like we have tons of choices.”-Jotsna

2) “I think the practicality of doing something that makes you a lot of money still resonates with my parents. I don’t think they get what I do, or why I would want to be in the arts and make no money but do something that I like... I think I’m pretty consistently actually fighting with my parents about what I do. Instead of doing what I do for a small organization, my father is like, well, why don’t you work at some huge corporate place like a finance place and do special events for them cause you’d make 150,000 a year and I think that’s still really their thinking. I don’t think they have a good understanding of why I do what I do.”-Pia

3) “They also base all job opportunities on salary rather than job satisfaction and that is not in line with my beliefs.”-Noreen

4) “My life is about choice. I know that if you do something you love and take it to the top, the money will follow. For them it’s about a 9 to 5 job, you come home and that’s it.

I'm studying social work now because I want to be a therapist. They were jarred by that. They said social workers don't make a lot of money, you have an engineering background. I'm not selecting a profession on how much it pays. I'm thinking about how rewarding it is."-Mona

5)"Basically now, it's like I'm cutting deals with them. I'll say ok, I'll do this, but I'm going to do it this way. There is a lot of pressure definitely but it's all coming from a good place."-Ali

**Findings:** The second generation adult children interviewees have to deal with the pressures put upon them by their parents to pursue a traditional course of study, and at the same time sort through the wide range of choices that they have available. Many of them see the importance of having a career that is satisfying and rewarding, regardless of how much it pays or how stable it is. This is a stark contrast to the viewpoint of their parents. While they understand where their parent's pressure is coming from, they feel that it is most important that they make decisions for themselves that will make them happy, even if these decision deviate from what their parents want for them.

#### **From Children: On Level of Weight Given to Parents' Input Now**

1)"They're very high up there. They're number one. In terms of prioritizing everything, definitely number one."-Zaynab

2)"80 percent of my decisions are centered around them. I've never made a decision without them. Sometimes I let them know that I want to do something different than what they want. I just tell them and it's okay."-Sukaynah

3) "They're more advisory support for me. They don't push and they don't call me every day. More like if I want to talk to them. Eventually they say it's up to you if you want to change things... It's more emotional support rather than the technical support, like the options of you can do this or that." -Jotsna

4) "When I have to make a big decision I'm constantly calling my mother. I like to hear what they have to say but I don't always follow it. It's a generational thing. A lot of things are weird for my parents but it doesn't change how I think about things." -Pia

5) "I talk with my parents almost every other day... Their advice is usually slanted towards being conservative and traditional and it would not fit me at this time." -Noreen

6) "Not as much now. In some ways their approval matters and I want them to be proud of me. But, they and I have realized that my life is my own... The course of my actions are mine and not my parents. It's not wise for them to tell me what to do because I have to live with my own decisions." -Mona

7) "I talk to my parents every day for at least an hour.. I give their opinions quite a bit of weight, yea, a lot." -Ali

8) "My dad is more like a sounding board. I just talk to him sometimes for hours at a time about decisions, weighing the pros and cons, and he mainly just listens. Eventually, he will give his opinion, but I think he knows I'll end up deciding whatever I feel like makes sense." -Maryum

**Findings:** Almost all of the second generation interviewees talk to their parents every day, and consult them when making decisions. Even when they know that their parents have differing viewpoints, it seems important to them that they let their parents know

what they are considering, regardless if they plan on disregarding their parents advice. Consulting their parents about their career choices seems like a way for them to show respect when at times they may be disrespecting their parents' wishes. Even though their parents might not necessarily understand or agree with their decision making processes, the willingness of the children to consider their parent's perspective demonstrates a familial closeness and an attempt to try to bridge the two viewpoints of both first and second generation.

### **Conclusion and Broader Findings**

Based on the results of these interviews, parental pressure to succeed among first generation South Asian immigrants on second generation children is a real and experienced phenomenon. The parents have made comfortable lives for themselves in the United States and feel as though they have a formula that will ensure similar success for their children. As interviewee Mona said, "When my parents moved here it wasn't to make a better life for themselves, but to make a better life for their family. They moved here in the hope that they would have successful kids who would have successful kids and then one day have a lineage of successful American Indian families".

In this project, there appears to be a split in the attitudes of the parents. The parents who chose their own careers for themselves in India/Pakistan and came from families who did not pressure them to choose a certain path appeared to be more liberal towards the choices of their children. For example, in the case of Mahesh, although his career was in science which is a field highly regarded among South Asians, the decision to choose this course of study was completely his own. He chose science because he had

a deep interest and passion for science, and his choosing to make a career out of it was not based on any parental or societal pressure. In turn, he passed on the same kind of independent attitude and values to his children.

On the other hand, Madhu and her husband had very little control in making decisions about their own careers. She had studied literature in college, but stayed home to raise her children shortly after she completed her degree and then immigrated to the United States. Her husband's parents told him that he should become a doctor and he did what he was told. They led an affluent life in India, and through the advising of her husband's parents were able to lead an equally affluent life in the United States. For Madhu and her husband, it appears that the underlying lesson learned was that if you follow the direction and guidance of your parents, which are in line with your own cultural values, you will be able to lead a comfortable and stable life. Their recipe for success seems to transcend geographical boundaries, making it all the more proven to yield the predicted results.

In terms of the adult children interviewees, all have close relationships with their families, and their parents often worry about them and specifically about their ability to support themselves financially. In South Asian culture, parents feel a responsibility to support their adult children both emotionally and financially until they are married and sometimes continuing until mid-adulthood. Based on the responses of the interviewees in my study, it seems that many South Asian parents equate money with happiness. Money brings financial security and the ability to support a family and those two things are crucial for their happiness. However, the children who were born and raised in the United

States and have had a very comfortable upbringing as compared to their parents. They have a wide range of careers and educational opportunities that they can choose from.

Due to the staggering number of career choices available, the children both feel liberated and conflicted. Some of the adult children interviewees have received nothing but supportiveness and encouragement from their parents to choose whatever they are interested in. However, the majority seem to feel that their parents cannot completely understand the range of choices they are exposed to and cannot process the rationales behind choosing a career that is not traditionally thought of as “stable”. It appears that the majority of the adult children have had some kind of conflict or point of stress over this issue with their parents, usually in the years post-college.

There is an overall pattern that emerges from the adult children interviewees, which is somewhere between appeasement and rebellion. Most of the interviewees have purposefully followed the guidance of their parents at one point or another though it went against their own desires. For example, Sukaynah enrolled in all Advanced Placement classes in high school based on her parent’s suggestion, although it prevented her from participating in competitive soccer, which she really wanted to play. Mona studied engineering in college because her parents wanted her to. She felt that it was ingrained in her and she didn’t give any consideration to what she might have wanted to study otherwise. However, as the children grow older and are able to pay their own rents and live independently, they feel less inclined to act on their parent’s guidance as well intentioned as it may be. Perhaps surprisingly, none of the children expressed resentment towards their parents for pushing them or forcing them towards a stable career path. Even

when the children were guided away from their personal interests, they seem to recognize and understand where their parent's influence is coming from. As interviewee Ali says, "It's a challenge for people. It is what it is. But overall it's a good thing and not a bad thing."

The results of this study will contribute to the small but growing body of research conducted about South Asian family dynamics in the United States. The individual experiences of the interviewees and overall findings helps to explain the phenomenon of the "stable career path" prevalent among South Asians. Second generation South Asians feel pressure from society to assimilate, while being dually pressured by their parents to attain success. Through creating discourse about this phenomenon, both South Asian parents and their children can contextualize their experiences and relate them to the experiences of others. Educators and administrators at both the secondary and university level will be able to understand why there are so many South Asian students oriented towards the math, science, engineering, and medical fields of study. Additionally, educators, administrators, and counselors will have more insight into both the influences behind academic success among South Asian students and the internal and inter-familial stress that can occur when South Asian students decide to pursue courses of study that their parents do not support. The range of perspectives offered by all interviewees in this study is important to note. There were both South Asian parents and second generation adults in this study that differed from the stereotype that all South Asian parents push their children and all second generation children feel conflicted about their career choices. Individuals interested in this research should be aware of the patterns and

conclusions made in this study, but as this study demonstrates, there is a wide range of South Asian parenting strategies and attitudes towards what constitutes a successful life.

Some of the interviewees expressed curiosity towards how the second generation will guide the third generation towards choosing careers. Interviewee Noreen has two toddlers living in Brooklyn, New York while her parents live upstate. Perhaps when her children grow older she will tell them about how her parents were able to attain success in a new country through utilizing traditional patterns and how she was able to choose a career through a combination of the lessons of her parents and her own desire for a career that is fulfilling and satisfying. I find it fascinating to think about how she will impart her own experiences as a second generation South Asian in guiding her children to their careers. I would love to re-visit this study in twenty years to see how the third generations of South Asians are affected by their parents in their life and career choices, and whether they bear traces of the “traditional” mentality or if the notion of stability and predictability vanishes in a rapidly changing world.

Although some of the second generation interviewees in this study made choices that their parents were not fully supportive of, they all had or were working towards full time jobs. All of the second generation interviewees had completed or were currently enrolled in higher education. With one exception, all of the second generation interviewees were heterosexual. I think it would be interesting to do a similar kind of study with interviewees who were much farther from the norm in terms of lifestyle and career choices. I wonder if their relationships with their parents take on a different form, or have a different pattern than those interviewed in this study.



The majority of interviewees in this study did not live in South Asian dominated neighborhoods or enclaves. I wonder how the results of this study would have differed had I focused solely on South Asians who lived in tight-knit communities comprised solely of other South Asians. Had I chosen to focus on that subset, I think that the traditional values and pressure to succeed would have been more pronounced in the findings. I would be curious to see how the results would be similar to or differ from this study.

In summation, the traditional South Asian attitude towards following a well charted recipe for success is seen clearly in this study. The pressure to choose a career that is stable and high paying is a phenomenon that continues to be passed down from generation to generation, and is an attitude that does not seem to be substantially weakened by starting life in a new country. The second generation feel conflicted about the pressures put upon them by their parents. It is a delicate balance between pleasing one's parents and pursuing one's own interest; of following the tried and true versus walking down a road less traveled; and of retaining cultural values or assimilating into the dominant culture in a new country.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions for First Generation Parents

- 1) When did you come to the US and why?
- 2) What do you do for a living? What was your experience like trying to continue or start a different career in a new country?
- 3) What role did your parents in Pakistan/India play in deciding on a career for yourself?
- 4) What was your role in your son/daughter's process of applying to college? What did you think about his/her choice of major?
- 5) What do you think about your son/daughter's career choices? Do you feel satisfied with the choices he/she has made? Do you think there is anything he/she should have done differently? Why?
- 6) Anything else to add?

## **APPENDIX B**

### Interview Questions for Second Generation Adults

- 1) Tell me about your family. Where are the members of your family from? When did they come to the US and why?
- 2) Where did you grow up? Were there other Indian/Pakistani families in your town/city?
- 3) What do your parents do for a living?
- 3) What was your parents approach to your studies when you were younger?
- 4) How did you and your family make the decision about what colleges you would apply to? And how did you make the decision to choose a major?
- 5) What influence does your family have on your career, both after you graduated from college, and now?
- 6) Did you ever feel discouraged by your family when you wanted to follow a course of study or pursue an interest that they didn't agree with?
- 7) How much weight do you give now to your parents input on your career choices?
- 8) Have you ever felt pressured to align your career path with those of your parent's friend's Pakistani/Indian children? Did you ever feel that competition with these peers was a factor in your career choices? Do you feel like that now?
- 9) How often do you keep in touch with your immediate family?
- 10) Anything else to add?

## APPENDIX C

Sabrina Eveland- Student researcher at SIT Graduate Institute

### INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Dear participant,

I am conducting a research project to find out about pressure to succeed among second generation Indian/Pakistani young adults. I am writing to invite you to participate in this project. I plan to work with approximately 12 participants in this study.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer basic questions relating to the topic that I am researching. You will not receive any compensation to participate in this project. The potential risks of participating in this study are minimal. Participation is strictly voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no prejudice, penalty, or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled. If you agree to participate and then change your mind, you may withdraw at any time during the study without penalty.

I seek to maintain the confidentiality of all data and records associated with your participation in this research. You should understand, however, there are rare instances when I am required to share personally-identifiable information (e.g., according to policy, contract, and regulation). For example, in response to a complaint about the research, officials at the School for International Training designees of the sponsor(s), and/or regulatory and oversight government agencies may access research data. You also should understand that I am required by law to report certain information to government and/or law enforcement officials (e.g., child abuse, threatened violence against self or others, communicable diseases). Data will be kept on my home computer and will only be accessible to SIT professors and my classmates upon request. I will be recording all conversations for research and transcription purposes. After the study is complete, all records will be destroyed. For interviewees who participated in my study conducted in November/December of 2011, I will use both materials from those interviews and new interviews for the purposes of my thesis. The results will be used in a capstone presentation, and published on the SIT Graduate Institute website. The results of the study will be available to all participants upon request.

The work will be conducted solely by me, Sabrina Eveland. I am a Master's candidate in International Education at SIT Graduate Institute.

If you have any questions about this research project or would like more information before, during, or after the study, you may contact me at [sabrinaeveland@gmail.com](mailto:sabrinaeveland@gmail.com)

Please provide your e-signature indicating your choice and email this document back to me. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sabrina Eveland

Master's candidate in International Education at SIT Graduate Institute

Yes, I, \_\_\_\_\_ consent/agree to participate in this research project.

No, I, \_\_\_\_\_ do not consent/agree to participate in this research project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date