



A Rainbow from the East:

A National Qualitative Study Assessing the Perspectives and Needs of South Asian Queer People on College Campuses

Pamela Roy & Raja G. Bhattar
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Thanks!

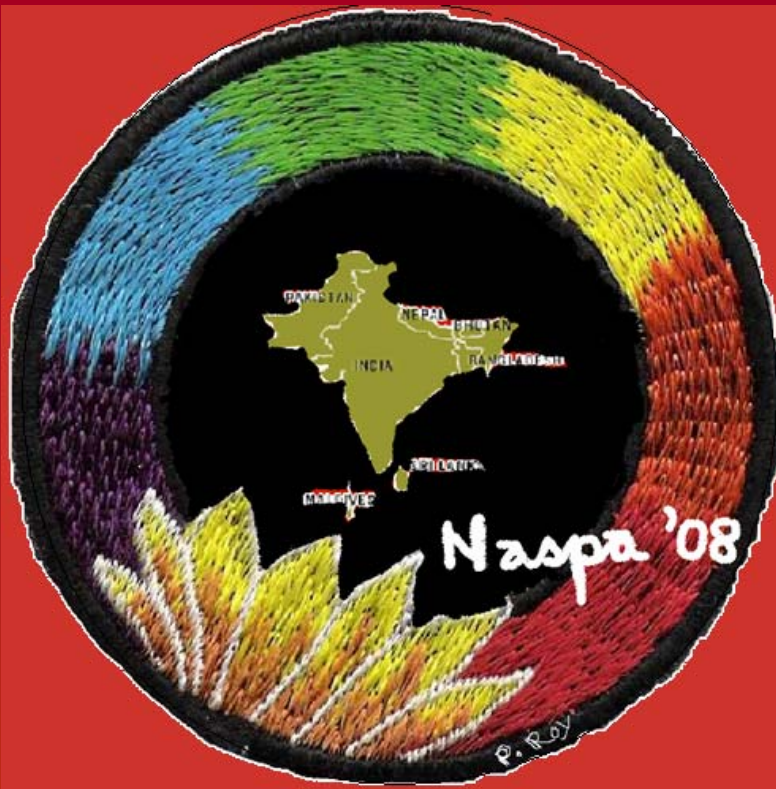
Raja Bhattar & Pamela Roy



Outline of Session

- Introductions
- Foundational Ideas & Terms
- Methodology of Study
- Demographics of Participants
- Results & Findings
- Implications for Our Work
- Q & A
- Evaluations





**“I have become a
queer mixture
of the East and the West,
out of place everywhere,
at home nowhere.”**

~ Jawaharlal Nehru



Foundational Ideas & Terms



Why a Qualitative Study?

- Richer, complex ideas and responses
- Phenomenological
- Grounded Theory



Queer



- An umbrella identity term encompassing lesbians, questioning people, gay men, bisexuals, non-labeling people, transgender folks, and others who do not strictly identify as heterosexual.



South Asian

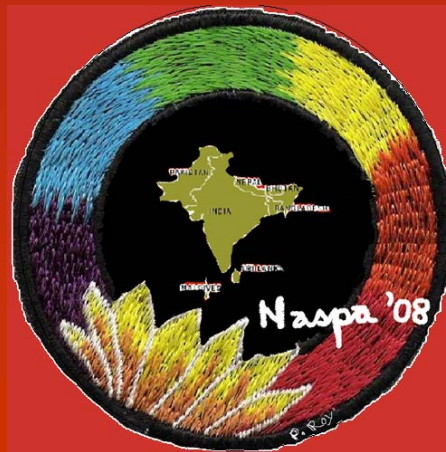
Geographic and political term of people with ancestry from:

- India
- Pakistan
- Sri Lanka
- Nepal
- Bangladesh
- Bhutan
- Maldives Islands



South Asian Queer (SAQ)

- People with familial and cultural roots in South Asia who identify as queer or other non-heterosexual identities.



Methodology



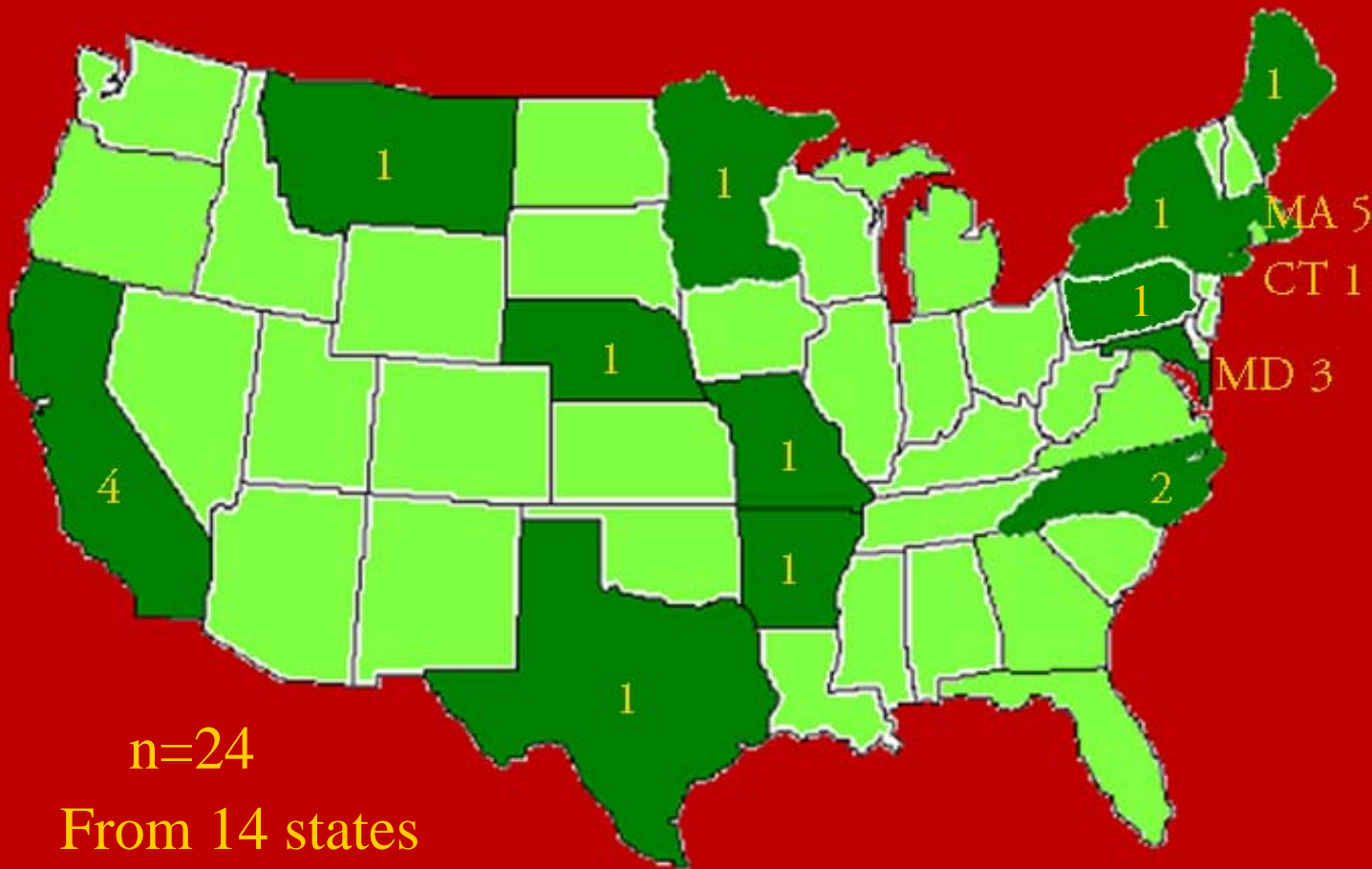
- Developing the Assessment Instrument
- IRB Approval # OGCA 07-266
- Recruitment methods
 - NASPA API KC, LGBT Issues KC, ACPA API & LGBT Standing Committees, SAQ list servs, other LGBT & alumni listservs, and personal contacts, etc.
- Sample Size: 24 participants
- Phone interviews, transcription, follow-up



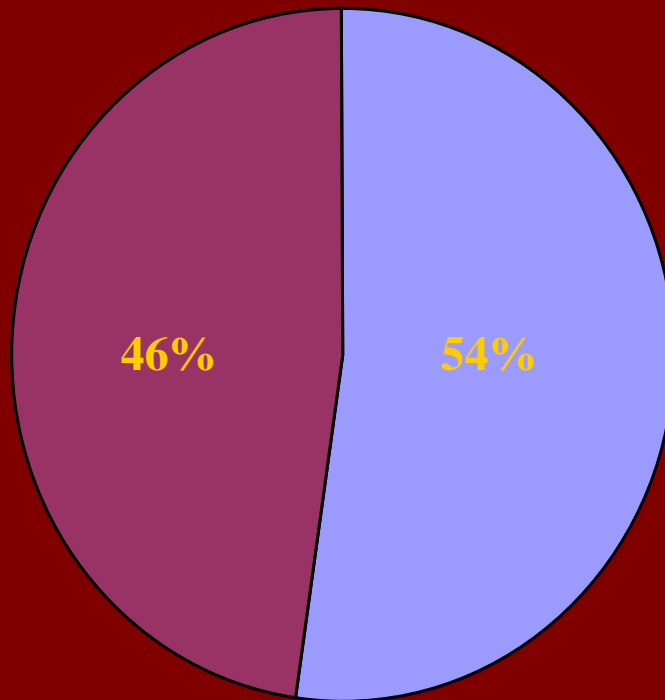
Participant Demographics



State Breakdown of Participants

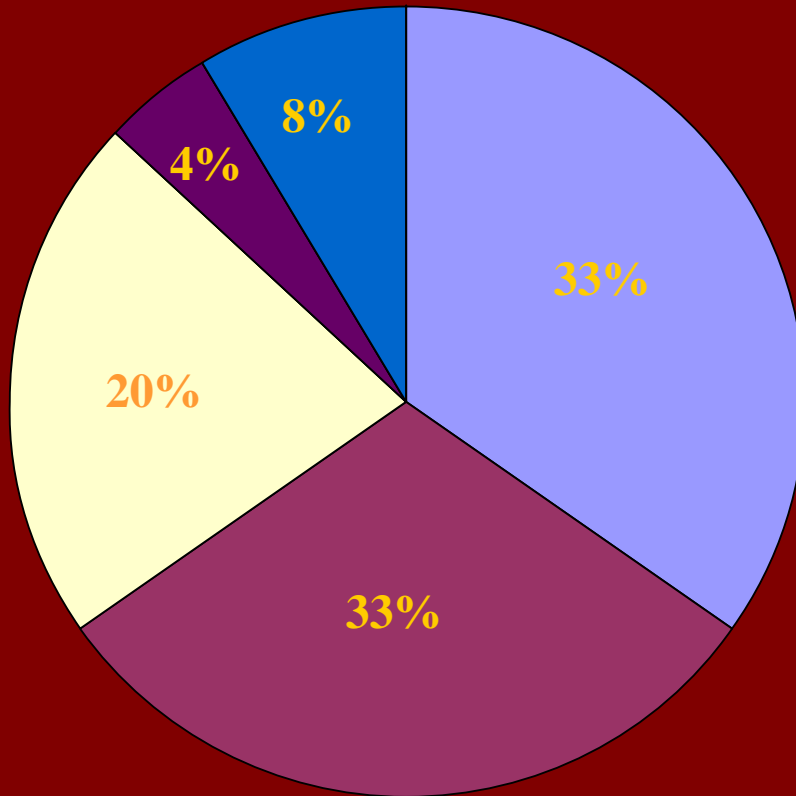


Institutional Type



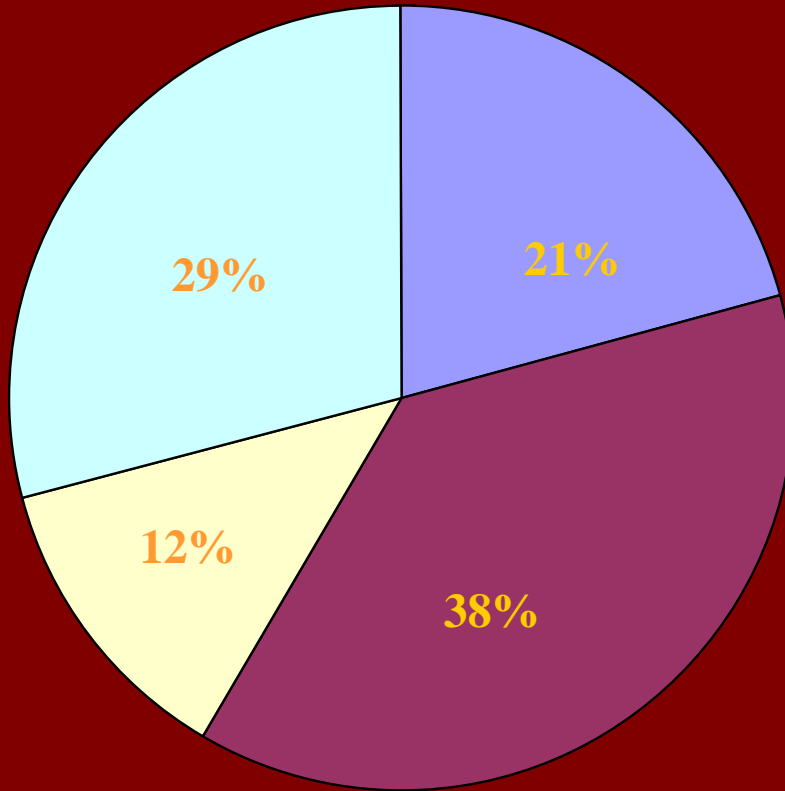
- Public Institution
- Private Institution

Age Range of Participants



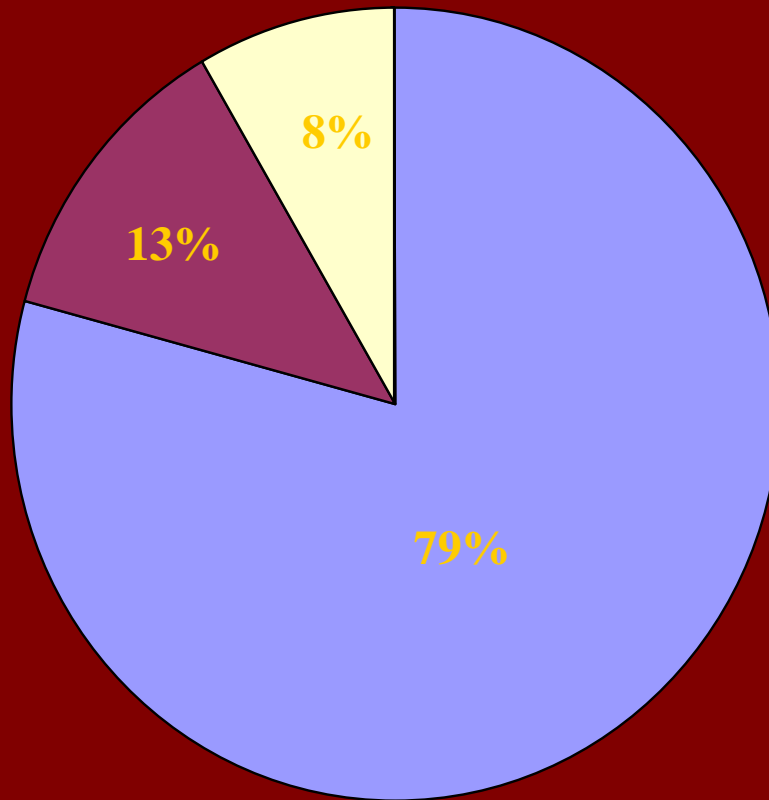
- 18-25 yrs.
- 25-30 yrs.
- 31-35 yrs.
- 36-40 yrs.
- 41-45 yrs.
- 46-50 yrs.
- 51-55 yrs.
- 56-60 yrs.

Role on Campus



- Undergraduate Student
- Graduate Student
- Faculty
- Administrator/Staff

Ancestry within South Asia



- India
- Pakistan
- Sri Lanka
- Nepal
- Bhutan
- Maldives Island
- Bangladesh

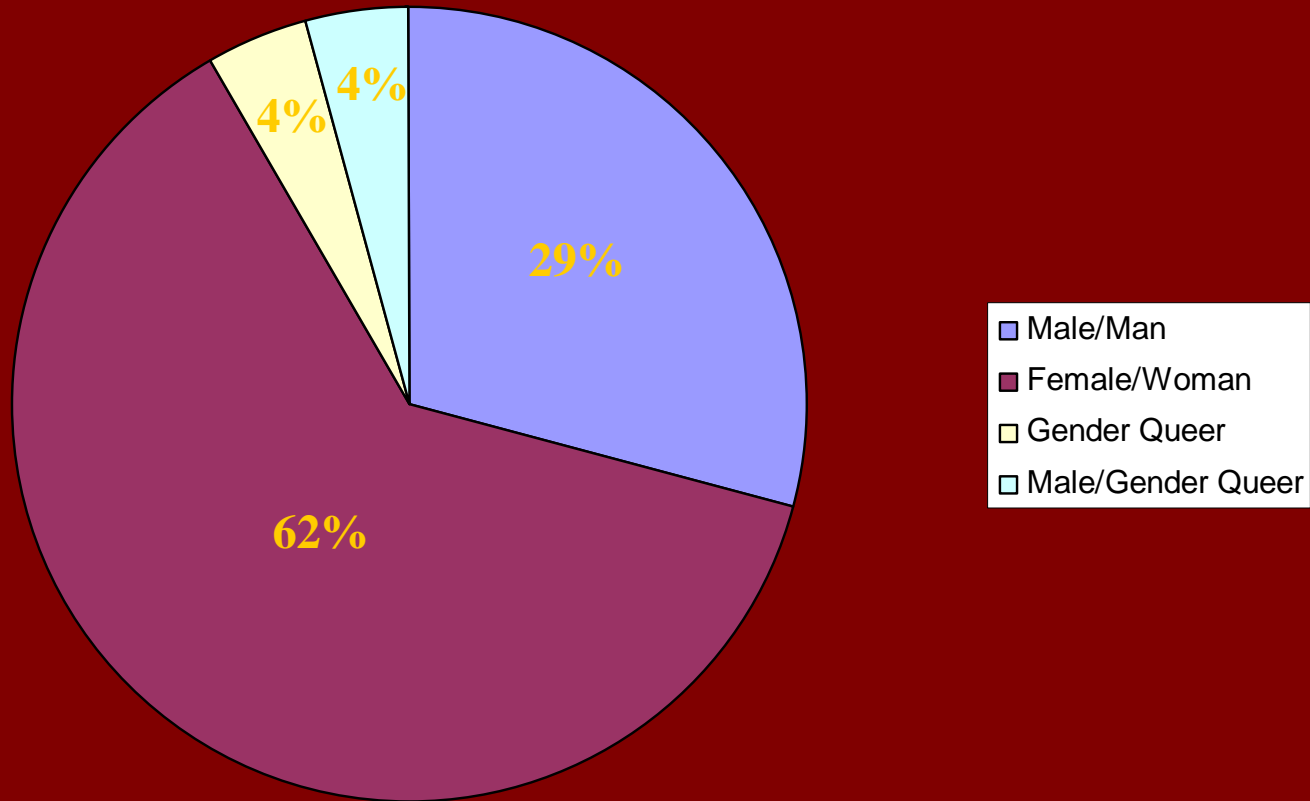


Participant Perspectives on South Asian Identity

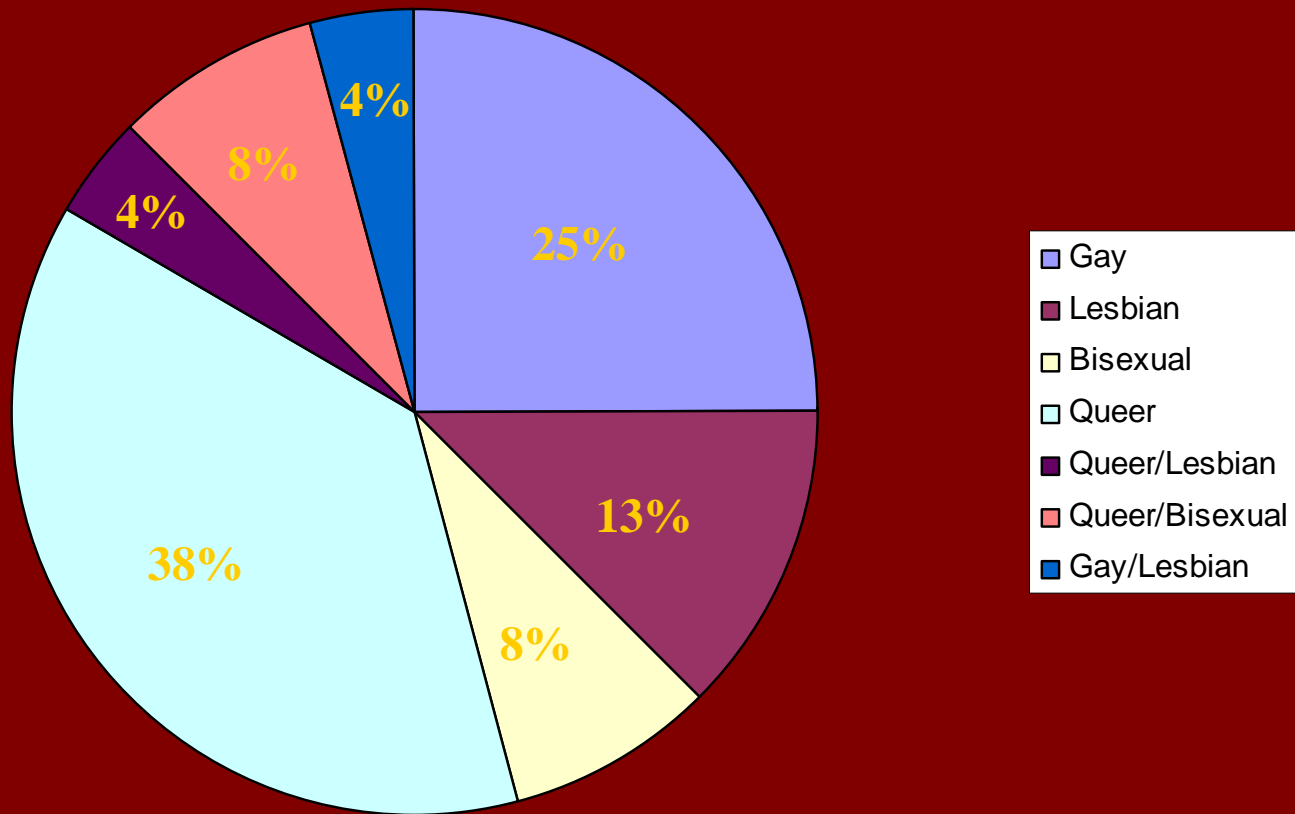
- Food/Culture
- Clothing
- Family lineage/place of birth
- Cultural celebrations
- Language (or lack of)



Gender Identity of Participants



Sexual Orientation



Participant Perspectives on Queer Identity

- Emotional/Physical attraction
- For solidarity & community
- Political/activist term
- Non-gender binary term
- Fluidity of expression



Participant Perspectives on South Asian Queer Identity

- Holistic sense of self
- Living in balance
- A novel concept
- Lack of community
- Internalized homophobia/racism



Major Findings

What role does your gender play in defining your South Asian Queer identity?

- “If anything...[gender] complicates my South Asian identity because everything in the culture is very gendered. It’s hard to get past the gender role I’ve been trained into. It’s a struggle.”

(Queer woman, early 20s, undergraduate student at public institution)

- “You’re raised to be a dutiful daughter, one of the pieces is that you are expected to get married, and there is no opportunity to have a queer identity.”

(Queer woman, early 30s, graduate student at public institution)



What role does your gender play in defining your South Asian Queer identity? (cont.)

- “Well...my gender...being gender queer...I think is hard. I think that most South Asians would have a hard time understanding being gay/queer itself...and adding the gender queerness to that makes it more complex”
(Gay Man, mid 20s, graduate student at public institution)
- “I think my gender journey is in some ways more complicated because I grew up in India, which in a number of ways is a gendered society...so there were certain things expected of me and certain things expected of my sisters.”
(Gay Man, early 30s, administrator at private institution)



What role does your gender play in defining your South Asian Queer identity? (cont.)

- “I don’t know if gender plays a role because I’ve never questioned my gender...I think these U.S. understandings don’t’ translate well to immigrants.”

(Queer, Woman, early 50s, administrator at public institution)

- “It’s played a major role! Initially, my parents told me, ‘do whatever you want, have casual sex whenever you want, but just marry a simple woman who will stay at home and give us grandchildren.’ I don’t think they would have said the same to my sister. Because of my gender, I have privileges and access to spaces that women don’t. And being queer and male; it’s opened up avenues within this community where some lesbians don’t have access”.

(Gay, Man, late 20s, graduate student at public institution)



Do you identify with a specific form of religion? If so, what roles do religion and/or spirituality play in your life?

- “It’s my newest addition to identify with this part of me. I was rebellious against religious activities and expression when I was growing up. When I am home I avoided going to temple, unless it was a festival, because I had to go to those.”

(Lesbian, Spiritual, Woman, early 20s, undergraduate student at private institution)

- “Well, I was raised Anglican Christian. Right around the time I realized I was gay...that’s when my religious beliefs began falling apart. I did not feel I could be a part of a religion that would condemn me for being who I am.”

(Gay, Anglican Christian, Man, mid 20s, graduate student at public institution)

Do you identify with a specific form of religion? If so, what roles do religion and/or spirituality play in your life? (cont.)

- “Christianity plays a significant part in my identity. I was re-baptized at the age of 14. I have a lot of questions about how my sexuality relates to my Christianity, because I was taught that homosexuality is a sin...there is a distance I feel from god, but he is still very close...we have a connection, like best friends.”

(Lesbian, Christian, Woman, late 20s, administrator at private institution)

- “A lot of my values around non-violence and equality come from my place as a spiritual being.”

(Gay, Spiritual, Man, early 30s, administrator at public institution)

Do you identify with a specific form of religion? If so, what roles do religion and/or spirituality play in your life? (cont.)

- “I identify as agnostic. My family identify as Hindu Brahmins. When I am home, I go through the rituals mainly to please my mom, but I do not necessarily believe in the dogma.”

(Queer, Agnostic, woman, late 20s, graduate student at public institution)

- “When I first got to college, 9/11 happened, I became more closely connected to being Muslim for political reasons and I was also racially profiled. Currently I feel being queer in Islam is difficult. My dad’s family is from Vancouver Canada, where recently a leader of a mosque there performed a commitment ceremony for a same-sex female couple...there’s more diversity of queer people there.”

(Queer, Muslim, woman, late 20s, graduate student at public institution)

What role does your age play in defining your South Asian Queer identity?

- “I think....gender and sexuality are something hard for younger people to understand. You really have to mature to let go of social constructs...I navigate towards older people...I feel like my identity and me are in the wrong age group...because traditionally, the younger gay crowds aren't trans friendly. I have trans friends and have learned from gender studies. It's only something you can figure out if you take time to learn.”

(Queer, woman, mid 20s, undergraduate student at public institution)

- “In India, age plays a role because I constantly am told ‘you are too young to know what you like’, it's hard to be taken seriously. In the US it's not the same, I have a sense of mobility with my age that I would not have if I were say 25 years old in India now.”

(Lesbian, woman, mid 20s, undergraduate student at private institution)



What role does your age play in defining your South Asian Queer identity? (cont.)

- “People my age have had a hard life, especially as immigrants...more than anything, cyberspace has changed the way the South Asian Queer community identifies people my age... they feel we’re too old to be hanging out or that we have nothing to teach each other. Being gay is seen as being youthful. Especially in this country, it’s all about youth. If you’re over 30, they think you’ve shriveled up and died. When I wanted to date...people saw me as this treacherous old woman. I think it’s because I’m a woman, we’re not supposed to be sexual. They want me to be ‘auntyji’.”

(Queer, Woman, early 50s, administrator at public institution)

- “I don’t think I’m particularly aware of my age as it pertains to my identity.”

(Queer, Man, mid 20s, administrator at private institution)



What role does your age play in defining your South Asian Queer identity? (cont.)

- “This obsession with youth is more apparent to me, especially in the gay male culture. When I was single for a little while I was trying to find people to date. It was interesting how many gay men well in their 30s to 40s are just obsessed with dating 18-22 year olds.”

(Gay, Man, early 30s, administrator at public institution)

- “Um...my age played a big role I think because I was at a place when I put myself out there...being able to feel adult enough to take on that role. To believe in myself. This is not just me being a college student. In the South Asian community there's a sense that when 'you're an adult, [you] go do something,' so it definitely played a big role in how I have become an activist.”

(Gay, Man, late 20s, graduate student at public institution)

What, if any, encounters with racism have you experienced from the Queer community on campus?

- “There comes a point where ‘coming out’ is very much connected with whiteness and class privilege, especially in a U.S. context.”

(Bisexual, woman, early 30s, graduate student at public institution)

- “White lesbians are caught up in their white lesbian identity and don’t see their racism...no one called me names, but they were caught up in their own oppression,...they were not able to see how their whiteness shaped their sexuality, white lesbians only look at their sexuality and their gender not their whiteness.”

(Queer, woman, mid 30s, graduate student at public institution)

- “I think the biggest thing is invisibility. The queer community doesn’t really acknowledge that we’re not all American. The majority are white or white-washed. It’s not so much as racism but ethnocentrism. It’s not my skin color but things I do that aren’t seen as ‘American’.”

(Queer, woman, early 20s, undergraduate student at public institution)



What, if any, encounters with racism have you experienced from the Queer community on campus?

(cont.)

- “Let me put it this way. It’s everywhere. I wish I could say it’s just white folk but it’s everyone; it just manifests in a different way. For white people I’m not queer enough. And if I show up in a *salwar* or *sari*, I’m seen as exotic.”

(Queer, Woman, early 50s, administrator at public institution)

- “Sometimes being out is the standard otherwise you are not gay enough, it excludes people even white people who are questioning their sexuality”

(Lesbian, woman, early 20s, undergraduate student at private institution)

- “The LGBT community here is largely white, but it doesn’t make me feel uncomfortable, it’s not necessarily a race factor but more that I am different because of my non-American/international status...It plays a role in the fact that I don’t have the American “I’m out to my mom and dad” coming out story”

(Lesbian, woman, mid 20s, undergraduate student at private institution)

What, if any, encounters with racism have you experienced from the Queer community on campus? (cont.)

- “No obvious racist attitudes. There is a lot of ethnocentrism...I have gone to queer parties, if I show up I’m usually the only person of color and South Asian and Indian, so they make assumptions about me and that is hurtful.”

(Queer, woman, early 30s, administrator, at private institution)

- “They expect us, people of color, to do all the educating. And it’s ridiculous that at a school with 80% people of color, all the staff at the LGBT center are white...And they offer student panels that come talk to classes and groups, but they’re all white too...just reinforcing the fact that queerness is just a white identity.”

(Bisexual, woman, late 20s, graduate student at private institution)

What, if any, encounters with heterosexism or homophobia have you experienced from people of color on campus?

- “Men hit on me, although I’m not so identifiable as a lesbian...I pass as heterosexual. I have only experienced homophobia from South Asians, if they know that I am a lesbian”

(Lesbian, woman, early 50s, faculty at public institution)

- “Well, I know that with the South Asian Students Association when we have functions, they always want their thing to be marriage. Like in fashion shows and things like that and that just seems very heterosexual. I understand because marriage is such a big part of Indian culture but it’s hard.”

(Queer, woman, early 20s, undergraduate student at public institution)

What, if any, encounters with heterosexism or homophobia have you experienced from people of color on campus? (cont.)

- “I actually haven’t experienced any homophobia on campus. The people of color and South Asians on campus are surprised when I talk about my boyfriend and things like that. But then they just ask a lot of questions and that’s it. They’re mostly progressive people on campus.”
(Gay, man, mid 30s, graduate student at private institution)
- “I think it takes the form of people who will no longer shake hands. And decidedly fewer invitations to have lunch. And because I was married to a man for so many years, so I think they see it as “if you stuck it out for so many years...so why now”? I think my ex-husband has been questioned about his manhood and masculinity. The heterosexism is a lot of everyday stuff.”
(Queer, woman, early 30s, administrator at private institution)

What, if any, encounters with heterosexism or homophobia have you experienced from people of color on campus? (cont.)

- “[College] is usually the first time that international students have been exposed to gay identity, where they come from, mostly non-European students, say ‘there is no such thing as gay people in my country’ and have this attitude, so it takes time and patience.”
(Lesbian, woman, mid 20s, undergraduate student at private institution)
- “I feel that with men of color, I’m more able to confront their homophobia much easier and counter them in several ways. But with women of color, I think they’re down if you’re a gay man (for shopping and crap) but with me...it’s just very difficult. And to them being a woman is always talking about men and I don’t want to have anything to do with that. And since I do have polyamorous relationships, people don’t know what to do. Sometimes I’ll challenge homophobia but other times I can’t because I just feel so alone.”
(Bisexual, woman, late 20s, graduate student at private institution)

What, if any, encounters with heterosexism or homophobia have you experienced from people of color on campus? (cont.)

- “There are very few on campus. No homophobia, but they do (like most people of all colors) tend to assume everyone is heterosexual until informed otherwise. The university tends to be heterosexist as do many faculty members. There have been hate crimes and hate speech on and off campus, but not by people of color.”
(Lesbian, woman, early 50s, faculty at public institution)
- “There is no one to role model ‘queer in academia’ so we lack the mentorship on how to become faculty or with job searches, there’s a big gap.”
(Queer, woman, late 20s, graduate student at public institution)
- “Being a gay male and South Asian in modern United States makes it tough but I try to tell the white queer community about my South Asian identity but they don’t get that part.”
(Gay, male, early 20s, undergraduate student at public institution)

Have you ever felt the need to choose, prioritize or emphasize one identity (i.e. race or sexual orientation) over another identity?

- “During social justice workshops which I participated in, it is clear that I am a woman of color and therefore usually identifies as such. I only identifies as queer when I needs to...I doesn't want people to make assumptions about me.”

(Lesbian, woman, late 20s, administrator at private institution)

- “I never came out, I don't know if I'll come out as queer, I'm currently dating a man, my family is tolerating me dating a black man, but not celebrating it.”

(Queer, woman, mid 30s, graduate student at public institution)



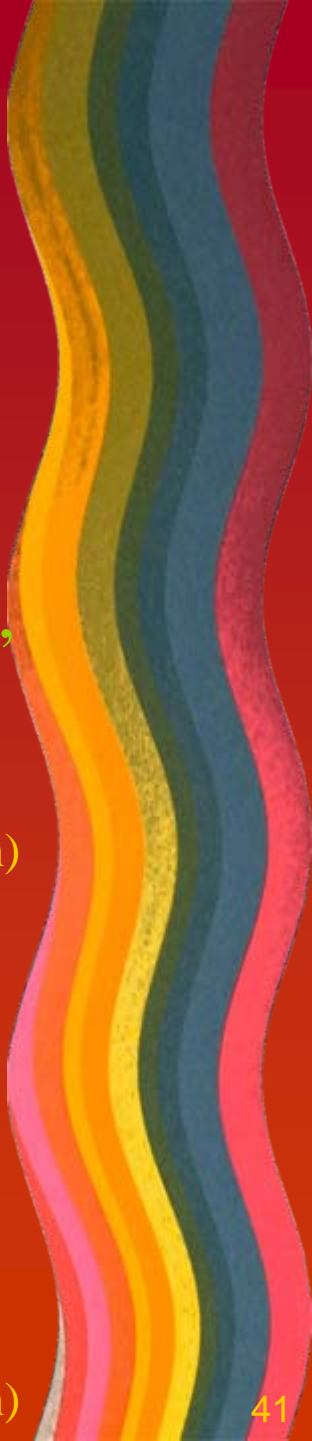
Have you ever felt the need to choose, prioritize or emphasize one identity (i.e. race or sexual orientation) over another identity? (cont.)

- “I think it really depends on who I’m around. With family, my South Asian identity comes first because I don’t want to piss them off too much. In most other places, my queer identity comes out, because that’s the one that meets more resistance from people most of the time.”

(Queer, woman, early 20s, undergraduate student at public institution)

- “I don’t think personally I feel like I have to prioritize, but I think the culture here I am expected to do so. For example the gay community, I’m expected to put it first and make everything else work around it.”

(Queer, woman, early 50s, administrator at public institution)



Have you ever felt the need to choose, prioritize or emphasize one identity (i.e. race or sexual orientation) over another identity? (cont.)

- “Now that I do think about it, when I work with queer organizations, since I don’t look American, I do tend to place less stress on my South Asian identity and don’t talk about the fact that I may have watched a few Hindi movies the night before and things like that.”

(Gay, male, early 20s, undergraduate student at private institution)

- “I think when issues of race and racism come up, they seem to me as, ‘oh let’s talk to him because he’s the only person of color in the office.’ Or sometimes I feel like I’m asked to do things from a particular point of view. So certain kinds of work, like domestic violence or ‘take back the night’ or things like that. So sometimes the pressure is from the outside as to, ‘this is the identity with which we want you to speak from.’ And I very strongly try to resist that when they try to put me in just the gay box so I’m very intentional in making sure to put it all out there and identify my experiences as a gay man of color.”

(Gay, man, early 30s, administrator at public institution)

Have you ever felt the need to choose, prioritize or emphasize one identity (i.e. race or sexual orientation) over another identity? (cont.)

- “It’s easier for me to be South Asian with the gay kids than it is to be gay with the South Asian kids.”
(Lesbian, woman, early 20s, undergraduate student at private institution)
- “OH Yes! It’s like the story of my life. I always feel like I have to leave an identity at the door. It just used to totally tear me apart. But now a days, reading about a lot queer women of color literature, has helped.... going out with my South Asian friends means they’ll never go to a queer bar, it’s always to a straight bar. I will be in the minority and have to fit into the straight culture but they won’t ever take a chance and go to a queer bar. But then it is cool because we can hang out in little India which my other friends won’t do. So it’s a constant struggle to choose.”
(Bisexual, woman, late 20s, graduate student at private institution)

Charting the Course for SAQ Student Success:

What you can do to
support this population...



Suggestions for Services/Resources

- **Information** – 21%
 - Access to internet/resources/books, dvds & other media
 - Studies/research like this one
- **Programming** – 26%
 - Programs to educate SA groups around sexual/gender inclusiveness
 - Programs/speakers/discussions to educate campus community
- **Counseling** – 31%
 - Cultural competency of counseling centers around SAQ issues
 - QPOC Counselors available on campus
- **Institutional Initiatives:-** 37%
 - Fellowships/scholarships for this particular population
 - Increasing visibility
 - Role models/mentorship program
- **Inclusive Spaces** – 73%
 - Perspectives & dialogue of intersections of identity
 - Non-US centric understanding/acknowledgement of “identities” & “coming out”
 - More inclusive Cultural/LGBTQIA centers
 - Physical safe space for QPOC’s with specific meetings for SAQ

Limitations of Study

- Time for research
- Assumptions
- Methods of recruitment
- Future areas of study
 - Immigration
 - Exploring identities currently untapped
 - Comparative studies
 - Role of marriage
 - Role of education



Questions to Consider

Question & Answer Time

Session Evaluations



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