Work in Progress

Relational Theory in a South Asian Context: An Example of the Dynamics of Identity Development

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About the Author

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Abstract

Indian culture has been referred to as one which is inherently inter-relational. The purpose of this presentation is to examine the ways in which salient aspects of South Asian culture, including family-centeredness, religion, regional affiliation, language, and caste/class, impact identity development in people of Indian descent. While the focus, in terms of examples and a case study, will be on Indian women who attend college in the U.S., the issues and questions raised during the course of this presentation pertain to both men and women who are raised within the Indian culture. Using the frame of Relational/ Cultural Theory, the question becomes: How does culture combine with developmental and psychodynamic theory in shaping relational images?

When talking about identity in India, we face the duality of an individualized self versus a communal self. Indeed, like other Asian cultures, the communal aspect of Indian living has long been acknowledged (Kakar, 1978; Ho, 1993; Sinha, 1997). For Indians who have immigrated to the U.S. or elsewhere, the degree to which they digress from traditional beliefs and customs varies. Some families maintain strict beliefs, while others are more tolerant and even encourage the incorporation of Western ideals. Still, several researchers have observed that, by and large, Indian families who have migrated to the U.S. and other parts of the world have typically held onto many aspects of their traditional values and lifestyles. The destination of migration, of course, determines the type of influence the "host" culture will have. Sowell (1996) has talked about the dispersion of Indians to all parts of the world which naturally creates various compilations of Asian and Western identities. Alvarez (1995) notes that, for many people, immigration is bittersweet in that it represents loss of the culture of origin and all its familiarity, but also offers hope for freedom and opportunities in the new world.

Many theorists distinguish between Western and South Asian cultures in one basic way: while the U.S. values and encourages independence and personal accomplishment, India has historically advocated communal values and individual accomplishment insofar as it improves the well being and/or status of one's family or community. David Ho (1979) defines collective identity in the following way:

> Collectivism affirms that preservation and enhancement of the well-being of the group is the supreme guiding principle . . . members of the group are expected to subjugate their own inclinations to group requirements, perhaps even to make personal sacrifices . . . with each member being related to other members in a network of

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interlocking responsibility and obligations.

Hsu (1985) has commented that the relational worlds in a Western person's life are less filled with kin and family relationships, and so the need to search for friendships and the need for self-reliance become paramount. He notes that for Asian cultures, such as the Chinese, few relationships are formed outside of kinship so that relational needs are automatically and permanently met.

As with many ethnic groups, Indian youth in the United States may find they live in two worlds: Western society which forms their external environment and their traditional Indian home which forms their interior environment. From this perspective, one may say that the need to work toward becoming relational in the Western world is in contrast to the task of the South Asian. The work may be in finding ways to tolerate, and perhaps introduce shifts in, family relationships so that reciprocal demands become less intense. This must be done in a way which respects and preserves cultural ties. Indeed, when Susan Jones (1997) studied identity in a culturally diverse sample of college women, she found the women "shared a sense that their identities consisted of multiple layers. Identity was experienced as evolving in an ongoing negotiation between the outside and inside worlds" (p. 380).

Much has been written about psychology and the common themes among various Asian cultures. Although focusing specifically on Indian culture, some of the notions apply to other Asian cultures, just as other features of Indian culture are similar to Western experiences. Furthermore, in reviewing the literature, and my own experiences clinically and personally, it is obvious that the diversity within India precludes any type of generalization about cultural influences. For example, when comparing the dramatically different economic strata of Indians, one may see more commonalities between the affluent in both India and the United States (Tharoor, 1997). In another example, Tharoor has stated that the only commonality between a Christian, Kerala speaking South Indian and a Hindi speaking North Indian, is that both come from India. This presentation emphasizes the diversity in India. I will talk about culture and identity mainly from the perspective of Hinduism, while acknowledging the vastly different experiences of a person practicing another religion in India.

Aspects of Culture Which Contribute to Identity

Views of the Self

The nature of self in India may be thought of as encompassing a highly personalized aspect and a communal aspect because of the impact of both religion and family. In the classic book, *Clan, Caste, and Club*, Hsu (1963) draws a distinction between the American, Chinese, and Hindu Indian psychological worlds, describing the Indian world view as one that is "supernatural oriented," whereas the Western stance is "individual oriented," and the Chinese life view is "situation oriented." His premise is that mutuality in relationships, tailored to meet situational requirements and social appropriateness, exists more in Chinese culture. In contrast, he observes that Indian culture is embedded in a religious orientation where relationships with gods form the strongest relationships. According to Hsu, while family is central to Indian culture, there remains an individual orientation towards the religious. In a more recent article entitled "Is the Indian Self Predominantly Interdependent?" Misra and Giri (1995) reported that, in their study of Indian graduate students, "the majority of the students were characterized with either low independent/low interdependent *or* high independent/high interdependent self construal." Some theorists have attributed the Indian's ability to integrate individualistic and collectivistic traits to India's period under British colonial rule (Patel et al., 1996; Roland, 1988). Clinically, Roland repeatedly noted in his work with Indian patients that there emerged a viable "private self" which was purposely preserved as distinct from one's "family self" and may be more connected to one's "spiritual self" (Roland, 1988).

Indian Family Structure and Dynamics

While there is evidence for an aspect of the Indian self which is individually oriented in the spiritual context, there is no doubt that South Asian culture places a powerful and lifelong emphasis on family and collective identity. Roland (1988) and Kakar (1978) posit that intense relational bonds between children and parents begin early in life. Both describe significant differences in the nature and duration of the early mother-child bond relative to Western child-rearing. According to Kakar, a highly gratifying, relatively long-term (until about age five) initial maternal bond is fostered in children. This is in contrast to Western child-rearing where independence and exploration are encouraged in the child, beginning

in the toddler years. Kakar observes that this bond is particularly strong in the mother-son relationship as the mother gains identity and status via her son. This may be viewed in contrast to Western observations which frequently describe a stronger mother-daughter bond. Kakar notes that in Indian childhood the son experiences a "second birth," beginning around the age of five. At this point he is no longer coddled and treated like a "little god" (as children are considered in much of India), but faced with the relatively harsh world of discipline, limits, and conditional love within the matrix of a tight-knit family. Kakar and Roland theorize that these early symbiotic bonds lay the foundation for a strong sense of reciprocity and mutual need-based relationships, which in turn become the foundation for a lifelong sense of connectedness and responsibility toward the family.

The daughter's early experience may be different because she is viewed as a guest in her own home (since she will eventually leave and marry—going to her real home). She may also be spared the discipline suffered by her brother. In fact, in some sects of Indian Hindus the mother overtly favors the daughter over the son (Chodorow, 1989). For the Indian daughter, adolescence may be a time when she learns about the realities of long-term responsibility toward her family and in thinking about her future, e.g., marriage and profession.

While arranged marriage in the strict sense—marrying someone after only one meeting and having no say in the match—is outdated in most urban families, it is in the midst of adolescent longing for intimacy with the opposite sex that parents may begin talking about the proverbial "nice boy to marry."

Even with the modernization of some Indian families, it is true that parents, and sometimes grandparents and extended family, are very involved with matrimonial decisions. Hsu makes the point that privacy is largely a Western notion that evolves from early social separation, for example, baby-sitting in a family system in which the marital dyad represents the strongest relationship. In traditional Indian families, the parent-child (especially the mother-son) dyad often forms the primary relationship. Subsequently, privacy in traditional Indian childhood and adolescence is virtually nonexistent. It is important to note that this lack of privacy would certainly be pathologized if viewed by Western standards which emphasize constructing and maintaining relational boundaries. Further, a Western perspective may condemn the intense mother-son bond as a sign of pathological dependency or controlling tendencies in the mother. While individual

cases of such maladaptive bonding certainly exist, on a cultural level it is more accurate to recognize that the strong mother-son dyad represents a position of power—in the family and in society—for the mother.

Strong familial bonds certainly lead to conflict. Indian and Hindu myths are replete with intrafamilial, as well as interfamilial, conflict. For example, the Bhagavagita begins with Arjun refusing to go to battle against his cousins as he does not want to shed the blood of his kin. Ultimately, the god Krishna reminds him of his duty in life and directs him to partake in the battle. Indian goddesses also carry power and anger, sometimes transforming into menacing, lethal figures, only to then return to peaceful, divine forms. Certainly, among the various Indian clients I've seen, the expression of anger was not a taboo subject in the sessions, or in their homes. In modern society, various authors have described the indirect and subtle ways in which conflict is expressed within Indian culture. Some conflict is culturally prescribed; conflict between the mother-in law and wife is common with the expectation that the son will negotiate between the two parties, and he will never fully side against his mother.

Saraswathi and Pai (1997) write that in modern middle class and urban families, children are increasingly questioning their parents' rules and beliefs. However, even with Westernization, both in India and the U.S., the most striking aspect of Indian culture is that duty and intense connectedness to the extended family last throughout life. Indeed the Hindu concept of *dharma,* or duty, is an integral part of one's purpose in life and only through practicing dharma is one able to possibly reach the ultimate salvation. Once again religion and family merge, for only by serving the family can one be closer to religious salvation.

During adulthood, obligations to family continue although they differ for daughters and sons according to regional, class, and caste origins. For young women, education is typically valued (to the extent that is normative within a caste group), but is secondary to her marriageability, which is comprised of a number of factors. A woman should not be too educated for her *jat*, or clan, nor should she be under-educated. Women are encouraged to pursue their careers and earn money, but not at the expense of marriage. Traditionally, parental pride versus shame is connected to a successful married daughter versus a single or divorced daughter. For the son, education and a prestigious or lucrative job serves him well by helping to secure a desirable wife. Again, choices in career and marriage are not individual choices but

rather must be considered in light of family preferences. Again, to cite Jones's (1997) study with college students, Jones describes how the women "found it impossible to talk about their identities without referring to their family experiences in that parents were perceived as the transmitters of strong cultural values and rich cultural traditions. Conflicts with parents over cultural values were painful and, in some cases, to be avoided."

Caste

The history and system of caste in India is a complex one which impacts the development of one's sense of self and, perhaps more specifically, the sense of limits and possibilities which are inherent in caste position. By and large, the caste system—which is essentially apartheid (Tharoor, 1997; Rajshekar, 1987)—has survived, in part, due to tradition steeped in the Hindu belief of four *varnas*, or loosely translated, categories of caste: Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras. Over time, caste has evolved so that now the "untouchable" designation has been replaced by the term "scheduled castes." In recent years, politics and social policy have used affirmative action to allocate seats in universities, government jobs, and even Parliament. Tharoor observes that these affirmative action policies which have brought the possibility of equality to people of scheduled castes, have also highlighted people's awareness of their position.

In our modern American thinking we may assume that the Indian college student of the '90s would not be aware of her caste position or the history of her family's caste, and that by living outside of India she would not be impacted by caste. The reality is that the invisible issue of caste—the history, memories, stories passed down from parents or grandparents—may be deeply felt. Perhaps the best example of this is in today's matrimonial ads in *India Abroad* and other such publications (read by Indians in the U.S., London, and elsewhere). In the ads, a desirable groom or bride is described by temperament, vocation, education, hobbies, and often with the added note "caste no bar."

Regional Affiliation

India is a country comprised of distinct regions in the north, south, west, and east, with each region possessing its own language, customs, food, forms of religious worship, and history. For this reason, one can have no real knowledge of or begin to make assumptions about a South Asian person's cultural experience without knowing the region from which they come. A woman raised in Bombay will share a completely different set of traditions than a woman from Kerala in the south or Delhi in the north. And, because each region in India houses a variety of religions, one can never assume that one is Hindu if from Bombay or Muslim if from Hydrabad. Differences across regions are dramatic. Illustrating this point, I am currently seeing an Indian student who is in her mid-twenties. She has a European boyfriend. During one session, I asked how her parents felt about her boyfriend and whether there was pressure to marry an Indian. She said that her parents would really like for her to marry a boy from the same jat and town in India; if not that, to marry someone who spoke the same language; and if not that, then it basically doesn't matter if she marries a non-Indian or an Indian from another part of India!

Religion

India is a country of religious diversity. While Hinduism is the majority religion, the country's other religions, which include Moslem, Jain, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Sikh, have existed for thousands of years and continue to thrive. The interaction between a specific religion and the Indian culture is unique and based on the tenets and beliefs of each religion. Additionally, regional differences in interpretation exist so that a Jain in South India may follow a somewhat different version of the religious doctrine or perform different rituals than a northern Indian Jain.

Often times the distinctions in religious practice, for instance in Hinduism, are due to worship of a specific god. Because there are a multitude of gods within the Hindu pantheon, the choice of gods and temples is huge. In India, images of gods are seen everywhere—in taxis, rickshaws, movie theaters—so that one is inundated with Hindu divinities. Also, there are certain gods who are worshipped in India regardless of religious affiliation, such as Ganesh, so that they become cultural as well as religious icons.

Language

As mentioned earlier, there are 14 official languages in India, with hundreds of different dialects. For the second or third generation Indian, language may facilitate or impede intimacy with parents and relatives. Additionally, the ability or inability to speak the parents' mother tongue will likely influence one's relationship with the culture of origin, as many ideas and pieces of history may not be conveyed as potently in translation. The use of language in South Asian, as well as other Asian, cultures is also important in that language conveys relational messages. For example, in Gujarati or Hindi there is no true word which means good-bye. In

Gujarati, the parting remark is typically *owjoe*, the literal translation of which is "come again." In Hindi, the word *Namaste* is used to say both hello and good-bye. Additionally, respect and relative status or familiarity is conveyed by differential use of pronouns, for example, the use of *thamey* (formal) or *thu* (informal) for "you."

Psychological Understanding

Some aspects of relational and psychodynamic theories may be integrated and understood within the context of Indian culture.

Relational/Cultural Theory

Relational/Cultural Theory talks about the centrality of relationships in people's lives and the ways in which relational ties may be growth-enhancing or in negative, destructive relationships, can stunt and even damage a person's self-image and relational ability. One aspect of Indian culture is the role of rituals. The function of rituals in maintaining traditions and mores has been well documented. Essentially, rituals formalize and honor relational ties, often in public ways, and convey the nature and importance of relationship within a given culture.

There are countless rituals within Indian society; so I will give only a few examples. During Raksha-bundan, a yearly ceremony which honors the brother-sister relationship, a sister ties a decorative string bracelet on her brother's wrist, signifying protection from bad luck, etc. In turn, the brother presents the sister with a gift, symbolizing his gratitude. While this ceremony is not elaborate but carried out in the privacy of the family home, the brother wears the bracelet until it literally falls off, so it becomes a public symbol.

Another ritual is a Hindu pre-wedding ceremony when the woman's family prepares her to leave home. While the groom's family does not attend this pre-wedding ceremony, the bride's friends and relatives are typically involved. This ceremony essentially formalizes the daughter leaving her home. Pregnancy ceremonies, which vary across jats and religion, remind the daughter that she is always welcome home. The daughter goes back to her parents' home so that her mother can be with her as she delivers her first baby.

Empathy

One major tenet of Relational/Cultural Theory, the importance of empathy, has been discussed extensively by Judith Jordan (1991). Jordan talks about the complex nature of empathy, comprised of both affective and cognitive components. Additionally, she speaks of the need for ego strength and flexible ego boundaries in order to accurately understand the experience of another while maintaining a distinct sense of self. According to Roland, Indian family members are often exquisitely sensitive to the needs of others and may subtly act in ways which take care of those needs. Additionally, he notes that often when family members or even acquaintances are conflict avoidant, it is to protect the other's esteem. This is in dramatic contrast to Western culture, in which conflict is avoided to preserve relationships, not necessarily the well-being of the other. It would seem then, that the degree to which empathy is cultivated, and the use of empathy, may be culture-dependent.

Empathy in Western culture is often thought of in terms of dyad relationships. Given the importance of the Indian family and extended family system, it would seem that there would be multiple relationships which exist simultaneously and which pull at once for various relational needs and empathic demands? This may be related to early caretaking by extended family members and friends. So, does the need to feel empathy for more than one person, often simultaneously, require a stronger ego strength but with extremely flexible and permeable boundaries? Is this comparable to the assertion that women's finesse in relationships requires flexible ego boundaries? If so, is there a way in which the Indian cultural system has an inherently female/feminine base?

As a therapist working with South Asian students, our task is to respond empathically to the student and to the student's family's experience. Given the attunement to the therapist, the student may quickly pick up on a tendency to judge or criticize the parents' position because it may be different from our experience. In a sense, it is about thinking like a family therapist when one is alone in the room with the student.

Power

Jean Baker Miller (1991) has talked about women's fear of power as it is defined by male terms, and that women tend to equate their own power with aggression and, sometimes, abandonment. Relational/Cultural Theory suggests that women's power in relationships, and their ability to empower others via relationships, has been historically ignored. When many people think of Indian culture, the images of bride burning, dowry, and general oppression come to mind. How then do we make sense of an Indian Prime Minister, or the long history of women doctors,

attorneys, and women in Parliament. Westerners may point to the caste system, saying that only privileged women can rise to such ranks. However, there is currently an Indian woman in Parliament who is of the "scheduled caste."

The reality is that there are both oppressed and powerful women in India, and have been for a long time. Again, it is about the shifting nature of power conferred on Indian women both in society and within the family (Kakar, 1978; Roland, 1988; Sinha, 1997). Historically, according to caste, women have possessed power not only in society, but—akin to Relational/Cultural Theory—definite power in family relationships, even among the oppressed caste. Roland has discussed what he calls "qualitative hierarchical" and "quantitative hierarchical" relationships, referring to the rather fluid nature of the power granted to a member in the relationship and status depending on ability/expert status (qualitative) or family position (quantitative). In this way, a daughter may carry power in one situation while being overlooked in other ways.

Psychodynamic Theory

Early Mother-Child Attachment

Traditional psychodynamic theory talks of the mother-child bond and the pathological ways in which mothers can maintain symbiotic ties with their child resulting in poor ego development and a less differentiated sense of core self. As the Stone Center relational theorists have pointed out, the emphasis on mother-child separation is harmful by labeling mutual needs as dependency. The idea that a more self sufficient, even more exploratory child may reflect maturity is in itself a culturally biased view. If in fact, as Kakar and Roland have described, Indian children are reared to be highly attuned to the needs of the other—and, initially, the needs of the mother—with the expectation of reciprocity in relationships throughout life, the Western ideal of maturity and independence does not apply.

As mentioned earlier, the mother-son relationship is often more intense than a daughter's ties with her mother. So, perhaps it is easier for a young woman to form a personal identity or pursue college, as her mother has no claim on her for her future (as she does for her son). Additionally, the mother may want her daughter to have the freedom and liberation she did not have.

Cultural differences in mothering may affect intergenerational relationships because of the way in which the mother was raised—within a highly protected, symbiotic mother-child relationship—is markedly different from the Western notions of mothering. So, when an Indian mother, now living in the U.S., gives birth and is rearing her child, the impulse perhaps is to hold on tightly, to fully satiate, and to never deprive the child. However, the social milieu in which she lives stresses optimal frustration, setting limits, having the child sleep in her own bed—notions which are not only culturally foreign but likely intuitively distasteful to the mother. The emphasis on the independence of the child may perhaps be threatening or even anxiety producing for the mother who has never, in her early developmental years, experienced such psychological separation. How then, does the mother's anxiety impact her child? How does the mother respond to her fear of losing the child, which within her subculture (the Indian community) still represents status?

Superego/Ego Ideal

Roland (1988) has suggested that for Indians the ego ideal may hold a more prominent position in the Indian psyche than the superego. He makes this observation during the course of his clinical work by noting that the boundaries between right and wrong appear flexible. That is, there appears to be a tendency toward contextually based behavior by which one may be a strict vegetarian and a Hindu, but eat meat for a work dinner and not feel conflicted. Traditionally, dynamic theorists have viewed this as an indication of a weak superego. However, it would seem to be culturally consistent that if the ego must be flexible enough to allow ongoing empathic exchange then perhaps this flexibility also allows for contextually based choices, which may be contradictory yet remain ego syntonic. It would be interesting to examine any relationship between Indian mythology, which sometimes transcends religious differences and development of the ego ideal.

Narcissism

Regarding the concept of narcissism, Roland (1988) points out that narcissism in Indian families is more about "we self regard" than individual narcissism as we think of it. Again, how does the strong mother-child bond with its emphasis on gratification and positive mirroring shape narcissism in the traditional Indian psyche?

Clinical Case

At this point I would like to end by offering a case illustration. Sonya is a South Asian college student who was raised in the United States by her

parents, both of whom immigrated from India. Sonya has two sisters. She pursued therapy due to long-standing struggles with depression and various emotional difficulties many of which were apparently related to childhood physical, verbal, and emotional abuse by her father. Sonya purposefully sought out a South Asian therapist, saying that she felt an Indian counselor would "understand" her distress. While I met with Sonya for only 9 out of 10 scheduled sessions, the degree to which she immersed herself in the therapeutic work was impressive.

We had an imposed time limit to therapy as the college term was coming to an end. Throughout the course of our brief therapy, Sonya talked about feeling marginalized in the context of her college environment, and that in some way she was less valued relative to the majority, Caucasian population. She also talked of her difficulties in establishing close, trusting relationships with men and women. Finally, Sonya used therapy as a place to voice her experiences of abuse at the hands of her father. In order to more fully understand Sonya's experiences, I will describe some underlying themes which will hopefully illuminate her experiences.

Shame Regarding a Self-perceived Falseness of Self

When Sonya talked about feeling marginalized, she articulated a sense of feeling overlooked and rejected by others. Exploring further, she was able to articulate a sense that she was bad and false. These issues of badness and lack of self worth were central to Sonya's experience. Even when her accomplishments were impressive, such as winning prestigious awards and grants, Sonya felt undeserving. Predictably, she could not easily accept praise since she felt that when people congratulated her they were acknowledging only her external self. They did not know all of her and if they did, they too would find she was unacceptable and bad.

Overall, her self worth was deeply tied to perceived rejection or acceptance by others. Most of the times when Sonya talked about feeling marginalized, it was in relation to superiors or members of the majority American culture. Her thoughts and opinions were not heard because she was Indian, whereas a white student expressing similar views would be lauded. Clearly, she created a dilemma for herself because when she did gain recognition, she diminished her self, but was quick to feel slighted when others were applauded for their abilities.

Sonya also described experiences of

marginalization in relation to her involvement in various campus organizations. Interestingly, Sonya felt most accepted in a political group which she labeled as "radical." This group was comprised of non-South Asian students, and in fact, most of Sonya's friend were not of Asian descent. This left her feeling conflicted, as she spent much time trying to find acceptance from the Indian community. She described feeling like a misfit with many South Asian students because they were, as she saw it, intimidated by her strong views. It follows that her use of the term "radical" in describing an organization may also reflect her self-perception as one who is in contrast to Indian culture.

Deep Ambivalence Towards Father

Sonya described her father as a controlling and volatile man who was emotionally abusive to family members. While she minimized the actual occurrence of physical violence, she admitted that there was always the threat of violence. Sonya gained support from teachers in whom she confided, and also gained confidence through her performance and achievement in school. As she grew older, her father became more violent toward her mother, which resulted in Sonya defending her mother, at one point, calling the police. This action, which violated cultural and family taboos about not revealing one's problems to outsiders, enraged her father. She recalls that after this, her father tormented her in ways which were even more psychologically painful: one time he threw away some of the novels by which Sonya escaped the reality of her life.

Even with the degree of hostility and fear that existed between Sonya and her father, she steadfastly respected his intellect. She talked about his passion for politics; although, even here they clashed. In terms of her ambivalence regarding her father, Sonya talked about becoming more aware of the dichotomy in herself. One session, she talked about the rage and hatred she felt toward him. While growing up, she was often told by others to try to find the humanity in him. When asked what it felt like for her to talk about this in therapy, Sonya responded, "Where is my compassion?" Even within her anger, Sonya tried to empathize with her father and was disappointed in herself that she could not. She felt that the abuse kept her attached to him and was terrified that she might become as hateful as he is.

Sonya struggled to understand how her mother has been able to live with her father for so many years. We talked about cultural restraints and expectations. We talked about the role of religion in supporting her

mother and providing hope. While Sonya described herself as only culturally Hindu, she described her mother as devoutly religious.

Early in therapy, after her disclosure of family violence, I suggested that Sonya read *Trauma and Recovery* (Herman, 1992). Like a diligent student, she began reading the book and over the course of therapy would critique various chapters. She found the information useful but did not seem comforted or particularly moved by the book.

Sonya's Sense of Isolation

Sonya talked of her despair at not having found a "kindred spirit" in her life. While she has many acquaintances, she formed few close friendships. She discovered long ago that she could not reveal personal parts of herself to others, even when friends confided in her. She commented sadly, "No one really knows the personal, spiritual side of me." We talked quite a bit in therapy about how Sonya coped with the loneliness by distancing her feelings and focusing on her intellect. Additionally, she could safely develop friendships around political causes which, by definition, were focused on something public, not private. As she learned more about the impact of familial violence on her life, she enthusiastically raised possibilities of public speaking and other forms of education in an attempt to help others. At one point, she suggested that she and I present a workshop at a conference.

Given Sonya's age, the issue of romantic relationships naturally surfaced frequently in therapy. She had been seriously involved with a young man who lives in India. However, she felt he did not know her "American side." While he was liberal, he did not know all of her, since he had only known her in India. There were pieces of her romantic life that she revealed somewhat hesitantly, or not at all, and I wondered whether she feared being judged as radical by her Indian therapist, similar to her experience within the Indian community.

Identity: Personal and Cultural

The following session revealed the fragility and resilience in Sonya's psychological makeup: Sonya arrived 35 minutes late to session. She entered in disarray and was excited about a book she was reading and felt that the author so accurately voiced her experience. She suggested I read the book, entitled *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three* (Nagarkar, 1980). Sonya read the following passage from the book:

When I first saw you, your eyes seemed extraordinary. Even through your glasses. I had never seen eyes that were so wide, and which hid so much. If I had walked straight through them for a mile or two, I still wouldn't have found you. Yet they were so open, so expressive. When I talked to you, I had the feeling of talking to two people at once. You had built a wall round yourself, in self-defense against your brilliant and temperamental father. To spite him. It worked. But then you got trapped within the wall. You couldn't escape from it, and you never tried to. It was safe in there. Yet in seeking that safety, you had lost your freedom, your capacity to grow. (p. 91)

When she finished reading, Sonya looked at me with tears in her eyes, amazed. From what she had told me about her experience, this passage did indeed capture who she was. While Sonya revealed herself through the startling images and words in the passage, it was a dramatic shift from our last session, during which she directly expressed her animosity and ambivalence toward her father. Today she returned to her intellectualizing stance, using a form of expression which was one step removed from her self. Given that we were ending therapy soon, her natural inclination seemed appropriate and in many ways a relief for me as she was clearly able to gather up her defenses to protect her self.

Sonya's choice of *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three* was telling because it is a book about, among other things, various kinds of violence in relationships. The author is an Indian man, and the book, in translation, is set in India. What did this suggest about where her identity is located? Throughout therapy and embedded in her struggles was the issue of her cultural identity. She felt marginalized in what she repeatedly called the "white," American culture, and yet she felt "radical" in the Indian community. But when it came to finding solace for her trauma, she found it not in a compelling and often referenced American book, *Trauma and Recovery*, but in a book firmly rooted in India. What did this mean in terms of loyalty to her family and culture?

Transference and Countertransference

Finally, I want to make a few observations about transference and countertransference in our work. First, I was struck by how quickly Sonya seemed to connect in therapy; and noticed that I, too, felt very engaged with her. At times we talked about her earlier, unsuccessful attempts at therapy and what

was different about this treatment. While Sonya did not verbally acknowledge my being Indian, I felt that she often gave me expert power and legitimacy because we share a culture. Her assumption that I fully understood her experience was conveyed through her eye contact, head movements, and nodding as if to say that I was really "getting it."

Addendum: At some point after terminating therapy, Sonya sent me a packet which contained information about domestic violence in Asian communities. She included a note of thanks and indicated that she might be in touch with me in the future.

Discussion Summary

Each colloquium lecture is followed by a discussion so that members of the panel, the audience, and the presenter can exchange ideas. Panel members who participated in this session were: Margarita Alvarez, Ph.D., Judith Jordan, Ph.D., and Usha Tummala-Narra, Ph.D. Robin Cook-Nobles, Ph.D., moderated this evening's discussion.

Question: Given the reciprocity and communal empathy, I was wondering about the incidence of interpersonal violence and violence against women in Indian culture? I was thinking it might be lower because boys, until the age of five, have that close bond with the mother, and the brother-sister bonds are strong.

Tummala-Narra: I read a statistic recently that came out in 1997, which reported that the incidence of domestic violence in this country among Indians is growing and it's near the 7% that are the national reports in America. The Indian-American culture is rapidly changing and the communities here have different divisions. There are men here who want to go back to India and marry and return with their bride, often times with the perception and expectation that their bride will be more accommodating and have traditional values. Unfortunately, in some of those cases the woman comes here with no family ties and no social support. So, if she finds herself in a violent relationship, she doesn't necessarily know how to get help. The idea of trauma, as we have formalized it in this country, is probably not as well discussed in Indian culture which doesn't necessarily see physical abuse as being abusive all the time, even though it may be for the individual person. Physical punishment happens much more frequently than one would think. So, it's interesting how Sonya copes with it. How does she separate out this traumatic event and how does she manage the issue of separating from her family when there is no framework available to

her within the culture?

Desai: My perception was that she feared separating from her family because that would mean she would become like her father—as if there was still more she needed to work out for herself within her family.

Comment: I was wondering about the expectation, for the man, that someone is going to be there forever. What does it mean for a man to have someone meet all of his needs as a child for five or so years? Suddenly, as an adult, it's expected that he will be out in the world, and he may have the same expectation that someone will be there to take care of him. And what happens if he doesn't find that? Maybe he gets angry or violent?

Question: The presentation gave us an idea of how complicated Indian culture is. I was interested in the idea of empathy in the context of the expectation that people be responsive to and responsible for many members in the family. In Western families that sense of pervasive and deep responsiveness is certainly not expected, although it happens to some degree. In Indian families, is it really known that people should be sensitive to other people's experience?

Desai: I don't know if it's overt awareness of being sensitive, but rather about being aware that you don't necessarily do what you want to do and make choices in your life based exclusively on what you want. Culturally, that's considered selfish. It's about making sure that everyone else is OK with your choices and, in some ways, making sure that other people's needs are met within the family. I realize as I'm saying this that in Western culture this sounds like the pathologized notion of co-dependency as we think about women sacrificing themselves for others. But there is a mechanism so that within a healthy family system you get something in return; your needs are met as well. I think it comes back to the idea of a communal aspect to the self.

Jordan: It sounds like it's really much more mutual and much more about representing yourself with the awareness of the needs and feelings of the other; it isn't just eliminating yourself or eliminating the other. This presentation raised some questions for me about empathy in a situation where the family relationships are so powerful and where we're not just talking about dyadic empathy. I was thinking about your student and how she was bringing such a strong relational value system and sense of self into a Western college, which can be such a non-relational context. It left her feeling isolated and marginalized and how common that is for people who come from cultures that are more relational than ours.

Tummala-Narra: I also think that there might be some gender difference in this as well. Indian daughters and women are raised to be much more aware of others' needs and to be able to accommodate those needs. I think most younger women growing up in the United States or other countries are taught that "you need to adjust when you get married." In India, marriage is the biggest goal, really, that families have for their daughters. They might encourage them to have a career and education, but, at the same time, the ultimate goal is to get married. I think marriage is supposed to be a permanent alliance of families not just individuals, and so you're accommodating and preparing yourself for the future. So I think the socialization is different for women than for the men.

Cook-Nobles: There are lots of parallels with other cultures. Talking about mothers and sons, in Black families, that is a very tight relationship and there is a strong allegiance.

Jordan: We spend a lot of time talking about language at the Stone Center and I was thinking about your example that there is no real word for "good-bye." There is something about the fact that we have such a culture of separation. It always impresses me how the Euro-American culture is so hyper-individualistic.

Comment: I was reflecting on the issue of Sonya's political involvement which I found interesting. I had two thoughts about it. One is that maybe she was looking for a larger community—something bigger that she could identify with beyond her family. The second point is about the part that a therapist plays in a situation like that because she was really inviting you to take a part in that larger family. What do we do in a situation like that? How do we honor that need to connect without losing our own boundaries?

Desai: I think that her invitation in a sense symbolized that, for her, I was already included in her psychological family. I felt the boundaries were solidly in place, but that perhaps she was voicing her wish to have our relationship transform into something that reached beyond the scope of therapy. I also thought of her political involvement in a couple of ways different than that. First, I thought it was a way in which she could try to identify with a positive aspect of her father, because even though she did not respect him in many ways, she respected his political intensity. I also think that she was trying to find her place in the world and, if her personal self felt too tenuous, then perhaps she could try to find a place for the political aspect of her self.

Alvarez: I'm also wondering what else she was enacting in terms of the father. Since Sonya's parents have three daughters, what happens if there is an expectation of a son? If the mother gains status through her sons and the mother doesn't have that, then what does she do? Also, what does the father gain in not having the son?

Tummala-Narra: Yes. Often times the son assumes the power and also the position of intelligence in the family, and I wonder if that's another way for Sonya to identify with her father. It may be that she became politically involved because that was one way for her to feel more intelligent.

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