

**Internalized Racism, Career Aspirations, and Academic Achievement in
South Asian Americans**

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of internalized racism on the academic achievement and career aspirations of South Asian Americans using a literature review of research published in the past thirty years. Archival research suggests that internalized racism can reduce peer support, weaken self-confidence, and limit the range of career options perceived as achievable by certain minority groups. The influence of internalized racism on goals is better documented in groups like African Americans and Asian Americans as a whole, but a key gap is present in the exploration of the impact within the South Asian American group. This gap in research makes it difficult to fully grasp how cultural identity struggles and societal stereotypes shape their academic and career outcomes. Future studies should focus on collecting lived experiences from South Asian Americans across the United States to better understand how internalized racism affects this growing community.

Introduction

South Asian Americans are United States residents whose heritage can be traced back to South Asia, including countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Internalized racism is one of the many complex mechanisms that could influence the careers that South Asian Americans choose to pursue through their education and professional careers. Internalized racism is better understood in African American, Native American, and East Asian American communities than in South Asian Americans. Internalized racism has been proven to influence the physical and mental health of those who experience it, which is one of the primary reasons it is essential to research in South Asian Americans. Additionally, the notion that internalized racism could influence career choices could reveal a much larger impact on the lives of those influenced if proved to be true. Hence, this research

paper explores the impact of internalized racism on the career choices of South Asian Americans and recommends further studies based on the conclusions found.

Background

Internalized racism refers to when individuals from marginalized groups accept and believe in negative stereotypes, biases, or prejudices about their own community. It is believed to inherently pressure marginalized racial groups to subconsciously and unintentionally oppress other individuals with similar racial backgrounds (Poon et al., 2016). This is an important area to study, especially for South Asian Americans, because of their unique cultural and historical experiences.

The Indian American community is one of the fastest-growing immigrant groups in the United States (Boodhoo, 2023). While internalized racism as a whole is “a source of race and racism-related stress and a consequence of experiencing racism” (James, 2022) South Asian Americans’ sense of identity is heavily shaped by India's colonial history, experiences as part of the Indian diaspora, and the racial systems in the US. During British colonial rule, notions of hierarchy and colorism became deeply rooted in Indian society. These ideas persisted after migration and mixed with Western ideas about race, creating intricate challenges for Indian Americans. Indian Americans also face a double-sided racial bias. On one hand, they are seen as a "model minority", which is a stereotype that portrays them as successful and hardworking (Mohite, 2017). On the other hand, they experience racism and exclusion which can be labeled as “Indophobia” (Ali, 2022). While the "model minority" stereotype might seem positive, it can be harmful because it hides the discrimination that South Asian Americans face. It also prevents conversations about racism by alienating this community as facing a positive stereotype, therefore separating them from other minority groups. This situation can lead to internalized

racism, which might manifest in feelings of shame, self-doubt, or rejection of their cultural roots. Due to this complex relationship between racism and South Asian Americans, it is essential to study the further impacts that internalized racism can have on the lives of members of this community. Studies show that internalized racism can harm mental health and lead to anxiety (Sosoo, 2020), and confusion about one's identity (Willis, 2021). It can also impact relationships, community connections, and family dynamics in immigrant households. For South Asian Americans, the challenges of adapting to a new culture, facing xenophobia/indophobia, and dealing with cultural stigma around mental health (Gaiha, 2020) make internalized racism a serious issue. However, because there is little research on this topic for South Asian Americans in comparison to African Americans or Asian Americans as a whole, a gap is present which prevents society from having a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which internalized racism affects the community and how to address any potential negative impacts. This study aims to explore the causes, effects, and extent of internalized racism in South Asian Americans as well as the impacts of internalized racism on the academic achievement and career aspirations of this community. 78% of Indian immigrants in the United States are employed in management, business, science, and arts as compared to 38% for all immigrants (Batalova, 2024). Internalized racism could be a mechanism influencing the career choices made by South Asian Americans to pursue certain fields of study and paths. It is essential to explore the dynamic between these two because South Asian Americans could be pressured into performing and achieving to an unhealthy level that could eventually cause health issues. They could also feel restricted in their career choices and dissuaded from pursuing their true passions, which could prevent certain fields of study from gaining diverse perspectives and voices, potentially hindering those fields' growth.

Research Question

What is the impact of internalized racism on academic achievement and career aspirations among South Asian Americans?

Methodology

This paper employs archival research. The scope of this review is defined by the following boundaries to ensure the information is relevant. The first will be the time period in which the existing scholarship was published. It is essential that the past research has been published in the last 30 years in order to accurately portray modern mechanisms relating to internalized racism. Archival research published before then may not represent the population growth of South Asian Americans in the United States. Although the selection process and methodology is relatively thorough, there is a potential gap in the resource identification process due to limited access to subscription databases and possible missing articles.

Literature Review

South Asia is a region which includes “India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives, and occasionally Afghanistan” (Viswanathan et al., 2021). According to Boodhoo (2023), Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial group in the United States, with Indian Americans forming the largest subgroup. A 1960s change in immigration policy helped lead to a migration boom of Indian technology workers, yet nearly 80% of Asian Americans feel like they don’t belong (Boodhoo, 2023).

Internalized racism is a type of racism which involves the acceptance and internalization of stereotypes about racial groups by the members of the group. It is a result of exposure to institutionalized racism, racist interactions, and racial violence and results in psychological, biophysical, behavioral, and health consequences (James, 2022).

Those experiencing internalized racism sometimes project feelings of inferiority to other racial groups onto members of the same race, making it difficult for some African American students in higher education to sustain healthy relationships with their peers, inherently being discouraged from academic achievement due to feeling a lack of support (Garvey, 2019). Peers have been found to play a significant role in collegiate success for African American men, as same-race peers provide support to encourage students to pursue activities and leadership positions (Harper, 2007). Internalized racism was found to have a negative correlation with value placed on higher education for African American men as they had higher measures of external academic locus of control, or belief regarding one's control over academic outcomes, when measured to have higher levels of internalized racism (Brown et al., 2017). Higher career aspirations are related to lower levels of internalized racism and connection with racial heritage and community is more likely to encourage achievement for African American adults (Brown et al., 2016). A higher frequency of everyday discrimination, a cause of internalized racism, is associated with increased probability of meeting criteria for major depressive disorder for African American and Afro-Caribbean adult males, proving that studying internalized racism's consequences is essential for the well-being of minorities in the United States (Molina et al., 2016).

While much of existing literature focuses on African American populations, parallels can be drawn to the South Asian American lived experience. During the British rule of India, many influential Indian elite and authors experienced internalized racism as a result of psycho-cultural colonization, expressing their admiration of British literature, policy, and culture and disgust of South Asian religion, books, and traditions through authorship at the time. Authors who expressed this internalized racism and inferiority complex include Rammohan Roy, Prasanna

Kumar, and Dawarkanath Tagore (Ali, 2022). In the modern age, a survey of South Asian American teenagers in states with many South Asian Americans, such as New Jersey, New York, Texas, and Florida, found that representation of South Asian Americans in television shows and movies causes self-perception to become more negative and 19.1% of respondents had responses indicating internalized racism (Viswanathan et al., 2021). Some South Asian Americans conceded that they struggled with their names and identities as students, often feeling alienated from their Asian culture through their names and distancing themselves from their Asian culture by changing their names and avoiding cultural connection (Shariff, 2008). Internalized racism is not well-studied because researchers fear their work will be perceived as victim-blaming (Garvey, 2019). There is still a key gap in research regarding internalized racism within South Asian Americans.

In the case of South Asian Americans, the stereotype resulting in internalized racism which relates to career aspirations and academic achievement is the model minority myth. The model minority myth is defined as the notion that Asian Americans are a generally high-achieving and hardworking group who therefore are perceived as not needing the same attention and care as the rest of the American diaspora (Poon et al., 2016; Suzuki, 2002). In this sense, the model minority myth is weaponized to undercut the social justice efforts of other minority groups such as African Americans to uphold White supremacy by framing Asian Americans as “honorary Whites” (Poon et al., 2016). The myth is perpetuated by the media, with the few Asian American characters in entertainment mostly embodying the model minority myth and therefore normalizing racial stereotypes for all different groups (Khorana et al., 2018). However, Suzuki (2002) highlights that Asian Americans still struggle in terms of economics to reach par with their white counterparts, noting that “whites consistently gain a substantially

higher return on education than any of the Asian American groups” even though Asian Americans are able to enter high-paying fields, but their mobility is cut short by the glass ceiling of racism. Hence, the belief in the model minority myth, albeit a ‘positive stereotype’, triggers a domino effect of belief in the connection between race and negative stereotypes as well (Devarajan, 2018). Positive stereotypes are proven to more likely strengthen correlation between race and group tendency than negative stereotypes (Kay et al., 2013).

The model minority myth and internalized racism both create an impact on career choices and academic achievement for many racial groups. In a study of Asian Americans excluding South Asians, assimilation to dominant culture, known as acculturation, has a great impact on self-efficacy, interests, and career choice (Tang et al., 1999). Minority groups perceived fewer career opportunities and greater career barriers than do white individuals, with minorities believing they might not think they’ll be accepted in certain fields even if they are capable of doing the work (Fouad et al., 2005). In a study of Chinese families in Canada, parents placed a heavy emphasis on education and some believed immigrants must align their personal aspirations to the demands of the labor market and visible minority status, encouraging children to pursue science and technology while discouraging their children from pursuing fields like arts, politics, and law because they didn’t want their children to experience discrimination; they strongly believed minorities must work harder to prove their worth and need to understand how to battle discrimination in the workplace (Li, 2001).

In India, a South Asian country, the British and Portuguese colonization introduced Western medical education and many medical students chose their career because of security and prestige (25.9% combined), and 22.7% chose medical careers due to parental desire (Diwan et al., 2013). The lack of representation and accessibility to resources in humanities fields, as well

as the belief that Asian Americans are the model minority and don't require additional support like the rest of the students, can cause Asian American students to deter from those fields (Suzuki, 2002).

Discussion and Analysis

The strong presence of South Asian Americans in the United States and the drastic physiological consequences of internalized racism illustrate that their study is essential for the health and well-being of this minority group (Boodhoo, 2023; James, 2022). Furthermore, understanding the impact of internalized racism on career choice and academic achievement is crucial to enabling South Asian Americans to consciously choose careers and have autonomy regarding achievement. According to Molina et al. (2016), internalized racism is positively related to major depressive disorder in African American and Afro-Caribbean adult males, and the same effect may exist in South Asian Americans, proving the study of internalized racism even more essential for South Asian Americans' mental health. The fact that almost 80% of Asian Americans feel as though they don't belong in the United States is concerning and indicates that outside of academics and the workplace, internalized racism could persist and perpetuate notions of alienation in society as a whole (Boodhoo, 2023).

The roots of internalized racism among South Asian Americans can be traced to British colonialism, which normalized racial hierarchies that persist in cultural consciousness today. Internalized racism in South Asia began during the British colonial era, when many well-educated Indian elite subscribed to the belief that British rule was normal and systematic while the Indian rule was barbaric and chaotic, creating an inferiority complex evident in literature of the time and encouraging the adoption of the complex among younger generations. The residual effects of the psycho-cultural colonization of British rule could manifest in

modern-day internalized racism, even amongst South Asian Americans who do not live in India. A survey of South Asian American teenagers found that even in states with many South Asian Americans, 19.1% of teenagers likely experience internalized racism. The lived experience of these teenagers is likely reflected in Shariff's (2008) observation that South Asian Americans struggled with cultural connection as youth because they wanted to distance themselves from South Asian culture. These experiences stem from early cultural identity struggles and grow more potent into acts of internalized racism, including the projection of negative stereotypes onto oneself and peers. This underscores that the projection of negative stereotypes on same-race peers probably occurs in South Asian Americans, therefore influencing the decisions they make as teenagers regarding careers and academics such as majors in college and extracurricular activities or clubs. This suggests that internalized racism not only shapes identity but also influences how South Asian Americans perceive viable career options

Based on existing literature regarding internalized racism and achievement in African Americans, parallels can be drawn to the South Asian American community. For instance, internalized racism could cause South Asian Americans to project notions of inferiority upon other South Asian Americans, estranging members of the group and inhibiting peer connection and support, similar to the function of internalized racism in African Americans (Garvey, 2019). In the African American collegiate community, peers encourage each other to pursue higher achievements even in fields where they are not well-represented, and high-achieving African Americans agree that peer support has enabled them to reach higher levels of achievement (Harper, 2007). Hence, South Asian Americans could feel discouraged from pursuing fields without much South Asian representation because the few South Asian members of those fields may estrange themselves from other South Asians due to internalized racism and rejecting

association with their racial group. Without peer support, South Asian Americans may hesitate to enter fields with low representation. As a result, they might gravitate toward disciplines with greater South Asian presence. According to Brown et al. (2017), since higher levels of internalized racism indicate a higher perception of an external academic locus of control for African Americans, South Asian Americans experiencing internalized racism may also feel less in control regarding their career trajectories and thus allow parents to choose careers for them. Both in India and Canada, Asian families encouraged children to pursue science, technology, and medicine (Diwan et al., 2013; Li, 2001). For Chinese families in Canada, this was because some parents believed minorities needed to work harder and prove their worth as well as understand how to battle discrimination, which is likely a result of exposure to racial violence or discrimination and therefore a potential sense of internalized racism (Li, 2001). Consequently, internalized racism in South Asian Americans leading to an external academic locus of control could lead to selection of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields because of internalized racism experienced by parents or parental figures of the same racial group. As Brown et al. (2016) observe, higher career aspirations in African American adults results from lower levels of internalized racism and higher levels of connection with racial heritage and community. Since South Asian Americans struggle with identity and names and acculturate by changing their names and distancing from South Asian culture according to Shariff (2008), South Asian Americans' distancing from their connection with racial heritage and community could also result in higher levels of internalized racism, and therefore lower career aspirations.

The main connection between internalized racism and achievement lies in the model minority myth because the myth prescribes success in both careers and academics to Asian Americans as a whole, including South Asian Americans. According to Poon et al. (2016), since

the myth is used to frame Asian Americans as ‘whiter’ than other minorities due to the positive traits prescribed by the myth, South Asian Americans could both feel the need to reject or subscribe to the traits prescribed by the myth. They may feel the need to reject the model minority myth and its prescribed success in careers and academics to feel less like a ‘model’ Asian American, or they could subscribe to it in order to feel more ‘white’, less like a minority member, and as Tang et al. (1999) put it, acculturated. In both cases, the model minority myth’s prescribed success could have a significant impact on career selection, especially since the myth is heavily perpetuated in media (Khorana et al., 2018).

The danger that lies within the model minority myth is that it encourages belief in a connection between race and group tendency (Devarajan, 2018). Should South Asian Americans choose to believe in the model minority myth and the positive notion that their racial group is generally hardworking and successful, they may also believe negative stereotypes are true for the entire racial group. The model minority myth then becomes a direct segue into internalized racism because it sparks the connection between race and stereotype and could influence career choice by making South Asian Americans believe their racial group is better or worse at a certain profession, therefore they should choose a career which their racial group is innately better at fulfilling. This deterrent in career choice is further exacerbated by the fact that minority groups already perceive fewer career opportunities, more obstacles, and experience fear of rejection from some fields even while being capable of working in them, likely because of a lack of representation and fear of stereotype projection by coworkers experiencing internalized racism (Fouad et al., 2005; Suzuki, 2002).

In India, factors such as security and prestige encouraged 25.9% of surveyed medical school students to pursue medical careers. The prestige could stem from the fact that Western

medical education was introduced in India by the British and Portuguese colonization, therefore medicine as a field could be associated with ‘whiteness’ and superiority while internalized racism encourages students to choose medicine as a career in order to feel more ‘white’ and less Indian. Living in a South Asian country, India’s medical students could well reflect the cultural connections between career and race even amongst South Asian Americans.

Conclusion

While it is evident that internalized racism and the model minority myth influence minority groups’ career choices and academic achievement, the impact of the two factors on South Asian Americans’ career choices is not entirely clear. For Asian Americans as a whole, internalized racism and the model minority myth pushes some members of the group to pursue STEM careers for fear of discrimination and alienation by same-race peers in fields where Asian Americans are not well-represented. In African Americans, internalized racism inhibits peer support and therefore may discourage self-efficacy as well as high career aspirations and achievement in some members of the group.

Directions for future research in this area include studying the lived experience of South Asian Americans in varied states throughout the country and collecting more data regarding the presence of internalized racism among the group.

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