ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: INVISIBLE IDENTITIES: THE SELECTIVE RACIALIZATION OF IRANIAN STUDENTS

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Southwest Asian and North Africans (SWANAs) are racially marked as white in the United States, despite their negative representation in the media resulting in their marginalization, similar to other Communities of Color (Tehranian, 2009). This study specifically focuses on the experience of second generation Iranian immigrants due to their religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity; the timing of their parents' mass migration to the U.S.; the increased political tension between Iran and the U.S.; and, because of an Aryan myth perpetuated by first generation Iranians who perceive themselves as white (Maghbouleh, 2017).

Little research exists to highlight the discriminatory experiences of SWANAs, or Iranians, with a racial lens as opposed to a religious one. Even fewer studies explore this in the context of higher education. This study explores the messaging second generation Iranians receive from their parents, peers, institutions such as universities, and society about their racial identity.

This research relies on John Tehranian's (2009) conceptual framework, *selective racialization*, which views racialization as the sum of actions occurring from systemic and individual levels. This study is guided by the following questions: (1) What messages do second generation Iranians receive about their racial identity? (2) How do they respond to these messages? (3) How do they perceive the university playing a role in their racial identity development, if at all?

Using a critical constructivist epistemology (Kincheloe, 2005) and a narrative inquiry methodology, this study interviewed how five second generation Iranian immigrants understood and navigated their racial identity. Participants shared different messaging they received at the interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels. These messages had impacts on their visibility which depended on their representation, cultural retention, and their proximity to whiteness. This study concludes with implications for both research and practice based on detailed findings provided by participants.

Key words: second generation immigrants, Iranian, Middle Eastern, SWANA, racial identity, racialization, university

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by

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Chapter I: Introduction

Hale shoma chetor ast? I ask him.
After much hesitation, he smiles.
He knows I am Iranian, like him.

My Uber driver, Cyrus (*see-roos*), the same name of my Amoo,
greeted me with a "hello" as I took a seat in his Toyota to head home.
In my experience, Iranian Americans are quick to recognize one another
—usually there is an embrace, followed by a discussion of the Iranian cities we have origins in.

Cyrus, on the other hand, answered my question in English.
I was taken aback by his hesitancy to respond in our shared language, and he noticed.

"When I came to this country, I was Iranian, then the Hostage Crisis happened, and being Iranian was not an option to keep my life in America. I decided to be Russian, until the Cold War happened. Next, I chose to be Mexican, but under this administration, this too can no longer be. ***Who shall I be next?***"

Racial identity can be fluid for many Iranians like Cyrus, who are not identified as one of the five monoracial categories outlined by the Census: white[1], Black/African American, Asian, Native American or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. In an attempt to shield himself from discrimination and violence, Cyrus takes advantage of his racial ambiguity; simultaneously, he reinforces his own invisibility by masking his ethnicity to fit the current political landscape. Indeed, Cyrus has the agency to label himself as different races over time, yet he consistently found that the changing societal, economic, and political perceptions of various ethnic groups were much more powerful than he could resist.

The racial perplexity that exists among Iranians like Cyrus is reflective of the Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA)[2] population in the United States. Though Iranians and other

[1] In line with Pérez Huber (2010): "I do not capitalize the term 'white' in this article, rejecting the standard grammatical norm as a means to acknowledge and reject the grammatical representation of power capitalization brings to the term "white." In line with this argument, I do capitalize the terms People of Color, Communities of Color, and Immigrants of Color as a grammatical move towards empowerment and racial justice" (p. 93).

[2] Traditionally referred to as the Middle East, or MENA (Middle East & North Africa); Shirazi & Hantzopoulos (2017) redefines the region as SWANA to depart from the Eurocentric conception of the Middle East,

SWANAs may at times benefit from racial ambiguity, they largely remain invisible, both by their own doing and by institutional procedures (Tehranian, 2009). The U.S. Census currently aggregates SWANAs into the "white" racial category; therefore, a precise count of the number of SWANAs in the U.S. remains unknown, though a current estimate is five million which includes Arab and non-Arabs (Wiltz, 2014). Data collected from the Census determines how upwards of $400 billion dollars is allocated across the country, it also affects the political landscape which relies on Census information to determine language assistance programs for voting (Wiltz, 2014). The entire SWANA population in the United States has been masked as "white" in racial categorization for decades, and in doing so, this population is also barred from resources available to other Communities of Color (Parvini & Simani, 2019).

A checkmark in this monoracial box may presume a proximity to whiteness, but there are impactful consequences from being mislabeled and forced into a category which does not reflect one's lived experiences. Erasure through a classification system meant to divide "others" from "white" allows abandonment of support and resources for an entire population. In addition, disguising SWANAs as white maintains white superiority by crediting successes from this group towards white data, where on the other hand, failures are explicitly tied to SWANAs (Tehranian, 2009). This categorization is the focal point of *selective racialization* theory; as Tehranian (2009) describes it, "Through the process of selective racialization, the white continues to be imbued with positive associations, while the Other continues to endure negative connotations" (p. 76). Though Middle Easterners today remain under the umbrella "white", this label may be granted or retracted at the leisure of white individuals and societal systems which determine who is

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with Europe as the reference point. Furthermore, SWANA acknowledges the construction of geographical boundaries for this region, and thus aims to broaden discourse among the experiences of people living outside of these confines.

considered white until it is no longer beneficial, resulting in a racial imposter syndrome for SWANA-identifying individuals.

The following study aims to understand how, and if, these processes of racialization manifest in the realm of higher education. Although some higher education research is available on SWANAs, most of their findings do not go beyond their experiences with religious discrimination. A number of studies examine the effects of Islamophobia post 9/11 on SWANA students (Ali, 2014; Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Awad, 2010; Mrayan & Saleh, 2016; Muedini, 2009; Peek, 2003; Shammas, 2009). These pieces of scholarship discussed the media's role on the perception of Islam post September 11th, and presented a better understanding of these students' sense of safety on campus, as well as their response to the media and peers' misrepresentation of their religion. Though the outcomes from these studies continue to be relevant for this population, they primarily analyzed one type of experience. Little to no research seeks to explore the ethnic or racial discrimination these students might face, nor does it question the experience of non-Muslim students who also face Islamophobia, despite their religious affiliation.

Second Generation Iranians

The oversimplification of discriminatory experiences among SWANAs is not solely a result of the inclination to understand religious intolerance. It is also rooted in the tendency to homogenize groups. This proclivity occurs for many racial groups, including Black, Latinx, and Asian people. In an attempt to uncover the variance within race, I direct this study towards one SWANA ethnic group. This study focuses on Iranian students for several reasons. First, Iranians are a diverse community; for example, Iranians practice a multitude of religions including Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and the Baha'i Faith, to name a few. Iranians also

vary, linguistically, from other countries in the SWANA population since they predominantly speak Farsi, not Arabic, and therefore do not identify with Arabs (Amanolahi, 2005; Maghbouleh, 2017). Finally, Iranians are ethnically diverse. Many Iranians identify as Persian, the largest ethnic group in Iran, additional ethnic groups include Turks and Kurds among others (Rashidvash, 2013). The variance of religion, language, and ethnicity among Iranians makes them unique from other SWANA groups. These differences are worth exploring deeper and how they contribute to Iranians' racial identity as they are key deviations from the larger community they belong to (SWANA). Without acknowledging these differences, research perpetuates their homogenization, thus misrepresenting Iranians and misinforming readers.

A secondary reason for focusing on second generation Iranians specifically is due to the timing of their parents' mass migration to the United States in the 1970s during the Iranian Revolution (Shavarini, 2004). Because of this, it can be assumed that many second generation Iranians are college age and largely entering, within, or leaving the realm of higher education institutions. Some research exists to understand how second generation Iranians have assimilated, or more notably, how they have diluted their ethnic identity due to assimilation (Bozorgmehr & Douglas, 2011; Daha, 2011). Though interesting, these studies did not examine parental influence on their children's understanding of their racial identity. This is important to examine as first generation Iranians hold a deeply rooted belief in a national myth which aims to distinguish them from Arabs while also aligning them with European whiteness (Maghbouleh, 2017). Second generation Iranians must untangle this myth in a country where their experiences both in school and among peers contradicts the narratives shared by their parents (Maghbouleh, 2017). In doing so, they further understand their social positioning in the U.S. in a way that is distinct from their parents' and peers' perceptions.

Another justification in exploring the experiences of Iranians as opposed to other SWANA groups is in regards to their political position with the United States. Iranian Americans have been caught in the middle of numerous conflicts between the United States and Iran, including the Iranian Hostage Crisis, the Iran-Iraq War, post-9/11 attacks, and most recently, the travel ban implemented by the current administration (Daha, 2011; Maghbouleh, 2017; Mobasher, 2006). The political climate in the U.S., being in opposition of the Middle East, certainly has ramifications for Iranian Americans—and university settings are no exception. In this study, I hope to better understand how the political tension between the two countries manifests on campus. This knowledge will help educators better serve students who may be impacted by the economic and social ramifications of this international conflict when it comes to paying for tuition, connecting with family, or surviving in a country that ostracizes them.

While Iranian Americans face bigotry, prejudice, discrimination, and racism, this population continues to persist academically and socially as shown through their retention rates, degree attainment, career outcomes and socioeconomic status (Bozorgmehr & Douglas, 2011). Maghbouleh (2017) made note of the socioeconomic profile of Iranians in the U.S. and related this to their integration upon arrival to their host country, "Iranians have disproportionately entered with training and experience in specialty occupations like engineering and medicine and possess higher rates of educational attainment and income than other legally white Americans" (p. 7). As a result of their high education and occupational status, in 1979 Iranians' mean income was almost double that of other recent immigrants ($17,537 compared to $9,464) and 60% higher than native U.S. citizens (at $11,169) (Bozorgmehr & Sabagh, 1988). Even though their socioeconomic status and educational attainment rates might indicate success, these factors provide little insight to their other experiences. This group is undoubtedly resilient and deserve

overdue consideration to highlight their achievements in ways that do not solely benefit or reflect white data.

Statement of the Problem

Although scholarship on SWANA populations exists, it is extremely limited, especially as it pertains to higher education. Literature that focuses on SWANA students predominantly focuses on the religious discrimination they face, rather than perceived racial or ethnic discrimination (Awad, 2010; Maghbouleh, 2017). Without questioning students' racialized experiences, scholars studying this population reinforce the legal construction of race, assuming SWANAs classification of "white" is an accurate reflection of their reality rather than a label. By assuming their legal whiteness reflects their lived experience, SWANA students remain underserved on campus and in a society where they are faced with opposition. The erasure of SWANA experiences beyond religious affiliation is perpetuated in higher education, not only through scholarship, but also practice.

The purpose of this study is to understand how, if at all, second generation Iranians reconcile narratives about their racial identity, as informed by their parents, peers, and the education system. In order to begin to understand this population, I will answer the following questions: what messages do second generation Iranians receive about their racial identity? How do they respond to these messages? In what ways do students perceive universities are playing a role in the development of second generation Iranian students' identity, if at all?

Overview of the Study

For this study, I utilize narrative inquiry to highlight the lived experiences of participants (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Using purposeful and snowballing sampling strategies, I will recruit three to five individuals to participate in individual semi-structured interviews. These

interviews will encourage participants to reflect on interpersonal (from family and peers), institutional, and societal messages they received about their identity. In doing so, I will gain a deeper understanding of the messaging these participants have received and get a better sense of how this might impact their racial identity development.

I rely on John Tehranian's (2009) *selective racialization* conceptual framework to carry out this study. This theory, intended to explain the racialization of Middle Easterners, extends original racialization theories to examine how individuals participate in their racialization from the bottom up (individual and interpersonal levels). Tehranian (2009) argued that Middle Easterners are subject to processes of racialization, still from the top down (at the societal and institutional levels) and the bottom up. Negative stereotypes of Middle Easterners reinforced by mainstream media results in the ostracization of this population. At the same time, this group is labeled as "white" yet rarely receives the benefits of proximity to whiteness; rather, members are erased through this classification. More unique is Tehranian's (2009) understandings of racialization from the bottom up; to describe this, Tehranian employs Yoshino's (2007) theory of covering. The process of covering is a progression towards assimilation—Yoshino (2007) provides a third alternative to processes of passing and converting. Covering, unlike the former two processes, is the conscious process of downplaying one's identity to avoid otherness (Tehranian, 2009; Yoshino, 2007). Tehranian (2009) argued Middle Easterners engage in covering, and this, in conjunction with their systemic racialization, perpetuates their invisibility, and weakens the unity among community. Given the connection between covering and intergroup solidarity, this study also examines how Iranian students' racial identity might relate them to their community (on and off campus).

I align Tehranian's (2009) framework with assimilation and broader racialization theories to include factors influencing second generation identity development. In an attempt to apply Tehranian's (2009) conceptual framework, I reconceptualize systems to be relevant to a higher education setting. As such, I delineate the institutional level as specific to universities, in an attempt to understand how universities—through administration, policy, practice, and scholarship—have a role in the process of racialization for this population. I focus on the institutional level while acknowledging it is shaped largely by the societal level. The societal level reinforces perceptions of SWANAs through mass media and policies. I modify the individual level to be specific to second generation Iranians, who are given messages from both their peers, and their first generation immigrant parents about their racial and ethnic identity.

Significance of Study

In spite of emerging scholarship on SWANA students, few studies describe these students' racial experiences. Even research on Islamophobic occurrences among these students' on campus is minimal. Though studies seeking to understand this population may be challenged because of SWANAs racial labeling, it is still important to research this population, and in the process, question their labeling. Higher education institutions which seem to have a common goal of diversifying their student population could be an opportune setting to conduct these studies.

Currently, the racial categorization system in the United States is also used in Higher Education institutions through college applications and other documents collecting demographic data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Incoming SWANA students are then tasked with determining their own racial classification. Universities aim to serve students, and over time, interventions

have been put in place on campus to help retain and support students with marginalized identities (Harper, Jones, & Schuh, 2010); however, as SWANA students are classified as white, they lose access to such services that are intended for Students of Color (Maghbouleh, 2017; Parvini & Simani, 2019). In sum, universities are not only complicit in the invisibility of SWANAs through demographic questionnaires, but also by excluding these students from resources for Students of Color. This is done without questioning their legal race, and assuming their whiteness. Thus, students are forced to negotiate between the messages they receive from the federal government and the university, and their reality.

From a policy and administrative standpoint, by disaggregating SWANA from the white racial category, universities can more accurately represent their students. More importantly, lack of statistical data on this population disguises concerns such as health trends, access to higher education through financial resources among other support services (Parvini & Simani, 2019). Disaggregating SWANA from white would also be helpful to collect data about hate bias exclusive to these students who can then justify cases of racism. Finally, such data would give insight to how federal policy influences college campuses; for example, the effects of the travel ban (including limited travel home and sanctions impacting tuition) might be examined among international SWANA students. By gaining this data, scholars in fields of higher education and student affairs can better target these populations to explore their experiences from both a qualitative and quantitative standpoint. This scholarship would contribute to the current gap in literature, uplift this population's narratives, counteract negative stereotypes of SWANAs perpetuated by the media, highlight their diversity, and inform practice from theory used by student affairs professionals (Ali & Bagheri, 2009).

Altogether, student affairs professionals who broadly interact with students would be able to learn the areas in which SWANA students need support, whether it relates to mental or physical health, retention, advising, degree attainment, or recruitment and can better serve in positions to support them. Multicultural centers might consider including a SWANA coordinator to serve these students and connect them with other resources on campus, similar to coordinators for Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native students. The lack of representation of SWANA populations on an institutional level through data collection, scholarship, and support services invisibilizes these students and calls into question their value in comparison to students who do receive resources. More importantly, institutions put additional labor on these students to bear the burden of navigating their liminal identity. As student affairs professionals, researchers, and practitioners it is critical to disrupt the cycle of invisibility MENA students face in order to support their holistic development and affirm their experiences.

Key Terms

The following terms are largely relied upon to carry out the following study, and therefore it is imperative to deconstruct their meanings:

- *Race* is a social construction used to categorize others largely based on phenotype (Chávez & Guido-DeBrito, 1999; Griffin & McIntosh, 2015).
- *Racial identity* "refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms, 1993, p. 3)
- *Ethnicity* "speaks to group membership based on common history, kinship, and shared culture" (Griffin & McIntosh, 2015, p. 244).

- *Ethnic identity* is a "multidimensional construct that involves understanding of one's own background, attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs about membership in an ethnic community" (Griffin & McIntosh, 2015, p. 244).
- *First generation immigrant* in this study refers to individuals who are foreign-born and relocated to their current residence, in this case the United States.
- *Second generation immigrant* an individual born and raised in the United States that has at least one foreign born parent (Pew Research Center, 2013).
- *Assimilation* aims to explain how ethnic groups integrate into mainstream U.S. culture by abandoning their own cultural traits in exchange for access to social and economic opportunity (Park, 1928; Zhou, 1997).
- *Acculturation* understands how immigrants adopt their host society's culture while also balancing that of their homeland (Alba & Nee, 1997; Zhou, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).
- *Racialization* is a process that ascribes a set of "characteristics viewed as inherent to members of a group because of their physical or cultural traits. These are not limited to skin tone or pigmentation, but include a myriad of attributes including cultural traits such as language, clothing, and religious practices. The characteristics thus emerge as 'racial' as an outcome of the process" (Garner & Selod, 2015, p. 12).
- *Southwest Asian & North African (SWANA)* refers to what is traditionally known as the Middle East, or MENA (Middle East & North Africa) region; Shirazi & Hantzopoulos (2017) redefined the region as SWANA to depart from the Eurocentric conception of the Middle East, with Europe as the reference point. Furthermore, SWANA acknowledges the construction of geographical boundaries for this region, and thus aims to broaden

discourse among the experiences of people living outside of these confines. At times, I use Middle Eastern or MENA interchangeably with SWANA to align with references from alternative studies.

- *Persian* refers to the culture and ethnic group who speak Farsi; Persians mostly live in Iran, but also includes those who live in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
- *Iranian* refers to the nationality of those who live in Iran; this includes Kurds, Turks, and other ethnic groups in addition to Persians.

Organization of Thesis

The organization of this proposal is as follows: the first chapter outlines the research problem, purpose, and significance of the study as well as provides an overview of the methodology and conceptual framework used to guide the study. The second chapter reviews the relevant literature to the study including studies on SWANA populations, Iranians, and second generation immigrants. To conclude, the third chapter expounds upon the methodological design for this study, including data collection, analysis, limitations and trustworthiness. The fourth chapter provides the five participant narratives using data collected from our interviews. The final chapter concludes by discussing the findings of this study in its relation to the conceptual framework and concludes this study with implications for future research and practice.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review examines studies across disciplines including sociology, psychology, anthropology, immigration, history, law, and education. I present existing scholarship on SWANA students, examine the construction of race in the U.S., overview Iranian history and emigration, and analyze second generation identity development. I conclude this chapter by reviewing the conceptual framework I utilize in my study to explain how second generation Iranians reconcile different narratives about their racial identity, as informed by their parents, peers, and the education system.

Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) Students in Higher Education

Student affairs and higher education scholarship largely exists to understand the experiences of Students of Color, particularly for Black, Asian, and Latinx students. Additional research aims to understand how these students make sense of their identity or conceptualize their sense of belonging, however, research in the field that considers the general experiences of SWANA is limited. Among scholarship that does seek to understand this population, most come from fields of sociology, anthropology, and psychology. More notably, these studies predominantly focus on Muslim SWANA students and perceived religious discrimination. Though the findings from these studies are relevant, they do not capture happenings beyond Islamophobia. In the following section I review the available literature on both Muslim and non-Muslim SWANA students and make a case to expand research grounded in the racial and ethnic discrimination among this population.

Muslim SWANA Students

Research on SWANA populations in higher education largely explores religious discrimination, predominantly among Muslim students post the September 11th attacks (Ali,

2014; Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Awad, 2010; Mrayan & Saleh, 2016; Muedini, 2009; Peek, 2003; Shammas, 2009). Consistent in these studies is the media's role on the perceptions of Islam and the implications for students' sense of safety on campus. Two studies discussed a change in the daily routine of Muslim students after 9/11, including code-switching language from Arabic to English and considering removing their hijab (Muedini, 2009; Peek, 2003). Perceptions of gender among Muslim students was also explored, particularly for women who donned a hijab and were viewed as oppressed by their religion (Ali, 2014; Mrayan & Saleh, 2016; Peek, 2003).

In acknowledging these behaviors and perceptions of Muslims, Ali & Bagheri (2009) directly outline suggestions for university stakeholders to accommodate these students' needs, which included but were not limited to: increasing prayer spaces, creating opportunities for dialogue among diverse students, considering dietary restrictions in dining options, acknowledging non-Christian holidays, training teachers on bias in the classroom, and increasing cultural support services (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). The themes and findings in these studies are undoubtedly valuable— they give insight to the experiences of some Muslim SWANA students. Nevertheless, many of these findings fail to capture the broader experiences of non-Muslim SWANA students, who may be facing the same forms of discrimination as a result of their ethnicity and presumptions about their religious affiliation.

Non-Muslim SWANA Students

Indeed, religion is a strong predictor of perceived discrimination for SWANA students; more importantly though, ethnicity has been found to be the second strongest predictor of perceived discrimination (Awad, 2010). Awad (2010) pointed out the complexity of ethnic identification among SWANA groups as a result of the ethnic diversity which comprises this

population; furthermore, the author made note of the tendency to homogenize them and further complicate their identity due to their legal classification as "white".

Rarely do studies investigate differences between SWANA ethnic groups or look at their experiences separate from their religion. In fact, only one study published in the *Journal of College Student Development* attempted to understand the discrimination experienced by Middle Eastern students on campus regardless of their religious affiliation (Modir & Kia-Keating, 2018). In their study, Modir and Kia-Keating (2018) aimed to understand the coping strategies and persistence among Middle Eastern students in the face of ethnic and religious prejudice. This study illustrated the consequences of having a small representation on campus, which led to "fewer cultural events, fewer opportunities for learning about their community, and an increased sense of invisibility, leaving [Middle Eastern] students feeling ignored and their sense of belonging on campus challenged" (Modir & Kia-Keating, 2018, p. 570). The authors followed this with a participant's statement discussing her desire for cultural organizations to lessen her feelings of exclusion on campus. Modir and Kia-Keating (2010) illustrated students' sentiments about being hypervisible in most spaces as a result of the scrutiny of Middle Eastern people in the media, however, on campus they were largely ignored— specifically when they were in need of services for Students of Color, but were denied services due to the grouping with white students (Modir & Kia-Keating, 2018).

The former study legitimizes the need to understand experiences of SWANA students from a racial lens. Modir & Kia-Keating's (2018) study provides evidence of non-religious discrimination, including racial microaggressions from peers, stereotypic remarks about terrorism, and prejudice rooted in ignorance about their culture. In doing so, the authors redirect the discussion surrounding SWANA student experiences from exclusively religion to race,

complicating the relationship between this populations' legal racial classification and their lived experiences. As Neda Maghbouleh (2017) states,

> The contemporary use of 'Islamophobia' as a catchall term for discrimination against... Middle Easterners in the U.S. efficiently but erroneously flattens the extent of genuine diversity within these groups and, more important, critically obscures the consistent racial valence of such harassment (p. 13).

Sayyid & Vakil (2010) state "religion is 'raced' and Muslims are racialized' (p. 276); Garner & Selod (2015) insists that racialization be a lens, although not the sole one, in which to view Muslims in the Western world. Although it cannot be denied that Islam is racialized in the United States (Joshi, 2006), naming Islamophobia as the single narrative of *all* SWANAs preserves the idea that all people originating from this region of the world practice one faith and negates the variance of religion among them. Furthermore, diluting all forms of discrimination towards SWANA individuals to a singular one reinforces their invisibility by ignoring their racialization regardless of religion and assumes their legal classification as white as a true depiction of their lived experience.

Race in the United States

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how SWANA populations became classified as "white", I investigate historical and contextual background referencing the construction of race in the United States. Legal archives initially suggest the origins of this classification transpired as a result of several court cases, primarily among Arab populations who advocated for their whiteness in the early twentieth century in the United States (Maghbouleh, 2017; Tehranian, 2009). When examined closely, though, the incentive behind these efforts were freedoms—such as voting, citizenship, and property rights— guarded by discriminatory policies set in place to maintain power by white Americans. Consequently, SWANA and other ethnic

minorities would present their case for white racial classification in an effort to access privileges afforded to whites.

Naturalization Rights

From its inception, citizenship has been a contested concept in the United States. The Naturalization Act of 1790 granted citizenship for any "free White person" residing in and under the jurisdiction of the U.S. (Naturalization Act of 1790). Following the Civil War and the Dred Scott Case (1857), Reconstruction Amendments were added to the Constitution; Amendment XIV addressed citizenship rights (Harrison, 2001). These adaptations invoked the extension of the original naturalization laws to include "[A]liens of African nativity and to persons of African descent" (Naturalization Act of 1870). Until 1952, federal law only allowed naturalization rights for persons who were white or Black, but no one who fell in between (Tehranian, 2009). The Naturalization Act then also served as a tool to govern the large influx of immigrants from Europe arriving in the United States during that time. As a result of heightened anti-immigrant sentiments, Congress instituted quotas to decrease the number of immigrants (Chacón, 2007; Immigration Act of 1924). Even so, the U.S. legal system was challenged in determining who, and from which groups, would be considered "white" and be granted its privileges. Unfortunately, these resolutions were largely inconsistent, particularly for SWANAs.

Racial Determination

Efforts by courts and policymakers to operationalize race in practice and law were inadequate. During this time, the United States' judicial systems were in constant conflict between two clashing approaches to racial determination: the common knowledge test and scientific evidence (Haney López, 1996). The common knowledge test considered the average person's beliefs and understanding of race (mostly grounded in physical appearance), scientific

evidence designated specialized knowledge largely contributed from the field of anthropology (Haney López, 1996). Neither of these theories proved to be sufficient in practice, however.

The collapse of both theories became apparent in two infamous court cases regarding race: *Ozawa v. United States* (1922) and *United States v. Thind* (1923). In 1922, Takao Ozawa petitioned for naturalization before the Supreme Court, who ultimately ruled that based on their Japanese descent, Ozawa was not a member of the Caucasian race, and therefore was denied naturalization (*Ozawa v. United States,* 1922). In this case, the court relied on common knowledge understood as membership within the Caucasian race in order to constitute a white person, a prerequisite to gaining citizenship rights. The following year, Bhagat Singh Thind, an immigrant of Indian ancestry challenged the Court, asking them to clarify which Caucasians would qualify as white (*United States v. Thind,* 1923). Thind referred to anthropological evidence classifying Asian Indians as Caucasian; the Court rejected this deposition, denouncing the use of scientific evidence in the case for racial determination as it left room for ambiguity in which individuals with brown or black skin would be designated as white (*United States v. Thind,* 1923). In addition to renouncing scientific evidence, the Court once again held to the common knowledge approach, stating

> "It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but-the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today." (*United States v. Thind,* 1923)

The inconsistencies in the Court's verdict for both cases points to the manipulation of power to maintain dominance. The Court would make decisions based on who they believed to be worthy of white privileges; science nor common knowledge was never a measure unless it benefited the white majority. As such, SWANAs would need to identify alternative measures

beyond skin color or anthropological ties to Caucasians to receive the Court's approval for racial reclassification and naturalization.

Shortly after Thind's case, the courts became more cautious in using common knowledge as a standard for determining race due to the lack of clarity in its interpretation, at least beyond skin color—which could no longer serve as a standard since the courts granted naturalization to persons with olive skin tones from other European countries, including Italy and Spain (Tehranian, 2009). Instead, the legislative systems would have to rely on alternative measures to grant whiteness. Tehranian (2009) argued performance would be the next prevailing measure used to determine race for SWANAs—and the groundwork had been laid in Ozawa and Thind's case, where both plaintiffs' educational status, religious beliefs, use of English language determined their ability to pass as white.

Performance to Pass

Performance of social identity was critically examined by Judith Butler (1988), who wrote about dramaturgy of identity as it pertains to gender. Butler (1988) argued, socially constructed identities are reinforced through action and its representation is "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (p. 520). Tehranian (2009) drew on Butler's (1996) work to detail the performance of identity through the following: "(1) differentiation of oneself from others; (2) pointing to paragons of one's chosen identity; (3) development of practices to affirm one's chosen identity; and (4) repeated engagement in these practices" (p. 47). The triumph of performance is evident in the case of the Irish, who upon arrival faced discrimination rooted as a dispute of their whiteness (Ignatiev, 1995). In response, the Irish pivoted their position on the color line through pro-slavery, anti-civil rights sentiments in alignment with

values held by the dominant group at that time; in return, this performance authorized their passing into white America. This performance of whiteness proved to be critical in litigation for groups who benefited from racial ambiguity—particularly for individuals of Middle Eastern descent.

SWANA as white

The first major case for naturalization pertaining to SWANA took place among a group of four Armenians (*In re Halladjian*, 1909). At the time, the government excluded Armenians from white race classification, interpreting white as synonymous with people of European descent, unlike the Asiatic origins of Armenians (*In re Halladjian*, 1909). Surprisingly, the court system diverged from this ruling based on their rejection of racial purity, granting them citizenship:

> There is no European or white race, as the United States contends, and no Asiatic or yellow race which includes substantially all the people of Asia...Armenians have always been reckoned as Caucasians and white persons; that the outlook of their civilization has been toward Europe...This court will not deny citizenship by reason of their color to aliens who, like the Armenians, have hitherto been granted it. (174 F. 845)

Furthermore, this decision was an outcome of Armenian's perceived assimilability and connection to Eurocentrism. Over a decade after *In re Halladjian*, another court case for the naturalization of an Armenian descendant returned: *United States v. Cartozian* (1925). Similarly to the former case, the courts granted Cartozian citizenship, however in doing so, the courts also set divisions between Armenians and others from the same region (Arabs, Turks, Kurds). Tehranian (2009) recognized the incongruity of the court's analysis, pointing out that through the scientific doctrine, all ethnic groups from the same origins as Armenians should count as Caucasian if Armenians are to be classified as such. Furthermore, this ruling abandons the common knowledge test— assumably, the average person would not be able to tell the difference

between an Armenian, a Turk, or Kurd. The disregard for both racial determinant theories points to a third measure: performance. In both *Cartozian* and *In re Halladjian*, the courts examined factors related to identity outside of ethnic affiliation. In the latter case, courts found ties between Armenian and European culture. In *Cartozian*, the courts mentioned the similarity of religious affiliation as Christians between Armenians and Europeans (*United States v. Cartozian,* 1925). Tehranian (2009) critiqued this consideration by the courts:

> Whether the Armenians have historically practiced Christianity is of no relevance whatsoever to any primordial or naturalistic view of racial grouping. Similarly, it is not discoverable to the average person on the street. Nevertheless, the court is constructing race through the lens of religion as a primary component in the semiotics of division. (p. 53)

Though Christian faith may have been sufficient in being granted whiteness for Armenians, it would not be as relevant for other SWANA groups. Instead, additional naturalization court cases involving Syrian, Asian Indian, and Parsees[3] relied on geographic boundaries to prove both the proximity to Eurocentrism and distance from others. As an example, the *In re Halladjian* (1909) case referenced Persians (Iranians) as the "fire worshippers" from whom Armenians needed saving (174 F. 841). In stating this, the courts distinguished Armenians from other SWANA groups by framing them as protagonists against their enemies, in this case, Iranians. In fact, Iran repeatedly served as a reference point in determining which side of the color line SWANA populations would fall on: Maghbouleh (2017) writes,

> Syrians and Armenians juxtaposed themselves against the non-whiteness of dark-skinned Muslim and Zoroastrian Persians through which they made claims to whiteness, while in the same era, Parsi claimants used their light skin, Zoroastrian faith and Aryan roots from Iran to prove their whiteness, notwithstanding a milennium in India. (p. 24)

[3] Parsi (Parsees) are an "ethno-religious minority group contemporarily tied to India. As migrants from Persia...Parsis settled chiefly in present-day Pakistan and Bangalore. There are intricacies of caste, education, wealth, status, and race embedded within [their] identity" (Maghbouleh, 2017, p. 21)

Though the Hart-Cellar Act ended in 1965, the discrepancies of racial determination persist for SWANA individuals. To this day, Iranians in particular remain on the border of the color line, similar to their position during the SWANA naturalization trials. Iranians' legal classification as white becomes even more complex when uncovering the Aryan myth that infiltrates the racial discourse among them. For this reason, coupled with the Court's historically controversial rulings, it is critical to question the suitability of a white label for SWANAs.

Iranians

In this section I review relevant historical and sociopolitical context shaping the trajectory of first generation Iranian assimilation into the U.S. I describe the origins of the Aryan myth which permeates racial discourse among this population as a justification of their whiteness. I then use this allegory as a backdrop to their experiences of discrimination in the U.S. following the 1979 Revolution and Hostage Crisis in an attempt to understand how first generation Iranians blended into white America. Finally, I outline the intensity of anti-Arab and Islamophobic rhetoric in the U.S. post September 11th where Iranian Americans would have to navigate their legal race classification through discriminatory court cases. Each of these elements are significant to illustrate how race operates in various contexts for this population.

Aryan Myth

The term Aryan has been explored, lost, resurfaced, reconstructed, and abandoned in a continuous cycle for centuries. "Aryan" was initially found among ancient Persian writings, and its definition related to the belonging of an ethnic group (Motadel, 2013). A second exploration investigated the term through a linguistic lens, connecting the use of Indo-European language among Europeans, Indians, and Persians (Motadel, 2013; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011). Over time, "Aryan" changed its definition, and its value; By the 19th century, "Aryan" was racially charged,

and thus a similarity of language also meant cultural, or racial affinity (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011). The meaning of the term continued to evolve until it became synonymous with superiority, and was operationalized to separate Jews from non-Jews among the German, assigning a political charge as well (Motadel, 2013). As the term became more widely used, non-European countries with Indo-European language ties used this connection to affiliate themselves with Europeans who perceived their language, and more broadly, their race to be superior to others (Motadel, 2013).

Iran's susceptibility to the Aryan myth was no less than that of Europeans. During the Qajar era, Persia lost territory and influence through British and Russian colonization (Maghbouleh, 2017). In an attempt to redeem themselves, Persia relied on the Aryan myth to historically and culturally align them with Europe, and thus strengthen their national image (Maghbouleh, 2017; Motadel, 2013). The myth in this context was fueled by a similarly fictitious nostalgia; remnants of ancient Persia resurfaced, pre-Islam, when Persia was seemingly more tied to Indo-European culture through religion (Zoroastrianism as a precedent for Christianity), the Persian Empire which inspired European art, Persian language, Persia's political structure, and the phenotype of Persian people: allegedly identical to those of light-skinned Europeans (Maghbouleh, 2017). Not only did this narrative amplify Persian nationalism and European kinship, it also sought to distinguish Persians from Arabs. This myth, as well as the historical insistence on dissociating Iranians and Arabs is fundamental in the racial discourse between first generation Iranians and their children.

The reconceptualized Arab-Persian history and newly codified language (rooted in anti-Arab rhetoric) was institutionalized through the first historical textbooks distributed to schools and read by middle schoolers under the Pahlavi regime in 1928 (Maghbouleh, 2017; Motadel, 2013). Only a few years later, Reza Shah notioned for the country to be renamed from Persia to

Iran, “a cognate of ‘Aryan’ and refers to ‘Land of Aryans’” (Motadel, 2013, p. 132). Reza Shah eventually was deposed from the throne during the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941, as a result of Reza Shah’s ostensibly amicable relationship with Germany (perhaps through the branding of Aryanism) (Eshraghi, 1984). Through U.S. and British forces, then, his son Mohammad Reza Shah replaced him. Mohammad Reza Shah was determined to continue the Aryan myth, and even referred to himself as *Shahanshah Aryamehr* (King of the Kings, Light of the Aryans):

> Certainly no one can doubt that our culture is more akin to that of the West than is either the Chinese or that of our neighbours the Arabs. Iran was an early home of the Aryans from whom most Americans and Europeans are descended, and we are racially quite separate from the Semitic stock of the Arabs. Our language belongs to the Indo–European family which includes English, French, German and other major Western tongues... As I have said, our culture is the oldest continuous one racially and linguistically linked to that of the West.[4]

Mohammad Reza Shah’s persistence in associating Iranian culture with that of Europe and the U.S. ultimately backfired, though. Many Iranians by this time were practicing Islam and also pointed to the economic and political instability of Iran due to U.S. and British control (Rubin, 1980; Wise, 2011). As a result of growing inequality, families were encouraged to enroll their children in universities overseas, most of whom chose the United States to do so (Mobasher, 2012; Torbat, 2002). This led to the country’s first brain-drain and as a result, more students from Iran were studying in U.S. higher education institutions than any other group (Sabagh & Bozorgmehr, 1994). Consequently, the population of Iranians in the United States increased, and narratives regarding their culture and community emerged and would follow them and their children for decades to come.

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[4] Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza, *Mission for My Country* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1960), pp. 18, 28

Iranian Americans

Though Iranians' presence grew in the U.S., it was not until the late 1970s when the first wave of Iranians migrated as the tensions in Iran climaxed and unfolded into the Iranian Revolution of 1979 which overthrew Reza Shah Pahlavi and replaced his government with the Islamic Republic, led by Ayatollah Khomeini. The Revolution was a product of oppression, persecution, inequity, and infelicitous relationship with the United States (Mostofi, 2003). First generation Iranians who migrated to the States during this time would be responsible for navigating the demise of the Iran they once knew, before the introduction of the Islamic Regime, while living in their host country, the United States. The Revolution was followed by the Hostage Crisis where fifty-two U.S. diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran (Mahdavi, 2005). Sara Mahdavi (2005) claimed the Hostage Crisis might be seen as the "first example of anti-Arab bias" (p. 214) in the U.S. As a result, Iranians were portrayed in the media as the anti-U.S. enemy. Demonstrations and rallies of U.S. Americans protesting for the deportation of Iranians ensued and were ultimately successful against Iranian students at universities who would require additional documentation (Bozorghmehr, 2007). Financial consequences also included increased fees for Iranian students, as well as facing the effects of Congress's sanctions on the country which closed off trade and blocked banking, disabling students to send or receive money between the two countries (Maghbouleh, 2017).

The anti-Iranian propaganda that stemmed from the hostage crisis challenged people in the U.S. to distinguish between Iranians in the U.S. who escaped the Revolution and those who initiated the it on behalf of the Islamic regime; ultimately, there was an "ignorance and refusal to distinguish between pro-and anti-Khomeini Iranians living in the United States" (Mobasher,

2006, p. 101). The reactions of U.S. during this time resulted in a certain trauma[5] that caused Iranians to conform and conceal their identity in a means to survive. To take control of their own feelings of "self-hatred, shame, inferiority, and insecurity" as well as manage hostility from the U.S., Iranians adjusted their physical appearance and personal values to fit a white U.S. America (Mobasher, 2006, p. 113). Blending into their host society's mainstream culture allowed them to gain proximity to whiteness, while also diverging from any discrimination resulting from political conflict. Some Iranians began labeling themselves as Persian, for a few reasons. One reason for the insistence of a Persian identity is that it "indicates a symbolic resistance against the Iranian government and Islamic ideology" which forced some Iranians to leave their homeland in the first place (Mobasher, 2006, p.114). Other purposes for substituting Iranian with Persian is to lessen the political charge behind "Iranian" (synonymous with the Hostage Crisis and terrorism) and to increase perceptions of racial ambiguity (Daha, 2011).

Persians expressed pride in their culture while simultaneously holding shame and grief in being associated with the political and religious state of Iran then (Mobasher, 2006). The transition from an oppressive regime to democracy in a new world encourages agency in choice of what is to be accepted, rejected, and integrated. To make the transition easier, Mostofi (2003) argued as an outcome of their migration, Iranian immigrants develop a new collective identity, rooted in a pre-Islamic Iran, which relies on their use of "imagination, nostalgia, and memories" (p. 685). Thus, Iranians live in a delicate space where they languish over memories of a home that is nonexistent while they live in a country where survival means adaptation (Mostofi, 2003).

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[5] "a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon the consciousness of members of a collectivity, and changes their identity fundamentally and irrevocably"(Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Semelser, & Sztompka, 2004, p. 1)

Iranian Americans then must negotiate memories of their homeland, and in turn, their identity in order to assimilate into a new space: the United States of America.

The year prior (1978) was the first year that the U.S. federal government standardized racial categories—classifying Iranians, and more broadly, Middle Eastern and North Africans as legally white (OMB Directive, 15). This classification had serious implications as animosity towards Iranians advanced in the U.S., especially following the Iranian Hostage Crisis and the September 11th attacks which further denounced Iranians, and more broadly, Middle Easterners and South Asians who were more likely tied to Islamic practices at a time when islamophobia was on the rise (Iyer, 2015; Marvasti, 2011). Iranians who might consider filing a discriminatory lawsuit would also have to consider their legal classification in a majority racial group.

Discriminatory Cases

Though no Iranians were found to be involved with the 9/11 attacks, the ramifications of their racialization surfaced. Similar to other Middle Easterners, Iranians faced increased hostility and violence for their relation to the Islamic Republic (Maghbouleh, 2017). At times, Iranians turned to the court system to seek justice, but largely failed in their pursuit due to their white racial classification, leaving them in legal turmoil where they were "targets of... racist actions by individuals and institutions at the same time they lack consistent access to race-based recourse" (Maghbouleh, 2017, p. 30). This oddity is illustrated in one particular case, *Pourghoraishi v. Flying J, Inc.* (2006).

Ahmmad Pourghoraishi, an Iranian truck driver, stopped to fill gas and use the restroom at a Flying J stop in Gary, Indiana. While waiting to pay, Pourghoraishi went to use the restroom but was stopped by the manager, Steve Lindgren, who accused Pourghoraishi of providing false information to the fuel desk and requested he leave the premises. Meanwhile, Larry Williams, an

off-duty local police officer working as a security guard intervened and arrested Pourghoraishi, calling him a “motherfucker” as well as telling him he would send him “back to his country” (*Pourghoraishi v. Flying J, Inc.,* 2006). Pourghoraishi was detained and questioned afterwards while the same officer searched his truck, confiscated his keys, registration and money from his wallet to pay for the gas he initially stopped to buy. The officer also charged him with trespassing and disorderly conduct.

In retaliation, Pourghoraishi went to the district court claiming Flying J, Lindgren, and Nakon Security “intentionally discriminated against him on the basis of race and national origin”; He charged the City of Gary, Indiana as well as Officer Williams for arresting him without probable cause, violating his Fourth and Fourteenth Amendment Rights (*Pourghoraishi v. Flying J, Inc.,* 2006). In order to allege racial discrimination, one must satisfy all three criteria set by the “Morris test” outlined in *Morris v. Office Max* (1996). The criteria are as follows: (1) the claimant is a a member of a racial minority, (2) the defendant(s) had intent to discriminate on the basis of race, and (3) the discrimination involved a contract between parties (*Morris v. Office Max,* 1996).

In regards to the first criteria, the court decided to rely on the “broadest interpretation of Section 1981 of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which prohibits racial discrimination, to include discrimination based on national ancestry” (Maghbouleh, 2017, p. 32). This allowed Pourghoraishi’s legal status as white some flexibility to proceed with a racial discrimination allegation on the basis of his nationality as an Iranian American; Alternative cases failed to recognize Iranians as anything other than their legal classification and were quickly dismissed (see *Abdullahi v. Prada*, 2008). Even so, Pourghoraishi would have to face the second prerequisite of the Morris test, confirming the defendants had an intention to discriminate against

him on the basis of his race. In verifying this, the judge asked Pourghoraishi if there was any way the defendants would have been able to assume his racial or ethnic background based on physical appearance, to which Pourghoraishi replied with a blunt no. The judge followed by asking if there was any physical indication Pourghoraishi felt made him look "different than anyone else", to which he again responded no (*Pourghoraishi v. Flying J, Inc.,* 2006).

Initially, through his lawyer's affidavit, Pourghoraishi claimed most people could tell he was of Middle Eastern descent in an effort to distinguish him from the defendant, however, Pourghoraishi still denied his ethnicity made him look different than anyone else, as in, other white people. In fact, Pourghoraishi went on to describe his own understanding of Iranian racial ideology, discussing the distinctions between Iranians and Arabs through their relation to Aryan ancestry. In his reluctance to affirm this difference, the second prerequisite of the Morris test had failed and Pourghoraishi's case was ultimately dismissed. "When taken as a whole, Pourghoraishi's testimony was both contradictory and an accurate reflection of the core paradox of Iranian Americans' racial status" (Maghbouleh, 2017, p. 34). Pourghoraishi's negotiation of the racial ideology he was taught in Iran and that of which was presented to him in the U.S. was contradictory and complex. This can only be understood through the influence of the Aryan myth, the foundation of racial ideology among many first generation Iranian Americans. Although first generation Iranians were forced to sacrifice some memories of their homeland, the Aryan myth was one that would remain; it prevailed as a necessity to survive in the white America their children would one day grow up. For this reason, this study explicitly examines second generation Iranians who negotiate understandings of their race as influenced by their first generation parents and the school system.

Second Generation Identity Development

To begin to understand how second generation Iranians make sense of their identity, it is necessary to first explore general literature on second generation immigrants' identity development. In doing so, I review available scholarship relating to factors impacting identity, including parental influence at home, as well as peer and teacher influence in school. These two environments are undoubtedly influential in socialization and development for youth; I outline how so in the following section. I then relate these factors specific to second generation Iranian Americans, exploring messages they receive from both parents and peers in their development.

Influences on Identity for Second Generations

At home. Studies showcased immigrants shaping their children's understanding of their identity, through the retention of their culture by speaking their ethnic language, practicing their parents' religion, and celebrating certain traditions (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Both explicit and implicit behavior by immigrant parents have the potential to influence their children's understandings of who they are and where they are situated in the context of their host country. In the example Portes and Zhou (1993) presented, first generation immigrants may have the ability to separate themselves from other Communities of Color in the U.S. in order to increase capital and gain access to certain resources. The nature of this social positioning has implications for how immigrant children come to understand which groups they do or do not share similar experiences.

The manner in which immigrant parents discuss (if at all) race guides the development of their childrens' perception of race (Hughes et al., 2006). Hughes and colleagues (2006) highlighted three messages parents share with their children: cultural socialization, preparation for bias, and promotion of mistrust. Cultural socialization is defined as parental practices that

teach and promote heritage, and in turn their children's sense of cultural pride (Hughes et al., 2006). Relatably, parental practices that prepare their children for bias includes a consciousness of prejudice towards their community as well as encouraging distrust among other racial groups (Hughes et al., 2006). The paradox in these two practices is on one hand, parents promote awareness of discrimination that exists against their own community, while encouraging a disengagement with other Communities of Color who face similar forms of discrimination. Another practice can involve avoidance of race-based discussions entirely, Hughes et al. (2006) named this as a type of silence, in which parents devalue race as a primary identity and encourage their children to instead emphasize individual characteristic qualities. The inclination to replicate the same values of their parents has been reflected in other studies showing second generation immigrants strongly identifying themselves as their parents did (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

At school. In addition to parental influence, second generation immigrants learn about their identity or more so their perceived identity from their interactions in the classroom. Since most time routinely spent from childhood to early adulthood takes place in school, it can be assumed that this is the first major institution outside of family that reinforces social understandings of identity, and thus an opportunity for racialization (Maghbouleh, 2017; Rumbaut, 2005). Research evidenced how negative experiences in school environments have consequences on student engagement and academic achievement (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan 2007; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). These experiences often stem from interactions with other agents in the classroom including peers as well as teachers.

Studies revealed the effects of strained student-teacher relationships resulting in classroom disengagement and ultimately an unlikeliness of academic success (Baker, 2006;

Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Ladd & Burgess, 2001). Teachers have the ability to help students feel included rather than isolated through the process of intergenerational bonding (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004); however, teachers are also capable of imposing expectations that students will assimilate into mainstream American culture by placing value on U.S. social norms and pedagogy (Peguero & Bondy, 2011). In addition to the interpersonal dynamics between teachers and students, an insistence on centering white, Eurocentric narratives in lessons endorses assimilation (Howard, 2003; Sleeter & Milner, 2011; Nieto, 2004). Until more action is taken by teachers to increase their multicultural perspectives, the promotion of assimilation, whether overt or covert, will continue to be placed on second generation students navigating their complex liminal identities.

Along with the impact of teacher-student relationships, peer group interactions are also important in identity formation. Existing literature discussing peer influence on identity consider in-group outcomes, where interaction with peers from the same ethnic group increase ethnic identity (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2000). Though research remains limited on the broad examination of second generation interactions with U.S. peers, the idea that peers have an effect on the acculturation of immigrant children persists (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Zhou, 1997). Accordingly, it is pertinent to examine the impacts of peer socialization on identity development for second generation students who receive varying messages about their positioning.

Influences on Identity for Second Generation Iranians

At home. The nostalgia that first generation Iranians holds for their memories of pre-Revolutionary Iran are passed down to their children, Neda Maghbouleh (2010) coined the term, “inherited nostalgia”. The ideologies communicated with their children regard ancient Persia as

it was illustrated by the Shah during his ruling: a strong, innovative empire which influenced European culture. In sharing this, first generation parents are also reinforcing the Aryan myth delivered to them, rooted in anti-Arab rhetoric and racial purity. Maghbouleh (2017) shared narratives of second generation Iranians that suggest first generation parents reliance on the Aryan myth stems from their desire to protect their children from discrimination and stereotypes rooted in Islamophobia and a inclination to assume all SWANA groups are both Arab and/or Muslim. Furthermore, this protection comes in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, which resulted in hostility towards SWANA populations similar to the hostility Iranians faced from the Hostage Crisis. Instilling a sense of cultural and ethnic pride, whether through the Aryan myth, or through the insistence that modern innovations originated from ancient Iran, would ideally help Iranian children to combat the negative messaging surrounding them trickling down from mass media (Daha, 2011; Maghbouleh, 2017). Former studies highlighted parents' desire for their children to retain their ethnic identity through the use of their native language (Farsi), celebration of Iranian traditions, practice of Iranian mannerisms, and in some cases, their religion (Daha, 2011; Mahdi, 1998).

Another value upheld and passed on to second generation Iranians regards the importance of education. While there is never a guarantee for financial stability, educational attainment is seemingly accessible in the United States to first generation Iranians. Minority groups, specifically religious-affiliated ones, did not have access to higher education in Iran (Daha, 2011). Access to higher education and degree attainment could help counter insecurities while advancing social and economic mobility. Persian parents emphasize the importance of education, which is then internalized by the second generation who excel in school and advance toward career paths, which grant their community respect (Bozorgmehr & Douglas, 2011). In the 2000

U.S. Census, one in four Persian-Americans held a master's or doctoral degree (Shavarini, 2004). Furthermore, second-generation youth may also view educational attainment as a way to "repay parental sacrifices after immigration" (Bozorgmehr & Douglas, 2011, p. 6).

Despite their parents' efforts, second generation Iranians on the ground racial experiences contradict the credibility of the Aryan myth. Second generation Iranians are then pressured to both honor the memories of their parents while also affirming their own feelings and knowledge concerning their identity grounded in reality. Mahdi (1998) wrote:

> The notion of "Iranian identity" found among second-generation Iranians is more symbolic than behavioral. It is symbolic because values, norms, and symbols representing Iranian culture are not as easily accessible to these youths as they are to their parents. While their parents have realistically lost their "home," these youths have a vague notion of parental "home" and a relatively ambivalent feelings about it. While "home" is here, they are expected to give allegiance to the "home in the distance." While they are proud of their family roots, they are not quite sure what those roots consist of. (p. 14)

At school. Second generation Iranians' experiences with both teachers and peers in primary education reject their legal classification as white. The paradox between their race on paper and in reality follows them into higher education where the consequence of their invisibility is the denial of resources afforded to other marginalized students.

The discriminatory remarks aimed towards SWANA individuals increased following the September 11th attacks. Iranian Americans, though not found to be involved with the attacks, faced anti-Arab, Islamophobic sentiments rooted in nationalism and white supremacy (Daha, 2011; Maghbouleh, 2017). One study highlighted phrases that were frequently directed at Iranians, including: terrorist, camel jockey, and sandnigger (Mahdi, 1998). This animosity was directed towards any and all individuals who even barely resembled a person of Middle Eastern descent (Daha, 2011). Maghbouleh (2017) wrote about such an instance occurring near the nation's capitol, on the Washington metro system where a University of Maryland doctoral

candidate, Miguel Sarzosa, was assaulted because he appeared to be Iranian during the introduction of the Iran Deal; Sarzosa was of Colombian origin.

Contrary to previous studies (Daha, 2011) finding second generation Iranians identify as "Persian", Maghbouleh (2017) found some participants explicitly used "Iranian" as a form of resistance to their parents' anti-Arab sentiments and exclusion of other ethnic groups in Iran such as Kurds and Turks. Perhaps the distinction between the two forms of self-identification are a product of the timing of their parents' migration or religious affiliation; this has yet to be further explored.

In addition to their experiences with peers, second generation Iranians shared negative relationships with teachers as a result of their negligence to act when these students are threatened in the classroom and their ignorance of Iranian culture and history (Daha, 2011; Maghbouleh, 2017). Participants in Daha's (2011) study share their frustration with teachers who mispronounce "Iran" and who are incapable of teaching about the Middle East in an unbiased manner. One participant in the study discussed her teacher's inability to distinguish between different countries and regions in the Middle East, assuming they were all the same and even mis-identifying her as Iraqi instead of Iranian. Daha (2011) noted that students'attempts to clarify were met with resistance and a reinforcement of negative stereotypes relating to terrorism or the oppression of women in Iran. Finally, Daha (2011) highlighted students' frustrations with gaps and inconsistencies in their history curriculum which lacked unbiased, accurate depictions of Iranians, if their history was even acknowledged at all.

The erasure of Iranians prevailed as second generations entered higher education institutions, where even before their arrival to campus, their invisibility was enforced in applications which asked them what race they belong to. In this case, SWANA students would

have to choose white and be agents in perpetuating their own invisibility; choose Asian, whether they actually believed this category represented them or not; or skip the question altogether. By not collecting racial data on these students in a way that is accurate or representative, higher education institutions lose enrollment and achievement data (Parvini & Simani, 2019). Furthermore, these students are cut off from resources available to other Students of Color which helps recruit, retain, and support them. The UC system was the first (and to this day, the only) university to provide a SWANA race category in 2013 (Yoder, 2013). In its implementation, the university would be able to map out specific support services needed for SWANA students.

Even though the field of higher education has made some progress in being inclusive to SWANA students, work must still be continued not only to reconceptualize demographic questionnaires and services, but through scholarship. Student affairs identity development models have yet to exist for SWANA students; and, they remain somewhat limited by emphasizing internal processes of development. Due to the number of external forces influencing second generation identity development, I retract from traditional student development models and instead focus on sociological-based theory to study second generation Iranians.

Conceptual Framework

In higher education and student affairs, research often relies on psychologically rooted notions of identity— a starting point that was meant to explore individual differences in relation to development (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). With time, there has been more consideration for theories established in sociology and anthropology among others, yet, a divide exists between the two frames; theories investigating individual or group identity relates to psychology, while sociological frames are more closely aligned with studies analyzing ethnicity and nationalism (Fuller-Rowell, Ong, & Phinney, 2013).

As psychological frames seek to understand internal development processes, sociological theories aim to incorporate environmental or external influences, allowing for a more holistic perspective on development (Patton et al., 2016). The literature I reviewed in this paper—including societal, institutional, interpersonal, and historical context—calls for the utilization of a sociological framework. Sociological frames relating to second generation identity development include but are not limited to assimilation theories and its renditions. Though these theories have served as the cornerstone of numerous studies, they disregard processes of racialization which influence the ability of Communities of Color to assimilate. This is especially critical to consider when attempting to understand a population, such as SWANA, that has been largely erased from studies on race. In this section I describe both the processes of assimilation and racialization as the groundwork for my conceptual framework, which utilizes John Tehranian's (2009) *selective racialization* theory to better understand the influence of both institutional (top-down) and individual (bottom-up) forces on the racialization of second generation Iranians.

Assimilation and Acculturation Theories

Studies on assimilation emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when an influx of European immigrants arrived in the U.S. Assimilation is a concept that aims to explain how ethnic groups integrate into mainstream U.S. culture by abandoning their own cultural traits in exchange for access to social and economic opportunity (Park, 1928; Zhou, 1997). After the Hart-Cellar Act retired, quotas on immigration also ended and the ethnic landscape of the U.S. changed, becoming sweepingly diverse with migrants from all over the world. With them, followed their children who emigrated at a young age (1.5 generation), or were naturalized as they were born in the U.S. to immigrant parents (2nd generation). Former assimilation theories were seemingly inadequate, as they were created for the first large wave of

European immigrants who could more easily integrate themselves in the U.S. as part of their racial similarity with other white people. Assimilation theories morphed and shifted to acculturation theories, which attempted to understand how immigrants, and perhaps especially second generation immigrants, adopt their host society's culture while also balancing that of their homeland (Alba & Nee, 1997; Zhou, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Another adaptation of classic assimilation theory includes Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory. Segmented assimilation theory suggests second generation individuals approach development and integration in different paths, three to be exact: straight-line theory or classic assimilation into dominant group, downward mobility into poverty, and upward mobility which allows maintenance of cultural values and increased solidarity (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Rumbaut, 1994; Zhou, 1997). Portes and Zhou (1993) examined which factors direct second generation immigrants toward each path. These factors include first generation emigration, socioeconomic status, community resources, and cultural and economic barriers, and the rate of integration (Portes & Zhou, 1993).

Segmented assimilation predominantly focuses on second generation incorporation into economic stratification, however, this model fails to consider the intersection and complexity of race beyond a black-white binary and socioeconomic status in discussing mobility. Furthermore, this model fails to explore larger systems of oppression that reinforce economic stratification based on racial hierarchies at the systemic and institutional level, but rather focuses on interpersonal and generational components. More concerning is the oversimplification of assimilation through a theory which ultimately "rests fundamentally on the notion that upward trends in education, income, and wealth lead to political and social incorporation into an

American mainstream that is implicitly and sometimes explicitly described as white" (Maghbouleh, 2017, p.7).

Maghbouleh (2017) challenged this theory by examining how Middle Easterners, in alignment with segmented assimilation theory, should be well integrated into U.S. fabric (and whiteness) through the factors listed above, yet on the contrary, SWANA groups continue to be pinned as "other" in the larger society. Maghbouleh (2017) offered that socioeconomic status and education, although critical for assimilation, only provide a piece of insight to their experiences, and even less insight to racialized experiences. As a result, Maghbouleh (2017) considered assimilation as it engages in both top-down and bottom-up processes through racialiation.

Racialization

It is imperative to begin incorporating processes of racialization in assimilation frameworks to better understand how immigrant groups who are not white make meaning of their identity in their host country (the U.S., specifically in this context). Racialization generally is defined as a process where race is assigned significance by actors[6] (Murji & Solomos, 2005). Though different racialization theories exist (Barot & Bird, 2001; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2013), Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (1986) racial formation theory remains one of the foundational racialization theories. Racial formation theory affirms the definition of racialization as described above, but also suggests this process is a continuous one in which the meanings assigned to race are flexible and can be reorganized and reinterpreted (Lamont, Beljean, & Clair, 2014). Furthermore, racial formation theory as defined by Omi and Winant (1986) understands race as it pertains to power situated between dynamic forces both top-down at the societal and

[6] The insistence on "actor" stems from the notion that race is performed, as exemplified in cases during the Naturalization Act where non-white groups dramatized Whiteness in order to gain access to resources that were otherwise restricted by law for non-whites.

institutional level and bottom-up from an interpersonal and individual level. The top-down piece of racial formation theory has been well researched, however, the more overlooked element of racial formation theory considers racialization from the bottom-up. The bottom-up processes of this theory are executed in two ways— in one way, bottom-up racialization can be reinforced through interpersonal, every day interactions between in-groups and out-groups (Omi & Winant, 1986); in another way, bottom-up racialization grants agency for minoritized individuals who have some ability to define themselves and ultimately reinforce racial inequalities (Lamont et al., 2014). Saperstein and Penner (2012) showcased the flexibility of racial labels at the micro level which reproduces such inequalities as a result of their findings:

> If nonwhites who achieve high status are more likely to subsequently be seen as and identify as white, and nonblacks who lose status are more likely to be seen as and identify as black, then the combination of racial fluidity and social mobility effectively maintains racial inequality in the aggregate, even as some individuals improve their status. (p. 710)

Though racialization does occur from the bottom-up, racialization from the top down is more directly consequential as it has the ability to shut down the opportunity for marginalized groups to have agency at all (Lamont et al., 2014).

Racial formation theory is applied to Iranians in Neda Maghbouleh's (2017) book, *The Limits of Whiteness*. Maghbouleh (2017) uses this theory as such: the top-down component considers structural and institutional power through the policies around race and immigration, marking SWANA, and in this case Iranian individuals, as white by law. Simultaneously at this level, individuals from SWANA regions are cast as deviant and radical making clear their limitations of whiteness through the use of fear tactics relating to terrorism in mass media. This trickles down to the bottom where racialization is further operationalized as discriminatory behavior affirms the incongruity between SWANA persons experiences and those of whites. The

exchange and tension between the top-down and bottom-up forces exemplify “how white racism continually reorganizes itself to exclude those whom the category ‘legally white’ nominally includes” (Maghbouleh, 2017, p. 7). As reflected in racial formation theory, meanings assigned to race are adaptable, recursive, and profoundly impactful. Surely, social systems influence the way individuals understand race, but to understand how bottom-up forces impact second generations’ understanding of identity, it is necessary to examine which factors—and where—immigrant children learn who they are or, more accurately, who they are perceived to be. Using race-informed theory to understand assimilation for SWANA populations is critical to interrupt the notion that SWANA experiences are similar to those of European whites and complicates the simplicity of segmented assimilation equations by examining how racialization is enforced at different levels.

Selective Racialization

Selective racialization is a modification of traditional racial formation theory, conceptualized by John Tehranian in his book, *Whitewashed: America’s Invisible Middle Eastern Minority*. Tehranian (2009) expands racialization to closely detail this process occurring at both the institutional (top) and individual (bottom); as such, Tehranian coins this as *selective racialization*. Tehranian refers to the top-down as the implications that come with negatively stereotyping SWANA populations through the use of mass media and other societal influences. This stereotyping, fueled by negative representations via media, solidifies SWANAs otherness.

Tehranian (2009) detailed this unconscious process by explaining how when SWANA individuals align with norms set and institutionalized by the dominant group, their ostracism is diminished. On the other hand, when SWANA individuals act offensively, their otherness is a

defining characteristic (Tehranian, 2009). This cycle permits two options in which SWANA are either erased from narratives of good, but are systematically tied to negative stereotypes.

In addition to efforts rooted from the top-down, SWANA individuals also engage in their own racialization from the bottom-up through the process of covering. As described earlier, processes of racialization allow some room for individuals to have agency in this development where they can closely align with whiteness through socioeconomic status, for instance, to distance themselves from other marginalized communities. Tehranian (2009) took this a step further to integrate Yoshino's (2007) process of covering in microlevel racialization. Scholarship examines behaviors such as passing and conversion in the process of assimilation (Yoshino, 2007). Conversion describes the act of pretending to be something one is not, while in passing, an individual's identity is acknowledged but attempts to conceal it (Tehranian, 2009; Yoshino, 2007). Yoshino (2007) added to these two theories of assimilation by originating the process of *covering* in which identities are recognized and played down to conform to norms; furthermore, Yoshino (2007) outlined the motivations behind this assimilation process, which are specifically to avoid othering and stigmatization as a strategy for survival. The proximity to whiteness through racial ambiguity allows SWANA individuals to engage in this act, is a privilege that is not afforded to other Communities of Color. Though covering—both implicit and explicit—might be beneficial in certain cases to avoid discrimination, holistically it engages in the perpetuation of this population's erasure by decreasing their unity as a group to systematically shatter the narratives that cloud their community (Tehranian, 2009). In the following section, I outline methods used in this study which aims to understand if, and how, second generation Iranian students experience processes of selective racialization within the realm of higher education.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach of this study including research design, sampling, data collection and analysis, and limitations. With selective racialization as the conceptual framework, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What messages do second generation Iranians receive about their racial identity? (2) How do they respond to these messages? (3) How do they perceive the university playing a role in their racial identity development, if at all? These research questions aim to help me understand how different societal institutions, such as the university, along with family and peer interactions inform second generation Iranians' understandings of their ethnic and racial identity. By exploring these messages, I seek to understand how these participants reconcile different narratives about their racial identity, as informed by their parents, peers, and the education system.

Positionality & Epistemology

In qualitative research, researchers themselves are the primary instrument used to collect, interpret, and report data from their participants (Creswell, 2013). Based on the epistemological perspective which the research is grounded in, the methodology may vary. Nevertheless, the approach taken towards conducting research is influenced by researchers' social positioning, or *positionality*, in relation to the phenomenon or population studied (Creswell, 2013). The centrality of the researcher in the process of qualitative research makes it essential for the researcher to reflect and share their perspectives, assumptions, and experiences which may influence decisions integral to the study (Creswell, 2013). In sharing my positionality, particularly with regard to my relationship with this population and topic, I intend to be

transparent both with myself and readers, as well as uphold the integrity of this study (Chavez, 2008; Milner, 2007).

I am a second generation Iranian woman who grew up in an Appalachian county of northeastern Ohio. Being one of the sole SWANA families in the region, the only connection I had to my Iranian identity was through my parents and grandmother. My understanding of self at home with my family vastly differed from who I was perceived to be in school by my peers, teachers, and administrators. At home, I believed we operated as any other suburban, nuclear U.S. American family, but in school, I was seen as different from my white peers because my family spoke Farsi in addition to English; we ate kabobs and rice for special occasions; we practiced the Baha'i Faith, not Christianity; and when my friends would visit, my mother would loudly play Googoosh through the Iranian TV satellite. Although my parents tried their best to incorporate me into white U.S. society, I found they were challenged to do so without also compromising their own beliefs, values, and norms rooted in Iranian culture.

My parents escaped Iran during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. My father was raised as a Baha'i, a religious minority in Iran. Baha'is in Iran are largely persecuted and denied access to higher education since the replacement of the Shah, under the ruling of the Ayatollah. My father was given access to study in the U.S. through a lottery system. To his dismay, he was stopped in Costa Rica during the Hostage Crisis, as Iranians were not allowed to enter the United States. After living in Costa Rica for two years, he was then able to enter the States where he attended university in Ohio. My mother was sixteen when her father presented her with a one-way ticket to the U.S. As a result of the heightened tensions in Iran, he predicted the onset of a Revolution; in an act of desperation to ensure his daughter would have a better life and chance of success, he forced her to leave home and study in the U.S. My mother and father met in Ohio where they

both attended university. Their time spent living in the U.S. has surpassed their lives in Iran, however, their nostalgia and deep desire to return to their homeland and reunite with their families has always been made explicit to me.

Growing up, my parents would drive hours to Chicago, Toronto, or the Washington DC metropolitan area to the nearest Persian restaurants and grocery stores, which were filled with produce from Iran. They insisted on holding on to a nation that no longer existed as they remembered it. Each piece of our life at home was an attempt to reconstruct their Iranian lives in their host country. As a child, I honored these memories, and tried to be a part of them and relate to a country I had never been to and would likely never be able to visit. I was embarrassed at times by my family's outward display of our culture in front of friends, but I never was ashamed— at least until 9/11/2001.

I was in first grade. I remember having the TV on all day in class, while I and my classmates watched in horror. My teacher at the time, who had taught me and both of my older sisters in class, would check in on me through the day. I was unsure why I received such special attention from her and attributed it to her relationship with my family over the years. As time went on, my classmates learned more details about 9/11— specifically, they learned who was deemed as the enemy, so they began to think of Middle Easterners as synonymous with terrorism. My peers asked about my family ties to the Taliban, questioned about my religion— how many Gods do I pray to? How many of them do I call Allah? Why do I not wear a hijab?

To avoid constant discrimination and microaggressions, I forced myself into white America in many ways, but more useful than any strategy was the concealment and denial of my Iranian identity. There is a moment in my high school English course that stands out to me when reflecting on these years. A peer was presenting on a topic related to the Middle East and

referred to the population as “A-rabs”; my teacher immediately stopped the presentation, and corrected his pronunciation, noting that “A-rab” was a slur she would not allow to be used. I was shocked. I, myself, was referring to Arabs as my peers had. I bought into the defamation of the Arab and larger SWANA community by emphasizing my Persian identity instead of Iranian and making clear the distinction between myself and Arabs.

I attribute my understanding then to my upbringing in a region desolate of other SWANA families and reliance on stereotypes of them. Where I grew up geographically isolated me from connecting with Iranian culture outside of my family. My only understanding of my parents’ homeland was through mass media representation. I began to believe the negative messaging about my community that was portrayed in film, in the news, in writing, and from my interactions in school. It was not until I started college in a larger city that my understanding of identity shifted. At college, I was able to connect with other second generation Iranians who shared similar experiences growing up as I did.

We were similar, but were different in interesting ways. Many Iranian students I engaged with grew up in larger cities and were more closely connected with their culture. While growing up they spoke Farsi with their parents and friends in the community. I learned Farsi audibly from my grandmother and father who were from a tiny village in Iran and my mother who had a Shirazi accent— add all of this on top of an English accent with little understanding of grammar, and that was my version of Farsi. My siblings and I would often be called “sefid”, or white, by our Iranian friends and some family members at gatherings due to our accents and lack of familiarity with large cultural holidays. To this day, I hold ethnic imposter syndrome of not being “Iranian enough,” while simultaneously not being “American enough”. As a graduate student in a new region that has an even larger concentration of Iranian Americans, my imposter

syndrome has only grown. Growing up, I was challenged in connecting with my culture, so I am increasingly aware of my otherness around other second generation Iranians who had the privilege of being raised in a metropolitan area where their culture was prevalent and celebrated.

Given these dynamics, I see myself to be both an insider and outsider: I relate to this population due to my generational and ethnic identity; however, I feel like an outsider based on my proximity to the culture in comparison to others (Glesne, 2016). My insider positioning (as a second generation Iranian) is an advantage because I have some understanding of cultural norms and practices; furthermore, I understand the language, Farsi, and may relate to some experiences as a second generation immigrant. My outsider positioning is related to my upbringing in a predominantly white, rural area which distanced me from my culture. Another way I am an outsider is due to my family's religious affiliation with the Baha'i Faith, a persecuted minority religion in Iran. As a result, we have never been able to travel to Iran, so I have no direct relationship to my parent's homeland. Nevertheless, I approach this study with an intention to highlight the beauty in our differences, and valuing each of our unique experiences, while also recognizing our commonalities as second generation Iranians in the United States. I am aware my experience may be similar to participants', and they may also largely contrast— even so, I take all of these accounts to be the truth based on our socialization.

My identities and their social positioning inform how I make-meaning of my reality. For this inquiry, I rely on critical constructivism as my epistemological approach which best aligns with my worldview given my intent to understand participant experiences in addition to uncovering how power, privilege, and oppression shape such experiences (Kincheloe, 2005; Perez, 2019). Though the two perspectives differ, combining them counters the limitations of

each and increases the ability to understand how worlds are created and shaped by undeniable forces that influence participants' social positioning.

Constructivism alone is based on the assumption that "multiple realities exist, differing in context, and knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants" (Abes, 2016, p. 144). Unlike alternative theories which aim to deconstruct reality, constructivism seeks to understand how realities *are* constructed and change with time, often through dialogue between researcher and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Abes, 2016). In using a constructivist paradigm, I offer restatements of their stories to confirm the accuracy of my interpretation. Additionally, I probe participants with follow-up questions, encouraging them to further articulate or explore the meaning and impact of their own stories (Creswell, 2017; Turner III, 2010;).

A constructivist paradigm is not without limitations, however. Perez (2019) highlights its constraints, stating constructivism "does not adequately attend to the existence of power, privilege, and oppression unless an individual perceives it to be a part of their reality" (p. 73). Therefore, a critical paradigm is helpful to consider systems of power in the construction of participant realities. Critical theories address social inequity and challenge dominant ideology for the purpose of emancipation and social transformation (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Abes, 2016). In using a critical paradigm, I counter systems of oppression by centering participants' realities, as well as challenge individuals, institutions, and systems to reconsider how they can make social structures more equitable and inclusive (Perez, 2019). Personally and professionally, I do not believe one can be done without the other, and so I combine both paradigms to hold participant narratives as truth while also taking into account how systems of power manifest and mold such realities.

Critical constructivism is a paradigm that both assumes knowledge is socially constructed, and acknowledges that individuals' worldviews are shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors and power dynamics (Kincheloe, 2005). Furthermore, this paradigm aims to "actively work toward equitable and liberatory educational experiences" through collective meaning-making (Perez, 2019, p. 75). Given this study's purpose to uplift participant experiences, counter dominant narratives perpetuated by systems of power, and challenge systems of oppression, a critical constructivist lens is not only appropriate, it is necessary.

Methodological Design

Storytelling is an extraordinarily powerful tool. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TedTalk, "The Danger of a Single Story" states stories can be used "to dispossess and malign, but stories can also be used to empower and humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (Adichie, 2009). The act of storytelling is also rooted in power, dictating which stories are told about whom and insisting that a singular narrative is representative of an entire group of people. I acknowledge the power of storytelling in this study, where I offer a space for individuals to redefine and share their stories, while also taking these accounts for what I believe them to be: knowledge. As such, I have chosen narrative inquiry as my methodological approach.

Narrative inquiry asserts that stories are a source of knowledge, looking closely at phenomena in a nuanced way for each participant (Bhattachara, 2017). The heart of narrative inquiry is meaning-making of stories; narrative inquiry, especially underpinned by a constructivist epistemology, encourages collaboration between the researcher and participant in this process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). The collaboration between researcher and participant is critical throughout the research process from the sharing of

stories to the analysis and recounting of them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Researchers using this approach have the responsibility to both interpret and report participants' experiences in a holistic and authentic way. This interpretation is not without context, as prescribed by Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) including time (past, present, future); social dynamics (relationships being described as well as relationship with participant); and space (physical environments).

Participants' narratives are at the center of this study in an attempt to uplift and highlight their stories while also contributing to a gap in the literature. In choosing this methodology, I aim to interrupt a cycle of invisibility and misrepresentation of a community to which I also belong. In this process, I hope to experience my own sense of liberation in uncovering stories about my community that counter dominant narratives about Iranians and SWANAs. As a scholar I hope to empower participants to reflect, share their own unique stories, and gain a sense of freedom as I have.

Sampling

When conducting research with a marginalized population, it is critical to be intentional throughout the research process, especially in recruiting a sample. SWANAs are a vulnerable group due to the dangers they face under the current administration which implemented the Muslim travel ban against many of their families' countries of origin (Maghbouleh, 2017). Sampling and recruitment are particularly challenging for this group due to their white racial classification. I rely on purposeful sampling to select individuals to study; Purposeful sampling is a sampling strategy in which a participant is selected due to their familiarity with what is being studied in addition to meeting pre-set criteria (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). This type of sampling is relevant to this study which explores a specific population of people: second

generation Iranian college students. In addition to purposeful sampling, I may rely on snowball sampling as a backup strategy to increase participation if purposeful sampling is not effective.

Participants in this study must meet the following criteria: 1) over the age of 18, 2) enrolled as an undergraduate at Park University (pseudonym), at least in their second semester, 3) born and raised in the United States, and 4) children of parents who emigrated from Iran. I chose to restrict my participants to students in at least their second semester to ensure familiarity with the institution. In my efforts to identify participants, I will refrain from using language such as "second generation", due to potential confusion between generations as they relate to college enrollment and immigration status; instead I will refer to this group as children of immigrant parents. Finally, I am specifically limiting my participants to immigrants from Iran, including Persians, Kurds and Turks. Individuals who participate in the study will be compensated with a $20.00 gift card from Amazon or Target for their time.

The study will be conducted at Park University, a large, public research institution in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S., which has a significant number of Iranian immigrants (Fata & Rafii, 2003). *U.S. News and World Report* classify Park University as a more selective institution with an acceptance rate of (47%), with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 30,000 students. The percentage of SWANA students enrolled is unknown, however, white identifying students make up 52% of the student population.

Qualitative researchers commonly have a limited sample size in comparison to quantitative researchers who aim to generalize their findings for a larger population (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). In its essence, qualitative research focuses on the uniqueness of different cases, and in this case, stories when using narrative inquiry. The intention is to present findings genuinely, including differences, while also pointing out larger themes connecting each

participant's story until a point of saturation is reached (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For this study, I propose recruiting three to five second generation Iranian immigrants to understand both the nuances and larger similarities between them, all of which have the potential to deconstruct dominant narratives about their community.

To recruit participants, I will depend on student organizations and institutional centers serving Iranian students at Park University. To solicit initial interest in participating, as well as screening for criteria matching, I will distribute a recruitment email (Appendix A) to these organizations. Finally, I will visit these organizations to build rapport by sharing my background as a researcher and intentions in conducting this study. In doing so, I hope to also gain a sense of these organizations' foundations and purposes in serving Iranian students.

Participants who express interest in the study will receive a follow up email including a Google form link to a brief questionnaire to assess if they match inclusion criteria outlined for the study (Appendix B). I will review responses and select candidates who are eligible to proceed in the study. I aim to diversify the sample by selecting participants who differ in social identities (gender, religion) and engagement with their culture through curricular and co-curricular engagement (Iranian student organizations and ethnic studies). After selecting participants, I will invite them to confirm their participation, outlining the logistics of the study, including time commitments and procedures. More importantly, I will discuss the steps taken to protect their confidentiality and establish consent. In accordance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures, I will answer any and all clarifying questions participants may have and make clear it is their right to withdraw from the study at any time. I will read the IRB approved consent forms (Appendix C) with my participant for them to sign and fill as part of the required documentation.

Data Collection

Interviews are commonly used for data collection in qualitative research, perhaps due to the flexibility in construction determined by the researcher (Bhattacharya, 2017). Interviews with open-ended questions are helpful for researchers to better understand the phenomenon they are studying through their dialogue with participants (Creswell, 2013). In this study, I will conduct one 60-90 minute, individual interview with participants at a location of their choosing on campus. The interview protocol (Appendix D) I designed for this study is guided by my conceptual framework, selective racialization; this framework was adapted for this study because of its relevance to SWANAs, as outlined by John Tehranian (2009). The questions included in this protocol will be used to understand how participants integrate messages about their racial identity from networks including their university, families, and peers. Before conducting interviews, I will review the protocol with a peer reviewer to ensure clarity and relevance of questions.

Interviews will be audio recorded upon receiving participant consent. In addition, I will continue to take notes during interviews, but will do so minimally to not distract participants in their reflection or sharing. These notes will largely comprise of verbal and nonverbal cues, observations, follow up questions, and perhaps notes for translation, should participants speak in Farsi, the official language of Iran.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a multistep process that includes the organization, coding, interpretation, and representation of data (Creswell, 2013). It is vital to honor the epistemological, methodological, and theoretical underpinnings of the study through the data analysis process (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). In narrative inquiry, the approaches to analysis can differ. I

choose to implement a more interpretive and contextual procedure that focuses on the "what" of the story (Schwandt, 2007). In the section below I outline steps towards data analysis for this study.

Organization and Management. Following the interview, I will journal as a form of reflexive-memoing. Birks, Chapman, and Francis (2008) noted the importance of memoing to reflect on decisions made during the interview process, emotions felt during and after, as well as thinking about dynamics between researcher and participant. Through the process of memoing, I aim to record any important notes from the interview, including nonverbal and verbal cues, that may not have been appropriate to record at the time. More importantly, I will write about my own thoughts and feelings from the interview process which could serve as additional evidence to findings, and point out any biases in my interpretation. This form of reflection holds me accountable as a researcher and closely connects me to my data. These notes may also be reviewed by a peer debriefer to further investigate any potential bias on my behalf.

After this, I will begin the analysis process by organizing participants. Each audio-recorded interview will be transferred to a password-protected file on my laptop to access and review while using transcription software. Upon transfer, I will delete files from the original recording device (mobile phone) and save them under participant pseudonyms on my laptop to conceal identifying information. I will begin the transcription process using an online software called Otter, converting speech to text. Following this, I will cross-check the accuracy of the transcript by listening to the audio once again and reading the transcript, correcting any mistakes. Finally, if participants utilize Farsi words in their interview, I will also include an English translation in the transcript. To do this, I will consult with a peer debriefer who understands Farsi to confirm the accuracy of the translation and phonetic spelling. Once the transcript is cleaned, I

will do a preliminary read to gather first impressions or thoughts of the data and record this in my memo.

Coding. To continue with the analysis process, I identify and assign *codes*— "a word or phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). Because of the lack of research pertaining to this study, I primarily rely on inductive coding to find patterns of words, phrases, and their meanings (descriptive and values coding) (Saldaña, 2016). Inductive coding is often used by qualitative researchers since themes and patterns are derived from observations (Soiferman, 2010). Inductive analysis can vary in its definition and process, but for the most part it begins with reading data and considering multiple meanings of words, sentences, and paragraphs, then identifying labels to create categories (Deterding & Waters, 2018; Thomas, 2006). As such, I use line-by-line coding reading each line of the transcript to assign codes (Saldaña, 2016). I then narrow my codes and group similar items together to create subcategories, categories, and themes. This process is cyclical and the flexibility allows respondents words to be emphasized in the analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

In addition to inductive coding, I rely on deductive coding to gain holistic and deep insight to participant data. Timmermans and Tavory (2012) imply qualitative researchers should take advantage of both inductive and deductive codes in the analysis process. Becoming familiar with existing research related to one's study makes this process inherently deductive, but can also be inductive by being open to findings (Deterding & Waters, 2018). I use codes rooted in the literature including racial and ethnic identity, messaging from parents, peers, and the institution, as well as covering processes. These codes will be organized in a codebook to help

with analysis. The combination of both deductive and inductive coding will provide me with a better understanding of participant's experiences.

Trustworthiness

The credibility of qualitative studies is measured differently in comparison to that of quantitative studies, due to its interpretive nature. Qualitative researchers assert there is no one truth or answer to the issue presented, each participant's understanding of a phenomenon based on their worldview is honored (Merriam, 1995). Even so, qualitative researchers must find a way to support their interpretations of participants' stories. Sharing one's positionality is important to preface the study with any potential bias in their interpretations and add credibility to the researcher; however, additional methods are needed to justify choices made in the study design and data analysis as well.

It is important to acknowledge researcher-participant power dynamics in the research process, particularly during interviews (Creswell, 2013; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). As a graduate student who holds an assistantship position on campus, I recognize my power and position in interviews which could result in participants withholding information due to fear of confidentiality. I aim to build trust with my participants both before the interview phase—by connecting with them at organization meetings— and during— by sharing my intentions behind the study. Additionally, utilizing a semi-structured interview allows for flexibility and probing during the interview to make the participant feel more comfortable in sharing— aligning more closely to a dialogue rather than a question and answer format (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). After the interview, I allow participants an opportunity to ask me any questions they may have about my personal experience; I wait until the interview is complete to share in an attempt to avoid any bias or influence on participant's answers before the interview begins.

In addition to the above, I utilize data triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks to ensure the trustworthiness of my study. Triangulation is a strategy that makes use of multiple sources of data, methods, or investigators to confirm findings (Dennis & Korth, 2013; Merriam, 1995). Data triangulation increases the internal validity of the study by ensuring interpretations of data are fairly consistent, for example between participants, other pieces of literature, or among researchers. In this case, findings confirm larger themes uncovered through the study. To do this, I compare participant stories within this study and to those in other bodies of literature exploring the racialized experiences of second generation Iranians and more broadly, SWANAs. In addition to interviews and former literature, I also will use participant data from the pre-interview survey (Appendix B) which asks qualitative questions such as, "What does being Iranian mean to you?" and, "How would you describe your race/ethnicity?" These questions will be helpful to compare during interviews when participants can elaborate further on their understanding of their racial and ethnic identity. Finally, I will ask participants to share a brief memo post-interview via email which encourages them to reflect on the interview and their experience to share their narrative. This is relevant given that the underlying focus of the study considers how and when second generation Iranians are perceived, if at all.

Another method to increase internal validity and trustworthiness includes the process of peer debriefing. Peer debriefers critically analyze data and findings to point out any controversy in interpretations by the researcher (Merriam, 1995). These individuals ensure the researcher is accurately interpreting participant accounts and confirm findings align with data. For this study, I will engage with a peer debriefer who is knowledgeable about Iranians in higher education institutions. This individual is external to the university where the study is being conducted and the study itself. I plan to share preliminary findings with my peer debriefer and share my

methodological approach (including coding and analysis process), as well. Peer debriefer meetings will be recorded through writing and any other relevant measures, such as video calls and audio recordings. Peer debriefer meetings will be intentional in discussing the presentation of findings and accuracy of interpretations. Should the peer debriefer in this study point out misalignments, I will share my intentions and reasoning behind my analysis and collaborate to find a resolution that upholds the integrity of the data.

A final method I use to enhance trustworthiness is member checking. Member checks take "data collected from study participants, and the tentative interpretations of these data, back to the people from who they were derived and asking if the interpretations are plausible" (Merriam, 1995, p. 54). Member checks are important to confirm researcher interpretations are accurate. This process also is important in setting up researcher-participant dynamics; including participants in the analysis process is integral in a constructivist approach. Given my epistemological position, I ensure my interpretations and retelling of participant experiences are accurate through restatements and sharing a copy of the transcript. I will send participants a full copy of the transcript in a Microsoft Word document via email to overview for accuracy. Should participants find any misinterpretations, I will follow up with my committee chair and respond appropriately, honoring their account as authentically as possible. In doing so, along with allowing participants to choose interview locations, and asking me questions following the interview, I hope they feel a sense of agency and inclusivity in the research process.

Scope and Limitations

This proposal has several limitations that could affect the outcome of the study. Among these, limitations are predominantly associated with the study participants. As mentioned, the goal of qualitative studies are not to generalize; therefore, although a small number of

participants may be common in this type of research, three to five participants remains small for the narrative inquiry methodology employed by this study. This remains a limitation by minimizing its transferability, or ability to represent the broader community (Krefting, 1991). Time constraints made it difficult to recruit more participants; however, I hope to provide rich, thick descriptions of findings from the participants I do have.

Another limitation of this study is the sensitivity of the topic and vulnerability of this population. In this study I ask participants to share with me their understanding of who they are, who they are perceived to be, and how they came to understand this. I ask them to reflect on their experiences with family, friends, teachers, and institutions which may have shaped their relationship with their social identity. Finally, I ask them how they negotiate all of these messages while centering themselves if at all. The subject is deeply personal, reflective, and sensitive. Participants may not be in a place to process these questions, limiting the opportunity for a fruitful discussion.

Other limitations related to the study include the demographics of this population. In previous chapters I justify my reasoning for researching only Iranians within the SWANA category. Though I believe some experiences shared by Iranian participants would relate to the larger SWANA population, the population is vastly diverse and this singular study cannot be representative of the entire community's experiences. Even among second generation Iranians, experiences may differ based on religion, gender, and socioeconomic identities, among others. Furthermore, this study only includes second generation Iranians attending one university, and those who are likely engaged in cultural organizations and institutions on campus. The decision was intentional in an attempt to better recruit students who likely identified with the organizations they were affiliated with, and to recruit students who may be more cognizant of

their ethnic identity— as a result, the participants in this study may not be representative of the larger community.

Finally, it is important to note the region where the study takes place. Conducting this study at a university in a region where there is a critical mass of Iranian Americans may shape second generation Iranians experiences in a way that is different from those who grew up in more isolated areas. My experience growing up in a community with no other SWANA families likely differs from someone growing up in a community with majority SWANA families and perhaps even peers in school. This limitation could be reflected in the findings for this study as being specific to this region of the country.

Chapter Summary

This chapter aimed to justify the nature of the intended study. I begin with stating my positionality to acknowledge any bias or insider status as a researcher in carrying out this study. I chose a critical constructivist epistemological approach to co-construct knowledge alongside participants to explore their racial identity as second generation Iranian students. I do so using a narrative inquiry methodology and through the use of interviews after selecting participants through purposeful sampling strategies. I hold myself accountable as a researcher to this study and participants through memoing, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks. Finally, I addressed any limitations and the scope of this study, particularly with regard to subject sensitivity and sample. In taking these steps, I intend to uphold the integrity and authenticity of this study. The following chapter presents narrative findings from participants.

Chapter IV: Narrative Findings

In this chapter, I provide findings based on my interviews with five second generation Iranian American students who participated in this study. In connecting with them and learning about their experiences, I was able to understand how they make sense of their racial identities, how they respond to messaging about their racial identity, and how they see universities playing a role in the development of their identity, if at all. The following findings are organized in a manner that reflect different levels of socialization (societal, institutional, interpersonal) which contribute to participants' racialization as well as their visibility. I interweave findings and quotations from participants to represent how these levels work and highlight the impact of societal, school, parental, and peer socialization on individual behavior.

Societal

Through interviews with participants, I understood that the societal level of racialization is powered largely by U.S. media in addition to the federal racial classification of SWANAs. The two forces seemingly contradicted each other, where the media often portrayed participants in a hypervisible, negative light yet their racial classification as white erased them. Participants discussed how both impact their visibility and their position on the color line.

Being Brown

Nima[7] was the first participant I met. He found out about my study through his affiliation with the Iranian student organization on campus. Nima is the child of two Iranian immigrant parents, who left Iran during the Revolution and emigrated to Canada, where he grew up for the first couple years of his life. Like nearly all of the participants, Nima is an engineering major in

[7] All names mentioned in findings are participant-chosen pseudonyms

his junior year; however, he is a nontraditional student who is in his late twenties obtaining his second Bachelor's degree at Park University. As such, Nima has a more comprehensive understanding of the impact he believed September 11th had on the holistic identity of all SWANA people in the United States. He was thirteen when the tragedy happened—a critical time for any adolescent's development:

> Once 9/11 happened I turned into a terrorist apparently. Go figure. But then again, so did like all the other Middle Eastern kids that were in my school, you know, everybody, we all turned into terrorists...And also after 911, I personally feel like that we all got categorized as one. You know, I feel like there was no distinction...I felt like that distinction was there, but for Americans particularly, once 911 happened, everything got blurred.

In this excerpt, Nima explained that after September 11th, the dominant narrative about him and other SWANAs became "terrorist", homogenizing the group as one. This seemed to be a direct result of the imagery produced and replicated by the media as well as the language used by government officials at the time. This type of messaging made Arash, another participant, question what times were like before 9/11 happened. Arash asked me during our interview if "Brown people were still terrorists" then. Arash was the second participant I interviewed. Arash heard of this study through a former instructor of his, who was also a colleague of mine. Knowing more about my study, my colleague believed Arash would be a great fit for the study given some of the conversations she had with him about his experience at Park University. Upon being contacted by said colleague, Arash quickly emailed me with interest to participate. Arash is also an engineering major in his junior year, with both parents from Iran. Unlike Nima, he was born and grew up in the United States and was only two years old when September 11th occured. Even without remembering all the details, he was aware that September 11th was a day that

marked his difference as an Iranian American. Still, he questioned the messaging he inherited from the media:

> I don't think like, just because of 9/11, that every Brown guy is a terrorist...I can't even say like there's been a string of terrorist attacks from Brown people, I only remember one and that's 9/11. You think of ISIS and Al Qaeda or whatever...but just 'cause the media tells you these are terrorist groups, and they're in the Middle East—which is where Iran, Saudi Arabia...are...

Here, Arash rejected the messaging that labels all Brown and Middle Eastern people "terrorists." He was only able to recall one terrorist attack involving SWANAs, which is 9/11, and mentioned knowing of only two terrorist groups that are widely promoted in the media and located in the region. Arash's point was although these were known terrorist groups from the Middle East, not every person from the Middle East is a terrorist. Though Arash could not recall the details on the day September 11th, 2001, he understood things shifted for the SWANA community, similar to Nima's understanding. Arash recognized that there are also other terrorist groups in the world and there have been terrorist attacks initiated by non-Brown people. Later on, Arash mentioned the media's inability to distinguish Iran's government and people; having traveled to Iran, Arash understood that although the government of Iran may not be exemplary, to him, the citizens of Iran were. He attributed the distinction to the media, which instead highlights a seemingly small percentage of citizens who have views aligned with an anti-U.S. government.

Niloufar takes pride in her parents' immigrant story and felt it was her responsibility to educate those whose narratives about Iran and the SWANA community were fueled by the media's interpretation. I met Niloufar through another student I advised in my graduate assistantship. I told her about my study and she took interest in participating. When it was time to conduct interviews, Niloufar was ready to connect and move forward. Niloufar is an outspoken second generation, Iranian American college student studying engineering as well.

Niloufar shared with me an experience where she traveled to a friend's home for the holidays and was challenged with their perceptions of Iran:

> I went to Wyoming for a week a couple years ago with like, this white guy who invited me and his family literally had only left the state of Wyoming three times. And...they're like the personification of Fox News. It was crazy… they had all these questions and all these, like, just misconceptions about Iran. And I was like, 'No, no, no, that's all wrong!'

In this scenario, Niloufar took responsibility for shattering the stereotypes associated with Iranians and other SWANAs which is often fueled by conservative media, such as Fox News. She attributed her friend's family's ignorance to misinformation coming from one skewed source and saw an opportunity to inform them using her own experience and narrative.

Being white

Though the above examples demonstrate ways in which participants felt othered by society because of their ethnicity, they also expressed frustration and confusion over their technical racial assignment in the United States as white. I asked what they thought of their racial categorization; some let me know before I had a chance. Niloufar was one of the first to identify how she felt on the subject:

> It pisses me off a lot. I never introduced myself as white. But when I see a box, I'm always like, what else? I *have* to put that. I think I learned that in like, high school...Why do Iranians have to go through the bullshit that we do in America, but then we have to be put in this category as white? Like, I know my white friends don't get, like, treated the same way I do. Or, you know, have people judge them before meeting them.

Niloufar made it clear she has never identified herself as white, but is never given a choice that seems representative among the monoracial categories listed on demographic forms. She learned in high school that she is technically white. She paused, taking a second to sigh, then hitting her hand on the table and asking why—why did she, and all other Iranians have to face the racism and discrimination they did in America, and at the same time be listed as white? She recognized

her experience vastly differed from her white peers who would never experience life the way she had as a Brown person. Arash also expressed confusion towards his racial categorization in the U.S. He wanted to be distinguished from white peers, because his upbringing and life experiences were distinct from them:

> I honestly think like...I shouldn't be putting white. It doesn't sound right at all. 'Cause I'm not white...I want to convey the message that I'm Persian. Right? Like, I want them to know that...It should be fixed...having to put white kind of like, puts me in a group of people who grew up *very* differently than I did. Like I didn't grow up the way they did. I already declared, like... you know, I'm not the same skin color. But, like, not having to—I was almost gonna say like, having the same resources they did.

Arash used words such as "them", but was unsure who "they" were. "*They*" were systems that would continue to erase and aggregate him into data attached to a population that could never represent him. Marking white felt disingenuous and Arash did not get to take advantage of the privileges his white peers had, nor did he grow up with the same capital his peers had simply as a result of his skin color.

Nima, who had originally written in "homosapien" for his race on the interview questionnaire, had a different perspective during our conversation. I learned Nima wrote his response as a result of feeling that he, like Niloufar, did not fit into any of the major monoracial categories available to him. Because Nima never felt represented, he often took a colorblind approach to race—believing it was insignificant, and that ascribing to any race would only allow him to be further discriminated against on the basis of identifying as a Person of Color:

> I just don't like that...because I feel like we're categorizing ourselves. We're all humans on this planet...I feel like it gets to a point where it's like, 'oh, you're *that* race, you're different from me' and then you get treated differently and everything about you is different whether it's good or bad... like I don't want to become a part of a race and then you're going to judge me because of that race. I think that's stupid.

As we spoke, though, he was intrigued with the idea of having a MENA or SWANA category. He was frustrated with having to choose “white” as his race. The prospect of being disaggregated from whites was exciting, because he could not identify with white people culturally nor physically:

> If we're going to consider Middle Easterners white...they're all putting us in the same category as what they consider white people in America, right? If that's the case... then we need to, like separate out somehow, whether we're white, a) their white b) their white, whatever it is, I don't know, you know, like there should be a separation there. Because I mean, I can't necessarily say that I can self identify myself with a blonde hair blue eyed person.

Nima understood he was not white because of his life experiences, particularly growing up during 9/11, but also because physically, he did not look like a typical European white person. Arash also understood white to be attributed to physical features, resorting to age-old racial determination techniques.

I was surprised when I met Jasmine, I would not have recognized her as Iranian immediately, which she knew– Jasmine had fair skin, light eyes and hair. She knew that although she may not always be recognized as Middle Eastern, she would often be recognized as “other” and her Persian name was a main reason for that. Jasmine was the last participant I interviewed. She reached out to me inquiring about the study after hearing from a friend through a personal contact of mine. We were able to sit down for an interview within twenty four hours of connecting. Jasmine is a first year in her second semester hoping to study biology at Park University. She is also the child of two Iranian immigrant parents who moved to the mid-atlantic region upon arriving to the U.S. Jasmine grew up in a rural town and attended a predominantly white high school. Jasmine also expressed frustration about being misrepresented on forms, not just for herself, but for her community. She recognized the impacts of not having racial data in

the United States:

> I get a little annoyed when I have to just click, like, white because I feel like that's erasing like a whole demographic of people and just clumping them in that...like why, can't they just make another box? Like, there's no like Middle Eastern or Arab section [on the census]. So I just feel like how…? We don't even know how many Middle Eastern people are in the United States because there's no... there's no box for us!

Jasmine understood the effects of erasure; without distinguishing SWANAs from white people in the U.S., we do not have even the most basic statistical information, including an accurate number of how many SWANAs reside in the United States.

As I spoke more with each participant, they agreed although they may still be hesitant to box themselves in, they all believed a MENA or SWANA category would be much more fitting, except Armon. Armon is a sophomore engineering major who I first met at a general body meeting for the Iranian student organization at Park University, where I hoped to recruit participants. Armon was eager to participate and share his narrative with me. Armon had a more difficult time getting past the word "Middle Eastern" in the MENA category, though. He told me when he heard that term, he did not affiliate with it because it was too heavily associated with Arabic people, whom he thought he was very different from, but it was deeper than even that:

> There's just something about the term plain 'Middle East.' Like... I just think of like Fox News… and it's like Iraq and Saddam Hussein... I can tell you why white doesn't feel accurate, but Middle Eastern still doesn't feel quite accurate. I think when you think Middle East you think like Muslim and...I'm not a Muslim...I think Middle East is just so tightly bound to Islam like if you could somehow mention that region of the world … without saying Middle East that would feel a lot better to me.

Armon's desire to distance himself from the term Middle East was not quite because it was affiliated with Arab people; it was because Arab people were affiliated with Muslims which was misrepresented by conservative media. As such, Armon had no interest in being attached to a term that connected him to more negative propaganda. When I told him the full acronym of

MENA, Middle Eastern and North African, he felt better about this: “I don't know why, but that does feel more like genuine… I don't like the connotation of [just] Middle Eastern. Like give us something else.” Simply including “North African” or using the acronym MENA altogether seemed different enough and refreshing in comparison to the imagery associated with the Middle East on its own. Furthermore, incorporating another continent to the term would expand the ethnic groups beyond Arab. MENA made sense to participants, much more than their current racial categorization.

Institutional

In this section participants exemplify how, perhaps, for them societal influences trickle down to the institutional levels such as school (primary and secondary), the workplace, and even spaces like the airport where their hyper- or invisibility is never consistent.

School

Participants discussed not only how stereotypes from the media shaped their identity, but also their own experiences in school. Nima attended school for half of his life in South Florida with the other half in New York. Although his experiences in school differed slightly between both states, one thing remained the same: the removal of SWANA history in his courses. Nima expressed deep frustration as he recounted the countless courses he would take focusing largely on European history:

> ...Throughout school I was like, why am I learning about every history in the world except for the Persian freaking culture like...What was the Persian Empire like? What did they do? Where did their empire go? What happened? Why am I learning about Napoleon? I don't care about him like, I don't care...And that was where I realized I was like, okay, yeah, I'm definitely different like, this is not me. This is not my past. This can be probably three quarters of the people in this room's past, but this is not my past.

Nima was missing an important piece of his cultural history—one that perhaps would have been able to connect him closer to his ethnic identity. Instead, he would learn about Greek, British, and French, among other European histories that were tied to his peers' ancestors. The moment Nima recognized when Iranian history was skipped over was also the moment he became aware of his difference in the classroom. I asked Nima what it would have been like to have his teachers discuss SWANA history and culture; he assumed it could never happen because parents would not let it happen. Nima imagined, "Parents would be the problem, they'd be like, 'why are you teaching my kids that?'" This concern stemmed from a perception that (white) parents saw him and his culture as a problem. Nima sighed and shared, "The sad part is...a lot of history has also been deleted from us, or taken away from us, or destroyed—not only Iranians, but Middle Easterners all over." Nima would be left to learn about his culture through the little pathways available to him: his family, and at times, the internet—what he describes as his "due diligence."

When participants did possess information about their culture, they always felt called to educate, but this had consequences as well. For Niloufar, educating others was a tiring task, and she hoped others would educate themselves. After returning from a volunteer trip in Greece where she served as a Farsi translator to Afghani refugees, she was at a tipping point when people asked her questions about herself and the crisis:

> This is not my responsibility. Like, everyone should know, you know?... I feel like this responsibility to explain to them about [the] things that are in the news, but then it caught up to me real quick. And now I'm like, don't ask to talk to me about it. I'm exhausted...It's exhausting. I have to live through it all over again and yeah, it sucks...it's like...leave me alone when it comes to Iranian stuff, too.

Overall, participants believed the majority of the U.S. Americans were ignorant and misinformed about SWANAs. Though they may have wanted to blame individuals themselves, they could not,

since they too felt misinformed and unsure of who they were as a result of top-down powers. Beyond erasure of their history and culture in school, participants described the anxiety they would feel in the classroom when teachers mispronounced their names. Jasmine shared:

> People cannot pronounce my name correctly...teachers on like the first day of school. Like I don't know why it's so hard. I remember my eighth grade social studies teacher for the majority of the year he would always mispronounce my name and in sophomore year my chemistry teacher also would every now and then say my name incorrectly...I feel like I feel like I shouldn't be embarrassed by it but when it would happen in like the class—like when they'd mispronounce my name—I would feel embarrassed. And some people just like as a joke would call me [something else]... I liked it when people would actually try to pronounce my name...I always like, take notice of the friends and the people who like take the time to actually pronounce my name even though it's like something super minute, I just feel like... they actually care.

Jasmine described the embarrassment she felt when her teachers and peers mispronounced her name, and would go as far as to make fun of it. It would be up to her to correct them, or let them continue to call her whatever they wanted. She also noted her appreciation for those who would at least attempt to pronounce her name correctly; she mentioned the pronunciation of her name being a "minute" detail, but given what her and other participants shared, it is clear the mispronunciation and disregard for their names has a significant impact on their self-perception.

Their names were significant, though participants also told me about ways in which they would change their dress and speech to fit in with their peers at school. Armon described how conscious he was of his peers' actions and what he did to mirror them:

> So I just wanted to fit in.. there's no like, group of Iranian kids. There's no like, 'Oh, this is where I fit in, like these are my people. They'll... get me.' So it's more like, let me just become someone that people understand around here… I just see what the other kids were doing and just do it. Like I see the shoes they wear, and I'd buy their shoes. I'd see everyone wearing a certain jacket and I'd buy that. I saw how they talked...stuff like that, and I would too.

Armon explained that he had no Iranian friends or community in school to find support from;

instead, he felt forced to replicate the culture of his white peers who were widely accepted in school. As such, he would buy the same clothing and brands as them, and he would mirror the way they spoke. Niloufar shared similar feelings of pressure to fit in, and moments when she felt very different from her peers. One example she shared was the feeling she would get when returning to school after summer break. Niloufar and her family would often travel to Iran for the summer, while her peers would go camping or to the beach. Niloufar, knowing how difficult it is to travel to Iran now due to U.S. policies, felt she did not fully appreciate her trips abroad.

In addition to their in-class experiences, participants also discussed their out of classroom experiences where they felt different from their peers as a result of their Eastern culture. Niloufar for example discussed her motivations for participating in clubs and sports to make friends in school, one being swimming. Here, she met a Syrian friend who shared similar cultural values and upbringing as her. Niloufar told me about when she quit the swim team as a result of cultural differences between herself, her Syrian friend and the rest of the girls on the swim team:

> We really were the only two Brown girls and basically, once we got our periods, like we just stopped going. Because in the Middle East like if you get your period, well, that sucks. You got to wear a pad for a week, but like, tampons are not a thing out there. So just...having to like stop what we were doing and our progress in swimming because of like... our moms simply didn't know how to use one and didn't like the idea of us using one as young girls.

In some Eastern cultures, it is more common or traditional for women to rely on pads instead of tampons because of the emphasis on virginity, signified by an unbroken hymen. This cultural difference found its way into Niloufar's everyday life and impacted her participation on the swim team in a U.S. school.

College

Throughout conversations with each participant, I learned just how impactful the

experiences that hypervisiblized and invisibilized had on them. I learned this through their self-perceptions and descriptions of themselves, in which many of them were unsure what "value" they had, or exactly who they were. My first question to Armon was to tell me about himself, and he responded by saying "honestly, there isn't really much to me, which kind of sucks." After encouraging him, he let me know he had a love for poetry and writing, which was his minor under his computer engineering major. Nima painfully described the feelings he processed during K-12 and how things have shifted, even slightly, now in college:

> For a very long time. I thought there's something wrong with me. I thought I was bad. I really thought like, okay...why was I born into this family? Now that I think about it, I had a very hard time trying to figure out who I was throughout middle school and high school and I think I found it in college.

These feelings, he said, stemmed from the harassment he received from peers. In an attempt to mitigate their violence towards him, he told me he would avoid lunchrooms or be the first to enter or leave classrooms. When his peers did find an opportunity to verbally attack him, he would internalize it and walk away without processing. He let me know this eventually made him spiral into depression, and he eventually was the one to take himself out of it.

Nima and others noted that college was a critical time in which their self-perception changed and developed. All participants at one point during our interview attributed peoples' misconceptions and discrimination to ignorance and lack of proper education on their culture. Participants hoped their peers would take it upon themselves to learn about their culture while they had an opportunity to in college. In doing so, they might become more educated about SWANAs and remove some of their bias towards them. Nevertheless, Niloufar shared an example of Islamophobia she encountered on campus; one day after leaving the campus bike shop, which was next door to the prayer room (largely used by Muslim students), she noticed a

white student filming and mocking students praying. She decided to confront him:

> [I said] 'Hey, can I help you?' And then he was like, 'No, no', he got really scared and just turned off his phone like started kind of running away. And I was like uh- uh, so then...I'm like, 'Hey, do you have any questions I can help you with? Like, are you confused? What's up?' He's like, 'No, no, you have to leave me alone right now.' And...then I got pissed.. I shouted like, 'Hey! They're just Muslims praying just the way Christians do too, man. They're just praying together. They're not hurting anyone!'...And then it just made me feel like shit....I didn't notice this [in the moment] but, he [had] a cross on his backpack. That's all I have to say about that.

Niloufar, although she did not fully identify as Muslim, felt it was her duty to confront this person. Niloufar, still felt a sense of solidarity with Muslims, Arabs, and other SWANAs, perhaps because she understood what it felt like to face this type of discrimination. In this story she also pointed out the fact that this student had a cross on his backpack, emphasizing the hypocrisy and differences between herself, other SWANAs, and white students on campus.

Participants pointed at the need for their peers to be educated on their culture, but they also felt they needed the same. Many participants knew about their culture through fragmented stories passed down from their parents and extended family members; or worse, the internet and social media sites. They shared with me their desire to take Persian classes at their university, which, although they were happy about, they also recognized had questionable backing as Armon shared:

> It feels like...It's just weird. Like, because I know it's [funded] from a state department...I don't feel like they're doing it at the goodness of their hearts. I think there's like intelligence gathering and stuff going on, like training of State Department agents.

Although a Persian language program existed on campus, Armon showed apprehension about participating in such courses given its source of funding and goals by the State Department, understandably so. Armon's intention to study Farsi for increasing cultural retainment may have

largely differed from other students in the course who hoped to increase their language skills for a government job focusing on a country that is at odds with the United States.

Three of five participants either had been or were currently affiliated with the Iranian students' organization on campus. Those who were still active members shared positive experiences as a result of being a part of the organization. They were excited they had a community of people who understood them, finally. Nima explained to me:

> The first time I went to [Iranian Student Organization] and everybody was very welcoming...I was just like, wow, there's a really nice community, pretty cool people. It was really nice because, you know, they were all identified as Iranians as well. And….I always wondered, you know, how it would be to have a Persian girlfriend to share the same common interest in food for example, just a little thing—like knowing that she knows what ghormeh sabzi is, and she loves it too….I feel like that might have kind of attracted me to [the organization] as well 'cause I was like, curious, I guess.

Nima said he joined the student organization to find a community where he was welcomed, which he was. He also mentioned excitement at the prospect of finding someone to have a relationship with who understood his culture—the language and food. Armon shared similar thoughts about the organization which he was a part of as Nima had. However, he went even further to say that the organization taught him to be his authentic self as a result of being called out by older Iranians:

> Finding like…[Iranian student organization] helped a lot because you find these people who are like, 'What do you mean, you're not Iranian? Like, what are you doing?'... They poke fun of you when you act super white because they know the same kind of bullshit you're doing because they used to do it too. So...they nurtured this like....comfort area where you can just do it. Like who cares? Like you can talk about ghormeh sabzi you know, and like, no one thinks you're gross or doesn't know what it is.

Armon told me about how his reliance on the term "Persian" changed to "Iranian" after attending the Iranian student organization meetings where he began to feel a sense of pride in his ethnic identity. He was able to connect with others based on their shared culture, but also with people

who felt pressure to perform their whiteness and cover their Iranianess.

Even though Nima and Armon shared positive experiences with the Iranian student organization on campus, a couple other participants felt it was exclusive. Jasmine, for example, said when she attended one general body meeting she was not welcomed as Nima had been, and found herself in a room of groups of people who already formed circles with their friends. I asked Jasmine if she felt she had community on campus, to which she replied:

> I don't know. I can tell that there is one, but I don't know if I'm part of it….I know because I see it. I see people together. Sometimes I feel like I'm just watching from the outside of it….and I wish that there was—I know with Iranian people I've never seen—I see people of the same culture and race like hanging out together and stuff, which I think it's nice to have. I was kind of looking forward to that when I was coming here because I'm like, 'Oh, I finally get to be with people like *me*', but then that just didn't happen. So it kinda sucked.

It did not sound like Jasmine had a community on campus, and if she did, it definitely was not an Iranian one. She mentioned that she had never seen this with Iranians on campus. This alluded to Armon's point about Iranians lacking a sense of community. Jasmine noticed other racial and ethnic groups together on campus—including her Indian roommate and friends, Black students, Latinx students, and so on—however, she never saw Iranians hanging together beyond the student organization, which she believed to be exclusive. Jasmine hinted at her disappointment upon leaving a predominantly white, racist high school and coming to a large, fairly diverse university where she again felt she had no community.

Beyond community among students, participants wanted increased representation on campus. They wanted representation in staff, faculty, and most importantly— for themselves, as SWANAs. Niloufar hinted at her intersectionality as a Woman of Color studying in the field of

engineering, a major composed predominantly of white males. Niloufar explained to me her deep want for professors in her field who looked like her:

> I kind of wanted to relate, like when I relate to a professor like it helps me just makes me enjoy the class more. Also all my professors are old white men. I've complained about this to my adviser… we need more representation, like I don't vibe with any of my professors...I don't know, I think representation is key. Whether it be faculty, whether that be like... I don't know. What else you can do.

Niloufar later mentioned in addition to having professors who looked like her, she believed it would be helpful to have counselors who were knowledgeable about her culture in the counseling center as well. Similarly to the multicultural center, the counseling center held affinity group counseling sessions for different identities, except SWANAs. Having SWANA representation in staff and faculty would be important to help support participants in their learning and retention through mentorship.

In addition to campus staff and faculty, participants hoped for representation and distinction from their white peers so they could take advantage of scholarships available to other Students of Color on campus as well. Although statistical data might present SWANAs as having high socioeconomic status in the United States, comments by all the participants negated that model minority-fueled stereotype. Armon told me a stereotype he believed existed in his community was that all Iranians were wealthy, which he knew was not true, because his family was not. Nima also expressed the need for financial assistance in school, especially being a nontraditional student obtaining their second bachelor's degree:

> The fact is there's like a million scholarships for Black people, Hispanic people and everybody in between except for us because we're considered white. That kind of sucks. It sucks a lot... I'm paying for everything myself out of pocket right now because getting a second bachelor's degree, you know, the government— people don't like that, they don't want to pay for it. So I've been looking at a lot of different grants that I could get that's based off of maybe my heritage or background or whatnot. Nothing, nothing at all… I feel like in those situations, we're like, completely looked over.

Nima took no issue with the fact that his Peers of Color received scholarships related to their racial identity, however, he was frustrated that he, someone who understood himself to not be white, would never have the same assistance and support as them. Nima seemed angry and confused by the fact that once again, his identity was not up to him. At the benefit of others only would he be considered white or not.

The above are just a few examples of the lack of representation and ultimately support available for SWANA college students, however, none would matter without one major action of universities: to disaggregate SWANAs from the racial category "white" on demographic forms. To the participants, this seemed like the simplest and earliest step the university could take to begin even understanding what they needed on campus.

Workplace

Similarly to their experiences on campus, participants mentioned their racial dilemma in the workplace. Of all participants, it was Arash who shared the most concern about his ethnic and racial identity impacting his future career success. He understood that although he may check white when asked on a demographic form, he believed both the name on his resume and his physical appearance may sway how employers perceive him:

> I feel like if I put *my* name, like, it's just gonna get tossed into another pile. I don't know, I feel like the very first thing you get from someone, like when you meet them in person, or in class...Like, I think when [they] read the name, [they] instantly start judging.

Arash made clear the consequence of having a name that distinguishes you as non-white when job searching. Later, Arash disclosed to me he did believe "the chances of things going south for us (people of Color) is higher than [white] people." When I asked him what made him believe that, he responded with the following:

> It really just comes down to like...people who are like above us, I guess—and by above us, I mean like people who will control who's getting hired. When you talk about real life, I guess, like, coming out of school when you're trying to actually do things... I think...looking for good people should be it.

In this excerpt, Arash pointed out power dynamics that occur particularly between white people and People of Color — which he sees himself as by using terms like "us." Arash also gave insight into his own belief system where he believes people who are skilled at their job should be hired, and only for that reason, regardless of Color. He hoped and believed in seeing people for their heart (if looking for a friend), or skills (if looking for an employee). As he described to me the importance of one's character shining through while interviewing, he paused and questioned his own belief system, again questioning how power plays a role in his ability to excel: "But that's the thing...are you even getting that interview in the first place because of what your color is?"

Airport

Besides workplace discrimination, participants discussed other spaces in which they feel hypervisible as a result of their name or appearance; for example, the airport. Nima was frustrated and exhausted even discussing it with me:

> I don't know if it's because of my name or...but yeah, if I don't shave. Oh God, I get pulled over every time. All the time. Randomly get searched, and it's always the, you know, when you go through the part where they say 'Put your hands up' and then the magnetic thing revolves around you and scans you, right? As soon as I walk up there, the guy <u>always</u> pulls me aside and does his own frickin' double wand 'round my entire body-search. Like, all right, here we go.

Nima could not attribute the reason he was pulled aside to any one thing about him—his name or his unshaved facial hair—but he knew to expect additional measures when going through the airport, once again noting his difference in comparison to white people. Niloufar gave insight on how this discrimination transcends even the U.S. When traveling back home from Greece, during

a transfer in Germany, she was stopped by two patrolmen in the airport where she was pulled aside:

> And I was just like, 'Why did you guys pick me?' And he said, 'Oh, it's random.' And then I said, 'All these white Germans came right now and you didn't stop *them*. Like, why did you pick *me*?' And then again, they just repeated themselves. That just like, really, like, upset me.

Niloufar sounded defeated comparing her experience to white Germans who were able to pass freely through airport security. She took it upon herself to question security, but nevertheless she would not receive the answer she knew was true: she was picked because she is Brown. Jasmine also discussed being pulled aside at the airport for additional security measures; in an effort to ease her experience, she told me she intentionally would never speak in Farsi because she would not "want to scare anyone into thinking anything." Contrary to Niloufar's approach which included confrontation, Jasmine believed it would be easier to avoid showcasing her ethnic difference by speaking Farsi. The reasons for both participants' actions seemed to differ, but upon closer examination, their intentions were to protect themselves.

Interpersonal

In addition to thinking about how schooling and other institutions shaped their identity development, participants talked about interactions they had with parents and peers.

Parents & Family

When asking participants about their perceptions, as Iranian people, of Arab people and other SWANAs, I learned about the distinction emphasized by their parents which ultimately influenced them; for example, Arash recalled a time when his mother interacted with a stranger and corrected them by saying they were not Arab people, they spoke *Farsi*, and they were Persian. After sharing with me, Arash says he would never say he was Arab either. Although all

participants agreed they were not Arab, some pondered why their parents were so adamant about letting others know at any given opportunity.

I asked Armon about why he believed his father in particular emphasized the distinction between Iranian and Arab people. In addition to Iranian-Arab history and tension, Armon saw Iranian people, particularly of the first generation, wanting to align more with Western culture: "Maybe it's like a 'let's push away from this and grab at that' type of thing." Armon knew his father's love for the previous Shah of Iran, who was notorious for aligning Iran's culture with the West.

All participants at some point in our conversation seemed unsure of their identity and their knowledge of their own culture— and, many of them were uninformed because they could only learn from parents who often had already assimilated and were hoping the same for their children. Many participants resorted to sources such as Twitter and Instagram among other online sites to learn about themselves, but there were still gaps in knowledge. Arash shared with me that he thought his parents were Muslim until just a couple of years ago: "I just assumed." He told me given what he knew of Iranian people and from the few he met, he simply assumed his parents were also Muslim given they were also Iranian.

Although Niloufar saw many differences between her family's culture and mainstream white American culture, she also believed many immigrants—at least those who resided in the area she grew up in—had a desire to be white and assimilate. I asked her what examples she had that led her to this conclusion; she told me about the Italian name her father goes by, who also happened to own an Italian restaurant. She did not think this was uncommon—for an immigrant to own a restaurant that was ethnically different from their ethnic background. It was not, but neither was the insistence on using a more European or American-sounding name by Iranian

immigrants. Almost all participants mentioned their parents using different names. Niloufar's father disguised his name because his Iranian name was the name of a widely known and hated Middle Eastern official. Armon's father also used a U.S. American name. I asked why he thought his father did so, to which he responded:

> Honestly I wonder. I know it does just make life easier when you write Evan[8] and people can say your name. I guess people would probably like, assume less of you when your name's Evan. Like [people think] 'oh [he] is probably just like me, he's probably a normal dude.' I don't know how much of that is conscious, or how much it actually affects the way people see[him], but I would say it's not just that it's easier to say it, I also think it makes life a little bit easier.

Armon described the privilege of having a traditional, American name in the U.S. He believed most people (white people) would not question people who have these names and that they also feel a sense of sameness with them. Armon also clarified that he believes his father uses a different name not only because it is easier to pronounce than his Iranian name, but also because it allows him to move through life easier.

All participants except Jasmine identified that they also felt some distance from their parents' culture. At home, most participants responded in English to their Farsi-speaking parents. Almost all participants attended what they would call "Farsi school" when they were younger, but felt out of touch with the language since college. Arash stated his regrets speaking English to his mother and also his hopes to visit Iran:

> I've always wanted to learn...I knew Farsi growing up speaking it, I never knew how to write or read, but like, my mom speaks to me. And I kind of wish I spoke back to her in Farsi. Because like, now, like, I do want to go to Iran like really bad....But like, I actually am kind of scared that like, if I go, like, would they keep me there?

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[8] To keep participants and their families anonymous, parents also were assigned pseudonyms in this study.

Arash hoped to advance his Farsi in anticipation of visiting Iran; however, as he was speaking to me, his excitement diminished realizing it would perhaps be some time before he could safely visit again, considering current travel ban policies. Armon also discussed his interest in advancing his Farsi. By being uninformed about his culture or language, he felt some sort of ethnic-imposter syndrome:

> I think it'd be cooler if I knew more about like Iranian culture and stuff. I feel like a little bit fake trying to be a part of that [culture] because I don't speak Farsi. I don't know like all the old Iranian writing poetry and stuff. But it's stuff I want to learn.

Without retaining pieces of Iranian culture, such as Farsi or knowledge of great Persian poets, participants believed they were missing a piece of themselves.

Participants mentioned learning about their culture and family through their parents who attempted to instill a sense of pride in their children, despite the negativity they faced from peers and teachers in school. A piece of their pride included their separation from Arab people as well as their Aryan roots, at the core of the Aryan myth. All participants had heard of this myth, though only two heard of it directly from their parents. Armon's father believed it was "science" which linked Iranian people to Aryan people. Armon immediately rejected this notion growing up, recognizing he was unlike his white peers:

> I just thought in my head like this is like bullshit. I'm not [white]. I see like, you know, the Christian, like super white kids and all that. I've nothing in common with anyone in [school]...I remember I always just, I couldn't get out of my head like I stick out here….They all had Christianity in common. They were all really pale, blonde kids. All their families were friends from like, you know, a bunch of like small communities they had, like they would go hiking together, they'd go to church together. And in my head the whole time I just... I knew I wasn't the same.

Armon knew from an early age that his physical appearance, his religious and cultural difference set him apart from his white peers. Because of this, it was easy for him to reject his father's

insistence that he was in fact, white. When asked why he thought his father wanted to align with whiteness, he told me it was because his parents had a dream of a "Western imperial Iran", something familiar among first generation Iranian people who lost their country after the Revolution. I was intrigued. I proceeded to ask Armon what his mom thought of his race. He said his mother strictly believed they were Iranian, and that was it. Beyond this, she only recognized cultural similarities:

> [To her] we weren't Middle Eastern. We weren't white, we were just Iranian. Like, she considered...Azerbaijani people, Afghani people, or like people at the Turkish border. But that was it. That's the extent she talked about race: These people understand us and the rest of the people don't necessarily do.

Like Armon's parents, Jasmine recalled her parents sharing with her the Aryan myth and an insistence on her whiteness when growing up. She, like Armon, would find herself fighting her parents' beliefs:

> [They'd say] 'Oh no, you're.. We're white." I remember I would always go against that for some reason, 'cause I feel like I don't… and I'd have to explain it to them. I'd be like, 'are we though? Like are we white?' I'd just explain, culturally, you know, like white people mostly... come from like…. European descent. And we're not part of Europe, we're technically part of Asia, I guess. Because the Middle East isn't even a real continent. So I'd be like, 'are we technically Asians, or... what are we?'

Jasmine expressed confusion about her race, but was adamant about one thing: that she was not white. Her explanation also relied on the anthropological approach of racial determination, however, her justification was her lived experience. Jasmine went on to tell me her mother would point out cultural differences between her and what she called "Americans", which Jasmine knew to mean white people: "She would say this is...what American girls do, but that's not what *we* do." Her mother's distinction only solidified her reasoning that she was in fact, different at

the very least, and not white at best.

Peers

Participants would be left to navigate their sense of pride and stories passed down from their parents while also facing discrimination from their peers. Jasmine's voice was soft as she told me about the friendships she made in school. One friend in particular had a father who worked in law enforcement and would often wear a gun in a holster on his belt. She recalled the anxiety she felt when visiting her friend's home and talking about herself or her family:

> I always got nervous talking about anything 'Iranian', so I would always stick to 'Persian' when I said anything to them because I didn't want... I didn't want to get ... I don't know. They wouldn't hurt me. But I didn't want them to have a bad image of me... which I don't... I don't think they would. It's so hard because they've always been nice people to me. But at the same time they're just really racist.

Jasmine explained she intentionally used the term "Persian" instead of "Iranian" when spending time with her friend and their family due to the more negative connotation associated with Iran. Jasmine implied she knew her friend's father would not hurt her, but was fearful of the perception they would have towards her if she exposed her background. Given that many participants mentioned the majority of people they interact with are unaware that Persian people are Iranian, this, in conjunction with Jasmine's lighter physical features, may have allowed her to go unquestioned by her friend's father. Later in our conversation, Jasmine told me she wondered if this person would have befriended her if she had darker skin, or perhaps been wearing a hijab. Jasmine shared other examples of racism and implicit bias in her friend and her friend's family's actions; one evening she joined them to see a play downtown and noticed her friend's father staring down specifically Black people on the street, "just because of their skin color." She also recalled being at a gas station with the same friend who asked Jasmine to roll up her window

when a Black man pulled up to the pump next to her. Jasmine understood the nuances of racism from her friend and in school:

> I think when we think of racists we have this image of a really like, radical person training that they hate anyone who is not white… but what I've learned from being at my school is that even your friends… that you know pretty well, and you see 'oh they're such a great person, they're so nice', they may have not outward racism, but subconscious racism. So it's frustrating for me because like… obviously no *non*-racist person wants to be friends with a racist person.

Ultimately, Jasmine recognized that although her friend and their family's attitudes towards her may have been pleasant, they were still racist—whether that meant towards her or other people of color and found herself questioning her friendships as a result.

Most participants attributed racist comments to ignorance and felt it was their duty to educate others. Nima faced a similar situation when visiting his girlfriend's family home while he was an undergraduate. He recalled hearing his girlfriend's grandmother say "Who is that foreigner you brought in?" upon seeing him walk into their home. Like Niloufar, Nima took it upon himself to let her get to know him, "As soon as I started talking to her, and she realized who I was, the foreigner thing went out the window." Nima and Niloufar took responsibility for combating prejudices they faced as a result of misconceptions. During our time together, Niloufar named several examples where she was required to inform others of their bias. Niloufar told me about a time in her undergraduate program, following the ISIS attack in Paris, when she gathered in a residence hall room with friends and processed the event:

> We're all talking and this one kid was like, 'Can someone explain ISIS more, like what's going on?' It was like a general genuine question, but like, I didn't have the answer. No one had it... I didn't know anything more than they're a terrorist group… What else is there to say? Then this one kid was like, 'You should ask Niloufar, those are *her* people.' I was just like, 'No!' I just sat him down. Everyone just got quiet and awkward and I was like, this is so wrong. This is like not cool.

Niloufar shook her head as she proceeded to describe how wrong the situation was. Niloufar again in this scenario felt responsible to not only educate and call out her peer, she also was viewed as the token SWANA. She claimed, similar to her white peers, that she had no idea that ISIS was more than a terrorist group, yet, she was the only one who was assumed to know because of the racist ideology her peers perpetuated that a) groups all SWANAs together and b) assumes they are all terrorists. Finally, in this excerpt, Niloufar described how the passivity by the other peers in the room contributed to her despair.

Nima described the anger and depression he felt, especially in middle and high school, when he became less confident in his Iranian identity in response to peers:

> It was bad...I was like, all right, so there must be something wrong with me... and then I would go into this phase of like, 'Nah, f** those people, they don't know what they're talking about. I'm a good person, I know who I am.' And then that's why I started hanging out with gang members, because then they saw me with them, then they'd stop saying that kind of stuff and then I had to get into a few fights as well. That wasn't fun… But, like, you start believing it, you're like, 'Okay, I guess they're right, if everybody's thinking the same thing, then I'm not necessarily right.'

Nima shared some of his adolescent trauma in which he would be called vulgar, vile names associated with his SWANA identity and it would impact his perception of himself. To get his peers off his back, he decided to join a gang in high school as a fear-tactic. Oftentimes he would get into fights at school. This path led him to even more trouble than he anticipated long-term.

All participants gave examples of how their names, appearance, and display of culture would set them apart from their white peers in school, particularly K-12. They were vulnerable discussing the emotions—anxiety, fear, depression—felt when hearing their name pronounced incorrectly out of the mouths of their peers and teachers. Among all participants this was a

common thread. Jasmine described the manner in which her name set her apart from her peers at a predominantly white school system in a rural town:

> It was mostly my name… that I would get, I guess, terrorist jokes. That obviously, like, set me apart from like, white people because they don't see me as... if I was white, they wouldn't be making terrorist jokes.

Remembering that Jasmine has more European-like physical features, she explained it is her name that could not allow her to pass as white, though. She understands she was never seen as white to her peers, otherwise they would not make terrorist jokes. Arash described the worry he feels when he is not present and others read his name; he was unsure what they would think of him as a person if his name was the first thing they heard, and they perceived it to be challenging: “So that's why I struggle with my name because like when somebody doesn't really know how to pronounce it on paper...like what did they pick up?”

Beyond their names, participants also discussed the way they were perceived by peers as a result of their appearance and display of culture. For example, Jasmine’s mother would pack her Persian leftovers from dinner the night before for lunch. Jasmine told me oftentimes her peers would gag and say “ew” to her food. Unlike their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, she would often bring rice and Persian stews to school. She wished her peers would be willing to try something different, because she knew just how delicious her mother’s cooking was.

I asked Niloufar how she knew she was different from her white peers, and Niloufar explicitly discussed what it was like to be both Persian and a woman in K-12. She had a difficult time upholding U.S. white-American beauty standards such as having little to no light arm hair:

> My body hair... like my arms. Kids would really call me out on my arm hair a lot, like my mustache stuff...and I like had to get into the whole waxing thing like way too early... yeah, people would call me a terrorist but not that often... I don't remember that much. I guess it didn't really stick with me, but um, people would make like Brown people jokes.

Although she may not have remembered the exact moments and number of times she was called a terrorist or heard Brown-people jokes, Niloufar remembered the way her body hair would stick out in comparison to her white peers. In response, Niloufar took it upon herself to learn how to wax at a young age, an age where most young girls would not have to worry as much about their self-appearance.

Most participants mentioned as a result of their current geographic location, which has a large Latinx community, they would be mistaken for Mexican, Central or South American. More simply, they are read as people of Color, and as such, they are asked the question many second generation immigrants are asked: "where are you from?" Being asked this is another marker of their difference from white peers. As Armon put it:

> I just thought I came from Iran and white people don't come from Iran. And I've never met another white person and asked, 'where you from?' And they go... like Pennsylvania, you know? They don't say anything! Like the craziest thing they'll say is like, something in Europe. Iran? No way.

Armon understands by being asked where he is from, he is different from white peers who are allowed to simply say their hometown or state and be left alone. Unlike them, all my participants said when asked the question, they would always initially respond with their U.S. geographic home until they were inevitably questioned again with a clarifying word: "background", and would have to respond with their ethnicity.

In addition to facing challenges being racially ambiguous, participants discussed being in a "gray area", as Nima put it, where they did not fit in with white peers, but also could not fully connect with fellow Peers of Color, including Black and Latinx folks:

> Could I have been part of the circles? Yes. Because I've had groups of friends that were like straight rednecks, you know? But was I considered to be one of them, like if I was

> white? Nah... I was never considered white, especially in the society that I lived in. For example, in...south Florida, particularly, you know? There, I wasn't white. There's definitely white people there and they did not consider me to be part of their group of people. Hispanics didn't necessarily consider me to be part of their group of people and neither did Black people. So I was always like, in this gray area… Because my name was Nima, and I look the way I look. I don't look like I'm white. Or, I'm not completely Black. And, I don't speak Spanish.

Nima described the extent to which he could relate to each of the predominant groups in his school. Nima, knowing he is technically white in the U.S., knew he could not be considered white by his peers. He also knew he could not be considered Hispanic or Black, because he did not look like either group, and he also knew there were cultural and linguistic differences. Although it is true, he is not Hispanic nor Black, he had a difficult time finding where he fit. He understood himself to be a Person of Color, but knew his experience did not match any of his peers, regardless of their race. He explained to me feelings of isolation as a result of being labeled by everyone else:

> I was being told who I was by my peers and you know, like, when everybody around you...when you get put by every single one of your peers into like this one category of like, you're not necessarily them... You're not part of them. You're not one of them and you're not welcome, then your mind kind of starts thinking the same thing.

Nima recognized in his adolescent years he could hang with peers to a certain extent, until his otherness was very apparent and decided by them. By being told he could not fit in anywhere, he began to believe he would never find a community of his own. Later, as Nima described his mental health struggles, these feelings of isolation and being unfit were contributing factors.

Questioning of self was not just up to Nima. Arash stated the same as he described to me a scenario months before where he returned home to the fraternity home where he lived. Although Arash was not a member of any chapter, he ended up there for living accommodations. One evening a member of the fraternity and resident of the home who was intoxicated began

talking with him; shortly after they parted ways to head to bed, Arash's housemate noticed he lost his phone. He seemed to accuse Arash of taking his phone, and insisted he look for it. Instead of confronting the tone in which he spoke to Arash, Arash turned around and headed to bed without responding. He processed later, and shared with me: "It was like..Why do you talk down to me like that? Because I'm not in Greek life? Is it because I'm Brown?" Arash took a long time processing, he slowed his speech, paused, changed his seating position and sighed. Later in our conversation he wondered what other people saw or thought when they saw him, and what his life might be like if he did not present the way he did:

> If they met someone else, that wasn't me, that was a different color, like, would they have acted differently? What would they have done? Would they have, like, wanted to hang out again? Would they have wanted to be friends?

Arash could not help but question what his life would be like if he looked differently or had a different name that was not attributed to his ethnicity. Though he would never know the answer, it was something he could not resist wondering.

Individual

In the end, the systems and players detailed above largely impact the behavior of these participants, particularly in how they identify themselves (racially, ethnically, culturally). All participants described the difficulty in choosing and navigating what seemed like two worlds where they were not white but not a Person of Color; not Arab but not exactly Middle Eastern; not totally American but not totally Iranian. For most, they described how this impacted their relationships with family, friends, and their own values and beliefs.

I began my inquiry with their decision to identify themselves as Persian versus Iranian, which they named on their pre-interview questionnaire. Although their responses differed at the

current stage in their lives, they all affirmed when growing up, particularly during K-12 years, they would intentionally use "Persian" only. All participants except one—Jasmine —believed most people did not know Persians were Iranian. Instead, participants believed that many people assumed Persia was a rich and ancient culture that made beautiful rugs and perhaps no longer existed in the present day. Jasmine thought people in her school knew Persian people were Iranian, and regardless of which term she used, she would face terrorist jokes. She went on to say in middle school she never wanted to tell people she was Iranian. If they asked for clarification in response to her stating she was Persian, "I didn't want to get made fun of", she said. In the pre-interview questionnaire, Jasmine filled in "Middle Eastern" as her race, and "Persian" as her ethnicity. Nima, like Jasmine, used Persian as a tool to redirect backlash he would receive as a result of peoples' negative perceptions of Iranian people:

> I do slip up and say Persian most of the time...because I feel like that's more socially accepted in America, because when you say Iranian—because the media blasted Iran so much...but when you say Persian they're like, 'Oh, Persian, Persian Empire', like their mind goes to something else. Like it's a whole different thing for them.

Nima mentioned he does "slip up" at times by using Persian, because he recognized using Persian instead of Iranian might seem inauthentic or exclusive to other Iranians who are not ethnically Persian. Nima wrote "homosapien" for race (he did not ascribe to any monoracial category) and "mix, mostly American" for ethnicity on the questionnaire. I wondered what other participants' thought others perceived Iran to be. Niloufar perhaps had the strongest reaction, "People think Iran equals ISIS. Iran equals Islam. Iran equals oppression." Niloufar wrote "Iranian" for both her race and ethnicity in the pre-interview questionnaire. Arash exclusively used Persian; initially, he said it was simply because he thought it "sounded cooler", but when prompted, he provided deeper justification:

> I think it has to do with the idea of people not liking 'Iranian'. But I mean, if I went into a job interview, I'd say Persian... if I said Iranian, would I think I'd have a lesser chance of getting the job? Like, maybe...so I guess I'm staying on the safe side.

Arash believed U.S. Americans thought of Persians as "their own group" because of things like Persian rugs, cats, and mention of the culture in songs, such as in Jay-Z's "Marcy Me" track. Arash also wrote "Middle Eastern" and "Persian" for race and ethnicity, respectively, on the questionnaire. While Arash provided reasoning for using "Persian" instead of "Iranian", Armon did the opposite. Armon shared with me he, like the others, used to only rely on "Persian" to describe himself, but things changed when joining the Iranian students' organization on campus where he believed he needed to be authentic and take pride in his culture. Armon wrote in "Iranian" for both his race and ethnicity in the questionnaire:

> I was sick of like trying to like cover up, saying like 'No, I'm not affiliated with *those* people, I'm Persian, it's different.' No it's not. It's not different. We are the same people… I noticed that kids who want to be more 'white' and less Iranian say 'Persian'...that's a small little thing you can tell about someone, like how much they're proud... how much they want to invest in themselves.

His membership with the student organization made him feel a sense of pride in his Iranianess and recognized by relying on "Persian" to describe himself instead of "Iranian", he was perpetuating stereotypes about his community and over-emphasizing the separation between an ethnic group and the nation in which it largely resides. He also recognized that this behavior was a covering behavior, and it was tied to a desire to be "more white and less Iranian." Armon went on to describe his confusion regarding why people see Iran and Persia differently, "I don't know why like one word flips a whole group of people, but they don't think of the Empire when they hear Iranian." Armon recognized how ethnic ambiguity tied to "Persian" had the ability to remove some of the negative connotation associated with "Iranian", yet, he could not understand

why these two words— relating to the same group of people— elicited such different responses.

Similarly with the distinctions made between Iranian and Persian, participants discussed with me their thoughts about emphasizing differences between Arab and Iranian people. It was apparent that participants desired some separation between their culture and that of Arab people, for a number of reasons, but primarily because they did not want to contribute to the homogenization of SWANA people. For example, Arash did not want to be viewed as Arab, because he simply was not; however, he also perceived Arab people to be primarily Muslim, which he also is not. In our conversation, Arash recognized that in the United States, most U.S. Americans would not be able to tell the difference between him and an Arab person: "I think we're screwed either way, it doesn't matter. If you say you're Iranian, they are gonna think you're Arab." Nima had a similar response to Arash, but it was his name that he brought to the forefront as an example:

> Once 9/11 happened, [my name] became a thing and it was a bad thing. A very bad thing… I believe my name is an Arabic name. So I was linked to Arabs immediately and then Arabs apparently linked to terrorism and everything else.

Because of his name, along with the reactions he witnessed of other Iranians who were mistaken as Arab, he believed he had an automatic, subconscious response to quickly deny being Arab and make note of the difference. Nima and Niloufar thought many Iranians focused on differences and not similarities—particularly focusing on their experiences of racism and Islamophobia in the United States. Niloufar wanted to build solidarity between the groups and believed she did so by going to the Arab student events on campus in addition to Iranian events; she even planned to study Arabic over the summer, despite her mother's distaste for it. Jasmine echoed Nima and Niloufar's concerns and thought the distinction is important to make, but also thought many

Iranian people take it too far to the point where it seems being Arab is a bad thing.

Armon learned from his father the differences between Arab and Iranian people. He believed this came from a sense of Iranian pride by his father. He, like Arash, viewed Arab people as largely Muslim as well, and used this to differentiate the two:

> I think the biggest thing is [Arabs] are much more heavily rooted in Islam. And I feel a lot of Iranian people aren't...Like, yes, we [both] drink tea, we play backgammon, but *they* talk about God and *we* don't which is a huge thing.

To Armon, it is Arab people who are tightly bound to Islam; this was a major cultural difference in his mind from Iranian people, however, Iran remains a majority-Muslim country ruled by an Islamic regime. Nevertheless, the relationship between this ethnic group and their religion created dissonance from Iranian people, who Armon believed did not focus on God or Islam, at least in his experience. As a result, Armon thought this distinction between the two ethnic groups in the United States was necessary. Oddly, though, Armon went on to criticize the Iranian community for having a lack of unity, unlike Arab people. He attributed this to Iranian people's desire to assimilate with white U.S. America:

> I think Iranian people are a little bit more concerned about fitting in...And that's like a big differentiating factor [from Arabs]...I think one of the huge things is Iranian people are more willing and honestly *wanting* to assimilate into the culture….Whereas Arab people come over here and they're more like still within their own culture—like they hang out with other Arabic people... Like you see Iranian people and they all have their 'American' accent, sit down, and say like 'Hey, my name is Joe.' Jafar becomes Joe, and stuff like that. But you don't see that as much with Arabic people.

Armon explained the negotiation process some Iranian American people in particular engage in to assimilate. In the process of assimilation, Iranian people lose the sense of community and shared culture unlike Arab people do, in his opinion. Even so, Armon describes Iranian people's willingness to go through this process, as opposed to Arab people who insist on keeping their culture, including their language and name.

Similarly to the confusion that arose in distinguishing Arab and Iranian people, participants described conflict in coming to peace with their names. All participants either had a fake name they used, or wished at some point in life they had a U.S. American name. Jasmine wished she was Bethany, Niloufar wished she was Ashley, and Armon wished he was Kyle. All three of them eventually came around, particularly during late high school and college when they felt a sense of pride and uniqueness in their names. Nevertheless, they still dealt with mispronunciations, and at times, they found it easier to not correct others if they were not forming long-term relationships. Arash and Nima on the other hand, used different names at times when meeting people. Nima for example had a faux name to use when meeting people in rural areas especially:

> I wouldn't say my name was Nima, I'd say my name is Anthony just because I didn't want them to like, feel weird because I didn't know if they were going to be like...who's that foreigner?

Nima said he used this name to not make others feel "weird", however, he felt unsure that they would call him a foreigner. He later said he would use this name to protect himself from any backlash he may receive as a Middle Eastern person. Arash on the other hand, consistently used another name for the majority of college, until recently before I had met him. It all started when people could not understand what he said his name was at a party. For ease, he just said his name was "Zack":

> I can play it off like, yeah act, right? But in my head, the very first day I was saying Zack it was so weird...But I don't want to keep doing this thing where like, at different stages of my life I keep changing my name.

Although it felt odd at first, he continued to use Zack, and believed he would be playing a part, or acting as he called it. When we met, he told me he made a recent switch back to Arash, but

because he still had a distaste for Arash, he was in limbo and unsure of what name he wanted. One thing was sure, whatever he came up with would have to be final, as it proved to be too difficult to play the part of Zack and still be Arash.

As their lives were just as complicated using a pseudonym, as it was living a pseudo-race. Because of the conflicting, mixed messages participants received about their race, they all gave insight to a state of racial confusion at some point in their lives. Arash for example admitted one time, not long ago, he believed “Asian” was the racial category SWANAs were classified as. Jasmine discussed the back and forth messaging she received from parents and peers among others:

> It was hard to distinguish what I am because some people tell me ‘no, you're white’ but other people say ‘no, you're not white.’ So I just, like made a decision for myself. So... I think I'm just Middle Eastern.

Jasmine decided to reject all monoracial categories and identify herself racially as Middle Eastern. Even so, Jasmine, because of her racially ambiguous appearance and ability to pass, was unsure if she could call herself a Person of Color:

> I would think to myself what if I was in a class, like with people that don't know me, and they said like, ‘oh like step forward or stand up if you're not white.’ I don't know if I would do that...because I feel like people would be like, ‘why?’

Jasmine’s life experiences have been unlike her white peers, particularly noted by the discrimination she has faced, however, Jasmine recognized her proximity to whiteness through her physical appearance holds privilege. She feared if she called herself a Person of Color, this identity would also be rejected by those who judged her based solely on her appearance. As a result, she is stuck somewhere in nowhere’s land between her white peers and Peers of Color.

Armon expressed the difficulty of balancing his Iranianess and U.S. American-ness (or

whiteness) between different audiences. He is critical of Iranian American people who lose their culture as a result of acting too “white”:

> So it gets hard, like as a balancing act. Because also no one wants to seem like super whitewashed in front of other Iranian people. Like when you have mehmooni [guests], you don't want to act like you lost your Iranian culture, like fake.

I ask him if this is true, then why might Iranians want to act white? He responded:

> To fit in more, like, life will be easier...If you want to climb and become like the social elites...it's usually...white people. So if you want to affiliate with them… you got to associate, affiliate, or assimilate more into that culture.

Here, Armon was talking about capital. He believed to climb the social mobility ladder, one might be forced to negotiate their own culture and assimilate to whatever group has power—which, in his eyes, are white people. Although he was suspicious of Iranian American people who play the balancing act, he, too, felt stuck in the middle at times. He noted, “I’m ethnically this and I’m socially more this, so now I don’t know which to check.” Armon explained that although he is ethnically Persian, he also saw himself as culturally U.S. American, and the two cannot be separated. In his mind, though, U.S. American *is* white and vice versa.

All three participants who identified as men had very clearly colorblind views on race. When bringing up the race they filled in on the questionnaire, they clarified that they do not believe in race, but when prompted, they begrudgingly would choose white. As Nima mentioned his distaste for assigning himself a race, Armon felt the same: “I don’t believe in race, honestly. It doesn’t make sense to me. Everyone is just what they are.” Naturally, it would not make sense to someone who is categorized into a race they do not believe makes sense to their life experience.

Participants again shared with me the developmental challenges they faced, and continue to face, while understanding their identity—an identity that is often trapped between generations,

nations, cultures, and races. It is further complicated with gender, appearance, level of assimilation, geographic location, among other factors. Jasmine described the culmination of this all:

> I feel like I had an identity crisis… I was thinking like, 'who am I?', you know? And...this is gonna sound weird, but like, I thought— I feel like it would have been easier if I just had like, darker skin that I could identify myself better...because like, I feel like people wouldn't be able to go against me...like if I said 'I'm Middle Eastern, I'm *not* white', if I had like darker skin, that would be more accepted... Like if my skin was darker, I would still be like the same exact ethnicity, right? But I feel like more people would be accepting to call me like a person of color…'cause... I feel like sometimes I'm like too white for Middle Easterners but I'm too Middle Eastern for white people.

Jasmine described a feeling of in-betweenness because of her appearance. Being a light-skinned Iranian, she does not feel confident calling herself a Person of Color in fear her peers would not only not accept her, but actively reject or "go against" her.

Armon also expressed a sense of in-betweenness as Jasmine, however, he did so in terms of his culture:

> I kind of wish that I could see what it was like if I was 100%. Iranian. Like what it would be like growing up, where I was one of those blonde Christian kids, the equivalent of that—like, I'm an Iranian kid in Iran growing up in the city… Because I always did have this notion of like there's nowhere I really belong because I don't belong here, because I'm not you know, a white kid, and I don't belong in Iran because I'm Americanized, I don't understand the culture. I don't speak the language very well. I can't read and write. I couldn't go back there if I needed to. So I'm kind of just in limbo like, I have my family and that's really the extent of people in the world that like, really understand me.

Armon wondered what it would be like to be fully, authentically Iranian—even in his wonders, this could only exist in Iran. He did not consider what it would be like to be fully, culturally Iranian in the United States; one identity exists here, the other, there. As a result, he did not feel he can fully belong in either place. Without having an ability to speak, read, or write the Persian

language, he felt at a loss. In the States, he is left, as he says, “in limbo.” Ultimately, he believed the only people that can truly understand him is his family, who, as Iranian immigrants, may feel the same.

Nima also shared feelings of frustration and confusion in his adolescent years; he told me he was trying to figure out who he was, to which I asked in what ways? He responded:

> Racially and like, everything. Like literally everything. Like it was just so much more than race..Who am I in this world? What am I doing here? Why am I here? Why am I being treated like this?

The hate he was confronted with as a young adult made him question not only his identity, but his existence. Arash’s experiences made a long-lasting impression on him as well. As a result of his experiences, he faced issues with trust for anyone beyond his family:

> For me to trust someone it takes a lot to be honest...not like you have to take a bullet for me but just like, for me, trust takes a lot of time. You don't have to do anything out of your way, it just literally takes time... I just like feel... I'm on my own most of the time. I realized, I guess you are. Family is one thing, right? Like parents—fine. You should have 100% trust or whatever...and it just goes down from there. And when like a stranger comes into play, it's like zero. It's hard for me, at least, it's very hard for it to go up. I don't expect anyone to like, try to get it...but it's just like a precautionary measure. I don’t...wanna get hurt, but just like make sure nothing bad happens there.

Arash, while describing the process of building trust, interrupted himself several times to justify why this was his process. As a result of his distrust beyond family, he feels some isolation. The lack of support was apparent in other parts of our conversation. The challenges he faced during a previous semester made him question his faith. Arash, who described himself as a very logical, positivist thinker, had a difficult time accepting God, until he faced difficulties in college:

> My sophomore second semester particularly was the hardest one, like that was a hard one to go through. I feel like I shouldn't have been able to like, induce like most things like I was going through... I thought I would just like not do the semester maybe. Like, the fact that I actually got through and passed my classes and like... I don't know. It just switched up, maybe that was like my brain protecting me... or maybe it was God.

Arash described himself as agnostic; he was unsure of God because he could not himself "prove" the existence of God, but he could not deny it either, especially given his triumphs in his sophomore year.

Summary of Narratives

All of the above examples shared by participants give insight to a larger, more complex problem that stems from the ever-changing level of visibility they receive in different contexts. In each situation, participants found they needed to defend themselves and face repercussions or they felt erased and isolated. Without accurate visibility and representation, participants present a lack of cultural retention, racial and ethnic confusion, and inadequate support which contributes to feelings of isolation. Participants' experiences developed and evolved greatly between their primary and secondary education. In the following section, I consolidated themes which emerged across each of the levels of socialization outlined in this chapter. I position findings within the theory of selective racialization and consider the implications of future research and practice for higher education and student affairs professionals in particular.

Chapter V: Discussion & Implications

This study sought to understand the messaging given to second generation Iranians about their racial identity; moreover, it aimed to understand how they respond to messaging about their race as informed by societal and institutional systems along with interpersonal relations. Finally, the purpose of this study was to examine how higher education institutions in particular play a role in the racialization or racial identity development of second generation Iranian students. As such, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- What messages do second generation Iranian students receive about their racial identity?
- How do they respond to these messages?
- How do they perceive the university playing a role in their racial identity development, if at all?

To theoretically ground my inquiry, I employed John Tehranian's (2009) conceptual framework of *selective racialization* for the SWANA population, which integrates the concept of racialization with Yoshino's (2007) theory of *covering*. This framework details the holistic process of racialization utilized at the systemic and institutional levels (top-down), and the interpersonal and individual levels (bottom-up). In this framework, SWANA individuals rely on covering strategies to dodge racism and assimilate to white dominant culture. This behavior combined with the negative depiction of the larger community from the top-down results in a persistent negative feedback loop that allows for two options: the community to be 1) viewed negatively, or 2) erased completely. Furthermore, the processes of covering taken up by SWANA individuals debilitate the community's capacity for unity and solidarity to resist racialization from the top.

I utilized narrative inquiry to recite the experiences of five second generation Iranian immigrants and their understanding of their racial identity. For this study I used purposeful and snowball sampling to reach participants and ultimately conduct semi-structured interviews with each of them. I chose these methods intentionally to increase my own understanding of racial identity development among these participants through their stories, as well as to engage them in a process of self-reflection. In the subsequent sections I overview findings and highlight themes related to my conceptual framework of selective racialization. Following, I outline implications for both research and practice within the field of higher education and student affairs. Lastly, I conclude my study with final reflections of the research process and hope for future studies.

Discussion of Findings

The questions motivating my inquiry regarded what messages second generation Iranian students received about their racial identity, and how they responded to these messages. Based on their experiences, participants received dichotomous messages about their race (whether they were regarded as white or not) at all levels. In this section, I overview findings and broad themes that arose from participant narratives. Although the process of racialization presented itself differently in each socialization level, its impact consistently targeted the level and type of visibility for participants. In some cases, participants felt hypervisible under a pernicious light fueled by racialization from the top-down. In many cases, though, participants remained invisible both from the top-down and the bottom-up as a result of their own behavior. I describe how their visibility would be contingent on factors such as: 1) their representation, 2) their cultural retention, and 3) their proximity to whiteness. Ultimately, this contributed to their understanding of race and their racial identity. This method is consistent with Tehranian's (2009) theory of selective racialization where SWANAs find themselves in a negotiation process that dictates

their representation. The modifications made to this framework were miniscule. I detailed the levels of socialization— societal, institutional, interpersonal, individual — rather than use the binary-model originally presented of top-down and bottom-up. In my analysis, I consider how participants modeled processes of covering at the individual level to mitigate the impact of racialization from the top.

Visibility through Representation

Beginning from the top-down, at the societal level, participants described the power of negative or violent imagery on their racialization. Nima and Arash specifically discussed with me the ways they believed others perceived them based on the media's misrepresentation of them. This included the homogenization of all SWANA individuals into one role: terrorist. Even Arash wondered how SWANA people were received in the United States before September 11th. While this was happening at the highest level of socialization, the processes of racialization occuring at the institutional level in primary schools were no more optimistic. All participants expressed frustration with others' ignorance about their culture. The opportunity to learn about different cultures and history primarily took place in history courses in grade school, however, Nima and Niloufar noted that their teachers never made note of Middle Eastern history. Instead, they and their peers would predominantly study European and North American history. Ultimately, participants found themselves having to learn about their own history and then take responsibility to educate others or defend themselves from being associated with terrorist organizations like ISIS. In sum, at the top, societally Iranian and SWANA participants in my study were portrayed negatively, and in schools they were not acknowledged in the slightest, leaving only one depiction of the entire population in the minds of their peers. This process is reflected in selective racialization when SWANAs have two options: 1) conform to white norms

and be erased, or 2) react and make their Otherness a defining characteristic (Tehranian, 2009). Ultimately, the only visibility reinforced is negative (Tehranian, 2009).

When discussing this with participants, I witnessed how this implicit messaging had become internalized and masked in their own conversations with people. In some cases, I noticed participants made themselves palatable to white people at the interpersonal level, relying on their personal characteristics and featured positives about their culture to shatter the stereotypes about their community. Jasmine, for example, covered her Iranian identity by identifying herself as "Persian" instead. Knowing the negative associations with Iran, Jasmine chose Persian to avoid backlash and covert racism from peers and their parents. This sort of covering paired with Jasmine's racially-ambiguous phenotype allowed her to pass easier than other participants. Other participants identified as Persian more heavily in grade school to cover their Iranianess until college when they learned about the nuances between the two; the former is an ethnic group which excludes other ethnic groups in the nation, such as Kurds and Turks. Tehranian (2009) explained the reasoning for many Iranian people to rely on Persian for ethnic identification: "Persia evokes images of an ancient empire, a proud history, magnificent rugs (and cats), and a rich culture. Iran, by contrast, evokes images of the hostage crisis, the Axis of Evil, radical fundamentalism, jihad and fatwas" (p. 27).

To boost confidence in their identity and ward off comments about terrorism and ostracization, participants' parents at the interpersonal level would emphasize the separation between themselves as Iranian and Arab people. Although the two groups are different, the intentions behind creating a barrier between them in conversation seemed more like a desire to gain proximity to whiteness and Western culture by parents. For participants, it seemed the dominant appeal was to move away from traditional "Middle Eastern" or "Arab" culture, which,

to them, was tightly bound to Islam— which they viewed as synonymous with terrorism in the U.S. Arab people comprise the largest ethnic group in the Middle East, and though they differ from Iranians primarily in language, Iran remains an predominantly-Muslim country ruled by an Islamic Regime (Pew Research Center, 2018). None of the participants strongly identified as Muslim, but most had a strong desire to move away from the religion and separate it from their ethnic identity. In this method of covering, they gain proximity to whiteness by dissociating with other SWANA groups, but at the same time they lose a larger sense of community. This is exemplified in Tehranian's (2009) work when discussing Jewish Iranians, who primarily identify with their Jewish ethnic and religious identity to cover their Iranian identity. In doing this, they demystify Iran as an "Islamic monolith" (Tehranian, 2009, p. 101). Furthermore, Tehranian (2009) repeatedly explains the ramifications of this type of dissociation which weakens the overall community "to systemically fight invidious discrimination and stereotyping in the long term." (p. 77).

The experiences shared with me made it clear how racialization from the top trickled down. Participants felt a loss of cultural knowledge, they were confused about their identity, and internalized the messages from the media, their teachers, parents and peers. One of the most surprising moments to me was hearing Arash state he believed his parents were Muslim until he began college. This assumption fits in the conceptual framework which details how individuals are affected by and ultimately reinforce the monolithic narrative of SWANA people from the top-down.

Visibility through Cultural Retention

In addition to their visibility through representation, SWANA visibility also seemed to be related to cultural retention. As described in the former section, the processes of racialization at

the societal level continued to be fueled by media imagery and the racist and Islamophobic rhetoric surrounding SWANA people. This seeps into the institutional level where racialization in school, the workplace, and even airport once again presents the choice to cover or remain hypervisible. Tehranian's (2009) conceptual framework attributes the consequences of covering to the entire SWANA community; although this theory was apparent through participant narratives, it was also complicated by them. By choosing to cover, in some cases, participants find themselves losing significant pieces of their culture as present in their name, appearance, and language. Therefore, covering in this case affected cultural identity at the individual level as well as within the broader community.

One example of institutional racialization perceived by participants is in the workplace. Arash described anxiety about others' perception of his identity as a white person on a job application where he used his non-traditional white, U.S. name. Arash also was nervous about his appearance and how he presented as a Brown person to future employers. He wanted to believe people received job offers on the basis of their skill, but at the same time he wondered if he would have an interview to begin with because of implicit bias towards his name. Arash feared employers would discriminate against him for his Middle Eastern identity, which was not viewed positively in the larger United States context.

Beyond the workplace, participants described anxiety when traveling, and in particular, when flying. Nima and Niloufar believed they were unfairly pulled aside at the airport because of their Middle Eastern appearance and names. While Niloufar found herself at times more frustrated for speaking up about this with security, Jasmine found it easier to again cover her Iranianess by avoiding speaking Farsi to her family. It is worthy to note that Jasmine has a higher ability to cover and pass than Nima or Niloufar who physically present more Middle Eastern

than Jasmine. The intent to cover was a survival strategy given the hypervisibility put upon them at airports after 9/11 (Maghbouleh, 2017; Tehranian, 2009).

Although it was Jasmine who covered at the airport, other participants covered their ethnicity in different ways at school. All participants shared they wished they had different names that were more reflective of white, mainstream U.S. culture. Nima and Arash actually used different names at times to cover their Iranianess. This was something participants learned mainly at the interpersonal level from their parents and other first generation Iranians who arrived during the height of the hostage crisis and used a pseudonym to cover and survive in an anti-Iranian country at the time. Tehranian (2009) explained the tactic of changing one's name as seemingly miniscule, but largely effective in covering. This decision did not go without consequence, though. Arash described the difficulty navigating what seemed like two very real identities: one as Zack, the racially-ambiguous Persian, and one as Arash, the Iranian foreigner. Nima did the same, using "Anthony" as his pseudonym to ease the anxieties of others who met him. Jasmine felt similarly; to avoid bringing more attention to the difference in her name, she allowed teachers and peers to mispronounce it in the classroom.

Beyond their names, participants also tried to fit in with peers by reflecting their dress and speech. This process is best described by Tehranian (2009) as "earning their white stripes" (p. 23). Armon described his process in detail, where he would purchase certain clothing brands to fit in with white peers specifically, because he recognized them as the dominant group in school who faced little discrimination. Niloufar echoed Armon's sentiments and even went on to describe the insecurities she felt about her appearance as a dark-haired woman (on her head and body). To avoid bullying, Niloufar took up waxing and shaving at a very young age to fit in. Although they tried to assimilate and make themselves less visible to their peers, there were

moments that they could not escape their difference. This was apparent in Niloufar's story about the swim team, where because of cultural distinctions related to feminine hygiene and sexuality, she was forced to give up something in the U.S. that would not make room for this difference. Finally in college Niloufar and Armon took pride in their ethnic identity and cultural uniqueness, as they described. They found universities to be a place where diversity was celebrated, and in that regard, they felt they fit into the campus environment given their unique ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

A final form of cultural attrition was present in the use of language. Many participants participated in Farsi school growing up, but during their primary school years, they focused on English and would respond to their Farsi-speaking parents in English. The reliance on English and disengagement with Farsi led to attrition of their linguistic skills. It was not until college when students hoped to regain their Farsi-speaking skills in Persian courses. In addition to the language, participants hoped to learn more about their culture in these courses to feel closer to their families in Iran and have a better sense of their ethnic identity.

The effects of cultural loss took a toll on participants who described imposter syndrome as a result of their in-between-ness as Iranian people. They could not relate to their parents who had a connection with a pre-Islamic country they had no attachment to, and they could not relate to dominant culture in the U.S. which gave power to their white peers. Arash explained, "I feel like I'm on my own most of the time.. I realized, I guess you are." Arash also illuminated feelings of isolation among second generation Iranian people who were ultimately left on their own to make sense of their racial, ethnic, and generational identity. This fact points to the long-term consequences of covering which disrupts SWANA people's ability to build community and resistance.

Visibility through Proximity to Whiteness

Although at the highest level of socialization SWANA people are often depicted as Brown, it is at this same level where they are labeled as white. SWANA people in the United States are racially classified as white, yet are not afforded the same privileges available to white people in this country. All participants were perplexed by this concept, and they seemed challenged by the definition and the value of race in North America. They were even more confused by the decision of institutions such as universities to replicate this categorization on demographic forms. Universities in their minds were meant to acknowledge and celebrate diversity of students, in fact, they saw universities pride themselves on this. If this was the case, why would they not disaggregate SWANAs from white data?

Even more confusing to some participants was the attitude of their parents towards their racial classification. All participants were aware of the common Aryan myth fed to first generation Iranian Americans and few had heard this directly from their parents, however, they were much more reluctant to buy into it. Tehranian (2009) affirmed this: “the younger generation of Middle-Eastern Americans is much more likely than prior generations not only to eschew covering techniques but to celebrate actively their ethnicity and even insist on their non-whiteness” (p. 31).

I asked participants questions to get at how they understood they were not white. Beyond the many examples they had already provided pointing at their otherness, they added they would often be asked where they were from, and noticed their white peers would never be asked the same. The major differences that came up included white peers’ appearance; participants believed white meant European-white, with blonde hair and light eyes, which many of them did not represent. In addition, their white peers largely practiced Christian faith, which they did not.

Furthermore, Nima, for example, shared that he never believed he fit in any circles, with both white peers and Peers of Color. Their racial and ethnic difference continued to be hypervisible in spaces with all their peers in this sense.

Because they could not fit into any monoracial groups and did not see themselves as white, many participants opted out of racial identification and took a colorblind approach to race. Instead of seeing their race as important, they believed their ethnicity as Iranian people was all that mattered. This was also promoted by their parents who insisted and encouraged their Iranian identity above all else, and particularly above a Middle Eastern identity which would move them closer in proximity to Arab people. This seemed to once again become internalized, especially for Armon, who was hesitant about choosing “Middle Eastern” if the option was available as a racial category. Armon’s hesitation seemed to come from the ties between the Middle East, Arabian, and Islamic people— something instilled by his parents. Instead, Armon felt more comfortable tacking on “-North African” to the category as it broadened the region and ethnic groups included. The insistence to move away from “Middle Eastern” presented as yet another form of covering or downplaying his Brownness. This is exemplified in the affiliation method of covering: “Two prevalent covering methodologies in the Middle-Eastern community exploit society’s frequent conflation of religious affiliation and national origin with racial identification” (Tehranian, 2009, p. 81). Armon did not want to affiliate with Middle East as it is understood in the United States,to be synonymous with Islam and subsequently, terrorism. Therefore, he aimed to move away from a Middle Eastern racial identity and identify solely with his ethnic identity as Iranian or Persian, which he understood to be more flexible in terms of religion. This was informed by his own experience as someone who identified as non-religious.

The Aryan myth, and more noticeably the emphasis on separating Arab and Iranian people by first generation Iranian people are incredibly detrimental to the entirety of the Iranian and larger SWANA community. Although the intentions behind covering are more about survival and seem positive in the short-term, ultimately, these decisions lead to the disenfranchising of the larger community. The separation between SWANA ethnic groups decreases solidarity and ability to resist systems of power at the societal and institutional levels. Tehranian (2009) noted a dearth of political involvement among Iranians; this is partially due to the skepticism and distrust of the U.S. government from the hostile relationship between Iran and the United States that never ceased. The lack of community and shared culture among Iranian people left the second generation participants in my study to navigate their position on the color line and question their identity in isolation. Based on their narratives, however, their experiences on campus highlighted the potential for universities to intervene and offer support in their development.

Implications for Research

This study is significant for its contribution to the dearth of research analyzing SWANA student racialization, particularly among second generation Iranian students. Furthermore, this study aimed to redirect the discourse surrounding SWANA students by focusing on their racial identity as opposed to ethnic or religious identity. For this inquiry, I utilized John Tehranian's (2009) theory of *selective racialization* which integrates Yoshino's (2007) theory of *covering*. This conceptual framework was used to better understand how racialization processes occurring at the systemic level trickle-down to the individual level where they are perpetuated by SWANA people themselves. This framework turned out to be not only appropriate but effective in discerning the nuances of the racialization process as well as its impact on participants.

Nevertheless, I noted some additional considerations in applying the framework itself to this study.

Although covering presents itself as an active choice made by SWANA individuals on a daily basis, I learned from this study it is not always conscious. The process of covering presented itself as a subconscious response by participants to avoid racism. In addition, participants at times would elicit this subconscious response which was influenced by the behaviors of their parents and larger community. For example, participants saw no harm in reinforcing the distinction between themselves and Arab people as their parents had. At the same time, though, they understood Arab people faced the same sort of racism and Islamophobia as them, regardless of if they were Muslim. Participants could not quite name the underlying reason for the distinction, but could point to similarities just as they could differences. It is fair, then, to consider the influences which lead to covering and question the activeness or passiveness in such decisions. Additionally, future studies should further investigate how religion has been and continues to be implemented in the process of racialization, using a model similar to Tehranian's (2009), where individuals and systems have influence over SWANA perception.

The impact of these decisions consequently disrupts the unity of an entire community. Armon at one point in our conversation described the sense of community and tight-knit relationships among Arab people and how Iranian people lack this. Jasmine also pointed this out on campus; she would see other Students of Color hanging out together and supporting one another, but she was unable to find the same sense of community with her own ethnic group. Additional research might consider the impacts of covering strategies on the Iranian community on campus, specifically. This would also introduce more research on this population in the context of higher education as well.

Tehranian's (2009) framework is applicable to view systems from a societal level down to the individual level, however, this frame or a reconceptualized model could be applied to view the intricacies of racialization at universities only. Future studies could use archival documents and interviews with administrators and other university affiliates to understand how Iranian people are being represented in different spaces (physical and virtual) on campus. This type of research should consider relying on sociological models as opposed to psychological due to their consideration for external influences on identity development. The decision to use a sociology-based model in this study proved successful given the many external influences on second generation Iranian identity development.

Other considerations for future research include the incorporation of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990) of SWANA people. Participants' narratives held similar themes, however, there were times when I noticed differences in experiences as a result of gender and religious differences. The two women in this study, Niloufar and Jasmine, were equally aware of their identity as women as they were their Brownness. Furthermore, if future study participants identified as Muslim, some of the findings of this study might differ, particularly if women in the study donned a hijab. In this case, their awareness of visibility would presumably be different from others in the study.

Beyond examining how different marginalized identities would affect the findings in this study, it might also be advantageous for future studies to choose participants from diverse major backgrounds. Coincidentally, all participants were STEM majors, and all but one were engineering majors. At the same time, it might be worth investigating career and major choice among Iranian students, who seem to largely study in such fields. Finally, although a few participants noted why their parents emigrated to the United States from Iran, further examining

the reasons behind their parents emigration could be noteworthy for future studies. This data could be important for contextualizing participant perceptions, which are highly influenced by their parents (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

A final recommendation for future SWANA studies could be to understand the role of student organizations for this population (Modir & Kia-Keating). All participants in this study were aware of the Iranian student organization on their campus, however, not all of them were members. For some, the organization was incredibly helpful in increasing cultural pride and retention of cultural practices, however, for others it was exclusive and caused more disruption in their campus community. It could be beneficial to understand what other positives come from this organization, especially academically. This type of study would also be interesting to understand how Iranian students discuss "race" among themselves; I found that participants in the study focused on their ethnic and cultural identity more than race, yet they all were discontent about being categorized as white. A focus group study could be helpful to situate participants with each other and hold a discussion solely on racial identity.

Lastly, and perhaps most critically, future research studying the racialization of SWANA students should include participants from different ethnic groups in the region. Although this study gave insight to the racialized experiences of SWANA students through the narratives of second generation Iranians, it is still not representative of the larger population. SWANA studies conducted with participants from Egypt, Kuwait, Turkey, and Afghanistan could provide deeper understanding of how this population more holistically understands race, or, how they differ in their understandings of race.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study present several recommendations for student affairs practitioners and higher education administrators to better understand and support second generation Iranian students. In addition to revisiting and broadening SWANA research, participants underscore the important role universities and subsequent resources— or lack thereof— play in their identity development.

Participants described shifts in their self-perception moving from primary to secondary education. A critical justification for this shift came from their engagement in an on-campus Iranian student organization where they felt a sense of normalcy, authenticity, and visibility being among their community. Nima and Armon in particular discussed values of the organization which included community building, increased pride, and opportunities for cultural retainment. Modir & Kia-Keating's (2018) study detailed participants' desire for cultural organizations to decrease feelings of isolation on campus. Student affairs professionals may consider examining the organization's environment and comparing it to students' perception of the larger campus climate. Even though a couple participants discussed the benefits of such an organization, others, like Jasmine, discussed the disadvantages such as feelings of exclusion and ethnic imposter syndrome. As a result, student affairs professionals, particularly those working in multicultural centers, could set up more formalized spaces for the broader SWANA community to connect and gather. In doing so, there is potential to build intra- and intergroup solidarity between Arabs, Iranians, and other SWANA ethnic groups (Maghbouleh, 2017).

Maghbouleh (2017) in her book, *The Limits of Whiteness,* assesses the impact of a Middle Eastern Resource Center (MERC) on campus: "The interplay between old and new as embodied in the physical space of the MERC possessed special meaning in its second generation

context…a nostalgic display of Iranian knowledge that transcended spatial and temporal boundaries" (p. 104). Maghbouleh goes on to explain that it was this space which connected second generation Iranians and other SWANAs to their parents' homeland, an "inherited nostalgia" (p. 102); it also was a space to celebrate such traditions without the pressure to cover. Furthermore, people in this role would hold the necessary skills to foster community and serve as an advisor and resource to students, building their social capital as well (Yosso, 2005).

In these spaces, and in academic spaces as well, higher education professionals should consider how they can promote educational opportunities for both SWANAs and other students on campus (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). Niloufar and Nima mentioned several times their disappointment in their peers' ignorance about their culture and attributed it to a lack of education. By giving these students a home in a multicultural center or in another space on campus, they will have the necessary support and guidance from staff who can host educational programs on campus about their culture (Maghbouleh, 2017). This allows two things to be done: (1) sheds misconceptions and shatters the singular narrative about their community, and (2) uplifts positive, accurate representations of this population and instills a sense of pride in SWANA students. Even more pressing is the prospect of educational engagement decreasing hate-bias incidents on campus, fueled by negative imagery from the top-down (Ali & Bagheri, 2009).

By doing this, participants would also feel less singularly responsible for educating their peers on their culture. In addition, they would also be learning about their culture. Almost all participants hinted at a sense of cultural attrition, whether through language, cooking, or historical knowledge. Having a language program funded by the State Department is a seemingly insufficient path for SWANA students to learn about their culture; based on what participants

shared, specifically Armon, there seems to be hesitation as a result of the university's intentions behind programs tied to national defenses. This is the only opportunity second generation Iranian students have to connect with their language yet their motivations to study Farsi could vastly differ from other students in the course. Neda Maghbouleh (2017) described the uncomfortability students felt from taking Farsi language courses alongside white ROTC students:

> The classroom's micro-interactions expose the complexity and interplay of perceived and actual racial identities: a technically white population of Iranian students were locally understood as non-white by their mostly European American military counterparts. (p. 100)

Providing another space for them, as other Students of Color are afforded, is not only fairly non-intrusive, it is equitable. Beyond this, universities may want to reconsider their sources of funding for such programs, if possible.

Gaining space and resources on campus could not be possible without one major change: disaggregating SWANA from the "white" racial category on university demographic forms. If this change is not made, SWANA students will remain invisible in every facet of higher education, as they currently are in larger society. Their invisibility will be apparent when needing data as simple as the number of SWANA students in attendance on campus, their residence on campus, those graduating from university, their recruitment, or retention between academic years. Furthermore, this erasure also bars them from adequate access to support services available to other Students of Color, such as affinity group counseling sessions, multicultural programs, scholarships, or advising (Maghbouleh, 2017; Parvini & Simani, 2019). Even beyond students, the negligence to include a SWANA or MENA category of demographic forms also affects faculty and staff data. Niloufar expressed the desperation she felt to connect with a faculty member that represented her on campus or in any of her courses. Universities that

aggregate SWANA into white would not be able to gauge the diversity of their faculty accurately, and they certainly would not have any knowledge of the number of SWANA professors or staff on campus (El-Farra, Hasnain, & Mason, 2013).

The decision to leave out this racial category on forms has a significant impact and ripple-effect. Participants shared their pain, confusion, and frustration as a result of having their invisibility perpetuated by an institution that claims to see them and other Students of Color. Participants bought into the idea that college would be a vastly different experience from their primary schooling, however, it is apparent that they continue to be failed by the university system's oversight to accurately represent and support them. As a result, they are left to fend for themselves when it comes to combating hate-bias on campus, learning about their culture, and teaching others about their culture. Furthermore, they are left in the dark when they need support (financially, academically, and emotionally) from offices and centers who are available to other marginalized students. On campus, they continue to navigate their place on the color line and in situations when they are erased or ostracized by people and systems larger than them.

Conclusion

I recalled hearing the term "research is me-search" in my undergraduate university, when my supervisor discussed her passion to study how gender played a role in neurological differences. I thought I understood what she meant, but in pursuing and completing this study, this phrase really took on a new meaning for me. I was confused in the fall semester of my Master's degree in my courses by the way race was being discussed. My whole life I was unsure of my racial identity and looked forward to discussing the social construction of race in a nuanced way, however, that did not happen, for me. I never came across a chapter in any of our textbooks that described the challenges that SWANA students faced on campus. I was motivated

to complete this study to initially learn more about myself and contribute to a seemingly black hole in the literature, but more importantly, I saw an opportunity to represent, uplift, and retell the stories of this community whose narratives were once again erased. Most surprising was they were being erased in real time and space in a place— in a field where diversity mattered.

As powerful as I believed this study could be, I also knew it would be incredibly stressful, frustrating, and exhausting to conduct. Through my writing, I was forced to confront and relive many of my experiences growing up in a new light where I was able to locate injustice and inequity. Although I had insider status (Creswell, 2013) with this community, *I* had the opportunity to develop in the research process, whereas my participants did not. They were not on the journey of self-discovery with me prior to their interviews. Therefore, I was anxious about overshadowing participants' voices with mine, or worse, coming to the realization that their experiences were vastly different from my own. I held this study to a high standard and wanted to honor every piece of it, especially the narratives of participants who did not have a chance to tell their stories before.

As I met with each participant, I became more and more confident in the purpose and intention of this study. While they shared their narratives with me, I was able to picture their story in my mind, while recalling similar experiences in my own life. Though we also differed in many ways, we shared a similar struggle in understanding our racial, and at times even, our ethnic identity. I heard them when they described painful memories from grade school where their peers excluded them; I heard them when they shared their pride in their parents' immigrant stories; and, I heard them when they explained the sense of loneliness and loss of community they feel.

At the end of each interview I walked away with a mixed bag of feelings: sadness, anger, worry, joy, pride, hope. I believe I gained much more from their stories, than they had gained from sharing them. I followed up with each one to share our transcript, get a pseudonym, and connect them with campus resources. I also asked that they share what it was like to have the opportunity to talk with me and be vulnerable, if they were willing. They described it as "cathartic" and that they had never been able to vocalize their experiences; rarely had they been asked to actively think and talk about them. One participant said it made them feel less alone. Another said it was "nice to finally get some representation."

I understand the power of qualitative research. I originally wrote that this study is significant for its contribution to literature among other reasons. While this is true, it is significant for far more important reasons: to tell the truth, to tell it all, to uplift, and to provide hope. I learned more about myself, this community and more in this research process than I have for the past twenty five years of my life. These participants' narratives emphasized the importance of this work, both in regards to research and practice, and among higher education professionals. Many times in history universities have taken the step forward before the rest of society. It is my hope that this study, which gives insight into the worlds of invisible students, encourages a minimal change in policy, but a monumental difference in their visibility on campus and beyond.

Appendix A

Good afternoon, [NAME OF ORGANIZATION LEADER],

My name is Sama Sabihi and I am a graduate student in the Student Affairs program at the University of Maryland. I am conducting a study for my thesis and I am seeking participants who identify as children of Iranian immigrants and are engaged with your organization, the Iranian Students' Foundation, to discuss their experiences.

I was hoping you could help me send the message below to those who are active members of your organization. All information will be kept confidential and used only for the purposes of this thesis. Interviews will take place in February.

I would truly appreciate it if you can share this via the listserv and with other students you may know.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact me at ssabihi@umd.edu.

Thank you,

Sama

Recruiting Iranian students from UMD to Participate in a Higher Education Study

The purpose of this research project is to understand second generation Iranian students' experiences at the University of Maryland, College Park

Participant expectations: The researcher will collect data through one in-person interview which will be audio-recorded. The interview will last about 60-90 minutes. All information will be confidential on a password-protected file and utilized for the purposes of a thesis project.

Participants' criteria: All participants must: (1) be undergraduate students attending University of Maryland (2) have completed at least one academic semester at the institution, (3) identify as children of Iranian immigrants, and (4) be at least 18 years old.

To participate in this study, please complete this online screening survey: [INSERT LINK].
If you are screened as eligible for the study, you will be contacted to schedule an interview in February.

Contact **Sama Sabihi** at ssabihi@umd.edu if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you!

Appendix B

Participant Screening Questionnaire

Name:
Email:
Phone Number:
Year:
Age:

Fill in

Where was your mother born?

Where was your father born?

Yes/No

Were you born in the United States?

Were you raised in the United States (majority of the time between ages 0-17)?

Are you involved in any Middle Eastern or Iranian cultural clubs/organizations?

Short Answer Responses

How do you define your race?

How do you define your ethnicity?

What does being Iranian mean to you?

Appendix C

Institutional Review Board
1204 Marie Mount Hall ● 7814 Regents Drive ● College Park, MD 20742 ● 301-405-4212 ● irb@umd.edu

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Project Title	*Thesis Research: Reconciliation of Racial Identity Among Second Generation Iranian*
Purpose of the Study	*This research is being conducted by* ***Sama Sabihi*** *at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you self-identified as a second generation Iranian and met the criteria for participation. The purpose of this research project is to better understand how second generation Iranians understand their racial identities.*
Procedures	*The procedures involve one 60-90 minute interview session that will be audio recorded, at a location of your choosing. Interviews will be audio recorded. All collected data will be kept secure with special attention not to include identifiable information.*
Potential Risks and Discomforts	*There may be some risks from participating in this research study, including feeling negative emotions attached to sensitive topics while telling narrative. You will not be required to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering*
Potential Benefits	*There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, possible benefits include providing insight to an underrepresented population in research. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of Iranians racial identity.*
Confidentiality	*Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing recordings on a password protected computer, to be deleted after the conclusion of the study. All records will be kept by student chosen pseudonym.* *If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.*
Right to Withdraw and Questions	*Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not*

	to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. *If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:* ***Sama Sabihi*** ***1131GG Glenn L. Martin Hall*** ***ssabihi@umd.edu*** ***301-401-0315***
Participant Rights	*If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:* University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678 *For more information regarding participant rights, please visit:* https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants *This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.*
Statement of Consent	*Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.* *If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.*
Signature and Date	**NAME OF PARTICIPANT** **[Please Print]** |
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT |

Appendix D

Guiding Research Questions:

1. What messages do second generation Iranians receive about their racial identity?
2. How do they respond to these messages?
3. How do they perceive the university playing a role in their racial identity development, if at all?

Interview Questions

Background Information

1. What are things about yourself that you like people to know when they are getting to know you? How come?

Racial Identity Influences

1. How did/do your parents talk about race, if at all?
2. What does being Iranian mean to your family, from your perspective?
3. Are there messages your family shared with you about other Middle Easterners or Arabs? If so, what are they?
    a. How does this make you feel?
    b. What are your perceptions of Middle Easterners or Arabs?
4. Beyond family, where else did you learn about your race?
    a. What did you learn? (i.e. from teachers, peers)
5. How aware are you of your race when interacting with other people?
    a. Has this changed over time?

Overlap

1. How have these external messages you've received informed your understanding of your race?
2. Have you ever had messages about race conflict between your peers and parents? If so, how?
    a. How have you navigated this?
3. What are some stereotypes that exist about your respective identities? How do you respond when you hear those stereotypes?
4. Can you tell me about a time you have been surprised or comforted by something on campus connected to your identity? How about a time you have been disappointed?
    a. Spaces you've connected with your identity?
    b. Resources you may need?
5. What else should I know?

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