

Growing up as a Second-Generation White American Hindu: A Symbolic
Interactionist Approach to an Ethnographic Study

A Senior Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Sociology Major and the B.A. Degree,
The University of California, Santa Cruz

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11 June 2016

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ABSTRACT

This senior thesis aims to explore the experience of growing up as a second-generation White American Hindu, and this groups' sense of social belonging and creation of personal identity in the Western world as adults. I will be using the lens of symbolic interactionism from George Herbert Mead (2015 [1934]), Erving Goffman (1956), Herbert George Blumer (1969), and Tamotsu Shibutani (2009 [1961]), who laid a foundation for studying identity formation in society. By applying Shibutani's framework for the creation of personal identity and reference group theory, along with definitions of religion by Emile Durkheim (2001 [1912]), I will analyze what it means to be part of this subgroup in American. Looking back at California in the early 1970s-80s, many individuals who were of different religious backgrounds converted to Hinduism and became devotees following the customs, culture, religion, and traditions of South Indian Hinduism through the Saiva Siddhanta Church, a legally recognized religious organization that follows the Saivite Hindu Traditions. This research project specifically studied the people who were born and raised in the Saiva Siddhanta Church. Through in-depth interviews of 12 participants, five key themes were explored: belief and definition of self, religion versus ethnicity, communicating and connecting with others, gender roles, and a general understanding and personal explanation of the respondents experiences. In conclusion, it can be seen that Shibutani's reference group theory has two key flaws. First, it does not address when there are two competing dominant reference groups. Secondly, it does not speak to how one navigates the social world when there is no reference group that applies to one's life.

Key Words: Sociological Social Psychology, Sociology of Identity, Sociology of Religion, Saivite Hinduism, Second-Generation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to convey my deepest gratitude to Professor Ben Crow, my research supervisor, for his patient guidance, enthusiastic encouragement, and useful critiques of this senior thesis. I am also particularly grateful for the assistance given by Tina Nikfarjam, for her endless amounts of reinforcement, examples, and important deadlines. My grateful thanks are also extended to the Interviewees, whose words and experiences brought this project to life. Finally, I wish to thank my parents, Adi and Asha Alahan, for their endless support and encouragement throughout my entire educational career.

PREFACE

Yeah, at varying levels, people will continue to ask questions until their curiosity is satisfied and some of their questions can be perceived as invasive, but because, I guess I just accept the fact that it is unique and it is different and people want to try and figure out where I fit into their framework or their understanding of the world, and until they can fit me in somewhere they are going to keep asking questions until they're satisfied, yeah it can be demanding but, I've come to expect it. –Respondent 7

The major lack of sex ED for it being an open-minded culture was really weird to me. I didn't really learn anything from my parents, I learned how to not have sex. . . I wasn't allowed to take sex ED in school; I was the only one in my class who had to sit in the library. –Respondent 5

There was no room to be yourself, that wasn't the point of it, at all. They were trying to put something together, they were trying create a society within this community and maybe if it had been a little easier, or more natural, or something. There were all these dynamics at play that were really hard for people to understand, and all these backgrounds that were very harsh, and maybe Hinduism and Indian culture were nowhere near as harsh as it all came out, but because that's where they came from, that is what was innately in them, and that's why it felt so harsh all of the time. –Respondent 1

What made me mad in India was being told I couldn't be a Hindu because I was the wrong color. –Respondent 4

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INTRODUCTION

Looking back at California in the early 1970s-80s, many individuals who were of different religious backgrounds converted to Hinduism and became devotees following the customs, culture, religion, and traditions of Saivite Hinduism through the Saiva Siddhanta Church. Many of these individuals were young couples that had their children after formally converting, and raised their sons and daughters under this Hindu belief system. For a time this was a large community with many children born into this lifestyle. This second-generation is not considered converts of Hinduism, as they were born and raised with the fundamental belief and background that lie in Indian traditions. Nevertheless, because they are categorized as White, many people in America contest the idea that they could have a culture or background that is not like that of other White Americans. That is where this research takes place. By utilizing ethnographic research (Appendix A: Method), I aim to investigate the experience of people who were born and raised in the Saiva Siddhanta Church, and their sense of social belonging and creation of personal identity in the Western world as adults. To keep their identity confidential, all names and identifying markers have been removed and replaced with a respondent number. While many respondents have discontinued practicing Hinduism, growing up in a subgroup in America has an effect on one's experiences and outlook on life.

This research explores how second-generation White American Hindus navigated the experiences of being raised in a religion that was not of their ethnic or cultural background. Specifically, focusing on how these second-generation White American Hindus understand and relate to their religious upbringing, place themselves in society, view religion and ethnicity, if gender roles affected their views on how they were supposed to act and relate to the opposite sex, and their overall experience of growing up part of the Saiva Siddhanta Church. The findings of

this thesis are organized into these five key themes: belief and definition of self, religion versus ethnicity, communicating and connecting with others, gender roles, and a general understanding and personal explanation of the respondents' experiences. Using the lens of symbolic interactionism from George Herbert Mead (2015 [1934]), Erving Goffman (1956), Herbert George Blumer (1969), and Tamotsu Shibutani (2009 [1961]), who laid a foundation for studying identity formation in society. By applying Shibutani's framework for the creation of personal identity and reference group theory, along with definitions of religion by Emile Durkheim (2001 [1912]), I will analyze what it means to be part of this subgroup in American. Additionally, I will explore how Shibutani's reference group theory does not apply to facets of this group. Through researching literature on this subject it quickly became apparent that there was limited resources available.

I noticed a discrepancy in scholarly articles on Hindu converts in America. The *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* has many studies such as: "The Interplay between Ethnicity, Religion, and Gender among Second-Generation Christian and Muslim Arabs in Montreal" (Eid 2003), "Religion and Ethnicity among Sri Lankan Tamil Youth in Ontario" (Amarasingam 2008), and "Identity Formation of Second-Generation Indo-Canadians" (Sodhi 2008). Yet, none of them address second-generation White Hindus. Because research is lacking on this field of study, my subjects do not have resources to turn people to who are curious about them.

My subjects have often had to explain and defend their upbringing, define what Hinduism is, and describe why and how they are—or were raised—White and Hindu. As a member of this community growing up, I have personal insights and a network a people to draw from. While being a member of this group may lead to some unforeseeable biases, my position allows me a standpoint that others would not have. I had access to a group of people who are diverse and

dispersed, facilitating a connection that would have been difficult for an “outsider” to come by. It was also through my own difficult and daily experiences that brought forth the creation of this senior thesis.

The Pillow Incident: How This Project Was Inspired

Instructor’s announcement to the class: “If you want we have those, what are they called...Darshani! The *circle* pillows! What are they *called*?”

“I’m sorry, what? I don’t know, circle pillows...?”

“Yes those! But what are they called? You know, you *sit* on them... you don’t know the *name*? Your parents *must* have had them!”

“Oh... Hmmm, umm. Well I—No. Sorry.”

“...”

Followed by a blank stare of astonishment and disappointment from my yoga instructor.

Never ending are the assumptions that I know all things related to Hinduism and Indian culture once someone learns my name. To back up, before I was born my parents joined the Saiva Siddhanta Church, and formally converted to Saivite Hinduism. This organization followed a particularly strict, traditional, and ultra-orthodox South Indian belief system. My parents changed their first and last names to Hindu names, and gave my siblings and I Hindu names. I was born in Southern California, and am mostly Norwegian with a smattering of French, German, and Western European/Scandinavian descent. I grew up in suburbia Concord, California, and was homeschooled up until sophomore year of high school. While growing up and into my early teenage years, I always wore Punjabis (traditional Indian clothing) and was

raised with very clear and distinct gender roles. Women were supposed to learn how to cook, clean, sew, sing, dance, and any other duties designed to take care of the family. Men found a trade and worked out of the home to financially support the family, and like most religions, abstinence was to be maintained until marriage. Growing up in this system was difficult, as with any child I just wanted to be “normal.” In my mind being normal entailed: going to a public school, having a diverse group of friends, and being able to dress like everyone else.

Nevertheless, the idea of “normalcy” is subject to many different interpretations.

Regardless of who I know or how I dress, people think it is strange that I have an Indian name and was raised Hindu. I was, and am, constantly asked *why* or even *how*. Ever since I was a child, without a full understanding of what I was supposed to tell them, I have had to defend my parent’s decisions, define my existence, describe my experiences, and explain who I am. The fact that I am not from India, not Indian, that my parents are not Indian, that I was not adopted, that I did not live in India, or that I have no ethnic nor heritage related to India/Hinduism, has confused nearly all that I have met. In America where the dominant majority is White and Christian, people who were not part of the Saiva Siddhanta Church have struggled to understand why I was being raised the way I was, and many Indian people that were not part of the Church were not sure if they should accept me into their culture and community. Even though the Saiva Siddhanta Church is a legally recognized religious institution with hundreds of thousands devotees (Kauai’s Hindu Monastery 2016), many in America are unable to comprehend an upbringing such as mine.

Background on the Saiva Siddhanta Church and Conversion to Hinduism

Founded in 1949 and incorporated under United States law in 1957, the Saiva Siddhanta Church is recognized as a legitimate religious institute in both American law and by many prominent Hindu religious leaders in India and Sri Lanka. It is considered to be the first “Hindu Church” in America. The members of Saiva Siddhanta Church are spread all around the world, including the United States, Canada, Mauritius, Malaysia, Singapore, India, Sri Lanka and nations throughout Europe (Kauai’s Hindu Monastery 2016). Despite the broadness of followers, it is still seen as an oddity by many in the United States for a White American to be Hindu, even if one was born into it. In order to gain a better understanding of Hinduism some historical roots and statistical data will be explored.

According to a demographic study of the global religious landscape conducted by the Pew Research Center (2012a), it was found that out of the 6.9 billion people in the world, 5.8 billion people are religiously affiliated. This study looked at the eight major recognized religions and based its analysis on survey data, population registers, and upwards of 2,500 censuses of the estimated 2010 global population. Hindus represent 15 percent of the global population, or roughly 1 billion Hindus worldwide (Pew Research Centers 2012a). While Hinduism’s historic roots reside in the Asian and Pacific island region where roughly 99 percent of the followers reside (Pew Research Centers 2012b), it is not the only place one can be a Hindu. To this day, Hinduism is one of the oldest and third largest religions in the world (Pew Research Centers 2012a). While many religions have a specific place or origin within history, or a human founder as the voice of God, Hinduism makes no claim to either. In general, Hindus trace their traditions and beliefs back to the *Vedas* and *Agamas*, a scriptural authority thought to be beginning-less and timeless (Coward, Harold 2005:1; Subramuniaswami 2003 [1979]:xxiv).

Not only is the religion ancient, there is great diversity within Hinduism. With four major dominating sects of Hinduism consisting of: Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. These four denominations all share many common fundamental beliefs in Karma, Dharma, reincarnation, devotee worship and one Supreme Being. Yet, even though they share a common heritage and cultural practices, they can vary enough to be thought of as entirely different religions (Kauai's Hindu Monastery 2016), which adds to the confusion for non-followers. Much of the Western world has a very isolated understanding of Hinduism, primarily because of historical denominations, societal shifts, and geographical forces throughout the past 1,000 years. Scholarly research has been conducted mainly in North Indian belief systems, leaving the Southern Indian and Sri Lankan Saivite beliefs less understood.

While there is little understanding of the Hindu religions, there is even less regarding how one converts to a denomination within the religion. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami states, "It is important to know that one cannot simply enter 'the Hindu religion.' That is not possible. It is necessary to enter one of Hinduism's specific sects or denominations... of your choice and arrange for the name-giving sacrament, *nâmakarana samskâra*" (2000:xxvi). This is significant to understand, and sheds light onto why many of the parents, and other individuals changed their name to one of Hindu origin. The personal and social understanding of changing one's name is not taken lightly, and if one wants to pursue the Hindu religion, or any way of life, it is important to commit fully. Formally converting to Hinduism is more than just taking on the beliefs. Hinduism is deeply imbedded in one's life, and as Harold Coward (2005) states:

Traditional Hinduism sees no distinction between the sacred and the secular, no separation of religious ritual from daily activities, and no significant differences between religion and culture. Moreover, Hindus do not have a common creed that must be believed. Until recently, one could not become a Hindu unless one was born into a Hindu family, and one could not cease to be Hindu if one was born a Hindu (p. 1).

Being and/or becoming Hindu is a lifestyle commitment. Hinduism has been around for centuries, and has a rich history that is deeply rooted in traditional practices; nevertheless, in modern time converting to Hinduism *is* possible. While there are gurus (teachers) and books to help through this process, conversion to Hinduism is still highly contested by traditionalists and researchers who do not fully understand the culture.

Frank Neubert (2010) briefly covers the basic assumption that converting to Hinduism is not possible and not accepted culturally, and brings to attention examples of groups and religious organizations that are engaging in Hindu conversions. Within his study, Neubert seeks to separate the terms “Hindu Religion” and “Hinduism” to compare the differences between global movements and traditional values. This may be misleading, as the two cannot be separated as a race and religion. Neubert also claims that “Hinduism” or “a Hindu religion” should accept converts because it helps propel social capital, citing Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) idea of networking—that there are three different kinds of capital we gain in a societal sense that should be used and extracted from each other. Contrary to that assertion, it can be seen from the Pew Research Center demographic studies, followers of Hinduism are not lacking, even though converts are only recently being recognized as accepted members within the religion. Hinduism has no need to gain more followers for the sake of networking. Though many in modern times question the fundamental purpose of religion, and what it provides personally and socially.

A Sociological Approach to Religion and Identity Formation

There are many different reasons why people choose to follow a religion, but from a sociological standpoint, creating a community is one of the most prominent and practical reasons (Hunt

2002). Sociologist Emile Durkheim (2001 [1912]) is among most heavily cited in the Sociology of Religion field. Durkheim did not focus on the spiritual particulars of religion, whether God was real or not, but more on the social structure that religion provides. In addition to the *creation* of social structure within society, there are the different ways people *understand* society, through shared meaning of language and symbols. While Durkheim tackles the purpose of religion, theorists such as Mead, Goffman, and Shibutani discuss how people present themselves and understand each other through a theory called symbolic interactionism. Shibutani elaborates on the reference group theory, while Goffman analyzes how people portray themselves. Throughout my interviews I evaluated these three concepts—solidarity through religion, reference group theory, and theatre work, beginning with a closer look at the function of a religion.

Durkheim states, “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite in one single community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (2001 [1912]:46). As such, religion was to Durkheim a social construction, used to reinforce the morals and social norms that were held collectively by all within the community. The purpose of participating in religious life was to be a part of a society, imbued with a general understanding of the world and the individuals place in it (Hunt 2002), thus creating a sense of solidarity amongst fellow believers. This notion of solidarity goes far to explain an individual’s participation in religion, and lends understanding as to why one would chose to convert religions; namely to participate in a community of beliefs that aligned with one’s moral compass. While religion provides this social bond and moral compass, there is another process in understanding why and how individuals apply different perspective of people and communities onto their own lives.

The social phenomenon of how people interact in different situations depending on whom they are surrounded by is continually being researched (Charon 2007). One theory, reference group theory, attempts to divulge how people align their actions and behavior of groups they are, or wish to be, part of. Herbert Hiram Hyman (1942) coined the term reference group theory to explain this cultural process, however, it is later work by Tamotsu Shibutani (1955) that I used in this project. Shibutani also focused on how communication and interactions creates and reinforces culture on a daily basis:

Culture is not a static entity but a continuing process; norms are reaffirmed from day to day in social interactions. Those taking part in collective transactions approach one another with set expectations, and the realization of what is anticipated successively confirms and reinforces their perspectives. In this way, people in each cultural group are continuously supporting one another's perspectives, each by responding to the others in expected ways. In this sense culture is a product of communication (p. 564).

As Shibutani explains, our understanding of community and culture is reproduced through our interactions and communications with each other. Through this process of communication, people align themselves with different reference groups to understand and reproduce what they believe culturally (Charon 2007). "A reference group, then, is that group whose outlook is used by the actor as the frame of reference in the organization of his perceptual field" (Shibutani 1955:565). This idea of reference groups illuminates why the parents within the Saiva Siddhanta Church enforced ancient Indian cultural ideals on their children. Indian culture and religion was meant to be the reference group growing up, a perspective that was being continuously filtered throughout the group and reimagined in the same ways, every day. It also explains the confusion of many White Americans when they interacted with someone that does not fit the mold, or reference group, they are used to.

As fundamentally social creatures, humans interact with each other on a frequent basis. Through these interactions different forms of communication and understanding are acquired, learned, and formed. It is also through these interactions that humans acquire unique understandings of themselves and share common understandings (Charon 2007:57). One theory, symbolic interactionism, attempts to explain these occurrences and make sense of these shared meanings. Symbolic interactionism is a theory originating from George Herbert Mead (1934), and it looks at the meanings that are placed on objects, behaviors, and interactions. These meanings are formed based primarily on what people *believe* to be true, the subjective meaning, versus what is objectively true. It is through social interaction that these meanings are articulated. Nevertheless, as we learn meanings through those social interactions, we also want to present ourselves in certain ways at certain times based on how we want to fit into a situation, or have others view us. In this sense, we are symbolically portraying ourselves on a daily basis.

This definition of symbolic interactionism is continued by Herbert Blumer (1969), a former student of Mead. Blumer states, “The term ‘symbolic interaction’ refers, of course, to the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings. . . Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions” (p. 66). Shibutani agrees that, it is through interactions that humans prescribe meaning onto things based on what we see other people do, and how we define it. A concept within symbolic interaction described by Erving Goffman (1959:49) is the theatrical portrayal of how we present ourselves. Goffman states we have a front and backstage that we use to perform in life and different social settings. Specifically, we have the side of us we show people or want to present at the moment, knowingly or not, and we also have what is thought of as a backstage, the part of us that is more hidden, or less likely to be out in public

view depending on the circumstances. Through the course of the interviews it was seen that many of my subjects' responses showed that they have incorporated aspects of the theatre in their daily lives.

After partial transcription and compiling all of the interviews, the five key themes began to emerge: belief and definition of self, religion versus ethnicity, communicating and connecting with others, gender roles, and a general understanding and personal explanation of their experience. While some of the topics may overlap slightly, the purpose is to shed light on how the subjects have come to define themselves personally and outwards. How this experience shaped who they are and what their feelings and opinions are in trying to understand growing up as a second-generation White American Hindu. Though, the process of definition can come easier to some more than others.

BELIEF AND DEFINITION OF SELF

“No I do not identify as Hindu, but I do recognize that a lot of my fundamental beliefs about how I view the world and how I relate to other people and how I treat other people are based on Hindu beliefs...” -Respondent 7

Having to define what one believes can be difficult for anyone, regardless of upbringing. Everyone goes through a process of trying to understanding themselves, and as Shibutani describes, “each can identify himself [or herself] as a particular human being, characterized by a distinctive set of attributes; he [or she] regards himself as an individual of a unique sort. Each person, then, has a relatively stable *self-conception*” (Shibutani 2009 [1961]:214-5). This self-conception, or self-definition can become problematic concerning religious beliefs when one is not of the traditional ethnic background. Those who are raised with a strict set of rules and norms are shaped by that way of thinking, even when one stops practicing the religious aspects of the

belief system. This is where my first set of questions began in the interviews: “do you consider yourself Hindu, and do you still practice?”

There were varying responses from the subjects when it came to defining their current beliefs and if they define themselves as Hindu. 17 percent state they are atheist/agnostic, and another 17 percent answered with a resounding “yes!” they are Hindu and do still practice. However, it is the remaining 66 percent that I want to focus on more closely in this section. Many began answering the question that they do not practice or consider themselves Hindu, yet as their explanation went on to describe their beliefs they would come back around to the fact that in many ways Hinduism still holds as the framework on life. Respondent 8 in particular said:

I definitely don't practice Hinduism, but I would say that I lean more towards Hindu beliefs, so I guess I would say that I'm non-practicing Hindu. Because, I decided in high school that I liked certain concepts, whether they were scientifically valid or not I don't really care, it's more that I don't like the idea that there's nothing after you die and I don't like the idea that there's no purpose. So I choose to believe that reincarnation exists and that Karma is a thing. Whether or not it is I don't really know, I don't think people necessarily can know. So I would say because of that, [I'm] probably still Hindu.

This is an example of how religion provides a social structure of understanding the world and where one is placed within the system (Durkheim 2001 [1912]). Respondent 7 described similar views on how they hold some of the spiritual beliefs of Hinduism, yet do not incorporate it into their daily life:

No I do not identify as Hindu, but I do recognize that a lot of my fundamental beliefs about how I view the world and how I relate to other people and how I treat other people are based on Hindu beliefs. Primarily just the belief in Karma, that what you do to others will be done to you, and likewise if something good or bad happens to another person, I think that they did a good or bad thing in the past depending on—that's why the “deserve” that to happen to them is because they did that, at some previous experience or previous life. So Karma, Dharma, and reincarnation, I believe in those concepts, but I do not practice any religious, I don't follow any religious [systems]. But if I had to

describe my religious outlook, or my spiritual outlook it's most closely aligned with the fundamental Hindu beliefs.

Many of the subjects have taken this idea, and used parts of their upbringing as the positive foundation in their life. Some have translated their upbringing as more of a *perspective* on life, rather than strictly following the religion, and have taken some of the core practices and maintain a relationship with the religion. Some have created more of a personal practice within the realm of beliefs, incorporating practices such as meditation and prayer in their daily life. However even though some of the subjects found ways to integrate Hinduism into their life in a way that are spiritually enriching, others still struggled with how to do that or if they even wanted to.

Respondent 9 tried to summarize how they define themselves as Hindu or not:

I feel like, because I was born into it, it is who I am regardless if I practice. It's like being Jewish; you're born Jewish so you're Jewish, no questions asked. I am Hindu, but I don't always know what that means for me and how I want to that be part of my life.

Believing in Hinduism, the concepts and the explanations of life and afterlife are all commonly incorporated into many of the respondents' answers. One explanation of this could be because they were raised with Hinduism, however, even though the religion is part of their background, it becomes difficult to identify if that translate into being part of their culture.

Claiming a spiritual belief to make sense of the world was widely accepted amongst the respondents, yet there was noticeable disagreement between the respondents when it came to defining if their background or culture were in line with being Hindu. When asked specifically if Hinduism was part of their culture, one reply was a clear and confident "yes, absolutely Hinduism is part of my culture" (Respondent 6). While others emphasized how they were raised

practicing Hindu culture, they were not sure if that gave them the right to say it was *their* culture.

Respondent 10 tried to elaborate on the subject:

I struggle with this question because I have actually thought about it a few different times. I know I am White and grew up in America, yet literally did nothing that was considered typical "American." You know, I learned bharatanatyam [classical Indian dance], went to the temple, was homeschooled, wore Hindu clothes, the list goes on and on. So I feel like because that was how I was raised it sort of is part of my culture, but its still confusing because its not part of my [heritage].

Part of the struggle with answering if Hinduism is part of their culture is because many people have often contested the fact that because they are White, they cannot claim an Eastern background. Nevertheless, Respondent 7 was more certain that the culture was not aligned with their daily life:

Not exactly. Culture is different for me. My cultural experience is more aligned with being a middle class white heterosexual [person] in California, and culturally my behaviors fit that more so than my religious influences or my religious experiences. I mean, I've been exposed to a lot Hindu culture and I think I have a really unique perspective on that culture, whereas other middle class white heterosexual [people] have never had a lot of the experiences I have had. Especially with Hindu culture in particular, but I don't feel like my behavior reflects Hinduism in anyway.

Even though there is some uncertainty between the respondents with deciding if Hinduism is part of their culture, there is still the argument that culture is a social creation. Communication is the driving force and influential guide to an individual's daily experience with how we all behave and think, as such, communication is the foundation to how society is created. (Charon 2007:37) In this sense, many of the subjects could claim Hinduism is part of their culture because it is how they socially communicated themselves growing up. This section considers how personal belief and self-conception arises from a range of experiences. The beliefs my subjects were raised with are not easily discarded, and some use Hinduism as a moral backbone to help create sense and

order within their lives. Regardless of the respondents' current beliefs, some of the hesitation to respond to the question of culture stems from trying to determine if Hinduism (the religion) and being Indian (the ethnicity) are one and the same.

RELIGION VERSUS ETHNICITY

...Culture is really tied into it though, so it gets complicated, but then again its what I was raised with so it makes sense to me. It's my reality. –Respondent 3

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2016) defines religion in three points: “1. The belief in a god or in a group of gods. 2. An organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods. 3. An interest, a belief, or an activity that is very important to a person or group.” Nowhere within those definitions does it state restrictions as to who can follow what religion. Yet culturally it is often seen that being Indian and Hindu are one and the same, and something that cannot be replicated from the outside. Although, if following the traditional belief that one can only be born Hindu, then all of my subjects fit that mold. These cultural and traditional ideologies become complicated in modern times as many different types of people practice and believe in different religions. Hinduism being an ancient religion with many different denominations, it is ultimately undecided who has the right to be the spokesperson for all who practice. There were three articles that stood out that had some relevance to my research concerning religion and ethnicity.

The first scholarly article was by Jessica Jacobson (1997), who concentrated on the questions as to *why* religion was more important than ethnicity to young British Pakistanis. For that research group, ethnicity resides in a particular place, while religion can be manifest anywhere. The subjects in the study also found more camaraderie with those who were part of the same minority religious subgroups, than of those who had ancestors from the same area.

These religious identities were discussed in a series of in-depth interviews with the intention of demonstrating how much can be learned about identity formation by focusing on subgroups.

While this study has concerns similar to my research question, it focuses more on the religious beliefs of the subjects.

The second, Paul Eid (2003), was closer to my research as he describes the conflict of religion, ethnicity, and gender for second-generation Christian and Muslims in Montreal. Eid had questionnaire samples from five different Montreal colleges of 250 second-generation Arabs, 16 of which participated in in-depth interviews. For Eid's subjects, religion acted as an "ethnic-like" maker and group binder, in that the subjects related more closely to the religion they were raised with rather than where historically their ethnicity lies. Like Jacobson's (1997) subjects, to them religion can be taken anywhere, but a place where ancestors may have lived stays where it is. Nevertheless, this study does not focus on people who follow a religion that is not of their ethnic background.

Amarnath Amarasingam (2008) describes the opinions of religion and ethnicity from interviews with 25 Sri Lankan Tamil college students in Ontario. Amarasingam argues that individuals of different ethnic or religious groups should have the freedom to define themselves instead of being labeled by an outside source or marker. Much like my respondents, the subjects in this study had difficulty answering questions with 100 percent certainty and clarity. While the conclusion of this study was that Ontario youth identify with ethnicity more than religion, the opposite of Jacobson's (1997) and Eid's (2003) study, it still only focused on groups who were already the ethnicity that was "allowed" for their religion. All three articles add to explaining the difficulties in being a religious subgroup and the differences between religion and ethnicity, yet they still fail to be encompassing enough to address the particular issues of my subjects.

Historically, it has been understood that religion is a building block to ethnicity, however, since there is so much global movement today, religion can easily be practiced without the ethnic background (Jacobson 1997).

When my respondents were asked if they believe that religion and ethnicity were intrinsically tied, 92 percent of them disagreed. One who did agree stated: “I feel like India and Hinduism are pretty much the same, and if people really resonate with [Hinduism]... more power to them, but then they should move to India” (Respondent 5). This argument is problematic because it overlooks the many Indians who are Hindu and live in the United States. Other respondents answered to the religion/ethnicity conundrum by looking at it from a historical background and through their lived experiences.

Some would say yes, [although] I feel like the exception to that rule because technically I was born Hindu, which makes me a quote “authentic Hindu,” and I say some would say no because they believe that you don’t become Hindu you are Hindu. You’re born that way, and I was born with those beliefs and born to Hindu parents, they converted which some might disagree with, but I didn’t [convert], I was born into a Hindu household. So historically yes I think religions are tied to certain ethnic groups and when you say you’re Hindu but you appear to be White, that confuses people. So I think that is a relatively modern phenomenon that you’ll have people from different ethnic groups practicing a religion that is historically not part of that ethnic group. So there is a relationship and I think that relationship is changing over time, but, my answer is no that they are not fundamentally tied, that there is a bit more fluidity, especially now, and as a product of that fluidity I mean I kind of have to believe that they are not intrinsically tied (Respondent 7).

This explanation follows the traditional thought that being born Hindu does give you more legitimacy, and takes into account the modern global movement of people in the world. Because they did not *choose* to be a part of a religion that was not of their ethnic or cultural background, they were born into a traditional Hindu household. Another subject pointed out how different

ethnic groups follow other religions, and that the bottom line having respect and understanding of the beliefs need to be involved:

I don't think that you need to be an Indian person to be Hindu, just in the same manner that you don't need to be Italian to be Catholic. I feel that anybody can be any religion that they want to be as long they you know, educate yourself on it, don't just go in and say "hey this is what I am" but I don't think [ethnicity and religion] have anything to do with each other. You can be whatever [religion] you want with your ethnic background (Respondent 6).

It is often forgotten that other religions have followers of different ethnic backgrounds, and are not questioned for doing so. Nevertheless, in an attempt to understand what it meant to them, many respondents considered the breadth of Hinduism and creating a personal connection with it. Respondent 3 discusses the dilemma of categorizing Hinduism as solely a personal philosophy, and explains how people often misconstrue that Hinduism is not really a religion or that it is tied to a particular ethnic group:

It's very, very common to have people say, "well Hinduism is a philosophy not a religion." Because they might have taken like, some random world religions class... People are quick to jump to the conclusion that you're just interested in specific aspects or lifestyle. I believe it is sustainable as a religion without the heritage attached. Culture is really tied into it though, so it gets complicated, but then again it's what I was raised with so it makes sense to me. It's my reality.

Many of these issues and misunderstandings are born from the fact that most of what is written and discussed about Hinduism comes from a Western perspective (Kauai's Hindu Monastery 2016). One thing that is not talked about often is that even though Hinduism is an ancient religion, it is still evolving. Respondent 1 talked about how Hinduism has transformed in the Western world because of outside involvement and interest:

One of my favorite parts about Hinduism is that it is extremely diverse, and it's about each lineage within it having some representation in current times. That's what defines whether it's a living religion or not, I think like, the sad part for most of what I see in Indian people around, that have come from India, that are here, that are assimilating, is they're now in this Western culture where they're trying to adjust to a much more perhaps more "intellectual way" of existing where they have to explain everything they do or just kind of put everything in terms of science because that's the current paradigm, that's the current religion and Hinduism as they've known it is not explicable that way, and the benefit to these White people having adopted Hinduism is that, it has gone through that "Western mind analysis" and come out the other end into some language that was guided from Gurudeva coming from an actual lineage. It wasn't just Gurudeva just independently saying "hey I'm going to figure these texts out and come up with my own ideas about them." It was him kind of getting the endorsement and the training from Yogaswami and carrying forward that living version of Hinduism. And within that there's been the metabolism of the Eastern/Western perception of Hinduism and I think its actually awesome! I think it's part of how I see a lot of California at least, developing, with this fascination with Eastern thought becoming a hybrid between eastern and western—I think there are some sad things lost in that, but there's also that kind of the capacity to think about the why and the how a little more objectively because of their Western take on things, and it forces the religion to either survive or not and so far it looks like it's making it and that's cool.

This metabolism of Eastern culture into the Western world allows for better understanding of different cultures, but it is a slow process. Overall most subjects agreed that religion and ethnicity are not intrinsically related. A majority stated that the two are completely different and should not be the standard for what defines you to be Hindu or not. Contrary to my interviewees, Howard Coward (2005) argues that one has to be born Hindu to be Hindu. My subjects *were* born Hindu, so contesting their legitimacy becomes more difficult. Because most of what is written and discussed about Hinduism comes from the outside dominant perspective, much is lost and/or misrepresented.

Brian K. Smith (2000) tackles the issue of who has the legitimate authority to speak for Hinduism, and who ultimately confers that authority. For Smith, there is a distinct difference between who *has* previously spoken for Hinduism, and who *should*. An important aspect that Smith highlights is that there is no singular Hindu, nor one belief in Hinduism. The religion is so

broad, and the sects within differentiate immensely, a single spokesperson is not suitable. This singularity within religion was originally “introduced by missionaries and scholars from the west” (Smith 2000:743). Smith argues that scholars of religion and theology are the only ones who should be speaking for Hinduism. His reasoning is that they are the only ones who have dedicated their time and energy to understanding all the complexities of religion. However, he does not address devout practitioners. This controversy leads to the “real Hindu” predicament, leading people to ask, if someone is not ethnically Indian can they *really* practice Hinduism?

While there is no working answer for the question, when someone adopts a specific point of view on the world, it then becomes their working conception, and regardless of if that conception is of one’s ethnic heritage or not, this frame of reference is how they make sense of and understand the world (Shibutani 2009 [1961]:251). People who grow up in a religious environment take those practices as their working conception. Even though the respondents understand the historical, cultural, and religious practices of Hinduism, it is still commonplace for many to be criticized for not being a *real* Hindu (i.e. not Indian), as Respondent 4 describes their experience:

What made me mad in India was being told I couldn’t be a Hindu because I was the wrong color... and I was really mad because I didn’t like being told I wasn’t a Hindu, and I was living there and living very according to the rules and doing puja every day and being very on top of everything and going to temple all the time and wearing Hindu clothes 100 percent of the time and learning all the Indian/cultural things, and then I was told I wasn’t Hindu and I just flipped at them.

This experience is not an uncommon one. In fact, it is frequently assumed that if a non-Indian is claiming they are Hindu, they are just appropriating parts of the culture and not fully understanding what it truly means to be Hindu. Many of my subjects lived in or visited India and

Malaysia, have studied Hinduism since birth, and have deep of knowledge of the religion.

Respondent 4 continues to explain how some Hindus in India act and treat the Hindu religion:

The thing is, a bunch of Hindus in India, they don't know why they do things, like the way we were brought up, we were educated about all the things that you do and why you do them and what they mean. You could talk to a random Hindu on the street, like if you talk to a Brahman maybe they've been trained about it or had classes in Hinduism so they understand more things, like about the festivals and things and then you talk to the random street Hindu and they're like, "nope." They don't know what Karma is, they don't know what ahimsa is, they don't know why they should be vegetarian because they're not vegetarian, because they're Hindu, but they're only Hindu on Fridays. They only are vegetarian on Fridays. You know things like that, they call fasting, and fasting for them is like not eating meat. At least that was my experience.

There is a lot of questioning as to who "owns" the religion at this point. Would it be the person who is born Indian but not practicing the traditions, or the person who has been taught it since they were born, regardless of their ethnicity? Who is in a position to make the final judgment call?

As an example of this perplexity, Respondent 3 talks about having to deal with people questioning their beliefs and upbringing:

Oh constantly, always. It's usually Indian people or those who have Hindu heritage in their background, even if they aren't practicing Hindus are really quick to judge and like, assume that you're some hippy that's practicing yoga and meditation and don't understand what any of it means. I mean, it's a mixed bag, some people are like "Ok cool you're Hindu I don't really know what that means... Like when people ask me about myself and I say that I am a Hindu they are always curious and usually ask like "Oh that's interesting, when did you start doing that?" like it's a fad. Or "Is your family following that too?" As if it's some random phase or craze.

It is common for people to assume that one is claiming Hinduism because it "sounds cool" and not understand that it is a deep personal choice that has not been taken lightly. Even though globally people are moving around more than ever before, it is still not commonly accepted for a

White American to grow up believing in an Eastern religion. There is a constant battle as to who has the say and who has the right to believe in what they want. It is the consensus with the respondents that ethnicity does not dictate ownership of a religion, even though they are constantly asked about it. This process of relentless defining and defending ones beliefs is something the respondents have had to deal with on an almost daily basis. While it is not always a negative experience, it can become quite exhausting. Having constantly to define yourself outwardly can stifle being able to understand oneself quietly.

COMMUNICATING AND CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

Some are genuinely curious about my childhood, but, there's only so much I can tell them. I mean I can tell them everything that happened until I'm blue in the face, but they cannot possibly wrap their minds around it. . . I don't get to have anyone who gets me. And why I behave in certain ways and do certain things. –Respondent 6

Trying to figure out who you are and where you fit in the world can be a very trying experience. As Shibutani states, “Very few people ever have occasion to ask themselves who they are. Each takes his [or her] personal identity so much for granted that he does not realize the extent to which his life is structured by the working conception he forms of himself.” (Shibutani 2009 [1961]:215). However, when you grow up in a lifestyle different from the norm, you not only have to figure out yourself for yourself, you are forced to do so because people are constantly demanding you define yourself in terms they can easily digest. While Shibutani is making a point that most people get to live in a state of not having to constantly be aware of their personal conception of identity, the respondents in this study lack that luxury, as many of them have to put on a “front” (Goffman 1956) for others. The first example of this is as simple as a name.

Names are the symbolic representation of ourselves, the way we identify ourselves when we meet new people and refer to each other. It is the first form of identity communication with another person. As a whole “communication is the touchstone of society” (Shibutani 2009 [1961]:86). We utilize words and speech to express thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, people are often taken aback when hearing a name they never have before. Whenever a subject meets a new person, undeniably questions surround their name and place of origin come up and an explanation is always expected, regardless if they feel like explaining right then.

Many subjects allow people to believe or assume that their parents were hippies and choose a Hindu name on a whim, saying, “yes there’s always an explanation of the pronunciation, you can usually get away with a brief ‘ah yeah my parents were really into Hinduism, hippies in the 60s... you know’ and leave it at that unless they press onward” (Respondent 2). They still have to defend and define their existence on a near daily basis. Another subject states that, “some of them didn’t believe me at first when I told them [my name], cause they were like ‘that’s too weird’” (Respondent 5) and, Respondent 6 continues this line of disbelief: “I have dealt with it so many times throughout my life. People find out my name and then they find out that I was raised Hindu and the judgments occurs and the ‘you can’t *possibly* be.’” That people are assuming that it is just too strange to be White and Hindu.

The examples continue to show how new people automatically assume that because something about you is different you must explain yourself to them. Even after demanding to know the meaning, people still would not be satisfied. More often than not, bringing attention to these differences is not a comfortable process. Respondent 7 describes how they have to explain their name to new people:

Every person I meet. Either they mishear it and mispronounce it as [name removed], basically every time I meet a new person who doesn't know me and doesn't know my background I have to explain it to them. And its very tiresome, and it's very-- it can be fun and I think people are interested and curious but also, you can tell it's different. Like there is an immediate difference between me and them just on the basis of name. Which doesn't fit any of their perceptions or their preconceptions about what someone like me looks like and has... they don't understand why someone like me would have a name like that. So, yes, I have to explain it all the time... They will ask "oh where does that name come from?" or, "what does that name mean?" or, "how did you get that name?" and my initial answer kind of answers what else they might ask, I tell them "my parents practice Hinduism and when I was born they gave me a traditional Hindu name." Which is a response that has taken me years, basically and lifetime to refine. Because it answers their first question and the next five that they were going to ask me, but if I can just get all of that out in a clean and simple way at the get go, then I just kind of end that line of questioning a little bit faster and satisfy their curiosity or their confusion sometimes.

The process of explaining one's name is not necessary terrible or difficult, but as Respondent 7 stated, it is immediately puts them in the spotlight as different. Someone from the dominant majority highlighting the differences between you and them, and pressing you to explain what it means often makes meeting new people uncomfortable. Much of this comes from the fact that people are constantly trying to make sense of the world by fitting people into convenient boxes or categories (Tajfel 1982). While categorizing things in people is something that happens naturally, it is not always in your best interest which category you end up in.

The category into which a person is placed is a matter of considerable importance, for the motives that can be plausibly imputed to him depend upon it. If those in a given category are assumed to have certain characteristics, they are expected to act in a particular way, and others become sensitized to cues indicative of such conduct (Shibutani 2009 [1961]:113).

While the processes placing one into a category comes through interactions with others, it can be difficult when one is placed into a category they do not want to be in or connect with. While we all carry a sense of self, that self is often created through social interactions (Mead 2015[1932]).

Nevertheless, many of the respondents began to find new ways around the idea of social categorizations:

It really wasn't until, it was after high school, in junior college I started making some really good friends who didn't really spend too much time or thought or energy trying to identify me as being part of a particular group but really looked and thought of me as an individual with unique, interests and talents and, and I am by nature more introverted so I don't keep a really large social circle, I don't maintain that, it's been more having you know, it's more of a quality not quantity with me and my friends and with my relationships, yeah its like you, that has definitely influenced who I let in basically, like who I really care to tell my story to, and it takes a long time, sometimes even years before I tell some of my friends more about my background or more about like the significance of my name or the religious upbringing I had, so it's definitely made me more guarded and at one point in my life that was more isolating and more damaging, but I feel like at this point I have enough quality friends, and I have enough social skills that I can meet people and relate to them and get to know them, you know open up to them on a certain level much more easily and much less anxiety than in the past...certain things I'll never be comfortable with, with really being asked about and having to explain even though I've had to explain it so many times that there was some permanent damage done, that was because of the experiences and not because of my personality (Respondent 7).

Being able to find people who don't try to pin you to one group or another and just accept you for who you are has been significant in forming a satisfying sense of self and acceptance in society for my subjects. But because often people can be so invasive, selectivity is key when deciding whom to open up to. Respondent 7 described how they connect with others, and how it can still be a difficult process. Respondent 12 continues with that line of thought and describes how sometimes such circumstances can be harmful:

I did a lot to dull myself down for a while. Really practiced at blending in and not being asked to define myself as often. I got really good at figuring out other people quickly, their likes and dislikes, where they stood on issues, and so on which allowed me to mold myself around them. It took a long time to start showing people all the sides of myself. But actually, I still don't offer that up immediately either. Its hard because I'm really extroverted and want to interact with people, but knowing I will have to explain every part of me get so exhausting that I will hold myself back at times.

While having the ability to adapt to changing situations helped Respondent 12 blend in when they wanted to, having to hide part of oneself is not ideal. Erving Goffman (1956) can shed some light on how some of my subjects have handled these situations.

As previously described, Goffman uses the theatre as a metaphor to describe interactions between people. Often, we are “acting” with other people, presenting the side of ourselves that we want seen, and portraying what we think is best for the situation. It is through the theory of symbolic interactionism that Goffman is describing these circumstances, and that we know how to manipulate situations and ourselves because we all have a baseline shared understanding of symbols and actions. Many of my subject’s spoke of how they needed to present themselves as “perfect” and how growing up in such a strict environment forced them to learn how to put on different faces.

There was a lot more fear in the community [growing up] than what I try to create in my current communities in life. I think also as a kid in a community you’re always sort of at the mercy of the adults. Period. And I think those adults were trying really hard to follow a lifestyle and a set of rules that were extremely difficult to impose, even in their own lives, but to make sense for us I think there was never enough effort put on making this make sense to us. So it felt like, I felt very unsafe most of the time, like I felt like I was constantly looking out for how to not screw up, I got really good at lying and creating these double worlds so that I could survive. And those were unhealthy, but I mean they helped me adapt at the time, but I’ve had to put a lot of work into unlearning those habits, and feeling safe and feeling like I can mess up (Respondent 1).

As in Goffman’s theatre example, acting the different parts became second nature for many.

However, feeling like you have to create a double world to exist becomes more complicated.

Nick Hopkins (2011) highlights the struggle and necessity of multiple identities and dual identities his subject feel they need to have in order to function in society. Hopkins continues to discuss how Muslims voice their identity in European Nations, specifically in British Nations, while being a subgroup. One of the issues is that Muslims “are routinely viewed as ‘in’ Europe,

but not ‘of’ Europe” (p. 253). Additionally, dual identities are prominent within minority groups, to maintain a particular sense of self and participation, and acceptance within the greater society, in order to “pass” as normal (Hopkins 2011). Respondent 5 describes applying other peoples lives to themselves to make sense of the world and feel some security, also highlights some similarities to Hopkins subjects:

The hardest part was trying to normalize myself and make friends that way without trying to be too weird. I had to cut down on a lot of my own personality just to fit in. After I was a little out of high school, cause I was kind of crazy in high school, but after that I was super scared of the world cause I hadn't experience much of it. I was on my own right after I turned 18, and trying to figure out how to be like everyone else and understand how their upbringing changed them, and how I could try to apply their upbringing into my life to be more like them, it was really trying to figure that out, because I was trying to figure out who I was cause I still didn't really know (Respondent 5).

This process of trying to fit in is a common experience that most young adults go through, which is never an easy experience, and an even more difficult experience for those whose identity is on display and names frequently questioned.

These experiences highlight how names are symbols, and how society reacts to things they have not heard before, such as assuming the respondents' parents were just “strange hippies”. When people come to that automatic conclusion, an expectation to have the etymology behind it is often assumed, leaving the respondent to feel exposed and different. Navigating these experiences can sometimes create dual identities, feelings of isolations, and the need to act a certain way to fit in. Having a strong sense of self helps answer these questions and allows for some to meet people who do not prescribe to the expectations that you have to belong to a predetermined category.

GENDER ROLES

“...And those were just assumed that I needed to get a good job, so that I could support my wife and that I was going to have a family. Those things were never really questioned growing up, that’s just what people did...” –Respondent 7

If there is one aspect nearly every religion has in common, Hinduism included, it is a need to create and enforce strict societal roles based on gender (Rao and Rao 1985; Lorber 1994; Sherkat and Ellison 1999). As Durkheim pointed out, religion is used as the binding glue for societal morals and creating norms. Nevertheless, these norms can be hard to follow in the contemporary world when the values were entirely set up in ancient times. All genders within my sample experienced varying levels of hardships and expectations based on what biological sex they were born as. 90 percent of the respondents said they did not know how to go about dating, or how to interact with the opposite sex in a more intimate manner as they transitioned into adulthood.

Most had friends of the opposite sex yet were raised “to think that we were going to at a very young age get married and be housewives and have babies...” (Respondent 3). Difficulties arose when it was realized that traditional arranged marriages were not going to work out, or when they realized that was not what they wanted for their future. Respondent 4 explains what it was like to go through that process:

When we started out we were brought up believing we were supposed to get married, and raise babies at home, and in my family home school them, and that was the role of the woman. And you were supposed to do that as soon as you finished high school supposedly. And so like, having that really strongly in our mind is kind of- it was a big struggle to accept that that wasn’t going to happen and that it was ok and that it was acceptable to find some other thing to do, and maybe still get married at some point but maybe not do it they way that we were brought up believing was the way to do it.

Eventually most of the subjects came to terms with the fact that things were going to turn out differently, and how the expectations to live a certain way were merely a product of the Saiva Siddhanta Church trying to merge traditional practices in the modern world.

There are a lot of requirements in a cultural Indian aspect. My visit to India really helped me to realize that that's cultural attempt that wasn't necessarily Hinduism and in the [Saiva Siddhanta] Church there was a strong attempt at weaving the two together, not just practicing Hinduism while being white Americans, but to actually practice Indian culture and being Hindu—and being white and American. But, I think the difficulty with that was once I was starting to see that wasn't likely going to be this plan playing out in my future, where I was going to get an arranged marriage to this perfect person that I would have kids with that I would be happily ever after—once I started realized that this wasn't likely to happen, I felt hugely unequipped. I had not been educated on how to manage money, I had not been educated really past high school. There was no emphasis and in fact if anything a block towards continuing education into college. And definitely just having that ability to interface with men with a confident tone in my voice, period. I didn't even know where my boundaries were, I didn't have boundaries, and I think so much of what was being I was not supposed to have to need them (Respondent 1).

While trying to teach traditional practices and maintain a certain type of lifestyle in modern times is not an uncommon practice, it can become damaging when education and boundaries are not reinforced, as Respondent 1 described. Respondent 11 had similar reflections:

It was basically, that is an idea of the 20th century and we were living in a culture that was far more ancient than that idea while I actually have a lot of respect for that I think that American culture is way off target, we still are in it, we still are surviving in it and I think I have a lot of bad experiences with men that maybe could have been prevented had I had more self empowerment and capability with voicing my needs or voicing my boundaries or even knowing what they were.

There is an emphasis on how cultural practices are respected and admired, however, many respondents described instances with the opposite sex where they felt like their boundaries were not respected, and did not know how to navigate out the situation because such scenarios had

never been discussed before. Further restrictions become more complicated when contemplating the idea of changing lifestyles and gender fluidity:

Everything is gendered in Hinduism, I mean even in the temple I was thinking about this the other day, now I think of it as being really bizarre and really restrictive, like the men and women sit on two different sides of the temple, like, in those worship groups, men and women are literally divided and there's an empty space between them for people to walk up and down. And I was thinking about a lot of the, you know the more recent awareness of transgendered people and LGBT couples and like if I were a trans-Hindu, I don't know if that would be possible, or like it would be so difficult because how would you grow up literally sitting on one side of the temple and then at a different time in your life switch to sit on the other side? Is that allowable? So yeah that just as a very literal and figurative metaphor that men and women are fundamentally treated differently, and that is supported and reinforced by, I don't know if you can say the religious belief but definitely the dogma of the church that we were a part of (Respondent 7).

The lines between genders were clearly laid out, but not entirely explained. Not only was everything separated by gender, education on reproduction was often ignored, or even shut out such as excluding their children from sexual education presentation in school. Moreover, Teaching abstinence only lead to a lot of confusing situations for my subjects as adults:

Oh man you know the worst one for me in most recent years has been the uh, whole figuring out dating thing. That was the most awful, most challenging. I still don't think I ever figured it out. The whole bramacharaya [maintaining abstinence until marriage] thing was really enforced, and I took it so seriously. And like, I know that... everyone had to "get over it." In order to be a functional adult in the western world, I was told you have to just "get over it." Which is very confusing and contradicted everything about how I was raised (Respondent 4).

Yet even though there was an expectation of purity, there was also the expectation of being able to figure everything out by themselves which left a lot of room for turmoil and embarrassment.

Lastly, the Respondents were asked if the strict gender roles affected their understanding of what their role and purpose was as they were transition from youth to adult, and how the process of navigating those roles impacted their life:

It did instill in me a certain expectation as to who does what and what I was expected to do as a man, like what I would need to do in my adulthood, and a lot of that was defined by our home life, by just the culture of the household. But also, again that was reinforced by the religion and the culture we were a part of, where I was expected to be the provider of the house, that I always felt this pressure to get educated to get a job so that I could support my wife and family. And those were just assumed that I needed to get a good job, so that I could support my wife and that I was going to have a family. Those things were never really questioned growing up, that's just what people did. And my wife's role would have been, if I had followed that strictly, to be a homemaker basically, to support me outside of work and raise the children and be the nurturer. And it was kind of... again it took me a lot of years to kind of unravel and figure out like wait a minute, do I want any of this and to also recognize that it was causing a lot of stress in me, not knowing what I wanted to study in school, not knowing what kind of job that would lead into and if it would pay enough for me to do these things, and again, kind of analyzing and realizing wait I don't have to do any of this, and it's ok to do something different, and one, maybe I don't want kids, and two, maybe I don't even want to get married in the first place and three, life is not just about having a job that pays well, there's a lot more to it. So I had to question a lot and kind of uncover some of those expectations that I was raised with and decide if I wanted to follow them or not, and basically what I wanted to do from there. It did guide my thinking for a long time and it did cause a lot of worry and kind of distress that I wasn't living up to these expectations until I realized that those expectations were not my own and not what I wanted (Respondent 7).

There was a process that most of the Respondents had to go through when questioning how they were raised, if they even *wanted* the things that were so ingrained in their upbringing.

91 percent of the respondents did not follow the path of a traditional Hindu lifestyle, and roughly 75 percent do not currently incorporate the practices in their daily lives. While relating to the opposite sex can be a confusing and unpredictable process in any culture, being unprepared for the harshness of the world is what bothered most of my subjects. It was repeated that much of the movement away from practicing Hinduism in the home life was because stern expectations that could not be met, and were causing more stress in their life than was desired. Having to deal with this confusion and stress led to a need to understand and decide what it was my subjects wanted from their *own* life. Taking a step back and reviewing one's own life is never

an easy process, and yet my subjects did their utmost to convey what it was like for them, and what their conclusion were.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE

“...being a Hindu in America was very much a minority, but being a white Hindu in America meant that I wasn’t part of the traditional Hindu ethnic group, so I was like a minority within a minority...”—Respondent 7

Growing up in a religious subgroup in American has a variety of effects on one’s personal identity. One of the principal complaints from the subjects was that there was no guidance on how to live in the modern Western world. Expectations ranging from knowing what your place was, to maintaining that role, and not questioning elders were firmly set. Respondent 5 explained their thoughts on how the experience was upsetting, but in many ways not so unusual: “I was pretty upset for a while because I don’t think parents should force their own religion onto kids... but most people were born into a religion and raised that way, ours just happened to be a bit different.” Many people are raised with religious beliefs, and because of that my subjects have found commonalities with other groups, however they may not always understand the particulars of their situation.

There are similar situations of growing up in a strict religion, such as being Mormon or growing up going to strict Catholic school with a Nun as your teacher. It is hard for people who did not experience the same thing to understand, and the people who would understand the most are the ones who were in went through the same experiences and in the same environment. Along those lines Respondent 7 goes into detail about how growing up in any intense situation allows you to bond with others that were there with you, and how not everyone else might not understand the particulars of those times:

So it's the same for me, the people I knew as a child, they understand what it is that we all went through; that was a shared experiences. Even if their individual perspective or their individual memories are slightly different there was kind of that immediate understanding of knowing how things were and how different that is than how things are now. And that yeah, anybody who did not experience that along with us fundamentally wont understand what it was like. Even the best they can do is try and imagine it second-hand, based on how well I am able to describe it. It almost feels like the experience of someone who like, relocates to a different country or something, if you come from a completely different culture like if we immigrated from you know, Europe or England or Australia or something like, except we don't have the accent to go along with it, we don't have the visible markers aside from our name, to identify us as something different, but it was extremely different.

People go through experiences everyday that others cannot understand. Especially for those of a religious background, the main difference for my subjects of growing up as a second-generation White American Hindu as opposed to somebody who grew up Mormon or went to Catholic school, is that there are far fewer that had this intensive experience, one that may never be replicated exactly in kind. How does one quantify the experiences? Many respondents stated that it is much like everything in life, there are good and bad results:

Its hard to put into just kind of one, there's not really one way to describe it. I could describe a lot of different parts of it. I think it was really, as I mentioned before it gave me a lot of unique perspective that I don't think hardly anybody in the world has experiences similar to the ones I did. Like I said being part of this ethnic majority but a cultural minority, being a Hindu in America was very much a minority, but being a white Hindu in America meant that I wasn't part of the traditional Hindu ethnic group, so I was like a minority within a minority. So, meaning that like I wasn't a White Christian but I wasn't a Brown Hindu either. So, I didn't fit into either one of those groups, so if I had to summarize it, it was both at the same time isolating and enriching. That, its taken me a lot of years, a lot of time to figure out where I fit in and where I want to fit in, and really kind of forced me to the even ask the question does it matter if you fit in? Because ultimately if you talk to somebody, anybody, any individual person and their experiences and their background and their religious or ethnic or cultural make up, like everybody is unique. And even though you might assume let's say, all White Christian people are similar, when you actually analyze them on individual level, there's a lot of differences and a lot of uniqueness to them so it kind of made some of those questions that I get asked by other people seem unimportant for me to ask of them in the sense that like, I'm not worried about trying to figure out where people fit into certain boxes in how I view the world. You kind of just have to take people for who they are. So I think that, in a way

being forced to be on the outside of a cultural group and looking back in, made me realize that the distinction between being “in” and “out” are kind of arbitrary. So, it was difficult but I am grateful for it, I guess is what I would say (Respondent 7).

There was a great deal of discussion surrounding the idea of acceptance into different social groups, how not being accepted was isolating, and how ultimately that acceptance does not actually matter. Looking like the dominant majority, but being minority in a cultural minority, is bewildering for all parties involved. Nevertheless, growing up outside of the norm gave the respondents a different lens when viewing the world. This lens allowed for different perspectives to be evaluated, and as a whole made them more accepting to other way of life.

The last quote I will present makes a valiant attempt to summarize the experience and understanding of growing up as a second-generation White American Hindu. I have broken it up into five points: 1. The overall experience is both isolating and enriching. 2. The realization that societal expectance is arbitrary. 3. Being different allows for unique experiences. 4. More tolerant for other ways of life. 5. Being on the outside looking in encourages action for positive change. Point number one and two beings:

Two major takeaways that I get from my experience being as you put it like a second-generation White American Hindu; One is that it was really difficult and at the time really I feel like harmful to me not being a part of any group, that the group that I was part of was an outsider group. And that group got smaller and smaller and transitioning from being an outsider to being you know, quote-unquote “accepted into the majority” was really difficult to try and make happen, and it wasn’t until I realized that acceptance is kind of arbitrary. That I was able to actually start feeling more comfortable with who I am... (Respondent 7).

It was a difficult and sometimes harmful experience to not be part of a recognized group however as time went on there was a realization that acceptance is subjective. Still there is a optimistic side to the experience:

So that's kind of the negative side of it, the positive side of it all, is that like I said, I was able to have experiences that almost nobody else in, that I've come across and no one else that I've met in my life has had to experience what it is like being a traditionally eastern Hindu in a western society and meeting the people in that group and also interacting with these religious leaders and travelling to different religious sites basically going to Hawaii and being part of the temple there, was really exceptional...
(Respondent 7 continued).

Growing up differently allows for experiences that no one else has had, and within those allows one to see and understand different perspectives and ways of life more easily.

...and really I feel like I am much more accepting of people varying beliefs because I came from being on the outside and I've had to try and like, establish my space within this greater cultural environment Whereas it's much more easy for me to accept someone who has different belief or different lifestyles it much more easier for me to look at that and be ok with it whereas if I was raised more in the majority and with like these traditionally modern American values, I would have had a hard time reconciling, the kind of the reaction that I get from people who don't come from my background is like "why would you ever do that?" like "why would you want to you, you know, change your name?" Or "why would you want to change your religion?" Like that just doesn't make sense to them. People who grow up with their family name grow up with a religion and they never really question that. Whereas when I meet somebody who has done that, like, changed their belief or changed their religion or changed where they live or who they associate with, it's not a, upsetting to me because I came from that space myself. So I like to think of myself as more tolerant or more accepting, even if I don't engage with those people as much it doesn't bother me... (Respondent 7 continued).

Having a different or difficult background can allow one to be more tolerant and accepting of other ways of life because they can understand what it is like to go through that process.

...And I do see a lot more value in having a more diverse set of beliefs and a more diverse set of people in all of these spaces. We benefit from that and unfortunately people are discriminated against and some religions or some ethnic groups or some cultural groups are persecuted for lack of a better term, but I can be part of that change that positive change where like, accepting people for who they are and allowing, or giving them the freedom to make up their own minds about what they believe in the world, and even if its not what I believe about the world and even if I don't agree with it, it's ok that's what you believe and that's totally cool. If that helps make the world, explain the world, and make sense of all this confusion then, that's great. But unfortunately like there's no set of religious beliefs that will do that for me. I have to just kind of come up with it on my own. Or figure it out as best I can because that's what I've chosen. I've chosen that I would rather struggle through and find my own beliefs through experiences

that I've chosen to take or make than to be told the way things are (Respondent 7 continued).

Being able to see both sides and be part of a positive, and more accepting change in the world, creating a better world, is enriching. While this last quote was lengthy, the five points that Respondent 7 made are incredibly important and summarizes many of the perspectives from the other interviews.

Another important point that many of the respondents mention was that they never think to question other people, who there are, where they are from, and why they were given the name they have. It was a realization made through these interviews that most importantly my subjects want to make sure they are pronouncing names correctly, and not asking any background information of it, because “that’s not what’s important” (Respondent 6). While this religious experience may have been trying and difficult for many, it has created a group of people who are actively concerned with understanding other people instead of categorizing them.

CONCLUSION

Religion has historically shaped and guided society, especially in a uniquely disparate nation like the United States (Peck 2005). Settlers from all over Europe came to America to with the intention to escape religious oppression and persecution (Zinn 2003 [1980]). This could create a more tolerant and accepting society to different kinds of religious beliefs, and yet it is considered an oddity when one is not part of the dominant belief system. This study explored the experience of what it was like to grow up and form an identity as a second-generation White American Hindu. An important aspect of this study is to give voice to a group of people who were raised in a religious subgroup. While many of my subjects have discontinued practicing

Hinduism, many of the foundational beliefs are still part of their everyday life. The five reoccurring points that came up in the interviews were, descriptions of current beliefs and how one describes themselves, opinions on religion being intrinsically tied to ethnicity or not, how they communicate and connect with others, the way gender roles shape/d their lives, and a general understand or explanation of their life experience as a second-generation White America Hindu. In many ways Shibutani brings to our attention how communication and social interaction forms identity, yet his reference group theory fails to fully encompass my subjects' experiences.

Shibutani describes how every individual uses himself or herself as a singular point of reference for making judgments and decisions (2009 [1961]):216). This framework for creating our personal identity is crucial in understanding how people shape their world, and contradicts the reference group theory's assertion that people's actions are based on what group they put themselves in. Tajfel (1982) states, "Social Identity will be understood as that *part* of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that memberships" (p. 2). The issue with this definition of social identity is that my interviewees and I grew up as members of the Saiva Siddhanta Church, shaped by practices and ideas our parents taught us. Our whole understanding of the world starts in this context, and then we struggled to live in the world of White America, while having names that make us stand out as different. That difference is not one that White Americans understand or even have language to find legitimate.

In the examples the respondents gave in their interaction with other people questioning their beliefs or legitimacy, it can be seen how difficult being in a religious subgroup is. For my subjects there was no reference group for them to draw on that made sense of their lives. There is

the feeling of deep found respect and admiration for Hinduism, and many of my subjects' feel that this is their culture, but have to fight on a daily basis to explain that. Shibutani states, "each person's conception of the world, then, is constantly being buttressed through communication" (Shibutani 2009 [1961]:168). Society often communicates that religion and ethnicity *are* intrinsically tied, even though my subjects did not choose this lifestyle, they were born into it. Nevertheless, this myth *is* slowly changing, as more people in the Western world learn about and understand Eastern cultures, religions, and traditions, because global movement is happening at an increasingly rapid pace. As my respondents and literature states, the most legitimate way to begin the journey into another religion is fully immerse yourself, and take on a name of that background, as the parents of my subject did for themselves and their children.

Because my subjects have "unusual" names, new acquaintance immediately notice a difference, and a series of questions begin that all the respondents have come to expect. Having their difference or otherness constantly pointed out was not always a comfortable process, and in many ways it has made my subjects more understanding of other people who are deemed unusual. "Taking the role of other means understanding the perspectives of others as we act—significant others, our reference groups, our generalized other; and/or the perspectives of those we are acting towards" (Charon 2007:114). Many of the examples about being White and having a different name gives awareness to how other people react to unique names, and how it is assumed that you choose this life/name. It also exemplifies how difficult, if not impossible, it is to completely connect with other people. Furthermore, it creates a binary between how Hinduism is part of my subjects culture, and yet not entirely. Being placed in the outsider position has allowed many of the subjects to see that being on the "inside" is arbitrary, and that their life experiences have allowed them to see and do things not available to many others. Nevertheless,

this experience did have difficulties, and many of the rules and roles were, and still are, hard to forget, especially pertaining to gender.

Gender roles were especially poignant, and it was stated that being raised with such isolated gender roles was hurtful at times. Many of the female respondents stated they felt like they were not allowed to go into higher education, that their only role was to be a housewife, and feel that the lack of sexual education and being placed in a submissive role lent them to be in sexually harmful situations. The male respondents felt the pressure that finding a job and supporting their family was their only role, and letting go of these demands was difficult. It can be seen that relationships, gender divisions, and lack of role models and reference groups creates a trying experience for young adults attempting to understand their modern life and moral obligations. While it could be argued that this is the nature of American society today, many do feel that the rules growing up were overly strict and isolating.

As a whole most respondents felt that growing up as a second-generation White American Hindu was enriching in many ways, but one thing that is important to note is that describing, remembering, and relieving these experiences is, and was, very difficult. It exacts an emotional toll to explain what it was like growing up. It can be seen that not having a reference group to help make sense of why society had trouble accepting or understanding who they were, is a factor in this confusion. However, it was stated that being able to grow up in a religion that is not of your ethnic background gives you an invaluable perspective of what it is like to be the outsider, which has translated for them to be more accepting of other people's beliefs.

In conclusion, it can be seen that Shibutani's reference group theory has two key flaws. First, it does not address when there are two competing dominant reference groups. Secondly, there is no mention of how one navigates the social world when there is no reference group that

applies to one's life. By exploring the experiences of these individuals I assert that part of Shibutani's theory is inconsistent. For my subjects, there were two competing dominant reference groups that they had to deal with. The first was, being white and living within the dominant majority. The second competing reference group was, living as a traditional Hindu with the practices of ancient India. Each reference group had a significant pull and influence on the subjects, and often contradicted each other, leaving the subject in a paradox and not actually belonging to either group. This paradox leads to the second point: there were no reference groups for my subjects to emulate. Because the Saiva Siddhanta Church was still relatively new and they were the first ones born into it, having a role model or reference group did not apply. Shibutani's explanation of reference group theory cannot fully encompass my subjects' experiences, nevertheless, his assertion that personal identity is created through interactions and communications stands true. It is through daily interactions with other people that my subjects have learned to define themselves both to themselves and to others.

Based on my research, I recommend further inquires on comparing other religious subgroups that have different ethnic backgrounds. More research needs to go into cross cultural relations, subgroups, and religious identities. Because this experience for my subjects was unique, one that does not happen often in America with such intensity, and something that was not often accepted as normal. I believe investigating further would provide highlights on how historically culture, religion, and ethnicity have been intrinsically tied, yet is malleable and ever changing. Through the immersion of other cultures, these ideas are becoming more fluid. Having these different perspectives on the world, and interactions with other people help us explore what it means to live in the social world.

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Appendix A: Method

For my method I used exploratory and suggestive ethnographic research, utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews (Appendix B), to study the lived experiences of the second-generation. Participants were selected from those raised in the Saiva Siddhanta Church, whose parents had formally converted to Hinduism before they were born. Because of time constraints I had to keep the sample size small, nevertheless, I still attempted to get diversity in age, gender, and location (where they grew up, and where they are living now). I had a total of 12 participants, and interviews were conducted in person, via Skype, or over the phone. Interviews were kept private by conducting them in the home of the participant or in a private study room in the McHenry Library at University of California, Santa Cruz. Because I know each participant individually through the community we grew up in, I did not need to do any extended screening.

To follow compliance with the Internal Review Board (IRB) on ethical studies, I completed the CITI human's subjects training before the project began. Prior to the formal interviews a recruitment email was sent to each individual asking for voluntary participation, a brief explanation of the nature of the study, assurance that anonymity would be maintained, and a timeline of when the interviews would be concluded was stated. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and recorded with permission. To keep identity confidential all names and identifying makers have been removed, and replaced by a Respondent number.

Because the respondents were so forthcoming with information and descriptions of their experiences, the entirety of the interviews could not be transcribed within my timeframe. This could be a weakness in my research because I did not have each answer written and able to look at and compare from a distance. Another weakness with my study is the fact that I am a member of this group, so potential bias may influence my analysis unknowingly. Nevertheless I listened

through the interview's numerous times to ensure I transcribed quotes correctly and I have taken every precaution to allow the data speak to for itself. As stated before, being a member of this group is also a strength to this project, permitting me greater access to the group than one would normally have.

Appendix B: Semi-guided Interview Questions

1. Do you still practice Hinduism?
2. Do you consider yourself Hindu?
 - a. How do you define your beliefs?
3. Do you feel like Hinduism is part of your culture?
 - a. Would you ever convert to a different religion?
4. Do you feel like religion and ethnicity are intrinsically tied?
5. Do you tell people you grew up Hindu? How do they react?
6. What do people normally say when they hear you have an Indian name?
 - a. Did they have a different image of you if they heard your name before meeting you?
 - b. What are the most common questions you are asked?
 - c. Did they ever get aggressive/invasive
7. Do people ask where you are from?
 - a. Did you ever feel like you were discriminated against?
8. Were there distinct gender roles growing up?
 - a. How have those rules/roles impacted you as an adult?
9. Did you ever feel like an outsider growing up?
 - a. Did you have a strong community of friends?
 - b. Do you now?
 - c. Do you feel like it is easy to connect to other people?
10. How do you feel when you see people wearing Hindu religious symbols (Ganasha t-shirt, aum bracelet...) Is it different when you see other religious symbols? (Cross, Star of David...)
11. How would you describe your experience of growing up in the Saiva Siddhanta Church?