

Unspoken Expectations: Children's Academic Achievement in the Beliefs of Asian Indian Hindu Parents in the United States



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Unspoken Expectations

My cultural psychological study of parental belief systems, or ethnotheories, examined distinctive patterns of socialization and beliefs among ten first-generation, immigrant Asian Indian Hindu parents with a second child around the age of eight, in Baltimore, Maryland.¹ Since the eighties, parental ethnotheories have been studied intensively within the discipline of psychology (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Goodnow & Collins 1990; Harkness & Super, 1996; Saraswathi & Ganapathy, 2002; Serpell, Baker & Sonnenschein, 2005). My study used as its theoretical anchor the developmental niche framework (Super & Harkness, 1986), which suggests that child development takes place at the confluence of three coordinated and interrelated structures: the physical settings surrounding the child, customs of childrearing, and caregiver beliefs and psychology (i.e., ethnotheories). In this chapter, I am concerned mainly with parental ethnotheories.

During initial visits to caregivers' homes, I provided each primary caregiver with a diary for keeping a detailed, weeklong record of the child's everyday routines and activities. At the end of the week, I used the recurrent routines and activities identified from an analysis of the diary to customize and personalize an ecological inventory. This inventory was used to record information on the resources available to the child, such as co-participants for activities as well as games, toys, and com-

¹My study utilized the methodology of the Baltimore Early Childhood Project (ECP), a longitudinal project undertaken at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County from 1993 to 1998 by Serpell, Baker, and Sonnenschein (2005). That study examined child socialization and parental beliefs in different sociocultural environments (African- and Euro-American, middle-income and low-income) and how these variations impact children's academic performance.

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puters. Posing questions such as “What does this mean to you?” enabled me to explore the subjective personal meanings (Bruner, 1990) that a parent attached to particular recurrent activities. I used the significance that parents ascribed to those activities and routines to infer inductively derived tentative themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and implicit ideas that parents valued and that informed their childrearing. These themes, preserved in the parents’ own words, provided the starting point for the first in-depth, semistructured ethnotheory interviews, in which I posed questions in order to obtain clarity about the themes. Based on the responses received in the first interviews, several other aspects of parental belief systems were covered in the next set of three or four interviews: socialization goals, factors that impact the attainment of stated goals, relative socialization responsibilities of home and school, parents’ perceptions of their child’s strengths and needs, and the attributions parents expressed for the strengths and needs they perceived in their child (Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 2005). Participant observation, usually at their homes, was used initially to develop trust with participants and, throughout the study, to recognize contextual concerns that shaped parental beliefs.

From analyzing the interviews,² I concluded that the parents placed enormous emphasis on independence, family closeness, and knowledge of culture and religion as socialization goals. But the caregiver diaries and ecological inventories revealed something intriguing and different from what emerged from the interviews: the parents invested significant amounts of resources in facilitating their children’s academic excellence. Nine of the sixteen children whose parents participated were high academic achievers. These children were in gifted and talented programs; winners of national spelling and geography bees, math competitions, and science fairs; and successful or aspiring applicants to the competitive summer programs at the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University. Aside from family-oriented activities and schedules aimed at inculcating an appreciation of “Indian” culture and Hindu religion, their daily routines were dominated by homework assignments, parent-supervised rehearsal for academic competitions, creative writing, journaling, workbook-based academic skill practice, television viewing for educational ends, attendance in scholastic extracurricular activities, and playing educational games, often on the computer. The children also had academically inclined hobbies. For

²Based on iterative readings of the transcriptions, I constructed a detailed listing of parental responses to each of the questions. The list was collapsed into six conceptual categories: personal/individual centered, social/interpersonal, academic, intellectual, moral, and cultural. Three independent coders assessed the credibility of the coding categories. We identified problem items and codes, and delineated decision rules, repeating the process until we reached an inter-coder reliability of 0.87 to 1. Subsequent reanalysis yielded a value of 0.93 for Krippendorff’s alpha. Following coding of all the responses, I generated frequency counts and percentages to identify the most common response domains in different sub-areas from aggregated responses. I also examined individual level data in order to study key phrases or words occurring within the broader context of an individual parent’s unique belief system. I shared tentative interpretations of findings with selected individuals from the Indian American community, and reformulated the interpretations through negotiated dialogue until a consensus was reached.

example, Lakshmi,³ a university instructor, said, “He will mix ... soap ... and milk or something and see how it looks under the microscope....”

Or consider this exchange with Naina:

H: And what about this ... enrichment program?

Naina: It is Math ... sometimes he will enjoy it, sometimes he won't ... we educate them that ... it will help you think and analyze things ... they are kids ... couple of years from now it might help them.

H: What are these computer games ... he plays?

Naina: We have ... reader rabbit ... math mania ... math games ... reading games, letters, spelling games ... there is rastro.com ... he likes to ... play games about different planets and stuff like that ... very nice website... for kids to learn about the solar system ... there are games and puzzles....

Or as Komal said:

... We ... have educational toys ... she's got that book ... that's sort of like a toy to her. She's been playing ever since she got it ... Leap Frog ... I bought ... other books ... she loves playing with.... And she has learned the ... U.S. map ... all the states ... and ... all the body parts ... she also plays with Math workshop ... a computer game.

But belying this preoccupation with academically-oriented activities, only 5% of the aggregate responses to my questions around the socialization goals that parents most valued were academic—/literacy-related goals like “get good grades,” “attend college,” and “be academically successful.” Ten percent were intellectual goals, such as “have a broad understanding of the world,” or “be creative.” Parents rarely emphasized academic success directly. When they did, it was only to say that studies must come before play, or to fleetingly mention incentives and rewards for good academic performance, or the opportunities and supports they provided for academic success. Much of this emphasis on academics came from one set of parents. When I directly asked participants about the importance of children’s academic success as a socialization goal, all ten parents readily agreed that it was crucial. But they hardly ever brought up academic success spontaneously as a valued goal.

In fact, when parents were asked to rank the socialization goals that they had expressed as important in raising their children, nine of ten explicitly placed academic goals lower than social and cultural goals. The only mother who emphasized education said, “education is the main goal ... I would like to see all the time the ‘A+’ grade, that is my goal ... he knows that main goal is...study, that’s it.” Ironically, that child was a good student but *not* a high achiever like the children of the other parents. As Pallavi, one of the parents who downplayed academic goals noted, “...it is very important that they ... do well in studies but ... other things should also come along. Probably that is *more* important (laughs)....” Similarly, Neeta said, “... if you are just academically successful, not really know how to get along with people, you may not be as successful in life ... not be as happy....” Or as Lakshmi summarized, “...I just want him to be happy as much as possible.”

It would, therefore, seem reasonable to conclude that the parents simply consider academic goals to be less important than social or cultural goals. And parental

³All names are pseudonyms.

statements like the ones above would have laid the discussion to a rest if it were not for the fact that the daily routines that the parents established for their children revolved around activities that primed school success. Their overt silence around the topic of their children's academic achievement and de-emphasizing of goals in that domain were not the product of terminated conversations or natural lapses. I had spent well over a year in repeated and intense exchanges with these parents. They had welcomed me into their homes, shared their meals with me, and spoken candidly of their deepest fears and dilemmas around parenting in a foreign country (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). They had also spoken more generally about life, family, and marriage. So their silence did not strike me as premeditated, or noncooperative; it struck me more as "attributable silence" (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 325). What then are we to make of this intriguing silence around academic goals in childrearing, after duly noting that the parents in this study were whole-hearted participants and that their reticence went on continuously, despite their persistent, fierce pursuit of academic goals in the daily routine? Attempting to answer this question is the main objective of the present chapter. I engage here with silence as an ethnographic object: Why is there this silence? What might such silences mean? And how might it operate within the ethnotheories of the parents in this study?

Silence Studied

Psychology assumes that good research practice consists of an orderly, prescribed sequence of activities that produce concrete, verifiable evidence primarily through what participants tell us, or in what we observe them doing. But consequences flow from accepting this premise. Thinking and saying are distinct behaviors that cannot be conflated. We obfuscate even as we claim to clarify; what is spoken is often contoured by what is left unspoken. What is left unsaid offers insights into the contextualized concerns, legacies, and power dynamics that frame particular ways of thinking and living. Our silences reveal as much about us—if not more—than our words. Yet silence remains remarkably understudied within the social sciences, and certainly within psychology, where it has been studied mostly in the context of social psychology, psychoanalysis, and psychotherapy, particularly with regard to trauma and abuse. I assume here that researchers are obliged to attend to and interrogate the meanings behind the silences that accompany interview data, especially when other data counter the perspectives offered by interview data.

Silence has been showcased in a distinguished line of work within philosophy, history, anthropology, religious studies, literature, and sociolinguistics (Achino-Loeb, 2006; Glenn, 2004; Kalamaras, 1994; Noelle-Neumann, 1984; Picard, 1948; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985). It is a topic within discussions of trauma and violence (Bernal, 2017; Kirmayer, 1996), memory (Ricoeur, 2004), cultural censorship (Basso, 1970; Sheriff, 2000), political censorship (Butler, 2004; Jaworski, 1997;

Scott, 1990), legal privilege (Wildman & Davis, 1995), and religion and spirituality (Bauman, 1983; Endo, 1966; Ueda, 1995). Most scholars concur that the definition, description, and interpretation of silence represents an enormous challenge because it can mean so many things: peace, resistance, respect, pain, vulnerability, disempowerment, loss, or something else.

Silence can be unintentional, a strategic code choice, or imposed by others. Studies of silence at the macrolevel inform us that some silences seen only in the public domain are enforced to prevent the free flow of information in order to maintain the status quo (Bernal, 2017). Such silences often coexist with a critique of power in private in what Scott (1990, p. 4) designated a “hidden transcript.” In cases where silence is identified as a broad characteristic of an entire group’s coerced behavior, it is understood as political censorship. But in cases where there is no identifiable coercion, silence becomes harder to explain.

At the microlevel, most people recognize the meaning and power of expressive silences within everyday conversations. We have all experienced the awkwardness of wordlessness in some interpersonal interactions. When silence is observed as a pattern across contexts within certain groups, it is interpreted as cultural censorship, or as conventional silence in that culture. Silences that are part of conversations within particular groups have been studied by sociolinguists as a style of communication that indicates problematic or conflicting emotions that require monitoring (Basso, 1970; Saunders, 1985). But colonial stereotypes have been used to inaccurately interpret such silences. As Basso (1970) noted with reference to the silence of Native Americans, with no regard for extralinguistic influences like cultural or social contexts, it has been interpreted as, “the outgrowth of such dubious causes as ‘instinctive dignity,’ ‘an impoverished language,’ or, perhaps worst of all, ‘lack of personal warmth’” (p. 214). Drawing from his ethnographic work with western Apache people, Basso underscores that complex and subtle distinctions in situational variables determine if and when members of that society refrain from speaking. Context has tremendous bearing on an individual’s decision to speak or not.

Some groups have been identified and studied as “silent groups”: minority groups within societies, women, and lower classes. The participation of these groups in public discourses is not granted legitimacy, they are (un)officially censored, and as a result, they mute themselves (Houston & Kramarae, 1991; Lakoff, 1975; Spivak, 1988). While silence is ubiquitous in human communication, groups organized by racialized identities, ethnicity, gender, language, and social class have strikingly divergent interests at stake in the selective suppression of discourse.

The particular interests that underpin such silences must be studied with care. In what follows, I single out the relative silence of immigrant Indian Hindu parents, around the topic of children’s academic achievements, as something that we must receive and interpret to render their intentions and practices fully intelligible to us.

Silence as a Discourse of Oppression and Powerlessness

Silence is thought to coincide with oppression and powerlessness and with gendered forms of injustice.⁴ Previous scholarship examines the silence among people who have been diagnosed with diseases such as HIV and their families (McHugh et al., 2018) and those who suffer from mental illness and suicidality (Szlyk, Gulbas & Zayas, 2018). A considerable body of literature examines the deafening silence among women who have endured assault and other types of violence, including domestic violence (Peters & Wolper, 1995; Romito, 2008). For these people, the stigma attached to their diagnoses and experiences renders it literally unspeakable. And in scholarship about women, silence is often considered a sign of weakness, synonymous with femininity, passivity, oppression, stupidity, and obedience (Glenn, 2004). But some of the literature has reframed silence as an exercise of choice and power by women and others (Ingram, 2016; McLaren, 2016). In all cases, silence is a product of power imbalances; those who have less power stand to face humiliation and pain if they speak out, and so they remain silent.

Eight of the ten parents in my study were women. Belonging to the middle- and upper middle-income groups, they were well educated—educational levels ranged from bachelors to doctoral degrees—and were in their 30s and 40s. Although they were immigrants, as educated, economically privileged, and professionally successful, highly vocal individuals, they cannot be characterized as an oppressed group. In light of this, as well as how well their children were doing academically and how open and talkative they were around their other socialization goals, the parents' silence around academic goals for their children cannot be plausibly attributed to any sense of obedience, gendered pressure, or inferiority. Furthermore, the casting of silence as always pathological, passive, and negative comes from uniquely Western perspectives that are not shared in many parts of Asia or even by many sociocultural, discursive, and religious Western traditions, which see silences as meaningful and empowering (Kalamaras, 1994). So what meanings might underlie the silence of these parents around the value they attached to academic goals for their children?

Isolation and Conformity

Noelle-Neumann (1984) examined the variables at play when people remain silent in the context of political elections and ideological and lifestyle-conflict situations. In elucidating the social psychological mechanism of this process, Noelle-Neumann used Asch's conclusions from his conformity experiment (1951) to argue that a fear

⁴See writer Rebecca Solnit's essay (2017) on the synonymousness of silence and power, especially pertaining to women's powerlessness at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/08/silence-powerlessness-womens-voices-rebecca-solnit>

of social isolation means that people observe others carefully, mostly at a subconscious level, to gauge the opinions and behaviors that will incur approval or rejection. When they evaluate behaviors or opinions as likely to elicit rejection, people hide them by remaining silent rather than expose themselves to rejection and isolation. This phenomenon is called conformity bias. Conversely, those who detect that their stance will garner public support tend to express themselves vocally and unhesitatingly, further silencing those who have the opposite opinion, setting into motion what Noelle-Neumann called “the spiral of silence” in the title of her work (1984). Thus, minority views go unexpressed for fear of social isolation and opprobrium. Furthermore, those who speak up tend to be younger, more educated, and men.⁵

Working from this framework, a reason for the silence of the immigrant Indian parents around academic goals lies in the fact that except among a small group of cultural elites, it is not normative in US society to emphasize academic achievement as an important goal for children to achieve. So-called geeks are not celebrated. In the United States, it is common for children’s social and extracurricular achievements to be feted and studied (e.g., Darling, Caldwell & Smith, 2005; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Mahoney, 2000).⁶ The study of children’s engagement in extracurricular activities has often happened against the backdrop of concerns over standardized testing of children in US schools, the loss of leisure time and school recess to intensive sessions of teaching to the test, and the resulting rise in disorderly behaviors by some children due to pent-up energy. Facilitating extracurricular activities, especially those that provide outlets for physical energy and cultivate athletic prowess, is a way to reduce the incidence of antisocial behaviors. Such an intense focus on extracurricular activities, especially those that are sports-based, is not found in India, where, for the most part, such activities are perceived as peripheral to academics. In India, conversations among parents with school-going children inevitably gravitate towards the topics of schools, examinations, and “studies.”

As immigrants in the United States, perhaps conformity bias exerts social control on Indian parents. So they fall in line with the covert pressures of society, unwilling, at a personal level, to deal with both the uncertainties that can accompany nonconformity and the anxieties that the disjunction between their own and the dominant ideology of childrearing could trigger in the majority population. Appadurai (2006) speaks of the fear that majorities feel when they are reminded unwittingly, by minorities, of the brief space that lies between themselves as majorities and their imagined ideals of a “pure” national and ethnocultural whole, unsullied by minorities. Appadurai calls it the “anxiety of incompleteness” (p. 8). It is possible that these parents, worried that concern with their children’s academic excellence will

⁵Noelle-Neumann’s perspective has been critiqued for various reasons. For instance, she does not consider disinterest, or shyness, or attempts to not embarrass someone with an opposing viewpoint as reasons for people’s silences.

⁶Years ago, when my then-elementary school-aged daughter enthusiastically endorsed reading as her favorite hobby, her teacher pronounced that she needed to be “more normal and watch TV.”

mark them as deviant or “other,” or create an anxiety of incompleteness in the majority group, do not bring up academic success as an important goal.

This seems only partially plausible when we consider that the parents were convinced that immigration had opened up more and better opportunities for their children. The parents were well acculturated to the United States and, hence, aware of the emphasis on extracurricular goals in US society. Accordingly, they had enrolled their children in various supplementary activities, including those that were sports-oriented. Perhaps as a social and cultural minority, they had experienced social pressure to accept the norms favoring extracurriculars. They may see such conformity as an act of tacit negotiation (Moscovici, 1985), a way of living with others without conflict. Crucially, far beyond the possible reason of a fearful compliance, they also genuinely saw participation in extracurriculars as a chance to acquire credit and opportunities for their children that they may themselves have not had growing up in India. Thus, conformity bias offers only a partial answer to my question about silence around their academic aspirations for their children. Perhaps a clearer answer is found in Noelle-Neumann’s clause, “... the spiral of silence reserves the possibility of changing society to those who either know no fear of isolation or have overcome it” (1984, p. 139). As we will see, the idea of swimming against the current does not, by any means, preclude conformity of the sort just discussed but actually exceeds it and deserves a closer study, especially in light of the concept of innovation.

Subversion and Resistance

Theorizing about situations where there are definite majorities and minorities, Moscovici (1985) noted that the majority holds a definite viewpoint, demarcating it as exclusively legitimate and normal. In the middle/upper middle socioeconomic status (SES) of US society of my participants, Anglo-American as well as African American parents were vocal in their commitment to helping their children reach the goal of self-actualization and attaining the full potential that forms the essence of individualism (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2004). The idea was to expose the child to as many activities as possible so that at least a couple would coincide with the child’s natural proclivities, enabling the crystallization in the child of a particular way to “be himself/herself.” As a strategy, parents enrolled their children in a range of extracurriculars: soccer, basketball, tennis, swimming, and ballet, to name a few. Physical coordination, social skills, and a spirit of sportsmanship rooted in teamwork were the anticipated gains.

In contrast to the Indian American parents, however, African American and Anglo-American parents overtly considered education as more important for their children. While 13% of the goals of African American parents and 8% of the goals of Anglo-American parents were in the academic domain, only 5% of the goals of immigrant Indian parents related to academics. Much like the Indian American parents, the Anglo-American and African American parents too did not emphasize it in

their interviews relative to their other socialization goals. But diverging from the Indian American parents, academically inclined activities were only moderately represented even in the daily routines of the children of the Anglo- and African American parents. These took the form of practices that are relatively common among contemporary middle-class families, like storybook reading at bedtime and games of Scrabble (Serpell, Baker & Sonnenschein, 2005). In addition, the middle-class African American and Anglo-American parents did not make available the type of targeted material resources and finely tailored support for their children that the Indian American parents did in the area of academics.

When I asked Neeta, a doctor, to elaborate on some of the activities she had mentioned in her caregiver diary, she described,

When he was little ... I had those computer programs like Jump Start ... workbooks, which he enjoys doing.... If he is not working on...[homework], once he finishes, then he has to do little bit of his workbook, and he likes doing those.... we are working on his creative writing, every month he has to write a piece, I ... ask him to pick a ... topic and write out the points ... and we make a first draft and second draft and third ... it's not initiated by him ... I suggest to him and then I tell him he has to do it and he has to do it.

As discussed in the previous section, the Indian parents may have looked to the majority in the United States for guidance and sought conformity with the emphasis on extracurricular activities. Through this method, they hoped to win inclusion and recognition, as well as more exposure and opportunities for their children. But "... located at the other end of the spectrum from conformity" is "the process of innovation in its 'authentic' form" (Moscovici, 1985, p. 20) for social systems, which are open, are defined as much by innovation as they are by conformity. Moscovici, who critiqued both Asch and Noelle-Neumann for overemphasizing the notion that the majority in a group has a large influence on the minority, argued instead that minority opinions can persist and resist group pressure.

The Indian parents in this study were not mere followers of mainstream norms. They were minorities who proposed alternative norms to the dominant ones; they were antinomians⁷ within the United States. So, while they adhered to the rules, they simultaneously innovated, by adding to the extracurricular mix Indian classical dance and music lessons and classes where their children learned about "Indian" culture, heritage, languages, and Hinduism. They additionally participated in a range of academically oriented extracurricular activities (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Peguero, 2011).

The pressure that immigrant Asian children as a group generally experience to pursue academic goals, due to the grip of the "model minority" stereotype, has been documented (Kao, 2000; Pang, 2006; Peguero, 2011). Although there is little on this topic as it pertains to immigrant Indian children, the parents in my study were undoubtedly steering their children towards academic success. So at the same time that they involved their children in sports and culture- and religion-focused

⁷The term antinomic refers to the holding of a different set of norms than the majority group and that are then offered as an alternative to prevailing norms (Moscovici, 1985).

extracurricular activities, they also enrolled their children in scholastic extracurricular activities like spelling and geography bees and Kumon, which Naina alluded to as “math enrichment classes.” In this view, academic excellence wins as many, if not more, and better opportunities in the long run than sports- and art-oriented extracurricular activities and especially in combination with such activities.⁸ This line of thinking is especially salient among highly educated parents (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008).

The parents in my study did not openly oppose dominant norms. In fact, they saw advantages to adopting some of those norms. But dissatisfied with the majority group’s consensus that social and extracurricular goals are among *the* most important goals, they redefined that norm by weaving in a simultaneous emphasis on academic achievement, a norm in their home country. As an antinomic minority within the United States, they interrogate the order and vision of the majority by publicly maintaining a certain level of conformity, while privately subscribing, with tenacity and consistency, to an alternate vision for their children. This is their tactic (de Certeau, 1984), their act of innovation in their host society, through which they demonstrate that in acculturating, innovation need not battle conformity. Berry (2001) would designate this as the strategy of integration. But making a far more nuanced distinction, Moscovici (1985) called this combination of public conformity and private nonconformity “compliance behavior”; it is conformity, *but only outwardly*.

This line of reasoning helps us to explicate the parents’ multipronged, not-entirely-conformist socialization focus. But why did they not talk openly about the importance of academic achievement? Theoretically, minorities are said to lack power, competence and resources, and hence, influence. But the parents in this study were a competent minority with substantial resources. They represented a fairly elite group, and elites can afford to be antinomians, should they choose. So we cannot claim that they reveal to us anything significant about the phenomenon of innovation (Moscovici, 1985). Ideas of conformity and innovation help us in partially understanding the silence of these parents around the cherished goal of academic success for their children. I found myself wondering if there could also be sociocultural or religious reasons for their silence.

Cultural and Religious Basis of Silence

It is well known that in ancient India, education was profoundly valued. The teacher, or *guru*, was worshipped as god by the student, or *shishya* (Kale, 1970; Raina, 2002; Sarangapani, 2003), and legend has it that a network of educational institutions, responding to the needs for primary and advanced education, imparted a rigorous

⁸The parents did not say this explicitly; I infer this from my experiences and interactions as an immigrant parent.

and scholarly training (Mukerji, 1961). Relatedly, in the *ashrama dharma* model, the prescribed model of the Hindu lifecycle,⁹ the period spanning the ages of 8–18 years (eight being the age of the children of my participants) was labeled as *brahmacharya*. During *brahmacharya*, the young person was expected to remain celibate and to show an uncompromising dedication to education in preparing for a career and livelihood. A daily routine arranged around everyday household practices and scholarly pursuits formed the backbone of *brahmacharya*, marking an age-based transition from the parental indulgence and unstructured life that characterized life before the age of eight.

Although the parents in my study were situated in the Western world and within the zeitgeist of current streams of thought, they also possessed a cultural memory (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Boym, 2001) of the value of education, a memory that many contemporary parents in India also possess and one that is reinforced in Hindu religious practice. For instance, Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of knowledge, music, and arts, and Hindu students worship her widely. There are festivals commemorating her, her statues decorate the halls of educational institutions, and Hindus invoke her before educational endeavors. The thought of their absent culture's emphasis on education, learning, and routine, especially between the ages of 8 and 18, provided these parents with a framework within which to live and parent in a foreign country. It is plausible that the silence of these parents around the importance of education as a socialization goal for their children presupposed a tacit understanding, on my part as a compatriot, of the *ashrama dharma* framework and its prescriptions and the reverence for the gifts rendered by goddess Saraswati.

Furthermore, according to many Hindu philosophical frameworks, humility is a desirable quality not only in the perfect student but also in the educated adult. A popular Sanskrit verse in the *Hitopadesha*, a twelfth century collection of Sanskrit fables and verses, reads:

*Vidya Dadaati Vinayam, Vinayaadyati Patrataam
Paatratvaaddhanamaapnoti, Dhanaaddharmam Tatah Sukham.*

Translated it means: Education gives humility, from humility comes worthiness, from worthiness one gets wealth, from wealth (one does) good deeds, from that (comes) joy.

⁹In the classic *Ashramadharma* conception, the ideal life cycle is divided into four *Ashramas*, or stages, with corresponding developmental tasks (Kakar 1979, 1981; Motwani 1958): *Brahmacharya* (student life, characterized by discipline, celibacy), *Grihastha* (family life, including making a living, procreation, and childrearing), *Vanaprastha* (preparation to leave material life by a conscious broadening of perspective through travel/pilgrimage), and *Sanyasa* (final renunciation of material life for the exclusive pursuit of spirituality; wisdom). Another stage, *Balya* (childhood, the golden period), with numerous substages, can be found as the first stage in folk versions of the *Ashramadharma* model. The entry into each stage and substage is announced by a rite of passage, ritual, or sacrament known as a *Samskara* (Kakar 1979, 1981). The stages were set up originally to apply only to members of the top three of the four castes, Brahmins, the priestly class; Kshatriyas, the ruling class; and Vaishyas, the merchant class. Other castes adapted the stages to meet their needs. Congruent with a mostly patriarchal societal structure, the *Ashramadharma* model was prescribed for men only.

When the parents were asked to enumerate the talents, skills, qualities, or abilities that they were proud of in their children, they offered a list of personal and social qualities such as being socially adept, affectionate, playful, independent, perceptive and observant, and street smart. Peripherally, and only sometimes, did they speak of their children's talent in math, their child's desire to improve in academics, or their hardworking nature. Perhaps it was their modesty around their own and their children's academic achievements that came through in their silence around their children's academic talents. The ideal of humility resulting from education applies to all areas of achievement. Given this, a generalized modesty must translate into silence around *all* areas of their children's achievements rather than a relative silence only around education with a willingness to speak of other areas. My data indicated that parents were measured even in their celebration of their children's achievements in interpersonal and other domains. Overall, humility seemed to drive at least part of the silence of the parents around their children's educational accomplishments.

To recapitulate, considering their high level of structural acculturation and their SES, feelings of isolation and oppression do not explain the silence of these parents around the academic achievement goals that they hold for their children. Public conformity to the norms of US society and private nonconformity provide a partial explanation. Explanations of a cultural and religious kind and of cultural memory offer additional insights. What other reasons could account for the expectation of academic achievement and its relentless inculcation and pursuit, its incorporation into the daily routine, but the silence of the parents when it came to articulating the centrality of academic success in socialization?

Silence, Privilege, and Power

Since 1965, within the United States, the group homogeneously labeled as Asians—irrespective of their startling diversity of geographical and ethnocultural origins or their variety of physical characteristics—have been stereotyped and lauded as “model minorities” (Leonard, 1997; Prashad, 2000; Takaki, 1989). They are held up as an example of hard work, educational and professional success, and acculturation within the so-called melting pot. Asian Indians are a particularly sparkling example because of their facility with English, which many other Asian groups (e.g., Chinese, Koreans) lack. This portrayal of Indians as a “model minority” is premised on the assumption that Indians, despite being new immigrants, manage to succeed within the United States; they are perceived as exemplifying the idea of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.” Two dimensions of this portrayal deserve attention: first, the reasons for it and, second, its veracity.

With regard to the reasons for the edification of Asian Indians in the United States, Prashad (2000) offers sharp insights. Indians are cast as remarkably successful despite not accessing state support. This claim enables the United States to argue that it must be due to some innate character flaw (and not centuries of slavery,

sedimented structural inequities, and systemic racism) that African Americans as a demographic group, despite generations spent within the United States, have been unable to reach marked levels of success. When Indians work in prestigious occupations, study in well-regarded institutions, show evidence of assimilation while also remaining politically inactive and pliable, or toe the agenda of conservative whites in active politics, they are treated as honorary whites. But when they assert themselves culturally, they face an anti-immigrant backlash. Under all circumstances, they face racism. Ethnic inclusion for Asian Indians, as for other nonwhite immigrants, is a mirage. Despite this, Indians, co-opted through praise by the dominant group, allow themselves to be recruited into antiblack racism in return for a promise of ethnic inclusion. The model minority stereotype is a carefully constructed weapon by White America in a “divide and rule” strategy that prevents the synthesis of any sort of solidarity among nonwhite groups (Prashad, 2000).

With respect to the veracity of the model minority notion, besides the fact that its origins are far from innocent, the numbers of currently economically disadvantaged Asian Indians in big cities like New York and their history in the United States as itinerant peddlers, seamen, factory workers (Bald, 2013a, 2013b), and laborers inform us that Indian immigrants within the United States have never been a homogeneously successful group. Furthermore, the idea that Indian immigrants within the United States have been successful solely on account of their hard work and entrepreneurial spirit is fundamentally untrue. It is false because it imagines all immigrant Asian Indians to be a naturally brilliant group with no history, moorings, or means, who magically establish themselves on a different continent, and succeed against all odds. Moreover, it places the immigrant Indians of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in the same category as the immigrant Irish and Italians who came to the United States fleeing economic hardship, the rural Indians of the 1800s and early 1900s who worked as peddlers (Bald, 2013a), African Americans who to date are trying to overcome the legacy of slavery as seen in persistent forms of racism, and many of the recent impoverished Hispanics who toil on US agricultural land.

The fact that US immigration laws enacted in 1965 filtered new entrants mainly by their SES and techno-professional qualifications is well chronicled (Leonard, 1997; Prashad, 2000; Shankar & Srikanth, 1998; Takaki, 1989). A large number of immigrant Indians of the post-1965 years in the United States were members of the socially and culturally dominant class and caste groups in India and, hence, beneficiaries of the consequences that flow from an individual’s arbitrary birth into a particular social class and caste.¹⁰ They may not have been from families with vast resources of wealth, but the parents in my study had adequate material means and access to social and cultural power in India. They were not haunted by the dispossession that refugees and those fleeing poverty or oppression experience. These parents had willingly left India in order to pursue aspirations exceeding what they

¹⁰Due to the increase in the numbers of Indian immigrants who are not highly educated in the U.S. and the concomitant increase in their representation in working class, non-professional occupations, the stereotype of the Indian immigrant as a member of the model minority group has become weaker (Prashad, 2000; Kibria, 2002).

had inherited. Unlike many other immigrant groups, they were not struggling to learn English. Seven of the 10 parents knew English well, having learned it in private, English-medium grade schools in India.¹¹ They also did not run into the barrier of limited access to jobs predicated on a high level of training and skills; they possessed such proficiency due to the highly subsidized, quality, public higher education made possible for them by the Indian government. All but one of the parents in my study had received educations in reputed colleges and universities in India. The educational levels of the parents in my study ranged from bachelor's degrees (two out of 10) to doctorates (three out of 10). Seven of the 10 parents had also specialized in disciplines such as medicine, math, computer science, and finance management, which enjoy greater societal prestige than the humanities and the social sciences. Already advantaged by their SES and caste and the cultural codes of conduct they had internalized through their upbringing, the pedagogic legitimacy of the educational institutions they had attended meshed with their financial means to further consolidate their social status within India (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This legitimacy, this economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), inherited in India, throws its full weight behind middle-SES Indians to propel them through the US immigration system that differentially selects potential immigrants, mostly according to their social origins.

As a mainly highly skilled and well-qualified group with financial means entering the US from India, a country marked for its civilizational and cultural greatness, these parents exemplified the stereotype of the model minority. Armed with their social and cultural class and academic qualifications, which they internalized in the form of durable practices, dispositions, and beliefs—or habitus (Bourdieu, 1986), whose symbolic and economic value is recognized in the global marketplace—they have acquired an additional patina by participating in higher education within the United States. Their occupations included publishing company representative to medical office manager, homemaker, financial service provider, doctor, and university instructor. They lived in single-family homes in suburban Baltimore and made a wide range of educationally focused materials available to their children, who were accomplished students. Their caregiver diaries and ecological inventories indicated the availability of not just televisions (including cable channels and access to documentaries and other educational shows), music players, and fiction and nonfiction books, but also personal computers, educational software and videogames, participation in Kumon classes for training in math, and parent-designed, individualized activities.

As highly educated professionals, these parents had not merely appropriated these resources materially. They were also skilled consumers of educationally oriented devices and resources. Now they bequeath these to their children by investing time, money, and effort to support their children in mastering the principles and practices of the educational process. Through routines and practices, they produced

¹¹The other three parents knew English but were less fluent. They had been educated in private, vernacular language schools in India.

within the family the conditions that are necessary to inculcate and reproduce in their children the cultural arbitrariness¹² that they have appropriated and that have been instrumental in their success. But the sheer transformativeness of their training practices as seen from their routines, recurrent activities, and the resources they offer to their children is masked, in the sense that they themselves do not fully recognize how systematic and dogged they are about transmitting a cultural arbitrary that, to them, seems as natural as the water they drink or the air they breathe. A part of their silence around academic success as a valued socialization goal in parenting can be attributed to taking for granted this ingrained cultural arbitrary. Silence here is an unconscious discourse, an ideology, representational device, a mode of knowing (Kalamaras, 1994).

The sheer range of education- and literacy-related activities and routines that these parents provided their children proved that the family was accomplishing a significant amount of pedagogic work. Yet the parents did not overtly highlight this work or their goal of academic achievement; such practices and the valuing of academic prowess are simply a tacit part of their lives. One does not discuss what one takes for granted "...because innocence is the privilege of those who move in their field of activity like fish in water" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 57). Cultural elites can place enormous emphasis on educational investment while remaining unconscious of it. It is so much part of their habitus that it falls outside the purview of analysis.

I recognized that this was probably a large part of the reason for their silence, but to attribute their underemphasizing of educational success to absorbed social class struck me as deterministic. I wondered how the parents would react to this interpretation and concluded that they would agree only partially with me.

The Significance of Practice

To say that the parents are Indian middle-/upper middle-class cultural and social elites is one thing. To say that this also becomes a description, an explanatory label of everything they stand for and think, is wrong (Latour, 2005). Social class influence is a macro variable that acts on humans and makes them act but by no means is it decisive. By willingly participating in US cultural and social systems while also balancing the cultural pulls of their homeland in raising their children, the parents demonstrate that they can manage habituses beyond those determined by their birth. That they do so informs us that class-structured consciousness explains some things but it can be too deterministic, too reductionist; it can ignore individualized self-design (de Certeau, 1984). Although our habits contain the accumulated sediments of our social class, they are also the sites for perturbing the presumptions and constraints of social class and other variables. We gain better insights into the choices

¹²As pointed out by Bourdieu, culture is arbitrary in both, its form and content. Furthermore arbitrary powers that are difficult to specify impose and perpetuate it through institutional and social conditions.

of these parents by making a partial attribution to acculturative pressures, social class, and cultural and religious variables and then focusing on how they define themselves within the spaces of the routines, activities, and practices they enact and create for their children.

In pursuing horizons far beyond what they knew, in following personally based generative principles of action as embodied in daily routines, the parents in this study were exercising individual will and spontaneity. They were stressing educational routines surpassing what they may have themselves followed growing up. In doing so, they were nurturing the disposition of respect for education to grow into new, heightened forms, forms that imagine an “ought to be,” excellence and perfection. For these parents, an ethic of practice orients them towards guiding their children to do even better than what they themselves are already carrying out successfully. Here, the purpose of daily and incessant practice of an “academic” manner is to value education for its own sake and to make academic dispositions into second nature, performing it as if it is something natural. In this way, perhaps they “pass off the wondrous as effortless” (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 184) and say nothing of it. Here, the silent worship of education and the cultivation of educationally oriented dispositions and habits are not merely an automatic enactment of social class. They are deliberate actions for carrying out the good of education for its own sake and to excel at it through daily striving towards it in a way that it is incorporated into human existence. Such striving was sacred for these parents, and one does not casually speak of something so sacred for fear of dishonoring or jinxing it.

Concluding Remarks

To claim that nearly everything that these parents think about and enact in the task of parenting can be found in what they put into words, or what we see them doing, is to miss the unstated motivations and cognitions that powerfully drive parenting. Here I have attempted to describe and explain the speaking silences that shape the beliefs and practices of a group of immigrant Indian parents as they socialize their children into the dispositions they value.

As a social, cultural, and numeric minority who live in a country that espouses pluralism but is nevertheless rife with racism, to exert influence or exhibit difference or disagreement overtly could invite racism stemming from jealousy and/or fear. So these parents publicly comply with many of the demands of their new country, also seeing long-term benefits for their children in such conformity. But then they subvert the will of the majority by expanding the widely shared definition of extracurricular activities to include Indian music and dance, lessons in Hinduism and “Indian culture” and languages, and academic enrichment lessons. This rearticulation keeps them within the boundaries of their host land while simultaneously enabling them to contain their new life within the roadmap provided by the religio-cultural norms of their homeland that remains an implicit but potent force in their lives in the form

of a cultural memory. Then, privately, they also direct their children's daily lives to the unyielding pursuit of scholarly achievement.

The parents in my study understated their agenda of educational success for their children partly because silence signifies humility and humility is central to Hindu understandings of education and achievement. In addition, they did not advertise their children's academic accomplishments because privilege claims silence for itself. Displaced from the social hierarchies that automatically conferred honor on them in India, as an immigrant group in the United States, the parents work silently to reclaim recognition for themselves and their children in a new country. They do so by pressing into service the accumulated symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) they have inherited and appropriated in their homeland and that they transfer to and enact in their host land. They themselves are well-established economically in the United States. To an extent, education is employed as the conduit for transmitting and acquiring power and sustaining power structures. But their children's academic achievements further legitimize them in their host land and win for them social recognition. Educational achievement as a form of virtuous success is used to compensate for the disadvantages of their ethnic identity.

The parents understand the value of education, based not only on a cultural memory of reverence for learning but also memories of their own educational achievements. The ideological consequence of this understanding is that they transmit it, not by preaching it, but by quietly weaving it into the routine. Their dispositions, routines, and embodied practices are close to the school's mode of inculcation and are recognized in the academic market. But unlike the practices and routines of school, which are articulated, theirs are more complex, intense, and implicit. This makes for an "insensible familiarization within the family circle" of educational acquisition "which tends to favor an enchanted experience of culture which implies forgetting the acquisition" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 3). So the children enjoy a sustained, implicit academic apprenticeship with the parents as live instruments who enable them to appropriate, through sustained practices, the cultural and social capital that predate these families and, thus, facilitate its intergenerational transmission (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Contrary to Noelle-Neumann's argument, here, the victors, not the losers, in the academic game tend towards silence.

The inculcation of a habitus offers a starting point for understanding the silence of the parents around academic goals and the education-based routines and activities they organize for their children. But their silent yet relentless pursuit of academic goals for their children in the daily routine is not merely due to absorbed social class but also to a deep desire for self-improvement in education, a cherished ideal driven by the knowledge that only through dedicated daily repetition of a valued activity can the individual achieve perfection. Such behavior does not seek to merely reproduce the structures of social domination. Due to its potential for self-generative personal and spiritual growth, the disposition for repeatedly carrying out academically focused activities through their incorporation into daily life possesses a moral and ethical dimension for which the homage is silence.

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Hema Ganapathy-Coleman's ethnographic and qualitative research is focused on the culturally based beliefs, or ethnotheories, of Asian Indian parents, both immigrants in the United States and parents living in the state of Gujarat, India. She has been especially interested in the everyday activities and recurrent routines that parents use to socialize their children into their ideas of “the good child” as related to religion, education, and ethnic identity, as they live at the confluence of often-conflicting demands. Her current project examines ideas about educational success and failure among parents and teachers of middle and low socioeconomic status in Gujarat, India.